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Colour Me Revolutionary: How the Use of Colour Grammar Aids in Understanding Internal Messages in Chinese Visual Iconography

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Abstract

Colour has a long history of artistic, symbolic, religious, and mythological use in China. This article takes the idea of colour as a meaningful communicative element within Chinese society and introduces the use of visual colour grammar as a new way to identify and breakdown the use of colour in political art and propaganda posters. The use of colour has been adapted by visual linguists into its own unique visual grammar component, relaying much more information than just a symbolic transfer from sign to signifier. Meaning in political posters can be derived from regularities in use, presentation, and conventional meaning. Colour as a visual grammar component is expressed through the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. This article explores how Chinese views on colour interconnect with the metafunctions of colour to look at how political posters and art of the People's Republic of China communicate meaning to its recipients. I will discuss both the approach to art as a text that can be "read" through visual grammar and present colour in the Chinese context as more than a symbol making device but as a meaning component in and of itself.

Keywords: colour grammar; Chinese art; propaganda posters; political art; visual analysis; Cultural Revolution; metafunctions of colour

Acknowledgment: All propaganda pieces used for this paper were taken from the iish flickr account that states that reproduction of images for research purposes is permitted as long as acknowledgement is given to original source.

Introduction

That colour has cultural and artistic meaning is a fairly universal concept. In Western society, people wear black to a funeral and know that calling someone "yellow" is an insult, meaning cowardice. Similarly, Eastern conceptions of colour encapsulate connotative values and societal usages to convey meaning. Colour has a long history of artistic, symbolic, religious, and mythological use in China. Song (2008: 66) maintains that colour is a cultural product that reflects national traditions; what is known about the Chinese cultural context is gleaned from fragmentary evidence and pieced together from ancient people's art, literature, and writings, and folk customs into a cohesive whole. Some of the earliest known colour-work items are the Yangshao pottery fragments found in archaeological digs, illustrations from Buddhist manuscripts, and embroidery (Yang, 2010).

According to Welch (2008: 219), colour in Chinese art is "not used haphazardly" and colour usages "signal or convey a variety of meanings from messages concerning status, virtue, fortune, and personality, to mood." Colour is highly symbolic, denoting rank, authority, virtues and vices, and emotions (Williams, 2006: 98). Scholarly descriptions of the use of colour in the Chinese context tend to focus on symbolism within the traditional uses of colour in Chinese art, folk customs, and ceramics (Hippisley, 1902; Reynolds, 2009). Dusenbury (2015) surveys the power of colour in ancient China, Japan, and Korea and advances the study of colour as more than an artistic device in these three societies. Colour as a component of Chinese art and political art is a widely explored area. Studies of traditional uses of colour in the Chinese context range from high society (Hippisley, 1902; Feng, 2010; The Met, 2014; Ho, 2019), folk (Song, 2008; Yang, 2010), and religious usages (Itten, 1961; Yau, 1994; Williams, 2006; Song, 2008; Welch, 2008; Feng, 2010; Karetzky, 2014) to the development of basic colour terms (Wu, 2011; Gao and Sutrop, 2014). Traditional art dictionaries include detailed notes on the meanings of the colours in different contexts, entries that explore the combinatory styles and power of the colours, and the iconographical symbolic meaning components (Eberhard, 1986; Williams, 2006; Welch, 2008).

Even well into the 20th century, colour is a well-documented signifier of information. Landsberger (2019: n.p.) notes that the use of colour in Cultural Revolution (CR) posters was an important meaning conveyer, with "the color red featured heavily; it symbolized everything revolutionary, everything good and moral"; the color black, on the other hand, "signified precisely the opposite." Moreover, "Color symbolism continued to be important in the following years, not only in visual propaganda, but in printed propaganda as well." Other explorations of colour usage include the influence of colour in the May Fourth Movement (Andrews, 1994) and the use of colour within the artistic confines of the Maoist period (Huang, 2011).

Despite the wide-ranging study of the utility of colour in the Chinese sphere, most studies adhere to descriptive, historical, or iconographical analyses of colour and there has been little or no work done on the use of colour as a grammatical mode. Therefore, this article introduces the idea of a linguistic-style colour grammar as a method of "reading" the imagery used in modern China. Utilising the three metafunctions of colour (van Leeuwen, 2011), this novel approach aims to explain colour choices in the imagery of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and to introduce a method for the analysis of imagery beyond mere description or general narratives. I argue that the use of colour in Chinese art is more than a symbolic or artistic device, but rather fulfils a (visual) grammatical role in the communicative properties of the imagery. Colour as grammar broadens imagery into a more complex mode of communication. [1]

Throughout this article I use political art, starting from the early PRC era up to the present, to explicate this form of colour parsing due to the intrinsic information transmission. Similar to Barthes' (1977) exploration of advertisement imagery, the propaganda art addressed in this article is meant to convey meaning from the leader to the led, with discrete information nodes used to encode the posters. This use of political imagery, however, is not the only use of colour as a meaning component of visual grammar, and this article only serves as a steppingstone for further exploration of the grammar of colour in Chinese studies and beyond.

First, I introduce what visual grammar is and how the language of colour functions. Next, I explore the uses of colour as meaningful components in PRC art, noting the prescriptiveness of

[1] The term grammar refers to "any systematic account of the structure of a language [and] the patterns that it describes" (Matthews, 1997: 150) or "the principles of operation of a language, or the study and description of these principles" rather than the popular usage that generally means the "correct usage" or ways we put words together (MacLeish, 1971: 55). Therefore, a colour grammar is looking at the systematic regularities of the structure of meaning within the imagery and provides a description of these principles.

art during this time. Utilising the three metafunctions of colour, the following section explains how visual colour grammar is used in political imagery, giving exemplars and possible interpretations based on extensive research. The final section utilises the linguistic metafunctions of colour to analyse several exemplars of Chinese political art, demonstrating the use of colour as a communicative element in and of itself. The use of colour can suggest changes in attitude as well as how it functioned to serve different purposes, movements, and leaders.

Grammar and the Visual Language of Colour

Visual grammar is the idea that images parallel the construction of linguistic-style signs and signifiers and contain common meaningful components and regularities that can be formally described (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Crow, 2010). In Hyman's (2006) seminal examination of our perception and experience of art, he explores our ability to interpret visual stimuli. His discussion revolves around our ability to interpret an image's depiction, that is to say, not an interpretation of the meaning of the image but of how our brains decipher the actual medium. In the final section he addresses the idea of art from a linguistic point of view; however, he argues against the idea that physical viewing and lens interpretation of the visual image can be interpreted linguistically as a conventional sign. His study looks more at how our eye interprets the image (how do we see red) than what our culture and society use the colours for. This article takes the view that reading visual images comes down to a form of linguistic-style sign, and the messages promoted as sign-making (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). The key difference is that the communicative qualities are explored as a linguistic form rather than in terms of the philosophy of art history. The parallels between the interpretation of artistic renditions and linguistic signifiers can be readily seen in images through colour, perspective and line, relative distance of the image to the reader, and eye line of the depicted character (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 6) as well as other more language based grammatical structures such as metaphor and symbols. Van Leeuwen (2011) expands on the use of colour as a grammatical mode, dubbing it "the language of colour," and it is this interpretation of colour that this article will use.

In this model of the "language of colour," colour as a visual grammar component is expressed through the three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002; Halliday, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2011). The first, ideational colour, is primarily used as an identification marker and can also convey conventional meanings such as blue on a map meaning a body of water or uniform and livery colours. The second, the interpersonal, is the "colour act" that denotes meaning through association as well as a marker that "is used to do things to or for each other, e.g. to impress or intimidate through 'power dressing,' to warn against obstructions and other hazards" (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002: 348). The interpersonal is part of the system of emotions that are attached to colours. The third metafunction, textual, is used as a marker of association, using cohesive colour schemes to tie subjects together or highlight/differentiate certain objects within an image. This can be achieved either by using the same colour over and over again to suggest a coherence in the text or through a colour coordination such as a colour scheme or the same physical characteristics like brightness or saturation (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002: 349). Within these metafunctional categories, the physicality of colour can infuse the imagery with additional meaning, such as value, saturation, purity, and luminescence, among others (van Leeuwen, 2011: 35–39; 60–65).

