

The Relationship between Ideology, Propaganda, and State Power in Communist China under Mao

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This lesson plan and worksheet—designed for the International Baccalaureate (IB) History curriculum—accompany the article “**Stories from the Revolution in Mao’s China: Teaching Students to Think about Socialism and Communism**” by Aminda Smith (*Education About Asia*, Volume 29:2, Fall 2026).

Abstract:

This lesson is designed for the International Baccalaureate (IB) History curriculum, specifically the *Authoritarian States (20th Century)* topic, and examines the emergence, consolidation, and maintenance of power in Communist China under Mao. Through inquiry and analysis of excerpts from Mao’s *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art* (1942) and a selection of **Chinese Communist propaganda posters**, students investigate the relationship between ideology, propaganda, and state power. **This lesson encourages students to evaluate how Mao conceptualized the role of art and literature as political instruments for the masses and how these ideas were subsequently implemented through visual propaganda campaigns** (though instructors may substitute where desired). This lesson is grounded in primary source analysis and historical interpretation, and this lesson aligns with IB historical thinking skills by requiring students to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize evidence while drawing connections between ideological theory and political practice. This lesson helps students first develop an understanding of Mao’s views regarding the purpose of culture, literature, and art before applying that knowledge to an independent analysis of propaganda posters drawn from different campaigns between 1949 and 1976. This approach promotes both student choice and academic inquiry while providing a concrete case study through which broader themes of authoritarianism, mass mobilization, political communication, and ideological control can be explored. The selected texts were chosen for their significance in revealing the theoretical foundations of Chinese Communist propaganda and their accessibility as primary sources that allow students to connect political ideas to historical practice. By examining Mao’s own writings alongside visual evidence produced under his regime, students gain a deeper understanding of how authoritarian states employ propaganda to shape public opinion, consolidate and maintain power, communicate policy objectives, and reinforce political authority. Although centered on Communist China, the lesson also encourages comparative thinking by prompting students to consider the broader role of propaganda within authoritarian systems across different historical contexts.

