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Iconography of Socialist Revolution: Construction of an Optimistic Imagery in Maoist China, 1949-1976

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Abstract

This paper analyses how Maoist China built an optimistic imagery of the newly established state under the guidance of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism by manipulating art, with peasant paintings of Huxian as an example, to glorify the Chinese Communist revolution and socialist utopia.

Tracking the evolution of peasant paintings in Huxian, from the 1950s to the 1970s, under the cultural policies of the Chinese Communist Party since Mao Zedong's famous talks on literature and art in Yan'an in 1942, this paper analyses how state sponsorship constructed an optimistic imagery of a socialist revolution and fostered the image of "socialist heroes."

By contextual study and close reading to render a historical and iconographic analysis, this study looks at how the regime employed new symbols, traditional elements, and visual imagery to transform popular attitudes and beliefs in order to gain and maintain control over the sphere of public discourse and thereby transform popular attitudes and beliefs. The peasant paintings glorify the proletariat by depicting the heroic character and the resilient strength of the people in building a great socialist nation. In doing so, it is interesting to examine how the government redefined social values and created a new socialist mystique.

Keywords: Peasant Painting, Huxian, Socialist Realism, Folk Art, China

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The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 was not just the establishment of a political regime. The leadership of the nascent Communist state aimed at constructing a new social order and a new national identity based on Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. With reference to the Soviet model and the experience acquired during its rule in Yan'an during the Resistance War against Japan (1937-1945), the Communist leadership utilised art and literature to glorify the Chinese Communist revolution and create the image of a socialist utopia. By depicting the heroic character and resilience of the masses, which means peasants, workers and soldiers, the state aimed at mobilising the people into building a socialist regime. In fact, mobilisation through mass line is the golden rule in nation building in Maoist thought since the Yan'an days (Selden, 1995). It is interesting to examine how the state defined new social values, thus creating a new socialist mystique through its cultural policies. This paper examines how the Maoist regime transmitted its official ideas, values and norms in creating optimistic imagery of a socialist revolution by constructing a new political iconography through the manipulation of art, with special reference to peasant paintings in Huxian (戶縣), Shaanxi province (陝西), as an example.

The political-socio-cultural background and the development of literature and art policies of China since 1949 form the backdrop of this study. In addition to reading the

iconographic messages of these paintings, how different art genres influenced them is also examined. During the fanaticism of the socialist revolution and the subsequent socialist construction, was the official literature and art theory of combining both revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism a contradiction? How much truth lay in the official insistent claim that these paintings were completed by amateur painters? Was it pure peasant spontaneity or was Party mobilisation and organisation behind it? To what extent were these paintings the peasants' own voices or propaganda transmitted through their hands? To answer these questions, a review of the development of the literary and art policies in the People's Republic of China is necessary.

Development of the Literary and Art Policies in the People's Republic of China

The Chinese Communist Party had been developing its literary and art theories since the 1930s based on the Soviet model and the leftist literary movement led by Lu Xun (鲁迅). Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Arts and Literature" in 1942 laid the foundation for the literary and art policies after 1949. In recognising the essential nature of the cultural army, Mao's talks aimed at ensuring the correct developmental path of revolutionary literature and art. Adopting Lenin's theory, Mao

saw literature and art as a component of the whole revolutionary machine, powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy (Mao, 1942, p.86). Therefore, Mao rejected art for art's sake and subordinated literature and art to politics, thus subordinating the artists and writers to the Party. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Party firmly grasped literature and art in its hands. The Ministry of Culture monopolised art education, art association, museums and galleries and related art units (Cohen, 1987, p. 22).

Socialist Realism: the Ideological Foundation of Socialist Art

Positive imagery of socialist construction is the gist of the iconography of Maoist China. The tenet of such construction is founded on socialist realism. As Communist China looked to the Soviet Union as its model, it adopted the Soviet official doctrine of "socialist realism" as its cornerstone of literary and art policies. "Socialist realism" became the Soviet official doctrine in the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. Its artistic origin was Ilya Repin and his fellow "Wanderers" ("Peredvizhniki") in the second half of the 19th century, which was based on 19th century French and German academic and realist art such as the works of Rembrandt, Frans Hals and Rubens etc (Laing, 1988, p.15). The "Wanderers" rejected the classicism of the Russian Academy

and viewed that art should have the function of serving the common man and expressing humanitarian and social ideals (“Peredvizhniki,” 2007).

As stated in the statute of the Union of Soviet Writers, socialist realism is “the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism. It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development.” Its function is to ideologically transform and educate workers in the spirit of socialism (First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934, p.716 in Tertz, 1960, p. 24). Abram Tertz, a contemporary Soviet writer noted, socialist realism is founded “on the concept of Purpose with a capital P.” Being an “all-embracing ideal,” the Purpose of socialist realism is to help transform people’s consciousness by literature and art for the sake of the revolutionary movement (Tertz, 1960, p.26). Such spirit of purposefulness is founded in the teleological nature of Marxism (Tertz, 1960, pp.33-4). Mao’s ideas of “portray[ing] the bright side” and the educational purpose of art and literature in the Yan’an Talks are the demands of socialist realism. As art was created for the purpose of carrying political messages to educate and transform the masses, artistic works done in socialist realism was narrative or anecdotal, in which the content was intended to be “read” (Laing, p. 20).

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, socialist realism

was institutionalised in the Central Art Academy under the leadership of Xu Beihong. Xu, who had studied in Paris and Berlin before, was a proponent of academicism. Chinese art students were sent to the Soviet Union to learn to paint in oil and Soviet masters came to China to teach in the 1950s. Konstantin Maksimov came to China in February 1955 to teach in the Central Art Academy. Socialist realism was frequently adopted in oil paintings though less in New Year painting and even less in traditional Chinese painting (*guohua* 國畫) (Galikowski, 1998, p.15). The constitution of the Artists' Association (1954) formally adopted socialist realism as its guiding principle in artistic creation.

Socialist realism frequently depicts the bright sides of the “new society,” “new heroes” and their revolutionary spirits. Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* (*Mat’*, 1906-7) has been regarded as the cornerstone of socialist realism for its devotion to social change and its portrayal of a revolutionary hero. Rufus Mathewson pointed out that the two “formulas” in *Mother* were much followed by Soviet writers: the “conversion of the innocent into an active revolutionary”(Nilovna, the mother of a revolutionary son Pavel, was increasingly drawn into the tide of revolution and became a true revolutionary) and “pattern of emblematic political heroism in the face of terrible obstacles” (Pavel). The adherence of these heroic characters to the revolutionary cause is enshrined as

revolutionary spirit (Mathewson, 1975, p.67 in Scherr, 1988, p. 44).

