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*Visual and Rhetorical Cues to
Transform Nature:*
A Historical Analysis of
Mao Zedong's Environmental Policy
Through Print and Visual Media

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree
of Bachelor of Arts
Environmental Program & Honors College
University of Vermont
2021

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Abstract

The contemporary mainstream media offers passionate praise for China's recent improvements regarding renewable energy generation and sustainability. However, such articles make deliberate comparisons of these achievements to the state of China less than a decade ago, with the nation's dense smog posing a public health crisis for the Chinese people. In this thesis, I step back into history to examine the environmental policy message promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao Zedong to better understand China's swift turnaround and present-day environmental policy. The existing body of literature provides ample evidence of the land-use change and pollution that arose in the Maoist Era, though little attention is paid to Mao's environmental policy message that led to said environmental degradation. Using *People's Daily* newspaper articles and propaganda posters, I uncover clues that Mao crafted an environmental policy message of utopian urgency and a conflict that pitted man against the fundamental functions of the environment. Additionally, I argue that Mao's environmental policy was important for the broader goals of the CCP as it was used to exert political control over China's citizens. Although many facets of Mao's environmental policy were anthropocentric, I also argue that Chinese print and visual media began to promote norms of environmental conservation in the 1960s and 1970s. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of how these emerging norms of conservation as well as Mao's anthropocentric attitudes towards nature have contributed to the contradictory environmental policy outcomes we see from China today.

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Introduction

China's appearance in international news today often highlights its recent improvements in air quality and renewable energy generation. These articles deliberately compare these recent achievements to the state of the nation less than a decade ago, when China was still being shamed for the nation's dense smog and the catastrophic threat it posed for public health. As those articles exemplify, the rate at which the Chinese have turned the tides regarding sustainable development is incredibly noteworthy. The most instrumental factor for this change has been political dominance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The CCP has been developing environmental policy measures at an extremely high rate over the past decade, leading to the current instrumental progress. For example, approximately two months ago, China passed a new fishing ban over the Yangtze River, which has suffered through several tumultuous decades of severe water pollution issues.¹ Although China has made remarkable improvements in sustaining the environment in such a short time period, China's integrity regarding sustainability remains questionable. The underlying problem with China's approach towards environmental governance is that it is almost entirely non-participatory. The public has no role as a stakeholder in environmental policy discussions and environmental injustices are common. Although smog and public health have improved in Beijing, the ethnic minority Uyghur population in Xinjiang province is experiencing worsening air pollution as CCP-backed corporations have been constructing factories to tap into the resource-rich province.² Understanding this contradictory environmental policy is a highly intriguing analytical question.

¹ Yan, Alice. 2020. "China Passes Law to Protect Yangtze River." South China Morning Post. 2020. <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3115431/china-passes-law-protect-river-yangtze>.

² Uyghur Human Rights Project. 2020. "UHRP: On Earth Day, UHRP Calls for Environmental Justice in East Turkistan." Uyghur Times. 2020. <https://uighurtimes.com/index.php/uhrp-on-earth-day-uhrp-calls-for-environmental-justice-in-east-turkistan/>.

Many contemporary historical analyses provide strong evidence of forestry loss, soil erosion, and the excessive use of pesticide that occurred when Mao Zedong was leader of China (1949-1976). But, less critical attention has been paid to expanding the understanding of how the environmental politics of Mao contributed to said land-use change and pollution. Arguably the most influential argument for policy motives behind the environmental degradation lies within Judith Shapiro's book *Mao's War Against Nature*, which investigates the pervasive anti-nature sentiment of Mao Zedong and his party in Chinese politics, history, and philosophy.³ Her argument comes from a series of interviews of Chinese citizens who grew up during Mao's revolution complimented with existing primary and secondary sources. Mao believed that an economic revolution driven by gaining political power over China's large population would not be possible without persuading the masses extensively through the media. Mao needed a method to inspire the populace to work 14-hour days cutting down trees to expand the land used for growing grain. When I contacted Shapiro directly, her statement that she was uncertain of the exact environmental policy message in both print and visual propaganda spearheaded this research project, starting with China's *People's Daily* newspaper archive.⁴

In this thesis, I argue that print and visual media contributed towards not only the environmental degradation during the Maoist Era, but also the recent upsurge in environmental conservation efforts in modern-day China. The Maoist Era, in this context, represents the range of years with the most significant policy reform under Mao's leadership: 1958 to 1976. The print media refers to the most widely-read newspaper during the Maoist Era: *The People's Daily*. *The People's Daily* newspaper database contains articles from 1946 to present day. The articles

³ Shapiro, Judith. 2001. *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Shapiro, Judith. 2019. E-mail communication with author. September, 17, 2019.

published in the present are usually accessible without a subscription, though the older archival articles, such as those from the Maoist Era, require a subscription for access. In some articles, the *People's Daily* included complimentary photographs and, as this analysis encompasses both print and visual media, relevant photographs were also included in this study. The slogans Shapiro mentions in her book—such as “encircle the rivers, build land” (*weihe zaotian*)—narrowed down my searches in the archive.⁵ I found that *gaizao ziran*, or, “transform nature,” was one of the most useful search terms for zeroing in on articles that offered clues of Mao’s environmental policy, given how frequently the term reoccurs within the archive. I refer to *gaizao ziran*—transform nature—throughout the four Chapters of analysis in this thesis, as it represented communication of Mao’s environmental policy in the media.

It is worth noting that one of the largest limitations of my analysis of the newspaper was that I was only able to access the newspaper archive for a few weeks due to challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because so, I was unable to conduct a thorough analysis and return to the archive when new questions arose during the critical reading process.

The visual media I specifically analyzed are propaganda posters, primarily from Stefan Landsberger’s online propaganda poster archive and Artstor. Chinese posters.net, where Landsberger’s propaganda posters are located, is an open access archive containing approximately 7 thousand propaganda posters, making it arguably the most comprehensive archive of Chinese propaganda posters available. Landsberger has divided the posters he has collected into useful categorical themes—such as “Great Leap Forward” and “Cultural Revolution Campaigns.”⁶ These themes helped me narrow down smaller groups of posters for

⁵Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 107.

⁶ Landsberger, Stefan. n.d. “Themes.” Chinese posters.net. Accessed May 5, 2021. <https://chinese posters.net/themes/index>.

further content evaluation. Also, the posters within the archive have tags associated with them to link together posters containing similar features. For example, small-word phrases related to the factors of environmental degradation discussed in the existing literature—such as “dam” or “pesticide” —also narrowed down my searches. The other archive I used for propaganda posters, Arstor, was accessed through the University of Vermont Howe Library website. Arstor is an online archive of museum artifacts of all varieties, including a small number of Chinese propaganda posters. Although both Chinese posters.net and Arstor were included in this investigation, the majority of the propaganda posters that I discuss in this thesis come from Landsberger’s archive.

Although other forms of propaganda were used by the CCP, such archival evidences are hard to obtain for analysis. For this reason, propaganda posters and *People’s Daily* articles were chosen for analysis because of their accessibility and the sheer number of primary sources within those archives.

Throughout the thesis, I occasionally make comparisons between Great Leap Forward (GLF) media attitudes towards the environment and Cultural Revolution (CR) media attitudes. Although the Cultural Revolution was not officially launched by the government until 1966, there had been previous ideological shifts in Chinese politics in the four years between the conclusion of the GLF and the start of the CR. It is important to note that I consider propaganda from the aforementioned four-year span (1962-1966) as “Cultural Revolution propaganda,” as well.

In the “Research Problem Overview,” I explore scholarly works which discuss the extent of the environmental degradation that occurred in the Maoist Era. Additionally, I provide an overview of the importance of propaganda, its relevance to my analysis, and the reasons other

than accessibility for analyzing propaganda. I also identify the gaps in the literature that have motivated this thesis in that section.

Next, I move on to the main interpretive section of the thesis, which outlines the key components of Mao Zedong's environmental policy. In Chapter 1, I explore the facets of utopian urgency, that is, the tendency of Chinese environmental policy to prioritize efficiency over anything else. The term "efficiency," in this context refers to Mao's goal of creating an incredibly strong Chinese economy that would rival the western superpowers. As I outline in this first chapter, Mao supported expanding China's economy by any means necessary, even at the expense of China's natural flora and fauna. Next, in Chapter 2, I argue that the Chinese government possessed a desire to take control over the natural functions of the environment in a self-made war that pitted humans and the natural world against each other. Third, in Chapter 3, I discuss how Mao's core ideological socialist thought was integrated into the environmental policy message during the Cultural Revolution. More specifically, Mao promoted an ideology of anthropocentrism, or human superiority over the natural world. In contrast with Shapiro's arguments, in Chapter 4, I outline the desires for environmental conservation that emerged in the later years of the Maoist Era and the significance of those desires.

In light of those key components discussed in the four chapters of evaluation, in the Conclusion I offer my final thoughts on Mao's anthropocentric environmental policy and how it parallels contemporary environmental policy in China. However, I also make comparisons between China's progressive environmental remediation efforts in the present and Mao's environmental policy, showing that Mao's policy was not entirely anti-nature. At the very end of this thesis, I provide a few research questions raised from this project that I hope can be investigated in future studies.

From this analysis of print and visual media, I found an environmental policy that changed substantially over the course of the Maoist Era. Mao's environmental policy during the Great Leap Forward conveyed his apathy towards the environment. The Communist Party rhetoric that promoted *gaizao ziran* meshed comfortably with a revolution that sought to develop as quickly and efficiently as possible, resulting in the environmental problems of the GLF. Afterwards, in the Cultural Revolution, Mao's socialist sentiments prevailed in the environmental policy that helped to satisfy his goals of expanding political power over the people. Environmental policy is often, especially in the propaganda posters, administered to the public through subliminal messages. For example, subtle symbols of Mao's expansionist environmental policy—such as hydroelectric dams and transmission towers—appeared in the background of propaganda images. The economic failure of the Great Leap Forward ushered in new desires for the CCP to understand environmental conservation and such ideological shifts successfully foregrounded the environmental conservation efforts we see from China today.

Research Problem Overview

Great Leap Forward Deforestation

Much of the contemporary scholarly literature and data support the conclusion that China suffered severe deforestation under Mao's control. As historian Mark Elvin writes, deforestation, or cutting down trees, is "the longest story in China's environmental history."¹ The Chinese were "just as hostile to forests, as they were fond of individual trees."² Mao's Great Leap Forward plan for economic reform contributed to much of the loss of forest cover as Mao's "Backyard Furnaces," cohesively consumed the domestic lumber supply. The "Backyard Furnaces," were small, individually-operated furnaces constructed in the backyards of the peasants in an effort to boost China's manufacturing sector through the smelting of steel.³ From 1958-59, approximately 600,000 steel and iron-smelting furnaces were built in the communes to achieve Mao's vision of rural industry.⁴ Those wood-fueled furnaces failed to yield much steel that could be refined for further use because the peasants operating them were largely untrained in smelting.^{5,6} One middle-aged woman, interviewed by Shapiro, describes her childhood smelting steel and cutting trees during the GLF:

Before, this was all virgin forest, with pines a foot thick. It was so dense that I was afraid to go there at night. The brush and branches we gathered were enough for all our firewood needs. We never had to cut the trees. There were small animals, rabbits, and pheasants. I was only ten or eleven during the Leap. We collected scrap metal and pots while the grownups cut the trees. The result was a big mess of melted steel. We turned it

¹ Elvin, Mark. 2004. *The Retreat of Elephants*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

² *Ibid.*, xvii.

³ Economy, Elizabeth. 2010. *The River Runs Black*. Second. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

⁴ Zhang, Zhihong. 1999. "Rural Industrialization in China: From Backyard Furnaces to Township and Village Enterprises." *East Asia*, 17 (3): 61–87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-999-0023-y>.

⁵ Becker, Jasper. 1996. *Hungry Ghosts: Mao's Secret Famine*. New York: The Free Press.

⁶ Percival, Robert V. 2011. "China's 'Green Leap Forward' Toward Global Environmental Leadership." *Vermont Journal of Environmental Law* 12 (3): 633–57. <https://doi.org/10.2307/vermjenvilaw.12.3.633>.

over to the local steel factories to process further. This was supposed to be the first step. But the temperature was too low. Wood can never burn hot enough to make steel.⁷

Furthermore, since the Chinese furnaces could not produce steel that could be smelted, the Chinese constructed tools and pulleys out of wood, further contributing to the decline in forest resources. For this reason, it is estimated that, in only a few months during the Great Leap Forward, China's forests declined by 10 percent.⁸ Along with fueling the furnaces, forests declined for the expansion of arable land for agriculture. Additionally, land was also cleared of tress to construct housing in response to China's population growth.⁹ This nationwide deforestation backfired on the Chinese farmers. The lack of forested land led to soil erosion that hindered grain yields.¹⁰ When soil erodes, it often ends up in watersheds which can cause flooding and turbidity, limiting its usefulness for agriculture.¹¹ A confluence of factors contributed to the famine, but the soil erosion and flooding certainly played a major role. The former contributed to a 30-percent decline in agricultural production by the end of the Great Leap Forward in 1961. By 1999, 38 percent of China's domestic land was classified as poorly eroded, with much of that erosion occurring during the Great Leap Forward.¹²

Also, China has traditionally suffered from severe forest fires, and they were especially destructive in the period between 1950 and 1962. From 1953 to 1957, forest fires resulted in the

⁷ Shapiro, Judith. 2001. *Mao's War Against Nature: Politics and the Environment in Revolutionary China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁸ Percival, 2011, *China's 'Great Leap Forward,'* 1.

⁹ Tian, Dexin, and Chin Chung Chao. 2010. "The Communication Model and the Nature of Change in Terms of Deforestation in China since 1949." *Applied Environmental Education and Communication*. Vol. 9. Communication Faculty Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533015X.2010.482493>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ Nagle, J. C. (2009). The Effectiveness of Biodiversity Law. *Journal of Land Use & Environmental Law*, 24(2), 203–252. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42842904>.

¹² Tian, 2010, *The Communication Model*.

loss of an estimated $23,307 * 10^4$ cubic meters of burnt woods.¹³ Additionally, large bonfires were a common occurrence when people would gather at the commune headquarters for meetings, further contributing to deforestation.¹⁴

Despite the loss of forest cover during the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese did possess at least a rudimentary understanding of afforestation, that is, the construction of new forests. In fact, many forest farms were built within the Chinese communes between 1957 and 1960.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the trees were cut down at a much higher rate than they were being grown in this period. Also, the subsidies for afforestation implemented in 1963 were shut down in 1966 when the Chinese political system nearly collapsed with the start of the Cultural Revolution that perpetuated the overcutting and underplanting of trees.¹⁶ It was not until the 1980s that China would begin to see improvements in forestry policy and forest coverage statistics. Even with that progress in the 1980s, it took the nation four decades to reach the level of forest cover prior to the Communist Party's rise to power. In 1949, it was estimated that China's total forest cover was roughly 13-15 percent.¹⁷ In 1989, China's forest coverage was listed by the Ministry of Ecology and Environment of the People's Republic of China at 12.98 percent,¹⁸ indicating that China made negligible progress regarding the expansion of forest coverage in that 40-year span.

¹³ Zhong, Maohua, Weicheng Fan, Tiemin Liu, and Peide Li. 2003. "Statistical Analysis on Current Status of China Forest Fire Safety." *Fire Safety Journal* 38 (3): 257–69. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0379-7112\(02\)00079-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0379-7112(02)00079-6).

¹⁴ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 83.

¹⁵ Edmonds, Richard Louis. 1994. *Patterns of China's Lost Harmony*. London and New York: Routledge.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷ Tian, Dexin, and Chao, 2010, *The Communication Model*, 124.

¹⁸ Ministry of Ecology and Environment of People's Republic of China. 2002. "Bulletin on the State of China's Environment in 1989." Beijing. http://jcs.mee.gov.cn/hjzl/zkgb/1996/200211/t20021115_83139.shtml.

Mao Zedong's Pest Campaigns

During the Great Leap Forward, the Chinese were hellbent on exterminating any natural pests that might interrupt Mao Zedong's revolution. This pest extermination campaign, lasting from 1958 to 1960, was dubbed the "Four Pests Campaign," and it sought to eliminate four different species—flies, mosquitoes, rats, and sparrows. This idea of purification, cleansing disease for the Chinese people, did not result in only those positive effects of purification. In general, the Four Pests Campaign was an unmitigated disaster for China's biodiversity and agriculture, especially due to its hostility to sparrows, which were targeted for their tendency to consume seeds needed for agriculture. Yet, what such linear views overlook is that sparrows also naturally consume insects. The dedication of the Chinese masses to exterminating sparrows resulted in a severe ecological imbalance, that led to the increase in locust population, killing much of the crops planted during the GLF.¹⁹ This anti-sparrow ideology was widely accepted and vitalized by the Chinese peasants and killing sparrows was even treated as an enjoyable leisure-time activity for young schoolchildren:

It was fun to "Wipe out the Four Pests." The whole school went to kill sparrows. We made ladders to knock down their nests, and beat gongs in the evenings, when they were coming home to roost. It was many years before we knew that sparrows are good birds. At the time, we only knew they ate grain.²⁰

In addition, this anti-pest ideology was not only reserved for sparrows and the other species of The Four Pests. In his memoir of growing up during the Great Leap Forward, Sheldon Lou recalls how his village mates in the communes would attack birds of all different species, reciting chants as they did:

¹⁹ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 87.

²⁰Ibid., 87.

