

Huxian's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes: Huxian Peasant Paintings from the Cultural Revolution and their Ideological Discourses

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Abstract: Huxian Peasant Paintings are a product of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Ostensibly painted by peasant amateur artists, they depict idealized peasants in rural China. The paintings were reproduced in large numbers and distributed as posters for the masses. Further evidence has shown that the amateur artists were in fact given detailed training by professional artists under the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). This paper seeks to analyze the images as important political texts from the Cultural Revolution because of the influence of the CCP. Using discourse analysis, this paper argues that these posters are an important discursive formation that allowed the CCP to transmit ideology to a largely illiterate or semiliterate rural population.

Key Terms: Huxian Peasant Paintings, Cultural Revolution Art, Discourse Analysis, Chinese Propaganda

All of the artists are people's commune members—women, youngsters, and old people, Party secretaries, production team leaders, militia company commanders and accountants. They are all pathbreakers 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.

- From the foreword in *Peasant paintings from Huhsien County, 1974*.

Introduction

The Peasant Painters from Huxian¹ County in Shaanxi Province in China reached national and international fame in the early to mid- nineteen seventies for their art depicting life in rural communist China. In 1974, Huxian was made a model for painting, and they were praised for “stepping out ahead in fine arts” (Huhsien Peasant Painting in China). Their paintings were reproduced as propaganda posters for distribution around China and were exhibited in Beijing and as far away as Paris. The paintings are a blend of folk art and socialist realism. Some of the images are stylistically complex, and others retain the folk quality one expects from peasant art. Even today, the paintings remain one of the most popular art forms from the Cultural Revolution (Crozier, 2010, 136). The images that the peasant artists created are significant scholarly resources for a number of reasons. First, they were created during the Cultural Revolution and as such make up an important component of the textual history of the period. Second, the images are political documents and can tell us much about the political climate of the period in

¹ Huxian and Huhsien are different transliterations of the name of the county the peasant painters lived in.

which they were created. Third, the images were touted as a product of the masses, a claim which later proved to be a half truth. A study of the production of these paintings can give us important insights into the intersection of state power and grassroots art during the Cultural Revolution.

In recent years, propaganda posters from the Cultural Revolution have received much more critical attention from scholars. While these images cannot tell us what it was like to live through the Cultural Revolution, they provide extremely important political texts that scholars can analyze to understand what ideologies the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promoted through its strict control over artistic production during the Cultural Revolution. A number of good sources document the posters themselves; however, in-depth readings of the posters as visual discourse are still rather uncommon. Harriet Evans' and Stephanie Donald's 1999 edited volume *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China* was the first collection of works that treated these images as important texts for understanding the Cultural Revolution (Evans & Donald, 1999). Other scholars have followed their example, and the literature is expanding; however, there is still much to be uncovered through analysis of these posters.

In particular, in-depth readings of Huxian posters as a unique genre of propaganda poster are strikingly lacking. Ellen Johnston Laing was the first scholar to take a serious interest in Huxian peasant art. Her landmark analysis of the stylistic and aesthetic qualities of the paintings convincingly argued that the images were not the work of untrained peasant artists, but rather they were sophisticated works of art that required significant training (Laing, 1984). Ralph Croizier (2010) provides an excellent history and an analysis of the political and folk content of the images; however, he does not examine the images for their deeper symbolic meanings. Francesca Dal Lago examines some Huxian paintings along with other posters of the period in her work on metapictures and visualized metatext; however, she fails to recognize Huxian paintings as a unique form of propaganda (Dal Lago, 2009). Yin-ki Cheung (2007) provides the only in-depth reading of Huxian paintings as a particular form of Chinese propaganda. She argues that Huxian peasant paintings "constructed an optimistic imagery of socialist revolution and fostered the image of socialist heroes" (Cheung, 2007, p.7). While I agree that these images created a utopian view of socialist revolution, by focusing only on the revolutionary romanticism in these images, Cheung overlooks their role in the ideological discourse of the Cultural Revolution.

In this paper, I argue that these paintings are not simply utopian visions of the future; they are an important discursive formation that allowed the CCP to transmit ideology to a largely illiterate or semiliterate rural population. Through a blend of semiotic analysis and discourse analysis of six Huxian peasant paintings, I highlight three discursive themes that are present in Huxian Paintings: abundance, modernity, and peasantry. I argue that the power of this discursive formation, at least from the CCP's perspective, was made particularly potent by insisting that this art was a product of the masses.

Methodology

In analyzing these images as part of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution and as a part of the larger discursive projects of the period, I am joining the swelling ranks of academics outside of film and media studies and art history who refuse to regard images as secondary sources. I aim to follow in the wake of scholars like Evans and Donald, who analyzed Cultural Revolution posters with serious regard for the "symbolic worlds of the visual text" (Evans & Donald, 1999, p.6). Evans and Donald assert that Cultural Revolution posters should not be analyzed only with regard to their aesthetics or political function; rather they should be:

examined as a dominant visual discourse—complementary to, but distinct from, other official discourses in structuring and establishing ideological positions—through which the power relations of the Cultural Revolution were played out at the time and through which the history of that time is evoked three decades later. (p.2)

They go on to say that posters should be understood as a “major visual text central to the processes of constructing meaning and practice” (p.2). By examining the Huxian peasant paintings as part of this dominant visual discourse, this paper will examine the role played by these images in promulgating the ideological agenda of the CCP.

