

Prabhav Jain
Professor Hyska
11/26/19

Propaganda to Unite Nations

<https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1950-s-002.php>

The 14th of February 1950 was one of two instances during which Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China (PRC), travelled out of China. Chairman Mao travelled to Moscow to meet Joseph Stalin, leader of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and sign the *Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance*. This treaty was in effect for almost 30 years and “embodied the highest principles of complete equality, national sovereignty... and was a model for a new type of state relationship” (Borisov and Kolosov, 1975, p. 65). One outcome of this treaty was the advancement of credit to the PRC from the USSR at an incredibly favourable rate, which was imperative in rebuilding the Chinese economy after prolonged military conflicts had occurred on Chinese territory. Additionally many Soviet companies also agreed to help train and educate the Chinese citizens by establishing technical schools (Borisov and Kolosov, 1975, p. 67). All of this resulted in the publishing of many Chinese propaganda posters supporting the alliance between the two nations; the poster linked above, published by Li Binghong in 1950, is a perfect example of this. This paper will argue that Binghong employed propaganda to push Chinese citizens to view the Soviets in a positive light thereby allowing them to better cooperate with the Soviets. This was done through the use of symbolism, not-at-issue content, and homogeneity of people within the poster.

Propaganda is media that aims to coerce people into acting upon some beliefs, doing so through political messages that circumvent rationality. This takes form from Jose Medina who defined propaganda as “the kind of communication that aims at instilling false ideological beliefs and conveying biased or distorted messages in a way that bypasses

rational scrutiny” (Medina, 2018, p. 52). However, in agreement with Hannah Arendt, one can also argue that propaganda relies more on the tendency of people to act on already held beliefs as opposed to actually cultivating with new beliefs (Arendt, 2004, p. 343). This addition to my definition is fitting as Arendt’s definition of propaganda is more applicable in the context of totalitarian regimes such as the PRC. Now, I shall establish that Binghong’s poster aimed to mobilize the Chinese based on some loosely held beliefs they already possessed.

By 1950, communism had become a widely popular ideology in China due to the efforts of the Chinese Communist Party, and the great inequality amongst people throughout the country. The lack of a social structure in China during the 1920’s and 30’s meant that the gentry class dominated the peasants, who made up a majority of the population. This led to abject poverty and constant famines. Due to this, the peasants were widely supportive of the communist party, especially Mao Zedong, which advocated communism and equality. Mao eventually managed to revolutionise the civil war of 1945-1949 into a peasant revolution and thus the PRC was born on the 21st September 1949 (Anna Cienciala and Dan Bays, 1996). It is evident that the communist party was widely supported by the peasants of China due to its communistic and nationalistic ideologies. Looking to the poster, we can see that the goal of Binghong, in support of the PRC government, is to motivate Chinese citizens to be accepting of the Soviets and allowing feelings of camaraderie to be fostered in everyday life; feelings of camaraderie that were imperative in supporting the recently signed Sino-Soviet treaty in addition to inciting Chinese economic growth at the hands of a generous USSR (Landsberger, 2019). Binghong’s poster realizes this goal by utilizing the fundamental belief of communism: encouraging people to be friendly and respectful towards their fellow comrades. This aim was realized in a roundabout manner due to propaganda being a tool for organisation rather than persuasion. As Arendt puts it for the specific case of communism,

“People are threatened by Communist Propaganda with missing the train of history” (Arendt, 2004, p. 345). Communist propaganda is perhaps the most paradigmatic example of propaganda inciting people towards action, for it presupposes equality so one who does not move forward will fall far behind. Therefore, while it is difficult to instil implicit trust of Soviets into the Chinese citizens, it is easier to rally Chinese citizens under the communist spirit to cooperate fully with the Soviets by using communism as a motivating force to overcome any inherent nationalism.