With the rhythm of the song, more birds, sparrows or not, dropped from the sky like stones. Suddenly a large light-gray bird landed on our roof a few feet from us. Its wings extended limply; its chest undulated like a bellows. It was exhausted, no doubt, and it was a pigeon.²¹

Lou also mentions that people valorized smoking cigarettes during the Great Leap Forward to keep away the snakes.²² We can reflect that the hostility towards pests and diseases culminated to excessive insecticide use, especially during the Great Leap Forward. It is estimated that 14.7 kg of insecticide was used per hectare of grain.²³ If we consider that the USA used less than 0.5 kg per hectare of insecticide on corn in 1960, it suggests how the use of insecticide was excessive in China.²⁴ As the Chinese insecticide was frequently made from natural species—for example, *Anabasis Aphylla*, consuming those plant species resulted in severe biodiversity loss. In that same year, 1958, approximately 500 different native plant species were used to make 10 million tons of insecticide and fungicide.²⁵ Similar to the consequences of the Four Pests Campaign, the excessive usage of pesticides backfired on the Chinese laborers, as the natural enemies of the plant hopper (*Nilaparvata Lugens*) were eliminated, paving way for this nasty insect to consume much of the rice that was farmed.²⁶

In the literature, little is known of the specific species that suffered biodiversity loss due to Maoist Era environmental degradation. The destruction of habitat from deforestation led to a decline in China's panda population, for instance, which teetered at extinction.²⁷ As the

²¹ Lou, Sheldon. 2005. *Sparrows, Bedbugs, and Body Shadows*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

²² *Ibid.*, 43.

²³ Tsai, James H. 1982. "Entomology in the People's Republic of China." *Journal of the New York Entomological Society* 90 (3): 186–212. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25009316>.

²⁴ Fernandez-Cornejo, Jorge, Alex Vialou, Richard Nehring, Craig Osteen, Seth Wechsler, and Andrew Martin. 2014. "Pesticide Use in U. S. Agriculture: 21 Selected Crops, 1960–2008." *USDA Economic Information Bulletin*. Washington, D.C. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib-economic-information-bulletin/eib124.aspx>.

²⁵ Tsai, 1982, *Entomology*, 197.

²⁶ Edmonds, 1994, *Patterns of China's Lost Harmony*, 149.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

importance of a stable forest habitat is not only exclusive to the Giant Panda, it suggests that other species also had a large decline in population, such as tiger.²⁸ Additionally, Mark Elvin argues in *The Retreat of Elephants* that China's historical tendency of hostility towards animals has contributed to the current decline in biodiversity. As the title of his book alludes, the Asian elephant population is in dire straits from habitat loss and China's history of fascination with ivory and elephant tusks.²⁹ Although the Asian elephant was placed on the CITES list of species that are illegal to hunt, poaching is still prevailing, and the ivory trade remains controversial in China.

Industry, Hydropower, and Dirty Water

For decades, the Chinese Communist Party has been fascinated by largescale hydropower projects that will expand China's energy generation, often at the expense of the environment. In fact, the obsession with large hydropower dams in China did not begin following Mao Zedong's takeover. China's "Three Gorges Dam," one of the largest dam projects on earth, was originally proposed over 100 years ago by former Chinese political leader Sun Yat-Sen. Large hydropower dams, while capable of extremely high energy generation, come with large environmental costs. Specifically, large hydropower dams account for far more land-use change than any other major energy source at 315.22 Acres per Megawatt of energy produced.³⁰ Mao Zedong and the CCP brought Sun Yat-Sen's vision of the Three Gorges Dam to fruition and began the construction in the 1950s. As Bao Maohang argues, the Three Gorges Dam is a significant aspect of China's history of water control given its location on the Yellow River.³¹ The Yellow River overflowed

²⁸ Nagle, 2009, *The Effectiveness of Biodiversity Law*, 217.

²⁹ Elvin, 2004, *Retreat of the Elephants*, 1.

³⁰ Landon, S., P. Strata, Anderson Barrett, Colton Cowan, Katie Colton, and Dallin Johnson. 2017. "The Footprint of Energy: Land Use of US Electricity Production." Logan. <https://www.strata.org/footprints/>.

³¹ Maohang, Bao. 2004. "Environmental History in China." *Environment and History* 10 (4): 475–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20723506>.

over 1500 times in its documented history, destroying homes and taking lives in its wake. Therefore, the Three Gorges Dam implied control over this river to the Chinese Communist Party and its people. The dam is criticized for being a symbol of totalitarian control and the CCP's socio-political legitimacy rather than being praised as a hydroelectric energy project.³² The Chinese Communist Party has historically censored the voices of intellectuals, occasionally through gruesome means, who speak out against the Three Gorges Dam.³³

The Three Gorges Dam and China's agricultural practices during the GLF and Cultural Revolution had adverse effects on the quality and quantity of water. For example, China promoted a concept of 'encircling lakes to build grainfields,' which resulted in a decline in water availability.³⁴ 'Encircling lakes to build grainfields,' also meant extracting vegetation which caused soil erosion into watersheds.³⁵ Unstable water volumes in rivers can lead to functionality issues with hydropower dams, a common occurrence involving Maoist-Era hydropower facilities. Chinese dams are often located in areas of high seismic activity, thus establishing a high risk for a dam failure. In 1975, the Banqiao Dam, a Great Leap Forward hydropower project located in Henan, ruptured, and resulted in an estimated 85,000 casualties.

Many of the dam constructions amounted to little benefit for the Chinese people. Elizabeth Economy notes that the majority of the dams failed within approximately three years after their completion despite the large amount of land-use change and relocations that had been invested to construct them.³⁶ Opponents to such dam projects also argue that China's energy

³² Mufson, Steven. 1997. "The Yangtze Dam: Feat or Folly?" The Washington Post Company. 1997. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/yangtze/yangtze.htm>.

³³ Xu, Haipei. 1992. "Lament of History, Call of New Civilization: Revelations from, the Three Gorges." *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 3 (2): 7, 29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41554048>.

³⁴ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 94.

³⁵ Bao, 2004, *Environmental History in China*, 481.

³⁶ Economy, 2010, *The River Runs Black*, 52.

storage system was not equipped to transport the generated power to the east coast industrial region, undermining the overall value of the dams.³⁷

‘Encircling lakes to build grainfields,’ was not the only contributor to water insecurity under Mao Zedong. Soil erosion further contributed to dam malfunctions and flooding.³⁸ By 1989, 14 of the 25 major rivers in China were badly polluted due to soil erosion.³⁹ Also, pesticide use was another major contributor to water pollution. Harmful nitrates from pesticides leached into groundwater and nitrate runoff into watersheds led to eutrophication, rendering the water useless.⁴⁰ It is important to note, rather briefly, that pesticides can be highly toxic to humans if they are either consumed or exposed through extended activities—such as agriculture.⁴¹ Although Chinese farmers conducted largescale water conservation measures, the lack of expertise led to alkalization—water with a pH too basic for usage—and soil that became too saturated with water for usage.⁴²

Chinese Philosophy Towards Nature and Mao’s Condemnation of Scientific Thought

Much of the environmental damages described above are at least partially attributed to sociological behavior towards nature and the persecution of intellectuals. In ancient history, two of the three Chinese core schools of thought—Daoism and Buddhism—promoted ‘Harmony of heaven and humankind,’ a philosophy of a mutual relationship between man and nature.⁴³ But, of the three schools, Confucianism seems to be the exception regarding this attitude towards

³⁷ Edmonds, 1994, *Patterns*, 84.

³⁸ Edmonds, Richard Louis. 1989. “Environmental Change and Management.” *Geography* 74 (4): 353–55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40571748>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 354.

⁴⁰ Sanders, Richard. 1999. “The Political Economy of Chinese Environmental Protection: Lessons of the Mao and Deng Years.” *Third World Quarterly* 20 (6): 1201–14. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993666>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1203.

⁴² Zhou, Xun. 2013. *Forgotten Voices of Mao’s Great Famine, 1958-1962*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

⁴³ Bao, 2004, *Environmental History in China*, 479.

nature. Confucian philosophy treats nature as an asset to be controlled rather than promoting a harmonious relationship between man and nature. While Mao rejected traditional Confucian discourse, Mao's Great Leap Forward policies—such as the Four Pests Campaign—paralleled the Confucian philosophy of anthropocentrism. As Shapiro argues, Confucianism's defining characteristic of pragmatism would better serve society if it were to adopt the Daoist sense of modesty and to treat humans as a part of nature rather than a superior entity.⁴⁴ In Daoism, an appreciation for the aesthetic composition of nature was a highly engrained facet, that implied its absence in Chinese media and culture during the Maoist Era.⁴⁵

Associated with the traditional Confucian principles, the suppression of intellectuals and scientific thought also contributed to environmental degradation. According to Becker, science was not actually 'suppressed' by Mao, but rather reconstructed with Marxist and Maoist thought.⁴⁶ For example, the *People's Daily* once reported that grade school children were taught to place decimal places in the incorrect place in their arithmetic work, exemplifying how the CCP promoted acrimony towards fundamental scientific and mathematical theory.⁴⁷

In light of this, we can reflect that the Chinese Communist Party reframed science to its benefit by propagandizing it with motivational language that orients the peasants towards action. Besides the Four Pests Campaign, other GLF policies that convey pseudo-science include the agricultural techniques of close planting and deep ploughing. Mao encouraged the peasants to plant grain seeds in a density as close as physically possible as doing so would, allegedly, maximize grain yields. In 1959, Mao ordered the peasants to plant 12-15 million grain seeds per

⁴⁴ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 214.

⁴⁵ Ames, Roger T. 1989. "Putting the Te Back in Taoism." In *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, edited by J. Baird Callicot and Roger T. Ames, 113–45. Albany: State University of New York Press, Albany.

⁴⁶ Becker, 1996, *Hungry Ghosts*, 61.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

2.5 acres, a drastic increase from the norm of 1.5 million per 2.5 acres.⁴⁸ Without ample soil space, however, the grain cannot absorb enough nutrients, which hinders the sufficient growth of seeds. Plowing the soil as deep as physically possible was believed to be an effective agricultural technique. Economy describes peasants who tied ropes around their waists to dig thirteen-foot trenches for the purpose of planting seeds.⁴⁹

A handful of intellectuals spoke out against the Party for all the flaws they found in Mao's economic policies. For example, Huang Wanli, a Qinghua University professor, pointed out that designers of the Three Gorges Dam ignored the 540 million tons of silt in the river.⁵⁰ This unaccounted-for silt could collect in front of the dam which could potentially lead to flooding. Huang was labeled a "Rightist," and a "Counterrevolutionary," by the Chinese Communist Party for his statements condemning the dam. But, intellectuals who spoke out against Mao were few and far in-between. Most intellectuals and critics remained silent, to keep themselves away from being exposed to the risk of persecution. Furthermore, many intellectuals rallied behind Mao's visionary thought, believing that Mao gave China the opportunity to return to its former pre-occupation glory.⁵¹ Some intellectuals, to avoid intense physical farm labor, became important members of Mao's propaganda team, falsifying data of grain yields to paint a false picture of success during the Great Leap Forward.⁵² Organized propaganda worked surprisingly well, despite China's immense size and population.

⁴⁸ Becker, 1996, *Hungry Ghosts*, 72.

⁴⁹ Economy, 2010, *The River Runs Black*, 51.

⁵⁰ Mufson, 1997, *The Yangtze Dam*.

⁵¹ Wemheuer, Felix. 2010. "Dealing with Responsibility for the Great Leap Famine in the People's Republic of China." *The China Quarterly* 201 (March): 176–94. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741009991123>.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 182.

Why Propaganda?

Propaganda is an ingrained custom of our daily lives. All humans communicate with each other, and much of that demonstratively intends to shape distinctive attitudes among others. People most commonly associate propaganda with half-truths and lies spread by totalitarian governments but, in reality, communication as persuasion is pervasive in this world. Much of the existing literature that examines propaganda was conducted since the mid-20th century. The totalitarian regimes—such as Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and the PRC—relied on propaganda to tighten their grip of control over the masses. Jacques Ellul’s 1962 book *Propaganda: The Nature of Men’s Attitudes* has been one of the most seminal analyses of propaganda so far. The two main types of propaganda, according to Ellul, are: (i) propaganda of agitation and (ii) propaganda of integration. Propaganda of agitation, which was the most utilized type within Maoist propaganda, was intended to instigate revolutionary action by the masses, while propaganda of integration sought to unite individuals into groups with the same ideas.⁵³

Ellul argues that propaganda is a necessity, for both the state and its people.⁵⁴ The state needs propaganda for the means of integrating individuals into a political system. It is worth noting that the reliance of individuals on propaganda is often overlooked. As Ellul mentions, “You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.”⁵⁵ Here, I can reflect that propagandees are not victims. They crave propaganda just as much as the state does and even get satisfied from it. For example, people found satisfaction in killing sparrows during the Four Pests Campaign. Without propaganda, the Chinese masses would not have performed the deep

⁵³ Ellul, Jacques. 1973. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes*. New York: Vintage Books.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

ploughing and backyard steel smelting that Mao envisioned. Fortunately, many of the modes of mass communication since the Maoist Era remain accessible and intact in the 21st century.

Therefore, propaganda allows us to understand more in detail about Mao's environmental policy and how culturally impactful such policies were.

In the extensive psychological analyses of propaganda that have taken place, evaluating the effectiveness of such propaganda has been one of the most arduous tasks. Researchers have not effectively developed a method to analyze the relationship between propaganda and the human psyche to answer the commonly asked question of "Did propaganda work?" The *Encyclopedia of Propaganda* mentions the paradox of stating "Prove that it worked," as the propagandist can retort with, simply, "Prove that it did not work."⁵⁶ It is important to note that I do not intend to evaluate the effectiveness of the environmental policy message within print and visual and media. As previously mentioned, that type of analysis is not possible at this time. Instead, my analysis is an evaluation of the content of Mao's environmental policy message, conducted by critically analyzing propaganda.

Propaganda Usage in the Maoist Era

The Chinese Communist Party was very methodical with its approach towards spreading propaganda and its techniques of molding the ideal citizen. In *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, Alfred McClung Lee compiled a series of propaganda techniques employed by Reverend Charles E. Coughlin. One of those techniques, "card-stacking," indicates the tendency of a propagandist to falsify data and statistics to paint an illusory narrative in the minds of the people.⁵⁷ As such,

⁵⁶ Taylor, Philip. 1998. "Foreword." In *The Encyclopedia of Propaganda*, edited by Robert Cole, xv–xix. Armonk: Sharpe Reference.

⁵⁷ Lee, Alfred McClung. 1939. *The Fine Art of Propaganda*. Edited by Elizabeth Briant Lee. New York: Harcourt, Brace Company.

falsified statistics were one of the most widely-employed techniques by the Maoist propaganda system. The *People's Daily* was riddled with falsified data, but it was the only newspaper available to read and thus it was impossible to refute the numbers. As Lou states in his memoir, “We knew that anything that appeared in Our Party’s newspaper had to be true.”⁵⁸ This quote exemplifies that propaganda is much more effective if it does not spread known lies and relies on spreading spurious statements that cannot be disproven. Adopting such techniques from the Soviet Union, the Party emphasized manipulating statistics. As discussed earlier, some of the firmest believers in Mao Zedong and the Party were former intellectuals who would be regularly reading the *People's Daily*. Statistics, whether accurate or falsified, appealed to this intellectual demographic. The CCP possessed total control over the distribution of newspapers, the personnel writing them, and any editorials that were written.⁵⁹ Maintaining its confidentiality, the CCP’s propaganda writers used pseudonyms, beginning in the early 1960s.⁶⁰ One of the most well-known pseudonyms used was *Liang Xiao*, presented as an individual’s name. However, as *Liang Xiao* has the same pronunciation as “two schools,” it exposed the pseudonym’s true identity as the writing team administered by China’s most prestigious universities: Beijing University and Qinghua University.⁶¹ The CCP reaped large benefits from its control over the newspaper with the political standardization of the people that occurred as a result. Yet, the effects were not always positive. As Ellul notes, an overload of information could work against the propagandist as the data may not be easily remembered when communicated in a jargonized manner.⁶² The esoteric jargon plagued the *People's Daily*

⁵⁸ Lou, 2005, *Sparrows, Bedbugs*, 65.

⁵⁹Houn, Franklin W. 1958. “Chinese Communist Control of the Press.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 22 (4): 435–48. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266818>

⁶⁰ Tsai, Wen-Hsuan, and Peng-Hsiang Kao. 2013. “Secret Codes of Political Propaganda: The Unknown System of Writing Teams.” *The China Quarterly* 214 (214): 394–410. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741013000362>.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁶² Ellul, 1973, *Propaganda: The Formation*, 57.

newspaper and newspapers were, as Houn describes, “So dull that it has incurred a considerable measure of popular aversion to them.”⁶³

On the other hand, the “band wagon,” propaganda technique was another propaganda technique mentioned in Lee’s book.⁶⁴ Maoist propaganda slogans frequently featured phrases such as: ‘Everyone is responsible for...’ (*renren youze*). Such slogans emphasize unity, a common mission, and a notion that everyone is performing a certain activity for a particular goal. Humans naturally gravitate towards uniting in groups, therefore, it made sense for many of Mao’s followers to hop on the largest band wagon in China: The CCP’s communist ideology.

