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"PESSIMISM IS WRONG": A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF STATE-SPONSORED VISUAL AND VERBAL CULTURE DURING CHINA'S GREAT LEAP FORWARD

An honors paper submitted to the Department of History and American Studies of the University of Mary Washington in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

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“PESSIMISM IS WRONG”:
A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF STATE-SPONSORED VISUAL AND VERBAL CULTURE DURING CHINA’S GREAT LEAP FORWARD

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the visual and verbal rhetoric of China’s Great Leap Forward. Comparing propaganda posters alongside with Mao Zedong’s speeches an analysis is made into the ways that technology, progress, and the rural and urban sectors are depicted in propaganda. Starting with the analysis of the early period and the trope of mass mobilization the thesis then moves into a discussion of the trope of positivity in the later period, and concludes with an overview of the artist Zhang Yuqing’s work. Through the analysis of the trends of mass mobilization and positivity applied to this period there is a clearer sense of urban-rural division, and a deeper understanding of the propaganda of the Great Leap Forward’s larger message.
Propaganda is a frequently used tool of governments to try and shape the opinions of the populace to align with policies. In 1958 the Chinese Communist Party led by Mao Zedong began an agricultural and industrial reform program called the Great Leap Forward. To support this new program and inform the populace the Party encouraged the production of propaganda posters advertising the campaign. The posters need to be analyzed in order to understand what the Chinese Communist Party’s ideal was for the Great Leap Forward. In order to recognize how the rhetoric of the Great Leap Forward was presented to the public requires placing this visual culture alongside with Chairman Mao’s political speeches of the time. To understand this rhetoric it is important to first understand the policy of the Great Leap Forward. From there it is essential to begin the analysis with the earlier posters at the start of the program and the different messages present and then moving onto the ways that posters changed to the programs end. In order to cohesively comprehend the changes in propaganda a series of posters produced by a single artist throughout the period will be compared. The artist Zhang Yuqing’s work is discussed as he produced well-known posters throughout the entirety of the Great Leap Forward. An analysis of the visual and verbal rhetoric of the Great Leap Forward’s propaganda will be explored in order to understand how the Party utilized propaganda themes to push the agenda of the program. Particularly themes of mass mobilization and positivity will be analyzed both in the broader period and through and individual artist’s work to reach an understanding of how visual propaganda related back to the state-sponsored goals of the program.
A Brief Background on the Great Leap Forward

The Great Leap Forward was a political campaign that was launched in 1958 by Chairman Mao Zedong and other high-ranking Chinese Communist Party leaders. The campaign had both rural and urban goals, although the rural objectives were pushed farther than the urban. The overarching goal for the program was to increase production in rural areas. Mechanization and new technology was the first piece of this push for progress. The Party increasingly called for new machinery and to speed up agricultural production. This came in the promise of newer farm tools, transportation, and communication networks. Collectivization was another piece of the rural aspect of the program because it was the final shift away from individual owned plots of land towards people’s communes.¹ People’s communes were large scale farming communities that consisted of many people from different villages all living, working, and eating together. The people’s communes removed all personal claims to land, animals, and objects and declared all property as belonging to the commune. These communes were particularly unpopular with the people forced to live on them. Along with the communes were new methods of farming based on uninformed science. As the result of previous purges of well-trained agriculturalists the new generation of scientific research was not always based on hard fact. One specific example of how the new science was disastrous was the standardized of all agricultural processes across the board, regardless of local geography,

¹ For further reading on People’s communes and collectivization see: Jasper
this action lead to inefficient farming methods in many people’s communes.\(^2\) In another example a supposedly scientifically trained cadre presented to Mao a fictitious report “that if an apple were inserted in a pumpkin it would grow with the pumpkin.”\(^3\) The results of fictitious reports such as this and under the Party’s willingness to believe these claims agricultural production suffered. Beyond agricultural problems issues with other new industrial practices changed the rural peasantry’s life. Backyard furnaces for instance were another piece of the industrialization of the nation that impacted rural communities. The Party encouraged rural farmers to construct rudimentary backyard furnaces to melt down iron and other metals that would be shipped to urban areas for production.\(^4\) However due to the difficulty in correctly making these items the majority of backyard furnaces produced useless metal and wasted important material objects that villagers had owned.\(^5\) Outside of the rural areas the urban sectors experienced different parts of the program.

The rural areas were essentially used to provide for the urban areas as all of their resources were given to those urban centers. The urban areas also had increased rates of industrialization, including factories. During the height of the famine urban areas also


\(^5\) Ibid, 65.
experienced rationing, however famine was less common in urban areas compared to the rural areas. Ultimately during the Great Leap Forward urban communities experienced the most change from the program in the form of social campaigns. Most of the social campaigns were about public benefit and improvement some examples were the four pests campaign, educational campaigns, as well as others. The Great Leap Forward was officially stopped in 1961. Before the program’s end however somewhere around 36 million people died. Other statistics put that number even higher 45 million. The vast majority of those who died did so as a result of the agricultural failures of the program. In conjunction with these failures were also a series of natural disasters of flooding and drought that hit many areas during the program’s years. Famine was the major killer as grain allotment and poor farming practices ravished the countryside. Since increased agricultural production was one of the goals of the Great Leap Forward many local cadres and leaders claimed that their communes could generate more grain than was actually possible. Each commune tried to one up one another and this over speculation lead to insanely incorrect estimates of how much any given commune could produce. The state


8 Dikötter, Mao’s Great Famine, x.

9 Ibid, xii.

10 Friedman et al., Chinese Village, Socialist State.
however was blind to the fact that these production numbers were so over inflated, so when it came time to collect the grain the state took much larger amounts from the communes based off of those higher figures. This left the communes with either very little or absolutely no grain for their own consumption. As a result famine became widespread in the rural areas of China. Meanwhile that grain was re-allotted to the urban centers to support urban growth. When officials finally started to learn of the famines often the relief they did send was not enough or government officials refused the relief in fear it would hurt their own position of power.\textsuperscript{11} There were also plenty of cases where relief was not sent or was not provided because of the high production predictions made by those communes.\textsuperscript{12} Ultimately the program’s high death toll categorized it as a failure, although officially ending in 1961 it took several years to fully disassemble most of the Great Leap Forward’s programs. The propaganda produced during the Great Leap Forward mirrors many of the proposed benefits and societal advancements of the program. The early period of propaganda, in particular, had many representations of early goals such as industrialization, steel output, and collectivization. Meanwhile propaganda in the later period was structured more around increased technological aims and continuation of the original goals previously emphasized by those posters from that first year of the program. By analyzing the propaganda from the early period into the final year of the program the underlying trends become clearer. For the early period the trope of mass mobilization for instance is predominantly common.