Unit Overall Learning Goal(s): ✓ Evaluate the conditions that facilitated the rise of authoritarian states in the 20th century. ✓ Analyze Mao's conception and use of propaganda in communist China. ✓ Evaluate the role and application of art, literature, and propaganda in communist China. ✓ Evaluate the extent propaganda facilitated the emergence & consolidation of power of the authoritarian state.		
Topic/Targets: • Define Mao's conception of art, literature, and propaganda • Analyze the Yan'an (Yenan) Forum on Literature and Art and its importance for understanding Mao's conceptions. • Propaganda	Progression, Chunks of Information, Essential Questions, & Reading Materials: 1. <i>Talks at the Yan'an (Yenan) Forum on Literature and Art</i> Excerpts 2. <i>Talks at the Yan'an (Yenan) Forum on Literature and Art</i> Reading Guide (Handout) 3. Instructor slides—the slides and/or classroom instruction before this lesson are most beneficial if they contextualize the origins and early days of the Chinese Communist Party. In particular, this instruction would likely highlight the context surrounding the CCP's survival and reevaluation of its own identity, organization, and methods that developed after the crucible of the Long March.	Formative Assessments: (Questions, Activities etc.)
(KS) Priority Standards: • 3—Societies are shaped by beliefs, ideas, and diversity. • 3.1 The student will recognize and evaluate significant beliefs, contributions, and ideas of the many diverse peoples and groups and their impact on individuals, communities, states, and nations. • 3.2 The student will draw conclusions about significant beliefs, contributions, and ideas, analyzing the origins and context under which these competing ideals were reached and the multiple perspectives from which they come. • 3.3 The student will investigate specific beliefs, contributions, ideas, and/or diverse populations and connect those beliefs, contributions, ideas and/or diversity to contemporary issues. • 3.4 The student will use his/her understanding of those beliefs, contributions, ideas, and diversity to justify or define how community, state, national, and international ideals shape contemporary society. • 5—Relationships among people, places, ideas, and environments are dynamic. • 5.1 The student will recognize and evaluate dynamic relationships that impact lives in communities, states, and nations. • 5.2 The student will analyze the context of significant relationships and draw conclusions about a contemporary world. • 5.3 The student will investigate the relationship among people, places, ideas, and/or the environment and connect those relationships to contemporary issues. • 5.4 The student will use his/her understanding of these dynamic relationships to create a personal, community, state, and/or national narrative.	Progression: <u>Chunks of Information:</u> • Mao's definition of art and literature • Mao's perceived issues with art and literature • Mao's asserted fixes for art and literature • Examples of CCP art and literature→Group evaluation <u>Essential Questions:</u> • How did Mao define the role of art and literature? • How did Mao define propaganda? • According to Mao, what were the problems with art and literature in China? • How did Mao propose to solve these problems? • How do Mao's <i>Talks</i> reflect his attitude toward the following groups in 1942: 1) the proletariat (workers, peasants, and soldiers); 2) the petty bourgeoisie; 3) allies of the United Front against Japan; 4) capitalists and landlords • Evaluate Mao's problems with art and literature. Which problem was the most important? Justify your response with evidence from the text. • Evaluate Mao's proposed solutions for art and literature. Which solution was the hardest to achieve? Justify your response with evidence from the text. • Mao stated that there was no "art for art's sake." To what extent do you agree with this statement? • Why do you think that Mao's <i>Talks</i> become so popular and influential?	Small Group Analysis: Students will discuss the reading and handout questions in segments as designated by the instructor (2-5 min—question dependent) scaffolding information continuously. In between student discussions the instructor will use Kagan strategies (cooperative discussion approaches, such as a timed "pair share" which has been successful at keeping a productive pace and thorough content coverage) to prompt student/cluster discussion findings. Instructors can predesignate pairs to share out in advance or use cold calling, popsicle sticks, or other methods to have student share out to the whole class. Using the prompted student findings the instructor will build on student understanding as a whole class addressing any gaps in knowledge. <u>Alternative instructor strategies as needed:</u> Journal response Use of graphic organizer Small group discussion—assigning tasks/roles Small group response collaboration Shoulder partner strategies Board work activity Peer Revision Calling on students <u>Class Discussion and Synthesis:</u> After students synthesize the information from the Mao's <i>Talks</i> the instructor will lecture any gaps in instruction then display at least two examples (example 1 & 2) of propaganda posters for image analysis (Process: What do I see? Why is it significant? How does this connect to Mao's <i>Talks</i>?) to provide examples for the following student assignment. (More Options) <u>Potential adaptations:</u> • Rephrasing questions or reorganize groups and partners • For Struggling Students: Use simplified graphic organizers to break down register content or rephrase guiding questions. • For Advanced Students: Challenge them to compare this authoritarian state with others. HW: Chinese Posters Analysis Student Choice Assignment

Lesson Narrative:**Pre-Teach**

- In the previous class students will have been assigned the excerpted reading of *Mao's Talks at the Yan'an (Yenan) Forum on Literature and Art* with the accompanying handout.

In class activity:

- Students will be organized in clusters (around 4 is preferable) and prompted by the instructor to begin discussion questions one and two. The instructor should set a timer for conversation to focus student discussion and preserve class time. The instructor will circulate the classroom monitoring student conversation.
- The instructor will direct student attention back to the entire classroom and students will share their cluster's findings through whatever prompting method the instructor sees fit (Kagan strategies, cold call, voluntary sharing, or predetermined based on instructor monitoring).
- The instructor will follow the previous sequence as desired or appropriate with the rest of the handout, scaffolding student understanding with additional questions as needed.