This paper shall now examine the characteristics of Binghong’s poster which make it coercive in a way that can bypass rationality. Medina showed how not-at-issue content can be included within photographs through composition and associative imagery (Medina, 2018, p.56). The at-issue content within this poster is clearly the friendship between the Soviet leader Stalin and the Chinese leader Mao, in addition to the achievement of world peace as chronicled by Binghong’s caption: “The Sino-Soviet Alliance for Friendship and Mutual Assistance promotes enduring world peace” (Binghong, 1950). This relationship is complicity strengthened by the not-at-issue content of the background masses of Russian and Chinese dancers. Whereas Medina showed how juxtaposition between depictions of whites as presentable and blacks as animalistic in the same photo made viewers disposed to racism (Medina, 2018, p. 56), I argue that the opposite can also occur and that it does so within this poster. The Chinese and Russian dancers are both organized almost identically with very similar colour schemes, red and white, and similar postures. There is essentially no juxtaposition; instead the homogeneity of the collective dancers makes viewers subconsciously regard Chinese and Soviet people as more similar to each other than perceived earlier. This simplistic depiction bypasses the common rationality of Chinese and Soviet cultures being very distinct, as in reality the attire and positions of the differing groups of dancers would be far less homogenous.

However the even deeper subverted message of the poster, is that of communism being the linking force between the two nations. The colour red is undoubtedly a common communist symbol, which the Chinese people have rallied behind during their civil war and other conflicts as the communist party's fighting forces were called the Red Army (Hu Shih, 1954, p. 781). Therefore by framing the entire poster in red via the background elements such as flowers, buildings, and clothing Binghong effectively reminds the audience of communism in an indirect fashion and emphasizes the backgrounds of the two most prolific communist figures, who are the at-issue content. This overall framework coerces people into associating communism with camaraderie towards the Soviets and the noble goal of achieving world peace, thus overpowering any nationalism.

The final question we should consider is if this poster, and the many other instances of government propaganda were successful in their endeavour to foster good perceptions of the Soviets by the Chinese. The overall push from the PRC government lead to many changes in the everyday lives of Chinese citizens, such as Russian being taught in middle school or Chinese-Soviet friendship month being introduced and happily celebrated in 1952. (Borisov and Kolosov, 1975, p. 74-75). While many of these improvements are from government policies I would argue that the propaganda of Binghong's poster, and other such posters, fostered a positive attitude towards Soviets by uniting them under the banner of communism. This is demonstrated by how well they worked with and learnt from their Soviet counterparts, resulting in gross output of industry increasing by 24.7% in 1952, and the fondness of the Chinese masses for Russian concerts. Consider the Soviet Army ensembles which garnered an audience of almost one million people (Borisov and Kolosov, 1975, p. 75). In the end Sino-Soviet relations only faltered because of ideological differences between leaders as opposed to the public. Hence, it is evident that the masses were indeed supportive of the

Soviets insofar that they could collaborate and work together, which was the scope of the intent as we examined earlier.

In conclusion, Binghong's poster couples race and ideology to establish feelings of camaraderie and respect from the Chinese towards the Soviets. This is done in order to support the Sino-Soviet treaty and allow Chinese people to learn more avidly from the Soviets so that the PRC may emulate the economic, social and military success of the USSR. Binghong employs the use of not-at-issue content through blending the Chinese and Soviet masses into one homogenous group, before surrounding them with communist symbolism to couple together race and ideology tacitly. I believed that this poster in some ways showed how propaganda, even when used by a totalitarian state, can in fact have positive consequences. The fostered relations between Chinese and Soviet citizens was undoubtedly economically and socially advantageous for both and enabled better international relations. Perhaps even in our modern, globalized world propaganda could make use of ideologies to break down national barriers and foster better international relations.

Word Count: 1462

Works Cited:

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Schocken Books, 2004.
- Borisov, Oleg Borisovich., and Boris Trofimovich. Kolosov. *Soviet-Chinese Relations, 1945-1970*. Indiana University Press, 1975.
- Cienciala, Anna M., and Dan Bays. “The Chinese Revolution and Chinese Communism to 1949.” *The Communist Nations since 1917*, 1999, acienciala.faculty.ku.edu/communistnationssince1917/ch9.html.
- Landsberger, Stefan R. “Foreign Friends: Soviet Union.” *Chinese Posters*, 2007, chinese posters.net/themes/soviet-union.php.
- Li, Binghong. *The Sino-Soviet Alliance for Friendship and Mutual Assistance Promotes Enduring World Peace*. 1950.
- Medina, José. “Resisting Racist Propaganda: Distorted Visual Communication and Epistemic Activism.” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 56, 2018, pp. 50–75., doi:10.1111/sjp.12301.
- Shih, Hu. “Communist Propaganda and the Fall of China.” *Columbia Law Review*, vol. 54, no. 5, 1954, pp. 780–786. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1119719.