One might argue that the vast majority of China’s population during the Great Leap Forward was illiterate and therefore could not read the newspaper.⁶⁵ Even for the illiterate demographic, however, card-stacking was still quite effective. Falsehoods were communicated verbally, from party officials and from one illiterate poor citizen to another. Lou includes a quote from a party secretary addressing the commune:

In this room you can say anything. We’re like a family. No one’s going to report you. But if someone from outside heard you, you’d be in deep trouble. You’d be history. They’d say you’re against the Great Leap Forward. And whoever’s against the Great Leap Forward is against the revolution—Chairman Mao said that. So, brother, think about it. Think about it.⁶⁶

It is very possible that Chairman Mao never uttered this statement. Still, the farmers had no idea if he did or not. They were all incapable of reading the newspaper. Despite the effectiveness of verbal propaganda, the Chinese still made an effort to mitigate the illiteracy. The reformation to the simplified Chinese character system that is currently recognized as China’s official language

⁶³ Houn, 1958, *Chinese Communist Control*, 447.

⁶⁴ Lee, 1939, *The Fine Art of Propaganda*, 105.

⁶⁵ Seeberg, Velma. 1991. “Literacy in China: Cultural Tradition and Educational Policy: A Proposal.” Chicago. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED331128>.

⁶⁶ Lou, 2005, *Sparrows, Bedbugs*, 63.

is rooted in the 1950s movement of increasing literacy. In turn, the number of people who could absorb newspaper propaganda expanded throughout the Maoist Era as the written language became more universal.

Meanwhile, the press was not the only platform that was manipulated by the CCP. The entire media was completely state-run. Even Mao's wife, Chiang Ching, played a pivotal role in organized communication, by producing films and plays that contained political undertones.⁶⁷ The most noteworthy of the bunch is *The Red Detachment of Women*, a play about the life of a female military soldier during the CR. The CCP created a robust and efficient propaganda department (*xuanguan bu*), administered by official party cadres (*ganbu*).⁶⁸ The cadres and party secretaries played crucial roles in verbally administering the propaganda to the masses, especially in rural areas. The cadres operated at a variety of scales and locations, some even at institutions of higher education, such as Qinghua University.⁶⁹ Additionally, their preaching of CCP ideals across the mainland often exposed party critics so they could be reprimanded by the Party.⁷⁰ Party officials who were responsible for making propaganda were called "propaganda soldiers."⁷¹ Li Shaomin accounts his experience as an art soldier for the Chinese Communist Party during the CR.⁷² Just like with the newspaper, artists were tightly controlled by the Chinese Communist Party. Chinese propaganda art followed a strict style of "socialist realism," a technique adopted from the Soviet Union during World War II. According to Li, the CCP

⁶⁷ Thomson, Oliver. 1977. "Modern China." In *Mass Persuasion in History*, 119–24. New York: Crane, Russack, & Co.

⁶⁸ Desnoyers, Charles A. 1998. "China: Since 1949." In *The Encyclopedia of Propaganda*, 110–17. Armonk: Sharpe Reference.

⁶⁹ Author, Unknown. 1968. "Workers' Mao Tse-Tung's Thought Propaganda Teams in Colleges and Schools." *Peking Review* 11 (43): 13–16. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1968/PR1968-43g.htm>.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷¹ Li, Shaomin. 2016. "Art and Politics: The Cultural Revolution in the Eyes of an Art Soldier" 23 (2): 199–219. https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/management_fac_pubs/26/

⁷² *Ibid.*, 201.

actually cared very little about artistic talent and skill, instead criticizing artists for political reasons.⁷³ In another article, Li mentions that he was expelled from his position as an art soldier due to his alleged “bourgeois tendency.”⁷⁴ Another academic refers to Chairman Mao’s propaganda as “command communication,” that effectively regurgitates as much information and party ideology as possible.⁷⁵ *People’s Daily* editorial writers, for example, were evaluated by their ability to convey as much information as possible, rather than their personal opinions or writing style. For this reason, the newspaper was frequently considered as boring and not widely-read by the public.

Similarly, the art affiliated to the socialist realism intended to efficiently communicate CCP ideals. The art was modest, but also eye-catching. Unlike the newspaper, the people did not react to propaganda posters in the same uninterested manner. Barbara Mittler argues in *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* that propaganda art was an ingrained aspect of popular culture during the Cultural Revolution and was intended to be treated as popular culture.⁷⁶ Almost every propaganda poster featured bright and warm colors and those colors were quite drawing to the public. Slogans and brief phrases were often included to supplement the posters and intended to instigate the masses politically. Such posters were printed and distributed in large quantities to the point where the copies were more valuable than the original.⁷⁷ While it was not necessarily worth more money, a copy of a poster could be

⁷³ Li, 2016, *Art and Politics*, 201.

⁷⁴ Li, Shaomin. 2011. “My Life as an Art Soldier in China.” *Modern China Studies*, 1–27. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1799312.

⁷⁵ Wu, Guoguang. 2017. “Command Communication: The Politics of Editorial Formulation in the People’s Daily.” *The China Quarterly* 137 (137): 194–211. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/655694>.

⁷⁶ Mittler, Barbara. 2016. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.

⁷⁷ Pan, Yaochang. 2014. “The Posters of the Mao Era: A Perspective of Art and Society.” *Artibus et Historiae* 35 (69): 289–304. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24595744>.

reproduced in large quantities, could be hung up anywhere, and placed in a newspaper. Because so, the copy was much more valuable than the original to the Party and its people.⁷⁸ The artists gained fame not mainly through the quality of their work, but through the number of copies printed.

The academic literature offers a few clues of a connection between propaganda and the environmental destruction during the Maoist Era. A 2016 historical study analyzed the discussion of water issues in the *People's Daily*.⁷⁹ The authors found that a considerable rise in the number of articles discussing water issues occurred in the mid-1950s and the majority of the articles addressed the water conservancy crisis caused by collectivized agriculture.⁸⁰ Mittler also argues that propaganda posters featuring Mao portrayed him as a persona of nature and a strong figure by placing him surrounded by rugged mountains.⁸¹ Although trace examples such as Mittler's do exist in the literature, a comprehensive analysis of Maoist propaganda and environmental policy has not yet been conducted.

Therefore, I can note that the existing literature does express that environmental degradation occurred at a large scale under Chairman Mao. Furthermore, propaganda, particularly print and visual media, was vital for Mao's radical economic reform. The major questions that I drew from my analysis of the literature are (i) what was the specific environmental policy message advanced by Maoist-Era print and visual media, and (ii) why would Mao needed an environmental policy to begin with? What this study shows is that the

⁷⁸ Ibid., 299.

⁷⁹ Xiong, Yonglan, Yongping Wei, Zhiqiang Zhang, and Jing Wei. 2016. "Evolution of China's Water Issues as Framed in Chinese Mainstream Newspaper." *Ambio* 45 (2): 241–53. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-015-0716-y>.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 244.

⁸¹ Mittler, 2016, *A Continuous Revolution*, 292.

propaganda message conveyed in such policies is highly multifaceted. First, Mao's environmental policy played a fundamental role in the mission to establish a successful agrarian society that was driven by the working class. For example, propaganda posters portrayed idealized societies devoid of nature which signified the success of Mao Zedong's countryside-based revolution. The *People's Daily* newspaper published numerous how-to guides for "deep ploughing," and "close planting," that allegedly would maximize grain output despite causing catastrophic soil erosion and water pollution in the process. In that light, Mao's environmental policy was one of efficiency at any cost. The welfare of the environment was almost never considered, unless it served some sort of material purpose for humans. For example, during the Great Leap Forward, the only CCP-driven advocacy for environmental conservation was for afforestation, and that was specifically for preventing soil erosion. In the next four Chapters, I will be offering my contribution to the existing body of literature by connecting the dots between Mao's environmental policy and propaganda.

Chapter 1: Utopian Urgency and Swift Modernization

Misinformed Agricultural Practices to Transform Nature

In *Mao's War Against Nature*, Judith Shapiro conceptualizes what she calls "utopian urgency."¹ Utopian urgency refers to the CCP's way of manipulating the nation's economy towards humanly ideals. The problem with this utopian approach to domestic China was that it did not consider any environmental consequences that may ensue. The devotion to utopian urgency peaked during the Great Leap Forward, as the initiative sought to remodel China's economic system to the gain competitiveness with Great Britain and the United States. Chinese propaganda referred to this process of implementing utopian urgency as *Gaizao ziran*, or "transforming nature," in English.

Prior to the GLF, in 1954, an editorial in the *People's Daily* titled "Propaganda of Advanced Experience in Agricultural Production," establishes the foundation for what the future agricultural propaganda in the *People's Daily* should entail. The article describes *Gaizao ziran* as propaganda:

It seems that the current task of farmers is to "fight against nature." This is propaganda without a line and is incapable of promoting a transformative technological revolution.²

Although the author of this editorial acknowledges the term was used as propaganda, he believes that rhetoric alone will not lead to the agricultural revolution that Mao Zedong envisioned.

During the GLF, the *People's Daily* published educational brochures for the masses and it often

¹ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 67.

²Xin, Shi. 1954. "Propaganda of Advanced Experience in Agricultural Production." Beijing: People's Daily.

included farming tutorials for the uneducated. Both scientific advancement and technological development played a pivotal role in utopian urgency to transform nature. In addition, Mao was aware that completing the revolution without scientific advancement and technological innovation would be completely impossible.³

The Chinese working class marched ahead with a wide variety of new farming principles to advance the Great Leap Forward's agenda. But, because the intellectual class was substantially repressed by Mao, such new procedures were highly misinformed and ineffective. For example, deep ploughing was a farming technique that involved ploughing the soil as deep as possible to incentivize proper root development.⁴ Easily comprehensible how-to guides for deep ploughing were published in the *People's Daily*.⁵ It was supposed to improve soil quality, increase the resilience of the soil to drought, and to amplify fertilizer retention, though these beliefs were erroneous.⁶ The Chinese strongly believed that this technique would result in high-yield grain seasons but deep ploughing was disastrous.

Dense planting, or *Mizhi* in Chinese, was another important technique of transforming nature in agriculture. Mao's administration believed that planting the seeds in close proximity to one another would improve agricultural yield. This suggests that no soil was to be wasted in the pursuit of maximized grain yields.⁷ This belief that cultivating seeds in a dense proximity would increase production was inherently faulty as plants always need a certain amount of space to gather nutrients.

³ Feng, Zhongtie, and Ke Ma. 1963. "Splendid Jialiang." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁴ Qu Mingzhen. 1958. "Deep Ploughing and Deep Turning." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁵ Shen, Hanmin. 1958. "How to Ensure That the County's Wheat Yield Is 3,000 Kg per Mu?" Beijing: People's Daily.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

Besides deep ploughing and close planting, the excessive use of fertilizer was another technique that the CCP emphasized in its agricultural how-to tutorials. **Figure 1-1**, a photograph originally taken in 1960 a newspaper article, captured the moment of workhands conducting intense farming labor during the GLF. As described by the caption, so-called “layered fertilizing,” was utilized in hopes of limiting pests as much as the farmers could.⁸ More specifically, the farmers in the image are adding the third layer of fertilizer on that field.⁹ In the Research Problem Overview, I discuss the copious amounts of fertilizer added by the farmers and the environmental costs of this excess usage. This coupled with their inexperience with agriculture, we can reflect that utopian urgency drove the haphazard, ill-informed modernizations to maximize grain yields.

“Learn from Dazhai,” and Learning the Laws of Nature

Utopian urgency during the Great Leap Forward was hellbent on relieving the poor and maximizing economic outputs in response to the political turmoil the early 20th century brought to China. Nevertheless, the Cultural Revolution ushered in a new phase of utopian urgency, integrated with a network of Mao-worshipping cults. The Cultural Revolution united Mao’s socialist thought with all aspects of life – including agriculture and *Gaizao ziran*. In 1963, Mao Zedong labeled the town of Dazhai as the Chinese Communist Party’s model for agriculture prowess. Mao’s injunction to “Learn from Dazhai,” in agriculture represented a significant pivot in the objectives of transforming nature. With Learn from Dazhai, Mao placed his own approval within the list of his agricultural goals for the peasant class. Meaning, farming was to be conducted for Mao himself, as well as the public’s welfare (**see chapter 3**). The utopian society

⁸ People’s Database Information. 1960. “Plant Wheat Well in Accordance with the Spirit of the ‘Eight-Character Constitution’.” Beijing: People’s Daily.

⁹Ibid., 3.

envisioned by the Party contained Mao's philosophy in every household, town square, and every relevant activity of the peasants.

For this reason, Learn from Dazhai was far more than just a movement to increase farming yield: it was a nationwide orientation that Mao planned to respond to the regressing agricultural system. The development of deeper knowledge in transforming nature for material gain was frequently expressed in Cultural Revolution *People's Daily* editorials.¹⁰ In light of this, we can reflect that the rhetoric of the CR was strongly influenced by the famine and hardship caused by the Great Leap Forward. Therefore, the insufficient research conducted for utopian urgency was critical to the devastating aftermath. Additionally, the Cultural Revolution promoted reformations in agricultural science in a wide variety of propaganda forms including newspaper, documentary film,¹¹ and even musical lyricism.¹² The failure to effectively educate the working class in agricultural science during the GLF was scrutinized in newspaper editorials.¹³ For example, a 1964 newspaper article outlines an investigation into Vietnamese agriculture and provides insight to an example of Communist agrarian sufficiency in a country with similar geography and climate to China.¹⁴

In this sense, it is useful to note, rather briefly, that *Nongye xue dazhai* is the Chinese translation of "Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture." The most notable word in this phrase spoken by Mao is *xue*, which means "learn," or "study." Chairman Mao's diction was not "praise," or "hail," but rather to study the success of Dazhai, and use that success as a model. Learn from

¹⁰ Unknown, Author. 1963. "Taking Agricultural Science to a New Level (Editorial)." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹¹ Mei, Huang. 1964. "Do a Good Job of 'Sending Charcoal in the Snow'-I Wish the Scientific Education Film New Achievements in Serving Agriculture." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹² Unknown, Author. 1964. "Learn from Dazhai Learn from Dazhai (song)." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴ Xinhua News Agency. 1964. "New Rural Map." Beijing: People's Daily.

Dazhai was an intellectual movement that aimed at understanding nature in order to transform it more swiftly, fruitfully, and efficiently. Examples of the CCP expressing their pledge to understand nature, its characteristics, and the forces it governs appear in *People's Daily* articles. In an effort to promote higher yields in sorghum—or grain—one of the editorials published in 1966 promoted greater intellectual study of the “Laws of Nature.”¹⁵ The laws of nature or *moqing ziran*, in Chinese, is an abstract idea, but primarily refers to the goal of maximizing grain yield, and how agricultural science can be improved to achieve said goal.

Farming output during the Maoist Era was fluky at best. The Chinese lacked the expertise to understand a trend of grain productivity that was either spontaneously increasing or drastically falling.¹⁶ Trial and error with farming was a commonplace, with peasants leading the charge in modifying farming techniques until a satisfactory harvest was achieved.¹⁷ Although the Chinese did want to learn more about nature, there has not been much attention regarding how they strived to learn more. The uneducated farmers controlled the vast majority of farming procedure and agricultural reform, and their lack of education contributed in large part to the deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water contamination that ensued described in the Research Problem Overview. To create the illusory political narrative that peasant-led farming reform was effective, vague language such as “large-scale mass movement to transform low yield,” was used in the newspaper.¹⁸ This abstracted rhetoric paired with the widespread falsification of statistical data constituted the widely employed and successful propaganda. It is very probable that some

¹⁵ Unknown, Author. 1966. Finding Out the Laws of Nature, Adapting to Nature and Transforming Nature. Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Xun. 1965. “The Dongzhangtun Brigade Guides its Members to Look Forward to Transforming Nature, Never Stop Thinking, Constantly Revolutionizing, Not Producing After Two Years of Continuous Development, More than 3,000 acres of Low-Lying Land Were Transformed.” Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁸ Li, Xuezhi. 1965. “Self-Reliance, Good and Fast Transformation of Low-Yield Fields.” Beijing: People's Daily.

party members caught on to the falsified grain-yield statistics in the *People's Daily*, as they would likely not have addressed accusations of misleading data otherwise. In contrast to the articles published during the GLF, the number of farming how-to tutorials were apparently few. Instead, the rhetoric of the CR was complimentary to Mao's class struggle. It promoted initiatives centered around the working class; and it relied on the successes of the farmers in their efforts to transform nature.

Transmission Lines, Hydroelectric Dams, and Subliminal Messages of Modernity

There are two facets of a utopian society in the eyes of the CCP: (i) a strong agricultural sector, and (ii) a booming industry. To the CCP, fostering innovative energy developments would bring China out of the dark ages and escalate their position as a global competitor. Because so, propaganda posters sought to remind the Chinese populace that it was Mao who was responsible for the functioning lights in their homes by including subtle, and often subliminal, symbols of energy modernizations. There was no extraneous feature in such propaganda print. If the feature did not serve a political purpose, it was not included in the poster; and if extraneous features were present, the artist was often ridiculed by the Party. In my study of the propaganda, I discovered a few specific reoccurring features that promoted the CCP's environmental policy message of anthropocentrism and utopian urgency: Transmission lines and hydroelectric dams.