\textsuperscript{11} Jisheng, \textit{Tombstone}, 154.

Mass Mobilization in the Visual Culture: Early Propaganda Trends

Early propaganda for the Great Leap Forward followed an overarching trend of depicting mass mobilization of the Chinese people. The early period starts in 1958 and continues until 1959, after that point the propaganda takes a noticeable shift that accounts for the later period of the program. The start of propaganda on the Great Leap Forward in the visual realm focused on mobilizing the workforce and bringing the people together for a cause. Typical of posters of this time period are large groups of people gathered together usually marching or progressing through the poster. There is a large amount of diversity in the types of people present in these early poster groups. By looking at the clothing and material objects that the people are associated with it is clear where the people are from and what career they are representing. The large mobilized groups contain both rural and urban professions. All the people in these posters are either timeless youths or young children, all in the peak of their health. While the call of mass mobilization was made to the entire country more generally, in posters exclusively young-looking individuals are shown. This of course was not the sole style of visual propaganda posters. Some posters also included photographs or symbolic images for mass mobilization. To better understand the messages in propaganda during the first year of the Great Leap Forward two radically different styles of posters will be compared alongside with excerpts from Mao Zedong’s speeches at conferences. The posters in this section’s analysis are an example of posters that exemplify the larger stylistic trend as well as another chosen poster that employs a different style choice but that still maintains
the central message of mass mobilization. The two posters discussed also contrast the differences between the broad call for mobilization and the more selective call for mobilization in an effort to understand how the diversity of the posters from the period still focus in on the larger cohesive trend of mass mobilization.

One particular poster, “Brave the wind and the waves, everything has remarkable abilities,” is an early example of the mass mobilization trend in the visual culture.\(^{13}\) (Figure 1) Published in 1958 this poster was made by nine prominent artists from the time.\(^{14}\) Even the creation of the poster then stems from the principle of coming together for success, a concept that was a frequent part of Great Leap Forward rhetoric. All the figures in the poster are sitting or running on the wave as they conquer the wave and are able to overtake the water. Although the first portion of the title says, “Brave the wind and the waves” all of the figures appear joyful and excited to be on the wave. In this way the wave has a symbolic meaning. The meaning is that there are going to be hardships and “wind” and “waves” that the people must endure for their own benefit and for the benefit of the progress of the nation. The Great Leap Forward then is the wave and by enduring temporary hardship the people are lead to believe that remarkable things will happen.

On the posters far left and at the forefront of the figures is a man in overalls standing on a gear bursting out of the water. He is leading a conglomeration of people


riding on a wave. Behind him sits a woman on a roll of bright red fabric holding bundles of thread over her shoulder. The position of these first figures is key to understanding the underlying message inside this poster. Both figures represent urban jobs in textiles and steel production respectively. It is industry then that leads the charge in the waves of progress in this poster. This is a clear connection to the early Great Leap Forward emphasis on increased manufacturing and production in urban centers. The urban in this poster are the leaders with the agricultural rural peasants close behind. In fact the rural peasants are situated behind the urban characters in an agricultural production group. While the Great Leap Forward had primarily agricultural regulations it often put the urban sector first in terms of resources and favor. In fact at the Hangzhou Conference in January of 1958 at the start of the program Mao Zedong when listing off one set of twelve from the Forty Articles for the Great Leap Forward stated “First, industry. Second, handicraft industry. Third, agriculture.” Mao and other leaders directly argued that industry was the first priority of the program. Even though there were more proposed changes to agriculture than industry, it was still industry that the Party favored to rank as most important. The visual culture further emphasizes this prioritization of urban rather than rural with the placement of the key figures in the poster. To represent the rural sector there is first a woman operating a bright new red tractor. The color of her tractor is an important symbol that is repeatedly present throughout Great Leap Forward posters.


The color red appears frequently throughout this poster, as well as in other posters from the period, primarily for its association to the Chinese Communist Party. The red tractor and red bundle of produced cloth are the most prominent red objects in this poster. However other background figures are also shown wearing a red headscarf, a red neck scarf, and other red articles of clothing. The red tractor specifically serves as a link back to the Party’s role in assisting with the progress of the nation. Its new red paint and clean exterior make it clear that the tractor is new advanced technology. The tractor stands in as a symbol for the increase of mechanizing agriculture and the progress that it was supposed to bring to the countryside. There is an underlying message inside the tractor that in order to brave the new changes the people must rely on the Chinese Communist Party to succeed. Only through the Party’s assistance and the people’s willingness to brave hardship could the program be successful. The poster then also includes an element of contradiction within itself. The Party is necessary and important to progress yet it is the people who must sacrifice for that progress. This message of course is a conclusion that makes sense understanding the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, at the time the association of the color red and new technology would have simply been with the Chinese Communist Party not with the later implications of failed promises.

Aside from the woman on the tractor other agricultural workers are present in the poster. The middle portion of the group includes a woman tending to a sheep with grain barreled in front of her, while a man and women stand nearby in work clothes with tools and boots. A young school child is also shown between the urban and rural running along. In the background military and other professional jobs can be seen, including a
cadre. A People’s Liberation Army solider is also present riding a bike behind the tractor. The variety of jobs depicted in this group includes most of the largest sectors of work in the country. The intention was for it to appeal to a broader mass audience by including all the different aspects of work. As stated previously typical of early propaganda on the Great Leap Forward all the figures are youthful, smiling, and in good health. This poster also contains a balanced inclusion of men and women, although it is a man who leads the group forward. There is a strong sense of positivity in this poster that goes along with the message of mass mobilization. A key example is that all the people in the poster are depicted as joyful regardless of the struggle to face. This positivity aligns with the Party’s goal for the people to embrace the Great Leap Forward happily. As Mao said in his speech at the Supreme State Conference in 1958, “There is no grounds for pessimism. Pessimism is wrong.”¹⁷ This ideology clearly presents itself in the pure cheerfulness of this poster. However it is not only this poster that makes positivity a priority, as will be discussed in the next section the late propaganda relies heavily on a state sponsored message of positively framing the Great Leap Forward. This positivity is typically centered on the idea of what is to come and increased access to technology. Figure 1 emphasizes this notion with its inclusion of the new tractor as well as objects related to industrial production. Later posters discussed will convey similar messages of positivity however unlike Figure 1 the overall focus will not be on mass mobilization. While this

poster captured mass mobilization with large diverse groups of people not all posters from the early period presented mass mobilization in the same way.