To analyze the Huxian Peasant paintings’ role in the discursive production of the Chinese peasants, one must first discover the meanings that are embedded within these images. Rose (2007) suggests that there are three sites where the meaning of an image is created: the site of production, the site of the image, and the site where the image is viewed (p.13). To understand the meaning that an image is imbued with, an analysis must take into account that the site of the image alone is not sufficient for making meaning. The creation of the image and the audience’s interpretations are important aspects of the making of meaning when analyzing visual images. Rose further argues that within each of these three sites, there are three modalities which are part of meaning making: the technological, the compositional, and the social (p.13). The technological modality is “any form of apparatus designed to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the internet” (Rose, p.13). The compositional modality is the “specific material qualities of an image or visual object” (Rose, p.13). In other words, the compositional modality refers to the way in which an image is spatially organized, the use of colour, and the content. The social modality is the “range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used” (Rose, p.13). Rose argues that it is because of the disagreements between which of these sites and modalities is more important that there has been no unified theoretical understanding of visual culture (p.13). However, I argue that it is not important to decide which site is most important in creating meaning, but rather it is simply important to understand that all of these sites with their overlapping modalities play a role in creating meaning.

For my analysis of Huxian Peasant paintings, I will be focusing on the site of production and the site of the image. However, I recognize that an important and under-studied part of Chinese propaganda posters as whole is the subjective responses of the audiences to these images. Important exceptions in the literature are Anchee Min’s (2003) “The Girl in the Poster” (2003) and Xiaomei Chen’s (1999) “Growing up With Posters in the Maoist Era.” However, these accounts are the authors’ subjective experiences rather than studies of poster audiences at large. Unfortunately, it is likely too late to gain any real insight into the actual peasant responses to the images during the Cultural Revolution. While it may be possible to interview people regarding their memories of the posters, I believe the responses would be clouded by the over forty years that have passed since the images were in wide circulation. That is beyond the scope of this paper, but I recognize that my readings of these posters are not universal readings. As Evans and Donald (1999) point out, readings of these posters “depend on the knowledge, fears, expectations, cultural specificities, and emotional or physic needs of their spectators, moving between different moments of experience, memory and place” (p.139).

To excavate the meaning that is within the site of production and the site of the image requires specific methodological tools. Evans and Donald address some of the methodological issues that are involved with unpacking the meanings of Chinese propaganda posters. First, there is much scholarly debate on where the political content and aesthetic qualities of these images begin and end (p.10).

While these images cannot be removed from their political context, it cannot be denied that much of their appeal lay in the aesthetic qualities of the image. As Evans and Donald point out, “a successful image had to retain an internal aesthetic cohesion to attract the eye of the beholder and to lend a visual coherence to the political message expressed through the image” (p.5). To address the aesthetic nature of these images, I will be drawing on the work of the art historian Laing (1984), who provides a detailed analysis of the aesthetic qualities of Chinese peasant painting. To examine the political and ideological messages, I will adopt a mixed-methods approach to the images, a combination of semiotic and discourse analysis. To draw out the meanings contained in the images, I use a semiotic approach.

The Huxian peasant paintings, like all propaganda art, use a symbolic language to create multiple meanings within a single image. A semiotic approach is crucial in identifying the multiple meanings that any object in an image may be imbued with. In her discussion of using semiotic analysis for images, Rose (2007) identifies symbolic signs as those that have a conventionalized but clearly arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified (p. 83). Huxian paintings use symbolic signs to illustrate the ideology that the CCP is attempting to imbue the image with. As I elaborate in my analysis, the signifier of a water tap can imply the abundance of water, the infrastructure to deliver water, and the electricity to power the pump to provide the water, which are all attributes of modernity. Thus, in the symbolic language of the Huxian paintings, a water tap is modernity signified.

Once I have analyzed the meanings contained within the images, I use the concept of discourse to place the meanings within discursive themes. I am employing the concept of discourse as developed by Foucault. Discourse “refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act based on that thinking” (Rose, 2007, p.142). Discourse is articulated through a variety of visual, written, and verbal texts, and the key to analyzing discourse is an understanding of that intertextuality. The discursive meaning of an image or any other text depends not only on the image or text in question, but also on the meaning in other images and texts. In other words, to create meaning from an image, the viewer draws on the meanings of other images and texts. So it is important to understand that the meanings in Huxian peasant paintings cannot be understood without an understanding of the Cultural Revolution discourse as well as the larger Chinese socialist discourse that began with the establishment of the People’s Republic of China.

It is also important to understand that power relations are embedded in discourse. Fairclough (2003) argues discourses “constitute part of the resources which people deploy in relating to one another – keeping separate from one another, cooperating, competing, dominating – and in seeking to change the ways in which they relate to one another” (p.124). The discourses in Huxian paintings were meant to create an ideal peasant subject who would have the correct relationship to the CCP as well as to other peasants. Fairclough also notes that “discourses not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions” (p.124). Huxian paintings are a discursive formation that represents the possible society that the CCP was striving for or, at least, the world that they wanted the peasants to believe in as a possibility.

Huxian Peasant Paintings Rise to Prominence

How did the Huxian Peasant Painters rise to become a national model for the production of peasant painting? The foundations were laid in 1942, during the Yan’an Forum on Art and Literature. At the forum, Mao Zedong and the CCP declared revolutionary art would be “for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy” (From the foreword of Huxian Peasant Painting in

China). Artists and writers were to develop a style that appealed to and served the masses. Artists were to popularize what could be readily accepted by the masses and “consequently the duty of learning from the workers, peasants and soldiers” had to precede educating them (Mao, 1971, p.75). Mao insisted that art and politics be “a unity of revolutionary political content and the most perfect artistic form possible” (p.86). Once the CCP was in power, the problem became “creating a new class of art that is not only for the people, but from and by the people” (Croizier, 2010, p.137). Throughout the 1950s, there were calls from various politicians to develop a national art form that could combine traditional Chinese symbolic motifs and socialist realism (Cheung, 2007, p.16). Under this pressure, peasant paintings began to gain political capital. The peasant art form that was initially chosen for adaptation to the CCP’s political purposes were the nianhua or New Years prints, which were a ubiquitous feature in rural China.