In traditional Chinese culture, nature was the vessel for aesthetics in which painters would escape to with the hopes of finding inspiration (**see Chapter 4**). The CCP intervened that freedom of expression by spreading their political indoctrination, advancing these symbols of modernity—transmission lines and hydroelectric dams. In the Research Problem Overview, I mentioned that critics of large hydroelectric projects in the Maoist Era argue that these dams

symbolized totalitarian control and party legitimacy, rather than as energy projects.¹⁹ The manner in which these dams were treated in the propaganda posters is the strongest evidence for this criticism. For instance, *Longtan's New Look* (**Fig. 1-2**) utilizes a hydroelectric dam as a symbol for modernity and utopia.²⁰ The exaggerated jagged and steep geography portrayed in the image shows the immense amount of effort that was exerted in order to construct the small, but prosperous city. The title, *Longtan's New Look*, insinuates satisfaction with the new utopian scenery of the Longtan district and achievement by the Chinese peasants. Additionally, according to *Longtan's New Look*, the hydroelectric dam was not intended to be a concealed symbol, as the poster satisfied its original objective to exhibit the new urbanized features of Longtan. However, in some cases, dams did appear subliminally. For example, another poster entitled, *Criticize the Reactionary Thought of Lin Biao and Confucius, Firmly Walk with the Workers and Peasants on the Road of Unity* (**Fig. 1-3**), disdains reactionary ideology.²¹ The peasant in the image represents the ideal Chinese Communist Party member. Confucius's attitude towards nature was much more anthropocentric than Daoism, which viewed humans as a feature within nature, rather than preaching superiority. The CCP under Mao tended to contradict their messages condemning Confucianism with their own practices, such as their inclusion of the hydroelectric dam in **Figure 1-3**. The significance of this dam serves as a reminder to the masses that it was Chairman Mao who provided that dam and electricity to the people. Ironically, Confucius would not have been completely opposed to such hydroelectric dams because he considered the relationship between man and nature to be subordinate to that of

¹⁹ Mufson, Steven. 1997. "The Yangtze Dam: Feat or Folly?" The Washington Post Company. 1997. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/inatl/longterm/yangtze/yangtze.htm>.

²⁰ Xu, Jialin. 1972. "Longtan's New Look." Ningxia: Ningxia People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1972-001>.

²¹ Che, Yongren, and Huali Yu. 1974. "Criticize the Reactionary Thought of Lin Biao and Confucius, Firmly Walk with the Workers and Peasants on the Road of Unity." Tianjin: Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-851>.

between men. The masses were largely uneducated, of course, so that many had never read Confucius. Therefore, they could never realize that Chairman Mao was actually supporting Confucianism while simultaneously contradicting himself. Mittler mentions in her book that some of the peasants were exposed to Confucian writings for the first time during the Cultural Revolution; and several of them thought that he was actually not such an incomprehensible guy.²²

In addition to such hydroelectric dams, the Chinese also had a unique fascination for transmission lines and towers as symbols of modernity and the superiority of man, as evidenced by their large presence in the propaganda posters. The placement of these structures in rural areas alludes to transforming nature and their height signifies towering over nature. These transmission towers frequently appear in an image completely outside of context. For example, *Go to the Country Side to Serve 500 million Peasants* (**Fig. 1-4**), an image of a Chinese Communist Party health worker, contains almost no background.²³ The only visible feature besides the health worker is the transmission tower on his left. The transmission tower could have been omitted from the image and it has negligible presence to the overarching message of the propaganda poster. Although the transmission tower in *Go to the Country Side to Serve 500 million Peasants* is unrelated to Chairman's Mao's environmental policy and transforming nature, the image clearly exemplifies the political purpose of placing transmission towers in Mao's propaganda.

²² Mittler, Barbara. 2016. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.

²³ Lin, Rixiong. 1965. "Go to the Countryside to Serve the 500 Million Peasants." Hebei: Hebei People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1965-030>.

Then again, some utility towers in Chinese propaganda posters are more elusive. The posters found in Stefan Landsberger's online poster archive are riddled with such structures. In **Figure 1-6**, an image entitled, *Become a Red Seedling*, the transmission lines again appear—this time without the tower itself—and are soaring above the peasant girl at the front of the image.²⁴ The girl's eyes are facing parallel to the power lines, expressing attention towards future progress and the ensuing utopian world.

Similarly, *Longtan's New Look* (**Fig. 1-2**) displays the transmission tower within a landscape and places it at the forefront of the image. More specifically, it resides at the top of a steep, narrow mountain; and leaves the viewer marveling at how it was constructed in such a challenging location. In this case, the tower symbolizes transforming nature and creating a utopia for the good of the CCP. Visualizing the electrical connection and urbanization within rural areas, the power lines are linked between the mountain tower to the village below. The miniscule figures of workers surrounding the structure make the utility tower's exaggerated vista to be visualized in an even wider scale.

In an image promoting birth control (**Fig. 1-5**), the transmission tower again appears, in this case, towering over a forest.²⁵ Unlike *Longtan's New Look*, the transmission tower in this image is unrelated to the primary message of the poster. However, its role is equally as important. The forest is described as the most inferior feature in the hierarchy that the image signifies: it resides beneath both the humans and the transmission tower. The utility tower at its core symbolizes progress and modernity. Such posters that depicted a small city within a rural

²⁴ Ha, Qiongwen. 1965. "Become a Red Seedling." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e12-474>.

²⁵ Designer, Unknown. n.d. "Practicing Birth Control Is Beneficial for the Protection of the Health of Mother and Child." Publisher Unknown. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e15-717>.

area of a metropolitan were indeed common. However, because the Party was uniquely fascinated with transmission towers, propaganda artists would include them in landscapes in lieu of a city if they wanted to. The transmission towers were, therefore, not only chosen for their simplicity to paint, but also because of their height and position on top of treacherous geography. As their height and location symbolize conquering and soaring above nature, they were better signifiers than a city for making political implications. Therefore, presenting these transmission towers as such subtly indicates that their purpose extended beyond promoting the environmental policy. Environmental policy also fit within the broader goals of the CCP to exert control over the masses. The repetitive usage of these transmission towers, therefore, suggests that it contributed to manipulating the masses to maintain their support of the one-party system.

Pigs, Tractors, and Speeding Up Agriculture

Within the large scope of utopian urgency, technological innovations, especially in agriculture, played an instrumental role. Tractors, for example, were believed to increase grain output at an alarming rate. Chairman Mao believed in industrialized-intensive agriculture; that is often referred nowadays as factory farming. This type of intensive agriculture frequently disregards ethical treatment of livestock as well as the environment. This style of intensive animal agriculture was a commonplace throughout the world at the time, but the Maoist-Era CCP was an especially large promoter of industrialized agriculture. For example, the phrase, “*huafei chang*,” or “fertilizer factory,” is used to describe a pig within a 1959 propaganda poster (**Fig. 1-7**).²⁶ Referring to a pig as a “fertilizer factory,” implies the lack of humane treatments towards it and the anthropocentric view that considers it entirely as an expendable asset. Treating pigs as

²⁶ Ben, Shi. 1959. “Pigs Are Fertilizer Factories as Well as Treasure Bowls.” Shanghai: shanghai people’s fine arts publishing house. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1959-002>.

factories for fertilizer partially explains how excessive the fertilizer usage was in Communist China. The background of **Figure 1-7** is, not a painting, but a photograph of a series of pigs within highly confined pens, a common characteristic of intensive animal agriculture.

The livestock are even more confined within their pens in **Figure 1-8** entitled *Energetically Develop Pig Farming*, though this image was published far later, in 1977. The image exemplifies that the authoritarian agricultural system was pervasive even after Mao's death.²⁷ The woman jubilantly driving a tractor commonly appeared in Maoist-Era posters and was also associated with modernity and gender equality. This kind of posters portraying liberated women operating heavy machinery influenced a bin of posters called "Tractor Girls," in Stefan Landsberger's extensive online archive.²⁸ Tractors were far more than a farming technological advancement; they were valorized as a political symbol. In addition to the transmission towers, such symbolizations of the tractors intended to legitimize the CCP and reminded the populace of Mao's illusory achievement in technological advancement and economic stability. The tractor was even idolized to the extent where Mao Zedong eventually believed that China needed an unwarranted army of tractors. *Speed Up the Mechanization of Agriculture (Fig. 1-9)*, contains a parade of farming machines, oriented in a similar fashion and demeanor to a military parade.²⁹ In this image, the tractors are organized in rows similar to soldiers in a war, embarking on the fight to transform land. I will dig deeper into this topic in Chapter 2.

²⁷ Ye, Wulin. 1977. "Energetically Develop Pig Farming." People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e15-967>.

²⁸ Landsberger, Stefan. n.d. "Tractor Girls." Chinese posters.Net. <https://chinese posters.net/themes/tractor-girls>.

²⁹ Unknown, Designer. 1960. "Speed up the Mechanization of Agriculture." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/d25-137>.

Chapter 1 Images



分层施肥，以充分发挥肥效。这是社员们在播种前施第三层肥——壮苗肥。 照片均为新华社记者 唐茂林摄

Figure 1-1: People’s Database Information. 1960. “Plant Wheat Well in Accordance with the Spirit of the ‘Eight-Character Constitution’.” Beijing: People’s Daily.



Figure 1-2: Xu, Jialin. 1972. “Longtan’s New Look.” Ningxia: Ningxia People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1972-001>.



Figure 1-3: Che, Yongren, and Huali Yu. 1974. “Criticize the Reactionary Thought of Lin Biao and Confucius, Firmly Walk with the Workers and Peasants on the Road of Unity.” Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e13-851>.



Figure 1-4: Lin, Rixiong. 1965. “Go to the Countryside to Serve the 500 Million Peasants.” Hebei: Hebei People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1965-030>



Figure 1-5: Designer, Unknown. n.d. "Practicing Birth Control Is Beneficial for the Protection of the Health of Mother and Child." Publisher Unknown. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-717>.



Figure 1-6: Ha, Qiongwen. 1965. "Become a Red Seedling." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e12-474>.

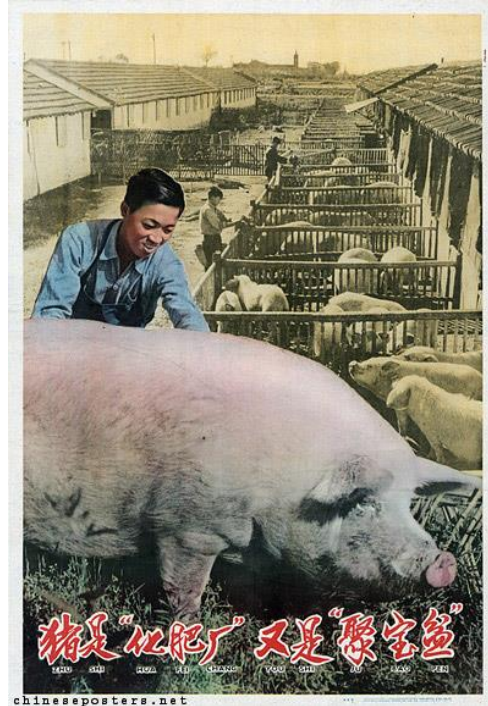


Figure 1-7: Ben, Shi. 1959. “Pigs Are Fertilizer Factories as Well as Treasure Bowls.” Shanghai: shanghai people’s fine arts publishing house. <https://chinese posters . net / posters / pc - 1959 - 002 .>



Figure 1-8: Ye, Wulin. 1977. “Energetically Develop Pig Farming.” People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters . net / posters / e15 - 967>

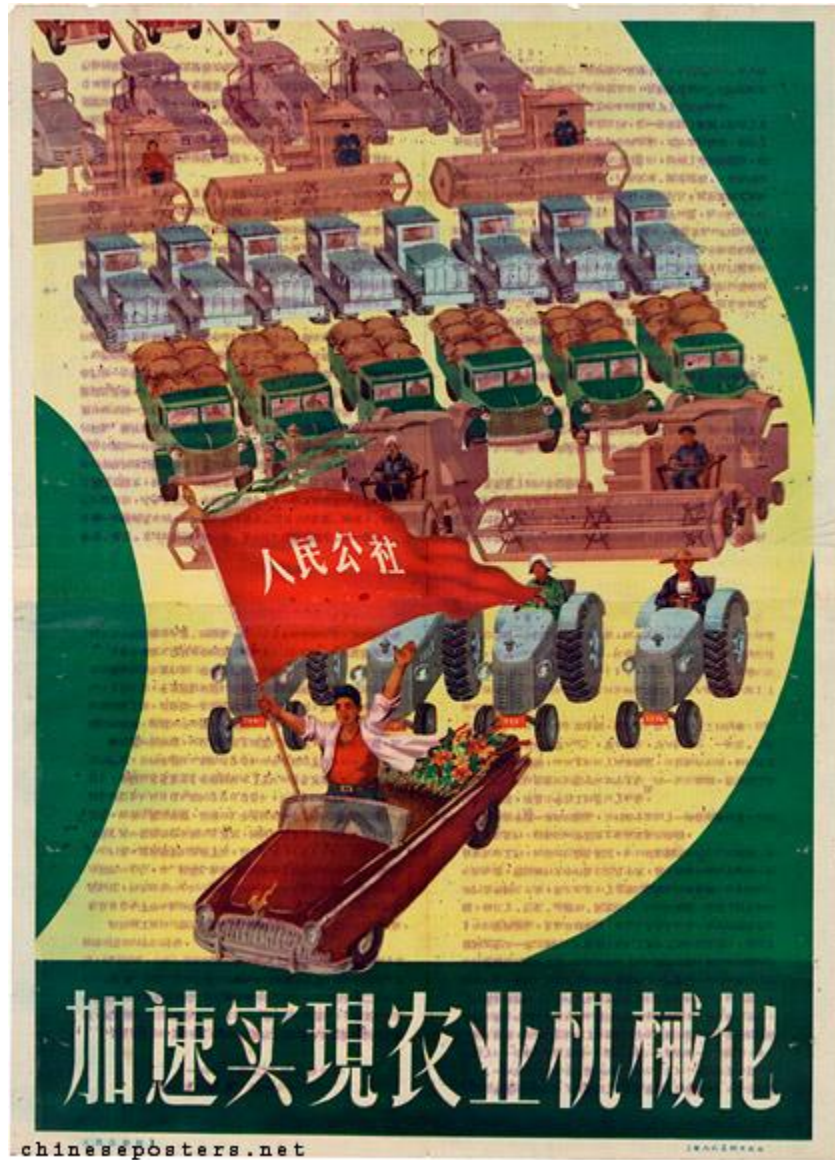


Figure 1-9: Unknown, Designer. 1960. “Speed up the Mechanization of Agriculture.” Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/d25-137>.

Chapter 2: Moving Mountains and Taking Control of Feral Land

The Man Versus Nature Conflict

In the previous chapter, I outlined how transforming nature through utopian urgency farming procedures aimed to maximize China's farming yield, regardless of the environmental consequences. Although maximizing efficiency of farming yield was a prevailing strategy, there are additional components of transforming nature. China is located in a region that historically has been susceptible to deadly landslides, earthquakes, and floods.¹ One of China's two longest rivers, the Yellow River, is nicknamed "The Great Sorrow," because of its tendency to flood regularly and cause devastation. In the eyes of many Chinese, the river has, not only flooded crop fields, but also claimed the lives of the poor rural farmers that Mao's communist revolution was built upon.

In light of this, conquering nature was not only about feeding China's starving population, it was also about building a subsistence-based society, in spite of the obstacles faced by the peasants. As Ruth Rogaski argues, the copious amount of fertilizer that was used during this era was reminiscent of China's Patriotic Health Campaign, a 1952 initiative that sought to mitigate China's poor sanitation and disease-ridden nation.² The Patriotic Health Campaign meshed comfortably with the political popularity of Mao's Four Pest's Campaign as controlling

¹ Han, Weixiao, Chen Liang, Baofa Jiang, Wei Ma, and Ying Zhang. 2016. "Major Natural Disasters in China, 1985-2014: Occurrence and Damages." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13 (11): 1118. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13111118>.

² Rogaski, R. (2002). Nature, Annihilation, and Modernity: China's Korean War Germ-Warfare Experience Reconsidered. *Association for Asian Studies*, 61(2), 381-415.

pests and insects that bring disease and hinder crop development was a crucial component of transforming nature.

Numerous articles in the *People's Daily* that account the endeavors of peasants contextualize this conflict between the Chinese masses and natural disasters which exemplify the dichotomy of men versus nature. In 1957, one year prior to the Great Leap Forward, the CCP announced that China's field of meteorology should adopt a greater emphasis on improving agriculture. More specifically, the sole purpose of meteorology was to better prepare for and, ideally, prevent future natural disasters.³ While the particular role of meteorologists is portrayed relatively vague in the newspaper, there is some evidence that advisory stations were set up to educate the farmers regarding weather and climate.⁴ Preventing drought and flood was a specialized job in some locations, as depicted in **Figure 2-1**, the image of workers aiding farmers in preventing drought.⁵ The caption describes the laborers as "soldiers," as if they are armed forces in a war.⁶ In this case, these soldiers are fighting against the forces of nature rather than human forces. Thus, natural disasters have been described as enemy diseases that needed to be "cured," that is, to be accomplished by everyone uniformly acting as soldiers against disease.⁷

Similarly, **Figure 2-2** portrays a large and burly worker pushing two stones away from each other, intending to express control over nature.⁸ For years, the Chinese felt as if they were slaves of the natural world. With Mao's revolution, they would be freed from the dominant power of nature, as long as they followed the example of the burly worker from **Figure 2-2**.

³ Unknown, Author. 1957. "Improve Work Quality, Reduce Disasters and Increase Happiness for Everyone Deng at the National Association of Advanced Meteorologists." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁴ Ibid., 4.

⁵ Zhang, Shixun. 1959. "Conquer Natural Disasters with the Power to Fight the Enemy." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Ming, Yu. 1958. "Huaibei Journey." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁸ Liao, Luyan. 1959. "The Mission of the Agricultural Front in 1959." Beijing: People's Daily.