Posters from the first year of the Great Leap Forward address many different aspects of progress for the program. “Mobilize the whole population, to make sure that steel is doubled!” is an example of a more realist style of poster.\textsuperscript{18} (Figure 2) All of the primary images in the poster are taken from photographs. These photographs show laborers at work in steel production as well as at backyard furnaces. Here the urban and rural contributions to steel production are brought together side by side. The call to mobilize in this poster centers on steel production and on the whole country coming together to increase that production as a group. The overall composition of the photographs makes out the shape of a tool striking hot metal and producing sparks. A large photograph is cut into the shape of a tool; this particular photograph is of pieces of paper spread around. Continuing from the tool and looking clockwise the next photograph is a single worker in a steel factory. Below that is a photograph of a series of mixers tended by several workers. The larger bottom image below is of a series of backyard furnaces. While the other images were taken in urban settings, the image of the backyard furnaces is an example of the uniquely rural contribution to steel production. Above this image is a group of several women striking at objects, which also possibly correlates to another rural method of metal separation. Subsequently above that image is another of a single worker in a factory in the middle of steel production. These

photographs that are being “struck” by the tool are a symbolic representation of mobilization. This poster explicitly calls for a mobilization of all of the Chinese people to produce steel. The image of the tool striking the steel correlates with the fervor that struck the nation into a frenzy of steel productions. People in both urban and rural communities were driven to help produce steel and increase their nation’s production. This was particularly notable in rural communities with backyard furnaces. Here the modernized factory is shown in conjunction with the backyard furnaces, the rural production with the urban industrial. The poster emphasizes that there is not a wrong way to make steel so long as you are making it. However comparing the poster to the historical record there is an issue with the logic it expounds. As mentioned previously the rural population excitedly and dedicatedly tried to produce steel in these rudimentary furnaces. Since temperature could not be carefully gaged, however, most of these furnaces produced wrought iron rather than steel and were useless.¹⁹ That being said the rural population did not know that the steel they were creating was not steel. In 1958 when this poster was made not even the Party was aware of the fact that backyard furnaces would not be useful in producing quality steel. Under the misconception that steel was easily made the Party pushed for steel production as this poster so clearly shows. The attempted steel production in rural areas wasted rural resources and time in a failed effort.

Every aspect of the poster further emphasizes the message to increase steel outputs. Even the color palette reflects steel production with the compared black and

¹⁹ Zhang, “Rural Industrialization in China,” 64.
white photographs and the colored sparks and sky. The photographs themselves are of
of course black and white, however the choice in colors behind those photographs is
significant. The background sky fades from a bright yellow illuminating the factory
below, to a strong orange, to an orange red on the top of the poster. The sky then mimics
the color of the fires of the furnaces made to produce the steel. This is highlighted further
by the flurry of sparks at the top of the poster where the tool is striking the block of
photographs that are the stand in for the actual iron. Fundamentally everything about this
poster then relates back to steel production. All of its elements are either explicitly or
subconsciously connected to steel production making a firm association for the viewers
of the poster. This heavy focus on steel mirrors the rhetoric in how the Party, and Mao
specifically, felt about the need to increase metal production. At the Beidaihe Conference
in 1958, Mao stated that the country “must go all out for the next two years on [the
production of] iron, steel, copper, aluminum, molybdenum, and other nonferrous
metals.”
He goes on to specifically to state that steel was the most important metal that
needed to be produced out of all the metals. This poster produced during the same time
then reflects the way visual culture served the goals the Party prioritized. Since steel was
considered the most important metal to advance it is the focus of the poster rather than
any other type of metal production. While the previous poster analyzed a broader sense of
mobilization across the program this poster keeps to one key topic for directed
mobilization.

20 MacFarquhar, Cheek, and Wu, The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao, 410.
21 Ibid.
Propaganda posters from the early period of the Great Leap Forward are characterized primarily by mass mobilization of the Chinese people. The posters are marked by figures that are from both rural and urban backgrounds in a variety of settings. Often these figures are in celebration working for the goals of the Great Leap Forward. However not all posters followed this model, other posters such as Figure 2 take on a more realist effort by including actual photographs into the posters. Even still the posters are uniform in calling for action in support of the program and the duty of the Chinese people. While the early years of propaganda are characterized by a call for mass mobilization to take part in the Great Leap Forward the subsequent years during the program take a different turn. In contrast to the early period the later period’s posters have a trend of re-enforcing the progress depicted in the early period and also emphasizing the expansion of program goals. Particularly common was a campaign to reemphasize that people’s communes were good. The following section analyzes these changes in propaganda in the later period.

A Policy of Positivity: Late Propaganda Trends

Propaganda throughout the Great Leap Forward’s years from 1960 until the program’s official termination in 1962 focused on re-emphasizing the promises of the initial program. There was a felt need to encourage an increase in vigor for the program. This came out of the Party’s resistance to admit the apparent flaws in the program. Particularly Mao’s own inability to admit failure in the program and the fear of others to
go against him allowed the program to persist for longer than it should have continued.²²

Posters from this period often focus on a general theme of speeding up production or development. The propaganda also focused on the ideology that a rapid increase of progress would solve the existing issues of the Great Leap Forward.

