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12 Visual Images of the Soviet Union and the West in China (1950s–1960s)

Abstract. Visual images have a great impact on any nation’s formation of perceptions about others. This is particularly typical of the countries where the literacy rate and levels of education are not considered very high. Politicians are highly aware of the role of visual images and their significance for political propaganda, and, therefore, work hard to construct effective images of themselves and “the others”. In the 1950s–1960s in the People’s Republic of China, visual images (portraits, posters, cartoons) played a very important role in mass propaganda and were used to introduce official ideas to the public. In that period the image of America and the West as a whole was negative in China, and it did not change much. The image of the Soviet Union, in contrast, was entirely positive in the 1950s, but during the “Cultural Revolution” it underwent significant changes, in many respects becoming similar to the image of the West. All these changes were reflected through posters and cartoons. Based on a review of Chinese visual sources (posters, cartoons, and *nianhua*), this chapter aims to study how visual images functioned in China’s public life in the 1950s–1960s. In this regard, the article is intended to provide a basis for understanding the issue and suggest future research directions in this area.

Keywords. China, the West, USSR, USA, Visual images.

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Study of Visual Images: Methodological Remarks

Upon conducting full-scale studies of the interrelation between states and nations at the present time, apart from economic, political, and cultural factors which must be taken into account, it is also necessary to consider images of any nation, which are related to social ideas and overall mentality of other ethnic groups. As Iver B. NEUMANN convincingly argues, an ever-present image of “the Other” not only influences the relations between different peoples in the obvious manner, but is also reciprocated in the development of political relationships between states.¹ Nowadays, this condition is taken into consideration in international activities of many countries and their foreign policy propaganda. This, as it were, determines the scope of the so called “soft power policy”, which explains why the way in which the countries and their representatives create an impression of other countries’ images on the global stage is one of the most important features of foreign affairs. In addition, based on the recently conducted research, there have been images and stereotypes of mutual perception between different nations throughout the course of known history. Likewise, preexisting forms of such images have been shown to influence their subsequent development.

Accordingly, studying national and ethnic images and stereotypes in the current context becomes extremely important in relation to scholarly and practical significance. It is required, not only to trace the evolution of images of various nations, by means of defining the tendency of their space-time development, but also to find causes for appearance and persistence of certain images representing other countries as being ‘alien’ and thus opposed to ‘native’ within a certain national mentality. Consequently, a certain amount of historical research, methods, and data from other disciplines (sociology, ethnology, social psychology, literary studies, etc.) are crucial and important in terms of practicality. It is impossible to understand the persistence or development of the images without an interdisciplinary approach.

It can be said that the continuity of images and stereotypes is generally an integral part of the general process of communication between societies and cultures. By implementing various scientific methods, scholars widely practice analyzing said characteristics. Currently it is possible to say that a new cross-disciplinary scientific trend, *imagology*, has entered the scholarly field. Imagology is considered to be an overarching academic discipline in humanities that examines the processes whereby images are formed, perceived, and transformed. By now, some

1 Iver B. NEUMANN: *Uses of the Other. The 'East' in European Identity Formation*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, Borderline Series 1999.

results in studying images of Russia in China in the 20th century have been obtained. First and foremost, one should pay attention to the book written by famous Russian sinologist Sergey TIKHVINSKY (1918–2018): *Chinese perceptions of the image of Russia*.² He was the first to suggest a detailed historical overview and analysis of Russia's image in China, with the 20th century included. A monograph by a young Russian researcher Natalia TEN was recently published and describes the up-to-date stage of evolution of this image.³ One should notice that the term “imagology” (*xingxiang xue* 形象学) in Chinese academic literature was used for the first time by MENG Hua in 2000.⁴ After a while, the relevant research on China's image in Russia and Russia's image in China was carried out. Attention should be paid to the interesting and substantiated monographs of SUN Fang and CHEN Jinpeng,⁵ and LI Suian,⁶ which represent a large period of history. More recently a joint research of Russian and Chinese scholars in this area has also been conducted.⁷

It needs to be stated that, for learning about the evolution of Russia's image in China in the 20th century, a set of circumstances relating to previous historic periods should be taken into account. First of all, the most important point to be made is that the process of mutual perception between the Russians and the Chinese was subsumed under a broader phenomenon of reciprocal interpenetration of two stable sociocultural traditions: one being Confucianism, and the other Russian Orthodoxy. For this reason, relevant ethnic images are heavily tied to the perception of another type of culture, other forms of social and political organization.⁸

2 Sergeĭ TIKHVINSKIĬ: *Vospriiatie v Kitae obraza Rossii* (Chinese perceptions of the image of Russia), Moskva: Nauka 2008.

3 Natal'ia TEN: *Ot Pushkina do Putina: Obraz Rossii v sovremennom Kitae (1991–2010)* (From Pushkin to Putin: Image of Russia in contemporary China, 1991–2010), Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie 2016.

