



Dazhai: Imagistic Rhetoric as a Cultural Instrument

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Abstract**

Much literature in organizational communication contends that culture is a powerful social reality. This power lies in culture's ability to influence, direct, and even control people's desires and dreams. [Lukes](#) (1974) argues that the exercise of control over people's desires and dreams is the supreme form of power. For the purpose of constructing the social reality of culture, various rhetorical mechanisms could be employed ([Medhurst & DeSousa](#), 1981). This paper, with the illustration of actual cultural artifacts, delineates and analyzes how imagistic rhetoric was employed in constructing the social reality of Dazhai, an agricultural paragon once in China for nationwide emulation. This study concludes that poster images possess great suasive potency by means of audience immediacy, making this rhetorical mechanism a powerful cultural instrument for the construction of social reality and for the propagation of organizational culture.

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Much literature in organizational communication contends that culture is a powerful social reality ([Deal & Kennedy](#), 1982; [Morgan](#), 1997; [Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo](#), 1982; [Smircich](#), 1981). This power lies in culture's ability to influence, direct, and even control people's desires and dreams ([Clegg](#), 1975; [Deal & Kennedy](#), 1982; [Deetz](#), 1982; [Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo](#), 1982). The exercise of control over people's desires and dreams, according to [Lukes](#) (1974), is the supreme form of power. For the purpose of forming the social reality of culture, various rhetorical mechanisms could be employed ([Bormann et al.](#), 1982; [Edwards & Winkler](#), 1997; [Smircich](#), 1981). With the illustration of actual cultural artifacts, this paper delineates, analyzes, and attests how imagistic rhetoric through poster images was employed in helping construct the social reality of Dazhai, an agricultural paragon once in China for nationwide emulation. This essay concludes that imagistic rhetoric possesses great suasive potency by means of audience immediacy, making this rhetorical mechanism a powerful medium for the promulgation of a particular organizational culture and social reality.

The first section of this essay presents literature concerning organizational culture as social reality, the power of constructed social reality, and visual or imagistic rhetoric. The section then explains how the present study extends literature on imagistic literature. Second, offering examples of poster and stamp images as cultural artifacts, I illustrate how imagistic rhetoric was employed to help construct the social

reality of Dazhai. Finally, imagistic rhetoric through poster images as a medium for organizational culture is discussed and analyzed.

Literature Review

Numerous organizational theorists contend that it is culture that makes human organization possible. According to [Bormann, Howell, Nichols, & Shapiro](#) (1982), for an organization to exist, a common frame of reference is necessary. This common frame of reference creates a web structure that holds different organizational elements together. [Geertz](#) (1973) argues, "Man [or Woman] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [or she herself] has spun...culture [is] those webs" (p.5). Some theorists argue that the common framework of reference that the culture of the organization offers is mainly reflected in values (e.g., [Haviland](#), 1993). Others argue that this framework of reference is mainly reflected in practices (e.g., [Eisenberg & Goodall](#), 1993). Yet, values and practices may mutually promote each other. What is more important in the present research is to study the executive power of organizational culture and how this power is cultivated and maintained.

Culture wields considerable power over and within an organization. According to [Smircich](#) (1981), managerial control could be executed through the means of culture. This is accomplished through influencing observable features of the organization (e.g., purposes, goals, heroes, villains, rites, rituals, and sanctioned practices). All these observable features of organizational culture help form a certain ideology which, [Clegg](#) (1975) contends, provides the structure for an organization's "mode of rationality." It is the mode of rationality, Clegg argues, that characterizes the deep structure rules of the organization wherein power arises. The "supreme exercise of power," according to [Lukes](#) (1974), is the "power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires" (p. 23). As previously discussed, culture forms the organization's ideology, the mode of rationality, and common framework of reference, all of which may help constitute the groove of organizational behavior. In this sense, [Mumby](#) (1989) is certainly right in his contention that "the most powerful group is the one which is able to institutionalize its own particular world view or ideology" through cultural artifacts (p. 294).

Organizational culture can be cultivated through numerous instruments or cultural artifacts. [Deal and Kennedy](#) (1982) and [Bormann, Howell, Nichols, and Shapiro](#) (1982) offer the following instruments for the creation of a certain organizational culture: rites, rituals, celebrations, legends, myths, and sagas that glorify the adventures, exploits, and successes of organizational heroes. Critics have examined different forms of discourse for their persuasive potential, such as fiction, autobiography, television, film, song, magazines, and public letters. [Medhurst and DeSousa](#) (1981) claimed that non-oratorical discourse (e.g., editorial cartoons) had not received much attention. However, since [Medhurst and DeSousa's](#) (1981) work, the study of cartoons as one form of discourse has received increased attention (e.g., [Bostdorff](#), 1987; [Edwards & Winkler](#), 1997; [Medhurst & DeSousa](#), 1981). Posters, especially color posters, on the other hand, have only received scant study, despite the fact that initial research illuminated the great suatory power of posters in ideological construction ([Evans, & Donald](#), 1999). Color posters, in particular, have received even less scholarly attention. This is so probably because color images are more difficult to be accommodated into the more traditional scholarly publications which are generally printed in black-and-white. Yet this factual restraint does not lessen the tenable need for more research on color images as a possibly potent form of rhetoric. Colors are primordial and powerful activators of human senses, as I demonstrate in the present study.