In order to identify colour components as visual grammatical nodes within imagery, this article adapts Hermeren's (1969: 83) concepts of internal and external arguments. Internal arguments rely on the conventionality of meaning within the narrative as well as prominence, conspicuousness, special attention to detail, or unnatural qualities. The external argument depends on background knowledge of the artist (Hermeren, 1969: 85) or a common expressive node for a specific time period. For example, the use of the colour red changes meaning depending on the

time period and contextual markers: sometimes it can be used as an auspicious colour and other times as a colour of rebellion (Song, 2008: 71). In sum, colour's meaning can be derived from regularities in use, presentation, and conventional meanings.

This article uses the metafunctions of colour and the ideas of the "language of colour" to examine the construction of an image and the use of colour to impart meaning, i.e., how to interpret the meaning behind the use of a specific colour. By utilising the ideational, interpersonal, and textual uses of colour to look at Chinese political art, this article demonstrates how colour can be used to interpret imagery on an individual basis as well as a tool for analysis to look at political shifts across time. In order to identify and interpret colour in this capacity, background knowledge of the cultural significances of colour are key. Clear, conventional uses of colour exist in Chinese society and documented in scholarly works; many of these fall into the three metafunctional categories: they are telling the viewer who someone is, conveying power and emotion, or tying themes together. Early on in Communist China, the use of art and standards of meaning were identified as important components of political communication, leading to a new visual grammar and meaningful colour in Communist China.

Meaningful Colour in Communist China

Starting with the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, art was classified as a political tool in the new Communist China. [2] Following the condemnation of "art for art's sake," artistic expression was defined as "for the people" and subsumed into political communication tools for the Party (Peking Review, 1966a, 1966b). As a result, not only were the themes and subject matter confined by propaganda aims, even the component parts of the images were highly politicised (Donald, 2014), including the colour palette. Colour remained an important communicative device in propaganda posters of the PRC. While the colour palette varies by era and even movement, the basic informational nodes start to be developed, with warm tones for positive characters and negative characters in cool or grey tones (Yang, 2010; Donald, 2014).

Art guidebooks in the PRC were a particularly valuable source of information for profession al and amateur artists alike. Through these small and inexpensive booklets, artists could learn the current political connotations of different motifs and colours as well as basic artistic instruction. Many of the guidebooks have politically acceptable models of poster art that artists could copy to produce local imagery quickly and without political backlash. One such example, entitled Rural Art Manual (Nongcun meishu shouce 农村美术手册) (1975), provides particularly thorough information for aspiring artists. The guidebook contains a six-page introduction to the use of colour. The very first lines clearly outline that the use of colour is to serve a political purpose, especially through the emphasis of the theme, the creation of the proletarian heroic figure, and the enhancement of artistic appeal. Interspersed among definitions and artistic technique tutorials are political messages and methods for using colour to communicate certain information (pp. 67–68).

[2] For the contents and impact of the Yan'an talks see Judd, 1985; King, 2010.

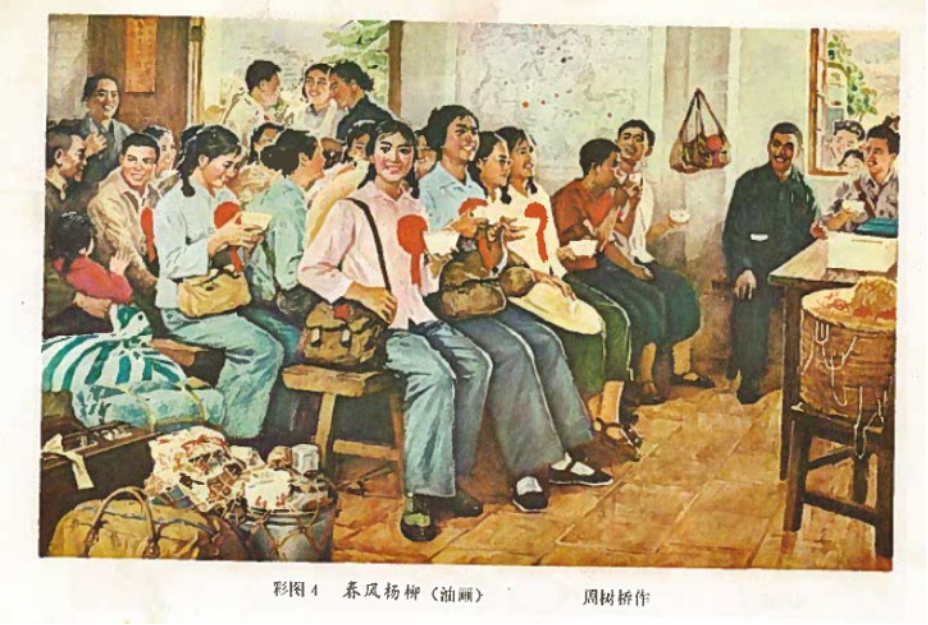

Figure 1: Spring Breeze in Yangliu (1975) (Chunfeng Yangliu 春风杨*). Artist: Zhou Shuqiao* 周树桥.

According to the guidebook, the use of colour was to be matched to the thematic needs of the piece; colour variety was selected under certain conditions and could even be removed in order to better serve the proletarian-heroic form of the artwork (p. 68). The use of colour is then explicated through a concrete example of Spring Breeze in Yangliu (1975) (Chunfeng Yangliu 春风杨柳), included in the colour plate section of the book (Figure 1). The book explains that colour is used to show the sun entering the room and warm and lively colour tones to draw attention to the kind and caring mood between the "vigorous" workers, peasants, and sent-down youths and the lower-middle-class peasants. This section also explicates how to differentiate conflicting characters using colour: positive characters have warm-toned skin and negative characters use cool grey colours. This exaggeration method elevates the heroic actors while exposing the insidious and repulsive spirit of the enemy (p. 69). The explicitness of the explanation highlights the way that colour was a communicative tool in China and the necessity to conform to these boundaries was important to the artist's political survival.

The Three Metafunctions: Colour in Chinese Political Art

In order to explicate the grammatical use of colour within the Chinese context, I will explore each of the three metafunctions of colour in turn. The example images were chosen as illustrative pieces that have clear and defined use of colour as well as present typical depictions and palettes of each movement they are representing. The typicality of the images is assessed based on extensive archival surveys of both the online archive at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) and field research conducted at the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center. Similar to the leitmotif, colour marks out identity, emotion, and thematic orientation throughout the modern Chinese period. In addition to these individual roles, temporal changes are an important and valuable use of this type of marker and I will point this out as needed throughout the discussion below.

Ideational

The use of colour as an identifying marker within China and Chinese art has been one of the most important and consistently used forms of colour well into the 20th century. The idea of marking identity through colour has a long-standing tradition in China: in imperial China, clothing colours

were given strict hierarchies, with red and yellow only being worn by the highest ranks and forbidden to the masses. Han dynasty officials wore dyed silk ribbons, showing their relative rank within the court. Jade beads of varying hues adorning the official headgear were also used to denote rank and later the court robes themselves were coloured to identify rank (Williams, 2006: 98–99; Welch, 2008: 219–220). Beyond the court, merchants and street hawkers wore specific colours to signify their trade (Welch, 2008: 220). In addition, different reigns were associated with different colours and cardinal directions, such as brown for the Song dynasty, green for the Ming, and yellow for the Qing (Yau, 1994; Williams, 2006: 100; Song, 2008: 70). This use of colour identity extended into the PRC era and this makes it an ideal method of tracing identification, exploring in-group and out-group dynamics, and looking at chronological changes in ideational colour usage. In Maoist China, the "red" classes were part of the ideational metafunctional marker of those who belonged to the People. [3] Yellow was also associated with the in-group, but not as frequently or demonstratively as red. By using this metafunction of colour, we can take a closer look at who is marked out by this colour, how the red classes progress over time, or compare the in-groups of the Mao era to that of, say, the contemporary era.