In fact, socialist realism depicts “positive heroes” who are not just good men but men of purpose. The positive hero was first found in Gorki’s novels in the 1910s such as *The Petty Bourgeois*, characterised by the hero’s self-assurance and straightforwardness towards his future goal. *The Petty Bourgeois* shows that “only men who are as pitiless, straight, and hard as swords will cut their way through” (Tertz, 1960, p.50). The positive hero embraces the ideals of “ideological conviction, courage, intelligence, will power, patriotism, respect for women, self-sacrifice.” The essence of such a positive hero is his lack of hesitation and inner doubts in striving directly towards the socialist purpose (Tertz, 1960, pp. 48-9). The image of the positive hero has undergone changes and achieved its full stature as “big and sturdy” in the early 1930s, when socialist realism was officially recognised by the Soviet Union. Socialist realism’s demand “to represent life truthfully as its revolutionary development,” as commented by Tertz, is a summons to depict the truth in the ideal and thus to represent the world and man not as they are but as they should be (Tertz, 1960, p.76). Thus, the ideal of socialist realism embodies romanticism (Tertz, 1960, p.77). The relationship between socialist realism and romanticism was not treated as contradictory by the Chinese Communist authorities, so long as the artistic content was to glorify the heroic characters of the revolution and the

happiness of the people living in the new socialist world. Such a connection was formalised in the new art theory of “revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism,” which was proposed by Zhou Yang (周揚) (Zhou, 1958, pp. 60-66), a chief Chinese Communist cultural spokesman in 1956, based on the theory of revolutionary romanticism by Soviet ideologue A.A. Zhdanov who proclaimed in 1934, that “socialist art and literature must be rich in ideals and must to a high degree combine truthfulness and revolutionary fervour” (Laing, 1988, p. 30). It also meant that artistic works had to fulfil the task of “the glorification of new things, new men” (Birch, p. 35, 1965 in Laing, p. 30). In fact, such a task contradicts to one of the criteria of “realism” in painting—being a challenge, sometimes may be implicitly political, to the existing social hierarchy (Nochlin, 1971 in Clark, 1991, p.2).

As noted by Maria Galikowski, the difference between socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism is not about nature but degree. Whilst revolutionary realism still maintains some degree of objective representation, revolutionary romanticism’s inclination to romantic dimension would often lead to “absurd and implausible over-exaggeration” (Galikowski, 1998, p. 102).

The Creation of the “New Socialist Man”

Parallel to the construction of “positive heroes” by the Soviet Union, the creation of the image of “new socialist man” in Communist China was also a product of “socialist realism.” The promotion of new socialist heroes and heroines was important for the Communist regime to inspire the people to heed the socialist cause. The driving force behind this was the quest for a new national identity for China in the modern world. Facing imperialistic aggression, internal disorder and the influx of Western ideas such as social Darwinism, nationalistic concerns about China’s survival in a competitive modern world had become a major intellectual concern since the late Qing period, and reached a climax during the May Fourth Movement in the late 1910s and 1920s. Among these nationalistic discourses, Liang Qichao’s discussions on “new nationals” in *Xinminshuo* (《新民說》), written from 1902 to 1905, had been influential in the 1920s and 1930s among intellectuals such as Hu Shi and Mao Zedong (Huang, n.d.). Liang’s discussions on “new nationals” were driven by a deep sense of crisis amidst the political chaos during the late Qing period. Placing China in an international competitive context in terms of Social Darwinism, with “survival for the fittest” in mind, Liang called for the making of “new nationals” to save China. His discussions on public virtue (論公德), state ideology (論國家思想), and the collective (論合群)

etc., can find echoes in the Communist ideals of “socialist new man.” Liang argued that as the basis of national power rests in the morality, wisdom and strength of the people, it was important to modernise such qualities in them for the purpose of strengthening the nation (Liang, pp. 6-7). He further elaborated that what Chinese people lacked the most was public virtue, i.e. care for public rather than private interests, which he defined as the foundation of the nation. He regarded the root of the decline of China lay in the selfishness of the people, thus he called for the invention of a new ethic (新道德), which was based on public virtue and from which arose the new nationals (新民) (Liang, pp. 13 & 15).

Liang’s call for making individual sacrifice for the interests of the collective found echoes in the new socialist ethic constructed by the Chinese Communists. In fact, during the Yan’an period, the Communists had already initiated the creation of a socialist society.¹ As early as 1938, as part of the programme of promoting production, the Communists promoted “model workers” (勞動模範) or “hero workers” (勞動英雄) as examples to be imitated by the residents in the border region, most of whom were illiterate peasants. For example, an exhibition on the products of Yan’an workers was held in January 1938 as a kind of competition of production revolution in Yan’an. A

¹ For further details, please refer to Mark Selden, *China in Revolution: the Yanan Way Revisited* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, c1995).

group of “hero workers,” such as Wang Huachun (王化純) (shoe maker) and Wang Liu (王六) (blacksmith), were praised by Mao Zedong as the “vanguards of strategic economic construction” (“國防經濟建設的先鋒”) (Zheng Yi, 1938/1988, p.3). These “model workers,” who had achieved “turn-over” (翻身) under the auspices of Communist rule, were not just hardworking, they were also selfless to devote their energy to the collective. The most famous example of peasant heroes was Wu Manyou (吳滿有). The official recognition of these socialist heroes, such as Zhao Zhankui (趙占魁), Zhang Chuyuan (張初元) and others, in Yan’an was repeatedly reported by the Liberation Daily, from early 1943 to early 1944, and formed a popular culture. Such an effort reached its height in 1943 when 180 “model workers” were honoured in the First Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region Labour Hero Meeting held in Yan’an (Hung, 1994, pp. 263-6).

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, more systematic effort was put into creating “socialist heroes.” One example is the promotion of female tractor drivers. The tractor was a symbol of prosperity and progress of rural villages in Socialist China. Women operating tractors was regarded as a progressive sign of women’s liberation. The image of female tractor drivers not only signified women freed from the shackles of the old feudal society, but also hope and good life under Communist rule.

The early 1950s was a period of collectivisation of agriculture. The construction of such new heroines could exemplify the progressiveness of new China (M. L. Yu, 2004, pp. 3-4).