4 MENG Hua 梦华: *Xingxiang xue yanjiu yao zhuzhong zongti xing yu zonghe xing* 形象学研究要注重总体性与综合性 (Imagological studies should focus on overall and comprehensive approach). In: *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue zazhi* no. 4, 2000, pp. 1–20.

5 SUN Fang, CHEN Jinpeng: *Eluosi de Zhongguo xingxiang* 俄罗斯的中国形象 (Image of China in Russia), Beijing: People's Publishing House 2010.

6 LI Suian 李随安: *Zhongguo de Eluosi xingxiang (1949–2009)* 中国的俄罗斯形象 (1949–2009) (Image of Russia in China, 1949–2009), Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe 2012.

7 Nikolaĭ SAMOĬLOV, LI Suian': "Obraz Sovetskogo Soiuza v kitaĭskikh uchebnikakh 1950-kh godov" (Image of the Soviet Union in the Chinese textbooks in 1950s). In: *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta* ser. 13, no. 4, 2012, pp. 14–22.

8 More details in: Nikolaĭ SAMOĬLOV: *Rossiia i Kitaĭ v XVII – nachale XX veka: tendentsii, formy i stadii sotsiokul'turnogo vzaimodeĭstviia* (Russia and China in the 17th – early 20th centuries: Tendencies, Forms and Stages of Socio-Cultural Interaction), St. Petersburg: Izdatel'skii dom Sankt-Peterburgogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta 2014.

In this context, examining visual images is crucial for general image studies. Visual symbols have long been a central component of political communication, and their importance has increased as the visual medium of television and the internet has become the dominant source of political information. Politicians understand the significance of visuals and work equally hard to construct effective image bites. In short, visual images play a central role in constructing political images. Despite their central position in political communication, these visual symbols have historically been overlooked in research. Based on a review of the growing and substantial literature, this chapter argues that it is time for political communication scholars to delve deeper into how visual symbols function in public affairs. To that end, this chapter seeks to provide a theoretical and literature basis to facilitate this change in focus and to suggest future avenues for research in this area.

W.J.T. MITCHELL reconsiders visual culture to be a form of life and contends in his book *Picture Theory* that nowadays we can speak of a new “Turn” i.e. the “Pictorial Turn”. This turn will supplant the study of culture as we have known it under the sign of the “Linguistic Turn”: “It is the realization that spectatorship (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality.”⁹ In *Picture Theory*, the book that many scholars consider to be one of the seminal texts on the Pictorial Turn in contemporary philosophy,¹⁰ W.J.T. MITCHELL aims to identify the picture as the subject where various disciplinary traditions (from philosophy to semiotics, from the arts to media studies) finally converge into visual studies. He explains that it is impossible to consider the visual as a “pure” field of representation that stands in extrinsic relation to the verbal: “The interaction of pictures and texts is constitutive of representation as such”.¹¹

A significant transformation of historical studies takes place under the influence of the recent Pictorial Turn, both in terms of a set of sources and in terms of methodology. The development of visual anthropology has also become an obvious factor and contributed to the development of the Pictorial Turn in the studies of history. Today, historians studying various manifestations of visualization use new tools for collecting and recording data. The growing popularity of historical photographs and documentaries, museum installations, and historical recon-

9 W. J. Thomas MITCHELL: *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1994, p. 11.

10 Alberto MARTINEGRO: “From the Linguistic Turn to the Pictorial Turn – Hermeneutics Facing the ‘Third Copernicus Revolution’”. In: *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics* vol. 5, 2013, p. 302.

11 MITCHELL: *Picture Theory* (1994), p. 5.

structions testifies to the intensification of the role of visual images in historical research. New methodological approaches to the study of visuality make it possible to reexamine the mechanisms of image formation, as well as the use of images for political and ideological purposes. Visual studies and studies visualization have become the trend these days.

Undoubtedly, visual studies cannot be equated with image studies; the latter covers a far broader scope. In this sense, MITCHELL's argument can stand that the study of visual images is just one component of a larger field. However, one should bear in mind that this component is an extremely important one. MITCHELL also recognizes the difference between a picture and an image.

I like to start from the vernacular, listening to the English language, in a distinction that is untranslatable into German: 'you can hang a picture, but you can't hang an image.' A picture is a material object, a thing you can burn or break. An image is what appears in a picture, and what survives its destruction – in memory, in narrative, and in copies and traces in other media.¹²

To this convincing idea one can only add that the difference between "picture" and "image" in Russian and Chinese is even greater, and the contents of the concept of image is much more multifaceted.