Synthesizing class learning:

- After building/affirming the appropriate understanding of Mao and Chinese Communist Party (CCP)'s vision for art and literature, the instructor will lecture on any details that need support to fill gaps in student learning.
- The instructor will then introduce the next assignment for students to take the understandings of Mao and the CCP's definition and goal of art and literature in the context of propaganda posters.
 - Students will be asked to evaluate at least two propaganda posters from [this](#) website. The posters must be from two different campaigns/eras of modern China within the years 1949-1976 (This assignment is best platformed on a digital format like Canvas and done on a software like Google Docs). The students will answer the following question set to complete their assignment:
 - Using this [link](#) scroll to the middle of the page and identify two campaigns from both the early (1949-1965) and late (1966-1976) campaigns under Mao (a total of two pieces of art to evaluate). In your completed assignment be sure to identify the artwork and include a small image and link of each of the two pieces selected at the beginning of each response. This assignment will synthesize your knowledge from the reading, class discussion, and the exemplars covered in class. You will follow the steps listed below where applicable and appropriate:
 - For Each Piece of Artwork:
 - What is the theme or motif (repeated imagery) of the artwork? What is the artist trying to say through the work?
 - What signs, symbols, or imagery help you know what that motif (theme) is? (describe in detail) See [this video](#) for assistance.
 - How are social or political statuses, genders, sexualities, age, nationalities, goals, or religions displayed in the artwork? What is the artwork's attitude toward the proletariat (workers, peasants, and soldiers, the petty bourgeoisie, and capitalists and landlords? How are enemies and allies marked visually?
 - Who was the intended audience for the artwork? Do you think this artwork effectively engaged its intended audience?
 - How does this artwork educate people on communism and Marxist theory?
 - To what extent does this artwork fulfill Mao's goals of art and literature described in the *Mao's Talks* at Yan'an?
 - Concluding thoughts:
 - How did the pieces of art make you feel?
 - To what extent does art like this still exist?
- Use the following rubric to evaluate the assignment:

Chinese Communist Propaganda Poster Assignment						
	'A' Range: 10 Pts	'B' Range: 8 Pts	'C' Range: 7 Pts	'D' Range: 6 Pts	'F' Range: ≤ 5 Pts	Points Earned
<u>Focus and Organization:</u> Composition skills including a clear and thought-provoking analysis and supporting argument.	Full marks will demonstrate excellent composition skills including a clear and thought-provoking thesis and supporting argument.	The essay will contain above average composition skills, including an identifiable thesis, although development may be insufficient and diction and style may not be consistently clear and effective.	Essays will demonstrate competent composition skills including adequate development and organization, although the development of ideas may be trite, assumptions may be unsupported in more than one area, the thesis may be weakly developed or not identifiable.	This paper will be an inadequately argued essay that possesses serious flaws in either the clarity of discussion, the development of ideas, or organization.	5 and below. Assignments will be given this grade for writing that substantially fails to meet the minimum parameters of the assignment or violate the standards of academic integrity.	
<u>Objectives:</u> Accomplishing a lively and convincing analysis that covers the objectives/goals of the assignment.	This mark includes lively and convincing analysis as well as a paper that completely answers the question of the assignment/achieving all the objects in a convincing manner.	The analysis is mostly lively and/or convincing and accomplishes the vast majority, but not all the objectives.	The analysis may be somewhat lively and/or convincing and accomplishes most but not all the objectives.	The analysis may be both lacking essential elements and/or be lacking arguments and/or analysis.	5 and below. This will be given for assignments that substantially fail to meet the minimum parameters or violate the standards of academic integrity.	
<u>Content Knowledge:</u> Incorporating enlightening, correct, and germane content knowledge.	Full marks will demonstrate the incorporation of germane content knowledge from readings, class discussion, lecture, and other materials.	Content knowledge is above average and incorporated, although there may be some inconsistencies or inaccurate information.	Content knowledge is adequate although there may be a lack of support, connection, or accuracy.	Content knowledge is inadequate and has serious flaws in accuracy and/or connection.	5 and below. This will be given for assignments that substantially fail to meet the minimum parameters or violate the standards of academic integrity.	
<u>Mechanics:</u> This section concerns the mechanics of the paper including, but not limited to, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and citation (Chicago).	Perfect or near perfect mechanics including spelling, punctuation, and citation.	Shows competence in the use of mechanics (spelling, punctuation, citation, etc.).	The diction and syntax may not be clear and effective. Minimally accomplishes the goals of the assignment.	Diction, syntax, and mechanics may seriously affect clarity. Fails to fulfill the goals of the assignment.	5 and below. This will be given for papers that substantially fail to meet the minimum parameters of the assignment or violate the standards of academic integrity.	
Comments:						Total Points: /40