To inspire the peasants to act like this burly soldier and persevere through harsh weather conditions, the CCP used propaganda. Chinese propaganda does not distance humans from nature but instead forms a tightly knit bond between the two. For Maoist China, nature was an obstacle that must be overcome, it was not something that was simply adapted to. As such, if a Maoist-Era poster depicted a natural landscape in a realistic manner, it was often to highlight the harshness of nature. Prior to the later years of the CR, very little artistic attention was paid to portraying the natural beauty of the environment. Much of the images that depicted nature in a realistic form were images of soldiers braving through the harsh elements during times of war. For example, *The Cavalry in Wind and Snow* (**Fig. 2-3**) depicts two cavalry soldiers in woolly overcoats who ride through China's snowy landscape.⁹ Their stern expressions bring out their focus on achieving the end goal of a CCP victory. Particular detail in this print was paid towards the snow on the ground and the snow stuck to the tree branches. This type of emphasis is very uncharacteristic of Chinese propaganda posters as natural environments often appeared simple and lacking of precise detail. Mao believed that portraying the environment in a realistic fashion was frivolous, unless doing so was needed for political indoctrination. A similar image, titled *An Arduous Journey* (**Fig. 2-4**) shows soldiers marching through difficult terrain represented by steep crags and thick forests.¹⁰ Part of the image depicts infantry men scaling one of these crags with a single rope. The scene displayed in *An Arduous Journey* is undoubtedly exaggerated to express the man vs. nature conflict.

If we revert back to China's tumultuous history with floods and their ramifications, it suggests that the Chinese possessed bitterness towards flooding and uncontrolled water. *Brave*

⁹ Zhang, Biwu. 1966. "The Cavalry in Wind and Snow." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e13-849>.

¹⁰ Ying, Yeping, and Huaqing Wang. 1961. "An Arduous Journey Scroll (Seven). Lazikou." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1961-012>.

the Wind and the Waves, Everything has Remarkable Abilities (Fig. 2-5) portrays a group of peasants that cleave the waves of the ocean.¹¹ Here, the water itself serves the purpose of highlighting the strength and resilience of the peasant class. However, the image also insinuates that nature must be controlled to orient China to economic progress and modernity. The peasants resisting the tides of the ocean imply that the revolution is unstoppable. Another image, *Our Great Teacher (Fig. 2-6)*, illustrates a jovial, young male teacher carrying a child across a rushing stream while other excited children look on.¹² This print represents the 1960s campaign that mobilized young children into rural areas for schooling. The scene intends to elevate the power and strength of the working class while simultaneously acknowledging the onerous journey of traveling through rural China on foot.

Overall, the images presented in this section portray a strong feeling of the man versus nature conflict. In this sense, such propaganda posters portraying human figures are intended to display the ideal communist revolutionary. Every feature of a Chinese propaganda poster is politically motivated, including the background landscape and its features. All of the images presented in this subsection are of a communist party member overcoming nature in some way shape or form, which made them, in the eyes of Chairman Mao and the CCP, an ideal member of the Chinese Communist Party.

Moving Mountains to Win the Man Versus Nature Conflict

Another dimension of the man versus nature conflict exemplified by the articles in the *People's Daily* is the transformation of large and seemingly unusable land masses into arable

¹¹ Wang, Liuying, Liliang Xin, Muye Meng, Jinping Xu, Biwu Zhang, Shaoyun Wu, Zhaofang Jin, Weibo Yu, and Zezhi Lu. 1958. "Brave the Wind and the Waves, Everything Has Remarkable Abilities." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1958-024>.

¹² Xin, Liliang. 1965. "Our Great Teacher." Shanghai: shanghai people's fine arts publishing house. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1965-002>.

land for agriculture. Barren land, like natural disasters, was viewed by the CCP as an enemy of the Chinese populace:

You can see the rolling hills, barren land, wind and drought. The frequent natural conditions in Pingtan Country are so bad, but the unity yield of their early rice increased by 57 percent, when natural conditions improved.¹³

As the rhetoric in the above article indicates how the Chinese treated rolling hills and barren land as equally undesirable as drought, barren land did not satisfy the expectation of the CCP to maximize efficiency of the land masses. Mao's CCP wanted to set an exemplary model for all of the Chinese people. Transforming nature—regardless of physical risk, feasibility, or education level—was undoubtedly possible to complete as no task has been too great for the citizens of China, even if the duty involved transforming deserts into fertile land.

New Masters of the Reclaimed Wasteland (**Fig. 2-7**), a poster published in 1964, shows an enthusiastic group of peasants in a rural landscape clutching mining tools.¹⁴ In the background, a larger group of peasants is working to mine away at a mountain. The landscape is yet to be fully transformed given the presence of the mountain and the large number of trees in the area. However, the title of this poster mentions that the land in its current state is “wasteland,” and the peasants are in the process of performing a makeover on the land. There is a section of the land that has already been converted into a grain field which suggests that the peasants have made significant progress. The atmosphere shows that there is still much work to be done to ensure total control, however, as the faces of the peasants in the foreground exhibit the vision for the future.

¹³ Unknown, Author. 1959. “Attach Great Importance to the Great Role of the People.” Beijing: Fujian Daily News.

¹⁴ Yao, Zhongyu. 1964. “New Masters of the Reclaimed Wasteland.” Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-695>.

In light of this, China's mountainous geography presented an arduous task of ensuring land-use was efficient and adequately tailored for agriculture. Converting the mountainous wasteland into grain fields and digging irrigation channels on mountains was highly perilous and exhausting work for the farmers. An example of what these terraces looked like can be found in **Figure 2-8**.¹⁵ The caption of this image claims that 92 percent of the 800 acres of land that was converted into terraces in Guizhou province can now be irrigated. There was a belief that the Chinese farmers were capable of artificially melting snow for agriculture.¹⁶ This practice of transforming mountains into terraces for agriculture, is often called "moving mountains" in Maoist-Era primary sources. This notion that the Chinese laborers could physically "move mountains," for agriculture originated in an old folk tale called *Yu Gong Yi Shan—The Foolish Old Man Moved the Mountains*. The story tells of an old man who single-handedly stripped down two mountains that obstructed his view bucket by bucket. The exact number of times this story was repeated during the Maoist Era is immeasurable, though it was first brought up by Mao in one of his many speeches. In other words, as an integral aspect of Mao's propaganda campaign, the slogans and stories of Chinese peasants transforming mountains allude *Yu Gong Yi Shan*. While the idea of moving mountains was inspired by a myth, the *People's Daily* and the propaganda posters played a seminal role in convincing the Chinese that transforming nature was no mere folk tale. For example, "bald mountains turn into green hills,"¹⁷ "I pushed the three mountains above my head,"¹⁸ and "Look at the mountains, dress them up beautifully,"¹⁹ were slogans that appeared in the newspaper.

¹⁵Cao, Zheng. 1958. "Let Water Serve Agricultural Production Better." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁶ Li, Bingshu. 1960. "Geography Should Serve Agricultural Production." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁷ Li, 1960, *Geography Should Serve Agricultural Production*, 7.

¹⁸ Hai, Leng. 1959. "600 Million People Build the Motherland Garden." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁹ Luo, Wencai. 1958. "Ask for Food from Barren Hills and Mountains." Beijing: People's Daily.

In addition, moving mountains was a revolutionary idea that extended beyond agriculture. For instance, industrial reforms, particularly in China's rudimentary rail system, were accomplished through moving mountains. The archaic Baocheng Railway was revamped in 1958. 20 percent of the route passes through hills and plains, while the rest travels through treacherous land encompassed by mountains, canyons, and cliffs.²⁰ *Tie long*, that is, "Iron Dragon," in English, is how Shao and Jiang call the train in their newspaper editorial. The editorial, "Iron Dragon Flying Over Thousands of Waters and Mountains," emphasizes the propaganda ideas of modernity and transforming nature in its content. "Let the mountains down and the rivers give way," the newspaper article states, emphasizing the enslavement of nature by China's Baocheng Railroad.²¹ The negative relationship between the Baocheng Railroad and the surrounding landscape is effectively summarized in the following quote:

[The Train] is also like a giant of steel, stepping on the sinister Qinling Mountains, embracing the rich Qinchuan and Western Sichuan plain.²²

The adjectives in this quote differentiate plains and mountains as forces of good and evil. The train steps on the sinister mountains while embracing the richness of the plains.

The Prize for Winning the Man Versus Nature Conflict

The Chinese propaganda mission also frequently used idealized landscapes as models to represent the destination of the man versus nature conflict. The village of Dazhai, which Mao labeled as a model for agricultural advancement during the Cultural Revolution, was frequently exhibited in an idealized fashion. The most apparent example of a Cultural Revolution

²⁰ Xiong, Yuzhong. 1958. "We Repaired the Difficult Baocheng Railway." Beijing: People's Daily.

²¹ Shao, Tingjun, and Qisheng Jiang. 1959. "Iron Dragon Flying over Thousands of Waters and Mountains." Beijing: People's Daily.

²² Ibid.

propaganda poster that exemplifies this would be *Dazhai* (**Fig. 2-9**).²³ There are vibrant images and symbols of liveliness in *Dazhai*. For example, there are painterly components that describe a utopian society—such as, cherry blossoms, the perfectly symmetrical terraces, and the red-roofed buildings. The only trees present in the image could be found in the city region, signifying that they were not naturally growing trees, but trees planted by the farmers. The mountains in the background are completely devoid of trees insinuating that they were all cut down to build farming terraces. *Dazhai* was undoubtedly an exaggerated and unrealistic depiction of both a society and a landscape. Such idealized societies were also portrayed in earlier posters from the Great Leap Forward, such as *The People's Communes are Good* (**Fig. 2-10**).²⁴ The ideal commune functions as a well-oiled machine with each feature playing its part for Mao's revolution. The commune is well-organized and prosperous with its flourishing grain fields, lively city area, and the backyard furnace located on the right-hand side. Again, the only realistic component that visualizes nature and society is reserved to the very rear of the image, which symbolizes the unfinished journey to transform nature.

Dazhai was Mao's Cultural Revolution model for agriculture, but *Daqing* was Mao's model for industry. In his 1975 image called *In Industry, Learn from Daqing* (**Fig. 2-11**), Song Wenzhi places towering industrial buildings that really draw the attention of the viewer.²⁵ The red billowing smoke is the most vibrant feature of the image signifying economic progress and China's industrial utopia.

²³ Unknown, Author. n.d. "Dazhai." University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/#/asset/AAPDIG_10312354166.

²⁴ Rui, Guangting. 1958. "The People's Communes Are Good." Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House. <http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/affiche/met/g01-959.jpg>.

²⁵ Song, Wenzhi. 1975. "In Industry, Study Daqing." Jiangsu: University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/#/asset/AAPDIG_10312352072.

This Maoist impulse of total control over nature and idealized landscapes pervaded in the other subliminal messages in propaganda posters. For example, a poster entitled *Marrying Late has Many Advantages* (**Fig. 2-12**), has a core message of deemphasizing marriage and having children in favor of focusing on revolutionary responsibilities.²⁶ This focus of the image regards the two peasants, the male farmer, and the female agricultural scientist, working together to improve China's grain yields for all. However, the background of the image and its features are also noteworthy in the sense of the Maoist impulse. The background portrays an idealized landscape with prosperous grain fields, a vibrant industrial sector, and organized mountainside terraces. The greenery in the image is sparse with only a few small shrubs. The background of the image shows the viewer the end result of the work conducted by the two revolutionaries in the image: a landscape scarcely inhabited with life. **Figure 2-13**, *Develop the Basket on the Back Spirit, Serve the People Wholeheartedly*, conveys its message in an almost identical manner.²⁷ The 'Basket on the Back Spirit' is the philosophy of the ideal CCP member, and conveying said philosophy is the primary intent of the poster. However, the background of this image also contextualizes an idealized agricultural scene without any trees, birds, or waterfalls. The only body of water is a calmly flowing stream, implying its optimization for irrigation and limited threat of water damage.

Besides *Dazhai* (**Fig. 2-9**), the images explored in this subsection have the same theme that consists of both the journey and the ultimate aims of Mao Zedong's revolution. The peasant farmers with their working-class demeanor represent the former. The landscapes, on the contrary, represent the latter. Ultimately, the final destination in the eyes of the CCP, was,

²⁶Unknown, Designer. n.d. "Marrying Late Has Many Advantages." Unknown Publisher. <https://chinese posters.net/sites/default/files/2020-06/e15-716.jpg>.

²⁷Liang, Yunqing. 1960. "Develop the Basket on the Back Spirit, Serve the People Wholeheartedly." People's fine arts publishing house. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1966-007>.

therefore, a landscape that minimized natural land that did not serve the revolution. As a result, the appreciation for the natural aspects of the environment was very limited.

Chapter 2 Images



驻河南开封的官兵，深夜车水帮助农民抗旱 张世勋摄

Figure 2-1: Zhang, Shixun. 1959. “Conquer Natural Disasters with the Power to Fight the Enemy.” Beijing: People’s Daily.



新华社供稿

Figure 2-2: Liao, Luyan. 1959. “The Mission of the Agricultural Front in 1959.” Beijing: People’s Daily.



Figure 2-3: Zhang, Biwu. 1966. “The Cavalry in Wind and Snow.” Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e13-849>.



Figure 2-4: Ying, Yeping, and Huaqing Wang. 1961. “An Arduous Journey Scroll (Seven). Lazikou.” Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1961-012>.



Figure 2-5: Wang, Liuying, Liliang Xin, MUYI Meng, Jinping Xu, Biwu Zhang, Shaoyun Wu, Zhaofang Jin, Weibo Yu, and Zezhi Lu. 1958. “Brave the Wind and the Waves, Everything Has Remarkable Abilities.” Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/pc-1958-024>.



Figure 2-6: Xin, Liliang. 1965. "Our Great Teacher." Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1965-002>.



Figure 2-7: Yao, Zhongyu. 1964. “New Masters of the Reclaimed Wasteland.” Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e15-695>.



贵州省仁怀县和平农业社第一分社，把八百亩坡地修成了梯田，并发展了水利网，全社92%的土地可以得到灌溉。现在梯田里已经蓄满了水。 曹正摄（新华社稿）

Figure 2-8: Cao, Zheng. 1958. “Let Water Serve Agricultural Production Better.” Beijing: People’s Daily.

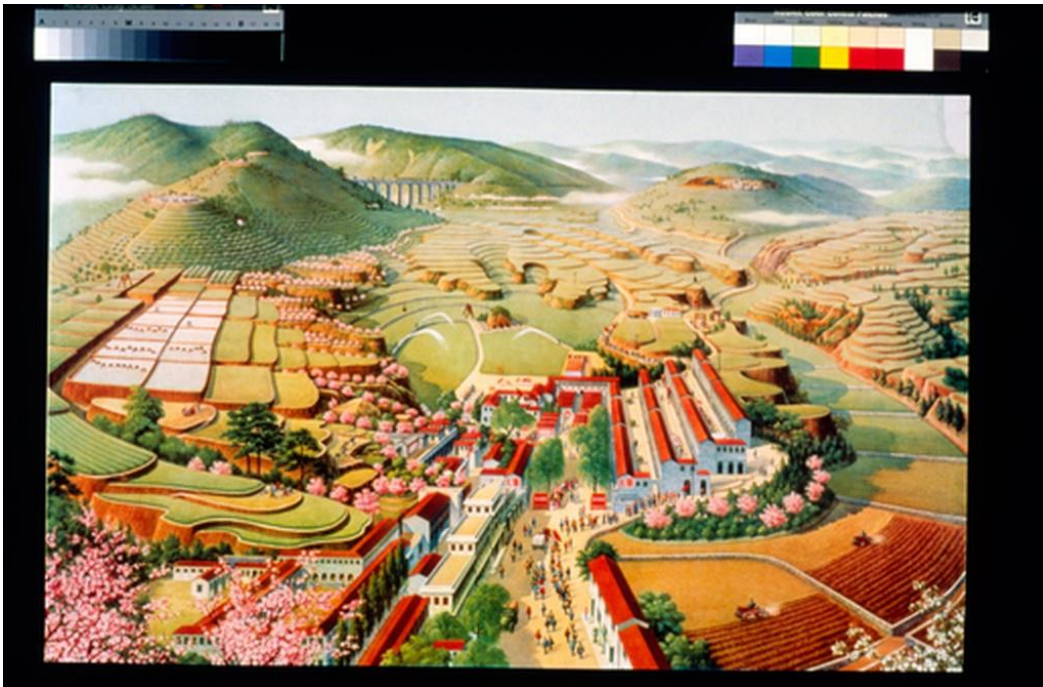


Figure 2-9: Unknown, Author. n.d. “Dazhai.” University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/#/asset/AAPDIG_10312354166.