In China, Red was traditionally considered a "life-giving" colour and theatrical protagonists had their faces painted red as an identity marker to signify inner qualities such as holiness and dignity, and to signify brave warriors and generals that had an inner yang strength (Eberhard, 1986: 248; Williams, 2006: 100; Welch, 2008: 222). This positively connotative colour was later appropriated to identify the People. It could be argued that the Mao era was associated with the colour red in a similar way to the dynastic reign colours, combining the folk uses of the auspicious colour with the dynastic thematic uses to implement a new and meaningful coloured era that had clear positive associations. This is similar to the appropriation of red in Soviet art, which transformed what was originally a religious meaning into a marker of the proletarian hero (Bonnell, 1999). This deliberate use of a previously known colour aided in the masses' instant comprehension: by seeing the colour in a new context they were able to parse the meaning using their internal lexicon. Early images from the PRC use the ideational colour of red frequently, but it is by no means uniform. It is not until the visual grammar of the PRC becomes more defined and standardised that the use of red becomes ubiquitous.

This use of red to identify specific characters and their innate qualities straddles the ideational and interpersonal (this aspect will be further explored below). Furthermore, red and yellow "were the preserve of nobility and were forbidden to commoners" (Welch, 2008: 219). By commandeering a previously forbidden colour, the CCP was able to demystify and overthrow the elite of society in one stroke. This is a similar strategy to the use of calligraphy in the big character posters of the CR, where the use of the old art for the new movement deposed the enemy from their high status. While red was the most commonly used ideational colour for the in-group, particularly in the Mao era, yellow was also used. According to Welch (2008: 222), "yellow was so strongly associated with sovereignty that it was restricted to the emperor." Yinghong Cheng (2015: 169) traces the meaning of yellow as an identification marker for the Chinese race, quoting an interview with a "professor of aesthetics" claiming that:

> Since ancient times the color yellow has been associated with the Chinese. The Chinese originated on the yellow soil plateau, hunting, gathering, farming, proliferating, becoming sons and grandsons of hua xia on this soil. It is the yellow soil that gives us food, feeds sons and daughters of hua xia, generates the yellow-skinned Chinese, and forms a culture of 5,000 years.

[3] Note that "the People" with the capital "P" is the translation of *renmin (dazhong)* 人民(大众), used by Schoenhals (2007) to differentiate the idea of the proletarian classes (also known as the red classes) as the "in-group," as opposed to people with a lower case "p" that is used as a general reference to human beings.

It is through this connection to yellow that the authors continue on to the association of yellow as an identity marker associated with the Chinese people and that can be perceived on such items as the flag and emblems of the PRC, the Party itself, the People's Liberation Army, the Communist Youth League, and the Young Pioneers. Zheng Liansong, the original designer of the PRC flag, explained that he used yellow as the colour for the stars on the flag, "because the Chinese nation is a yellow race" (Wu and Lansdowne, 2015: 169). The backgrounds of images often utilise this yellow ideational meaning to surround the characters with an unrealistic but meaningful colour. Writing on red (such as the red rosettes) is usually in yellow as well.

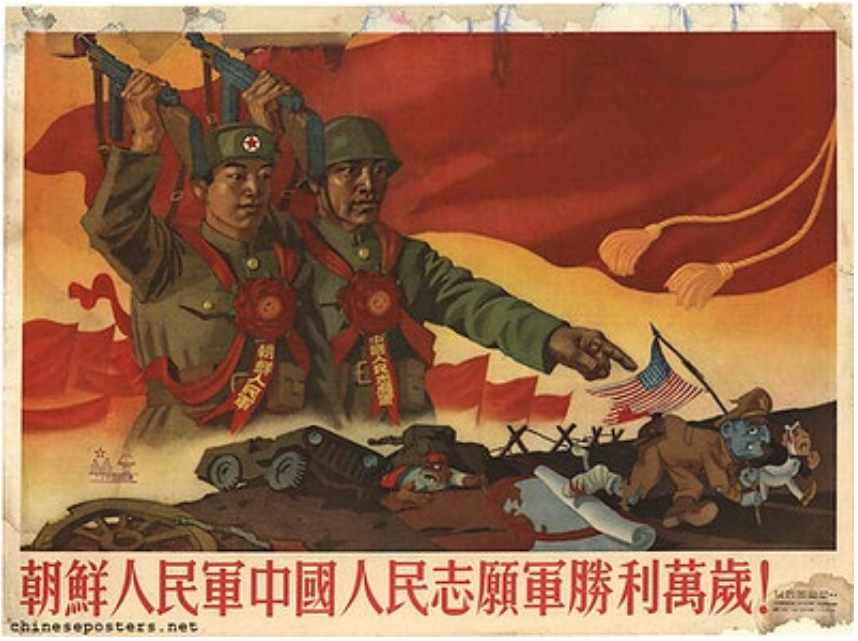

*Figure 2: Long Live the Victory of the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteers Army! (1951) (Chaoxian renminjun Zhongguo renmin zhiyuanjun shengli wansui!*朝鲜人民军中国人民志愿军胜利万岁!). *Designers: Zhang Ding* 张仃; *Dong Xiwen* 董希文*; Li Ruinian* 李瑞年*; Hua Tianyou* 滑间友*; Li Keran* 李可染; *Li Kushan* 李苦禅; *Tian Shiguang* 田世光; *Huang Jun* 黄均; *Zou Peizhu* 邹佩珠*; Wu Guanzhong* 吴冠中. *1951 Call no.: BG E16/268 (IISH collection).*

People who had performed especially meritoriously were awarded red rosettes, Red Guards wore red armbands, and positive characters were shown in warm-toned imagery. These markers of identity are reflected in the imagery of propaganda posters from the very beginning of the PRC, coming to a peak during the CR. Figure 2, Long Live the Victory of the Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteers Army!, shows an early use of this type of highlight-item imagery, where the main characters are not enveloped in fully red clothing, but rather with small red items that stand out from the rest of the scene. This poster is from just after the establishment of the PRC (1949–1951) and shows the use of highlighting items to identify characters and endorse characteristics. Soldiers are shown performing exemplarily in their duties (an interpersonal use of condoning the behaviour) and marking them as People. The image depicts a Korean and a Chinese soldier in victory over the American forces in the Korean war. Both soldiers wear rosettes, which also marks the Korean soldiers as part of the in-group promoted by the Party. The red rosette is a consistent item worn throughout the Maoist and early post-Mao period, showing a chronological consistency that both aids in identity within the imagery, but also shows how new movements and periods kept a well-known identity marker. These rosettes do not

vary in any of the physical properties of the colouration, and this shows the importance of the colour to the identifying marker. They are never shown in a different colour, meaning that the rosette itself is not the connotative part, but rather the red rosette is the important marker. Continuity of this type of red highlight item can be seen in Figure 1 from the 1970s, where the exemplary youths continue to wear these rosettes. In addition, red stars, Mao badges, and Young Pioneer scarves all served as ideational identity markers.

In addition to highlight items, red- and pink-hued clothing were also used to demarcate the members of the People. After the foundational period of the PRC, the CCP turned its attention to economic policies and the next period of art focuses on the Great Leap Forward (GLF, 1958–1966). Socialist realism had taken hold of the art realm and many of the images show the rosy optimism that was typical of this period. Despite the apparent realism of the images, red is still used often. Women wear pink and red, and most protagonists have red highlight items, similar to the earlier images. Figure 3 shows a typical image of this red identity marker. Like many of the women of this period, the subject wears a pink patterned overshirt and a red undershirt, a subtle yet effective tie into what she represents. Further strengthening this idea of red and pink for female members of the People, Berry (2012) traces the use of the colour red in the yangbanxi 样板戏 (model works from the CR) noting that red is not as common a colour as one might have thought. However, there is a notable character that wears red: the young female or apprentice character. According to Berry (2012) and Welch (2008), the ancient Chinese tradition of a female wearing red suggests a meaning attached either to virginal or bridal red (Welch, 2008: 221; Berry, 2012: 238–39). The primary characters to wear red clothing are the young women within the images, usually wearing a red or pink shirt.

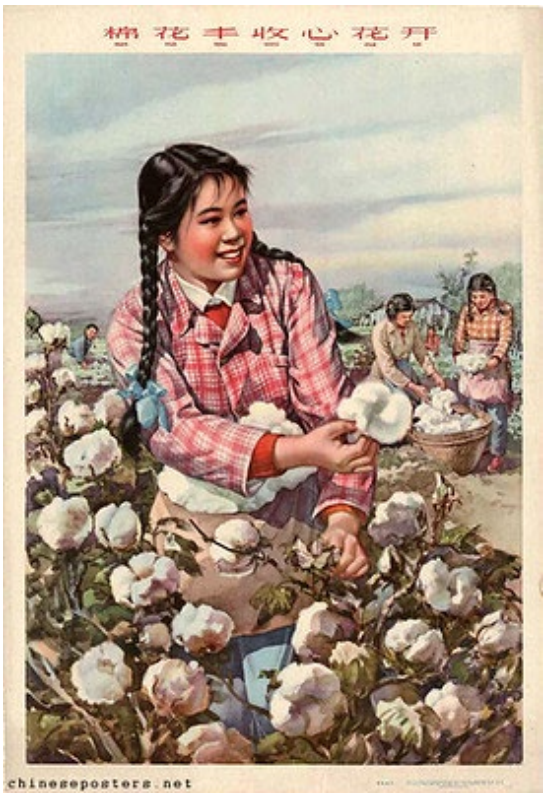

Figure 3. The Bumper Cotton Harvest Makes Our Hearts Bloom (1958) (Mianhua fengshou xinhua kai 棉花丰收心花开*). Designer: Xie Mulian* 谢幕连. *1958, September. Call no.: BG E40/40 (IISH collection).*

Perhaps the most well-known era for the use of red in its imagery is that of the CR. An important contributing factor to red as an ideational colour category is the artistic concept called "red, bright, and shining" (hong, guang, liang 红光亮) that was predominant during the CR. As part of this concept, images portraying positive characters used a red tone to indicate identity both through obvious red items, skin tones, and an inner glow emanating from the characters. This resembles the face paint of the operatic theatre; the complexions of the leaders and red classes all taking on a red hue. In full-colour gouache or oil painting-based posters, the colour is more subdued, presented as a rosiness or ruddiness. In woodblock-style imagery, the red categories are either marked by an identity item outlined above or are filled in with a bright and pure scarlet red that is the same hue used for the items. The early part of this movement was awash in red that serves as all three metafunctions of colour. Figure 4 shows an example from the Mao cult imagery that depicts a socialist realist image with Mao in the centre, red skin tones, Mao badges, red and pink clothing, and the red flags in the background. It is noteworthy that the red and pink clothing on young women shows a continuity across movements and highlights the transformation of a traditional use of red to the modern use in the posters.

Another common method for utilising colour as an identifying marker during the CR was the flooding of the black outline of a character with a scarlet infill; this was also used when no actor was shown in the image, but rather a disembodied limb or weapon striking at the enemy. The ideational marker of red is used to make it clear that the subject is a member of the People, even if no other marker, such as clothing, is available. In Figure 5, the People are metonymically represented by the oversized fist punching down on the enemy. The infill of scarlet red makes the recognition of who the hand denotes unquestionable: a representative of the People. There is no way that a contemporary audience could have interpreted this as, for example, an image showing an oppressor beating down on the underdog. The colour coding does not allow for this divergence of interpretation and is therefore incredibly important to the meaning and interpretation.

Whether it is the red hues of an identity-marking item, or the red of the woodblock, the physical properties are extremely consistent, particularly the value, saturation, purity, and luminosity. The physicality of the colour in the full-colour images is more diffuse; however, the tone leans more toward high luminosity and luminescence to parallel the red, bright, and shining characteristic. Later, as the CR becomes more subdued and especially as the "Up to the Mountains, Down to the Villages" campaign was in full swing, the colours gravitate to a less intense form of the red colouration, though it does not go fully back to pre-CR levels until after Mao's death in 1976.

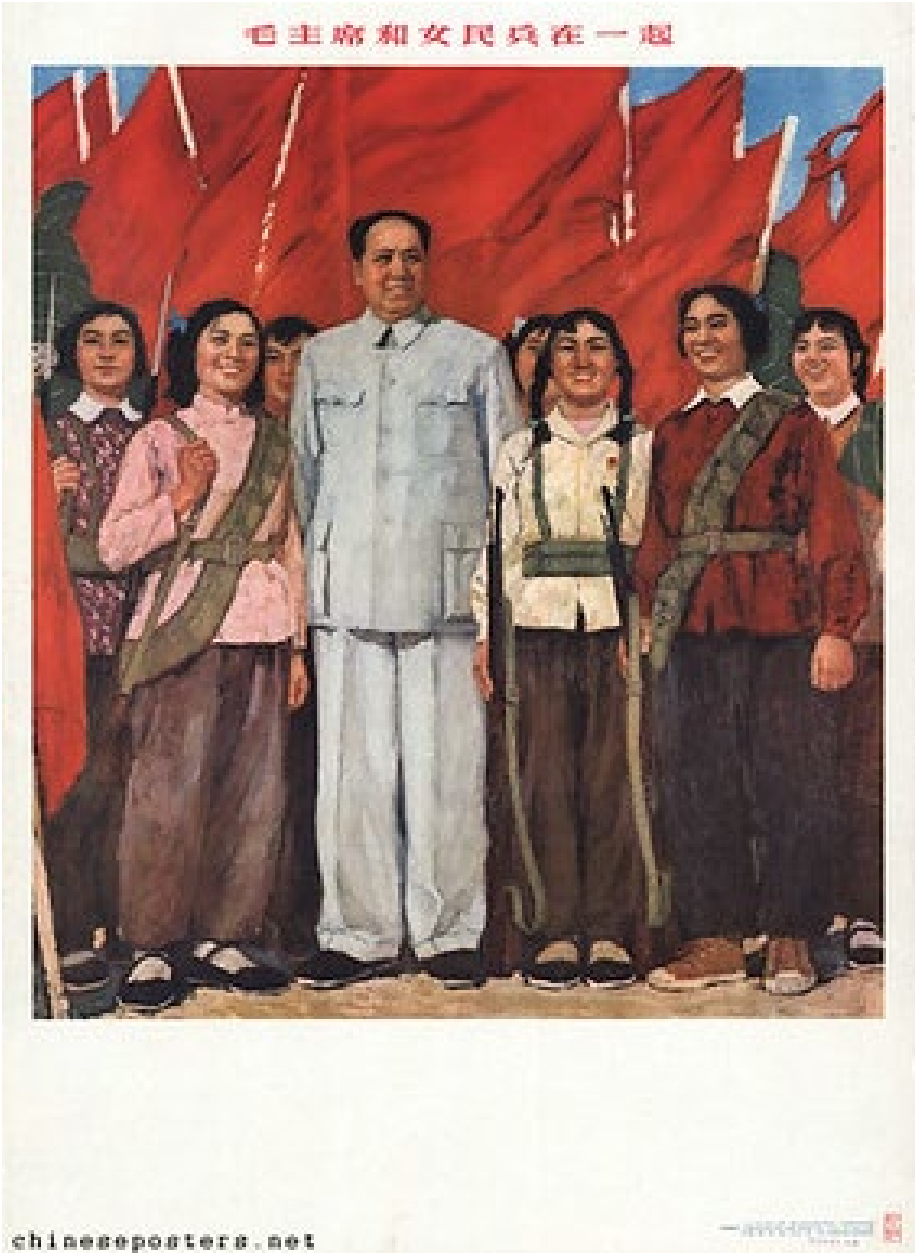

Figure 4: Chairman Mao with Women's Militia Members (1965) (Mao zhuxi he nüminbing zai yiqi 毛主席和女民兵在一起). *Designer: Wang Dejuan* 王德娟. *1965, November. Call no.: BG E15/148 (Landsberger collection).*

During the era of modernisation from 1977 to 1989, the official state-funded imagery starts a slow transition from the flood of red to a more subdued use, and eventually to almost no red used as an ideational colour. Under Hua Guofeng, whose brief reign left little time for true change in imagery, there is a general continued use of red, similar to the GLF period, with occasional CR-esque imagery attacking the Gang of Four. The rosettes, red skin tones, and red flooding are still used in this era, a technique that more or less disappears in later imagery unless they are specific references to the Mao era. This end of an era of the use of ideational red has potential overlap with the third metafunction of colour, the textual. The seeming ability to visually differentiate Maoist with the post-Maoist era specifically by colour theme lends to this idea that

the textual element of the imagery bestows a cohesiveness to the Mao era that the later decades were moving away from.

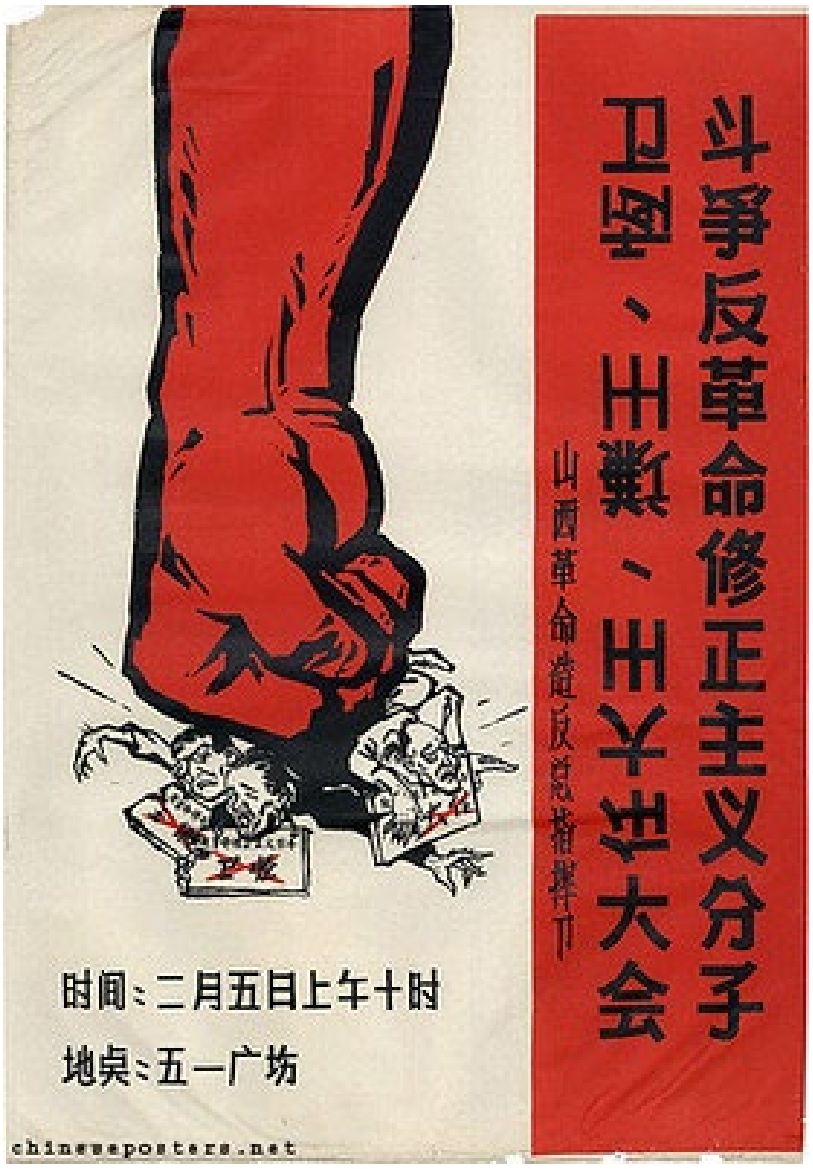

Figure 5: Great Meeting to Struggle against the Counterrevolutionary Revisionist Elements Wei Hu, Wang Qian, and Wang Daren (ca. 1967) (Douzheng fangeming xiuzheng zhuyi fenzi Wei Hu, Wang Qian, Wang Daren 斗争反革命修正主义分子卫沍、王谦、王大任大会*). Designer unknown. Call no.: PC-1967-010 (Private collection).*

In the post-Mao era, ideational colour transitions from the political propaganda sphere of influence to the contemporary art scene of political pop and magical and cynical realism. Artists such as Yue Minjun and Zhang Xiaogang utilise this common red ideational colour to comment on society rather than to convey political messages. The uses may be different, but the function of identification is similar. Both artists utilise the ideational red in different ways; Yue Minjun in self-portraiture and Zhang Xiaogang in his surreal "Bloodline" imagery. Yue notes in an interview that, "in many of my works we can trace influences of the origin of propaganda painting, which emphasises the influence of the Cultural Revolution in my memory. For example, there are rows of heads that appear one after another, that undoubtedly offered transcendence in my past" (Cué, 2017). Undoubtedly, the colour palette has a similar influence in his art. Zhang Xiaogang's

Bloodline paintings "engage with the notion of identity within the Chinese culture of collectivism" (Saatchi Gallery, 2020).

While warm tones of red and yellow conventionally mark the People, cool and dark colours of blue/green, black, and white are ideationally used as markers of the lower strata of society and, within the confines of the PRC, the inimical characters (Yang and Gentz, 2014). According to Eberhard (1986: 43), blue/green colouration of the face is a traditional Chinese identifier of a ghost or a bad character, and Welch (2008: 223) pinpoints that a green face within the theatrical identifiers was used to denote demons and green robes were the marker of a beggar character. Black and white are by and large associated with a more negative character identification, such as informers, witches, and treacherous or mischievous characters (Welch, 2008: 222–23). In the PRC, these cooler and darker colours were used almost exclusively to identify enemies. This type of identifying inimical colouration can be seen in Figures 2 and 5, the former in the blue colouration of Douglas MacArthur and the latter in the black and white of the miniscule enemies beneath the fist. According to Donald (2014: 663) the enemy clothes in political art are white, symbolising death and imperialism. This colouration also marks Japanese and Nationalist troops in propaganda and are therefore conventionally known markers of the inimical form. The conventionality of marking enemies with dark colours was noted in the guidebook quoted earlier and shows how deep-rooted the association was by 1975. After the collapse of the Gang of Four, the visualisation of enemies disappears in favour of positive messaging.

This type of social cue that indicates the in-group and out-group dynamic has a multi-faceted role to play in the art of both the Maoist period and beyond. First, it can be used to analyse the art itself, which characters are shown to be the collectively acceptable protagonists, the idealised citizen through a consistent ideational colour. Second, it can be looked at as the social integration of the artist within the cultural sphere of the PRC. In the Maoist period, like the Stalinist period, this took the form of strict adherence to the state's prescribed art style and the need to publicly declare allegiances. According to Barmé (1999), Socialization with a capital "S" was the new censor in Communist China, tying the artists themselves into a specific social dynamic that was acceptable within a highly Socialized sphere where the artist's loyalty was assumed and only negative examples could single one out (Barmé, 1999: 16). Third, it can be used to compare chronological pieces and new art movements to see how they use the colour grammar of the past to inscribe new critiques. Fourth, it can be used for a cross-sectional analysis of similarly motivated imagery, such as that of the Soviet Union and Maoist China to look at how the colours are used within the Socialist colour grammar rather than the area-centric role.

Interpersonal

The interpersonal colour metafunction encompasses connotative meaning, emotional value, and correlative significance. In the imperial court, the importance of colour dressing went beyond identification to an expression of power (Yau, 1994). In addition, colour in China has an emotional value that may differ from the ways that the West traditionally views "colour emotions." Yang (2010: 3) maintains that each colour contains several connections that signify to the audience various emotions or perceptions. Warm tones such as red pull people in or make things stand out, while cool blue colours push people away or make things go into the background. This last point is important with regards to the use of warm colours for protagonists and cool colours for antagonists—this naturally makes the viewer feel closer to the People and further from the "enemy."

Yang (2010) lists three basic emotional ties that the general public associates with each colour in Chinese society. For example, red signifies enthusiasm, prosperity, and health; yellow connotes brightness, loyalty, and gentility, and black can variously indicate depth, mystery,

bewilderment, sadness, and terror. As an extension of the colour emotions, rituals adopt colours as part of their meaning to correlate the emotional core with the ritualistic goals. One example of correlative significance are the colour associations made with weddings and funerals (Welch, 2008: 222; Williams, 2006: 98), with the tendency for young women to wear red clothes (Welch, 2008: 221; Berry, 2012: 238–9), which emphasises a value judgement (chasteness, purity) with regard to these women. White is associated with death and mourning, and the connection between the two was so effective that the colour of the moon on the emperor's clothing was switched to pale blue to avoid an inauspicious connection (Welch, 2008: 222).