The Use of Folk Art in Creating the Socialist Iconography

The adoption of folk elements in art by the Chinese Communist Party can be traced to 1939 in the use of New Year paintings for propaganda purposes (Jiang, n.d., in Wang, 2005, p. 461). Themes like resisting Japanese aggression, such as “Support Our Own Army” (“擁護咱們老百姓自己的軍隊”) (Gu Yuan 古元, 1944), “Cooperation between Soldiers and People, Victory at War” (“軍民合作, 抗戰勝利”) (Yan Han 彥涵, 1944) and the embellishment of socialist life in the border region under Communist rule “Bumper Harvest and Abundant Livestock” (“五穀豐登, 六畜興旺”) (Wo Zha 沃渣, 1942), “Know a Thousand Words” (“識一千字”) (Zhang Xiaofei 張曉非, 1944) were all popular at this time. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the use of folk art for propaganda use was encouraged by the authorities. As early as November 1949, Mao ordered the launching of New Year painting work (Shen, 1949). The Communist authority was aware of the “feudal ideas and concepts,” such as deities and folklores, associated with New Year paintings. Regarding the New Year paintings as a

tool of transmitting feudalistic ideas, the Communists called for reform and creation of a new type to educate the people. In this directive, new themes of “the birth of a new China”, “the great victory of the people’s war of liberation”, “the life and struggle of the ordinary labouring people” were singled out (Galikowski, 1998, pp. 25-26). In 1951, the Communist government extolled twenty-five New Year paintings in a nationwide New Year painting competition. The themes of the winners such as “Peasants and Tractors” (“農民和拖拉機”) (Li Qi 李琦), “Celebrate the Founding of the People’s Republic of China” (“慶祝中華人民共和國成立”) (Gu Qun 顧群) and “Children in New China” (“新中國的兒童”) (Zhang Ding 張汀) demonstrated what imagery the nascent state wanted to present.

The Communist Party was aware that peasant romanticism demonstrated in New Year paintings, as in the projection of peasants’ hope of bumper harvests and happy family life, suited the optimistic sentiments of the new era and therefore desirable to be utilised to glorify the socialist revolution and construction. Given its popularity among the population, folk art, as in the example of New Year paintings, has propaganda potential to transmit political messages to the masses more effectively.

Other than its grass-roots origin and romantic flavour, folk art was linked to the search for a new modern Chinese identity as discussed by Chang-tai Hung (Hung, 1985)

and Felicity Lufkin (Lufkin, 2001). The term “*minjian meishu*” (民間美術) was translated from “folk art” (volkskunst). Folk art was considered to be pure, simple, spontaneous and as a collective creation of a harmonious community. The creation of folk art was an outcome of the collective wisdom and effort of a community rather than individual genius (Lufkin, 2001, p. 5). The concept of folk art was imported from the West during the late 19th and early 20th centuries against the backdrop of foreign aggression, the rise of romantic nationalism and the importation of Social Darwinism. In Hung’s *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature 1918-1937*, folk meant peasants whilst primitive was associated with the minorities (Hung, 1985, pp. 8-9). The interest in folk art was related to the Folk Literature Movement in the late 1910s-1920s initiated by folklorists such as Lin Fu, Zhou Zuoren and Gu Jiegang at the Beijing University (Hung, 1985, p. 1).

Unlike Europe in which the discovery of the folk by intellectuals was related to the rise of nationalism and the nation-building movement in 19th century Europe, Chinese intellectuals’ interest in the folk was a result of the iconoclastic spirit of the May Fourth Movement (Hung, 1985, pp. 16-7). Radical intellectuals believed that the political chaos and social ills of China were caused by deep-rooted cultural problems. They believed that unless there was a total transformation of culture, no political and social reforms

could be successful. Regarding Confucianism, the representative of “high” or “elitist” culture, as the root of all evils, they found the culture of the common people, “low culture,” as seen in folk literature, could provide resources for cultural and social transformation. Such a romantic view of the folk and its culture (mainly peasant), and the elevation of the status of common people were unprecedented (Hung, 1985, p. 10). The legacy of intellectuals’ appreciation of folk art and their recognition of it as a communal creation which should come from the people and hence be used to serve the people was inherited by the Chinese Communists. When the People’s Republic of China was established in October 1949, the government proclaimed that literature and art should serve the people and inspire their political enlightenment and enthusiasm for labour (Andrews, 1994, p. 37). Mass art, amateur artistic creations of workers and peasants, was encouraged. As early as 1950, there were circular exhibitions of amateur art of workers in various factories in Beijing. (Jiyanan, 1950, pp. 25-27)

The Great Leap Forward, the Emphasis on National Art and Mass Participation in Artistic Activities

The official promotion of mass art reached an unprecedented scale during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960). This demonstrates how art was manipulated to construct a

socialist utopia within the context of Mao's ideas of socialist revolution. The "General Line of Socialist Construction" of the Great Leap Forward was formulated in 1957 after the successful Five-Year Plan and the Anti-Rightist Movement. Mao had been searching for a unique way for China to achieve Communism. His sinicisation of Marxism during the Yan'an Rectification Campaign in the early 1940s was a prologue to his creation of an indigenous Chinese road to Communism freed from Soviet influence. After the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations since 1956, Mao was eager to surpass the Soviet Union in achieving Communism. Mao's ambitious plan of a nationwide steel-making movement and the founding of the People's Communes were based on his belief in the subjective initiative of people against objective laws and obstacles. With high target aspiration to be achieved rapidly by means of mass campaign, the whole propaganda machine was involved and the masses were mobilized in artistic activities (Galikowski, 1998, pp. 80-82).

As Mao was searching for a unique Chinese way to achieve Communism, traditional Chinese painting and folk art were encouraged because of their indigenous origin. Mao had been conscious of the value of folk art and their nationalistic appeal since the 1930s. He did not favour entire Westernisation of arts. In a forum of music workers in the mid-1950s, he pointed out that Chinese national arts should "make the

ancient serve the present, and make the foreign serve the Chinese” (“古爲今用，洋爲中用”). Based on Chinese artistic cultural heritage, art workers should selectively and critically choose Western elements to employ so as to enrich Chinese arts. Mao criticised blind adoption as “doctrinism” (“教條主義”) and blind rejection as “conservatism” (“保守主義”). In general, art should be more Sinicised, rather than Westernised for him (Mao, 1956/1992, pp. 90-8). Hence, traditional Chinese paintings (*guohua* 國畫), which had been overshadowed by Soviet socialist realistic oil paintings in the early 1950s, was transformed according to Mao’s principle of “making the past serve the present” (古爲今用), to suit the propaganda needs of the Party. Figure paintings replaced landscapes, bamboo, flower and bird paintings. To meet the demand for realism, models were to be drawn from life. In addition, symbolic meanings of traditional motifs were stressed, to make *guohua* relevant to the revolutionary society (Sullivan, 1996, p. 139).

Zhou Yang, the vice-minister of the Ministry of Culture, had repeatedly called for the development of national art from 1951 to 1953 (Laing, 1988, p.20). The debates on traditional Chinese painting (*gouhua*) during the Hundred Flowers Campaign in 1956 and the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957, resulted in the disgraceful dismissal of Jiang Feng (江豐), who was claimed to have condescending views on *gouhua*, confirmed the

Party's recognition of *gouhua*.