Furthermore, I call for more awareness of the suatory or didactic function of color images, in addition to their depictive or epideictic function. Recently the depictive or epideictic function of images has received a healthy share of the attention from scholars on visual rhetoric ([Bostdorff](#), 1987; [Edwards & Winkler](#), 1997; [Medhurst & DeSousa](#), 1981). However, the volume of study of the suatory or didactic role of images, especially color images, is easily eclipsed under comparison. In this regard, [Olson](#) (1983) makes a commendable initiation in claiming that widely distributed posters can play a suatory role in political communication. A reading of Olson's work, however, would reveal that such claims await further evidential substantiation. This study also endeavors to furnish this evidence through personal experience and audience

narrative memoirs.

Finally, the present study invites attention to portrayal of women that presents an interesting contrast with, and yet confirmation of, women's status as explicated in traditional feminist literature. In much feminist studies (e.g., [Iannello](#), 1992; [Segal](#), 1992), women belong to an oppressed and marginalized class that awaits emancipation. Women portrayed in Dazhai campaign posters, on the other hand, occupy a visual dominance that promotes women's prominence and their role for national contributions. However, despite this visual prominence, portrayal of women in Dazhai posters seems paradoxical in the sense that the portrayal is masculinized, representing emancipatory oppression ([Lee](#), 1998).

Dazhai: A Brief Introduction

The Dazhai Production Team in Xiyang County, Shanxi Province of China, was made a national model in 1964 when Mao Zedong issued the call "*In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai*." The peasants in Dazhai were held as heroic models. They overcame the most severe conditions, and worked long hours without rest in bitter cold weather ([Rawski](#), 1979). Dazhai's success story was based on its ability to turn its infertile soil into productive land by relying on human power and hard work. Water was transported over many miles for irrigation, land was cleared in the mountains, and terraced fields were built that withstood drought and flood. The main driving force behind these achievements was Chen Yonggui, a true Party activist who represented the poor and lower-middle class peasants of the Production Team. Chen, usually shown with a towel around his head, organized the villagers into teams with names such as "Oldsters and Youngsters," and "Iron Girls," to perform the backbreaking work that was needed to convert barren Dazhai into a "Pacesetter in China's Agriculture" ([Wen & Liang](#), 1977).

Although Dazhai later was exposed and admitted by the Communist Party itself as a hoax, the economic, ecological, and ideological effects of the Dazhai campaign upon Chinese rural development proved to be massive, pervasive, and tenacious ([Dernberger](#), 1994). As a response to the call of learning from Dazhai, as many as 80 million peasants participated in farmland capital construction work each year. It was estimated that during the early and mid-1970s, as much as 30 percent of the total rural labor force was devoted to land investment and the building of infrastructure. Consequently, the hard work of the peasants in countless Chinese production teams and communes practically changed the landscape of rural China and somewhat paved the way for further mechanization ([Wen & Liang](#), 1977). Even today, when traveling rural China, one can still see, on walls in numerous villages, faded slogans proclaiming *Nongye xue Dazhai* ("In agriculture, learn from Dazhai").

However, the effects of the Dazhai campaign were not always positive. Because different areas in China have vastly different topographical and ecological conditions, following Dazhai as the standard model for rural development turned out to have disastrous consequences, particularly in areas with abundant water resources. Lakeside wetlands, grass, lands and forests, for instance, were rapidly converted to farmland, resulting in severe erosion ([Dernberger](#), 1994).

Imagistic Rhetoric in Dazhai Campaign

[Evans and Donald](#) (1999) acknowledge difficulty and danger in interpreting the *meaning* and themes of posters. This is obviously caused by the chronological, geographic, and cultural distance between the present interpretation and the historical use of the posters. To help decrease and overcome this difficulty and danger, [Evans and Donald](#) (1999) offer two suggestions: (1) political analyses are essential given the overriding political purpose of Chinese posters in the period; and (2) semiotic and historical interpretations, linguistic competencies, and a sense of the aesthetics of the period in its own particular context can all offer valuable help. To follow Evans and Donald's first suggestion, I consciously focused on the political intentions behind the posters in my interpretation. Regarding their second suggestion, my cultural background was of great help. Born in a small Chinese village, personally living through a portion of the Dazhai campaign, and growing up with the experience of the posters (similar to [Chen](#), 1999) in her reminiscent narrative), I am blessed with fluency in the language of Chinese, and with a basic understanding of the historical background and Chinese peasants' political and aesthetic ethos during the historical period.

In the interpretation and analysis of Dazhai posters, testimonial and research evidence were also employed. Invocation of all this help (as semantically implied by the word "help"), of course, will not exempt me from the difficulty and danger involved in interpreting the posters.

Considering the availability of different channels of persuasion, the ubiquity of propaganda posters, and the lack of literacy on the part of the target audience, Dazhai campaign posters presumably played a tremendous rhetorical or didactic role in soliciting millions of Chinese peasants' enthusiasm and participation in the campaign. This section of the paper provides actual examples of imagistic rhetoric used in the Dazhai campaign to illustrate how certain rhetorical themes are visually portrayed and how the power of imagistic rhetoric is symbolically conveyed.