In his book, *The Cult of Happiness: Nianhua, Art, and History in Rural China*, Flath (2004) notes that since the reform movements of the early twentieth century, various groups have attempted to adapt the popular nianhua for their own political purposes (p.126). However, it was the CCP who most effectively adapted the nianhua to their political needs. For the CCP, the popularity of nianhua was not the sole consideration in developing a new art form; it also had to conform to socialist ideology. The class content of peasant nianhua could not be questioned in the same way as traditional Chinese painting (guohua), which was linked to the bourgeoisie and landlord class. The artists of nianhua were amateurs, and the content was easily accessible to the masses and could be moulded to the CCP’s propaganda needs. The first major post-1949 attempt by the Party to engage the masses in revolutionary art came during the Great Leap Forward (GLF), Mao’s disastrous campaign to propel China past the most industrialized nations of the world and establish a socialist paradise. During this period, the promotion of art from the masses reached an intense fervor, and peasants were mobilized to participate in artistic activities, with training provided by professionals who were sent to the countryside (Cheung, 2007, p.17).

Huxian peasant painting’s modest beginnings were in 1958, when a young artist named Chen Shigeng was sent to the area to teach peasants the fundamentals of painting and drawing (Croizier, 2010, p.169). While the initial efforts to coax paintings out of the peasants were not altogether successful, some Party members in Shaanxi Province endorsed the early efforts, and the Huxian Party committee founded a temporary art school. The school was set up with assistance from the Xi’an Art Academy and founded on the principle of part work, part study, combining manual labour and cultural production (p.169). The peasants who attended the school were members of a construction team building the Gan Yu reservoir. While attending painting classes, they split their time between one-third labour and two-thirds study. The Gan Yu reservoir project was one of the few GLF projects that was not a wasted venture. However, overall the GLF was a failed campaign which ended in 1960. With the end of the GLF came the closing of the art school, and during the “three bad years” that followed, peasant painting virtually disappeared from Huxian and the rest of China.

During the Socialist Education Movement (1962-1966), peasant painting in Huxian made a significant recovery. In 1964, the local Party leadership organized a “Three Histories” (三史) exhibition for the peasants to “remember the bitterness (of the old society) and remember (sic)² the sweetness (of the new society) (憶苦思甜) and to reinforce their class consciousness (階級覺悟)” (Cheung, 2007, p.21). More training was provided for the peasant painters, and their art soon gained national and international attention. In 1966, the peasant painters from Huxian were featured in a full page article in

² A better translation of 憶苦思甜 is to “remember past misery and think about present happiness.”

People's Daily (p.22). The art produced by the peasants was used in national political battles to denounce the "bourgeois authorities" for looking down on peasant painting as "simple," "low class," and "crude" (Cheung, p.22). The paintings were taken up as part of the two-line struggle as outlined by Chen Boda in his 1966 essay "Two Lines in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." The essay, which was heavily edited by Mao, claimed the reason for the resistance to the Cultural Revolution was the "lingering effects of the bourgeois reactionary line" (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, p.136). Huxian paintings were used as examples by critics to attack the bourgeois reactionaries' preference for more traditional forms of art. Thus, the paintings were used for explicitly political purposes from the outset of the Cultural Revolution.

During the first three years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), the chaos caused by the Red Guards led to a period of low cultural production. As such, there are few peasant paintings from this time. However, the Huxian peasant painters again rose to prominence in the early 1970s when the leftists in Beijing needed an example of "Maoist mass cultural production" to counter the attempts of the moderates in the CCP to restore cultural and education policies that were seen as elitist and bourgeois (Croizier, 2010, p.174). The Huxian painters were given official sponsorship by the Cultural Group of the State Council. The Cultural Group was largely under the influence of Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, and the other members of the "Gang of Four," who would later be held responsible for the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution (Cheung, 2007, p.22). Within the CCP, an internal power struggle was unfolding as people jockeyed for position with Mao visibly ailing. There were two primary factions, those led by Zhou Enlai (moderates) and those led by the "Gang of Four" (leftists). The Huxian painters were called into the service of the latter. The struggle for power that was going on in the CCP manifested itself in the 1973 "Criticize Lin Biao, Criticize Confucius" (批林批孔) campaign. The campaign was initiated by the leftists ostensibly to criticize Lin Biao's Confucian leanings (MacFarquhar & Schoenhals, 2006, p.366). Lin Biao, who died in 1971 trying to escape China after a failed plot by his son and himself to assassinate Mao, was not the real target of the campaign.³ In the allegorical political style of the Cultural Revolution, the campaign was ultimately directed at Zhou Enlai. In the campaign, the peasant paintings were given the task of denouncing the theories of "revisionist line in art," the "idealist theory" of "innate genius," and the "highest are wise and the lowest are stupid," which were explicitly attributed to Confucius and Lin Biao (from the foreword of Huxian Peasant Painting in China). However, implicitly these criticisms were aimed at Zhou Enlai and his supporters.

