
Comparing the Political Propaganda between the Cultural Revolution and the Kim Il-sung Era after 1967: A Critical Analysis of the Characteristics of these Two Periods

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This essay compares the political propaganda of the Cultural Revolution in China and the Kim Il-sung era after 1967, the third ruling period. The analysis highlights the similarities and differences between these two periods in terms of their attempts to establish a unique style of political propaganda. While both countries had to deal with the legacy of the Soviet Union, they could not abandon the Soviet legacy completely, and the legacy even influenced them to a certain degree. Besides, the Cultural Revolution was characterized by inconsistency due to frequent changes in political power, while North Korea's propaganda remained consistent under the absolute rule of Kim Il-sung. The comparison sheds light on how political propaganda can reflect the political environment and the leadership style of a country.

Introduction

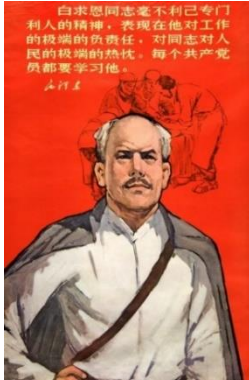
The Chinese Cultural Revolution was a movement from 1966 to 1976 launched by Mao Zedong. The main objective of this movement was to consolidate the power of Mao Zedong and tried to achieve other goals like restoring the vigorous spirit of the Chinese communist revolution.¹ Besides, North Korea, as a traditional ally with the CCP, also

¹ Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong. "Propaganda Posters from the Chinese Cultural Revolution." *The Historian*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (1997): 777.

had a significant change since 1967, namely the third period of the Kim Il-sung era. Kim Il-sung could finally be independent in his decision making, and thus soon revived his personality cult and even extended it to another level.² The personality cult of Kim Il-sung in that period was intertwined with the Cultural Revolution. Extensive research has contributed to the Cultural Revolution,³ and North Korea as well.⁴ However, seldom contribution has been conducted to the comparison of these two periods. There must be something mysterious that is worth investigating as political propaganda was pervasive in both periods. Therefore, it is interesting to find out the similar and different characteristics of the political propaganda between the Cultural Revolution and the third period. The essay includes two parts. It will first compare the similarity of these two periods, then move to examine their distinction and third with a conclusion of this essay.

Following the path of the Soviet Union: Similarities between the Two

The legacy of the Soviet Union was pervasive in the political propaganda in both China



Poster 1: "Bai is willing to help others without asking for return, he should be the role model of all communists."

during the Cultural Revolution and North Korea at that period. For China, one of the purposes of Mao Zedong to launch the Cultural Revolution was the collapse of the Sino-Soviet relation since the 1960s due to the Soviet leaders hold suspicious about the Chinese development path. They thought the CCP had made many wrong decisions, like initiating the Great Leap Forward.⁵ China and the Soviet Union, thus, went on a different communist path. In light of that, Mao Zedong had to seize the leadership of world communism by using the Cultural Revolution to exhibit that he was a more capable leader than the Soviet Union. So, it was not suitable for the Soviet element to exist so much during the Cultural Revolution

² Fyodor Tertitskiy. "The Ascension of an Ordinary Man: How the Personality Cult of Kim Il-Sung Was Constructed (1945-1974)." *Acta Koreana*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015): 2.

³ Richard Curt Kraus. "The Cultural Revolution: A Very Short Introduction". *New York: Oxford University Press*, 2012, 19.

⁴ Alexander Dukalskis and Zachary Hooker, "Legitimizing Totalitarianism: Melodrama and Mass Politics in North Korean Film." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2011): 53.

⁵ Richard Curt Kraus, "The Cultural Revolution", 24.

as China intended to open a new communist path. Any Soviet element would become sensitive because it hindered the development of Mao Zedong thought. Therefore, political poster, which was the main dominator of promoting Mao's aims, should not include the Soviet element.⁶ However, it is contradictory that the political posters still remained many Soviet legacies. The poster, for example, on the left side is a political poster about Norman Bethune. The texts on the top tell that all the communist comrades should learn his spirit of unselfishness. This poster is full of Stakhanovism that the Soviet Union used this ideology to raise production before. It uses a "model labour", Norman Bethune, for enhancing the morality and loyalty of the communist members and even the ordinary Chinese to Mao Zedong. Although it was the only example of this essay, people, who are proficient in the posters of political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, observe easily that such political posters at that time were not traditional Chinese art. They mingled with the Chinese and the Soviet style of painting.⁷

In North Korea, with the detachment from the Soviet Union and the purge from the 1950s until the Gapsan Incident in 1967, Kim Il-sung truly established his own version of the personality cult.⁸ Even though Kim Il-sung could design his propaganda independently, the Soviet mechanism of propaganda influenced to a certain degree as before. The poster of on the right side is a North Korean poster called "Provide a strong line of defence for the Republic's honour and sovereignty". There is a soldier standing at the top. A large crowd of people from different occupations stay behind the soldier. It means all the North Korean people should



Poster 2: "Provide a strong line of defence for the Republic's honour and sovereignty"

⁶ Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, "Propaganda Posters from the Cultural Revolution", 777.