Themes in the Imagistic Rhetoric of Dazhai Campaign

Images selected for this study come from three sources: (1) [IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection](#); (2) [University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection](#), and (3) personal possessions. The IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection of Chinese posters and University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection are perhaps the most comprehensive collections. These two sources have produced authoritative works on the subject of Chinese posters (see [Landsberger](#), 1995, and [Evans & Donald](#), 1999). The selection of images for this study includes all posters from the collections that have a relevance to the Dazhai campaign. The selection also conforms with my memory of typical Dazhai campaign posters of that period in Chinese history. Personal possessions are actual artifacts from that period. With such reasoning, the images selected are presumably representative of the poster population of Dazhai campaign.

From my analysis, the didactic force in the imagistic rhetoric in Dazhai campaign is achieved mainly through concentrated portrayal of salient themes. Judged from the images' visual composition including hierarchy, dominance, coloring, and repeated patterns, from an analysis of visual symbolization, and through assistance from my native familiarity with the cultural, historical, political, and audience background of the period, the Dazhai posters' themes center on industriousness, unity under Party leadership, the important role of women, and other minor themes such as participant satisfaction.

Theme 1: Industriousness or hard work.

Industriousness or hard work is probably the most salient theme designed for the imagistic rhetoric of Dazhai campaign. The thematic message of the whole campaign was that hard work will guarantee miraculous success, however harsh the local conditions. In [Figure 1](#), a peasant woman is studying late at night while her child is asleep. It seems to be 11:30 PM according to the clock. Signs of hard manual labor during the day, the spades and pickax, stand against the bed. To improve her "revolutionary ideology," she apparently has been writing for some time and is getting new ink into her pen. Five certificates of merit hang on the wall as proof of the fruition of all her hard work. Being a mother of a little child makes her industry even more noteworthy. The inspirational source behind the woman's industriousness seems to be symbolized through a poster of a revolutionary heroine on the wall and through the red books of Mao's collected works that stand on the windowsill.

[Olson](#) (1983) observes that postage stamps were used "to impress upon the public the necessity of spreading the Four Freedoms throughout the world" (p. 22). Some stamp images were also used in Dazhai campaign to help inculcate the ideology of hard work. As a brief digression, stamps, compared with posters, are more distributive but less exhibitivite. That is, stamps travel and thus may have a dynamic geographic salience; posters stay and their larger size may facilitate a more stabilized visual salience. As another factor, stamps may fare better with historical bequest through collectors' hands. How all these factors combine to impact the relative rhetorical potency of posters versus stamp images awaits further investigation. As indicated in [Figures 2, 3, and 4](#), hard work was also portrayed in stamp pictures. In [Figure 2](#), symbols of hard physical labor, the spade and pickax, remain on people's shoulders even during mental, ideological study (as embodied by the book in hand). In [Figure 3](#), men and even women are carrying heavy stones using the crude tool of the carrying poles. The message seems to be that hard work can compensate for and prevail over harsh physical conditions. In the background, the Chinese slogan of "learning from Dazhai in agriculture" is on the banner ([Figure 2](#)) or on the mountainside ([Figure 3](#)), verbally reminding the audience

of the inspirational source behind the portrayed hard work. [Figure 5](#), which appears like a photo, presents a plain and realistic depiction of hard work. Again, the simple tool of carrying poles is used, making the work of terracing the mountains genuinely strenuous to the viewer. The carrying pole, the spade, and the pickax as symbols of industriousness are also represented in [Figure 5](#). The thick, cumbersome cotton-padded clothes that the laborers wear clearly indicate the wintry cold. The targeted viewers of the posters, the millions of Chinese peasants, will easily understand and identify with what the cold means to the laborers' bare hands: cutting pain.

[Figure 6](#) offers an enthusiastic delineation of hard work in a war-like panorama. The viewer can almost feel the energy, the ardor, and even ecstasy that are exuding in the laborers' efforts to harness the River of *Quyú* (as indicated by the Chinese words at the bottom of the image). The central message of "*Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture*" is boldly written in gargantuan (bigger than human figure) Chinese characters on the mountainside, standing there as if they were the secret incantations giving magical power for all the energy, the ardor, and even ecstasy.

[Figure 9](#) presents a heroic display of the spirit of industriousness. The hyper-realistic representation of the ageless, larger-than-life woman forms the prototype of the "Iron Woman" that Chen Yonggui, the leader of Dazhai, cultivated ([Wen & Liang](#), 1977). The dynamic pose, the visionary look on her face, and the harsh natural elements come together to accomplish an eloquent piece of rhetoric, one that teaches heroic industry.

Theme 2: Unity under party leadership.

Unity is first and foremost ideological unity with party leadership. Mao clearly understood the power of ideology when he said, "Ideology marshals behavior and actions." In [Figure 1](#), the red books that stand on the windowsill are Mao's selected works. The decoration on the straw hat, the red star, is a symbol of the Chinese Communist Party as can be seen on the national flag. The basic tone of color for the whole picture is red, implying revolutionary loyalty to Communism. The heroine in the poster on the wall has a pistol hung over her shoulder, another symbol of the militant revolutionary spirit. All these combine to suggest the ideological inspiration and identification behind the woman's industriousness of working hard during the day and studying late at night. The action of studying itself (especially studying Mao's works) indicates an endeavor for ideological identification. This becomes more so considering that intellectual work is not generally associated with Chinese peasants.