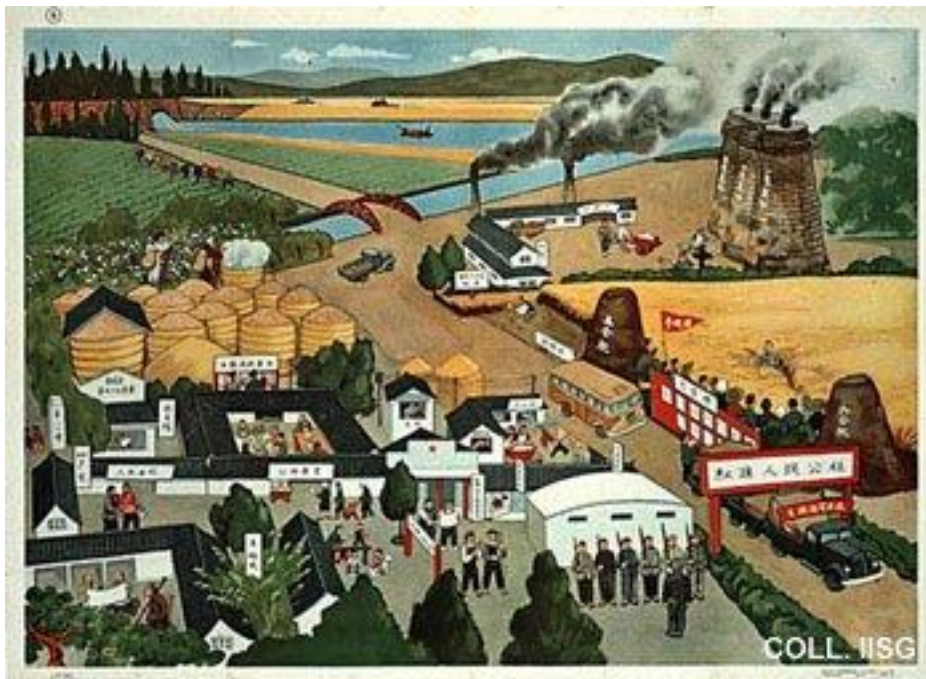


Figure 2-10: Rui, Guangting. 1958. “The People’s Communes Are Good.” Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House. <http://www.iisg.nl/exhibitions/affiche/met/g01-959.jpg>.



Figure 2-11: Song, Wenzhi. 1975. "In Industry, Study Daqing." Jiangsu: University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/#/asset/AAPDIG_10312352072.



Figure 2-12: Unknown, Designer. n.d. “Marrying Late Has Many Advantages.” Unknown Publisher. <https://chinese posters . net/sites/default/files/2020-06/e15-716.jpg>.



Figure 2-13: Liang, Yunqing. 1960. “Develop the Basket on the Back Spirit, Serve the People Wholeheartedly.” People’s fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters . net/posters/pc-1966-007>.

Chapter 3: Mao Zedong and his Philosophy as Nature's Deity

Mao's Socialist Thought and Transforming Nature in the Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong's socialist thought was integrated into the CCP's environmental policy message, driven by the Mao personality cult that emerged at the same time. In his 2011 book, *The Mao Cult*, Daniel Leese delves into how the worshipping of Mao Zedong became a widespread personality cult, with the masses conducting daily rituals—such as worship, study, calisthenics, and dance—to revere Mao and his socialist thought. In turn, the frequency of the phrase “Loyalty to Chairman Mao,” drastically increased in the *People's Daily* from 1963 to 1966.¹ Mao Zedong's philosophy became an aspect of all phases of everyday life for the Chinese people, including the mission to transform nature. Two quotes included on page 184 of Leese's book illuminate the comparisons made between Mao's thought and the forces of nature:²

1. A shaking earth and tumbling mountains are unable to shake the boundless loyalty of every red heart to you.
2. The unrestrained sea and the empty sky are not enough to contain our boundless belief in you. (184)

As discussed in Chapter 2, A large component of transforming nature and the propaganda that promoted it involved preventing the natural disasters that had plagued the mainland for so long. The more powerful the negative consequences of natural disasters were, the more Chairman Mao became willing to possess the power and resurge to resist them. In essence,

¹ Leese, Daniel. 2011. *The Mao Cult*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

Mao's belief was that as long as the Chinese working class employed Mao Zedong thought, they would be able to keep minimizing the negative consequences of natural disasters, drought, and poor-agricultural yield.

In my analysis of the *People's Daily*, I was able to find articles that converged Mao Zedong's socialist thought with the concept of transforming nature. For example, reporter Yi Xiang applies Mao's revolutionary thought to overcoming the fears of failure transforming nature.³ This philosophy of breaking free from the enslavement and fear of nature is reoccurring in the newspaper. It was not the natural disasters that were blamed for low grain yields, it was fear of said natural disasters that intervened the productivity of the labor force.⁴ GLF propaganda accused the natural disasters as being the primary inhibitor to prosperous agriculture, so such examples are important to distinguishing the GLF propaganda and that of the Cultural Revolution. In other words, Mao's enemy shifted from nature itself to the individuals who enabled nature.

While there does seem to be a correlation between Mao Zedong thought and transforming nature, determining the application of Mao Zedong thought is somewhat indefinite. The articles suggest that Mao Zedong thought was applied to farming practices in the struggle against nature but I could not effectively what changes were implemented.⁵ But, I did notice that the CCP emphasized studying the story of *The Foolish Old Man-Yugong Yishan* and its politics during the Cultural Revolution to a larger degree. In 1962, Wang Che published a musical number adopted from *Yugong Yishan* in the *People's Daily*.⁶ The lyrics of the song are organized in

³ Yi, Xiang. 1964. "Dare to Revolution and Practice." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁴ Lin, Lin, and Fengshan Yang. 1966. "Arm the Masses with Mao Zedong Thought to Promote the Great Leap in Production." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ Wang, Che. 1962. "The Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains(Chorus)." Beijing: People's Daily.

chronological order and lack musical aesthetics. This expulsion of musical components exemplifies that the socialist undertones were preferably more important than developing catchy and repetitive phrases for the tune. Strengthening socialism meshed comfortably with Mao's plan to "move mountains." *People's Daily* articles published during the Cultural Revolution take a more aggressive stance towards mountains. For example, rhetoric such as "cutting mountains," and "splitting mountains," was used in the articles, rather than, simply, "transforming mountains."^{7,8} The goal of such rhetorical phrases was to imitate The Foolish Old Man by aiming to completely level mountains to create grain fields. An example of what this process looked like can be found in **Figure 3-1**, which portrays numerous Chinese farmers using picks to chip away at a mountain.⁹ The *Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains* was also relevant to Mao's primary goals to maintain control over the working class and prevent a rebellion. For example, in 1966, Mao took a dip in the Yangtze River to silence the critics who were dubious about Mao's age and physical health. In what is one of the most infamous political stunts of his tenure, Mao publicly showed that, even in old age, one could remain vigilant and strong as is the Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains.¹⁰ It was no coincidence that Mao chose the Yangtze River for this political stunt; the Yangtze River is well-known for its notorious floods and the ensuing bitter hardship and casualties it caused. Therefore, we can reflect that Mao's performance symbolized fearlessness of an old man in conquering nature.

⁷ Hong, Tao, and Youqin, Ye. 1965. "Long Live Self Reliance!" Beijing: People's Daily.

⁸ Unknown, Author. 1970. "The Arid and Poor Hillside Turned into a Productive 'Dazhaitian' Ditches Fill Trenches to Create Land, Gaining Grain Production and Increasing Production Year after Year." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁹Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Heaver, Stuart. 2016. "Chairman Mao's Historic Swim – Glorified in China but Ridiculed by the Rest of the World." *Post Magazine*. <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/1999098/chairman-maos-historic-swim-glorified-china>

Cultural Revolution propaganda suggests that the CCP possessed an anthropocentric attitude towards nature, meaning that humans were considered superior to the natural world and its inhabitants. There is some evidence that this attitude was adopted from Soviet philosophy, especially from Friedrich Engels. According to one article titled “A Minor Correction,” Engels argued that animals passively adapt to nature while humans actively transform it.¹¹ In other words, animals acclimate to the natural changes, whereas humans are more deliberate in their approach towards their surrounding environment. Mao believed that humans possessed a ‘*zìjue de nongdongxing*,’ that is ‘Conscious Initiative,’ in their actions.¹² One reason why Mao oppressed the intellectuals and specialists was that these individuals were ‘thinkers,’ and thinkers are only capable of acting subjectively in Mao’s eyes. Mao favored action rather than thinking because action resulted in objective change—such as higher grain yields and smelted steel. The author of “A Minor Correction,” mainly evaluates the capability of humans in transforming nature rather than whether or not humans should do it. However, the tone reads as if the author believes that anthropocentric change is instinctual for homo sapiens, which is a controversial idea.

New-found Criticism of Those Who Threatened the Transformation of Nature

In the Cultural Revolution, Mao also strategized propaganda as a method to criticize his political opponents who threatened the environmental policies and the transformation of nature. Following the disastrous Great Leap Forward, the CCP began to divide internally, and the more moderate wing of officials began to gain traction. This internal division led to the production of propaganda that condemned native Chinese who either doubted the revolution or those who

¹¹ Ruo, Shui. 1963. “A Minor Correction.” Beijing: People’s Daily.

¹² Ibid., 19.

resisted the mission of transforming nature.¹³ If we revert back to the poster entitled *Criticize the Reactionary Thought of Lin Biao and Confucius, Firmly Walk with the Workers and Peasants on the Road of Unity* (**Fig 3-2**), as indicated by the title, it intended to criticize enemies of the Party.¹⁴ The peasant in the image represents the ideal revolutionary who worked tirelessly to transform the background landscape into a prosperous utopian land. Mao's ousted advisor, Lin Biao, is displayed as the enemy of Mao's environmental policy in this image. The *People's Daily* was also used to criticize those who threatened Mao's environmental policy mission. One such article condemns any individual who considered Dazhai to be fallacious.¹⁵ Chen Yonggui's article also shows that the farmers with low morale following the GLF were highly scrutinized as doubters of transforming nature:

Some comrades lack the Confidence, thinking that low-yield fields are backward and unchangeable.¹⁶

This quote exemplifies the tighter relationship between criticism of counter-revolutionaries and the effort to transform nature shaped by Mao and his political opponents. In this sense, the lack of strong Party leadership contributed to doubt of Mao's ambitious policies to transform nature. The extensive use of trial and error by the inexperienced farmers led to drought and deforestation. In turn, this negligible success in agriculture perpetuated the decline of morale during the later Mao years. The emerging division in Mao's party and the questioning of his policies placed more political pressure on him to maintain the support of the masses. The farmers were beginning to notice that Mao's policies were not leading to the economic and

¹³ Ruo, 1963, *A Minor Correction*, 15.

¹⁴ Criticize the Reactionary Thought of Lin Biao and Confucius, Firmly Walk with the Workers and Peasants on the Road of Unity.

¹⁵ Chen, Yonggui. 1967. "Dazhai Advances under the Glory of Mao Zedong Thought." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

logistical success that they were promised. In order to maintain control, Mao needed enemies and unity against these enemies, as evidenced by the quote. Still, what Mao needed to legitimize himself as the supreme leader of the Chinese Communist Party was the peasants to believe that they could achieve greatness in transforming nature.

Placing Mao Above Nature

In light of this, one of the propaganda tactics to legitimize Mao and his policies was to place the supreme leader within an idealized landscape. *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (**Fig. 3-3**) is arguably the most impactful propaganda poster of the entire Maoist Era.¹⁷ As millions of copies of the poster were printed and plastered all over the mainland, it is understandable why Chairman Mao was universally idolized during the CR. The image portrays a young Mao marching onward through the countryside to attend a miner strike in Anyuan. Mao's complexion implies his engaging, goal-oriented mind while his eyes are looking towards the future and what is in front of him. The surrounding landscape distorts our sight by adding height to his outer appearance. Mao's height is exaggerated to the extent that his head is fully surrounded by the clouds in the sky. In this sense, the image portrays Mao as a symbolic ruler by making him look taller and designing the mountains to appear smaller. Therefore, we can reflect that *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* conveys a strong sense of inspiration for the masses. They too can successfully move mountains as their great leader did. Similarly, *Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside* (**Fig. 3-4**) advocates transforming nature in such a manner.¹⁸ However, rather than placing Mao in a landscape that feels diminutive, *Chairman Mao Inspects the*

¹⁷ Liu, Chunhua. 1968. "Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan." Beijing: Hebei People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e12-703>.

¹⁸ Chen, Yanning. 1972. "Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside." Beijing: University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/#/asset/AAPDIG_10312352053.

Guangdong Countryside locates Mao in an idealized countryside to highlight the achievement of Mao's environmental policy in action. Corresponding with Mao's appearance in the center of the image, Mao's height elevates him to the highest status among the other individuals. His white shirt appears brighter in contrast to the surrounding colors, and that different saturation makes him the most eye-catching figure in the image. The commoners following Mao and the surrounding landscape express agricultural prosperity and demonstrate following Mao's ideology in transforming nature.

While it is not possible to fully determine the exact psychological effect of placing Mao within such landscapes in that manner, the strategy was employed by the CCP to a significant degree. Given that *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* was printed over 900 million times, Mao's role in influencing the public-oriented mission to transform nature is undeniable. This artistic technique of separating the status of human beings with nature represents continuity of Confucian philosophy, contrary to the numerous times which Mao and his administration condemned Confucianism. Portraying Mao as far superior to nature as the posters and the newspaper did show that Mao's environmental policy did contain elements of anthropocentrism.

Chapter 3 Images

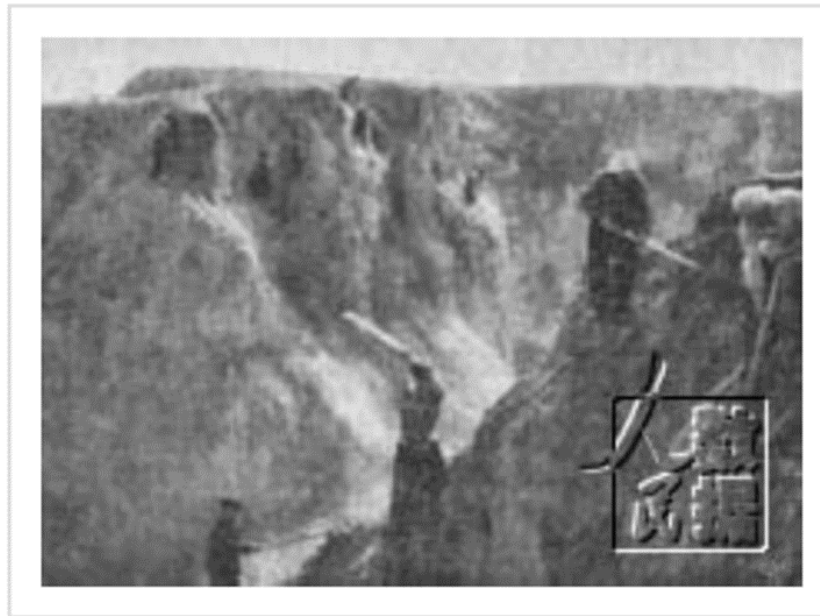


Figure 3-1: Unknown, Author. 1970. “The Arid and Poor Hillside Turned into a Productive ‘Dazhaitian’ Ditches Fill Trenches to Create Land, Gaining Grain Production and Increasing Production Year after Year.” Beijing: People’s Daily.



Figure 3-2: Che, Yongren, and Huali Yu. 1974. “Criticize the Reactionary Thought of Lin Biao and Confucius, Firmly Walk with the Workers and Peasants on the Road of Unity.” Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese-posters.net/posters/e13-851>

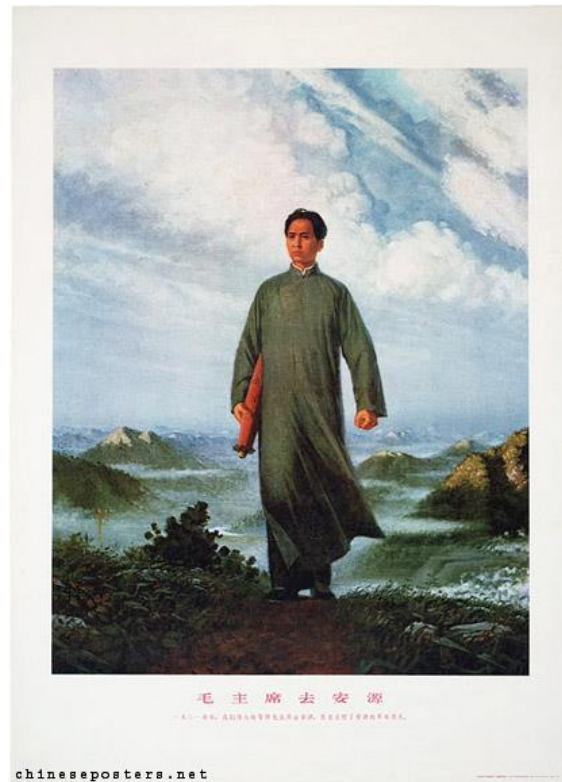


Figure 3-3: Liu, Chunhua. 1968. “Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan.” Beijing: Hebei People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters . net / posters / e12-703>.



Figure 3-4: Chen, Yanning. 1972. “Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside.” Beijing: University of Westminster Chinese Poster Collection. https://library-artstor-org.ezproxy.uvm.edu/#/asset/AAPDIG_10312352053.

Chapter 4: Emerging Norms of Afforestation and Conservation

Restoration of Forested Land

While there are some overlaps between Judith Shapiro's findings and mine which reveal the anthropocentric politics of Mao's government, they do not suggest that all facets of Mao's environmental policy were anti-nature and anthropocentric. For example, when discussing Learn from Dazhai in the Cultural Revolution, Shapiro mainly describes the negative environmental impacts of the movement—such as cases of forestry loss and the slogans that advocated tree cutting.¹ What had been underdiscussed, however, is the advocacy of afforestation, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. It is worth pointing out that the excessive loss of forest during the Maoist Era was the result of maximizing efficiency of the land. The CCP did not intend to overcut and underplant trees for the benefit of harming nature. In other words, geography was intended to serve agriculture and material purposes,² but the Chinese did not possess any particular vitriol towards forested land. Logging during the Maoist Era should not be considered as a practice that intended to harm nature but an anthropocentric practice that failed to account for the environmental consequences of deforestation. Forests were viewed as assets to agriculture because they protected against soil erosion and were viewed as potential sites for arable land. Therefore, forests were not necessarily considered wasted land by the CCP.³ Following an evaluation of China's forestry conditions in 1961, Li Fanwu in the *People's Daily* raised concern that China's forest reserves and their respective resources will fail to support the

¹ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 112.