⁷ Ibid., 789.

⁸ Fyodor Tertitskiy. "The Ascension of an Ordinary Man," 209-210, 225.

protect their fatherland if necessary. Yet, the Soviet style of designing propaganda appears in this poster that the poster includes heroic realism. Heroic realism is a common characteristic in Soviet propaganda. The Soviet Union always used this art for portraying the ideal New Soviet Man. The above poster also applies the same strategy that it tells what a new or real North Korean should be. Other forms of Soviet manifestation were also pervasive in the third period of the Kim Il-sung era, like displaying the portraits of Kim Il-sung, building the leader's statues and quoting his works.⁹ The Soviet Union left a lot to China and North Korea in the above-mentioned periods. Even though they wanted to get rid of the influence of the Soviet Union, it was irrational as the Soviet mechanism had entrenched in these countries. Both China and North Korea adopted the Soviet style of propaganda intentionally or accidentally.

With the detachment from the Soviet Union, both China and North Korea had to start political propaganda with their own characteristics. Yet, their designs still have Soviet



Poster 3: "Chairman Mao is the red sun in the hearts of people of the world."

mechanism in terms of propaganda. This political propaganda started to have a process of de-Soviet Unionization. It is not only about de-Stalinization because China and North Korea planned to extricate the influence of the Soviet Union at that time, as they hoped to act independently, but not focus on a particular period. Therefore, de-Soviet Unionization is a more suitable term to describe this phenomenon. In China, during the Cultural Revolution, the Soviet Union was less to be mentioned, at least in terms of the positive image. Mao Zedong became the only man who owned the permanent positive image at the end of this movement.¹⁰ For example, the poster on the top of the left side is from the Cultural Revolution. The title is "Chairman Mao is the red sun in the hearts of people of the world". Mao is the sun of this poster, and there are

⁹ Ibid, 226.

¹⁰ Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, 790-791.

people from different nations that march arm in arm holding copies of the Little Red Book. No Soviet element could be found on the surface of this poster. However, the



Poster 4: Sino-Soviet Friendship

poster below to the previous one was published before the Cultural Revolution. Soviet elements are clearly visible in all perspectives. Not only there are the flags of the Soviet Union and China at the front, but there is also a western style building with a communist symbol in the background.¹¹ Apparently, the pattern of the political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution shifted to de-Soviet Unionization from stressing the Sino-Soviet friendship. The similar phenomenon also appears in songs and dramas. The whole political propaganda focused on promoting Mao's goals and class struggle.¹²

In addition, North Korea also have a homogeneous characteristic that Kim Il-sung further downplayed the Soviet Union in North Korea since 1967. The process of de-Soviet Unionization began earlier than in China. In the mid-1950s, Kim Il-sung had already exaggerated the contribution of the KPRA in confrontation with Imperial Japan during World War II like presenting the KPRA as the assistant of the Soviet Army.¹³ The KPRA was radically deified after 1967. Kim Il-sung described the KPRA as the main force, who had defeated the Imperial Japan.¹⁴ Hence, the Soviet Union was only mentioned very briefly in the North Korean history.¹⁵ The de-Soviet Unionization also reflected on different dimensions from visually, like posters, dramas, and other printings, to physically. The most significant physical embodiment should be the requirement of wearing badges with the portrait of Kim Il-sung or printing his name with a special type.¹⁶ The function of wearing a badge was to stress that who was the

¹¹ Ibid, 783.

¹² Ibid, 777.

¹³ Fyodor Tertitskiy. "A Blatant Lie: The North Korean Myth of Kim Il-Sung Liberating the Country from Japan." *Korea Observer*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2018): 233.

¹⁴ Ibid, 234.

¹⁵ Ibid, 233.

