

The art of medicine

Maoist public-health campaigns, Chinese medicine, and SARS

Public-health posters are a window into the history of medicine and the politics of public health. Developed out of mid-19th-century mass media campaigns to sell products, announce performances, and propagandise in western and central Europe, they were intended to promote healthy behaviours among individuals and so strengthen the body politic. By the early 20th century, this visual culture spread to mainland China through new forms of advertisements, political propaganda, and public-health posters. Propaganda posters reached their heyday during the Great Leap Forward (1958–60) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Public-health posters were an integral part of the mass political and public-health campaigns of those movements to enforce conformity, test loyalty, and designate enemies. Although the political Maoist propaganda posters have subsided since the 1980s with the new economic reforms of the Deng era, public-health posters continue to have a role in modern China. During national crises, such as the 2003 epidemic of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the propaganda and public-health posters of the past merged with renewed political campaigns calling for national unity in the present.

On Labour Day May 1, 2003, *The Beijing Times* published a poster titled *Declare War on SARS!* (figure 1). The five-character phrase grammatically recalls the five-character slogan of the Communist Revolution “Serve the People!”. A young man dressed in proletarian blue raises his right fist and breaks through the top border calling the masses to unite behind the government to conquer SARS. His posture mirrors that of a young barefoot doctor in a 1970 public-health poster for the prevention of respiratory tract infections (figure 2). The red cross has moved from the barefoot doctor’s first-aid satchel to a surgical cap replacing the old red star on Maoist military caps. A white face mask, which became the international symbol of the SARS epidemic, now covers his mouth.

“It is most important for people to wear face masks everywhere and clothe [themselves] completely with disinfected [clothing]”, states the poster. Further recommendations to open windows to circulate air, report illness to the local public-health office, isolate the sick, and seek early treatment found in the 2003 SARS poster could have been plucked from the earlier 1970 respiratory illnesses poster. One of the only elements of the Maoist poster missing from the 2003 one is the list of Chinese herbal formulas to prevent the spread of respiratory tract infections; comparable formulas were nonetheless provided in many other mainland Chinese media during the SARS crisis. Even the grammatical structure of the 14-character lines of verse suggests inspiration not only from *lushi* “regulated verse” of classical poetry, but also from Chairman Mao’s famous poem *Farewell to the God of Plague*. Written in 1958 in response to a *People’s*

Daily article on the alleged eradication of schistosomiasis, Mao’s poem was reprinted a decade later on a public-health poster titled *We Must Eradicate Schistosomiasis*, which had a political subtext to discredit Mao’s rival Liu Shaoqi. Other visual clues in the SARS poster suggest this earlier conflation of pest eradication campaigns with political purges.

The revolutionary red background, proletarian doctor, five-character slogan, and 12 lines of paired seven-character phrases visually and literally link the *Declare War on SARS!* poster to Maoist public-health campaigns. Yet the four black-ink images of the fountain pen, shovel, sickle, and rifle behind the verses on the SARS poster are what clinch the Maoist political undertones of this new campaign. In the Maoist era, the pen was mightier than the sword: words inspired, reformed, and purged. The pen, shovel, sickle, and rifle depicted in the 2003 SARS poster were borrowed from a 1967–68 political cartoon in which these four “tool-weapons” attack a prostrate Liu Shaoqi (figure 3). There was a symbolism behind these images: the pen signified students, the shovel represented workers, the sickle stood for peasants, and the World War II Garand for soldiers.

This same image of tool-weapons appears in the *We Must Eradicate Schistosomiasis* poster, in which a local cadre who has allegedly followed the capitalist path of Mao’s rival Liu stands hunched over in shame before a peasant tribunal. Liu is also shown being violently stabbed by a fountain pen in a poster behind the cadre. Although the shovel usually threw out rats of plague and snails of schistosomiasis, in the next panel of *We Must Eradicate Schistosomiasis* a



Figure 1: *Declare War on SARS!* (2003)



Figure 2: Detail from *Take Action to Prevent Respiratory Diseases* (1970)

peasant shovels out caricatures of Liu and his associate as the “Gods of Plague”, as lethal to the national polity as snails were to rural society. In the Korean War, posters for the 1952 First Patriotic Hygiene Campaign depicted similar shovelling out of “germ-like” American soldiers and Uncle Sam. During Mao’s 1967–68 campaigns against Liu and Deng Xiaoping, posters show a fist and a Maoist-text-wielding stake attacking the two men. Although from 1959 to 1968, Liu was officially the State Chairman of the