It was during this late period of the Cultural Revolution that the peasant paintings from Huxian County rose to perhaps their highest level of public visibility.⁴ In 1974, Jiang Qing selected Huxian painters as a model for all others to aspire to. Once Jiang Qing had selected the Huxian Painters as models to be emulated, the official discourse glorified Huxian peasant painters as masters of the new socialist culture, armed with revolutionary enthusiasm, who occupied the ideological and cultural field (foreword in Peasant Paintings from Huxian County). According to the discourse, the artists only paint as a spare-time activity, working hard towards creating a socialist utopia. The artists were said to be at the forefront of production as well as cultural production. These claims, along with the claims about the amateur status of the artists, would later prove to be false. However, during the Cultural Revolution,

³ For more detailed discussion of Lin Biao's fall from grace and his tenuous link to Confucius see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals pages 332-336. For the purposes of this paper it is enough to know that Lin was a scapegoat for criticizing Zhou Enlai.

⁴ After the Cultural Revolution, the Huxian peasant painters managed to disengage themselves from their political beginnings and have gone on to create very successful commercial ventures out of peasant painting. For a discussion of Huxian peasant painting from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the present see Croizier's (2010) "Hu Xian Peasant Painting: From Revolutionary Icon to Market Economy" particularly pages 152-163.

these claims gave the messages in the posters even more legitimacy. The socialist heroism of the artists gave the discourses displayed in the images even more power.

In tracing this very brief history of Huxian peasant painting, I have shown how this art form was political from its beginnings. The attempt to create an art form that was a product of the masses was the impetus for peasant painting guided by the state. In Huxian, the peasant painting movement was given longevity through the enthusiasm of the local cadres in promoting peasant painting and the political needs of those in the CCP who could claim legitimacy by using it as a model. When reading these images, we must keep the explicit connection to politics and ideology in the forefront.

The Content of Huxian Paintings

Huxian peasant paintings are a unique form of visual propaganda for a number of reasons. They draw on peasant romanticism and combine it with revolutionary romanticism and socialist realism to produce paintings that are accessible to the peasants and also contain “correct” ideology. When compared with other propaganda art from the Cultural Revolution, peasant paintings stand out as being particularly colourful and happy. These are not the militant images of revolution seen in so many other posters; rather, they depict a pleasant life with little hardship in rural China. The posters are still politically charged, but these images are not strident in the same way as many of the other images from the Cultural Revolution.

As mentioned previously, there is an important connection to be drawn between nianhua and Huxian peasant images. To create a form of propaganda art that was accessible to the masses, the CCP wanted to adapt the traditional New Year’s prints. Landsberger (1995) notes that “this was done by first selecting artistic and aesthetic forms that the people had grown accustomed to, by filling these with new, revolutionary content, and by appropriately refashioning the contents as a whole” (p.169). This is apparent in Huxian images. The images borrow numerous elements from folkloric and rural tradition: romanticism, bold expression, idyllic rural beauty, bumper harvests, prosperity, and rich illustrative colours. The paintings are also clearly revolutionized, with peasants engaged in heroic socialist construction and political education. By combining an already established art form with revolutionary art, the CCP developed an extremely effective form of propaganda.

What are the ideological messages contained in this propaganda? In analyzing the Huxian images, I have identified three discursive themes that I argue can be found in the majority of Huxian paintings: abundance, modernity, and peasantry. Abundance is a longstanding theme in the traditional peasant art form of New Year’s prints (nianhua). While the CCP attacked some of the content of New Year’s prints as feudal, the abundance that was often displayed in the images was an element that could be readily adapted to the CCP’s ideological needs.

The second discursive theme I identify is modernity. Modernity and abundance are closely linked themes in these images, in that abundance appears as if it is a result of modernity. The modernity discourse is centred on rural electrification, large irrigation projects, and scientific agriculture practices. The modernity shown in these images is always implicitly linked to the CCP, so in effect the discourse in the images is one of the CCP bringing modernity, which in turn brings abundance. This discourse is one that attempts to legitimate CCP rule, by showing the Party as the provider of modernity.

The final discursive theme I identify is that of peasantry. I define “peasantry” as what it means to be a peasant. One of the discursive functions of the paintings was to show the viewers what it

was to be a peasant in China. Huxian paintings, above all else, depict the lives of peasants. However, the peasants in the images are not necessarily peasants as they existed; they are the image of an idealized peasant in almost every sense. The peasants in Huxian paintings are all remarkably clean, have nice clothing, are well provided for, and are politically engaged and highly productive. The Huxian paintings created a discourse on how to be a good peasant. Peasants were not only a target for change during the Cultural Revolution; they had been revolutionized in various ways since Mao had first identified them as China's unique replacement for the proletariat in the communist model. Because the proletariat was so small in China, Mao decided the revolutionaries in China would have to be the peasantry. The CCP had undertaken many campaigns over the years to reeducate them to the varying needs of the Party. It began with the land reforms where the peasants were recreated as their own masters. Then when the CCP wanted to create communes, the peasantry was again reeducated to understand the benefits of communal ownership. As the political campaigns waxed and waned, the peasantry was a constant target for new ideology. The peasantry depicted in the Huxian images is but one manifestation of this. Thus, peasantry as I have identified it here is not a timeless version; rather, it is the peasantry of a specific moment in history.