² Luo, Wencai. 1958. "Ask for Food from Barren Hills and Mountains." Beijing: People's Daily.

³ Unknown, Author. 1957. "Greening the Motherland." Beijing: People's Daily.

national economy and China's large population in the coming years.⁴ The same piece argues that China's consumption of forest resources cannot compromise future generations in their access of these same resources,⁵ a principle that is called "sustainability," in the present. In these lights we can reflect that the Chinese possessed at least a rudimentary understanding regarding the importance of forests in limiting soil erosion during the GLF. Forests were capable of "regulating the climate," though the usage of this vague language suggests that the CCP did not fully understand the importance of forests as carbon sinks.⁶ Furthermore, after analyzing the newspaper archive, I am still unsure as to whether or not the CCP possessed a deeper ecological understanding of the relationship between tree coverage and soil erosion suggesting that they were not exposed to such ecological theories. In summary, there is some evidence that the Chinese started promoting environmental conservation and sustainability in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the eyes of Mao Zedong, transforming nature was more than just the removal of forests for agriculture. In actuality, afforestation, that is, the planting of trees to create forests, was considered to be within the realm of *gaizao ziran*. For example, Mao's CCP knew that mitigating Inner Mongolia's 16 percent desert expansion could be accomplished through afforestation. This desert in Inner Mongolia was referred as the "Yellow Dragon," in the *People's Daily*.⁷ Treating nature as one giant organism, such as this "Yellow Dragon," is an aspect of Fengshui—in other words, Chinese geomancy. Fengshui emphasizes harmonizing human beings with their environment, so it is possible Maoist China was influenced by such doctrinal values. Furthermore, it is also possible the CCP did promote some degree of a

⁴ Li, Fanwu. 1961. "How Fast and Economical to Carry out Forest Regeneration." Beijing: People's Daily.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Wang, Zaitian. 1960. "A Huge Victory in Transforming Nature." Beijing: People's Daily.

harmonious relationship with nature, though further evaluation is needed to shed light on the attitudes towards Chinese geomancy during the Maoist Era.

Propaganda played an instrumental role in educating the Chinese masses about afforestation, its benefits to agriculture, and its benefits for the overall well-being of the people. For example, tree-planting was treated as a competition among labor forces which had a startling parallel with the provincial competition to produce the most grain.⁸ Afforestation was regularly referred as *Lühua zuguo* which translates to “Greening the Motherland,” in English.⁹ Marking afforestation in this manner parallels the goal of renovating the “Yellow Dragon.” *Lühua zuguo* was not only found in textual propaganda, but in visual propaganda as well. **Figure 4-1** shows a hard-working peasant woman carrying what appears to be wood. The caption reads “Greening the Motherland is good, women want to win glory for afforestation.”¹⁰ The image, published in 1960, shows that a desire for afforestation was even present during the Leap, despite the socio-political popularity of logging.

Ultimately, however, the mission to persuade the Chinese peasants to “Green the Motherland,” was not very successful. The Chinese were removing trees at a much faster rate than the trees were being replenished, explaining the decline of forest cover. Additionally, the swift, sweeping afforestation plan that was utilized disregarded important factors such as soil content, distance between seeds, and water quality.¹¹ The *People’s Daily* does not provide any indication that the Chinese farmers understood the importance of planting indigenous tree species in deforested areas. Normally, non-native trees take far more time to grow than natives,

⁸ Wang, 1960, *A Huge Victory in Transforming Nature*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ Yin, Rongsheng. 1960. “Greening the Motherland Is Good, Women Want to Win Glory for Afforestation.” Beijing: *People’s Daily*.

¹¹ Unknown, Author. 1965. “One-Day Afforestation. Beijing: *People’s Daily*.”

if they succeed at all. In 1963, it was claimed that 907,800 acres of forest was added in Dianbai County in only 8 years.¹² As always with the *People's Daily*, however, it is impossible to verify the truth of this statistic. It is known that, throughout the 1960s, forest coverage continued to decline in China, with total coverage reaching a low-point of 12 percent in 1970.¹³ Coupled with Mao's suppression of the intellectual class, China's afforestation campaign proved to be ineffective in substantially restoring forests until the years following Mao's death.

Mao's Environmental Policy Extends Beyond Material Purpose

Despite the lack of visible forest expansion, Greening the Motherland was not entirely unsuccessful in shifting the mindset of the Chinese people. Norms of environmental conservation began to become more widespread in the years following the GLF. In his book, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, Jacques Ellul describes Mao's Theory of the Mold. This theory was the foundation of Mao's propaganda mission, which sought to use widespread political indoctrination to shape the Chinese communists so that they were ideologically the same person.¹⁴ As an individual, Mao also believed that he could mold nature into something very helpful to his politics. While the primary objective of afforestation tailored towards successful agriculture and lumber supply, the mission to Green the Motherland expanded the ideals of environmental conservation.¹⁵ Meaning, the Chinese began to advocate protecting nature for reasons other than for material benefit in an effort to advance Fengshui by aiming at establishing a greater harmonious relationship with the natural world.

¹² Lin, Xuan. 1963. "Afforestation Changed the Economic Outlook of Dianbai County." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹³ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 82.

¹⁴ Ellul, Jacques. 1973. *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. New York: Vintage Books.

¹⁵ People's Database Information. 1962. "Guangzhi Fast-Growing Forest Trees -Domestic Short Review." Beijing: People's Daily.

During the Great Leap Forward, the most remarkable achievement of the Chinese regarding environmental conservation was through the promotion of afforestation for the purpose of agriculture. However, the purpose of afforestation shifted in multiple ways following the GLF, as the efforts to restore forests failed due to the CCP's absence of expertise in agriculture. First, the tone of the articles discussing China's poor forest reserves was much more alarmed following the GLF and, therefore, there was more urgency to plant trees.^{16,17} The mission to 'Green the Motherland' became far more widespread as well. Both **Figures 4-2** and **4-3** both call for an upsurge in the planting of trees, though the background landscapes devoid of tree cover shows that there is still a long road ahead towards recovery.^{18,19} Moreover, as the purpose of reconstructing forests was no longer solely for filling barren mountains or increasing farming yields, there was comparatively more focus on the aesthetic appeal of forestry expansion and improving the scenery of China's landscape.²⁰

Consistent with the increased criticism in the rhetoric during the Cultural Revolution, articles in the *People's Daily* condemned slash and burn-style farming,²¹ and the lack of laws and regulations that protect forests.²² Slash and burn refers to the farming method of incinerating and cutting down trees to create arable land—a farming practice that is widely regarded as unethical. China wanted to break free from these farming procedures:

¹⁶ People's Database Information, 1962, *Guangzhi Fast-Growing Forest Trees*, 21.

¹⁷ Dong, Zhiyong. 1964. "Forestry Construction Is a Key Measure to Fundamentally Solve China's Agricultural Problems." Beijing: People's Daily.

¹⁸ Unknown, Designer. 1973. "Make the Motherland Green - It Is Everybody's Responsibility to Take Good Care of Trees!" Beijing: Beijing Municipal Parks Office. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e15-418>.

¹⁹ Wang, Tiecheng, and PRC Ministry of Forestry Propaganda Office. 1970. "Start a New Upsurge of the People's Duty of Tree Planting Movement." Beijing: China Environmental Science Press. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-197b-001>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

²¹ Xinhua News Agency. 1970. "From Slash and Burn to the Hometown of Tea and Rice: The Deeds of Yunnan Construction Brigade to Build Awa Mountain." Beijing: People's Daily.

²² Unknown, Author. 1963. "Protecting the Forest is Everyone's Responsibility." Beijing: People's Daily.

They are determined to change the habit of destroying forests and opening wastelands.²³

In this sense, Learn from Dazhai was the precursor to the emerging norms of environmental protection during the Cultural Revolution. In her criticism of Learn from Dazhai, Shapiro includes a quote from a professor at a Chinese agricultural university, who was sent to survey the land-use in Western Sichuan province during the 1970s.²⁴ Although the scientist's quote suggests that overreliance on growing wheat led to desertification, I found the fact that he was sent there in general to be highly significant. This professor was sent to Western Sichuan to learn the laws of nature and to study nature, to better understand how these problems arose. Therefore, the Chinese did exert some amount of effort to mitigate the land-use change, even if the outcome was limited.

The destruction of China's forests occurred through an unreasonable Chinese economic system. Dazhai sought to reform this economic system by emphasizing the importance of preserving the existing forests in addition to afforestation. Planting trees without protecting existing forest cover was considered a "wasted effort."²⁵ Fixing this backwardness extended beyond afforestation as well. One poster from 1972 captured a jovial coal miner with a cart filled with coal. It is captioned: "Struggle to Reverse the Situation Where Coal is Mined in the North and Transported to the South," (**Fig. 4-4**).²⁶ In this sense, the poster may be calling for coal expansion in the south to fix the transportation issue. However, the overall message that conveys distaste with the reliance on coal remains intact. Coal mining was critical to the

²³ Unknown, 1963, *Protecting the Forest is Everyone's Responsibility*, 22.

²⁴ Shapiro, 2001, *Mao's War Against Nature*, 113.

²⁵ Unknown, 1963, *Protecting the Forest is Everyone's Responsibility*, 22.

²⁶ Yi, Fasheng, and Chenlei Wu. 1972. "Struggle to Reverse the Situation That Coal Is Mined in the North and Transported to the South." Hubei: Hubei People's Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/e37-201>.

expansion of the Chinese economy, so such criticisms of coal mining in propaganda posters are exceedingly rare and noteworthy.

One of the most prominent advocates of environmental conservation in China during the Cultural Revolution was renowned ornithologist Zheng Zuoxin. In response to the direct attack on his discipline, Zheng vehemently opposed the Communist Party's Great Leap Forward pest campaign to eliminate all sparrows. Zheng was, of course, blacklisted as a reactionary by the CCP for his criticisms of China's Four Pest's Campaign.²⁷ Even so, the CCP continued to allow Zheng to publish his arguments in the *People's Daily*. Zheng's opinion pieces scrutinized the disregard of biodiversity by the CCP, a topic that was rarely discussed in other newspaper articles. Along with his policy criticisms, Zheng advocated new policy implementations of: tighter hunting restrictions, the establishment of new research departments to study ecology, and the construction of nature preserves.²⁸ Although the reason of the *People's Daily's* decision to publish articles written by a man who was labeled as a counter-revolutionary remains unknown, Zheng somehow managed to appeal to Maoism by arguing that protecting wild animals was a crucial step for understanding and eventually transforming nature. Additionally, Zheng argued that the CCP should use propaganda to promote values of biodiversity and natural resource conservation.²⁹ Most notably, his relentless efforts to persuade the CCP to pay better attention to the environmental consequences of their actions resulted in the removal of sparrows from the Four Pest's Campaign.³⁰ This provided further evidence that the CCP believed Zheng Zuoxin's

²⁷ Hao, Zhang. 2019. The Man Who Saved Sparrows From Catastrophe. *China Global Television Network*. <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514f34596a4e32457a6333566d54/index.html>

²⁸ Zheng, Zuoxin. 1962. "Reasonable Use and Protection of Wild Animal Resources." Beijing: People's Daily.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

³⁰ Ibid., 23.

arguments had merit and which resulted in environmental conservation becoming normative during the Cultural Revolution.

Artists Returning to Nature as a Vessel of Beauty

With this evolving aspiration for greater environmental protection in the Cultural Revolution, The CCP gave propaganda artists greater freedom in their artistic depictions of nature. The later Mao years represented a shift back to the former ways of treating nature as a vessel for beauty. This reactionary shift towards appreciating the aesthetic appeal of the natural world is the most dramatic shift in propaganda art in the Maoist Era. Nature was not only depicted with greater realism, but also with a far more positive connotation as well. In Stefan Landsberger's extensive poster archive, there are a few examples of propaganda art that emphasize the beauty of undisturbed mountain features. *Daybreak of Spring over the Kunlun Mountains* (**Fig. 4-5**), is one such poster with a tone that treats nature in a benign way.³¹ Printed in 1972, the intention of the artist Fang Jizhong was to bring out the beauty of the Kunlun Mountains in northern Xinjiang and the glistening snow on top of them. The print itself feels much more like aesthetic art rather than propaganda, as its aesthetic is not intervened by the political doctrines. Although it is difficult to determine how **Figure 4-5** became a propaganda print, it is remarkable that the CCP allowed it to be printed. In this sense, we can reflect that *Daybreak of Spring over the Kunlun Mountains* made strong implications to the developing norms of environmental conservation in the late Cultural Revolution.

³¹ Fang, Jizhong. 1972. "Daybreak of Spring over the Kunlun Mountains." People's Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/d25-1>.

Similar to the peaceful depiction of nature within *Daybreak of Spring over the Kunlun Mountains*, several propaganda prints that portray Mao's residence in Shaoshan also emphasize the beauty of nature. In these prints, Chairman Mao's abode was displayed as a modest and quaint residence surrounded by a lush and verdant forest. Uniquely, his house is not the defining feature of the scene. The forested landscape appears far larger in these prints and therefore emphasizes the natural and sacred beauty of Shaoshan. The prints convey a feeling of peace and innocuousness, and ultimately associate Chairman Mao with a legacy of peace. Such features imply the antithetical impulse to the dominant strategy of placing human features at the top of the hierarchy within propaganda. The Shaoshan prints and their relationship with the beauty of nature can be best exemplified by *The Pine Trees of Shaoshan* (**Fig. 4-6**).³² The tall and strong stature of the pine trees in this poster remind us of the transmission lines in the posters I discussed in Chapter 1. However, the pine trees have the central focal point in *The Pine Trees of Shaoshan*, as opposed to man-made features. In *The Pine Trees of Shaoshan*, Guan Shanyue emphasizes that both Mao's home and the surrounding environment are sacred. *The Pine Trees of Shaoshan* was printed in 1977, one year after Mao's death, making it the most recently published poster I have included in my analysis. Overall, the image represents a dramatic shift in China's attitude towards nature and is one of the strongest precursors to the environmental conservation efforts that contemporary China is implementing.

³² Guan, Shanyue. 1977. "The Pine Trees of Shaoshan." Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House. <https://chineseposters.net/posters/pc-1977-002>.

Chapter 4 Images



Figure 4-1: Yin, Rongsheng. 1960. “Greening the Motherland Is Good, Women Want to Win Glory for Afforestation.” Beijing: People’s Daily.



Figure 4-2: Designer, Unknown. 1973. “Make the Motherland Green - It Is Everybody’s Responsibility to Take Good Care of Trees!” Beijing: Beijing Municipal Parks Office. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e15-418>.



Figure 4-3: Wang, Tiecheng, and PRC Ministry of Forestry Propaganda Office. 1970. “Start a New Upsurge of the People’s Duty of Tree Planting Movement.” Beijing: China Environmental Science Press. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-197b-001>.



Figure 4-4: Yi, Fasheng, and Chenlei Wu. 1972. “Struggle to Reverse the Situation That Coal Is Mined in the North and Transported to the South.” Hubei: Hubei People’s Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/e37-201>.

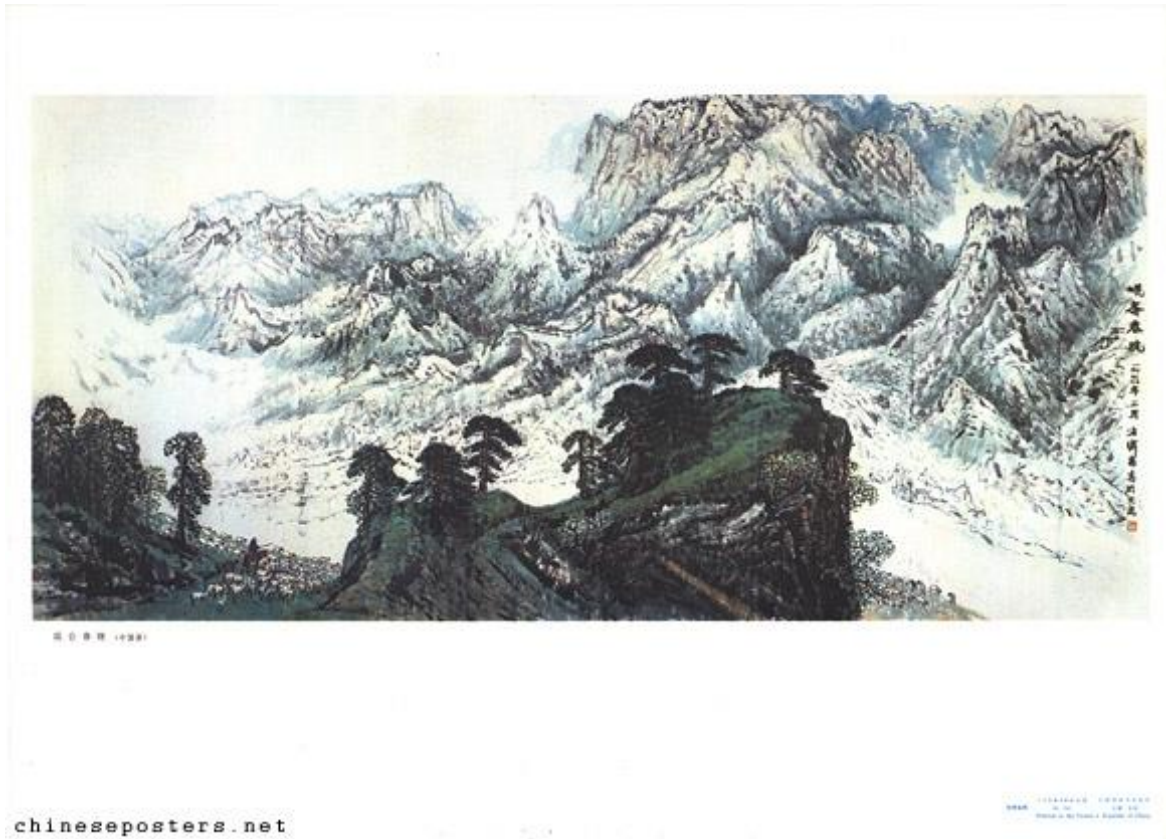


Figure 4-5: Fang, Jizhong. 1972. “Daybreak of Spring over the Kunlun Mountains.” People’s Fine Arts Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/d25-1>.