Visual images have a great impact on the forming of any nation's perceptions about other peoples. This is particularly typical of the countries where literacy rate and levels of education are not very high. It is obvious that visual images have long been a central component of social, political, and cultural communication, and their importance has increased in our time, as the visual environment of television and the internet has become the dominant source of information. In many cases, visual images play a central role in building political images. Politicians are highly aware of the role of visual images and their significance for political propaganda, and, therefore, work hard to construct effective images of themselves and "the others". However, despite the crucial place of visual images in political communication, scholars have, for a long time, ignored these images in their studies.

12 MITCHELL: *Picture Theory* (1994), p. 16.

The Role of Visual Images in 1950's Chinese Political Propaganda

In the 1950s–1970s in the People's Republic of China (PRC), visual images (portraits, posters, and cartoons) played a very important role in mass propaganda and were used to introduce official ideas to the national consciousness. After 1949 most posters and cartoons that appeared in China had to promote the main ideological principles of the Communist Party, including its foreign policy. MAO Zedong and other leaders of communist China suggested socialist realism, as it had been practiced in the Soviet Union since the pre-War period, to be the best tool to develop new ideas and forms of art. It provided a positive view of life, represented in the rosy colors of optimism, though largely seen through a political lens. Socialist realism in the USSR was focused on industrial constructions, power stations, collective farms, and the working people.

In the first decade of the PRC times, many Chinese artists studied painting and applied art in Soviet art academies; others were educated by Soviet professors who came to teach in Chinese art institutions. Therefore, the influence of socialist realism was very strong. Posters and pictures that appeared in China after the formation of the PRC contain evident and well-recognized elements of socialist realism, inspired by the examples from the Soviet Union. However, additionally, they were also featured with many characteristics of *guohua* 国画 (traditional Chinese paintings) and *nianhua* 年画 (folk paintings) – sweet colors applied in soft gradations or a combination of black contours with bright flat colors.¹³

At the same time, in the first years after the formation of the PRC, a peculiar type of fine art, the *xin nianhua* 新年画 (new *nianhua*), developed actively in China, combining all the forms and techniques of traditional *nianhua* painting with new propaganda tasks.

After 1949, both pictures and posters with realistic plots (socio-political, historical, and portraiture) became most widespread. The household genre also underwent active transformation. At that time, it was also associated with socio-political issues and had to demonstrate the advantages of socialism. Artists had to cover important social events. MAO Zedong's ideas on the general accessibility of art and on the priorities of socialist values over art exerted a significant impact on

13 Stefan LANDSBERGER: *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 1995; "Chinese Posters: Propaganda, Politics, History, Art", 2020, March 26. Available online: <https://chineseposters.net/index.php> (last access 2020, April 21).

xin nianhua 新年画. Such aspects as “general accessibility” and political programming brought about a tremendous narrowness of the new *nianhua* genre.

Many Chinese artists who created *xin nianhua* 新年画¹⁴ turned to realistic oil painting techniques as this genre had everything that was needed to show a new life of ordinary people and “their struggle for the brighter future”. Taking realistic symbols as the basis, the artists constructed new visual images. They sought to demonstrate to the audience the drama of the revolutionary years, the pathos of victory, the exploits of real people, achievements of the country, portraits of leaders and outstanding figures. Many of them tried to create a synthetic style that combined elements of European paintings with Chinese folk painting traditions. In these works, attempts can be seen to preserve the direct techniques of folk art: the brightness of silhouettes, the rhythmic combination of color spots and symbolism of images. For the better development of contemporary themes, painters began to use new materials and techniques. There appeared a great variety of technical means of printing, including black and white and color woodcuts, color lithography and color printing.

More often artists were assigned enlightening and propaganda tasks. The works of this period were devoted to the themes of grandiose economic construction, military victories, glorification of the heroes of labor, struggle against illiteracy, and clarification of new laws and regulations. Since the main consumer group of *xin nianhua* belonged to Chinese peasants, most of the images were devoted to the political course of the Communist Party in terms of the agricultural sphere and social transformations of villages. These were stories about the agrarian reform, the creation of agricultural brigades, agricultural cooperation, struggle to increase production rates and harvest output. In accordance with the literacy program, *Nianhua workshops* printed numerous pictures promoting culture and education (see fig. 12-1).

Today, St. Petersburg State University Library’s collection contains three folders of *xin nianhua* pictures (*xin nianhua xuanji* 新年画选集) printed in a typographic manner in Beijing in 1950.¹⁵ Among the pictures, predominant are examples showing peasant life and agricultural activities, but there are also *nianhua* related to foreign affairs. Although these *xin nianhua* differ greatly from traditional *nianhua*, their creators, nevertheless, clearly borrowed a number of easily recognizable traditional ideas, images, forms and details from old *nianhua* and

14 From this point onwards, the terms *nianhua* 年画 and *xin nianhua* 新年画 remain indicated in Pinyin in italic but without Chinese characters unless necessary.