Given the surge of nationalism, the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and the limitations of *guohua* in demonstrating socialist construction realistically, peasant paintings became a rising star in the search for indigenous forms of visual art to meet propaganda needs. Moreover, as *guohua* has a long tradition of literary painting, which was blacklisted as “bourgeoisie” and “rightist,” it was not politically correct to be used as propaganda for the sake of the “proletariat.” Contrary to *guohua* which were drawn by professional painters, peasant paintings were created by the amateur peasant painters. The “class content” of the authors, and hence the subject matter, were supposed to be “red” and “pure.” Its direct ways of presentation were easy for the working class to comprehend, especially as the peasants had little or no experience in painting, and peasant painting had hardly existed before (Sullivan, 1996, p. 147). Unlike *guohua* which was a well-established genre with a traditional artistic canon, peasant paintings were easily moulded to meet the Party's propaganda needs.

During the Great Leap Forward, masses were mobilised to participate in artistic activities. Artistic training was given to the masses by art professionals who were sent to the countryside. Just like agricultural and steel production, production of artistic works was set to achieve high targets in a relatively short time, with competitions among

regions (Galikowski, 1998, p. 85). The popularisation of art in the countryside coincided with the establishment of rural communes. The setting up of communes aimed at minimising the differences between urban and rural, manual and mental labour (Laing, 1988, p. 29). The official encouragement on the training of worker-peasant-soldier artists was proclaimed in the directive from the Ministry of Culture in January 1958, ordering that culture be “brought to the countryside” (Laing, 1988, p. 31). The proposal of the Artists’ Association in 1958 responded to the official call to carry out training of worker-peasant-soldier artists by professional artists (“Meixie xiang fenhui he meishujia tichu changyi,” 1958, p. 5). The official heightened emphasis on class (proletariat) and its anti-elitist inclination was reflected in the goal to develop a student body with 60 or 70 % from worker-peasant class within five years. These “leftist” students would, in turn, replace the “rightist” instructors. Accordingly, around 80% of students entering the Central Art Academy in 1958 were from the worker-peasant-soldier class (Cohen, 1987, p. 211). Such anti-elitist, populist sentiments can be traced to the folk literature and art movement during the 1920s and the 1930s as discussed above.

The promotion of mass participation in art was carried down to the lowest organisational level in the countryside. Every commune was to have rural cultural clubs and art training classes provided to the peasants under local party leadership. Village

mural painting movements saw the initiation of peasant paintings. Peasants were mobilised to paint murals in the whole country as the slogan “all villages would have murals, and slogans would be everywhere” goes. (“Meixie xiang fenhui he meishujia tichu changyi,”1958) Village murals attracted the attention of the authorities because of their peasant origin and highly visible nature. Murals can be produced economically with low levels of artistic skills. Although some rural murals were produced during the Resistance War against Japan, its propaganda potential had not been fully recognised by the Communist government as its attention was directed to the promotion of New Year paintings (Cohen, 1987, p. 211). Pixian (邳縣) in Jiangsu province (江蘇) was regarded as the pioneer in the village mural movement (Duan, 2005). In mid-August 1958, the editorial office of *Fine Art* journal organised a visit to Pixian. Village mural movements quickly became a nation-wide effort under official promotion. *Fine Art*, throughout 1958, published increasingly more works produced by “artists from the masses,” than those by professional artists. Besides, the People’s Fine Art Publishing House released a whole series of worker, peasant and soldier painting albums in 1958 and 1959 (Galikowski, 1998, p. 86). The exhibition in Beijing in September 1958 displayed drawings, paintings and photos of peasant wall paintings (Laing, 1988, p.31). The public spotlight enjoyed by the village mural movement demonstrates how the Party

manipulated the cultural machine efficiently to serve its propaganda needs.

The content of peasant painting was directed by the authorities. The Directive from the Ministry of Culture in 1958 demonstrates how the government directed art in creating images of socialist construction. Themes like construction and maintenance of water conservancy projects, the accumulation of manure and the struggles against the four evils (rats, sparrows, mosquitoes, flies) and similar tasks were stated in the Directive to be carried out in cultural work (Laing, 1988, p.31). For example, “Catching Moths” (ca. 1958), a painting drawn by a peasant called Hu Guilian, answered the call of the government of eliminating the “four evils.” Besides, traditional peasant wishes for bumper harvests can also be seen in peasant paintings, as in Cai Jinbo’s “Big Fish” (ca. 1958). The picture depicts a giant fish as a boat with a woman on it paddling with a huge wheat stalk. Fish is an old motif of “plenty.” The exaggerated size of the fish and the wheat stalk showed peasant romanticism and their hope of food abundance. Another picture of “More Gears to the Wheels, More Water to the Fields” (ca. 1958) by an anonymous peasant painter depicts how mechanisation of irrigation can ease peasant’s workload in farming. The images of food abundance and mechanisation of agriculture were important elements of socialist construction (Laing, 1988, pp.31-2).

Huxian Peasant Paintings: Final Effort of the Construction of the Iconography of Socialist Revolution during the Maoist Era

Huxian peasant paintings in Shaanxi province originated from the promotion of mass art during the Great Leap Forward. Though the tide of promoting mass art receded with the failure of the Great Leap Forward in the early 1960s, peasant paintings survived and developed during the Socialist Education Movement (1964-1966). A large scale Huxian peasant campaign started in 1964 due to official re-emphasis on proletarian art—worker, peasant and soldier art. To echo the Socialist Education Movement, Huxian Cultural Hall organised “Three Histories” exhibitions under the *xian* (county 縣) party leadership as a means for peasants to “remember the bitterness (of the old society) and remember the sweetness (of the new society)” (憶苦思甜) and to reinforce their class consciousness (階級覺悟). The “Three Histories” (“三史”) mean family history (家史), village history (村史) and commune history (社史) (or village history (村史), the turn-over history of poor peasants (貧農翻身史), and the exploitation history of landlords (地主剝削史). (Duan, 2005, pp. 14-5). Training classes were organised at Taiping steel-making site (太平煉鋼工地) and Ganyu reservoir construction site (甘峪水庫工地) by Chen Shiheng (陳士衡), a young teacher sent by the Xi’an Art Academy (西安美專) in 1958. Training classes were extended in scale

and duration and trained many peasant painters. A good foundation was laid for its further development during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Duan, 2005, p. 15). During that time, Huxian peasant paintings were cherished as a “new-born thing” (“新生事物”) and advertised by the official foreign press (Duan, 2005, p. 47). In 1973, twenty out of the twenty-two communes in the county had amateur art groups (業餘美術小組). Over five-hundred people of both sexes and different ages participated in artistic activities. Around 40,000 works were said to be produced (Journalist from Xinhua News Agency, 1973/1975).

Exemplified as a good model of rural artistic activities to be emulated by professional artists, Huxian’s peasant painting movement was glorified as a revolutionary cult of “learning from Dazhai in agriculture” and praised for “stepping out ahead in fine arts” (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*, 1976). High level official sponsorship gave Huxian peasant paintings momentum during the Cultural Revolution. Under the auspices of the Cultural Group of the State Council (國務院文化組), in which the “Gang of Four” (Jiang Qing and her close associates) had much influence, a national exhibition of Huxian Peasant Paintings was held in Beijing in 1973. As a “model” to be emulated nationwide, the paintings were exhibited in eight cities and visited by around two million spectators. These high-profile official receptions at

national level further confirmed its special status and helped it win national acclaim.

