

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF CHINESE COMMUNIST PROPAGANDA

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Scholars of western democracies have had much to say about the use of propaganda in the dictatorial regimes of the twentieth century, often with a conscious understanding of the contrast between these “thought-controlled” governments and their own. Of these dictatorships, the Communist government of China is usually treated with astonishment; not only was China considered an unlikely prospect for Communist revolution, but its longstanding legacy of scholarship and elitism also makes its use of socialist propaganda and censorship seem farfetched and forced. Many, no doubt, wonder how a society as obsessed with history, culture, and scholarship as the Chinese could have largely accepted the propaganda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) without more resistance or skepticism than it did. These thinkers, however, fail to understand that official propaganda by China’s imperial government had a long tradition, that Chinese scholars themselves participated in censorship, and that literary and artistic achievements were always seen in the context of providing cultural enlightenment to the people. Looking at this historical legacy, it is easier to see that the success of Chinese Communist propaganda was not an accident of the twentieth century, but an expansion upon long-standing Chinese traditions of imperial and scholarly propaganda.

The cult-like admiration of Mao Zedong shows one important aspect of traditional Chinese propaganda, since it built upon the historical notion of the emperor’s role as mediator between heaven and earth, and, thus, as a quasi-divine figure. In fact, one of the terms used to refer to the Emperor was traditionally *tianzi*, 天子, or Son of Heaven. Mao Zedong, always a charismatic individual, expanded his image over time as an object of reverence; subsequently he encouraged what some call a faith, Maoism, based on personal dedication to Mao with often religious overtones.¹ In so doing, Mao evoked traditional ideas of the emperor as a religious figure. Chinese emperors consistently implied this religious association throughout Chinese history and often stated it more overtly. For example, many Buddhists in China believed that the emperor was a *bodhisattva*, an enlightened individual who had chosen to return to existence to help others reach *nirvana*. The government officially ignored this belief, but unofficially propagated it specifically to establish legitimacy with newly-included Buddhist areas like Mongolia in the eighteenth century.² Sometimes the image of an emperor’s divinity was propagated

against his will. Jonathan Spence's investigation of the Kangxi Emperor shows that his official imperial valedictory was heavily edited by the Confucian scholars. They removed references to Kangxi's human weaknesses and added depictions of his Confucian piety and dignified ritual role, despite his instructions to leave his final words untouched.³ This unwanted censorship sheds some light on how institutional the propaganda system had become, as well as on the never-ending rivalry between scholar and emperor.

The historical tension between these scholar-officials, called *literati*, and the rulers of China bears itself out through two different strains of Communist propaganda. The most obvious analogy to draw is the similarity between the Communist regime's treatment of literature and the traditional disdain of powerful emperors towards the literati. The burning of classics by Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221-206 B.C.), or more recently by the Qianlong (r. 1735-1795) literary inquisition, put in practice the paranoia of rulers to remove literature and intellectuals that were critical of their regimes. Mao Zedong's Yunan conference in the 1930s set the tone of the Communists' view that literature's only purpose should be to propagate Communist ideas.⁴ The subsequent censorship and prohibitions on non-Party literature hardly needs expounding. In this important regard, the suppression of anti-Communist literature and the publication of pro-Communist literature both correspond closely to the treatment of literature in traditional Chinese history since the Chinese state had always had a double role in censorship and propaganda.⁵ Mao Zedong's increasingly dictatorial actions against intellectuals in his own camp during the Cultural Revolution also seem to follow the model of the ancient emperors quite well.

The literati, however, were not always directly against imperial control, and they provide in history an alternative example of propaganda that the Communist regime, though largely anti-intellectual, still drew upon. It is interesting to note that until the Cultural Revolution (1967-76), the CCP relied heavily on party intellectuals as a way to influence elites, create literary propaganda, and explain party doctrine in more sophisticated ways. Timothy Cheek focuses his study of Maoist culture on the propagandist Deng Tuo, an almost anachronistic figure infatuated with traditional culture who viewed himself as a traditional literatus, using propaganda to elevate the people culturally.⁶ In echoing the role of the literati, members of the Communist intelligentsia eventually set themselves up to criticize Mao's manipulation of power, thus becoming targets for expulsion or death. But the legacy of the literati in Party literature and censorship remained a vital part of the Communist propaganda machine. Even after the

purge of the Party intellectuals, modern-day groups of local artisans with Party connections talk of themselves as the cultural elite and use the same term (*wenren* 文人) as the traditional literati.⁷

Some scholars see a counter-example to this long legacy of propaganda in the early twentieth century, when late Qing reformers and Republicans created a system of literature and news that was relatively independent from official ideological control. It must be noted, however, that all newspapers from the most open periods of the Republic (1912-1949) were still subject to censorship by their respective political camps.⁸ State censorship was never abandoned; it merely operated on a more fractured basis since there were multiple “states” in operation during the warlord and anti-Japanese periods. Moreover, even the historians most optimistic about freedom of press in the early twentieth century note the tendency in these “free-speech” advocates to treat their publications as political and moral “vanguards” to elevate Chinese society, a practice which still echoes the perspective of traditional literati propaganda.⁹ This means that while the Republican period did come the closest in Chinese history to legitimizing free speech, it was nevertheless still inextricably linked to a culture that accepted censorship and saw literature as a means to propagate an ideology, even if that ideology was of a more democratizing intent.

Looking at the literati emphasis on civilian bureaucratic government throughout Chinese history, it is hard to see how the Communist emphasis on the dominance of the military could have been anything but a clean break from China’s past. However, there are precedents of long periods of warfare in Chinese history, and dynasties such as the Qin (221-206 B.C.), Tang (618-907), and Mongol-controlled Yuan (1279-1368) were legitimized and sustained solely by their military might. Most importantly, though, is the legacy of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the last imperial period and one in which the military played a vital role in propaganda and political identity. As Mark Elliott suggests, the entire concept of Manchuria as a separate homeland with its own character came largely from an attempt by the Manchus to legitimize their military rule; it allowed them to contrast their valiant, austere warrior upbringing with the decadence of Chinese urban civilization.¹⁰ The military propaganda monuments and artwork exalting Qing conquests in the western provinces set the prototype for much of the Communist emphasis on military victory and honoring brave soldiers. Some even suggest that the relationship between Chinese nationalism and the twentieth-century military has its roots directly in imperial attempts to commemorate battles and foster a more militarized culture during the reign of the Qianlong emperor.¹¹

In social propaganda, the use of children as tools to produce empathy and youthful idealistic pride has its precedents as well. Propaganda depicting children more committed to a cause than adults was utilized in the 1905 Chinese boycott of American goods. One illustration of this time showed a young girl who cries out for a boycott of American goods even though the movement is waning, thus showing a dedication that puts the adults to shame.¹² In this example of early twentieth-century propaganda, one cannot help hearing echoes of the later Cultural Revolution in which zealous Red Guard teenagers were encouraged to support the Socialist cause even by shaming and denouncing superiors. Children's literature and cartoons from the 1970s portrayed young revolutionaries denouncing capitalists and foreign collaborators with much the same dedication as the boycott girl, the only difference being in the active and violent nature of the dedication.¹³ This ideal, which merged devotion to the state with devotion to Communist ideology, even resulted in Red Guards turning in their own parents as subversives. This phenomenon exhibits possibly the greatest break with China's past that existed throughout the CCP's propaganda campaign, since it completely overrode filial piety. Nevertheless, precedents like the aforementioned early twentieth-century propaganda did lay the groundwork for this idea of encouraging children to shame adults. To understand the Red Guards, it is important to remember that Chinese society always viewed education as a tool for fostering specific ideology in children. With this fact in mind one can more easily see how the CCP exploited idealistic youthfulness in the Cultural Revolution, especially considering that Mao Zedong's Red Guards intentionally recruited teenagers so young that all they knew was the official doctrine of the Party.

The traditional manipulation of language also seems to be a factor in Communist propaganda. Throughout Chinese history, the pictographic origins of characters always presented a way for the state to euphemistically add positive or negative connotations to names or ideas. Dynastic names and titles were always euphemistic, so that simply reading the names of the Ming 明 (bright) Dynasty or the Qianlong 乾隆 (glorious beginning) Emperor brought a history of positive connotations to the reader. Rebellious groups could also use characters as counter-propaganda, as in the Taiping use of adding a dog radical, 犬, to the front of the name of the emperor.¹⁴ Many words used everyday in China still have euphemistic or idealized meanings with regard to Chinese self-identity. The word for culture 文化 (*wenhua*) literally means "changing letters," illustrating the literati's point of view that the highest cultural achievements in China were found through mastery of the written word.

The CCP utilized euphemistic names as well—for instance, “The People’s Republic of China” 中华人民共和国 (*zhonghua renmin gonghe guo*)—but they also had a new venue for propaganda in the simplification process. For instance, in the traditional writing of the word ‘history,’ 歷史 (*lishi*), the inside part of the character 歷 is ideographically the image of footsteps through a rice field, which means experience (thus history is the study of experience).¹⁵ The simplification process changed the character 歷 to 历, replacing the character for ‘experience’ with a phonetically similar character meaning ‘strength’ or ‘muscle.’ Though some may call it coincidence, the skeptical may see a relevant connotative change: history is now the study of strength, not experience. This change would certainly fit the CCP’s ideology with regard to the military, and it could even imply the thrust of Marxism itself in that the history of all mankind is a history of struggle. Another example of a propagandized ideograph is the word for ideology, 主義 (*zhuyi*). The simplification process changed *yi* from the image of a ritual sacrifice: 義 (a sheep being put to the sword), to a simpler image: 义. While some have wondered whether this new image could be meant to look like a cross, it seems much more likely that it is supposed to evoke the image of the hammer and sickle, and thus the flag of the communist regime in the Soviet Union. Though these specific speculations can become farfetched, the use of ideographic characters to subtly imbue a connotative change in meaning is indeed a propaganda tool that the Communist government expanded from longstanding traditional archetypes.

As this wide and varied tradition of cultural, social, political and linguistic propaganda shows, it is impossible to assume that Chinese Communist propaganda was a coincidence of modern, external methods. The CCP instated new ideas and policies, but the propaganda machine behind these ideas almost exclusively utilized precedents both ancient and recent in Chinese history, effectively reinterpreting ideas of power and culture that were still uniquely Chinese. By expanding upon this traditional template of propaganda, the Communist government was able to emulate both the powerful dynastic emperors and the civilized Confucian literati even as it advocated ideas contrary to both traditions. It is within this much broader and entrenched historical tradition, therefore, that one must evaluate the success of Communist propaganda in China.

Notes

1. Timothy Cheek, *Propaganda and Culture in Mao's China: Deng Tuo and the Intelligentsia*, 69.
2. David M. Farquhar, "Emperor as Bodhisattva in the Governance of the Ch'ing Empire," 28.
3. Jonathan D. Spence, *Emperor of China: Self-Portrait of K'ang-Hsi*, 175.
4. Cheek, 94.
5. Stephen R. MacKinnon, "Toward a History of the Chinese Press in the Republican Period," 4.
6. Cheek, 2.
7. Stig Thogersen, "Cultural Life and Cultural Control in Rural China: Where is the Party?" 132.
8. MacKinnon, 8.
9. Joan Judge, "Public Opinion and the New Politics of Contestation in the Late Qing, 1904-1911," 70.
10. Mark C. Elliott, "The Limits of Tartary," 636.
11. Joanna Waley-Cohen, "Commemorating War in Eighteenth-Century China," 899.
12. Sin-Kiong Wong, "Mobilizing a Social Movement in China," 393.
13. See Godwin Chu and Francis Hsu, *Moving a Mountain: Cultural Change in China*, 245, for a children's cartoon of a young Lei Feng denouncing a landlord.
14. Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*, 182.
15. The information on these specific characters was given to me by Dr. Vincent Yang.

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