15 *Xin nianhua xuanji* 新年画选集 (*Anthology of New Year paintings*), vol. 1–2, Beijing: Rongbaozhai xinji 1950.

Chinese medieval paintings. All visual images were understandable for both urban and rural population.



Figure 12-1: *Du bao tu* 讀報圖 (Reading newspaper).¹⁶ *Xin nianhua* in the form of a traditional lunar calendar.

16 Designer: Li Qun 力羣. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

“Laodage”:

Visual Images of the Soviet Union in China in the 1950s

In 1950 the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China signed the Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance, which established close relations and cooperation in different areas. The Treaty was supposed to foster the rapprochement of the socialist countries in their struggle against imperialism. In the 1950s, large-scale propaganda campaigns launched both in the USSR and in China were to create extremely positive images of “fraternal peoples” and “brothers forever”. Their goal was to arouse a feeling of mutual understanding between the two nations and bring the Soviet people closer to the Chinese, who could serve as a valuable ally in the USSR’s struggle against the United States. Communist China was interested in receiving economic, military, scientific, and technical assistance from the Soviet Union, as well as in the training of qualified personnel. Economic cooperation became an important component of the bilateral relations and enabled China to achieve fruitful results in industrial growth. It also helped to supply China with Soviet weapons and equipment for modernization of the Chinese army, navy and air force, changing it from a primitive and poorly equipped armed force into a modern one; the largest in Asia. For all these reasons, mass propaganda campaigns were carried out on a grand scale in both countries, and visual images played a particularly important role in these campaigns.

The central idea for this visual propaganda was set to present Josef STALIN with MAO Zedong as the major pillars of Sino-Soviet friendship. Their figures took central position everywhere because in the 1950s “China Stalin” became the image and symbol of peace and socialism all over the world. Images of STALIN and MAO standing side by side were intended to symbolize not only the strength of the two communist nations, but also to personify the power of the entire socialist camp. On the posters, two powerful figures of the communist leaders opposed the entirety of the imperialist West (fig. 12-2). The poster designed by LI Binghong with portraits of STALIN and MAO amidst people in folk dresses dancing on the Red Square and Tiananmen is accompanied with the slogan: “The Sino-Soviet Alliance for Friendship and Mutual Assistance promotes enduring world peace”.¹⁷ Portraits of the two communist leaders are present even on the *nianhua* along with celebrating children (fig. 12-3).

¹⁷ LI Binghong (黎冰鸿). In: Chinese posters.net. Available online: <https://chineseposters.net/artists/libinghong.php> (last access 2020, April 29).



Figure 12-2: “Under the banner of STALIN – MAO Zedong forward, to victory!”¹⁸ Poster.



Figure 12-3: “Zhong su youhao wansui 中蘇友好萬歲 (Long live the China-Soviet friendship)”¹⁹ *Xin nianhua*.

18 Designer: LI Zongjin 李宗津. *Narodnyĭ Kitaĭ* (People’s China). 1952. No. 22, p. 10. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

19 Designer: ZHAO Min 趙敏. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

In the 1950s, a large number of posters and other illustrations were published to familiarize the Chinese people with the phenomenon of the Russian teacher who would provide them with assistance. The Soviet people were portrayed as good friends, *laodage* 老大哥 (the “elder brothers”), from whom Chinese people were supposed to learn everything about modernization. This idea was to be promoted in many propaganda posters. The “elder brother” was always represented with the position of a teacher, while the Chinese were depicted as attentive pupils, absorbing every word spoken by their teacher. At that time, a large number of posters and *xin nianhua* appeared in China, depicting well educated skilled Soviet people (engineers, professors, agronomists, doctors, experienced workers) who taught their Chinese counterparts and helped them fulfil new scientific and technological achievements, as well as offer them practical recommendations (fig. 12-4). On these posters Soviet people always looked more mature and more experienced than their Chinese “comrades” and students so that the image of an “elder brother” was even strongly visualized. On one of the *xin nianhua* pictures, one can see Soviet specialists with the Gold Stars of the Heroes²⁰, which was meant to show the ordinary Chinese people that the most honored Soviet citizens were sent to help them (fig. 12-7). Posters and paintings usually demonstrate the moment of communication between Soviet specialists and their Chinese counterparts or students. In one of them, a reputable Soviet engineer is explaining something to a young Chinese (fig. 12-5). In another, an elderly Russian worker is sharing his experience with a young Chinese friend, which takes place in front of a huge modern factory building (fig. 12-6). Another poster “Great friendship, fraternal feelings!” designed by WANG Naizhuang (王乃壮) shows steelworkers (Russian and Chinese) engaged in steelmaking together while it is clearly visible that it is the Soviet engineer who is controlling the steel melting process. The image was based on a photograph published in *China Reconstructs* (August 1955).²¹

Many posters and pictures portray friendly meetings of Chinese workers and peasants with guests from the Soviet Union as well. These show how warmly and cordially the Chinese greet their “elder brothers” (fig. 12-7). One of the *nianhua* shows that the Chinese meet Russian friends in the same way as they celebrate New Spring, New Year (fig. 12-8).