As a component of the revolutionary propaganda machine, which was often reported in newspapers such as the People's Daily, Huxian peasant painting movement was claimed as a part of the proletarian art following the guidance of Mao's Yan'an Talks. In these news reports, the political correctness and high quality of the Huxian peasant paintings echoed the official line of the Anti-Lin Biao and Anti-Confucius campaign of the Cultural Revolution. Huxian peasant paintings were given the political task of denouncing the theories of "revisionist line in art"² and "idealist theory" of "innate genius" and "the highest are the wise and the lowest are the stupid," said to be held by Lin Biao and Confucius, by demonstrating their creativity in art (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*, 1976).

The Glorification of Peasant Painters as Socialist Heroes

The official discourse glorified Huxian peasant painters as masters of the socialist new culture, who, armed with revolutionary enthusiasm, occupied the ideological and

² The condemnation of "black paintings" as counterrevolutionary, bourgeois styles and subjects was an attack launched by Jiang Qing against Zhou Enlai, who sponsored fine arts that were not of Jiang Qing's type. Zhou initiated decorations for the new wing of the Beijing Hotel in April 1973 after the visit of an American table tennis team in 1971. In addition, he also exported Chinese paintings for foreign exchange. He justified this by separating these paintings as "outer art" for foreigners, therefore not necessary to have political contents that were compulsory for "inner art," which was for Chinese consumption. By the end of 1974, Jiang Qing had held exhibitions of "Black Art" in Shanghai and Beijing to mobilise national criticism against these "wild, strange, black and reckless" paintings (Andrews, 1974, pp. 368-376).

cultural field (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*). As poor and lower-middle class peasants stated in an official publication of their works, all of them were people's commune members, including "women, youngsters and old people, Party secretaries, production team leaders, militia company commanders and accountants" (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*). Taking up painting as a spare-time activity only, they worked hard to build a socialist utopia (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*). The official discourse emphasised that the peasant painters were "all path breakers in production and at the same time an advance force in culture. With hoe in one hand and brush in the other and taking the Party's basic line as their guide to action, they are active in the three great revolutionary movements of class struggle, the struggle for production and scientific experiment and in carrying out the central task at each step of the revolution" (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*). The purpose of their paintings was said to condemn revisionism and the bourgeoisie. Their art was said to be revolutionary "for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy" ("團結人民, 教育人民, 打擊敵人, 消滅敵人") (Foreword in *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County*). The class content of peasant painters and its revolutionary zeal as demonstrated in their artistic activities suited the image of socialist heroes who struggled for the socialist cause. As

the slogan goes, “(in order) to paint a revolutionary painting, (one has to) become a revolutionary first” (“要畫革命畫，先做革命人”) (Duan, 2005, p. 148).

The emphasis on the amateur status of the peasant painters and their combining art, as a spare-time activity only, while continuing their normal working lives served to demonstrate that these peasant paintings were art of the masses. As “proletarian art” was the only acceptable art to Mao, who had already in the Yan’an Talks stressed the fundamental importance of literature and art serving the masses, the “redness” (political correctness) of the peasant painters must be given significance. Their peasant class status and the spirit of peasants were highly valued, as demonstrated by the slogan, “not just being among the workers and the peasants and painting the workers and the peasants, (one should) learn from the workers and the peasants humbly” (“身在工農畫工農，還要恭恭敬敬學工農”) (Duan, 2005, p. 148).

Were all peasant painters from the poor and middle peasant class in the people’s communes as claimed by the official discourse? As educated urban youths had previously been sent to rural villages, could they possibly have been remoulded as peasants and counted among the “peasant” painters? According to Liu Qunhan (劉群漢), an instructor at that time, there were more than twenty educated urban youths participating in Huxian peasant painting movement (Duan, 2005, p. 152). Educated

urban youths were sent to farms and factories during 1968-1976 to gain personal experience of proletarian life. Many amateur paintings were said to have been created by these rusticated youths (Andrews, 1994, p.352). In Huxian, the most renowned educated urban youth peasant painter was Li Zhenhua (李振華). Her painting “Brigade Ducks” (“大隊鴨隊”) was among the works to be sent to Beijing for national exhibition in 1973 and circular displays in eight cities in 1974 (Duan, 2005, p.155).

In fact, professional help was given by the Party to the rural community to foster the peasant painting movement. In Huxian, the County Cultural Hall and the Shaanxi Academy of Art offered training to peasants. Art students from the Hangzhou Academy taught there in order to improve peasants’ painting skills (Duan, 2005, p.155). In 1958, Chen Shiheng (陳士衡), an art teacher and graduate from the Xi’an Art Academy, was sent by the Academy to investigate the demand for art by rural villages and peasants. His report was expected to be used for educational reform of the Academy according to Mao’s call that education must combine labour and serve proletarian politics. Chen organised two training classes in Huxian, one in Taiping steel-making site and another one in Ganyu Reservoir construction site (Duan, 2005, p.7). The aim of these classes was to train over one hundred peasants in the art of painting. Government-sponsored training was continuously made available to peasants, by art teachers and students from

different art bodies. (Zhongguo Huxian nongminhua zhanlanguan, n.d.) For example, Wang Youzheng (王有政), Guo Quanzhong (郭全忠), Kang Long (亢瓏), Gao Minsheng (高民生) from the Mass Arts Hall of Shaangxi Province (陝西省群眾藝術館); Cheng Zheng (程征) from the Arts Hall of Xianyang District (咸陽地區藝術館); Ding Jitang (丁濟棠), Liu Qunhan, Ma Hongzhi (馬宏智) of Huxian (Duan, 2005, p.71). Mao had already stated, in the Yan'an Talks, that “raising standards” (提高) was as important as “popularisation” (普及) (Mao, 1942, p. 83). Mao denounced art “lacking in artistic power” as “poster and slogan style” (Mao, 1942, p. 90). Therefore, by inference, the standard of amateur art should also be upgraded to render sophistication.

Content of Huxian Peasant Paintings

Huxian peasant paintings have to be considered within the context of the Great Leap Forward, which was launched in May 1958, the Socialist Education Movement (1964-1966) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). To echo Mao's slogan asking people to “go all out, aim high and achieve greater, faster, better and more economical results in building socialism,” (“鼓足幹勁, 力爭上游, 多快好省地建設社會主義總路線”) in order to “surpass Great Britain and catch up with the United States,” (“超英趕美”) furnaces were set up in work units, schools, farms etc. to increase steel

production during the Great Leap Forward. Fig. 16 depicts an idealised steel-making scene in the campaign. Ambitious agricultural and steel production targets were set up. Mao strongly believed that human will could overcome any obstacles in building a socialist utopia, which was within reach under the Great Leap Forward. Though the Great Leap Forward ended up with a horrendous famine, Mao was undeterred in his belief and insisted that the Socialist utopia was within reach.

