

Trajectories of revolutionary ideology: Inquiry into the paper currency design of the Chinese Soviet Republic under the Chinese Communist Party (1931-1937)

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of currency design in the Chinese Soviet Republic as a tool for ideological dissemination and cultural transformation. By analyzing the integration of Soviet Socialist Realism and traditional Chinese artistic elements, the study highlights how visual strategies in currency design were used to reinforce Communist values and reshape national identity. Comparative analysis with the currency designs of the contemporaneous Republic of China, led by the Kuomintang, underscores differences in political and cultural messaging. This research emphasizes the strategic use of visual culture to influence public perception and behavior, illustrating the potency of art in political and social contexts. The findings suggest that currency design can be an effective medium for ideological indoctrination and offers insights into the broader significance of revolutionary art forms in shaping collective consciousness.

Keywords: 1930s, design criticism, design history society, Chinese designers, cultural nationalism

Introduction

The nexus between political upheaval and cultural expression remains a pivotal area of inquiry within the discipline of art history and visual studies (Tagg 1992). This paper seeks to explore this interconnection through the lens of paper currency design during a critical period in Chinese history—the era of the Chinese Soviet Republic (CSP). Under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the design of paper money was not merely a utilitarian necessity for economic transactions but also a carefully crafted artifact imbued with rich ideological significance (Chong Kun Yoon 1968).

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The Chinese Soviet Republic (1931-37), a nascent state born out of revolutionary fervor and political strife, utilized every facet of cultural production to cement its ideologies among its populace (C. K. Yoon). As a key component of the CSP's revolutionary journey, researchers have tended to study the CSP from political, economic, and social perspectives, with very little mention of the banknotes issued by the CSP (Marc Oppen 2018). Paper currency, a pervasive and accessible medium, emerged as a crucial vehicle for disseminating revolutionary ethos (Ernst 2014). The aesthetic and symbolic choices made in these currency designs provide a unique window into the ways in which the CCP sought to communicate its legitimacy and revolutionary ideals (Wambui Mwangi 2002). This paper aims to decode these visual strategies, examining how the elements of design were employed not just for their functional value but as potent tools of political and ideological expression.

This investigation is anchored in the theoretical frameworks of Cultural Materialism and Artistic Semiotics, which together enhance our understanding of how material culture and semiotic processes reflect, inform, and shape societal conditions and ideological constructs. Cultural Materialism, developed by Raymond Williams, asserts the imperative role of material cultural forms (such as currency) in both reflecting and shaping societal structures and conditions (Prendergast 1995). Artistic Semiotics, particularly the contributions of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, provides a methodology for analyzing how signs within these currency designs function as conveyors of meaning, embedding complex messages about authority, identity, and collective memory within seemingly mundane objects (Chandler 1994; Skaggs 2017). By employing these frameworks, this paper will dissect the layers of meaning embedded in the paper currency of the Chinese Soviet Republic, exploring how these designs served as a canvas for ideological instruction and a mirror reflecting the turbulent socio-political landscape of the time. The ultimate goal is to illuminate how art and design, as expressed through the medium of paper currency, function as critical dialogues between the state and its citizens, encoding and reinforcing the narratives of power and revolution.

This introductory exploration sets the stage for a detailed analysis of the specific design elements of the currency, their historical and political contexts, and their broader cultural implications. Through this lens, the paper will contribute to a deeper understanding of the

intersection between art, politics, and society during one of the most tumultuous periods in Chinese history.

Historical and ideological contextualization

The emergence of the Chinese Soviet Republic marked a pivotal intersection of political ideology and artistic expression, which profoundly influenced its cultural outputs, notably in the design of currency (C. K. Yoon). This section provides a critical examination of the ideological underpinnings and their manifestations in the visual culture of the period, particularly through the medium of currency. The ideological framework of the Chinese Soviet Republic was steeply embedded in Marxist-Leninist thought, advocating for a radical restructuring of society through proletarian leadership (M. Oppen). This revolutionary philosophy was not merely a political doctrine but also a cultural strategy that permeated all forms of artistic expression (Bowler 1991). The currency design, in this context, functioned as a visual manifesto, encapsulating the ideals of revolution and communal solidarity (Kirshner 1997). Artistic elements were employed not as mere decoration, but as semiotic tools loaded with political significance (Bal and Bryson 1991; Murray Edelman 1995).

