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# Political and Ideological Symbolism of Chinese and North Korean Propaganda Paintings

## Topic and Research Question

My research paper is concerned with the political and ideological symbolism of propaganda paintings in China and North Korea. Hereby, I am focusing on art as a tool for disseminating political ideologies. Regarding art, my research paper is especially concerned with propaganda paintings, which were produced in the era of China under Mao Zedong and North Korea under Kim Il Sung. Among others, major research questions of my thesis paper are: Which concepts of authoritarian and totalitarian research exist and how are these concepts implemented into Chinese and North Korean propaganda paintings? What is the ideological framework for political artworks and which guidelines do they have to follow? To what extent is political art in China and North Korea based on Soviet style Socialist realism?

I stress the relevance of my research paper by pointing out that political ideologies as well as art have always been a reflection of the respective society in which they were developed. Thus, propaganda paintings can serve as a bridge-builder and help us to further understand other societies. This in turn is of essential importance, as the contemporary world will have to deal with a rising China and a highly unpredictable North Korea in the next years. It is vital for us to fully understand these societies

## State of the Art

Extensive research has yet been made on the subject of Chinese and North Korean visual propaganda. However, the vast majority of these works are descriptive and don't undertake an analytical comparison between China and North Korea. Several approaches do exist on the analysis of visual propaganda, e.g. by comparing chronological eras, examining historical and political background of a certain era or focusing on the role of individuals of a society in visual propaganda. However, this vast research field makes it hard to create an overall analytical framework, especially when trying to apply it on more than one society.

## Methodology and Approach

I have chosen a political approach by first classifying each country's political system in order to apply various theoretical theses on totalitarianism on the two countries. By doing so, I elaborate the political bullet points, which later serve as theoretical framework for the empirical part

of my MA thesis. In a second step, I examine the ideological patterns of both nations and how each country's respective ideology is linked with art in general and the process of creating art. Hereby, I apply my self-developed Four Level Pyramid Model. Afterwards, I examine the aesthetics of Soviet style Socialist Realism. Consequently, I elaborate the central aesthetic concepts of Socialist Realism, which will serve as analyzing categories for the empirical part and thus form the second part of the analytical framework. The chosen pictures will be analyzed by means of Erwin Panofsky's Three Stages Model, which is concerned with the iconographic and iconological content of visual artworks. In a final step the empirical findings are compared and analyzed.

## Main Facts

I argue that any kind of art in China and North Korea is best understood as part of a political program, which expresses a comprehensive world view and has its own inherent logical system of symbols and narratives. In both countries art didn't exist for the mere sake of itself, but instead was assigned a role as part of a political program.

As Chinese and North Korean art was heavily influenced by Soviet style Socialist Realism, their symbolisms and motives are very similar and show numerous analogies. Recurring main art motives of both countries' propaganda paintings are: 1) the glorification of the respective political leader, party or ideology, 2) the transformation of nature and society on behalf of the political ideology, 3) the creation of a hero by means of Mao/ Kim himself or by common people serving as role models for the New Man, 4) enemies of the people, the country or the ideology serving as negative role model.

While the first three categories serve as art motives in most Chinese and North Korean propaganda paintings, the fourth category – the depiction of enemies – is heavily underrepresented in the case of North Korea. While Chinese propaganda paintings often feature enemies, most examined North Korean artworks lack this art motive.

Both nations' artworks feature extensive symbolism in various forms, which mostly can only be understood through additional background information of the respective country's culture. Old symbols were often adapted and reframed by Chinese and North Korean artists in the course of creating propaganda paintings. A typical example is the extensive use of the color red, which is perceived in the Chinese society as an

auspicious color. Thus, red was often used to illustrate the party or the 'communist spirit'.



Despite all these findings there are also some differences between Chinese and North Korean art symbolism. For instance, Kim is generally depicted closer to the people than Mao. There are several artworks featuring Kim sitting together with common people, playing with children or conducting on site visits. Similar artworks also exist in the early years after Mao gained power in China. However, in the course of time such images increasingly disappear as they get replaced by artworks depicting Mao as a huge silhouette or sun floating ghost-like above the masses at the peak of his personality cult.

## Results

The political system of China under Mao and North Korea under Kim were both totalitarian systems in terms of featuring an official ideology, a monopoly of information and a state apparatus with strict hierarchical forms of organization. Both countries experienced similar historic events like foreign occupation, which in turn shaped the ideology of the respective political movements and their political systems.

Both nations' ideological foundations had their origins in the Soviet Union's Marxism-Leninism, which was re-developed by Mao and Kim into ideological spin-offs, namely Mao Zedong Thought and Juche. This not only emphasized the alleged superiority of the respective ideology compared to Marxism-Leninism. It also helped to foster the position of Mao and Kim in the respective country's political system and thus eventually set off a tremendous personality cult. Both ideologies stressed

the importance of the creation of a new socialist man and a new socialist society.

Both countries regarded art as crucial to accelerate the transformation of man and society. Thus, art in China and North Korea under Mao and Kim didn't exist for the mere sake of art, but instead was assigned a clearly predefined role with a clear goal within the strict hierarchical role structure of the respective political system and its state apparatus. This was achieved by means of the Four Level Pyramid Model.

Soviet style Socialist Realism had a tremendous influence on the Chinese and North Korean art scene. Propaganda paintings in China and North Korea resembled the technical painting style of Socialist Realist paintings in the Soviet Union. Additionally, the three central concepts of Socialist Realism, narodnost, klassovost and partiinost were continuously implemented into Chinese and North Korean artworks. Narodnost was constantly emphasized by Mao and Kim, stressing that art should come from the masses and serve the masses. Klassovost and partiinost are also omnipresent concepts in Chinese and North Korean propaganda paintings, as they are mainly concerned with the construction of the New Man and a new society (klassovost) or with the glorification of the respective party or their leaders (partiinost).

## References

All references can be found in the full version of my MA thesis available at [othes.univie.ac.at](http://othes.univie.ac.at).

## About the Author

I obtained a Bachelor degree in Chinese Studies and a Master degree in the study field of East Asian Economy Society (both at the University of Vienna). Besides, I spent two years at the Beijing Language & Culture University studying Chinese. Research during my studies focused on state ideologies and identity building of nations. Currently, I am living in Shanghai, where I am working at the German Chamber of Commerce.

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