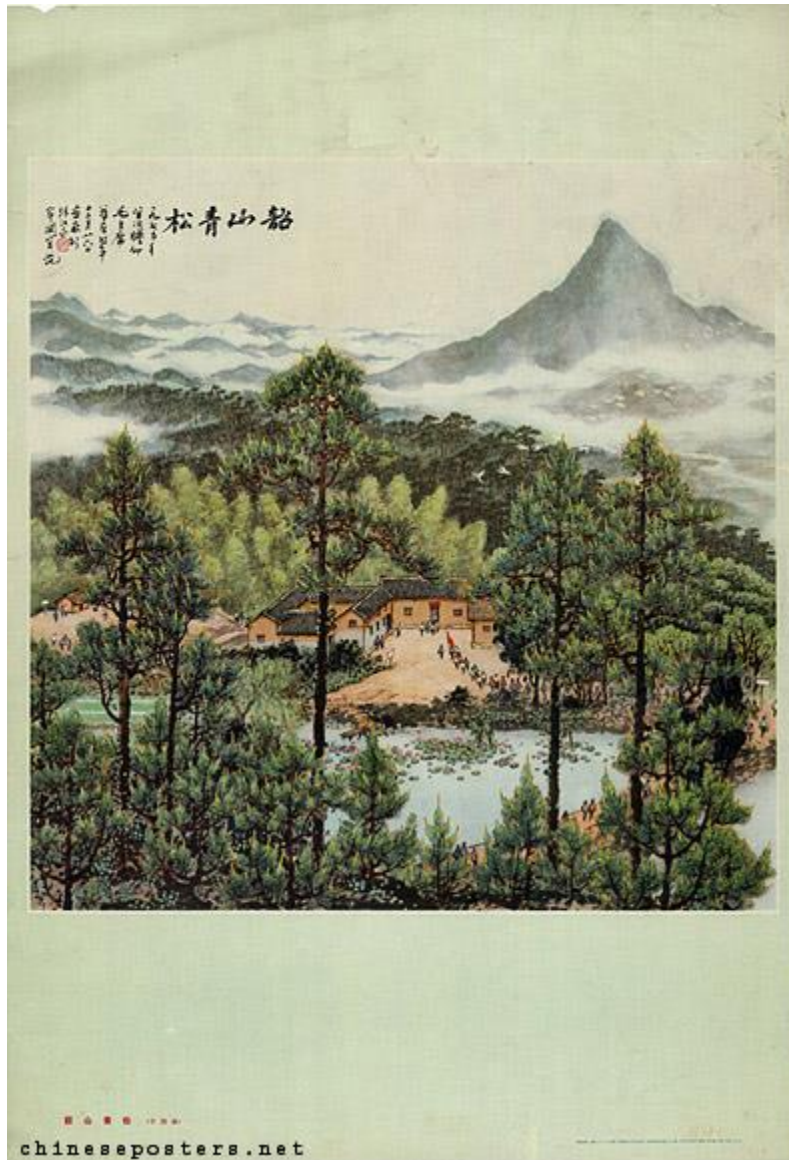


Figure 4-6: Guan, Shanyue. 1977. “The Pine Trees of Shaoshan.” Hunan: Hunan People’s Publishing House. <https://chinese posters.net/posters/pc-1977-002>.

Legacy & Conclusion

The Maoist Era was a long and strenuous slog to bring China out of the economic and political turmoil of the early 20th century, ultimately failing to accomplish both of those objectives. Following Chairman Mao's death in 1976, Deng Xiaoping took over a struggling nation and sought to clean up the challenging economic situation perpetuated by Chairman Mao. China pivoted to a top-down mercantilist economy centered around an emerging manufacturing sector fueled by China's rich coal reserves. Under the administration of the CCP, China saw immense economic growth in only a few decades. While the economic system itself shifted dramatically under Deng's government, the ideals of utopian urgency remained popular enough to perpetuate the immense environmental pitfalls, particularly regarding air quality. When I was young, I remember hearing about the dust and smog that covered the mainland every year. Pictures of Chinese citizens wearing facemasks surrounded by Beijing's dense smog could be found all over the mainstream media.

Historical analyses of Maoist Era environmental policy, such as the one I have provided, are important because the fundamental aspects of Mao's environmental policy are still heavily rampant in contemporary Chinese society. The methodology of utopian urgency that prioritized efficiency at any cost should be considered crucial for China to be the world's largest carbon dioxide emitter in the 21st century. Nevertheless, those emerging norms of environmental conservation that I discussed in Chapter 4 did persist into the modern era. In the past decade, China has reversed the expulsion of environmental remediation in the nationwide politics and attempted to respond to existing environmental damages. In 2014, the Chinese Communist

Party, under administration of the newly elected President Xi Jinping, declared war on pollution.¹ To the Chinese, it proclaimed a new era of sustainability and a service-based economy that oriented them to compete with global superpowers, such as the United States. While the war on pollution is still in its infancy, early analyses suggest that China is indeed winning the war, and is far ahead of schedule as well. For example, concentrations of air pollution have fallen dramatically since 2013, by as much as 36 percent in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region.² Much of the swift progress is attributed to rapidly shutting down the manufacturing plants that emit coal into the atmosphere through smokestacks. Similarly, manufacturing output has declined in that same region by as much as 9.6 percent since the declaration of war on pollution.³ In addition, China has also implemented sweeping reforms to phase out coal in favor of a somewhat cleaner resource—Natural Gas. But, most importantly, there has been more nationwide attention of the public towards air pollution since 2013, as the Chinese Communist Party started to valorize the environmental conservation practices.⁴

Also, the implementation of environmental policy by the CCP has changed substantially following Mao's death. Under Mao's administration, policy implementation rested primarily on the shoulders of the peasant class. Today, the CCP devises policy measures and thrusts them upon the local party cadres to enforce, while the average citizen possesses little to no involvement in the decision-making process. However, while China's environmental improvements in the last seven years are noticeable, there are several caveats with a top-down

¹ Greenstone, Michael, and Patrick Schwarz. 2018. "Is China Winning Its War on Pollution?" *Air Quality Life Index*. Chicago.

² Greenstone, Michael, and Schwarz, 2018, *Is China Winning*, 5.

³ Li, Xiao, Yuanbo Qiao, and Lei Shi. 2019. "Has China's War on Pollution Slowed the Growth of Its Manufacturing and by How Much? Evidence from the Clean Air Action." *China Economic Review* 53 (August 2018): 271–89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chieco.2018.08.015>.

⁴ Saikawa, Eri. 2019. "China's Continued War on Pollution." China Research Center. 2019. https://www.chinacenter.net/2019/china_currents/18-1/chinas-continued-war-on-air-pollution/.

environmental policy approach that are often underdiscussed. This top-down approach of swift, aggressive environmental policy was first discussed in detail by Bruce Gilley, who debunks China's policy by labeling it as "authoritarian environmentalism."⁵ China's system of authoritarian environmentalism produces policy outputs at an alarming rate, though Gilley argues that authoritarian environmentalism has had far less success in creating policy outcomes.⁶ Giving the local party officials sole decision-making power often limits these outcomes that Gilley mentions due to a multitude of reasons. First, the turnover of party cadres is very high as many party officials transfer to a new location frequently in less than five years.⁷ Strong policy outcomes require cooperation with local residents and perhaps, more importantly, ample time for implementation. Secondly, local party officials often prioritize economic development over environmental conservation because the economy is more determinant for their favorability ratings. Thirdly, while considering environmental problems on a local scale is indeed pivotal, many environmental catastrophes occur across municipal boundaries and mitigation, therefore, requires cooperation between different municipalities, something highly lacking currently.⁸ Finally, the large number of new environmental regulations in China is burdensome for the local officials and, in turn, so are preparing for government inspections. The problem is not that China does not have enough regulations; the problem is that China has far too many.⁹

⁵ Gilley, Bruce. 2012. "Authoritarian Environmentalism and China's Response to Climate Change." *Environmental Politics* 21 (2): 287–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2012.651904>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁷ Eaton, Sarah, and Genia Kostka. 2014. "Authoritarian Environmentalism Undermined? Local Leaders' Time Horizons and Environmental Policy Implementation in China." *China Quarterly* 218 (1): 359–80. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741014000356>.

⁸ Shen, Wei, and Dong Jiang. 2020. "Making Authoritarian Environmentalism Accountable? Understanding China's New Reforms on Environmental Governance." *Journal of Environment and Development*, October, 107049652096113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1070496520961136>.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

In light of this, there are many logistical flaws regarding China's authoritarian environmentalism. But the most critical flaw that fails the system is in the moral and ethical dimension. Without allowing for participation of the Chinese masses, environmental conservation becomes infinitely more challenging, especially given China's large population. Moreover, environmental justice issues are almost completely ignored. Environmental justice can be defined as the fair and ethical treatment of individuals under environmental policies, laws, or regulations regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. One example of environmental justice issues lies within the Chinese government's recent initiative of forcefully replacing old coal furnaces in residential homes with more eco-friendly natural gas furnaces. A recent study showed that the new furnaces are only viewed favorably by wealthier citizens who can afford it:

Our village is a middle-income community, with about 200 households. All the households have installed gas heating devices in 2017. But, due to high expenses, at most 20 to 30 households actually use gas for heating. The vast majority of the households only use it for cooking. Too expensive! It is an unrealistic project for rural regions.¹⁰

While the clean heating program has aided China in its war on pollution, it also exposes the glaring environmental justice issues in contemporary Chinese society. Citizens who expressed disapproval with the Coal-to-Gas (CTG) Project argued that their contribution to the smog by burning coal is negligible compared to that of large manufacturing plants in urban areas.¹¹ So far, China has shown that fundamental human rights and justices cannot be fully compatible with environmental conservation in order to win the war on pollution. Moreover, consistent with

¹⁰ Hu, Zhanping. 2020. "When Energy Justice Encounters Authoritarian Environmentalism: The Case of Clean Heating Energy Transitions in Rural China." *Energy Research and Social Science* 70 (August): 101771. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2020.101771>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Gilley's arguments, this case study reflects a policy output rather than a policy outcome. In the present, the CCP still frequently does not invest enough time into considering the consequences of their environmental policies. Instead, they revert to utopian urgency and authoritarian environmentalism.

One might argue that the influence of Mao's environmental policy on the present is negligible because current environmental policy is administered by officials rather than peasants. The problem with this view is that it does not consider how inherently party-centric and top-down Chairman Mao's environmental policy was, despite the illusion that it was participatory. Mao sought to mold the perfect peasant in the image of a Chinese Communist Party soldier all without any conflicting opinions. Every citizen possessed the same exact environmental policy. Those who did not share that same policy were relentlessly ostracized by the CCP. The common Chinese citizen today has only slightly more decision-making power than they did in the Maoist Era. In a way, the cadres are similar to the masses in the Maoist Era as they are forced to either perform seemingly insurmountable tasks to satisfy the CCP or face political consequences. Furthermore, although the propaganda today is arguably not as relentless as the Cultural Revolution, the propaganda mission remains strong in Chinese culture. Murals with the phrases "Tackle air pollution; Build green home together," and "Small family, big nation, clean heating," can be found in rural villages that have recently replaced coal heaters with new natural gas heaters.¹² Rather than accepting a diverse array of perspectives, the CCP continues to show the negative results of standing against the idea of molding everyone to its own agenda. In addition,

¹² Hu, 2020, *When Energy Justice Encounters Authoritarian Environmentalism*, 12.

these slogans, along with the war on pollution, show that China still frequently treats environmental problems as a conflict between man and nature, as described in Chapter 2.

Unless the CCP allows greater representation of its citizens and NGOs, it will not achieve the long-term environmental progress the country so desperately needs. China has made remarkable progress in the short-term, though shutting down industrial facilities will not be sufficient for long-term progress. The CCP can shut down factories to curb emissions, but would they be able to foster the necessary technological innovation and public participation that are vital to achieve sustainable development? Early evidence suggests that there is light at the end of the tunnel for China. China is slowly becoming a world leader in solar energy generation, investment, and technology. In 2017, China finished constructing the world's largest floating solar farm, on top of flooded land that was once occupied by a coal mine.¹³ The solar farm has even had a positive impact beyond China's borders as it has incentivized South Korea to begin constructing an even larger farm.¹⁴ In addition, China has also been cultivating large quantities of *Gracilaria* seaweed to combat eutrophication in streams and to serve as a carbon sink.¹⁵ Despite such achievements, the road towards sufficient innovation is long. The desire to take control over land remains intact as fertilizer use in Chinese agriculture is still extremely excessive.¹⁶

Regarding representation in environmental policy-making, the Non-Governmental Organizations with environmental conservation ideals are beginning to gain influence.

¹³ Pourn, Hamid M. 2018. "From Collapsed Coal Mines to Floating Solar Farms, Why China's New Power Stations Matter." *Energy Policy* 123 (July): 414–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.enpol.2018.09.010>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 418.

¹⁵ Yang, Yufeng, Zhaoyang Chai, Qing Wang, Weizhou Chen, Zhili He, and Shijun Jiang. 2015. "Cultivation of Seaweed *Gracilaria* in Chinese Coastal Waters and Its Contribution to Environmental Improvements." *Algal Research* 9 (December 2017): 236–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.algal.2015.03.017>.

¹⁶ Saikawa, 2019, *China's Continued War*, 6/9.

Although one might argue that their influence has been negligible, it is important to consider that the majority of China's environmental NGOs were founded in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the CCP tightly restricted their policy-influencing power up until only a few years ago. In a case study published in 2020, Gao and Teets found that Green Zhejiang, a grass-roots environmental advocacy NGO, successfully aided the provincial government of Zhejiang in implementing water pollution regulations while simultaneously mobilizing citizens to become savvier about reporting water pollution issues.¹⁷ The transformative impact of Green Zhejiang signifies a step in the right direction for China. It will be enthralling to see if environmental NGOs are able to continue to emerge in China and if these organizations are able to expand their role as stakeholders.

For future research, I would like the scholarly community to develop a deeper understanding of why China drastically shifted its environmental policy in the last decade. A few questions that could be investigated are as follows: What motivates the Chinese Communist Party's environmental policy initiatives in the present? What will likely motivate them in the future? As the *People's Daily* and propaganda images remain state-controlled in contemporary China, the Chinese people continue to be influenced by rhetorical and visual cues to transform nature. Interdisciplinary scholars could potentially make comparisons with the historical analysis that I have provided and investigate modern-day environmental policy messages in the *People's Daily*. Also, further exploring the murals that Hu Zhanping describes in his case study

¹⁷ Gao, Xiang, and Jessica Teets. 2020. "Civil Society Organizations in China: Navigating the Local Government for More Inclusive Environmental Governance." *China Information*, March, 0920203X2090811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X20908118>.

would shed light on the present-day communication of environmental policy, especially in rural areas where much of the population remains uneducated.¹⁸

These research questions need greater attention because global environmental problems are becoming more prevalent and impactful. As China continues to remain one of the world's largest polluters, domestic environmental improvements can also have a global impact.

Some loose ends remain after this project. At the moment, I am still unsure if the present-day Chinese Communist Party purely cares about the environment, or if their actions are solely attributed to expanding regime legitimacy. Declaring war on pollution could have simply been a public health initiative or a political initiative to maintain support of China's citizens. Despite the evidence I have provided, shedding light on this complex question requires even more critical attention. My indications point to the conclusion that, under Mao, the CCP enforced an environmental policy that pitted man against nature in hopes of developing China's economy as efficiently as humanly feasible. However, in contrast to the evidence that Shapiro provides, I argue that Mao's environmental policy was not a monolith. The attitude towards nature did become more positive following the Great Leap Forward. Even if it was not fully successful, Learn from Dazhai was an intellectual movement that sought to better understand nature and reform the economic policies to become less anthropocentric. Moreover, propaganda posters in the 1970s showed at least some appreciation for lush natural landscapes and the aesthetic appeals of nature. It is entirely possible that striving to understand the laws of nature paved way for China's attention towards environmental conservation in the present.

¹⁸ Hu, 2020, *When Energy Justice Encounters Authoritarian Environmentalism*, 12.

At the time of writing this final paragraph, much of China's Maoist-Era primary sources still remain undiscovered or inaccessible for analysis. Reflecting back to my Introduction, there are still numerous *People's Daily* newspaper articles that I have not yet been able to research. I hope that, in the future, these remaining documents may be revealed and investigated so that the body of interdisciplinary literature can continue to expand. In our understanding of history, politics, and sustainability, there is simply nowhere to go but up.

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