One particularly common theme in visual propaganda was the positivity of people’s communes. In a poster titled “Speed up the mechanization of agriculture” from 1960 the focus is on the technological benefits of the commune.²³ (Figure 3) The poster is from a series titled “People’s Communes are Good.” The poster centers on a male youth standing in an open top new red car holding high a red flag with the words “People’s Commune are Good” on it. Behind the primary figure is a row of tractors, followed by a row of combines, followed by trucks, then more rows of combines and tractors repeated. The poster’s emphasis is on the new vehicles that assist in advancing the commune. The increase of technology is equated with an increase in efficiency and speed of production. The vehicles push forward on the road of progress. Here technology and progress are synonymous. Looking at the individual vehicles themselves can reveal more about the messages intended and potentially unintended inside the poster.

It is important to examine the car in which the main figure of the poster stands. This car is much newer and fancier looking than the typical farm equipment, especially

²² Frederick C. Teiwes and Warren Sun, China’s Road to Disaster: Mao, Central Politicians and Provincial Leaders in the Great Leap Forward, 1955-59 (Armonk, N.Y: Routledge, 1998), xx.

with the many flowers in the back of the car. In fact this type of vehicle is not even practical for rural consumption. While the farm equipment is shown as advanced and efficient the front car is more glamorous and inefficient for a rural area. The inclusion of this car helps undermine a point about how the greater public understood people’s communes. Increasingly in the late period of the Great Leap Forward there was a division between what the rural people in the people’s communes were experiencing and what the urban communities understood about this experience.\textsuperscript{24} In this poster the fancy automobile stands as a strong point of analysis for this trend. Experiencing famine and failure of the people’s communes the rural populace was more interested in those same advancements that they had been originally promised. Only some people’s communes had ever received the full amounts of technology promised and most were still waiting or hoping for the technology. The fact that propaganda posters from this period show even more advanced technology than at the programs start shows the disconnect between what urban audiences thought people’s communes were like and the reality of the situation. In this way this particular poster’s version of progress would have been a far loftier dream to a rural community. Meanwhile to an urban community it would have made more sense potentially. Since they were not living inside the communes to an urban audience the inclusion of a car would seem like the next logical step in improving the lives of the rural populace. The inclusion of the car then tells us something of its unknown creator, that

they had less experience with rural living or the current state of the people’s communes. It also makes sense when considering that Mao himself included automobiles as a part of the industrialization of China. He even uses automobiles in an example of the need for a riddance of bourgeois ideals, stating that they “do not necessarily need specially [assigned] automobiles. It’s OK to make some allowances for the old and infirm; for the rest there should be no ranking [for automobiles].”

Here Mao is using the increase of automobiles to point out the equalization of the people. In this context the idea of having a new car in the countryside becomes about equalizing the rural and the urban. Beyond this message however is another potential analysis to why the inclusion of the new car could have made sense to the artist of the poster.

The inclusion of the new red car could also have had another more industrial message. While many posters have focused previously on the types of new technology produced in China less emphasis was placed on the automotive industry. The inclusion of a new bright red car is a reminder to the people of the advancement not only in industrial goods but in other machinery as well.

The inclusion of the car in this reasoning of analysis then makes more sense for why it was made the focal point of the poster. However it is essential to remember that this poster was a part of a series about why the people’s communes are good. Therefore the previously mentioned analysis of the car not fitting into rural society stands as the lasting point. This poster then shows the increasing

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division in the later period between the actual functionality of rural progress and the urban idea of rural progress. Considering that to an urban audience the newly manufactured car does not seem out of place, while a rural audience would immediately notice the car as unusual. The division between the two sectors of the populace becomes clearer through the analysis of these posters, especially considering the artists themselves as influencing the posters. While this posters artist is unknown it is likely that they resided in a city since most publishing houses were located in Shanghai or other cities. So while it is impossible to actually know this particular artist’s background or rural experience the reality from the poster and knowledge of poster production the likelihood was that the artist was living in an urban area rather than a rural one. While this poster shows a growing division in understanding between urban and rural communities not all posters about people’s communes have that divide so clearly present. Another poster from the same series “People’s Communes are Good,” focuses on the output of people’s communes.

Many posters from the period focus on the actual production from the people’s communes. In the poster “The communes are big, the people numerous, the natural resources abundant, it is easy to develop a diversified economy” the focus is on the goods produced by the people’s communes. (Figure 4) This poster comes from the same series as the previous one discussed, and also like Figure 3 the designer of the poster is

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28 Unknown, The communes are big, the people, numerous, the natural resources abundant, it is easy to develop a diversified economy, 1960, chineseposters.net, http://chineseposters.net/posters/d25-138.php.
unknown. However due to the different art styles and the same year of production it is clear that it was made by a different artist than the former poster. In this poster a muscular young woman holds onto a harvest that consumes most of the poster. The faintly out of focus background contains obscured people at work alongside livestock. The primary crops that the woman holds are grain and millet in over proportionate sizes. Both crops were among the most common grown at the time and key to the survival of food production. Millet and grains are substantial foods and had been traditionally grown in China. All the foodstuffs in the poster are scaled up beyond natural to represent the ideal that the people’s communes could produce the most bountiful production. Tied around the millet and grain is a red ribbon, intended to allude back to the fact that it was the Party that made the harvest possible. Again red is a symbol meaningfully placed alongside positivity and productivity to encourage the association of the Party with these values. Aside from grain and foodstuffs the poster also includes other aspects of rural production.

The poster goes beyond just the food production portion of people’s commune’s outputs and branches into other industries that arise from agriculture. Next to the woman’s hand sits cotton a connection to the material production by people’s communes beyond just food products.29 This is a reference to textiles and other cotton produced goods. While textile work was in the urban factory the inclusion of cotton stands as a reminder that it is the rural sector of the populace that makes the urban possible. Beneath

the woman’s hand sits a silkworm on top of a leaf that is in the process of producing silk. The breeding of silkworms had long been a practice in China since the Shang dynasty and it is a culturally important industry.\textsuperscript{30} Its inclusion in the poster then would have resonated with the Chinese people as a continuation of traditional agricultural and animal husbandry along with the modern updates. In the top corner of the poster beneath a gathering of fruit are two small bees. The bees, like the silkworm, are reminders of the other goods produced from insects in rural China.\textsuperscript{31} Both insects represent niched production areas that rural areas participate in to benefit the greater populace. Aside from the insects two other animals appear to the right of the woman a pig and a goose. Pigs were another important piece to the Chinese diet, especially for rural families as pork was the more accessible foodstuff compared to other meats. The inclusion of the fattened pig then is a direct reference to prosperity. The communes were supposed to be producing larger animals and therefore there was to be more plentiful to eat, and more to benefit the nation. Similarly the goose was another major food producer especially because of the eggs that they laid. When we look back to the start of the Great Leap Forward, Mao made it clear that not only was agriculture a priority but so were the industries in rural areas. In