20 The Gold Star medal (in Russian: “*Zolotaia Zvezda*”) was a special insignia that identified recipients of the title “Hero” in the USSR.

21 Great friendship, fraternal feelings! In: Chinese posters.net. Available online: <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e15-866.php> (last access 2020, April 29).

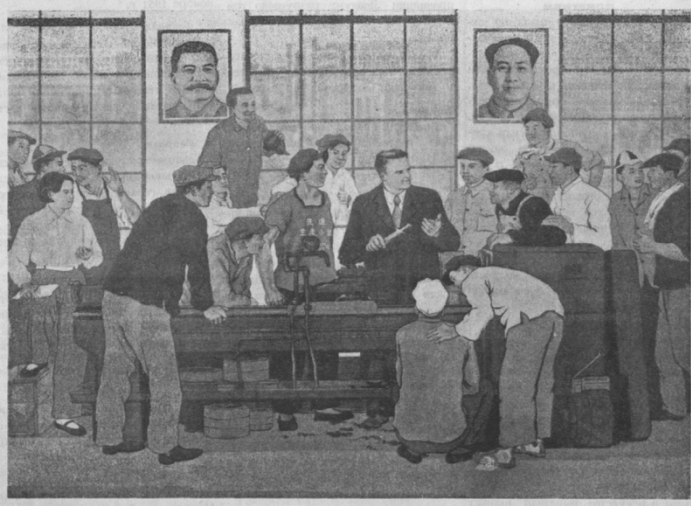


Figure 12-4: “Elder brother from the USSR”.²² *Xin nianhua*.



Figure 12-5: “*Xuexi sulian xianjin jingyan jianshe women de zuguo*
學習蘇聯先進經驗建設我們的祖國 Study the Soviet Union’s
advanced experience to build up our nation”.²³ Poster.

22 Designer: WU Dezu 武德祖. *Narodnyĭ Kitaĭ* (People’s China). 1952. No. 3-4, p. 40. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

23 Designer: DING Hao 丁浩. *Narodnyĭ Kitaĭ* (People’s China). 1953. No. 21, p. 19. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).



Figure 12-6: “Study the advanced production experience of the Soviet Union, struggle for the industrialization of our country!”²⁴ Poster.



Figure 12-7: “*Huanying sulian pengyou* 歡迎蘇聯朋友 (Welcome to Soviet friends)”²⁵ *Xin nianhua*.

24 Designer: LI Zongjin 李宗津. *Narodnyĭ Kitaĭ* (People’s China). 1953. No. 4, p. 19. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

25 Designer: DENG Shu 鄧樹. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).



Figure 12-8: “*Youyi xinchun* 友誼新春 (Friendship’s New Spring)”.²⁶ *Xin nianhua*.



Figure 12-9: “*Xin Zhongguo de ertong* 新中國的兒童 (New China Children)”.²⁷ *Xin nianhua*.

26 Designers: WEN Tao 文韜, WANG Huizhi 王慧芝. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

27 Designer: ZHANG Ding 張行. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

Through such visual images, often created in the form of *nianhua* which were accessible to the common people, even illiterate and poorly educated peasants perceived the idea that the Soviet people were true friends and “elder brothers” of the Chinese. Captions of these *nianhua* are often very concise and easy to read. Numerous Chinese posters and photographs in different magazines were designed to reflect the success of the Soviet Union in industrial construction, science, and art, and the victories of the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War. Images of the first Soviet space satellites (sputnik), atomic icebreakers, and other achievements of the USSR in the use of peaceful atom appeared on the Chinese propaganda posters designed by LI Lang (李浪) and SONG Xishan (宋锡山), in 1958.

The impression of fraternal friendship between the Soviet people and the Chinese were usually supplemented with appropriate slogans and appeals on such posters. These slogans were supposed to strengthen “the elder brother” image: “The Soviet Union is an example to follow”, “Study the Soviet Union’s advanced economy to build up our nation”, “Study the advanced production experience of the Soviet Union, struggle for the industrialization of our country”, “Study the Soviet Union, to advance to the world level of science” etc. A special series of posters was devoted to military cooperation between the USSR and China. As a rule, representatives of the two friendly armies or navies were portrayed. They were portrayed as strong young men as well as “brothers-in-arms”. These visual images were usually accompanied by specific slogans such as: “Long live the friendship between the peoples and armies of China and the Soviet Union” or “The Sino-Soviet alliance is invincible in the world”. In contrast, the capitalist world and Old China were painted in dark colors, and unpleasant images were used.