Using the provided and appropriate reading, please focus on the themes, concepts, and ideas that are essential to the questions found below. Using your Golden Ticket annotation & commenting skills, please be sure to annotate the reading for the following things:

1. Vocabulary (Green)
2. Bold Assertions
3. Central Ideas
4. Supporting Details
5. Self-Created Questions

Subtopic: Excerpts from the Talks at Yan'an (Yenan) Forum on Literature & Art

- ✓ Analyze Mao's conception and use of propaganda in communist China.
- ✓ Evaluate the role and application of art, literature, and propaganda in communist China.

1. Determine the purpose of Mao's forum at Yan'an by completing the following sentence stem: "The purpose of our meeting today is...":

2. Using the graphic organizer below, complete the prompts to better understand the problems Mao perceives in art and literature. In the top bubble of each prompt, rephrase Mao's problem into your own words. In the space below each prompt, explain Mao's proposed solution.

"The problem of class stand...":

•

"The problem of attitude...":

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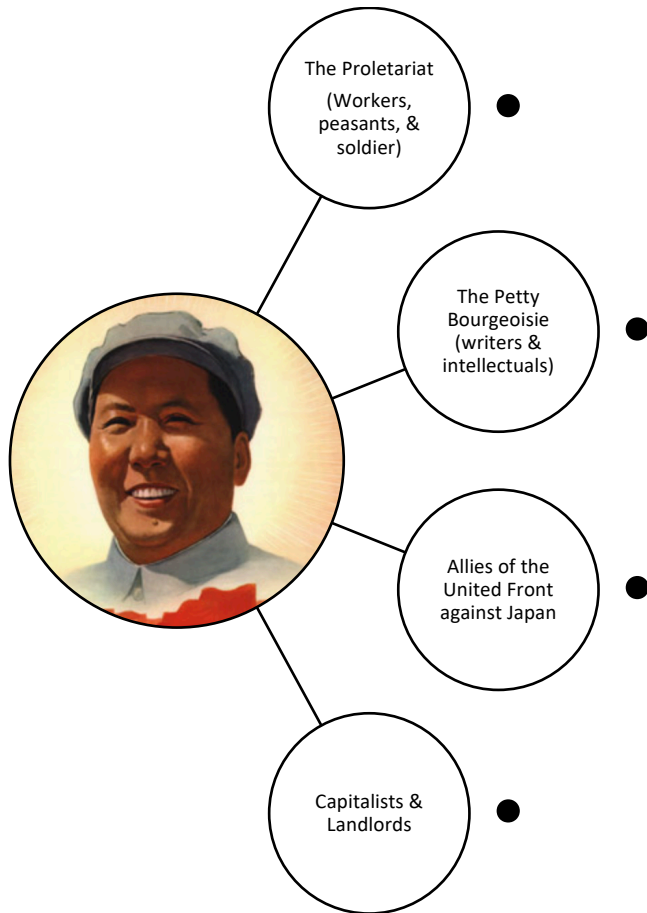
"The problem of audience...":

•

The problem of study:

•

3. Using the graphic organizer below, describe how Mao's *Talks* reflect his attitude toward the following groups:



4. Evaluate Mao's problems with art and literature. Which problem was the most important? Justify your response with evidence from the text.

5. Evaluate Mao's proposed solutions for art and literature. Which solution was the hardest to achieve? Justify your response with evidence from the text.
6. Mao stated that there was no "art for art's sake." To what extent do you agree with this statement?

7. Why do you think that Mao's *Talks* become so popular and influential?