According to Eberhard (1986: 248) the ancient usage of red continued through to the PRC with "the presentation of communism as the 'rule of the Reds' . . . and of the 'Red Guards' as the shock troops of revolutionary unrest." Cushing and Tompkins (2007: 14) add that red in general represents socialism and revolution—the "red sun" represented Mao and Mao Zedong Thought; and Yang and Gentz (2014: 115) state, "red is obviously the dominant colour representing anything related to the Communist party and communist cause, socialism and revolution." Red in PRC artwork is expressed through tone and items associated with proper behaviour that has the connotative signification of revolution and admiration. In many posters a red highlight has a dual purpose of an ideational and an interpersonal indicator of celebration and honouring of successful citizens (Cushing and Tompkins, 2007: 14; Yang and Gentz, 2014: 115).

The ritualised Red Guard gatherings at Tiananmen Square were highly "coloured" and items were used to reinforce the ritualistic feeling of the public display. According to Gaunt (1999: 34–36) public displays, like these mass gatherings, are visually imposing demonstrations of agitation and integration propaganda designed to both intimidate the enemy and bring the in-group together. The ritualistic colouration of the red items with the standardised Red Guard uniform makes the display inherently and immediately understandable and instantly differentiated to images of similar gatherings for jubilation.

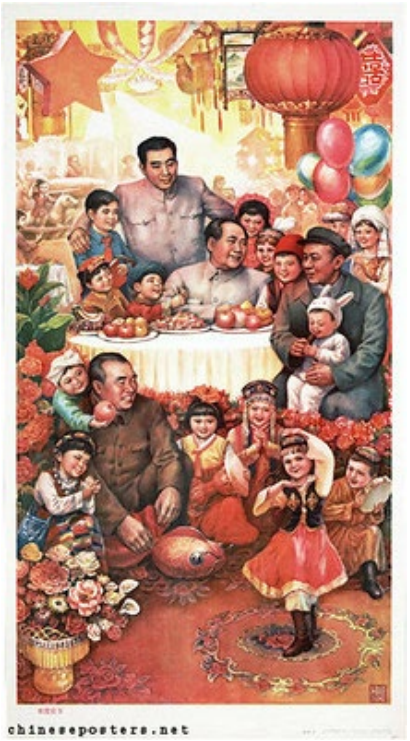

Figure 6: Celebrate a Festival with Jubilation (1983) (Huandu jiajie 欢度佳节). Designer: Wei Zhigang 魏志刚. 1983, August. Call no.: BG E13/363 (Landsberger collection).

In later posters, such as those from the 1980s–2000s, the emotive quality of the colours tends towards either nostalgia or patriotism and good citizenship. Posters that refer to Mao, anniversaries, history, and so on use the exaggerated warm tones of the Maoist period and generally appear overtly red. Patriotic imagery also uses red and warm tones, but generally not to the intensity of the Maoist or nostalgic imagery, at least until the Xi Jinping era. Figure 6 shows the use of nostalgic interpersonal colour; the colouration reminds one of the images from the CR, with a flooding of warm tones, light shining from unnatural angles, red clothing of the children, and floral arrangements. Yet the emotion is one of nostalgia for a bygone era: happiness and jubilation are central to the image, not revolution.

The emotional and correlative significance of colour in political imagery aids in understanding how contemporary people would have interpreted the underlying values of what was being communicated to them by the propagandist. The knowledge that a red rosette was not only identifying an in-group person but also giving that person's behaviour a stamp of approval would be instantly recognisable and internalised. In a retrospective analysis, this information on how images were permeated with emotionally connotative colours allows us to utilise the well-known colour keys to more accurately interpret what an image "was saying" and more definitively "know" how to decipher political communication. Knowing that red equalled revolution and positive qualities and dark, cool colours were equated to malevolence makes us, the reader, more in tune with the contemporary propagandists' messages and gives us the ability to look back and analyse not only individual images or sets of images, but use them as a lens to gauge the mood and historical place of these pieces of important communicative power.

Textual

Textual traditions of colour utilise colour combinations, colour schemes, and conventional highlight colours to communicate a cohesion and unity of meaning across multiple pieces. While red and black as a colour theme can be seen in earlier (pre-CR) images, it was the CR period where this theme flourished. Yang (2016: 2) states that "the change to the red-art style of the cultural revolution and the violent and militaristic themes is a sudden shift that gives the readers some impression of the mood of the time." Jiang (2017: 237) adds that the colour choices of the CR propaganda posters were used more as a way of visually intensifying an effect and denote obvious revolutionary markers and political orientation. As a textual metafunction, the use of red therefore transforms into a colour scheme and marks the imagery as part of the revolutionary theme. This is further accentuated by the use of the ideational and interpersonal colour categories to denote class stance, with red denoting the People and black the inimical classes. Red, black, and white imagery in the woodblock style are almost exclusively about Red Guards and revolution during the CR (Figure 5, above), while red-dominated gouache imagery is reserved for Mao-cult posters (Figure 4, above). The "red, bright, and shining" colour concept also applies to warm colours in general and, therefore, "light and bright colour schemes highlight positive events [and] values," while "anything related to the enemy is dark, usually dark blue, green, brown or black" (Yang and Gentz, 2014: 115). While this use of black and white with a red highlight may be due to limited resources or the speed of printing, the colour choices are still consistent. The colours could easily have been black and white with a yellow highlight (since yellow is also seen as a positive ideational colour), but this is not the case after the establishment of the PRC.

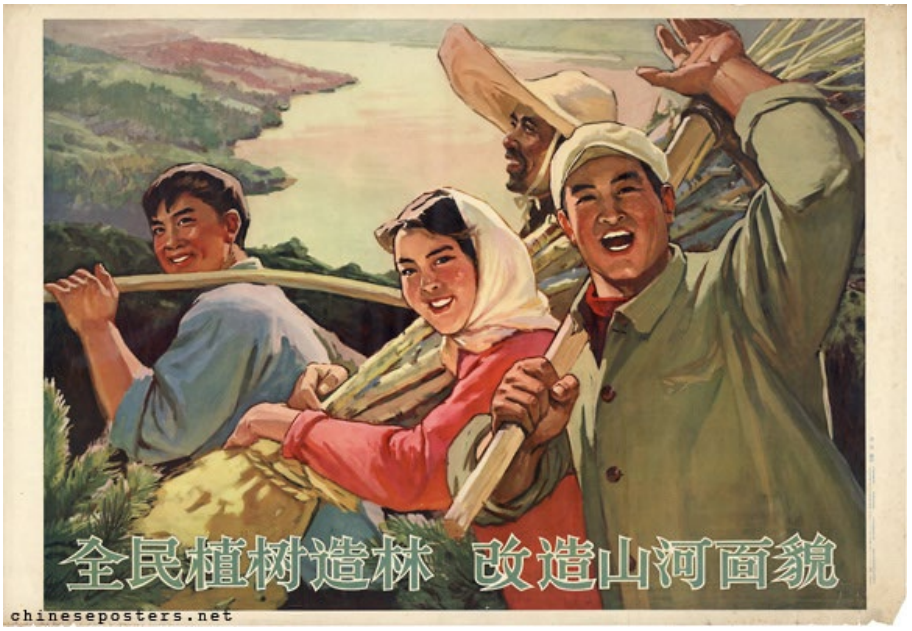

Figure 7: Everybody Plants Trees and Creates Forests to Change the Appearance of Mountains and Rivers (1966) (Quanmin zhishu zaolin gaizao shanhe mianmao 全民植树造林改造山河面貌). *Designer: Sun Wenchao* 孙文超. *Call no.: BG E37/296 (Landsberger collection).*

Another important colour scheme of the Maoist period is the more naturalistic (but still bright) colouration used to depict agriculture, industry, and the positive effects of CCP rule. This conforms with the Maoist conception of romantic socialist realism that depicts utopic and rosy images to inspire the audience. Images of bumper harvests or other productivity-based activities, such as in Figure 7, are generally shown with bright blue skies, perfectly green and yellow crops, and happy and healthy people. Note the bright colours, luminous faces, and generally rich hues of the Figure 7; this is repeated over and over again throughout this thematic style.