“Paper Tigers”: Visual Images of the USA and the West in China at the Time of the Korean War

“Paper tiger” is the English translation of the Chinese term *zhilao hu*²⁸ (纸老虎). It refers to something or someone that claims to be powerful and threatening, but is actually ineffectual and unable to withstand challenge. The expression became

²⁸ Originally, “paper tiger” is an ancient description used in Chinese culture. It first appeared in Western literature and was translated into English in the book *The Chinese: A General Description of the Empire of China and Its Inhabitants* (published in 1836) by Sir John Francis Davis, a British diplomat and sinologist who served as chief superintendent of British trade in China from 1833 to 1848 and governor of Hong Kong from 1844 to 1848.

popular as a catchphrase which MAO Zedong first put into practice and used against his political opponents, and later was actively applied in communist China to criticism about Western imperialism, particularly the U.S. government. MAO first introduced his concept of “paper tigers” in August 1946 in his talk with the American journalist Anna Louise Strong (1885–1970): “All reactionaries are paper tigers. In appearance, the reactionaries are terrifying, but in reality, they are not so powerful. From a long-term point of view, it is not the reactionaries but the people who are powerful.”²⁹ This was a very important statement by MAO concerning the international and domestic situation not long after the end of World War II. There, MAO Zedong put forward his famous slogan to the masses: “All reactionaries are paper tigers!”. This thesis armed the people ideologically, strengthened their confidence in victory and played a significant role in the People’s War of Liberation. Just as LENIN considered imperialism a “colossus with feet of clay”, so MAO Zedong regarded imperialism and all reactionaries as “paper tigers”; both dealt with the essence of the matter. This thesis is a fundamental strategic concept for the revolutionary people. Later on, plenty of times he compared imperialism with a “paper tiger”:

To destroy the rule of imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism in China, it took the Chinese people more than a hundred years and cost them tens of millions of lives before the victory in 1949. Look! Were these not living tigers, iron tigers, real tigers? Nevertheless, in the end they changed into paper tigers, dead tigers, and bean-curd tigers. These are historical facts. Have people not seen or heard about these facts? There have indeed been thousands and tens of thousands of them! Thousands and tens of thousands! Hence, imperialism and all reactionaries, looked at in essence, from a long-term point of view, from a strategic point of view, must be seen for what they are - paper tigers. On this, we should build our strategic thinking. On the other hand, they are also living tigers, iron tigers, real tigers that can devour people. On this, we should build our tactical thinking.³⁰

After MAO’s speeches the “paper tiger” image was used everywhere in China. With such an image, it was much easier to motivate and mobilize the masses to fight against imperialists, and MAO Zedong actively used it:

29 “Talk with the American Correspondent Anna Louise Strong” (August 1946). In: *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. 4, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1961, p.100.

30 Speech at the Wuhan Meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (December 1958). In: *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. IV, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1961, pp. 98–99.

I have said that all the reputedly powerful reactionaries are merely paper tigers. The reason is that they are divorced from the people. Look! Was not HITLER a paper tiger? Was HITLER not overthrown? I also said that the Tsar of Russia, the emperor of China and Japanese imperialism were all paper tigers. As we know, they were all overthrown. U.S. imperialism has not yet been overthrown and it has the atom bomb. I believe it also will be overthrown. It, too, is a paper tiger.³¹

In October 1950, just one year after the People's Republic was founded, the Chinese People's Volunteers stepped in to support North Korean communist forces in the Korean War (1950–1953). The Korean War marked the period of a strong rise in patriotism among Chinese people. After the beginning of the Korean War, the USA officially became China's main foreign opponent and most vicious enemy. The slogan "Resist America and Support Korea!" was very popular in mass propaganda and was supplemented by another one: "Defend Home and Motherland!"

The war time provided numerous opportunities to demonstrate Americans and other "Western imperialists" in an extremely disgusting guise. American soldiers murdering and looting in Korea became popular characters on Chinese posters and caricatures. Sometimes ugly and revolting military men on the Chinese caricatures resembled the U.S. president Harry TRUMAN or general Douglas MACARTHUR, the commander of the American troops in Korea. A popular theme in political propaganda of that time was the accusation that the USA was engaged in bacteriological warfare against Chinese.