fact in one conference speech he stated that “the value of the output of local industries in
the provinces should surpass the (value) of agricultural production.” The inclusion of
other rural industries by this artist then has a clearer more purposeful meaning. Here we
see that the artist was referencing the importance of not only strictly agricultural
production from people’s communes but also for other industries that existed within the
rural communes. People’s communes also collectivized all industries that had been a part
of village life most notably animal husbandry. On top of that all the foodstuffs and
animals shown in the poster were commonly known and would have resonated with both
rural and urban audiences. Therefore the poster was likely to have been used in both
sectors of the populace to advertise for the people’s communes. The diversity in the
poster also has a larger message.

The variety and diversity of the types of crops shown in the poster mirrors the
idea of a diversified economy in the posters title. The idea of highlighting a “diversified
economy” plays into the reasoning behind including the variety in foodstuffs and animals
in the poster. By referencing the benefits of the many different forms of rural production
the diversity is clearer. Even flowers are included in the poster alongside the grains. The
inclusion of all these elements creates an overall message that the pleasant and the
practical co-exist in the abundance of the people’s commune. The inclusion of different
industries inside agricultural production attempts to glorify the positive benefits that the
people’s communes in theory helped to accelerate. Diversity in this context serves a

32 MacFarquhar, Cheek, and Wu, The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao, 385.

33 Friedman et al., Chinese Village, Socialist State, 186.
purpose since it enforces the concept that people’s communes were abundant and full of variety in their production. Understanding that concept however it would not have made sense that every people’s commune produced all the variety of foodstuff and production pictured in the poster. Climate, land quality, and other natural conditions strictly dictated the kinds of production each people’s commune participated in. The state’s intended overall message for this poster was to bolster the positivity on the greatness of what the people’s communes could and were accomplishing. However people inside those communes would have understood that it was impossible to do all those things in their area by this time in the program. After the first year of excitement as reality set in people were less easily convinced of the marvelous things that people’s communes could do, and were more aware of the limitations they faced especially since famine was so common by this point. By this point famine was so widespread that in Yang Jisheng’s book *Tombstone* he explains that “deaths in 1960 exceed[ed] 5 percent of the population in six counties and cities” based on research in several provinces.\(^{34}\) With famine as a stark reality to rural populations the diverse and bountiful harvest depicted would have been appealing but would not have seemed attainable.

The propaganda of the later years of the Great Leap Forward then is marked by trends of increased positivity and encouragement for the program. In particular people’s communes are emphasized as positive centers for growth and abundance. Growth and abundance are primarily depicted with examples of increased technology and harvests frequently in connection with the people’s communes. Posters from this period also

\(^{34}\) Jisheng, *Tombstone*, 131.
clearly indicate the increasing rural-urban divide in terms of how the urban
misunderstood the actual conditions of the people’s communes. While previously in the
early period posters had depicted the prioritization of the urban population over the rural
population posters during the later period center more on the result of that prioritization
through the increased division of the two groups. These posters maintain the official
rhetoric of positivity and have no markers of the actual famine or failures of the Great
Leap Forward. For instance in a speech at the Lushan conference Mao warned to the
cadres and leaders that “if the paper you publish prints bad news every day, people will
have no heart for their work. It wouldn’t take as long as a year; we would perish within a
week.” This ideological statement only further confirms why Chairman Mao and the
Party felt it necessary to develop propaganda that focused on the positive aspects of the
Great Leap Forward. The visual culture of the later period then adheres closely to the
verbal rhetoric of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party, and does not deviate from the
central narrative. This strong connection meant that the propaganda of this period is
centrally focused on reassurance for the success of the Great Leap Forward.

**Zhang Yuqing: Exploration of One Artists Contribution**

During the Great Leap Forward there were many different artists producing posters. Different artists obviously had various styles and content for their posters. However, trying to deeply analyze each artist and the ways that they impacted Great Leap Forward propaganda is a task beyond this thesis. Focusing in on one particular artist does

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35 Mao, *Chairman Mao Talks to the People; Talks and Letters*, 139.
help to track a change in propaganda in a more detailed fashion. Zhang Yuqing is a particularly useful artist to examine when looking at the Great Leap Forward because he produced work throughout the period and that work still exists in a large quantity. In fact Zhang is considered to be “one of the most prolific artists of the 1950s and 1960s.”

Therefore his work would have been more widely available and influential during the Great Leap Forward. By looking at the changes and continuities between Zhang’s works at the programs start till its end the shifts in propaganda can be analyzed. Specifically looking at Zhang’s shift in style, content, and changing depiction of the people’s communes reveal the changing narrative of the propaganda of the Great Leap Forward.

Zhang’s early propaganda for the Great Leap Forward focused on rural scenes and the increased technology. One early poster titled “The future of the rural village” from October of 1958 is focused on advanced processes in farming. (Figure 5) The poster centers on the new technologies that were supposedly available on the people’s commune. The foreground scene is a group of people working on processing grain. Every portion of the process of grain production is shown in the poster. In the far left corner of the poster a tractor carts grain through an empty field. The next field over has a combine finishing up that field’s production. Next to the fields on the right are stacked piles of grains that are being bailed together where they will be transported by tractor to the next step. Next a group of women and a man load the bailed grain onto a machine to shift it

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out. The rest is then added into a final machine behind it where it comes out fully shifted. In the very front of the poster stand two women tying up bags of finished grain. Inside Zhang’s poster he is dedicated to fully showing every step of the grain harvest to emphasize just how the new technology impacts every step of the process. This detail to the process would have appealed to a rural audience. A rural audience would have understood the tedious steps to grain farming and seeing how people’s communes’ technology would have directly impacted the process would have been impressive. The inclusion of all these technologies is purposeful and instructive in what rural communities would find appealing in a people’s commune. The grain process however is not the only technology present in the poster.