In [Figure 2](#), the intellectual (left) and the peasant are standing closely together, with a book (probably on proletarian revolution as dimly discernible from the words on the book cover) held in the intellectual's hand, and with the same tool of hard physical labor, the spade, held on their shoulders. In the background is a big red banner with large Chinese words: "*Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture*." The whole picture portrays not only the salient message of unity, but also, perhaps more importantly, the ideological identification that creates this unity as symbolized by the book, the words on the red banner, and the red banner itself which traditionally represents leadership in Chinese culture. Many colors and images in [Figures 3](#) and [4](#) serve the same rhetorical function: the girl's red clothes, the red agricultural machinery, the soldier and peasant working shoulder to shoulder with visionary looks facing the same direction, and the huge slogan "learning from Dazhai" in the background.

The message of unity under party leadership is delineated in a variety of implicit symbols and explicit words in [Figure 7](#). Chen Yonggui, Dazhai's party leader, stands in the center of the crowd, his leadership buttressed by the red book (Mao's selected works) in his right hand. Everyone looks at him and listens to him, apparently enjoying the reading. Words under the picture read, "To learn from Dazhai well, the ideology of the leaders must be revolutionized." Similarly in [Figure 11](#), the party leader, Chen Yonggui, stands in the center, holding the big ear of corn in his hands. All the other people are looking in his direction, listening to his explanations of probably what unity under correct leadership can produce--wonderful harvests, as pictured in the neat pile of corns before the crowd. The central position of Chen Yonggui in the crowd and the direction of people's looks may imply to the viewer that unity under party leadership is the source of success. A richer and more celebrated image of harvest and unity under party leadership is portrayed in [Figure 19](#). In the center of all the prosperity, dwarfing everything else, is the

central gate to the village. On the gate is a huge poster of the Great Leader, Chairman Mao.

[Figure 8](#) presents another conspicuous delineation of the theme of unity under party leadership. The leader, who stands in the very front of the crowd, is the only one with a book in his hand. This book, as mentioned previously, symbolizes the ideology through which the masses identify themselves with the leadership of the Party. Only a mastery of the ideology will entitle the person to lead and to point the direction, all of which seems to be portrayed by the young man holding the book, leading the crowd, and indicating the direction to go. Among the crowd are not only peasants, but also factory workers and intellectuals. The unity among peasants, factory workers, and intellectuals is reinforced by the intimate physical proximity in which the people stand. The central message of "*Learning from Dazhai*," as written in big Chinese characters in the background, is not neglected. Red banners that are planted everywhere give a pervasive tone of the "revolutionary enthusiasm." A bolder and more romanticized portrayal of unity under party leadership is discernible in [Figure 10](#). The larger-than-life hero or leader, with euphoric idealism on her face, stands over the crowd, pointing with her extended arm. The crowd, standing in intimate proximity, looks and forges toward the visionary destination pointed out by the heroic leader. The pervasive image of red banners again seems to present the clear message of the fiery spirit of revolution.

The ultimate leadership at the time of "learning from Dazhai," of course, rested with Mao Zedong, the Chairman of the country and the Chinese Communist Party. In [Figure 12](#), the large figure of Mao stands in the center of the crowd among an excellent harvest of cotton. An almost endless line of people were waiting to see and connect with Mao. The rhetorical message is accentuated by the words at the bottom of the image, "All living things depend on the sun" (i.e., All success depends on the correct leadership under Mao). Notice this time that the crowd is all women except for Mao and Chen, the party leader of Dazhai. The important role of women seems to be another theme portrayed in the imagistic rhetoric of Dazhai.

Theme 3: The importance of women.

Maoist culture during the Cultural Revolution advocated egalitarianism, including that between men and women. Mao himself claimed, "Women hold up half of the sky." The important role of women in agricultural production was abundantly portrayed in propaganda posters in the Dazhai campaign as an effort to entice and solicit participation into the campaign from half of the rural population.

Women in Dazhai campaign posters were frequently shown as engaged in precisely the types of work traditionally deemed suitable only for men. [Figure 13](#) portrays Chen Yonggui's "Iron Girl Brigade." With Chen standing in the center, the "Iron Girls" were happily engaged in the "masculine" work of harnessing and terracing the mountains, in this case through detonation, so that the infertile mountainous land could be transformed into arable, productive, terraced soil. The central message of "learning from Dazhai," again, is conspicuously shown in the background. The gender of the subjects in the poster is discernible from their hairstyles, color of clothes, and one girl covering her ears, an indication of the traditionally "feminine" fear of loud explosive sounds. Under the heroic inspiration of the "Iron Girl Brigade," millions of "imitation boys" (*jia xiaozi*) and "iron women" (*tie nuren*) were cultivated ([Wen & Liang, 1977](#)).

In [Figures 4, 5, 8, 9, 14, and 15](#), women were shown either as engaged in some traditionally "masculine" work or as operating machinery traditionally deemed suitable only for men. In [Figure 14](#), for instance, the woman is depicted as pushing the wheelbarrow, which is traditionally perceived as heavy manual work suitable only for men. The man standing by the woman is Chen Younggui, an iconized representation of the Dazhai campaign.

Besides the equality in physical work between the two sexes, women were also frequently, though not always, portrayed as equal in authority. The woman in [Figure 1](#) is probably a leader in a study group or even a party leader. In [Figure 10](#), the woman is the larger-than-life heroic leader of the crowd, whom she is motivating, inspiring, and directing. In [Figure 16](#), women are shown as national models, standing on the Tiananmen Rostrum where Mao declared the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. From our present-day viewpoint, Mao was certainly clairvoyant in motivating women to participate in the Dazhai campaign. Women proved an important segment of the peasant population for the success of Mao's Dazhai

campaign.