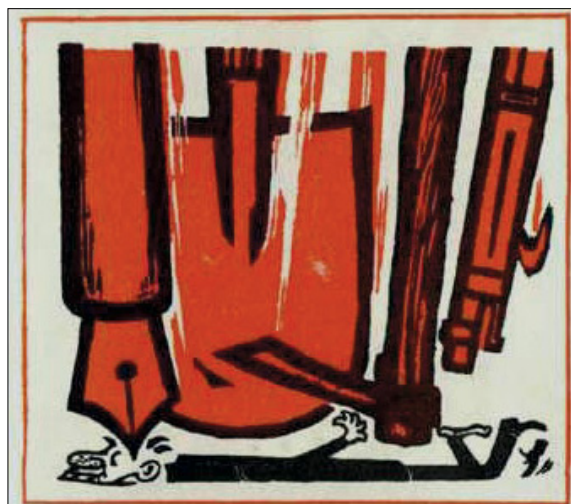


Figure 3: Liu Shaoqi attacked by tool-weapons (1970)

People’s Republic of China, Mao successfully orchestrated his persecution and downfall; Liu died in 1969.

On April 20, 2003, just 10 days before the 2003 SARS poster was published, Premier Wen Jiabao fired the Health Minister Zhang Wenkang and Beijing Mayor Meng Xuenong for having hidden the severity of the SARS epidemic in Beijing. I doubt whether the artist intended to link their firing with the earlier scapegoating of the former Chairman Liu, but perhaps the SARS poster alludes to Liu’s support for greater centralisation of public health over decentralisation and self-reliance? *Declare War on SARS!* also borrows a Maoist strategy to create greater national unity through presenting a common enemy. By changing Liu’s prostrate body to floating coronaviruses, the artist significantly replaced a former political “enemy of the people” with a new biological threat to society. The half-toned, magnified, coronaviruses stand out in the poster as visually anachronistic to the other elements that recall Maoist public-health campaigns. Perhaps by visualising the invisible, the coronavirus image psychologically lessened the fear its initial mysteriousness engendered. But in verse, “Trust the government, trust the party; the SARS virus will ultimately be eliminated”, one can hear echoes of earlier campaigns.

Visual and textual elements from Maoist-era public-health posters were not the only aspects from the past integrated into the government’s campaign against SARS. The past 50 plus years of top-down central government support for Chinese medicine as an integral part of the Chinese health-care system is as unique to mainland China as its role was multifaceted during the SARS epidemic. The government recommended SARS prevention formulas in newspapers, encouraged doctors trained in Chinese medicine to join their biomedical colleagues, and praised the integrated Chinese-biomedical treatment of SARS patients in the Guangdong Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine where the epidemic first broke out. Yet the unknown story of the SARS epidemic outside mainland China is the part Chinese medicine played: psychologically, for those in the public who purchased Chinese medicine as SARS preventatives; politically, for those in and outside the government who promoted Chinese medicine in the fight against SARS; and clinically, in the hospitals where physicians treated over 50% of SARS patients with integrated medicine. During the past 30 years, Maoist public-health policies have declined in China. Nonetheless, this legacy is still seen in Chinese medicine’s integrated place within China’s health system, which the response to SARS brought to the surface—just as the *Declare War on SARS!* poster brought other Maoist-era images back into public view.

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Further reading

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- Taschen. Chinese propaganda posters: from the collection of Michael Wolf, with essays by Anchee Min, Duo Duo and Stefan R Landsberger. Cologne: Taschen, 2003.

Online images

- US National Library of Medicine. Chinese public health posters. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/chinese/posters/index.html>
- Morning sun. <http://www.morningsun.org>
- Picturing power in the People’s Republic of China. <http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/poster/exhibintro.html>
- China posters online. Westminster University, Centre for the Study of Democracy http://home.wmin.ac.uk/china_posters/health.htm
- An iconography of contagion: an exhibition of 20th-century health posters from the collection of the National Library of Medicine. Washington, DC, USA. <http://www7.nationalacademies.org/arts/044621.pdf>

Courtesy of the US National Library of Medicine

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