Within such a context, positive imagery of socialist construction is a central theme in Huxian peasant paintings. “A Painting in the Class-Education Exhibition, Niutung People’s Commune,” (No. 5) (fig. 1) illustrates people in the commune engaging in collectivised labour work. The picture comes with the inscription: “Yan’an’s (Yenan’s) sons and daughters, with firm fighting will, dare to give the land a new look. They work hard and fast to gain a rich harvest. Dazhai (Tachai) flowers’ perfume spreads everywhere.” Drawing reference to the Yan’an and Dazhai’s paradigms of revolutionary production cults, the painting demonstrates that manpower in unity, with little or no aid of machines, can still do well in socialist construction. Mao’s famous dictums, such as “human beings can surpass nature,” (“人定勝天”) and “a lot of people is good for work,” (“人多好辦事”) come from his firm belief in “people’s power,” (“人民的力量”) and “man’s subjective initiative” (“人的主觀能動性”) (Y. F. Chen, 2001, p. 701).

By the same token, excessive optimism in the capability of manpower in overcoming natural hindrances with use of a low level of technology is conveyed in “Today’s ‘Foolish Old Man’ Create New Scenes,” (Scrolls 1-4) by Cheng Minsheng (程敏生) and Zhang Lin (張林) (figs. 2a & 2b). This scene depicts the nationwide irrigation works from Autumn 1957 to Spring 1958. Relying on manpower rather than technology, one billion labourers were mobilised (Y. F. Chen, 2001, p. 700). In the painting, plenty of people are working on the construction of a reservoir. Men and women irrigate the fields. Harvest is abundant and ducks are swimming in the newly-made pond. The theme “Foolish Old Man Can Move the Mountain,” was used by the painter Xu Beihong (徐悲鴻) during the Anti-Japanese War to eulogise Chinese resilience in overcoming the impossible.

The heroic depiction of workers, with their strength, resilience, unity, sacrifice and fighting spirit in encountering all the hardship in building a socialist utopia, reflects the glorification of the proletariat since Mao’s Yan’an Talks and the making of socialist heroes. With regard to the question whether to expose and condemn or extol, Mao stipulated: “all the dark forces harming the masses of the people must be exposed and all the revolutionary struggles of the masses of the people must be extolled. They should never expose the masses despite their shortcomings. They should help them to

overcome these shortcomings by criticism and self-criticism (Mao, 1942, p. 91). Moreover, they should eulogise “the people, the creators of the history of mankind, proletariat, the Communist Party, New Democracy and socialism” (Mao, 1942, p. 93).

According to Mao’s literature and art theory of “combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism,” literature and art should reflect life on a higher plane to render more intensity. Subject elements can be concentrated to produce a more typical artistic model, thus being more idealistic and universal than actual everyday life (Mao, 1942, p. 82). Developing from the “revolutionary romanticism” of the Soviet ideologist Zhdanov (Sullivan, 1996, p. 145), Mao further elaborated it to make literature and art reflect combined revolutionary optimism and revolutionary heroism (革命樂觀主義與革命英雄主義結合) (Zou, 2002, p. 7). The optimism and heroism of people’s power in Huxian peasant paintings were a reflection of this.

The optimistic imagery of socialism can be seen in the depiction of bumper harvests and serenity of country life. “Golden Hills, Silver Sea” by Li Shunxiao (李順孝) (fig. 3) depicts abundant harvests of crops and cottons. Peasants are dancing happily around. Other than crops, side-line production often appears in Huxian paintings. “Brigade Pig Farm” by Liu Xuxu (柳緒緒) (fig. 4) shows pig-rearing in the collectivised commune. “Flourishing Side-Line Occupations” by Bai Tianxue (白天學)

(fig.5) portrays basket-making, handicraft textile and raising pigs and goats in a vivid, indigenous way. “Commune Fish Pond” by Dong Zhengyi (董正誼) (fig. 6) portrays an enormous harvest of fish. The cooperation of communal members, men and women, old and young, echoed the cooperative spirit of commune. The abundance of chickens in “Brigade Chicken Farm,” by Ma Yali (馬亞莉) (fig. 7) and harvest of cabbage in “Cabbage,” by Jiao Caiyun (焦彩雲) (fig. 8) also show super abundance in communal village life. The affluence in food demonstrates the utopia of village life. Other than adhering to the official dictate of combining revolutionary optimism and revolutionary heroism, these rosy pictures often projected peasants’ ideals and hopes, as commonly found in folk art like New Year paintings. In fact, Huxian peasant painters were advised by Chen Shiheng, the first instructor, as early as 1958, to draw inspirations from their daily life by close observation. Chen laid down the principles of “drawing reality,” “drawing from memory,” and “drawing ideal” (畫現實, 畫記憶, 畫理想) for the peasant painters to follow (S. H Chen, 1999, p. 141 in Duan, 2005, p. 213). Therefore, Huxian peasant painting had a touch of sincerity and warmth of life that was not often found in propaganda posters produced by professionals.

Other than abundance, modernisation of agriculture is also illustrated in Huxian paintings. Modernised irrigation is a popular theme. Like portraying “good harvest”

during famine, Huxian paintings also delineate profusion of water during periods of drought. In “Sprinkling” (fig. 10), a big electric water pump is sprinkling water extensively into the field. Drinking water in jars and bowls are waiting by the field side. Besides, as the tractor was a symbol of agricultural modernisation at that time, “Buying ‘Iron Oxen’”(fig. 11) depicts plenty of tractors in the “Huxian agricultural machines company” (“戶縣農業機械公司”). “Iron oxen” was a familiar term for tractor used by peasants. As the state was promoting women’s liberation, the two tractors in the painting are being operated by women, while men are passengers only.

The official advocacy of women’s liberation is also frequently seen in Huxian peasant paintings. Women were “liberated” to work as productive members in the people’s communes for the construction of socialism. “Women Hold Up Half the Sky” by Cheng Minsheng (fig. 12) is dedicated to promoting women’s liberation. In the painting, people gather in front of a wall covered in posters looking at one entitled “Shattering the age-old iron chain, women can hold up half the sky”(“砸碎千年鐵鎖鏈，婦女能頂半面天”). The poster delineates a fisted, determined woman speaking for women’s liberation. The spectators are mostly women of different generations. These women are engaged in different occupations, including a postwoman, tractor driver, medical doctor and farmer.