Reading the Posters

This section provides a close reading of six Huxian peasant paintings. According to some sources, as many as forty-thousand paintings were created by the Huxian peasant painters during the Cultural Revolution (Cheung, 2007). As such, choosing images to analyze becomes an extremely complex task. For my paper, I have selected paintings that were reprinted as propaganda posters and thus were widely distributed. Because the CCP endorsed the distribution of these images, I argue these images best represent the intersection of the CCP's ideological agenda and the folk art of the peasant painters. In order to choose images, I researched the online archives, published collections of posters, and Dr. Richard King's personal collection of posters, looking for the Huxian paintings that appeared most often.⁵ I then chose six of the images for analysis. Ideally, I would have preferred to analyze more images, but for an undergraduate paper, six was the most that could be accommodated. The posters analyzed in this paper are all from the late Cultural Revolution years. My readings of the posters will highlight the three discursive themes that I have identified: abundance, modernity, and peasantry.

⁵ Richard King collected the majority of his posters while living in China in 1976, during the final year of the Cultural Revolution. As such, his collection of over a hundred posters is representative of what was available to the Chinese population at the time.



Figure 1. Du Zhilian, *The Whole Family Studies The Communiqué*. Peasant Paintings from Huh sien County, Foreign Language Press. Peking, Foreign Language Press. 1974. p. 4.

“The Whole Family Studies the Communiqué” (全家学公报)

This image shows a family gathered together reading. The viewer knows the family is reading a political document; however, the title of the Communiqué is unclear. The family pictured is an ideal Chinese family with three generations living under one roof. The scene takes place inside their home, where the family is seated together on the kang (heated bed). The image centres on the young daughter reading the newspaper aloud. Her grandmother sits on her right side, hand sewing an insole and smiling as she listens. Her grandfather sits to her left, holding his pipe and smiling as well. Her younger brother, who appears as though he is not quite old enough to read, leans over her arm to look at the paper, as though he can sense the importance of the document. Her mother sits on the edge of the kang listening, while her father is seated in a chair beside the kang with a notebook in his lap. The entire family leans in towards the daughter as she reads, obviously intensely engaged by what they hear. The subtle lean of all the participants towards the newspaper draws the viewer’s eye to the Communiqué.

This image is a good example of what Francesca Dal Lago (2009) refers to as a “visualized metatext” (p. 167). Dal Lago notes that in some Cultural Revolution posters, the surface image, or the poster, visualizes another image or text which she refers to as an “internal image” (p. 167). The internal images and the way that the people in the surface image interact with them act as visual instructions for

the viewers of the surface image. In other words, this painting acts as a guide for how a family should interact with the Communiqué. They should study it closely, together as a family. This is part of the discursive theme of peasantry. To be good peasants, the young and old should be engaged with political news and learn from it. The gun hanging on the wall is also a powerful signifier. It indicates that the family is a part of the People's Militia, and thus the family is a model of military preparedness for the viewer. The family in the poster also has a poster of a female militia member hanging on the wall, providing a model for them as well. The gun and the poster within the poster show that to be a good peasant is also to be constantly vigilant against enemies, be they foreigners or revisionists.

Beyond the more explicit instructional message in this poster, there are other signifiers that link to discourses of abundance and modernity. Electricity is one of the most pervasive signs of modernity in Huxian paintings. In some images, electricity is simply just a small power line in the distance of the image; in other images, it is more obvious. In this poster, access to electricity is shown by the way the room is brightly lit by the single lightbulb that hangs over the young girl's head. The pull-string switch for the light is also prominently displayed in the image, giving the impression that electricity is available at the demand of the family. Also displayed in this painting are a bicycle, a sewing machine, and a radio. These items show that under socialism, a peasant family is well provided for, but the items also show the strength of Chinese industry. Thus these items represent the ability of socialism and CCP to develop industry in China and to deliver the fruits of industry to the village. In other words, these items represent a modern form of abundance.



Figure 2. Zhang Lin, *When the Undertaking is Great be More Industrious and Thrifty*. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1974. From the Richard King collection.

“When the Undertaking is Great be More Industrious and Thrifty” (业大更勤俭)

This image depicts an old peasant man demonstrating the repair of ox muzzles to a young peasant. The image is not explicit about its location, but given the pooling of resources in the image, the oxen and the many plows hanging on the building in the background, the viewer is led to understand that the location is a Huxian commune. Laing (1984) has identified this image as being based on socialist realist principles in a simplified form (p. 9). Laing draws attention to the oxen creating a subtle letter V which draws the viewer's eye to the two subjects of the image. The socialist realist influence is very apparent in the composition of the old peasant and the young man. The old peasant's oversized hands and the young man's wide smile with white teeth bared are representative of the socialist realist influence. A deeper analysis of the image beyond its aesthetic lineage reveals that the image displays multiple visual discourses.

Concerning peasanthood, the ideological message is clear. The younger peasant should learn to be industrious and thrifty from the old peasant, and the old peasant should be an enthusiastic teacher. Juxtaposing this poster with the first poster, “The Whole Family Studies the Communiqué,” we can gain an interesting insight into what the CCP thought the correct role of older and younger peasants should be. The young peasants are to educate the older peasants on political matters because they have the education and literacy skills to transmit CCP ideology. The older peasants have the knowledge and skills for efficient agricultural production and should pass these on to the youth.

The discursive theme of abundance is visualized through a number of images in the poster, of which the oxen are the most obvious example. The oxen in the image are very large and well nourished. In particular, the centre ox appears muscular and powerful. The fecundity of the oxen is represented by the two calves in the image. Abundance is also represented by the many plows and other farming implements that hang on the wall of the building in the background. In addition, there are four horses in the distance, further reenforcing the idea that the commune brings abundance. The abundance of water is also subtly depicted in the image. On the far right hand side of the image, a tap is pictured over a water barrel. The tap is representative of more than water. It also represents modernity. In order to have a tap with running water, infrastructure must be in place for a delivery system including large pumps and plumbing. In addition, electricity would be required to power the pumps. A complete modern infrastructure is thus represented by the tap.