However, the portrayal of women in the Dazhai campaign is paradoxical. On one hand, the visual prominence of women is promoted. On the other hand, the portrayal of women is "masculinized" and their femininity largely erased. In the posters, gender distinctions, including physical distinctions, between men and women were largely camouflaged. Both of the sexes had stereotypically "masculine" bodies and were generally dressed in cadre gray, army green, or worker/peasant blue. In this sense, the effort to promote women's status still presents them in male patterns. Scholars disagree on this kind of depiction of women. Some would consider it as emancipatory oppression (e.g., [Lee](#), 1998). That is, the effort to emancipate women from male dominance itself represents oppression if this effort is carried out against the reference of a male framework. Others would consider it as "socialist androgyny" (e.g., [Young](#), 1989). That is, the reworkings of the image of the female gender empowers women with new possibilities associated with a new image, an image severed from traditional femininity. Despite this scholarly divergence, portrayal of women as a salient theme in Dazhai posters helped to fulfill their rhetorical function in soliciting women's participation and enthusiasm in the campaign.

In addition to those three previously explained themes of industriousness, unity under Party leadership, and the importance of women, there are other minor themes in Dazhai posters. Participant satisfaction is one of such minor themes. Smiling faces and euphoric expressions are easily discernible from most of the posters. Satisfaction and enthusiasm are also detectable in the characters' physical postures when they are engaged in labor or celebratory behaviors.

Imagistic Rhetoric through Symbolic Mechanisms

The preceding section of the paper illustrated how poster images were employed in the Dazhai campaign to convey certain rhetorical themes. This section explains what and how symbolic mechanisms were utilized to enhance and reinforce the rhetorical themes in Dazhai campaign. These symbolic mechanisms include identification, romanticization or idealization, and visual dominance.

Mechanism 1: Identification.

[Olson](#) (1987) argues, "Both visual and verbal rhetoric entail a commitment to use a community's representational systems in endeavors to enlist the will of an audience." A conscious effort can be detected in Dazhai posters to achieve easy visual, social, and cultural identification with the targeted audience, the millions of Chinese peasants. The characters' images were so carefully crafted that they appeared to be realistic photographs of Chinese rural peasants. They wear hand-made, cotton-padded clothes, and straw or towel hats (almost an icon of Chen Yonggui, the Dazhai leader). They sleep in kiln-type beds ([Figure 1](#)). The crude tools the characters use for manual labor are too familiar to Chinese peasants: spade, pickax, the carrying pole, and the shoulder pad. Besides the main characters of peasants, other characters in the posters (intellectuals, soldiers, and educated youth) were also close visual copies from reality at that time. All these prototypical images made it easy for audience members to find themselves in the posters, and hence to identify with the poster characters. For cultural identification with the audience, the posters, in their visual composition, adroitly incorporated plenty of folkloric and rural traditions, as I will discuss later in this essay.

Mechanism 2: Romanticization or idealization.

Dazhai campaign posters employed a skillful combination of realism and romanticism, enhancing both their credibility and motivational power. Romanticized images offer the audience what to hope for and what to emulate. A merely mechanical depiction of reality may fall short of this desired motivational force designed for Dazhai campaign posters. [Figure 17](#) is an aerial view of the promulgated Dazhai. The rich colors and perspective echo Chinese classical painting, with cherry blossoms in the foreground and tiny figures dwarfed by the beautiful landscape. Nature is tamed and everything is orderly and productive: the defoliated hills have been terraced almost to the summit of the hills, the village itself consists of neat rows of dwellings, and a quarry and aqueduct are shown in the distance. The bright colors and rich visual patterns form a collage of bucolic beauty. Even today, dozens of years after the Dazhai campaign, such an image

would offer a dream version of what life could be for countless Chinese rural villages.

[Figure 18](#) is the epitome of romanticism. Here the scene of a great harvest is set in the ethereal fairyland, above the white clouds in the azure sky. Standing on a huge dragon, a traditional symbol of the great Middle Kingdom (China), are the heroes and heroines of the campaign: the nation's peasants and workers. Held high in their hands is their great accomplishment: agricultural harvest, industrial prosperity, and scientific advancement. Celestial birds fly around to join the human celebration. The decorated archway, another traditional Chinese visual pattern, leads to a not-so-distant utopian world: human prosperity nestled in idyllic beauty. The message of this romanticized poster seems bold and direct: with correct ideology and a strong will, nothing is impossible to human effort.

The ultimate rural village is portrayed in [Figure 19](#). The Chinese caption at the top of the poster reads: "Build the New Socialist Rural Villages." The rural village depicted in this picture goes well beyond any successful small city in China at that time. The over-abundant prosperity appears ready to burst from the poster's visual constraints. The prosperity in the foreground is idealized and romanticized by what lies in the background: well-forested mountains and a wide, blue river, on which are a huge dam and ships. This poster would give soaring wings to every peasant's imagination, at that time, of what the "new socialist rural village" could be.