Under the aegis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the state's approach to cultural production was rigorously controlled and directed towards serving the revolutionary cause (Shambaugh 2008). The CCP's influence extended deeply into the realms of visual arts, where currency design was orchestrated as a form of state-sponsored art (Wang 2007). The party leveraged its cultural apparatus to ensure that every element of currency design adhered to a strict ideological line, effectively making artists and designers instruments of state ideology (Gladston 2014). The integration of art and politics was meticulously managed through a network of cultural committees and propaganda units, which dictated the artistic narratives to be followed (Richard Curt Kraus 2004). The currency thus became a curated exhibit of socialist realism, a style characterized by glorified depictions of the working class and idealized portrayals of the party's leaders. This approach not only reinforced the visual iconography of socialism but also aligned public perception with the state's ideological objectives (Wyatt 2008). In the broader strategy of statecraft, currency was utilized as a primary vehicle for ideological dissemination, embedding complex narratives into the daily lives of citizens (Cohen 2018). Every banknote issued was a piece of propaganda, a miniaturized canvas

where art and ideology converged to foster a collective identity and educate the populace on the virtues of the socialist path (Siegenthaler 2016). The design features of the currency—such as the use of proletarian motifs, revolutionary red and other symbolic colors, and inscriptions espousing unity and strength—were not arbitrarily chosen. They were the result of careful artistic deliberation intended to communicate specific political messages and values. The iconography used in these designs drew from a deep well of Soviet-inspired socialist realism, adapted to reflect the unique cultural and political landscape of China (Shen and Xia 2016).

Deconstructing the aesthetics of currency design

On 7 July 1932, the National Bank of the Chinese Soviet Republic issued a unified series of paper currency, creatively spearheaded by designer Huang Yaguang (John E Sandrock). This launch included various denominations, each intricately crafted to embed political ideologies through symbolic artistry.

The currency series featured denominations of 1 Yuan, 5 Jiao, 2 Jiao, 1 Jiao, and 5 Fen (Raeburn 1937). Notably, each banknote carried the Cyrillic signatures of Mao Zemin and Deng Zihui—key figures in the bank and finance ministry—lending a personal touch that connected the currency directly with the leadership, enhancing the notes' authenticity and authority. The consistent inclusion of their portraits further personalized the regime's message, creating a visual link between the state's economic promises and its leaders.

5 Fen Note: This note is distinguished by its dual-color scheme—emerald green and brown—each choice resonant with earthy stability and the vibrancy of new growth, symbolizing the regeneration under Communist governance. The depiction of the Red Army on the march, framed by a world map, is a powerful visual narrative that speaks to the international aspirations of the Communist movement and its grounded, mobilized efforts within China. The use of “Bank of the Chinese Soviet Republic” at the top anchors the note's legitimacy, while the promise at the bottom to exchange paper for silver coins reassures its value.



An aged and worn 5 Fen banknote from the Chinese Soviet Republic, featuring faded green and gray tones with Chinese text and serial number D 959354 prominently displayed. The note shows signs of significant wear and tear, indicating its historical usage.

Figure 1 Caption: 5Fen, Photographed in the author’s personal collection

1 Jiao and 2 Jiao Notes: These notes are marked by their rich, deep hues—maroon and blue, respectively—colors traditionally associated with nobility and trustworthiness. The 1 Jiao note features a central floral pattern that subtly alludes to cultural heritage and renewal, whereas the 2 Jiao note boldly displays a portrait of Lenin, emphasizing alignment with Soviet Communism and its ideological heroes. Such imagery not only decorates but declares the socio-political lineage and commitment of the regime.



An image featuring two historical banknotes from the Chinese Soviet Republic. The top note is a 1 Jiao banknote, colored in deep red with intricate patterns and Chinese script, displaying the denomination prominently in the center. The bottom note is a 2 Jiao banknote featuring a detailed portrait of Sun Yat-sen surrounded by ornate decorative borders, predominantly in blue. Both notes show signs of wear and age, indicative of their historical and monetary significance.