During the Korean War, there appeared a considerable number of propaganda posters illustrating the victories of the North Korean army and Chinese People's Volunteers. These were posters designed in a realistic manner or in the form of caricatures. The Americans and their allies were shown either as defeated and captive (in realistic posters), or as miserable and puny midgets on whom the young and strong Chinese and Korean warriors were easily cracking down (via caricatures). After the start of the Korean War, the United States officially became China's main foreign adversary. The war provided numerous opportunities to show Americans in a bad light. At that time, Chinese propaganda posters and caricatures formed the common Chinese perception of American imperialism as a "Paper Tiger", which could easily be coped with and defeated (cf. fig. 12-9). The image of American imperialism and the United States in the form of a paper tiger played a highly important role in the education of Chinese children after the Korean War. Americans in the form of paper tigers appeared in children theater plays, puppet shows, posters hung around in schools and kindergartens, and even in the English language textbooks. An important theme in Chinese newspapers and

³¹ Speech at the Moscow Meeting of Communist and Workers' Parties (November 18, 1957). In: *Quotations From Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, Beijing 1966, p. 46.

magazines at the time of the Korean War was the accusation that the U.S. military forces were engaged in bacteriological warfare against China.³² On this occasion, the Chinese and North Korean officials repeatedly made their statements.³³

It has been suggested that starting from 1952, the American activities included the utilization of disease carrying rats, insects, and other vermin on the Chinese territory. In response, the Chinese government organized mass inoculation campaigns within the framework of the Patriotic Health Campaign to combat unhygienic conditions in urban and rural areas, and to annihilate potential disease spreading animals and insects. The Patriotic Health Campaign started in 1952 after the appearance of the first “poisonous insects”. The American germ-warfare in North Korea had been reported earlier, but in 1952 Chinese officials linked these reports with the occurrence of domestic epidemics. In March 1952, some accounts confirmed the spraying of germs by Americans in Manchuria and Qingdao. Since then, Chinese newspapers began to publish articles and information notes which set out more and more facts about the germ-warfare that moved to China itself. Under the circumstances the Chinese government established a special committee for epidemic prevention and launched programs for anti-epidemic injections. Poster propaganda of anti-epidemic activities was an integral and important part of that campaign. The image of the USA and American soldiers on the anti-epidemic posters became violent and negative. Their images were connected with the images of disease-carrying rats and insects. On the poster “Resolutely cut off the bloody and criminal hand of the American aggressor that spreads germs!” is written and it depicts the bloody hand of American imperialism, decorated with the dollar sign symbol, swastika, and the Japanese flag, with a disease carrying rat; injections and the hygiene campaigns were directed against the germs “spreading by American imperialism”. Another poster designed by YE Shanlu (叶善箒) was given the caption: “Everybody must take precautions against epidemics to smash the germ warfare of American imperialism”.³⁴ Therefore, the Patriotic Health Campaign and the visual propaganda they employed played an important role in promoting the negative image of the USA and the West in the 1950s China.

At that time the image of the United States became equal to the image of the West in China. The West was almost identified with the United States. Other

32 “Against U.S. Bacteriological War: A Statement by the P.P.C.C. and Democratic Parties of China issued on March 8, 1952”. In: *People's China*, March 16, 1952, pp. 3–4; “Foreign Minister Chou En-lai’s Statement of March 8, 1952”. *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5; “Down with the Germ-War Criminals! Editorial”. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

33 “U.S. Germ-Warfare Denounced: Statements by the Korean and Chinese Foreign Ministers on U.S. Bacteriological Warfare in Korea”. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.

34 “Patriotic Health Campaign (1952)”. Available online: <https://chineseposters.net/themes/patriotic-health-campaign.php> (last access 2020, April 23).

Western countries were mentioned rather rarely, let alone depicted. In addition to the United States, only satirical images of West Germany, which was positioned as an American satellite and semi-colony, can be seen in Chinese caricatures of the 1950s. The cartoons most often demonstrate how America is reviving German militarism (*junguozhuyi* 军国主义). Another caricature shows Berlin divided into two parts: light (East Berlin) and dark (West Berlin). In this picture the divided city is similar to the image of traditional Chinese dualistic symbol *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳 (dark-bright, negative-positive).

National Liberation Movements, the Second Indochina War, and the Image of the USA in China

Shortly before and during the Cultural Revolution in China, American imperialism and the West as a whole continued to be heavily criticized. As the self-proclaimed leader of the so-called Third World, China supported many national liberation movements and radical revolutionary parties in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This struggle was seen as part of a global movement in which the “countryside” (the Third World states) would fight against the “cities” (developed and industrialized countries of the Second and First Worlds) and conquer them. In many ways, China supported the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist wars, that is, the armed struggle of the peoples of the Third World against Western imperialism, propagating its own experience of the armed struggle against the Kuomintang (*Guomindang* 国民党, the Nationalist Party, in China until 1949 and in Taiwan since then). Due to the insufficiency of Chinese economic and military potential, the support was only moral for friendly nations and radical revolutionary parties in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In this sense, visual propaganda played a big role (cf. fig. 12-10).



Figure 12-10: “*Baowei heping!* 保衛和平! (Defend peace!)”.³⁵ Poster.

35 Designer: SU Guojing 苏国惊. *Narodnyĭ Kitaĭ* (People’s China). 1952. No. 7-8, p. 19. From the collection of St. Petersburg State University Library (Oriental Department).