[Figure 20](#), following the traditional ink-and-brush Chinese painting style, provides another example of the romanticization of materialistic prosperity and human harmony. As indicated in the title of the painting, "Our Great Motherland is Thriving," this poster image is a rich condensation of all the possible visualizations of prosperity. In the foreground, people of all nationalities stand close together as if celebrating the great achievement of the motherland. Red flowers, a symbol of festive jubilation, are in every hand. Behind the people are several big pine trees, a traditional signifier of longevity and stability. The wide river, which threads through the complete length of the image, is well harnessed as one can see through the gigantic cranes for water transportation, the bridges for land transportation, and the dams for irrigation. An idyllic beauty is depicted through the color of green and the images of plants, water, well-forested mountains, and meticulously-planned land. All this effusive depiction of human prosperity and natural beauty, to which verbal words may fail to equal, extends to the horizon and merges into the heaven. To a Confucian mind, this would be the ultimate summation of what competent governance can achieve. And in the very center of the whole visual composition, too conspicuous to ignore, is the national emblem—revealing the reason behind all the human prosperity nestled in serene nature. The romantic utopianism delineated in rich colors promises great motivational power to Chinese peasants, for whom all the visual patterns in [Figure 20](#) are too much a familiarity ingrained in their minds.

However, the overly-romanticized utopianism was not without its unintended effects. With a great discrepancy between what was visually presented in the posters and what the peasants actually lived through in their daily reality, irrationality and cynicism easily emerged. Much irrationality occurred in the "Great Leap" movement and the Dazhai campaign probably due to a fanatic wish to realize what was visually depicted in the posters, "the new socialist countryside." Everyday cooking utensils were thrown into the crude backyard steel refineries to produce steel for national power. Trees were cut down to claim more arable land, resulting in widespread deforestation. All rural trade and industry were abolished to follow the pure Dazhai model, resulting in widespread poverty ([Rawski](#), 1979). When people realized that "these visual products had nothing to do with the reality they were supposedly representing, even though realistic imitation was the literary and artistic style Mao himself advocated," they began to rebel ([Chen](#), 1999, p. 116). Some sent critical letters to Mao himself and ended up in prison. The rebellious elements in the movement reveal "how, contrary to the poster creators' intentions, posters could function as seeds of rebellion, militating against the very icons and concepts presumably propagated by the poster" ([Chen](#), 1999, p. 115). Thus, due to too much idealization and a political effort to narrate Mao's contrived social text, the posters failed their intended purpose at least to a certain degree.

Mechanism 3: Visual Dominance.

Certain colors, images, and verbal messages dominate in the posters of Dazhai campaign, presumably intending explicit rhetorical persuasion. Red, for instance, is a conspicuously prominent color in Dazhai

campaign posters. This color, in traditional Chinese mentality, is associated with happy and festive occasions such as weddings; it is a symbol of festive jubilation and Bacchanalian exhilaration (Williams, 1976). During the revolutionary period and after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, this popular color was "revolutionized" and politicized. It became a symbol of the Chinese Communist Party and its publications (Landsberger, 1995). Red is everywhere in Chinese political and national emblems and artifacts: the Tiananmen Archway, the national flag, the national emblem, emblem of the Communist Youth League, and the cravat of the Young Pioneers, to cite just a few. Red is used to such an extent in the posters that it is sometimes beyond realistic possibility. In Figures 1 and 17, for instance, window panes and house roofs in rural China are rarely red. The viewer can also see the color in images and backgrounds that include clothes, flags, certificates of merit, and Mao's selected works, which more explicitly symbolize, than the color of red itself, the revolutionary loyalty to Party leadership.

Besides the instrument of color, the dominance of certain images and verbal messages are also reflected in their ubiquity and large size. Heroes and leaders are often portrayed in larger-than-life sizes, giving them more visual prominence than the multitude (Gittings, 1999). The heroine and leader in Figure 10, for instance, are an obvious case of an unproportionately large size with the color of red forming a fiery background. The verbal message of "*In agriculture, Learn from Dazhai*" is also often portrayed in large size Chinese characters and with much ubiquity. In short, the dominance of certain colors, images, and verbal messages help to make more explicit the rhetorical messages and concepts presumably intended in Dazhai campaign posters.

Discussion

The great effect of the Dazhai campaign was visible through the changes it helped to produce in Chinese rural villages. Despite its negative effects, countless Chinese villages at that time were transformed based on the model of Dazhai. Mountains and even forests were claimed and harnessed into arable soil. Grain production increased in many areas (Wen & Liang, 1977). A large proportion of Chinese peasants at that time were illiterate or semiliterate. Thus, verbal rhetoric would largely fail for such an audience (Evans & Donald, 1999). The Communist Party achieved a tremendous rhetorical feat with the help of propaganda posters. As an illustration from personal experience, my elder brother was the brigade leader of our village at that time. In my memory, relatively little verbal propaganda (such as booklets, leaflets, or letters) was handed down to him for the purpose of promulgating the Dazhai model. Visual rhetoric through poster images, on the other hand, abounded. He frequently received from the commune leaders large color posters, which would then be conspicuously placed throughout my village. Vestiges of wall posters of that period are still visible today in my village.

I literally grew up with the experience of propaganda posters. In our drawing classes, we would imitate the posters. During the summer, even when school was in session, we would go to the fields to pick wheat heads or cotton (as seen in Figure 12), or dig up sweet potatoes as a practical effort to learn from Dazhai peasants. Full-time learning from the Dazhai model was more directly reflected in almost all the activities of the village peasants: political study under the tree (see Figures 1, 2, 7, 8, and 20), construction of irrigation systems (see Figures 6 and 20), and leveling and harnessing of land (see Figures 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, 14, and 20).