Figure 2 Caption: 1 Jiao, 2 Jiao. Photographed in the author’s personal collection

5 Jiao Note: Featuring an eight-petaled plum blossom, a symbol of resilience and renewal in Chinese culture, set against a deep purple background, this design element bridges traditional Chinese symbolism with the revolutionary context. The surrounding world map and denomination suggest a global perspective and the expansive reach of the state’s ambitions.



An image of a historical 5 Jiao banknote from the Chinese Soviet Republic, featuring ornate black and white patterns with Chinese characters prominently displayed. The banknote has a central floral medallion and is bordered with intricate designs and denominational numerals. The serial number 'B 882577' is visible at the top. The note shows signs of wear and age, reflecting its historical significance

Figure 3 Caption: 5 Jiao. Photographed in the author’s personal collection

1 Yuan Note: The most significant denomination, colored in maroon, prominently features Lenin’s portrait alongside the denomination in large script, reiterating the currency’s connection to broader Communist movements. The detailed back design in green, featuring intricate patterns and the prominent display of the denomination in English, underscores the note’s dual function as both a local economic instrument and a piece of international propaganda.



An image of a historical 1 Yuan banknote from the Chinese Soviet Republic, prominently featuring a detailed portrait of Lenin in the center, surrounded by intricate patterns and Chinese characters. The banknote is colored in shades of brown and beige, showing significant signs of wear and aging. The serial number '688857' is printed at the bottom, and traditional Chinese decorative elements enhance the visual appeal of the note, reflecting its historical and monetary significance

Figure 4 Caption: 1Yuan. Photographed in the author’s personal collection

The currency of the Chinese Soviet Republic, notably complex in its production, reveals a unique intersection of technical constraints, artistic choices, and ideological imperatives. The diverse textual variations in characters across different denominations highlight a nuanced approach to typography that reflects both practical limitations and deliberate design choices. For example, characters such as “中,” “苏,” “维,” “国,” “银,” and “行” exhibit significant differences in stroke orientation and style. Some characters appear upright, while others tilt slightly forward or backward, suggesting variability in the printing setup or manual adjustments. This variability not only addresses the pragmatic aspects of printing technology of the time but also underscores an artistic intention to impart a subtle dynamism within the static medium of paper currency. Further exploring the character “苏,” variations such as connected or separate initial strokes and inconsistent lengths and angles of diagonal strokes reveal an artisanal approach to each batch of currency printed. These variations are not mere inconsistencies but rather artistic nuances that could be interpreted as a reflection of the individuality of each print run, which in the broader context of art criticism, can be seen as an effort to humanize and personalize the currency during a tumultuous political era. The use of prefix letters in the currency’s serial numbers, such as A, B, C, D, E for the five fen notes, and varying across other denominations, serves a functional purpose due to the limitations of the six-digit numbering machines. However, from an artistic standpoint, these prefix letters add another layer of complexity and aesthetic differentiation to the banknotes. Each letter not only extends the serial number but also introduces a textual element that interacts with the other visual components on the note, enhancing its visual hierarchy and the interplay of textual and graphic elements.

In terms of color variation, the banknotes showcase a range of hues that were initially sourced through covert operations from Nationalist territories and later produced locally under increasingly difficult conditions. The variation in ink colors—from deep greens and maroons to lighter tones—reflects not only the availability of resources but also the intention to use color as a means of visual distinction and ideological expression. The fluctuating shades could be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the instability and flux of the era, with each hue capturing a moment in time within the broader narrative of the Chinese Soviet Republic. The signature variations of key figures such as Deng

Zihui and Mao Zemin, which differ across denominations and even within the same denomination, add a layer of authenticity and security to the currency, while also serving as a focal point for artistic examination. The slight variations in signature placement, orientation, and spacing contribute to the overall aesthetic and functional integrity of the banknotes, offering insights into the meticulous yet variable processes involved in their creation.

Over the same period, The currency produced by the major official banks of the Republic of China, such as the Bank of China, Communications Bank, Central Bank, and Farmers Bank of China, displayed a sophisticated blend of Chinese calligraphy on the front and English on the reverse, showcasing the cultural penetration of Western influences and the “West learning spreading to the East (徐滄水 1924).” This typographical choice was emblematic of the era’s globalization and reflected the influence of Western powers on China’s economy. In contrast, the Chinese Soviet Republic’s currency predominantly featured Chinese calligraphy with minimal use of English, aiming to resonate more directly with local revolutionary sentiments and less with international or bourgeois influences.