Throughout the entire poster one particular technology present is light posts and telephone wires. In the foreground a young woman stands talking into the telephone that is housed inside a red little box. Red again stands as a symbolic color for the Party in this poster like other posters previously discussed in this paper. Here the red of the telephone box connects the Party with communication. Several of the other new pieces of machinery in the scene are also red. The connection with newness and the Party is a trope that is present frequently in posters from the first year of the Great Leap Forward. The telephone wires and light posts line the road in the background as well as alongside the river on the right. Electricity and increased communications were incredibly appealing to rural inhabitants. The picture of the people’s communes was all about the betterment of a more productive and efficient life. Increased communication networks and electrical networks were key components in this new life. Most people’s communes did not
actually end up achieving these aims, especially not to the well-planned system that Zhang lays out in the poster. Alongside technology irrigation also is depicted in the poster.

One of the numerous aspects of the Great Leap Forward’s intended plans was an increased call for more structured irrigation systems. When the new people’s communes were introduced and constructed often irrigation systems needed to either be rerouted or fixed for new locations or from resulted deterioration. In the poster cleanly defined water channels line the outside of the fields and are supplied by the larger river off to the side. Water channels from the rest of the landscape in fact separate the entire farming production center, with a bridge connecting the two sections. The well thought out and well-planned system of irrigation present in Zhang’s poster would have been a marked shift from often haphazard systems of old. Mao himself called in the first set of twelve articles for water as the first highest priority. Mao later stated that “all Twelve articles on water, fertilizer and so on, [were] to achieve the proper balance,” in improving the people’s communes. This poster is effective at capturing the many different aspects that were important to rural farmers. The promises inside this poster would have appealed to rural farmers because it seemed to fix all the issues they struggled with before. These posters of course promised more than the Great Leap Forward could ever deliver;

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39 MacFarquhar, Cheek, and Wu, The Secret Speeches of Chairman Mao, 382.

40 Ibid.
however, being produced so early on these posters had a better chance of positively impacting rural populations’ opinions on the program.

Now that the foreground of the poster has been discussed it is important to focus on the background. The people’s commune’s actual housing and dinning structures are located all together in a community of red roofed homes. Behind the commune homes are a series of furnaces. These are meant to represent the backyard furnaces that the people’s communes used to try to produce steel. These furnaces appear just as new and shiny as the farming equipment in the foreground does. Even farther behind the backyard furnaces are a series of grain storage towers and grain elevators. The multiple towers pictured are intentional to make the viewer realize just how prosperous this particular fictive people’s commune is at production. Alongside production transportation also is emphasized in the poster. Two buses are travelling along the main road in front of the commune alluding to the push for increased connectivity and transportation options that were a part of the Great Leap Forward. Three trucks transporting products are seen along the same road driving away from the main commune, other vehicles are also present on the road.

Another mode of transportation in the poster is a red train headed towards the commune center. There is also a bridge faintly discernable behind telephone wires that connect the two sides of the river. On the opposite side of the river appears possibly another people’s commune. The inclusion of all these details corresponds with different points of prioritization on Mao’s Forty points for the Great Leap Forward in the first year.41 Since initial aims for the program included increased industry, agricultural production, and

41 Ibid, 379.
transportation in the people’s communes Zhang’s poster includes all of those points. As an artist, Zhang tries to capture the essential points of the program and include as many as possible while still having a coherent piece, and every inclusion in his posters appears to be directly thought out and correspond with an ideal or a aim of the Great Leap Forward. Zhang’s early poster work ambitiously takes on the task of trying to represent as many aspects as possible about the Great Leap Forward, which is a trend that carries through into his later poster work.

Zhang’s posters towards the end of the Great Leap Forward become increasingly complex and intricate. While Zhang’s poster art style has always been detailed and multifaceted it become increasingly so by the end of the Great Leap Forward. The posters become more elaborate and look at even larger scales than some of his earlier work. One such poster “The new centre of the commune” is a good example of this shift in Zhang’s style.\(^\text{42}\) (Figure 6) In this poster Zhang is revisiting the idea of the new wave of what is to come for people’s communes. The vision this time however focuses more on the new center of life at the heart of the commune instead of the agricultural improvements that were typical of the earlier posters. This poster includes all of the same overarching elements seen in the other poster previously discussed in that it includes the agricultural, the industrial, and the commune itself. The vision for the people’s commune in 1961 however is remarkably different than it was just three years prior.

The new hope and dream for the people’s commune was giving rural inhabitants increasingly urban associated benefits. On first glance the commune center of the poster

appears to be a city rather than a people’s commune. Instead of more basic housing the streets are lined with multilevel homes all of new construction and centrally planned. The streets are lined with planted trees set in rows lit by light posts. The ideal for the modern rural people’s commune then is to model the communes on the urban centers of population. Interestingly this picture of the new commune appears officially at the very end of the Great Leap Forward, a moment when people’s communes were proving to be failures and ineffective in achieving the goals set for them.\textsuperscript{43} However just because the rural populations had given up on the dream of the people’s commune did not mean that either the urban population or the government had yet. When the Great Leap Forward officially ended the people’s communes were not immediately disbanded instead the process of de-collectivization was slow and not uniformly the same depending on the area.\textsuperscript{44} Zhang’s poster then sits in an interesting moment where the fate of the people’s communes was unclear. While the exact date of the poster’s creation is unknown outside of the year, it fits along with the rhetoric of the last hopes of the Party for success in reviving and revamping the Great Leap Forward as a program. The uncertainty of what was to come in this moment for people’s communes is clearer considering that the Party was still supporting propaganda about the positive aspects of the people’s communes. As Zhang and other artists continued to produce propaganda posters about people’s communes these posters fill in the understanding that there was no clear narrative about


what or how people’s communes would be as the Great Leap Forward came to an end. Analyzing the elements inside Zhang’s poster then gives hints towards speculations on what was to come for the people’s communes.