Peasants in my village were particularly industrious in leveling the land. My brother, as the brigade leader, would lead the villagers who would spend months in the freezing winter leveling land. The land was frozen, hard as iron. The mere use of crude tools such as the spade and pickaxe made it quite strenuous work. Everyone was conscripted, including mothers with small children, many of whom were left there alone playing with the dirt or locked inside homes crying. The learning sometimes went to more absurd lengths. As a display of heroic learning, some would refuse to wear gloves to protect their hands from the wintry cold (see in Figure 5). Doing otherwise might be considered bourgeois and corrupted. Some villagers began to question the rationality of all this and protested against my brother. I remember at one village meeting my brother said, "How could we realize the future socialist village as we see in the posters? Don't just envy the beauty of the future. Look more at what Dazhai people are doing to bring about that beauty." In saying so, he was referring to the propaganda posters visible throughout the village.

In her reminiscences, "Growing Up with Posters in the Maoist Era," [Chen](#) (1999) discusses how she was emotionally and behaviorally impacted by propaganda posters.

I grew up in a culture where posters...constructed and reconstructed who I was and what was socially expected of me.... I remember gazing at the healthy, attractive body of Pretty Plum (Deng Xiumei), a female Communist Party worker.... I wanted to grow up to be just like her.... I detected a special allure in [what is depicted in the posters].... Many an afternoon after school did I linger at the New China Bookstore to admire the beautiful bodies on wall posters, and, spending what little pocket money I had, I would bring some posters to my classroom so that my classmates might be equally inspired by them, in our mutual exertion to gain the honorary title of 'five-distinctions class'.... Seduced by the enchanting blue skies, white clouds, and red flags...in the background of the picture, I longed to merge with the enthusiastic crowd.... I have no doubt that in my unconscious, posters became indelibly inscribed as part of my childhood world of wonders, my wanderings, and the motions associated with growing pains (pp. 105-109).

The intention of rhetorical persuasion in Dazhai campaign, especially through posters, was well contemplated much earlier than the campaign itself. On May 2, 1942, Mao Zedong began his famous Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art with the following words:

The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and mind ([Tang, Blecher, & Meisner](#), 1982).

Art, including the art of the Dazhai posters, clearly served as an ideological and political instrument in China. All the images carry clear rhetorical and didactic meanings.

In its rhetorical effort through propaganda posters, the Chinese Communist Party likely kept well in mind the targeted audience, many of whom were illiterate or semi-literate. Images, compared with verbal rhetoric, possess more cognitive immediacy. In this sense, images, because of their easier mental decoding and cognitive reception, would fare better with the target audience. Furthermore, [Jameson's](#) (1988) research found that images are more powerful than the narrative words in the sense-making process of audiences. This claim is corroborated by [Olson's](#) (1983) study of the suasory role of icons in political communication.

Compared with photography which also represents images, posters may possess an advantage in the potential for rhetorical persuasion: posters are more amenable to imagistic malleability. According to [Minick and Jiao](#) (1990), the style of posters is more dynamic and illustrative than that of photography. While the realism of photography could be used to document the successes in harvesting and construction, it was not "the ideal medium for the creation of expressive and compelling imagery that would mobilize the nation" ([Minick and Jiao](#), 1990, p. 106).

The Dazhai posters' illustrative style reflected the Chinese folkloric and rural traditions of the target audience. [Olson](#) (1987) argues, "Both visual and verbal rhetoric entail a commitment to use a community's representational systems in endeavors to enlist the will of an audience" (p. 18). In her rhetorical analysis of the success of Rockwell's icons in Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" campaign, [Olson](#) (1983) found that Americans could easily understand the ideals portrayed in the posters "because [Rockwell] selected images which represented a simple, American way of living based upon fundamental institutions" (p. 16). As early as the pre-liberation Yan'an era, the Chinese Communist Party decided to adapt the traditional New Year prints for its propaganda purposes. According to [Landsberger](#) (1995), "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). The same strategy was also visible in Dazhai posters, which represented a calculated combination of audience tradition and rhetorical modernity. On one hand, the posters borrow numerous elements from folkloric and

rural traditions: romantic depiction with vivid expression and bold outline as in *guohua* (traditional Chinese painting), delineation of idyllic rural beauty, rich colors, depiction of bumper harvests as portrayed in *nianhua* (or New Year poster, indispensable for the Chinese Spring Festival). On the other hand, propaganda posters are clearly "revolutionized" for their current rhetorical function: though against a traditional landscape background, participants in the posters are enthusiastically and heroically engaged in the revolutionary work of socialist land reform and construction, imbued with the revolutionary color of red and armed with the revolutionary ideological weapon of Mao Zedong thought (as symbolized through Mao's red books). More specifically, for instance, many of the confirmed themes and visual patterns of *nianhua* are easily visible in the posters. To symbolize an auspicious prospect, a traditional Chinese aspiration, idyllic rural prosperity is a habitual theme in *nianhua*. This is evident in Figures [12](#), [17](#), [18](#), [19](#), and [20](#). To accentuate the rosy future, rich and stronger-than-life colors are often used in Chinese *nianhua* ([Landsberger](#), 1995). This is visible in Figures [1](#), [4](#), [12](#), [16](#), and [17](#). To embody interpersonal harmony, another espoused Chinese value, euphoric smiles and camaraderie are another characteristic of *nianhua*, as evident in Figures [2](#), [7](#), [8](#), [10](#), [12](#), [13](#), [14](#), and [16](#). Figure [18](#) can be viewed as an apotheosis of the traditional Chinese *nianhua* in that the dragon, the archway, the boat, the birds, and the ethereal heaven are all too familiar visual patterns in *nianhua*. Traditionally, the warm color of red is associated with festive jubilation in Chinese culture. Yet in the posters, the audience familiarity with red is deftly borrowed for a revolutionary implication—loyalty to communism and Mao Zedong thought.