¹⁶ Fyodor Tertitskiy. "The Ascension of an Ordinary Man," 226.

leader of North Korea. Obviously, it was to centralize the position of Kim's regime and put the Soviet Union be peripheral. According to the doctrine of Marx, individuals could be negligible in history development.¹⁷ But North Korea asserted a different way from the Soviet Union in developing history that individuals, Kim Il-sung and the Kim's family, became the history drivers.

Although de-Soviet Unionization was a pivotal mission for China, during the Cultural Revolution, and the Kim il-sung era after 1967, they could not abandon the Soviet culture completely, at least some of the Soviet legacy disappeared from the surface of the political propaganda. There are two similarities between these two periods that they were influenced by the Soviet legacy, and they also tried to get rid of it. That is contradictory to some extent.

De-Soviet Unionization: Attempts to Alienate from the Soviet

While the Cultural Revolution and the third ruling period of Kim Il-sung shared some characteristics, it is less likely to happen that the essences of their political propaganda were literally homogeneous. Little consistency could be found in the political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, whereas, North Korea showed continuity in political propaganda. Due to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution, the change of political power frequently occurred. One of the prominent examples is Lin Biao. The



Poster 5: "Long live the proletarian headquarters led by Chairman Mao and assisted by Vice-Chairman Lin"

poster on the left side was launched in 1969. The title is "Long live the proletarian headquarters led by Chairman Mao and assisted by vice-Chairman Lin". Lin Biao was close with Mao Zedong at that time and was even considered as the successor of Mao Zedong.¹⁸ However, following his death because of the failure of the coup and the rise of Gang of Four,¹⁹ The criticism of Lin Biao along with Confucianism appeared

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Richard Curt Kraus, 27-29.

¹⁹ Ibid, 95.

soon. The poster on the right side, “Wage the struggle of criticizing Lin and Confucius to the end”, reflected this fact. The image of Lin Biao was different from before. Not only did Lin Biao get involved with the inconsistency of this political propaganda, but other CCP leaders also had a similar experience, like Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping.²⁰ The inconsistency of political



Poster 6: “Wage the struggle of criticizing Lin and Confucius to the end.”

propaganda was a problem during the Cultural Revolution. The orientation could be changed along with the change of political power.

By contrast, the North Korean propaganda was much stable than the Cultural Revolution. The power of Kim Il-sung had strengthened through the purge of the Yan'an faction in 1956 and the purge of the Gapsan Faction in 1967.²¹ From this time onwards, Kim Il-sung became the absolute power holder in North Korea.²² He was the chief commander in developing political propaganda, like the cult-oriented propaganda, from 1967 until his death.²³ Without any challengeable opposite, the personality cult of Kim Il-sung and even his family highly developed. It had a sudden and remarkable leap after 1967 about using the word “Leader” to describe Kim Il-sung.²⁴ There were increasing personality cults of Kim Il-sung and his family that appeared since 1967. The political propaganda depended heavily on the thinking of Kim Il-sung. Given that he just wanted to legitimize his rule,²⁵ the political propaganda would only surround how to gain the maximized legitimacy. The propaganda thus became consistent as Kim Il-sung put other agendas behind this purpose. Kim Il-sung was the only leader that held actual political power in North Korea, but the political struggle was pervasive in China during the Cultural Revolution. Political propaganda is hard to be consistent under

²⁰ Ibid, 96.

²¹ Fyodor Tertitskiy. “The Ascension of an Ordinary Man,” 219-221.

²² Ibid, 219.

²³ Jae-chon Lim. *Leader Symbols and personality Cult in North Korea: The Leader State*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2015, 10.

²⁴ Fyodor Tertitskiy. “The Ascension of an Ordinary Man,” 222-223.

²⁵ Alexander Dukalskis and Zachary Hooker, 53.

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upheaval. It can be speculated that the political propaganda of North Korea at that time must be much more consistent than the propaganda in the Cultural Revolution.

Conclusion

De-Soviet Unionization was the common goal for China's political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution and the propaganda under the rule of Kim Il-sung after 1967. Unfortunately, they were hard to reach that, and the Soviet legacy still remained influential in their propaganda. Even though there were some similarities, a significant distinction existed. Consistency was their disparity in making propaganda. The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, but the propaganda system of North Korea still remains the mechanism, which was laid down by Kim Il-sung. The comparison even reflects that how political propaganda can reflect the political environment and the leadership style of a country as the analysis highlights how the consistency or inconsistency of propaganda can reflect the stability or instability of political power, and how the overall message of propaganda can reflect the ideological priorities of the ruling leadership.

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