In fact, political messages are often infused in these peasant paintings. “Listening to the Good News” by Liu Zhigui (劉知貴) (fig. 13) portrays workers gathering together to attend a political class after work. The hoes and hammers beside them indicate that they are having a break after their day’s labour. A female worker holding a flag of “8th March Team” (三八隊) signified women’s liberation. “The Whole Family Studies the Communiqué” by Du Zhilian (杜志廉) (fig. 14) illustrates a peasant family reading the communiqué (the party’s newspaper). This picture subtly conveys an ideal family in a traditional sense: three generations of grandparents, parents and children (an elder daughter and a younger son are symbolised by “good” (好) in Chinese character). Reading the party’s newspaper shows that this family is politically aware. The sewing machine, radio and bicycle in the picture show that this family is well-provided for. The *kang* (炕) (heated bed) and the surrounding wallpaper suggests that the setting is in a traditional Northern Chinese village home. By putting the ideal family in such a local setting, the painting cleverly conveys to the peasant audience that socialism is good.

“Party Class” by Liu Zhigui (劉知貴) (fig. 15) is more direct in conveying the political message. A little blackboard with Mao’s slogan “the issue of line: must be articulated every year, every month, every day” (“路線問題: 必須年年講, 月月講, 天天講”) gives the gist of this picture. A group of peasants gather in a peasant’s home

after work (hoes and hats are put in the corner) at night to attend a political class. They are eagerly listening to the speaker whilst taking notes. It contains not only traditional peasant life elements such as the *kang* and the corn hanging outside the window: signs of harvest, the world map and the *internationale* poster hanging on the wall also draw peasants into the world proletarian revolution, which would have little importance to their daily lives. Whilst showing the infiltration of party propaganda into villages, the painting also reflects politicised peasant life and widespread revolutionary enthusiasm during the Maoist period.

Visual Characteristics of Huxian Peasant Paintings

Huxian peasant paintings were influenced by Chinese and Western sources. As peasants were surrounded by folk art like New Year paintings and paper cut-outs in their living environment, their paintings demonstrated folk art characteristics. One of the important sources of influence was New Year paintings. Realistic in style, they are not confined to photo-like realistic depiction (Zou, 2002, p. 29). Due to official encouragement, New Year paintings became more folk like since 1956 as a respect for national heritage and a reaction to Western influence. Elements from paper cut-outs (剪纸) were adopted. Lines became more decorative and the colour was rich. While

parallel layout structure was retained, character depiction became more formalised. The coexistence of simplicity and exaggeration was characteristic. New Year paintings in Yangliuqing (楊柳青) had already been influenced by Western perspective in depicting complex architectural elements. Under the Communist reform, a new type of New Year painting emerged, which adopted strong Western perspective, Western figural arrangements and new dramatic gestures (Andrews, 1994, pp. 60-1).

Similar to New Year paintings, which often have decorative elements, peasant paintings often repeat a pattern. For example, the repeated patterns of corn and cotton, in fig. 3, show the abundance of the harvest and exhilaration. Marked by brightly-hued colours and *xianmiao* (outline drawing 線描), Huxian peasant paintings manifest a strong traditional Chinese flavour. “Cabbage” in fig. 8 is full of a repeated pattern of cabbages. The chickens in fig. 7 are also rendered in recurrent patterns. The treatment of repetitive patterns gives a sense of exuberance. Rather than being monotonous, the paintings are vivid and joyful because of the luminous colours and variations of colour tone and small details.

As in New Year paintings, paper cut-outs also influenced Huxian peasant paintings. The lines and the red colour of fig. 5 in depicting the three patches of goats, pigs, hanging textiles and basket-making, have a strong traditional paper cut-out flavour.

The levels of skills vary among Huxian peasant paintings. Some are clearly more amateur as the spatial perspective is not quite correct. For instance, the ponds and embankments in figs. 2a and 2b do not have accurate perspective in depth and distance, and are also inconsistent. Despite different levels of proficiency in handling perspective, scale and proportion, these paintings are generally realistic.

Realistic representation was influenced by Soviet socialist realism in oil paintings, which was the Chinese official favourite in the 1950s. Some of the more sophisticated Huxian peasant paintings have adopted elements of Western paintings, such as three-dimensional drawing, perspective, triangular composition, light and shading and attention to proportion and fine detail. Fig. 14 is a triangular composition, which makes the picture look balanced and focused. The perspective system has the vanishing points meeting at the light bulb in the window. Placed below the vanishing point is a girl in red. The audience's sight lines will be drawn to her, the most important person in the painting, as she is reading the *Communiqué*. The sewing machine on the right and the bicycle on the left serve to balance the structure. This artistic treatment helps to demonstrate the theme.

Triangular composition is also seen in fig. 13, in which two triangles are extended from the two red flags. The long queue holding red flags on the left hand side, other

than suggesting the never-ending revolutionary force, form a tripartite composition with the two triangles. On the one hand, three-dimensional effects, rational human body proportion and shading are adopted from Western paintings; on the other hand, outline drawing, absence of a single light source and the textual strokes (*cunfa* 皴法) of the rocks in the lower right hand corner, show the influence of Chinese paintings. The combination of Western and Chinese painting skills and realism are characteristics of more sophisticated Huxian peasant paintings, whose painters had no doubt obtained professional training.

Moreover, during the Cultural Revolution, the principles of the “Three Prominences” (三突出) of Jiang Qing’s model operas became the golden rules in artistic creation: positive characters were given prominence among all characters; heroes and heroines were given prominence among all positive characters; the principal hero or heroine was given prominence among all heroes and heroines (H. J Yu, p. 111 in Galikowski, p. 165). Therefore, Huxian peasant paintings also adopted the presentation of the characters of model operas. The central speaker in fig. 9, with his raised fist right arm, adopts the typical heroic posture of a revolutionary. The actual and implied visual lines converging on him also emphasise his revolutionary greatness.

In Huxian peasant paintings exaggeration is also used, often as a romantic

demonstration of abundance of food. “Commune Fish Pond” (fig. 6) portrays an enormous harvest of fish in vivid colours. The oval-shaped composition makes the fishnet look three-dimensional. In order to exaggerate the abundance of the fish harvest, the fishnet and the catch seem to be elevated and thus are not observed in a true ratio. Such romantic sentiments are commonly found in Chinese folk art.