This optimistic colouration continues after the Maoist period, while the revolutionary red, black, and white does not. This means that the textual colour scheme of the Maoist period is clearly differentiated and not associated with later regimes' propaganda imagery. Instead, the richly saturated and luminescent colouration of the positive socialist realism transitions to other positive themes, such as economic advancement, celebrations, and even the discotheque. Economic innovation and scientific education are both textual categories that fit into this scheme well into the present day. Figure 8 shows this bright and cheery colouration extending from the textual elements of the agriculture and industry from the previous periods into more modern material. The hands holding the beaker have a similar rosiness or underlying red tone as previous imagery without being unrealistically red, and the bright rainbow hues at the top of the image highlight all the positive uses of this scientific integrity. Even the shipping crates on the dock are by and large coloured red. Similarly, advances in society and culture are also highlighted by this type of colouration. Bridging the gap between highly coloured and red-tinted imagery, the couple in Figure 9 dance the night away in a newly approved discotheque. According to Landsberger (2019: n.p.), "disco was a huge craze in the 1980s. The poster shows that it is accepted and should no longer be condemned as a form of Western decadence." The warm tones of the image show the interpersonal condonement of the action, while the bright and happy hues make the category part of the advancement category. Even the woman is wearing the identifying "red" in her trousers, a subtle yet clear connector to the connotation between women, appropriate behaviour, and red. Though there are red tonalities in this image, the saturation and tone of the red is varied and not solely the revolutionary scarlet of previous decades. This shows the adaptation of colour grammar

over time, this is not a "revolutionary" textual image, but it is a positive advancement image that depicts behaviour condoned by the propagandist.

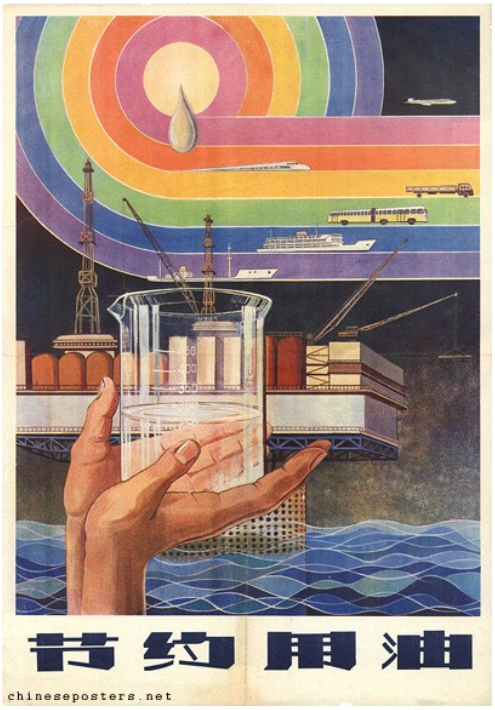

Figure 8: Economize on Oil (1980s?–1990s?) (Jieyue yong you 节约用油*). Designer unknown. Call no.: BG E37/61 (Landsberger collection).*

Figure 9: Youthful Dance Steps (1986) (Qingchun wubu 青春舞步*). Designer: Wang Bingkun* 王炳坤*. 1986, April. Call no.: BG E13/441 (Landsberger collection).*

The textual element of the colour metafunctions allows the reader to categorise and analyse political imagery based on the knowledge that it fits into specific overarching themes and messages. In the past, distinguishing between revolutionary posters and those of economic messages was a key skill to deciphering what the Party was telling the People. The fitting of colour schemes into specific categories helps to more readily understand how these messages fit into the grand scheme of Party communication and as researchers how to more easily identify units of analysis.

Colour Analysis Based on the Three Metafunctions

Colour grammar facilitates a more accurate method of image description and analysis of posters. While propaganda and the propagandist have definite messages that they are communicating, it can be difficult to "prove" what that information is. This level of analysis is one method to "know" what is being said and give a more concrete way of presenting this knowledge. The following examples utilise all three metafunctions together to explicate how they may be used to look more closely at political art. The final example here looks at political pop to show how the methodology can be extended beyond political propaganda.

Hold High the Great Red Banner of Mao Zedong to Wage the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the End—Revolution is No Crime, to Rebel is Justified (Figure 10), is from the early period of the CR (1966–1969) and represents a typical image of this period. In the poster, four Red Guard models are ideationally marked by the red colouring of their skin, their red armbands, and their Little Red Books. The masses are further signified as part of the in-group with similarly red skin tones and items, and are portrayed as marching within a sea of red flags. The clothing is the military green hue that was common during this period and marks the identity of the wearers. The interpersonal connection is made through both the revolutionary zeal of the image and the message that is emphasized at the top of the page through the slogan that directly connects the idea of "red" to revolution: "Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong." The emotive qualities of this piece communicate to the People the incredible revolutionary sentiment of following Mao's thoughts and the colour red is highly associated to this idea. It also mirrors the coloured public display described by Gaunt (1999), showing the mass gathering of Red Guards and the agitation and integration propaganda intended by these spectacles. The textual metafunction of the poster classifies this image into that of the "revolutionary" theme through red colouring with yellow highlights and white and black details. This combination of the three metafunctions allows us to clearly identify the positive characters, what is being condoned, and where this message fits into the overall propagandist machine. In comparison to other images, such as Figures 2 and 6, colour analysis can show colours in a militaristic setting (Figure 2) being adapted into the CR narrative despite the absence of a military conflict or the continuity of the black, white, and red imagery of the textual theme and how these images were supporting the same message during the same period.

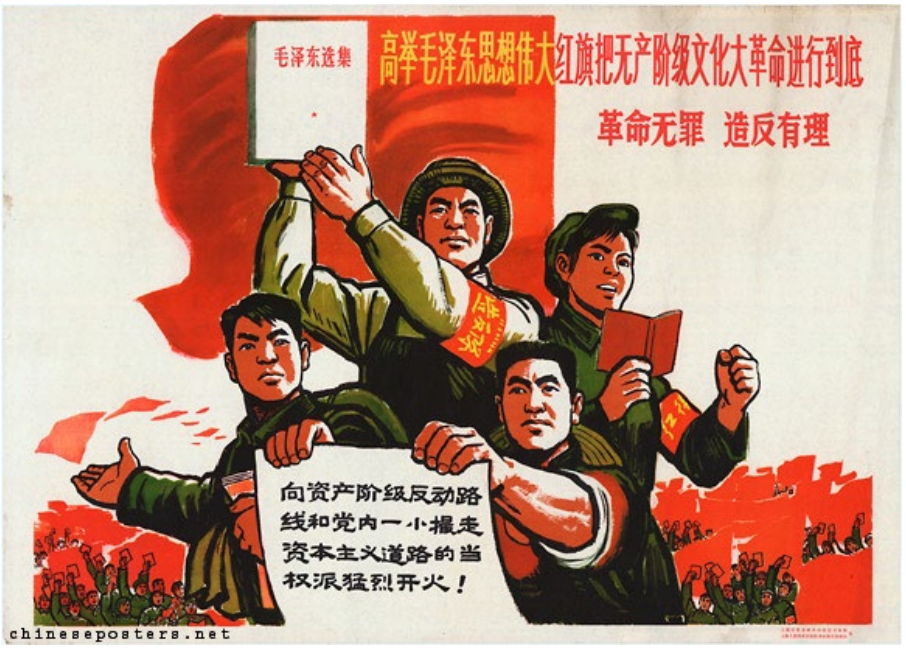

Figure 10: Hold High the Great Red Banner of Mao Zedong to Wage the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the End—Revolution is No Crime, to Rebel is Justified (1966–1967) (Gaoju Mao Zedong sixiang weida hongqi ba wuchan jieji wenhua dageming jinxing daodi—geming wuzui, zaofan youli 高举毛泽东思想伟大红旗把无产阶级文化大革命进行到底—革命无罪，造反有理). *Designer: Revolutionary Rebel Command of the Shanghai Publishing System* 上海出版系统革命司令部; *Revolutionary Rebel Committee of the Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House* 上海人民美术出版社革命造反委员会. *Call no.: BG E13/764 (Landsberger collection).*

The Deng Xiaoping era represents a period of artistic experimentation in both style and colour—imagery is still richly coloured, though not limited to the rosy tones of the previous decades nor the strictly socialist-realist stylisation. Figure 11 shows the transitionary style of the 1980s. Rather than a distinctly red skin tone, the child is merely rosy cheeked, more similar to pre-Mao colouration. His space suit is a ruddy red, the spaceship has red highlights, and even the dog and cat wear red-toned ribbons. This shows a continuity of ideational colour as a marker even into the 1980s, though this iteration is substantially subtler. The interpersonal colouration indicates advancement and development through clean sharp colours, the dynamic movement of the spaceship, and dreamscape-like quality. This is a child engaging with the modern and the novel. The imaginary background of the moon and bright blue sky seem to place this image into a textual theme similar to the images of economic, agricultural, and societal imagery of the previous decades (Figures 7, 8, and 9), particularly the bright blues and greens that lend a feeling of optimism and opportunity. Similar to Yang's (2016) statement that the reds of the CR give the reader a sense of the feeling of that time, the positive colouration here gives you a sense of the sentiments of this era: expectation, innovation, and advancement.

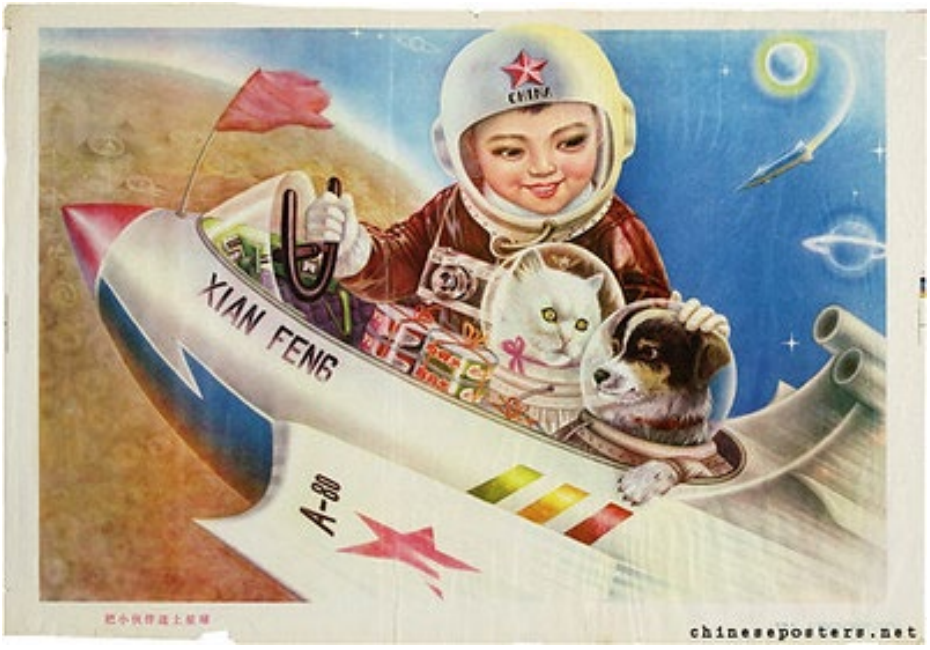

Figure 11: Bringing His Playmates to the Stars (1980) (Ba xiao huoban songshang xingqiu 把小伙伴送上星球). Designer: Shi Shiming 史士明. 1980, June. Call no.: BG E15/478 (Landsberger collection).

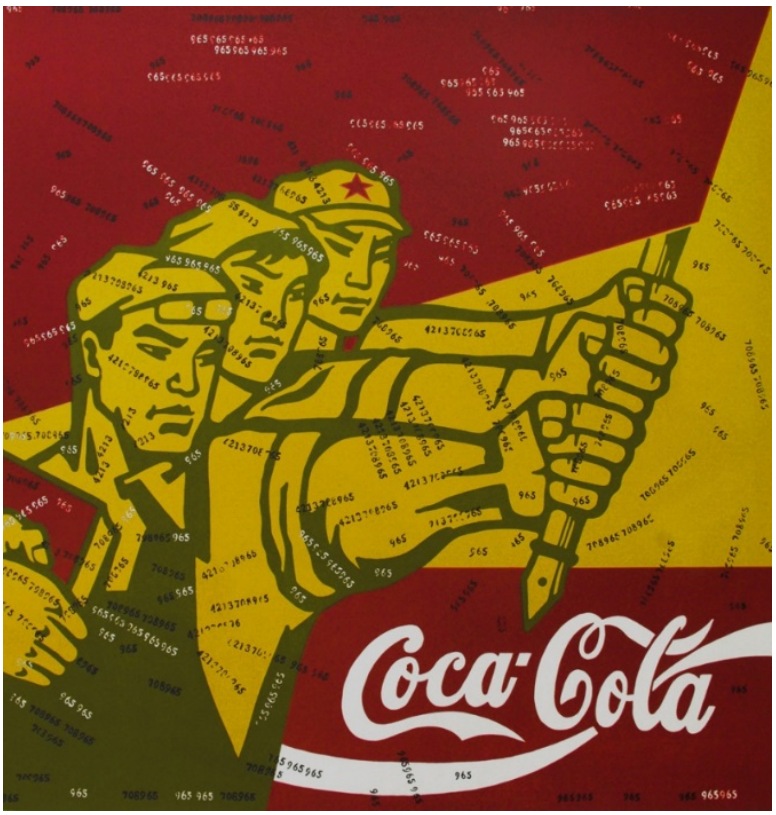

Figure 12: Great Criticism – Coca Cola (1994) by Wang Guangyi. Tate Museum Online. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/political-pop.

The final example (Figure 12) is from Wang Guangyi's "Great Criticism" series. He uses the three metafunctions of colour to turn the political propaganda of the CR on its head—

ideational in the yellow and red identifying the characters, interpersonal in the emotive revolution and nostalgia qualities, and textual to tie the imagery into a specific category. Wang further taps into this interpersonal use of colour by juxtaposing the red of revolution and the brand red of Coca-Cola to subvert the ideals of a Socialist China and the recent wholesale adoption of capitalism in China. This is an example of Barmé's (1999: 99) remark that the red of revolution and the glittering gold of capitalism in 1990s China combined into a grey anomie that cloaked the country in ideological and cultural dysfunction. By utilising this colour combination and co-opting colours of the past and present, Wang makes his criticism even more poignant and the ironic use of the metafunctions of colour help us instantly understand his point.

Conclusion

Colour is an important factor to think about when interpreting imagery, not only from an artistic and symbolic point of view, but from an intrinsically grammatical angle as well. This article has argued that colour fulfils a visual grammatical role that communicates information through the "metafunctions of colour." It first looked at colour as a key element of the grammatical form of artistic expression. It then explored the meaning of cultural uses of colour within the modern Chinese sphere. Combining these two approaches, it then looked at how the metafunctions of colour present themselves within propaganda and political imagery separately, and then all three together in several exemplars. In this way, the use of colour grammar as a tool for reading imagery and understanding some of the more in-depth meanings of the communicative art style of propaganda were explored. Colour grammar, by itself or paired with other visual grammatical modes (such as symbols, metaphors, metonymy, deixis, and so on), is an invaluable tool to not only take a closer look at political imagery, but imagery in general. In addition, it lends a degree of validity and potential quantifiable results to a usually qualitative and subjective area of study. The use of colour to grammatically "read" an image will hopefully be a useful method of analysis for Chinese studies as well as broader fields including East Asian studies and other visual studies from around the world.

This type of analysis adds to the existing scholarship in visual linguistics, Chinese studies, and art history. It takes a concept that has been exclusively used in Western art analyses and broadens its utility by adapting its characteristics to better serve a new area of study. Previously, authors such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) stated that these methods were solely based on a Eurocentric study of art and that interpretation for other areas would need to be adapted in order to allow for both cultural differences and different ways of conveying meaning through art. This article attempts to start this journey of adjustment so as to allow for not only cross-cultural knowledge sharing but also comparative research using similar tools. In addition, by using these methods of interpretation, a deeper and more intensive study can be advanced of the Chinese propaganda scene by looking at the meaning behind the imagery with demonstrable results, rather than the general descriptive and historical narrative that is the norm. This method of interpretation can be coupled with other visual grammar elements to map out the grammar of how propagandist and the audience were communicating with each other. It also lends to other artistic studies, not just Chinese or propaganda studies including other East Asian studies, comparative ideological based imagery (communist based, fascist based, authoritarian based), advertisement, religious imagery, counter-culture and political movement art, and much more.

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