In short, the Dazhai posters made an adroit manipulation of the visual background of folkloric and rural traditions for an instrumental foreground of didactic and rhetorical function. To borrow [Gittings'](#) (1999) argument, Chinese propaganda posters combine a socialist realism with a traditional romanticism, producing images of a strong idealistic bent, enabling posters to be a more effective vehicle for rhetorical persuasion and motivation and verbal propaganda. The realism and idealism in posters work together to transform the concrete images into rich signifiers of desired rhetorical messages that help imprint a certain social reality and organizational culture into the viewers' minds.

Conclusion

As [Lippman](#) (1922) said, pictures in our heads can shape our world. That is, ideology directs behavior and actions, which in turn change the external reality. The imagistic rhetoric in Dazhai campaign proved highly effective in achieving its didactic purpose. These images, with pervasive distribution, viewing, and subsequent internalization, helped to construct an ideology and culture desired not only by the government, but also by many audience members. The effect of the mental images that Dazhai campaign posters facilitated and even produced was discernible in the behavioral changes in the audience and the physical changes in Chinese rural reality in the 1960s and 1970s. With actual artifacts from that period, this essay demonstrated and analyzed how images were employed as rhetorical instruments to help construct a certain social reality and organizational culture for audience emulation.

[Olson](#) (1983) calls for more study of the political uses of icons, which seems to have helped to solicit a healthy increase in the study of political cartoons and paintings. However, in the view that the majority of these studies focus on the depictive or epideictic role of imagistic rhetoric, I offer the following suggestions for future studies on the subject of visual or imagistic rhetoric: (1) the didactic or suasive role of imagistic rhetoric merits more attention; (2) the study of colors, as an indispensable part of human visual sensibility and thus an important component of imagistic rhetoric, perhaps should appear more in scholarly publications, especially those facilitated with electronic technology; (3) the rhetorical economy of images, as opposed to verbal rhetoric, merits further investigation; and (4) the portrayal of women in imagistic rhetoric, especially when it promises new feminist possibilities, calls for more attention.

Works Cited

Sources of Images:

All of the posters in this paper are used with permission from their sources:

1. Figures 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20: [IISH Stefan R. Landsberger Collection](#). I am very grateful for Dr. Stefan R. Landsberger's generosity in permitting me to use from his comprehensive collection of Chinese posters. Obviously, the bulk of images used for this study come from this collection.
2. Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12: Personal possessions. My thanks go to my family members and many of my friends for their all-out effort in locating Dazhai posters for me.
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Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19

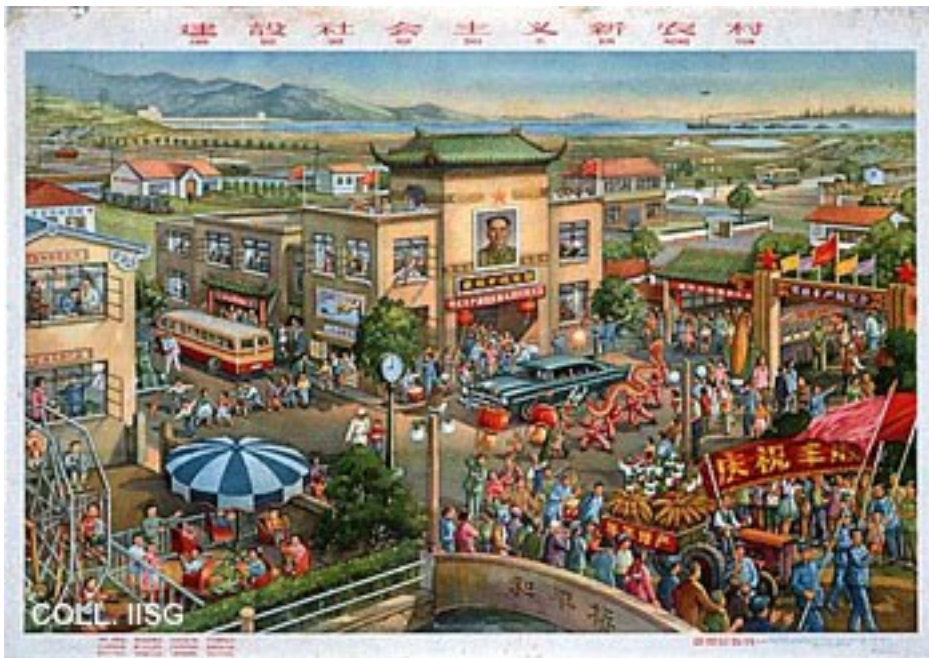


Figure 20