The types of activities occurring among the populace inside the commune’s planned streets are telling of the concepts of modernity. Modernity in this context refers to the urbanization of the rural people’s commune predominantly through new technology. True to Zhang’s style the poster includes many various people all interacting in different activities. The major groups of people on the left side of the poster are all a part of a celebration parade for the people’s commune. The celebratory parade is marching towards a large building which appears to be a Party office and is marked so by large flags over the entrance. The people are filing into the office in two lines followed by a group holding several Chinese flags. This group also includes some young children playing a large drum and other instruments. Behind that group a man drives a tractor pulling a banded tow with people seated inside. A group of flag bearers take up the rear of this procession. The entire people’s commune in this poster seems to be in the middle of a celebration of the newness of their commune. The entire main avenue street is lined with little flags along the top of the buildings while the start of the street is lined with full sized flags in the ground. Flags also surround a nearby fountain. Returning to the group, however, the inclusion of the tractor in the procession is a key reminder that this is still a rural people’s commune despite the urbanization that it has undergone in the name of progress. In fact in the far left corner of the poster several other tractors and farm
equipment can be seen in a sectioned off lot again reinforcing that the “new” people’s commune is still agriculturally based.

The left front foreground of the poster depicts a park full of people in various leisure activities. A thoroughly planned park it includes sections of seating around a flower garden, open green space, a children’s playground, and even a lake for boating. Focusing first on the seated figures around the flower gardens most of the individuals are involved in group discussions or reading. One pair of what appear by their silver hair to be older men seem to be playing a tabled game. This is interesting to point out because older individuals are almost uniformly excluded in most poster art. While the age of the individuals is not completely clear, they do appear to be older than the traditional youths that are present throughout this poster and other posters. Although Zhang’s reasoning is not completely evident as to why these figures were included it possibly marks a shift away from the traditional youth depiction into a more inclusive view of the populace. On the other left side of the flowers are two major groups. The first is a large group of young people standing around two identically dressed women who are dancing, as some young children also intermix with the group. The other group on this side is a family where the mother and two children are seated on a bench as the father takes a photograph of them. The inclusion of a man taking a photograph brings up the concept of modernity and people’s communes. The fact that the man has access to his own camera means that the people’s commune is successful and thriving to the point that it’s populace can gain access to advanced personal technology. As a contrast to the larger scale technology that tends to appear in the posters, the camera stands out as different. Typically the
technology pictured is industrial, agricultural, or transportation based. The commonality between these types of technology is that they are all communal resources that benefit the entire commune. A camera however is a personal rather than a communal object of technology. Despite that fact Zhang does have the man using the camera taking a photograph of a group of individuals. By purposely arranging the people in this manner Zhang still emphasizes the camera’s role as an object for a group even if the group is limited. In general however the camera is not for the use of the commune nor is it beneficial to the commune rather it is a benefit to the individual. The same can be said of a stroller pushed by a nearby couple with a child inside. Here again is a more modernized object that benefits a singular group rather than the entirety of the populace. The inclusion of these goods in Zhang’s poster introduces another message that the new construction of the people’s communes would not only benefit the quality of living standards but would also allow for an increase in personal luxury that had been significantly out of reach for the rural population. The sense of newness then expands beyond the collective general good of communes in this poster.

The background of this poster includes the more common rural elements usually found in people’s commune poster propaganda. Rice paddies in a field take up the main section of the far left background. Separating the rice from the other fields is a road with vehicles present. Several other fields are present in the background in various steps of cultivation. Tractors and other agricultural machinery are in those fields producing. Also in the background beyond the agricultural plots are smoke clouds streaming from an industrial center, again pointing to the backyards furnaces. Despite how far back in the
poster they stand, these furnaces’ appearance reminds the viewer that the people’s communes still are playing a role in steel production and the country’s steel industry. It is interesting that Zhang still includes steel production in the poster even if it takes a far back role therefore its inclusion reminds that the people’s communes still were involved in steel production even though it was clear that rural community’s steel was not up to production levels. The background of the poster includes some of the other traditional agricultural processes however there is one particular industry that is excluded.

It is interesting to point out that both in this poster and in the previous poster by Zhang there are absolutely no animals present. Animal husbandry and livestock appear nowhere in the new ideal of the people’s commune. This is peculiar when considering that people’s communes as rural centers were in charge of not only grain and other crops but also meat and other animals. Animal husbandry, especially pig-raising, was essential to agricultural success and the meat industry in China. The exclusion of all animals then is systematically factually incorrect, and because of that it is key to consider why Zhang and other artists chose to omit animals in the glamourized image of the people’s commune. One potential reason for the exclusion of animals is the role of livestock in farming. The primary reason no large livestock appears in either of Zhang’s posters is that the posters emphasize that the new technology is the innovative alternative to manual labor. This technology was intended to replace the time old custom of oxen and other livestock labor to complete farm practices. Therefore the ideal image of the people’s communes could not include large livestock. It would have added a complicated layer to

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45 Zhang, “Rural Industrialization in China,” 64.
the posters about the reality of what to expect. The reality was that many people’s communes got little or none of this advanced technology and continued traditional agricultural practices with livestock or human manual labor. The tractor and other equipment was intended to fully replace the livestock’s role, so including livestock in the agricultural process could have produced doubt about the success of the people’s communes. There is also the factor that animal husbandry and production was not as highly emphasized as other types of agricultural production. Grain and other grown products received more reforms and changes than livestock cultivation. Other than communalization of livestock to the entire people’s commune, the way that livestock was treated did not change dramatically from before collectivization. Therefore it would be less of an interest to depict livestock when there were not many changes in the people’s communes.

The exclusion of pigs, geese, and other animals of similar production could have other meanings aside from the shift in technology. These animals do not directly contribute to physical jobs in farming, aside from fertilization, but are still essential for the food industry. The most likely reason that these animals are not included in the posters is that animal husbandry was not as highly emphasized in the Great Leap Forward’s agricultural plan compared to grain production, industrialization, and other agenda points. Therefore in the prioritization of what to include in the posters livestock and animal husbandry are omitted in favor of other agricultural industries. The complete omission however of animals creates an inaccurate characterization of people’s

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communes. It is important to note here though that this is a generalized trend some posters such as the previously described Figure 4 do include animals. However posters such as this one focuses on commune production rather than on the idea of the people’s commune. Moving away from the individual elements in Zhang’s posters it is necessary to consider his shift in work in a broader sense.