Conclusion

According to Mao’s “Yan’an Talks,” artists and writers were to develop “a mass style” for the proletarian audience, who provided the source of creation of art and literature. With socialist realism as the only acceptable style, Mao denounced any other creative mood that was “alien to the masses of the people and to the proletariat,” whether it was feudal, bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, liberalistic, individualistic, nihilist, art-for-art’s sake, aristocratic, decadent or pessimistic (Mao, 1942, p. 94). As art was manipulated by the Party to serve as propaganda with socialist realism as its guiding principle, the iconography during the Maoist period was full of optimistic imagery of the socialist revolution. Peasant Paintings were associated with Mao’s ultra-leftist line, a product of the Great Leap Forward, the Socialist Education Movement and the Cultural Revolution. The importance of this genre lies not only in its optimistic imagery of the

socialist construction, but also the value of peasants and the mobilisation during the Chinese Communist Revolutionary Movement. Mao had long regarded peasants, the bulk of the Chinese population, as a dormant potent force which should be released for building China's future. His mass line theory became the cornerstone of state-building. The struggle and hardship of the peasants provided the fuel for the revolutionary machine. They were mobilised and driven by the bright vision of the future provided by the Communist Party. In the pre-1949 Communist revolutionary bases, peasants provided manpower for the Red Army and economic construction. Their art, as in the case of New Year paintings, provided ideas and forms for Communist propaganda. As image is easier than words for people to understand, the Party recognised the importance and effectiveness of using visual propaganda to get the political message across to peasants, who were mostly illiterate or just had some rudimentary education. The Party sophisticatedly conveyed the message through popular visual propaganda that it had fulfilled peasants' dreams of abundance and happiness under its adroit and ingenious leadership.

In Mao's Thoughts, the masses were not just passive consumers of art. Under proletarian dictatorship, the masses were upheld in official discourse as the lord and creator of culture (Mao, 1942, pp. 76-7). The proliferation of mass art, especially

peasant painting, was a result of official encouragement since the Great Leap Forward and the official condemnation of “expert,” “bourgeois” art of “professionals.” The peasant painting movement, as in the case of Huxian, would not have existed without official organisation. When mobilising the peasants to paint, the Party indoctrinated them and involved them in political movements. Such a political education process was also an effort to remake the apolitical peasants, who were distrusted by Lenin as having “petit bourgeois” mentality (Fitzpatrick, 1993, p. 751), into active supporters of the Party and socialism.

During the peasant painting movement, peasants were not passive receivers of political messages, they became creative transmitters of them. Drawing and viewing the paintings became a part of political education for them. As peasants were instructed to combine their daily life experience in their artistic creation, they often took inspirations from everyday experiences (Duan, 2005, pp. 8-12). Such a touch of life not only makes the paintings vivid and lively, the paintings are also telling stories to the audience and thus are easier to comprehend. As these paintings are presenting good life under socialism in everyday story-settings, such subtlety and liveliness is more sentimental than overt shouting of monotone, straight-forward slogans and easier to be internalised by peasants, as painters and audience, that socialism is good.

However, were peasant painters really conscious of their roles as “revolutionaries” just like the slogan “(in order) to paint revolutionary paintings, (one has to) become a revolutionary first” (“要畫革命畫，先做革命人”)？ Rather than going into in-depth analysis of these peasant painters, the case of Li Fenglan (李鳳蘭), a model female peasant painter in Huxian, gives insight into how peasant painters were shaped by the official discourse as revolutionaries. As a married woman with a heavy family burden, Li was assigned to work in the Ganyu Reservoir construction site where she joined the painting class of Chen Shiheng in 1958. As well as working in the field, she had the extra burden of childcare and housework, yet she painted in her “spare time,” which meant either while cooking or staying up late at night. In 1972, before Li became famous for her painting “Spring Plough” (春鋤) (1973), Li was chosen by the county authority as a “model” because of her typical qualities—being a woman with a heavy family burden (Duan, 2005, p. 174). According to Li, as a woman, she had achieved “turn-over” (翻身) and became a “lord,” (“主”) in contrast to being a “slave” under the exploitation of a landlord, after years of participation in peasant paintings and social activities (village and brigade woman officer, commune representative). She regarded that women engaging in farm work was “turn-over” (Duan, 2005, p. 14). Her understanding and experience of “women’s liberation” was in line with the Party’s

discourse on women's liberation and "turn-over" of poor peasants under Communist leadership. In Party rhetoric, which is based on Friedrich Engels' *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State*, the prerequisite of women's liberation lies in their participation in labour. The promotion of women's liberation cannot be separated from the Party's mobilisation of women in the agricultural collectivisation campaign ("Mobilise Women to Join the Agricultural Collectivisation Movement," 1955). Li's sense of dedication to the Socialist revolution against all odds (heavy family burden and the social stigmatisation on women) was extolled by the Party as a model to be imitated by the people. She stated that "if I do not draw the revolutionary spirit of everyone, I have not fulfilled the political responsibility as an amateur painter" (K.C. Chen, 1976, p. 46). As she fitted neatly in the right image of a liberated, devoted revolutionary that the Party was promoting, she was raised to an honorary position in the National People's Congress in 1975 (全國人大代表, 第四屆全國人大常委會委員) (Duan, 2005, p. 175). Li's case shows that other than possible internalisation because of everyday indoctrination, there was political manoeuvring behind the scene in the making of Li Fenglan as a stereotype to be modelled upon for the whole nation.

We can see from the case of Huxian peasant paintings how state sponsorship manipulated folk art in making an idealistic socialist iconography. The discovery of the

value of the folk (peasants) was a result of the elevation of the status of the masses. Such a discovery, which fostered the growth of the Folk Literature Movement in the 1920s and 1930s, initiated Chinese intellectuals to the beauty and the usefulness of folk art in transmitting social and political messages to the masses. Folk art, as in the case of peasant paintings, was fostered and sponsored by the state under sophisticated organisation and manipulation. When art under the dictate of politics and realism is deprived of its allegorical function, can a well-designed official construction of an optimistic imagery of socialist life serve the interests of the proletariat?

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Illustrations



Fig. 1



Fig. 3



Fig. 2a



Fig. 4

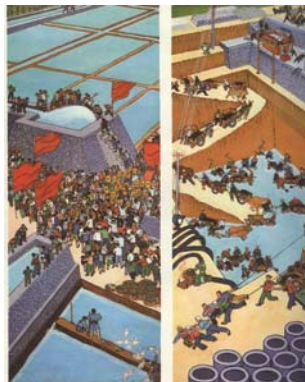


Fig. 2b

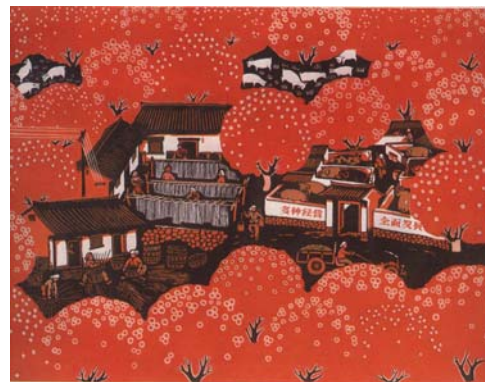


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 9



Fig. 7

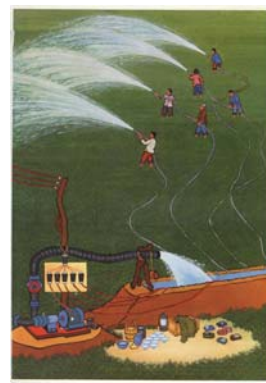


Fig. 10



Fig. 8



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 16



Fig. 13



Fig. 14



Fig. 15