Figure 3. Ma Zhenlong, *It's Always Spring in the Commune*. Xian: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1975. From the Richard King collection.

“It's Always Spring in The Commune” (公社春长在)

This image depicts a number of peasants organizing an immensely abundant harvest of vegetables from the commune greenhouses. In the centre of the image, an older male peasant smiles happily at the enormous tomato in his hand. On one side of him, a young girl holding a basket of cucumbers looks on approvingly. There is snow on the ground, and the peasants are all dressed in bright padded winter clothing. The harvested vegetables are foregrounded, brightly coloured and very detailed.

This poster clearly shows the link between *nianhua* and peasant paintings. Even the title of the poster could be a reference to the New Year Spring Festival. The peasant romanticism elements are well represented. The huge abundance of produce, prosperity in the form of warm winter clothes and tractors, and the colouring of the images are vibrant in the tradition of the *nianhua*.

The transition from peasant romanticism to revolutionary romanticism is made by the title of the poster: “It's always Spring in the Commune.” By linking the fruitful harvest of vegetables with the establishment of the commune, the image conveys the message that commune farming leads to abundance beyond imagination. The image also conveys the benefits of modern scientific methods for agriculture. The use of greenhouses to harvest vegetables at all times of the year also conveys the

message that the Party has brought development and modernity to the countryside. It is important to note that it is highly unlikely that a plastic sheet greenhouse with straw insulation would have enabled any kind of vegetable production in the cold northern Chinese winter, let alone the kind of abundance depicted in the poster. The poster certainly leans to the revolutionary romanticism side of the spectrum, with the only realism being the artistic style.



Figure 4. Song Houcheng, *Family Planning is Good*. Xian: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1975. From the Richard King collection.

“Family Planning is Good” (计划生育好)

This image depicts a scene where a young peasant couple is being praised by the commune’s rural doctor and other commune members for their good family planning. The scene takes place out in the fields at what appears to be a break from work to discuss family planning. Hung from a rope between two trees are a number of posters celebrating the couple’s family planning. The first one reads “The two of them practice good family planning.” The next one shows them standing with their one child, a son. The other two pictures that are visible show them engaged in their professions: she drives a tractor, and he is an electrician. On the road, the doctor enthusiastically praises them while others gather around to congratulate them. The state birth planning manual makes three appearances in the image. The doctor has one in her pocket, one of the peasant women who is congratulating her comrade holds one in her hand, and another copy sits on top of the doctor’s medical kit. The poster clearly is part of the family planning discourse that was being promulgated by the CCP. However, it is family planning

aimed specifically at peasants. To be a good peasant, one must limit the size of the family and maintain a high level of production.

Particularly interesting in this image is how the discourse around scientific farming intersects with the scientific management of population. Besides the birth planning message of the image, there are many signifiers of scientific farming. In the background, there is an irrigation channel with a large electric pump pumping water into it. Next to the pump is an insecticide spray can. On the left side of the image, an old peasant man sits on bags of fertilizer and the spreading machine lies on the ground beside him. All of these items are intended to increase the fertility of the land. However, the discourse on family planning is about reducing people's fertility. According to this image, to be modern is to diminish the fertility of people through scientific birth planning but to increase the fertility of the land through scientific agriculture. This image is a significant scholarly resource for those studying the history of China's birth policies, as this is one of the early attempts to control population growth before the 1978 implementation of the "One Child Policy."



Figure 5. Zhang Lin, *Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes*. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1975. (Sheet 1). From the Richard King collection.



Figure 6. Zhang Lin, *Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes*. Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1975. (Sheet 2). From the Richard King collection.

“Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes” (当代愚公会新图)

This is a set of four images on two separate posters that were meant to be displayed as a set. The four images depict the temporal sequence of the construction of a reservoir and irrigation channels, the celebration at finishing construction, the lush green fields that the irrigation allowed for, and the abundant harvest that is the result. The title of this poster is a reference to a Chinese fable about an old man named *Yu Gong* (the foolish old man), who decides one day that he wants to remove two mountains that block his view. In the fable, the man calls together his family, and they set about the task of slowly digging up the mountains. Another old man in the village laughs at their attempts to move the mountains, but *Yu Gong* is undeterred. He refutes the other man with the argument that for generations his family will continue to dig and since mountains cannot grow, eventually they will be removed. God is moved by his determination and sends down two angels to remove the mountains. This fable became a part of the Maoist legacy when Mao, in his closing speech to the Seventh National Party Congress, described the CCP as the foolish old man, imperialism and feudalism as the mountains to be removed, and the Chinese people or masses as the God who would help to remove them. The speech became one of the “three constantly read articles” promoted by Lin Biao as the best way to study Mao’s ideology. Thus the title of these posters alone makes them explicitly tied to Maoist ideology.