A large number of anti-imperialist posters aimed at supporting the national liberation movements were to there to convince the Third World countries to support their struggle against the United States and Western countries.³⁶ Chinese posters of the time called for: “Vigorously support the anti-imperialist struggle of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America” and persuaded the “awakened peoples” to “form the possible united front in order to win the war against imperialism”. Visual images of Americans and other Westerners in these posters were very repulsive in appearance. They were portrayed in the form of wretched little men trying to oppose the rise of national liberation movements. Sometimes they were depicted in the form of wolves or other predatory animals. In any case, the muscular and well angulated representatives of the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America swept them out of their way.

During the Second Indochina War (1957–1975) the renaissance of the “Paper Tiger” image can be seen. At that time China not only kept a close watch on the U.S. military activities south of its borders (in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia), but tried to support anti-American forces in that region. A potential spillover of hostilities into the Chinese territory seemed rather possible, as the PRC had taken side on Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The struggle of the peoples of Indochina (especially the Vietnamese) against the American intervention provided inspiration to many Chinese artists in the 1960s to the early 1970s, and their posters strongly influenced the popular consciousness leading to the rise of patriotism. The slogans “Down with American imperialism!” and “American imperialism is the common enemy of all the people in the world!” became increasingly frequent at that time. A huge number of Chinese posters of the 1960s–1970s depicted Vietnamese partisans (and even Vietnamese children) who heroically fought against the American invaders. “American imperialism must be beaten!” was also the frequently used slogan on Chinese posters of that time.

On some posters, the scene of parachuting American pilots being shot down in the sky of Vietnam is also found. One of the pilots has the face of the U.S. president Lyndon JOHNSON, who was responsible for escalating the Vietnam War. This example proves that Chinese artists as the authors of propaganda posters sought to visualize the image of the enemy by adding the features of a concrete politician. Welcoming the victories of the Vietnamese partisans, Chinese propaganda tried to bring their struggle to the level of an absolute and emphasized its global significance.

36 “Foreign Friends: National Liberation Movements”. Available online: <https://chinese-posters.net/themes/liberation-movements.php> (last access 2020, April 23).

Images of the USSR from the Time of the Sino-Russian Split

While the image of America and the West as a whole was still negative in China and did not change much, the image of the Soviet Union, in comparison, was entirely positive in the 1950s. However, during the Cultural Revolution period significant changes can be noted in many respects as the image of the Soviet Union was becoming similar to the image of the West. The transformations were mostly reflected on posters and cartoons.

When the Sino-Soviet split started in the 1960s and especially after the 1969 border conflict over Zhenbaodao 珍宝岛 (or Damanskiĭ) Island, the most explicit Chinese propaganda was directed against the USSR. During this period, there appeared a great number of posters that called for *Dadao Su xiu* 打倒苏修 (fighting against the Soviet revisionists), who, like the Western imperialists before them, were depicted as vile ugly dwarfs. Sometimes “Soviet revisionists” were portrayed along with “American imperialists”. On the posters both were being swept out of the way by the valiant *Hongweibing* 红卫兵 (Red Guards). The slogan “All peoples of the world, unite, to overthrow American imperialism, Soviet revisionism and reactionaries of various countries!” became very popular in the course of the Cultural Revolution. MAO Zedong’s political opponents who were attacked by the Red Guard were often called the “Chinese Khrushchevs” on propagandist posters.

Typical examples of the Maoist propaganda at the turn of the 1970s were the publications of political comics. In the comics “Soviet spy arrested” was described in a typical spy story. It was about a spy group from the USSR Embassy, which engaged in espionage by the order of the Soviet government. In the suburbs of Beijing, a spy cache was made for the spies. Police and security services seized evidence from them proving their espionage. The Soviet Embassy officers abused their diplomatic status, tried to undermine the sovereignty of China and violated the generally accepted norms of international law by engaging in espionage, and they thus committed a crime. The Chinese government deported the Soviet spies from the country in protest against the actions of the Soviet authorities. The appearance of such publications contributed to a change in the image of the Soviet Union in China, especially among the younger generation.

Finally, it is noteworthy that at the period of the Cultural Revolution and the Sino-Soviet Split, “Soviet revisionists” and the Soviet Union were never called “paper tigers”, despite the fact that numerous posters appeared against both American imperialism and Soviet revisionism. The former (i.e. American imperialism) was represented in Chinese propaganda posters and caricatures as a paper tiger, which could be easily coped with and defeated, and this perception of America

was effectively indoctrinated in China. The last poster with the caption “Imperialism and all reactionary forces are paper tigers” was published in January 1971. A few months later the Ping-pong diplomacy started, which paved the way for a visit of president Richard NIXON to Beijing in 1972.