Zhang’s style goes through development during the Great Leap Forward, as does the type of messages his posters convey. One clear change in his posters is an increase of detail. As previously discussed, Figure 5 contains plenty of detail to analyze and comprehend. However compared to the sheer volume of information in figure 6 there is a noticeable difference in content. Zhang’s entire career is marked by an attention to detail and that attention continues to get more and more complex throughout time. This complexity also means that his posters become both more crowded and that the viewer is situated at a farther distance away from the subjects compared to his earlier posters. His earlier posters emphasized the newness of the technology and excitement of the rural people about the people’s commune. His later posters hark on this surge of improvements to make life better however there is an increasingly urbanized feel to the rural subject. The speculations on the improvements of the people’s communes move from rural embracement to conversion to the urban style of living for success. His later posters on the Great Leap Forward then stand as an example for the urban populace’s lack of awareness of the failure of the people’s communes. Instead Zhang’s poster operates

under the assumption that the technology present in his 1958 poster had been available to the people’s communes. Here the rural-urban divide is evident in the lack of concrete knowledge about the actual state of people’s communes and the ways that the presentation of these communes positively continued well beyond the people’s commune’s failure. Zhang’s late work on communes does however fit into the trend of the positivity and encouragement of what the people’s communes could in theory do. In this way Zhang follows the over-all trend in the field while still following in his own stylistic development.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately the propaganda of the Great Leap Forward aligned with the program’s initiatives while the changes in propaganda mirrored the changes in the program itself. The early period of the first official year of the Great Leap Forward centers propaganda on mass mobilization. As the Party and Chairman Mao Zedong officially started the Great Leap Forward their call for public support echoes in the visual culture of the propaganda posters. While posters from this period reference a variety of topics those topics all have a greater connection in common. All of the themes in this period relate directly back to the mass mobilization of the different initiatives of the Great Leap Forward. In “Brave the wind and the waves, everything has remarkable abilities” the message includes both the new things to come for the rural and the urban. (Figure 1) The poster depicts new equipment for the rural sectors and new industrial jobs for the urban sectors. Comparatively from the same period the poster, “Mobilize the whole population,
to make sure that steel is doubled!” takes on a more direct call to mobilization. (Figure 2)

While Figure 1 concentrates on a call for a generalized mass mobilization for the Great Leap Forward, Figure 2 calls for mobilization in the production of steel. Beyond being a more targeted focus in mobilization Figure 2 also is inclusive by calling both rural and urban people to participate in the production of steel for the nation. Both posters then feature rural and urban contributions to the effort of mass mobilization, as well as the types of technology possible to make progress in the represented industries. While the early period of the Great Leap Forward focused on mass mobilization as its primary message, the later period centered on a push for maintained positivity for the program.

Technology in these posters from the later period revolves around the idea of abundance. In the poster “Speed up the mechanization of agriculture” for instance there are rows upon rows of new farm machinery all together. (Figure 3) The poster also includes a new car leading the procession of vehicles. While technology is not overtly present in the poster “The communes are big, the people numerous, the natural resources abundant, it is easy to develop a diversified economy” the poster focuses on the results of the new technology. (Figure 4) Boasting the large agricultural harvest alongside other industries, Figure 4 also recalls the Great Leap Forward’s agenda for all rural industries beyond farming, including animal husbandry, cotton and silk production. However Figure 3 and Figure 4 both project positivity beyond what was actually possible in terms of production levels for agriculture and machinery. A deeper analysis of the posters of the era makes a clearer picture of an increasing rural-urban division, specifically in the urban populace’s lack of understanding about rural conditions. The division between the rural
and urban then had both ideological and physical manifestations in the ways in which the two groups were depicted in propaganda. This is evident through the ways in which each is depicted in the visual culture and how the rural is often made to look like the urban. There is a clear disconnect between what the Party thought was possible for the people’s communes and what actually was feasible. Since both posters are also from the same series they are an interesting look into the different ways posters could present the same overall message about people’s communes to the broader public. Subsequently as both of the posters from the “People’s Communes are Good” series are so varied for the same topic the posters serve as reminders of the diverse topics within the Great Leap Forward. Outside of comparing and contrasting posters from the same period it is productive to analyze one particular artist throughout the period and see how a shift in propaganda is present in their work.

Through looking at the prolific artist Zhang Yuqing’s work from the program’s start to its end there is a clearer analysis on shifts in style and propaganda. Zhang’s work from the Great Leap Forward’s first year for instance focuses on the excitement to come for the program. Particularly in the poster “The future of the rural village” the central focus is on the benefits to come from the mobilization into people’s communes. (Figure 5) Here in Zhang’s poster there is an incredible amount of detail present and many different aspects of the Great Leap Forward’s proposed improvements are depicted including but not limited to irrigation, mechanization of farming, communication, transportation, and backyard furnaces. Zhang’s later work towards the end of the Great Leap Forward increases in the amount of information and detail that it includes. In the
poster “The new centre of the commune” Zhang shifts the focus from the agricultural improvements to the improvements inside the commune. (Figure 6) Compared to his early work the details are even more intricate and show a changing trend in society. The poster still maintains that sense of positivity and belief about people’s communes that marks the later years of the Great Leap Forward. It also marks the trend of the idea of an urbanization of the people’s communes, as the poster in Figure 6 shows a centrally planned town with modernized buildings and parks. This urbanization relates back to the growing rural-urban divide, as artists increasingly equated technology that makes the rural sector of the population appear more urban as the ideal for what was modern.

Zhang’s posters fit into the overarching trends for the periods of the Great Leap Forward during which they were made. Overall the visual culture of the Great Leap Forward aligned with the verbal rhetoric of Mao Zedong to spread the Chinese Communist Party’s message of the Great Leap Forward.

Ultimately the propaganda of the Great Leap Forward aligns firmly with the primary goals of the program, prioritizing aspects of the program such as agriculture, people’s communes, and industrialization through the primary themes of mass mobilization and positivity. The shifts in the propaganda’s themes then visually represent the changes in policy throughout the program. While this research offers a starting analysis into the propaganda of the Great Leap Forward more work still needs to be done. Compared to Cultural Revolution propaganda very little research has ever occurred on the visual culture of the Great Leap Forward. More research into an even broader selection of posters could produce more detailed conclusions on the themes discussed
here as well as other themes centered on the urban and industrial sectors in order to understand the propaganda of the Great Leap Forward in a more detailed manner.
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