The first image shows the construction of the reservoir. Abundance and modernity are the important themes in this image. Power lines run in from the top of the image, providing electricity for the large pumps required for the project and to power the two large floodlights that will enable the workers to work late into the night. Abundance is signified by the many oxen used to pull the loads of earth out of the reservoir and by the abundant building materials available for the project. The second image depicts the celebration of the completion of the project. The abundance of water dominates this image, which would be of particular importance in Huxian, given its geographical location and history of drought. A crowd gathers as water sprays out at the top of an irrigation channel and floods the fields. In the bottom corner of the image, ducks frolic in one of the reservoirs. A number of large red flags fly as if to signify that the water is a gift from the CCP. The third image provides a view of the reservoir with the lush green fields in the background. Electricity is again displayed prominently in this image with the power lines linked to the pump house which is pumping water to the fields. Other signs of modernity are depicted by the tractor pulling supplies and peasants spraying insecticide in the fields. The water tower shows that the commune has the ability to store water. The final image in the set displays the immense harvest of a wide variety of crops, the abundance of which is linked to the initial construction of the reservoir. Cotton, corn, peppers, wheat, and rice are all shown in large quantities in this image. Also shown in this image are two large trucks and a tractor to assist with the harvest.

In these images, being a good peasant means participating in the mass construction of the irrigation project. Teamwork, the division of labour, and communal celebration of accomplishment are shown to be important markers of peasantry. The image also implicitly conveys the peasant enactment of two of Mao’s most famous dictums “people can triumph over nature” (人定胜天) and “a lot of people are good for work” (人多好办事).



Figure 7. Song Houcheng, *Impenetrable Fortress*. Xian: Shaanxi Renmin Chubanshe, 1974. From the Richard King collection.

“Impenetrable Fortress” (铁臂铜墙)

This image depicts a large People’s Militia rally taking place. It is one of the most explicitly political Huxian paintings and is somewhat of an anomaly with its militant message. The image centres on an older peasant man standing and orating with his rifle grasped in one hand raised above his head, while his other hand is clenched into a fist in front of his chest. More than a hundred members of the People’s Militia are in a large semicircle around the speaker, with the women kneeling in the front rows and the men standing in the rear. Everybody in the image is holding a gun. In the background of the image, the wall of a building is covered in a number of big character posters.

The slogan “Ruthlessly Criticize ‘Restrain Oneself and Return to the Rites’ Grasp the Gun Tightly” (狠批“克己复礼”紧握手中枪杆) is prominently displayed in the background, as the peasant in the centre of the image stands, likely criticizing Confucius and Lin Biao and certainly grasping his gun tightly. The only other legible text on the wall reads “Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers are the main force for criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius” (工农兵是批林批孔的主力军). Above that text is an image of a crowd engaged in a rally to criticize Lin Biao and Confucius. To the left of that image is an image of a large clenched fist coming out of the sky and physically crushing caricatures of Lin and Confucius. This image is another example of a visualized metatext. The people in the image are reacting in a specific

way to the big character posters on the wall behind them, and this is transmitted to the viewer of the image as the correct way to respond to the visual texts that are displayed. In other words, to be a good peasant, one should join the militia and criticize Lin Biao and Confucius.

Besides the didactic nature of the image, modernity and abundance are again prominent themes. However, the abundance and modernity in this poster are of a different variety than typically seen in Huxian paintings. This image shows an abundance of modern military arms. Every person in the image holds a rifle and in the centre of the group, just behind the peasant who is speaking, two machine guns are on display. Modernity is also made prominent by the large electrical transformer on the roof of the building in the rear of the scene and the power lines that run overhead.



Figure 8. Song Houcheng, *Grasp the Gun Firmly*. Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County, Foreign Language Press. Peking, Foreign Language Press. 1974. p. 12.

“Grasp the Gun Firmly”

This image is particularly interesting in that I have found two different versions attributed to the same artist. While the differences are not great, they do serve to show the editorial scrutiny that these images were under and the proclivity of different publishing houses to change the images as they saw fit. The original painting (Fig. 8) as shown in Foreign Language Press publication *Peasant Paintings from Huhsien County of China* does not have the same visual depth as the poster that I used for my analysis (Fig. 7). There are aesthetic differences most obviously in the detail drawn around the base of the tree in the foreground of the image. In the original, there is no detail around the base of the tree; in the revised

version, there is some shrubbery and flowers added around the base of the tree to give the image more depth. However, the addition of the flowers takes away from the strident nature of the original painting. The changes that were made at the publishing house were not simply aesthetic; they also included the content of the image. For example, in the original painting, the machine guns are somewhat hidden behind the speaker's legs and very crudely drawn. In the revised version, the machine guns are clearly visible and illustrated in more detail. Also, the peasant in the centre of the image in the original painting has an open hand, while in the poster version his hand is clenched into a tight fist. Further, in the original image, the big character poster, "Workers, Peasants and Soldiers are the Main Force for Criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius," that appears on the building behind the rally has a different image on it. Instead of a group of workers, soldiers, and peasants, there is just one peasant, who looks remarkably like the peasant in the main image, standing with his fist raised. The changes in the poster version are difficult to evaluate. At first glance, they seem to simply be aesthetic changes that make the image a little more complex and give it more depth. However, in making changes, the publisher is contradicting the CCP's very justification for the use of peasant art as propaganda. The art was intended to be less complex as a product of the masses and thus a more legitimate form of socialist cultural production. At the very least, these changes show the editorial scrutiny that the peasant paintings faced.

Making Sense of Huxian Peasant Paintings

As I noted earlier, meaning is constructed in images through a combination of three sites: the site of production, the site of the image, and the site where the image is viewed. In addition, there are three modalities within each of these sites: the technological, the compositional, and the social. The site of production for Huxian images is critical in understanding the meaning in the images. In the technological modality at the site of production, there are a number of important factors to consider. To ensure the peasant paintings met the CCP's propaganda requirements, training, in particular, was crucial in creating the meaning in the images. This training enabled the peasant artists to create sufficiently sophisticated images while maintaining the folk characteristics which made the images so popular. Also important are the many books on the correct way to create socialist art that were in circulation during the Cultural Revolution.⁶ There can be no doubt that these instruction manuals influenced the way peasant painters created their images. In the compositional modality, the adaptation of the nianhua style was critical in making these images readable to the Chinese peasantry. The social modality encompasses a wide range of complex political and social relations. Perhaps the most important for the site of production is that the artists were not free to paint what they wanted. Liu Zhide, perhaps the most famous peasant painter, is quoted as saying "what the Party wants us to paint, we paint" (Croizier, 2010, p.145). The Party was in firm control of the artists and ensured that the content of the images was only that which met the Party's approval. The discourses of abundance, modernity, and peasantry were ideas that the CCP felt were important to transmit to the peasantry, and the Huxian paintings became the vehicle for transmission. As Evans and Donald (1999) note, posters were "produced and disseminated to educate the mass public in ideological values defined by the authoritarian party-state" (p.4).

The site of the image is, arguably, the most important place in which meaning is constructed. The Huxian paintings contained political ideology that was predetermined at the site of production, but the image had to convey those preconceived ideas. The technological modality at the site of the image is the production of propaganda posters. The images became powerful forms of propaganda because they

⁶ Laing (1984) notes that do-it-yourself painting manuals of this sort were in wide circulation by 1970 and possibly even earlier (p.9).

were reproduced in mass form as posters. The posters were aesthetically pleasing with their bright colours and thus very attractive to their target audiences. In addition, the propaganda poster was a relatively cheap way to address a mass audience (Evans & Donald, 1999, p.8). The compositional modality at the site of the image is linked back to the training the peasant artists received from professional artists. Evans and Donald best sum up the importance of the compositional modality:

...effective posters had to have an immediate, direct appeal to their audience. Their aesthetic construction grew from a sophisticated notion of political spectatorship. They had to compress information, and provide contextual hints on that information, in visual forms to which their audience could respond. A successful poster had to retain an internal aesthetic cohesion in order both to attract the eye of the beholder and to lend visual coherence to the political message expressed through the image. (pp. 4-5)

The discourses that I have identified within the Huxian paintings are only created through the aesthetic blending of traditional peasant romanticism in the form of *nianhua* and the revolutionary realism which the professional artists taught to the peasant painters. To create images that had mass appeal to the peasants, it was critical to embed the ideological messages in artistic forms that were legible to the audience. Arguably, the most important aspect of the social modality at the site of the image is the relation between the peasant artists and the peasant audience. The fact that fellow peasants, in particular heroic socialist peasants, were creating the images made them all the more acceptable to their audience. The artists were people whom the peasantry could easily identify with, and that legitimates the messages contained in the images even further.

It is through the complex relationship between the site of production and the site of the image that the meanings in the Huxian images can be understood. When understood in this context, the discourses of abundance and modernity were meant to legitimate the CCP's rule, while the discourse on peasantry was meant to recreate the peasantry as the ideal subject. Abundance was the most important thing to a Chinese peasant struggling to survive. Abundance had long been a popular theme in *nianhua*, and by adopting it for propaganda purposes, the CCP had a powerful legitimating tool. By linking abundance to socialism, the CCP came across as a great provider. As I have shown in my readings of the images, the theme of abundance is apparent in all of these images.

Modernity and abundance are closely linked in the Huxian images, perhaps most strikingly in "*Today's Foolish Old Men Create New Scenes.*" The abundance that is shown in the last frame of the image is shown to be a product of the reservoir and irrigation construction. Further, electricity is required to run the large pumps, and modern scientific farming methods are used to create the abundant harvest. The CCP is thus made out to be a great provider as it provides the infrastructure and tools to be modern. It is important to note, however, that the modernity and abundance that are pictured in the posters were not the reality for most peasants in China at that time. Andrews (2010) notes that during this period, "the practical needs of material existence, such as food and clothing, became ever more difficult to obtain" (p.31). So perhaps the Huxian images served as beacons of hope rather than representations of reality.

Peasantry as a theme served to create a peasantry that accepted CCP rule. The peasants depicted in Huxian images are a remarkable blend of political beings that strive for the highest level of production. They follow the scientific methods put forth by the CCP not only in farming, but in family planning. They are politically engaged with the important campaigns of the moment and ready to fight

for the socialist utopia presented. They are willing to sacrifice for the benefit of the greater good. The peasants represented in these images are what the CCP considered the ideal peasant in the late Cultural Revolution, and they were to be models for peasants all over China.

Conclusion

The title of this paper refers to one of the images which I have analyzed, but it is also an apt description of the undertaking of the peasant painters from Huxian. The peasant painters created new scenes by blending the folk stylings of traditional peasant art with revolutionary realism. I have argued that Huxian peasant paintings constitute a unique form of propaganda. It is through this blend of styles that the paintings achieve this status. These new scenes were explicitly linked to politics and the promotion of the CCP's ideological agenda. By combining peasant romanticism with revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism, these images had a strong discursive power. Further, through identifying the artists as socialist heroes, the paintings' ideological messages gained even more credibility. The discursive themes of abundance and modernity were used to legitimize CCP rule, and the discourse on peasantry was used to create an ideal Chinese peasant. Through detailed analysis of the Huxian images, I have shown how these images constitute an important part of the textual history of the Cultural Revolution. I have also provided insight into the intersections between state power and grassroots art during the Cultural Revolution.

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