In terms of layout, the Republic of China’s notes adhered to a symmetric design centered around a vertical axis, creating a balanced and harmonious visual appeal that conveyed stability and order. This symmetry was enhanced by the strategic placement of text and numerals in varied arrangements—horizontal, vertical, and diagonal—to maintain dynamic and engaging compositions (刘明刚 2011). On the other hand, the Chinese Soviet Republic’s currency exhibited more varied and complex layouts that reflected the tumultuous conditions under which they were produced, often eschewing symmetry for more pragmatic and revolutionary-themed designs that prioritized ideological content over aesthetic balance.

The decorative patterns on the Republic of China’s banknotes frequently utilized European-style filigrees and were characterized by advanced color gradations, a testament to the sophisticated steel engraving techniques employed by Western companies that dominated banknote production (Purtle). These intricate patterns and the high quality of printing highlighted the technological prowess of Western printing capabilities. Conversely, the patterns and icons on the Chinese Soviet Republic banknotes were simpler and focused more on ideological symbolism such as hammers, sickles, and vignettes of

workers and soldiers. These designs were not only influenced by the limited printing resources but also by a deliberate choice to use the currency as a medium for spreading Communist propaganda.

In Color Schemes, The Republic of China's notes featured a rich palette of yellow-green, blue-purple, and dark red, with subtle gradients that were achievable through advanced Western printing technologies (C. Wang et al. 2021). These colors, along with their sophisticated application, indicated a level of monetary stability and internationalism. In stark contrast, the Chinese Soviet Republic used bold primary colors, particularly red to signify revolution and green for agriculture, applied in solid blocks to accommodate the less advanced local printing techniques available during that time. These colors were chosen for their strong symbolic meanings and ease of production under constrained conditions. For two currency designs of the same period, while the Republic of China aimed to project an image of stability, modernization, and international alignment, the Chinese Soviet Republic focused on mobilizing revolutionary spirit and resilience through more stark, symbolically rich designs. This analysis highlights the role of currency as a critical interface where art, technology, and politics intersect, shaping the public's interaction with and perception of the state's authority and ideological orientation.

Semiotics of rebellion: Encoding ideology through design

An in-depth investigation into the semiotic layers of currency design of the Chinese Soviet Republic reveals how symbols and motifs function as potent carriers of ideological narratives, intricately woven into the fabric of the currency. Currency, often a mundane aspect of daily life, is transformed into a dynamic tool for ideological expression in the hands of the Chinese Soviet Republic (M. Oppen). Each element—the choice of symbols, their placement, and the interplay between different motifs—carries specific ideological messages intended to resonate with and mobilize the populace. For instance, the consistent use of the hammer and sickle across various denominations is not merely symbolic of labor but serves as a unifying emblem of the alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry (Platoff 2020). This emblem is strategically placed to catch the eye, its placement on the currency acting as a constant reminder of the Communist commitment to these core classes (J. E. Sandrock). Further, the inclusion of portraits of key revolutionary leaders like Lenin not only personalizes the currency but also semiotically links the Soviet regime's current endeavors with a

broader historical narrative of revolutionary legitimacy and continuity (Getty 2013). They command respect and loyalty, serving as focal points that draw the user's gaze and, by extension, engagement with the ideological messages they embody. The scenes depicted on various notes—whether of military parades, agricultural labor, or industrial prowess—are carefully chosen to depict the ideal socialist state (C.Y. Zhang 2016). These scenes are encoded with aspirational narratives, each element crafted to depict the unity and strength of the collective effort. For instance, scenes of the Red Army not only highlight military might but also symbolize protection, security, and the defense of socialist values against external threats (Li 2007). The workers and peasants are depicted in robust health and in productive settings, symbolizing the promised prosperity under Communist governance (Dreyer 2018). The semiotic richness of these designs extends to the use of color and typography. The predominant use of red across the currency serves as a visual anchor, instantly associating the notes with Communist ideology, known for its association with revolution and the struggle for workers' rights. The typography, often bold and straightforward, enhances readability and impact, ensuring that the messages are clear and accessible.

Visual elements in currency, such as imagery, color, and typography, are not merely decorative; they are imbued with ideological significance, crafted to resonate with the collective consciousness of the society (Hymans 2004). In the context of the Chinese Soviet Republic, each element was carefully selected to project and reinforce the values and goals of the Communist regime. Imagery is a powerful communicator of ideals. The depiction of industrious workers, peasants in fields, and soldiers in unison not only illustrates the regime's commitment to these social classes but also promotes an ideal of collective labor and unity. These images are emblematic, representing the backbone of the Communist ethos. They are designed to inspire pride and a sense of belonging among the citizens, continually reminding them of the regime's focus on communal progress and strength through unity. Color plays a critical role in visual communication, carrying significant psychological impact. The predominant use of red across the currency is a strategic choice, symbolizing revolution, vigor, and the sacrifice of the masses. This use of red not only aligns with the global communist movement's color symbolism but also serves to instantly evoke an emotional response from the viewer, connecting them to the revolutionary spirit.

Additionally, the incorporation of more subdued tones, such as greens and browns, reinforces themes of growth and stability, grounding the revolutionary messages in a sense of enduring progress and natural renewal. Typography in the currency also contributes to the construction and communication of revolutionary ideals. The use of bold, clear typefaces ensures that the messages are legible and authoritative, conveying a sense of certainty and order. The typography often includes slogans and mottos that encapsulate key communist ideologies, designed to educate, mobilize, and reinforce the collective identity and mission of the state. This straightforward, impactful use of text helps unify the visual message across the various denominations of the currency, making the ideological narrative accessible and omnipresent.

Visual strategies in currency design, such as the use of specific symbols, colors, and imagery, are crafted not only to carry aesthetic value but to embed deep-seated messages that resonate with the viewer's daily experiences (Gruber and Haugbolle 2013). These elements become tools for ideological indoctrination, subtly influencing perceptions and behaviors through constant interaction. Symbolic Imagery plays a pivotal role in this process. By repeatedly exposing citizens to images of collective labor, military readiness, and leadership figures, the currency reinforces the values of unity, diligence, and loyalty to the Communist cause. Such imagery helps to normalize these ideals, embedding them into the fabric of everyday life. Over time, these images help to shift public perception, aligning it more closely with the values depicted. For instance, the depiction of industrious peasants and workers not only highlights the dignity of labor but also promotes the Communist ideal of a classless society where everyone contributes to and benefits from collective efforts. Color Psychology is another powerful tool in shaping perceptions. The strategic use of red, as previously discussed, invokes feelings of excitement, urgency, and passion, which are aligned with revolutionary activities (Rossi 2019). This constant visual cue helps to keep the spirit of revolution alive, maintaining a sense of ongoing struggle and vigilance among the populace. Subtler colors like green and brown, associated with growth and the earth, reinforce messages of fertility, stability, and rebirth, suggesting that the revolutionary path will lead to prosperity and renewal. Typography and textual content in currency design also contribute significantly to shaping ideological perceptions (W. Mwangi). The bold and clear fonts used for slogans and

denominational values are not just practical for ensuring legibility but also serve as assertive reminders of the state's messages. The presence of these texts in everyday transactions ensures that the state's ideals are regularly communicated to the public, reinforcing the authoritative voice of the government and its omnipresence in daily economic activities.

Through these visual strategies, the currency of the Chinese Soviet Republic serves as a continuous medium of ideological expression. Each element works synergistically to reinforce the Communist narrative, subtly influencing the public's perceptions and aligning them more closely with the state's goals. This transformation of perception through visual design is not merely about changing how people see their currency but about reshaping how they view their society, their roles within it, and their collective future.

Synthesis of artistic and ideological influences

The currency of the Chinese Soviet Republic serves as a rich canvas for the interplay of external and domestic artistic influences, embodying a complex synthesis that reflects both global ideological movements and deeply rooted cultural traditions. Externally, the influence of Soviet art, particularly the Socialist Realism style, is paramount in the visual strategy of the Chinese Soviet Republic's currency (Rusnock 2002). Socialist Realism, an art form that emerged as the state-sanctioned style in the Soviet Union, emphasizes heroic portrayals of workers and peasants, depicting them in idealized, often monumental forms that symbolize collective strength and socialist ideals (Karpova 2015). This style's adoption in the currency design was not merely an aesthetic decision but a calculated move to align the visual narrative of the Chinese Soviet Republic with that of the broader Communist bloc. The imagery of Lenin and the ubiquitous hammer and sickle iconography further reinforce this Soviet influence, embedding symbols of communist solidarity and revolutionary zeal into the daily transactions of Chinese citizens (Barnes 2010). On the domestic front, the currency design incorporates traditional Chinese artistic elements that resonate with local cultural sensibilities and historical continuity (P. Gladston). This strategic integration serves to localize the communist ideology, rendering it more palatable and relevant to the Chinese populace. Traditional motifs, such as pastoral scenes reflecting agricultural life and the use of specific color schemes that echo historical Chinese art, play a critical role in this cultural

bridging (Tang 2015). Additionally, the employment of Chinese calligraphy in the currency's typography not only adds aesthetic value but also connects the modern revolutionary messages with ancient forms of Chinese expression, revered for their artistic and cultural significance. The convergence of these external and domestic artistic influences creates a nuanced visual discourse within the currency's design. This discourse is a deliberate fusion, aimed at crafting a visual identity that both communicates the revolutionary messages of the Chinese Soviet Republic and respects the cultural heritage of its people. The resulting design is a sophisticated amalgam, where Soviet artistic principles meet traditional Chinese aesthetics, creating a unique ideological and visual synthesis. This deep integration of art forms serves multiple functions: it legitimizes the new regime by aligning it with a powerful international movement, it educates and mobilizes the populace by embedding ideological symbols in everyday objects, and it maintains a continuity with the past, thus easing the cultural transition to a new social order. Through this lens, the currency transcends its role as a mere medium of economic exchange and becomes a vital tool in the cultural and political indoctrination process, illustrating how design and art are employed not just to decorate but to persuade, unify, and transform a society.

The synthesis of artistic influences in the currency design of the Chinese Soviet Republic not only creates a unique visual lexicon but also reflects broader trends in political art and propaganda, particularly during times of intense ideological dissemination and nation-building. This insight into the synthesis provides a deeper understanding of how visual elements are leveraged in political contexts globally, highlighting the strategic use of art as a medium for shaping public consciousness and reinforcing regime legitimacy (M. Edelman). The convergence of Soviet Socialist Realism with traditional Chinese artistic elements in the currency design illustrates a broader trend in political art where art is employed as a vehicle for ideological affirmation and a tool for socio-political engagement (Gill 2011). Socialist Realism, with its emphasis on the idealized portrayal of workers and heroic narratives, was a dominant artistic strategy used across the Communist world to promote socialist values (Gutkin 1999). It aimed to inspire the working class and project an image of a progressive, industrially advancing society (Cai 2016). This approach to art aligns with broader trends in political propaganda that seek to mobilize the populace by presenting an aspirational vision of the

future, often characterized by unity, prosperity, and collective effort (Stremlau 2011). Incorporating local cultural motifs and traditional aesthetics, as seen in the Chinese Soviet currency, reflects a trend in political art to contextualize revolutionary ideals within the familiar visual and cultural frameworks of a nation (Z. Zhang 2018). This strategy is not unique to China but can be observed in various revolutionary movements worldwide, where the integration of indigenous elements into political propaganda helps to root international ideologies in local contexts, making them more palatable and relatable to the target audience (Wehrey and Boukhars 2019). For instance, during the same period, other revolutionary states and movements, from Cuba to Vietnam, also incorporated local cultural references and nationalist themes into their propaganda to strengthen the resonance of their messages with their respective domestic audiences (Fernandes 2006).

Moreover, the use of currency as a medium for such artistic and ideological expression is indicative of a broader trend where everyday objects are transformed into conduits of political messaging (Remillard 2007). Currency, because of its universal necessity and constant circulation, serves as an ideal vehicle for this purpose (Kindleberger 2005). This approach is reflective of a larger strategy within political propaganda to permeate everyday life with ideological narratives, ensuring that the political messages are not confined to public speeches or posters but are integrated into daily transactions and interactions (Desan 2014). This synthesis in the Chinese Soviet Republic's currency design thus not only underscores the adaptive and integrative strategies of political regimes to embed ideology through art but also highlights the role of art in constructing and affirming national identity under new regimes. It exemplifies how political art evolves from purely aesthetic expressions to become powerful tools of political engagement and social engineering, reflecting and shaping the socio-political narratives that define eras of transformation. Understanding this synthesis within the broader context of political art and propaganda provides valuable insights into the mechanisms through which art influences public perception and behavior, illustrating the potent intersection of art, politics, and daily life in shaping collective consciousness and historical legacy.

Cultural repercussions and artistic aftermath

The introduction of currency that bore the marks of both revolutionary symbolism and traditional Chinese artistic motifs played a significant role in normalizing the visual elements of the Communist ideology among the general populace (R. C. Kraus). The constant circulation of these banknotes meant that every segment of society repeatedly engaged with the imagery and messages they carried, thereby embedding these elements within the collective consciousness. Over time, this repetitive exposure did not merely influence the aesthetic preferences of the people but also subtly aligned their cultural identity with the values and goals of the Communist regime (Doctoroff 2012). The currency's design, by incorporating elements of Socialist Realism—a style characterized by its didactic emphasis on depicting idealized versions of workers and peasants in heroic scenarios—alongside traditional Chinese art forms, played a dual role. It acted as a bridge between the revolutionary new and the culturally familiar. This bridging was crucial in a country with deep historical and cultural roots like China, where a sudden break from the past could have led to cultural dissonance. Instead, the artistic strategies employed in the currency design fostered a sense of continuity, making the revolutionary ideals feel like a natural progression of the Chinese cultural narrative rather than an abrupt imposition. The currency impacted the broader artistic landscape by setting a precedent for the types of imagery and themes that were considered culturally valuable and politically acceptable. Artists, designers, and other cultural producers, seeing the motifs and styles endorsed on the currency, were likely influenced in their own creations, contributing to a cultural shift towards more ideologically aligned art forms (Keane 2013). This shift was significant not only in the visual arts but also in literature, performing arts, and public discourse, gradually transforming the cultural landscape to reflect the new socialist reality. In terms of national cultural identity, the currency helped forge a new collective identity centered around the values of communal labor, sacrifice, and revolutionary zeal. These values, repeatedly reinforced through daily economic interactions via the currency, became cornerstones of the national identity under the Communist regime (Cooper 2009). The integration of these values with traditional cultural symbols ensured that the transition in national identity was both profound and nuanced, reflecting a complex interplay of revolution and continuity.

Reflecting on the legacy of the currency designs of the Chinese Soviet Republic provides valuable insights into the trajectory of Chinese artistic expressions post-revolution (Hui 2016). These designs, which seamlessly blended ideological symbolism with traditional artistic motifs, have left an indelible mark on the evolution of art and design in post-revolutionary China, influencing various forms of cultural expressions and artistic practices. The integration of political and traditional elements in the currency designs during the Chinese Soviet Republic period set a precedent for subsequent artistic endeavors in China. Post-revolution, as China embarked on constructing a new socialist society, the themes and stylistic approaches initially popularized through these currency designs continued to resonate (Lin 2017). The emphasis on Socialist Realism, which prioritized depictions of the proletariat in an idealized manner, became a dominant artistic style not only in visual arts but also in literature, cinema, and other cultural productions (Gao 2011). This style was instrumental in shaping the narrative of a new China, portraying it as a unified, industrious, and forward-moving nation.

Moreover, the legacy of these currency designs is evident in the way they helped to standardize certain symbols and motifs that became synonymous with Chinese identity and national pride. For instance, the recurring imagery of workers, peasants, and soldiers—originally propagated through the currency—became staple icons in Chinese propaganda art. These images served as powerful tools for instilling a collective memory and identity, reinforcing the Communist Party's ideals and the virtues of socialism. The currency designs influenced the broader visual language of China by encouraging a blend of accessibility and didacticism in artistic productions. The clear, bold, and direct style seen in the currency's typography and graphic elements has permeated various forms of public and commercial art, from street banners to educational posters, and even into contemporary digital media. This style emphasizes clarity and message-driven artwork, which continues to be a significant aspect of Chinese visual culture. The impact of these designs also extends to how art is used as a vehicle for education and ideological indoctrination. The strategic use of art to convey political messages in the currency paved the way for more expansive and systematic approaches to using art in public life, promoting state narratives and values. This approach has had lasting implications for how art is perceived and utilized in Chinese society, maintaining a tight interweaving of art with political and social

functions. In reflection, the legacy of the currency designs from the Chinese Soviet Republic era is profound, influencing the trajectory of Chinese artistic expressions in significant ways. These designs helped mold a visual culture that is uniquely Chinese, yet distinctly shaped by the revolutionary context from which it emerged. They not only reflect the historical and cultural transformations of their time but also continue to influence contemporary artistic and cultural practices in China, demonstrating the enduring power of art as a mediator of social values and national identity.

Concluding reflections

The synthesis of key research findings from the analysis of currency designs during the Chinese Soviet Republic era provides a comprehensive understanding of the intersection of art and politics, elucidating how deeply intertwined these domains are, especially in contexts of significant socio-political change. This synthesis reveals the multifaceted role of art in political discourse, not just as a reflection of cultural and political dynamics but as an active participant in shaping and propagating ideological narratives.

Art as a tool for ideological dissemination: The designs of the Chinese Soviet Republic's currency illustrate how art can be strategically utilized to disseminate ideological content. By embedding socialist symbols and revolutionary motifs within everyday objects like currency, the regime was able to ensure constant exposure to its ideological messages, thereby normalizing and reinforcing its political ideals across the populace. This use of art transforms mundane transactions into opportunities for ideological reinforcement, showcasing the potent capabilities of visual art as a medium for continuous political communication.

Cultural synthesis and identity formation: The integration of traditional Chinese elements with Soviet-influenced Socialist Realism within the currency's design highlights art's role in cultural synthesis and identity formation. This blending serves to localize broader socialist ideals, making them more accessible and acceptable to the Chinese public by linking new ideologies with familiar cultural narratives. Such strategic cultural synthesis not only aids in easing the transition to new political regimes but also plays a critical role in shaping a unified national identity that aligns with the state's goals.

Legacy and influence on subsequent artistic practices: The legacy of these currency designs extends beyond their immediate temporal

context, influencing subsequent generations of artistic expression in China. The aesthetic choices and thematic focuses that were popularized through these designs have echoed through decades, influencing public art, propaganda, and even commercial art practices. This enduring influence underscores the deep impact that politically driven art can have on the broader artistic landscape, shaping aesthetic norms and expectations well into the future.

Reflecting on the insights garnered from the study of the currency designs of the Chinese Soviet Republic, several future directions for research within design history and political iconography become evident. These directions not only promise to expand our understanding of the complex interplay between art and politics but also aim to uncover broader cultural and historical implications of design in various political contexts. Firstly, future research could benefit from comparative studies that examine currency designs or other forms of political iconography across different political regimes. Such studies would provide insights into how different political systems utilize visual culture to reinforce authority, disseminate ideology, and foster national identity. Comparing regimes with differing ideologies, such as authoritarian versus democratic, could particularly illuminate how governmental structures influence artistic expressions and the dissemination of political messages. Additionally, as digital media continue to dominate visual culture, research could explore how the transition from physical to digital formats affects the creation and circulation of political iconography. This includes investigating the role of digital currencies, social media, and online platforms in shaping contemporary political narratives and how these platforms redefine interactions between art, politics, and the public. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that track changes in political iconography over time within a single nation to understand how shifts in political landscapes affect artistic expressions and national identity. Such studies could provide deeper insights into the dynamics of cultural resilience and transformation, especially in nations experiencing rapid political changes or cultural amalgamation. Furthermore, incorporating ethnographic methods to study how different populations perceive and interact with political iconography can yield nuanced understandings of the impact of design on public consciousness. This approach would consider factors such as age, education, and cultural background to determine how various groups interpret and engage with the symbols and motifs presented in political

art. This reflective discussion on the future directions for research within design history and political iconography highlights the need for a multidisciplinary approach that integrates art history, political science, sociology, and digital media studies to fully understand the potency and implications of visual culture in the political domain.

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