

Email Exchange with Stone Huang, August 6, 2007

GL. *Some of the billboards show high quality painting skills other not? Does that mean that painters were given the job with different types of background training? For instance in "traffic" <http://www.mat.ucsb.edu/~g.legrady/rsc/China1985/pages/traffic.html> The top left picture is very well painted, and the bottom right seems naive...*

SH. Yes, painters were given the job just because some officer thought he/she could do this kind of job. They usually had different training backgrounds. Few of them were graduate from fine art schools, but others not. Normally, there would be a position of fine art in Propaganda Departments of big institutes. In this case, the painter is more professional. (This doesn't mean the painter had a background of academic art education. Some of the painters were just good at painting without school training. They could learn painting by themselves.)

GL. *In "Hands" <http://www.mat.ucsb.edu/~g.legrady/rsc/China1985/pages/hands.html> The bottom left picture is done in a fine art (Western Impressionist, or Chinese poetic) style. The image therefore communicates a poetic style whereas the message is educational. Was the painter maybe a fine artist, or a naive artist - Why do you think it was not done in the more industrial/commercial style like the others?*

SH. About this picture, the main idea is on population control and family planning. Its target was parents but not schools. I think the painter used a poetic style to tell the potential audience that family planning is good for the family, and it made parents realize that they could have their only child get a better education. The image, "Procreate less and educate better" emphasized the relationship between family planning and education. So the poetic style helped parents believe that family planning was valuable for their family happiness.

GL. *In "Show" <http://www.mat.ucsb.edu/~g.legrady/rsc/China1985/pages/show.html> the bottom right picture looks like a military picture but you translate it as "Science propaganda". Is it not military propaganda?*

SH. No, it is not military propaganda. In the 1980s, China Science propaganda images normally used that kind of style to illustrate Science and technology. At that time, China artists regarded such things as satellites, telescopes, nuclear bombs, planes, atoms as symbols of advanced science technology. They occasionally used portraits of scientists like Einstein and Curie, but these were not very popular.

GL. *What are the 4 modernizations?*

SH. The 4 modernizations refer to modernization of agriculture, modernization of industry, modernization of science and technology, modernization of national defense. The 4 modernizations were the goals of Deng Xiaoping's reforms in the 1980s. They were first introduced by Zhou En lai in 1975. I remember when I was in primary school, history and politics examinations always tested this content.

GL. What is the Arabic, or Hindu looking, non-Chinese writing in the second images of "<http://www.mat.ucsb.edu/~g.legrady/rsc/China1985/pages/facing.html> Why is there "Hindu", or Arabic language on a Chinese poster?"

SH. The writing is in Uighur, a language used in Xinjiang Uighur region of China, which is very similar looking to Arabic. This is a Uighur film called "The Melody Of My Hometown" shot in Xinjiang region of China, 1984. The Small Chinese writing is as follows:

Written by: Liu Cheng, Xia Lan, Directed by: Ma Jingwu, Photographed by: Liu Yongsu, Artist: Kang Lin, Music by: Zhou Ji, Aibaidula, Main actor/ actress: Erding Paha, Zhaer Guli.

GL. You mentioned that some of the posters had special characters. What were they?

SH. The special characters used in the 1980's were a failed attempt to simplify Chinese characters by the government. When communism won the China civil war in the 1950's, the government reformed the whole country to fit their ideal. Some researchers thought that traditional Chinese characters were too complex to learn and write for the general masses. So the first simplification steps took place in 1956. These are the characters we use now in China. This reformation made Chinese characters easier to write.

About ten years later, on Dec 1977, the government issued the draft of "The second round of simplified Chinese characters". But this plan proved unsuccessful as some characters were too ugly and unreasonable to use. On June 1986, the government finally canceled this proposal. Thus there were some characters that were only used for a few years in China between the late 1970's to early 1980's.

To explain the characters on the billboards more clearly, I marked them out here. Please find them on the attached image.



GL. *Was billboard painting work difficult for the painter?*

SH. It normally took my father about 2 to 3 days to finish one painting, about 2-meter height and 3 meter width. He was skilled and fast. It is said by my father that other painters may take more days to finish one. The painter's job was paid at an average salary.

GL. *What was the technique?*

SH. Normally, painters mount white paper on wood board, sometime use fabric as canvas. Gouache is the most popular material for film posters and propaganda pictures. If the painting will be featured outdoors for a very long time, painters will coat a layer of varnish on it. In some case for outdoor posters, they used color lacquer to prevent sunshine and rain damage. The techniques came mostly from Soviet Russia.

GL. *How were the images planned? By committee? Who designed the images? The painter, or a designer?*

SH. Different images were planned by different institutes. For example, film posters were planned by the cinemas. Traffic propaganda pictures were planned by the traffic office. General propaganda pictures were planned by the government. The head of the propaganda department in such institutes planned the text and the painter designed the image. The painter was also the designer in most cases.

GL. *Does your father have any other comments to share with us about the experience of being a painter for such billboards?*

SH. My father was a professional painter of billboards of film posters. He said it was a very good job at that time. He was delighted to have people see his work on the street. In the 1980's, just after the 'Gang of Four' was beaten down, China was becoming more open and free. At that time, Chinese people's only entertainment was watching movies. A film ticket was cherishable. Because he worked in cinema and my family watched movies free.

GL. *Did he do other kinds of painting?*

SH. Yes, he is an artist of Chinese handwriting and Chinese ink painting. These kinds of Chinese art went through a rebirth in the 1970's. He also occasionally did oil paintings. His first name is LongCheng and family name is Huang. He was born in the countryside of Dingbian county, Shaanxi province. Dingbian is a very small town in northwest China. My father didn't get any academic/commercial/fine art education. My grandfather liked painting, and he learned a lot from my grandfather when he was young. In high school, he showed great talent of fine art. That time, he witnessed the "culture revolution" and painted some

caricatures and propaganda pictures. That was the beginning.

A portrait of LongCheng Huang in the 1980's:

