REVOLUTIONARY WOMEN: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF FEMALE IMAGERY IN CULTURAL REVOLUTION POSTERS FROM AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

MULHERES REVOLUCIONÁRIAS: UMA ANÁLISE SEMIÓTICA DO IMAGER FEMININO EM CARTAZES DA REVOLUÇÃO CULTURAL A PARTIR DE UMA PERSPECTIVA EDUCACIONAL

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Abstract: *This study investigates the semiotic representation of female figures in Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) propaganda posters, emphasizing their pedagogical function within the ideological and political education system of Maoist China. By applying semiotic theory, the research explores how visual elements in educational propaganda shaped collective consciousness, transmitted state-sanctioned gender norms, and served as tools of political socialization. It reveals that women were depicted as revolutionaries, labor models, and political participants—symbolizing socialist ideals of gender equality and collective identity. These portrayals functioned not merely as artistic expressions but as educational instruments designed to cultivate ideological alignment, behavioral norms, and moral exemplars for both youth and adults. The study fills a gap in previous research by analyzing female imagery through the lens of educational semiotics, highlighting how visual propaganda reinforced sociopolitical values and shaped public understanding of gender and civic responsibility during a transformative period in Chinese educational history.*

Keywords: *Women. Imagery. Cultural Revolution, Education*

Resumo: *Este estudo investiga a representação semiótica de figuras femininas em cartazes de propaganda da Revolução Cultural (1966-1976), enfatizando sua função pedagógica dentro do sistema educacional ideológico e político da China maoísta. Aplicando a teoria semiótica, a pesquisa explora como elementos visuais na propaganda educacional moldaram a consciência coletiva, transmitiram normas de gênero sancionadas pelo Estado e serviram como ferramentas de socialização política. Revela que as mulheres eram retratadas como revolucionárias, modelos de trabalho e participantes políticas — simbolizando ideais socialistas de igualdade de gênero e identidade coletiva. Essas representações funcionavam não apenas como expressões artísticas, mas como instrumentos educacionais projetados para cultivar alinhamento ideológico, normas comportamentais e exemplos morais para jovens e adultos. O estudo preenche uma lacuna em pesquisas anteriores ao analisar o imaginário feminino através das lentes da semiótica educacional, destacando como a propaganda visual reforçou valores sociopolíticos e moldou a compreensão pública de gênero e responsabilidade cívica durante um período transformador na história educacional chinesa.*

Palavras-chave: *Mulheres. Imaginário. Revolução Cultural, Educação*

Introduction

Historical Context and Ideological Education

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a period marked by mass political mobilization and ideological transformation, during which educational content extended beyond schools into public spaces. Propaganda posters, inspired by Mao Zedong's revolutionary directives, became key vehicles for disseminating moral education and revolutionary literacy (Cushing, 2007; Clark, 2008). Through visual metaphors and simplified narratives, posters taught values such as collectivism, class struggle, and loyalty to the Party, aligning closely with the national curriculum and political education campaigns (King, 2010). Borrowing from Soviet visual pedagogy, the Chinese Communist Party used posters to create a unified ideological environment that transcended traditional schooling systems.

Propaganda Posters as Educational Instruments

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), propaganda posters functioned not only as tools for political messaging but also as powerful educational instruments embedded in the broader system of ideological instruction. These posters served as a form of visual pedagogy, designed to inculcate Maoist values, promote political consciousness, and reshape public understanding of social roles—particularly gender roles—through accessible and emotionally resonant imagery (Valjakka, 2005; Cushing, 2007; Pozzi, 2018).

A central feature of these posters was the pervasive use of red, symbolizing revolution, ideological purity, and collective unity. This "Red Sea" of color became an educational visual code—instantly recognizable and emotionally charged—that reinforced loyalty and revolutionary zeal. As a non-verbal communicative strategy, the color red also became a form of emotional education, shaping the viewer's affective relationship to political ideals.

The visual construction of these posters followed the "high, big, and complete" aesthetic model, portraying figures—both male and female—as heroic and idealized embodiments of socialist values. This visual language served a didactic function, presenting standardized models of citizenship, behavior, and moral character for viewers to admire and emulate. Workers, peasants, soldiers, and intellectuals were represented as model citizens; among them, female figures were especially significant as educational symbols of gender equality, productivity, and ideological commitment.

Women were frequently depicted in work uniforms, holding tools or Quotations from Chairman Mao, emphasizing their active engagement in labor, politics, and revolutionary study. These depictions played an instructional role in teaching new gender norms and civic duties. For example, posters showing female Red Guards marching alongside men or women leading rural collectives visually communicated the lesson that women were both capable and essential in building socialist China. These portrayals were instrumental in gender socialization, conveying expectations for women's public roles and redefining femininity in terms of political and productive capability.

The strategic use of such imagery was not merely aesthetic—it was deeply educational and ideological. Through consistent repetition and standardized themes, posters helped construct a unified political culture and a shared visual curriculum. Women's representations, in particular, conveyed a dual educational message: the ideological commitment to gender equality and the political necessity of women's participation in socialist modernization.

For example, posters from 1968 prominently featured women as both industrious laborers and loyal revolutionaries—roles that combined physical productivity with political engagement. These representations were designed to teach by example, functioning as visual lessons on how to be a proper socialist citizen, worker, and comrade. In this way, propaganda posters became an integral part of informal public education, particularly in rural areas and among populations with limited access to formal schooling.

According to data summarized in Table 1, nearly 40% of propaganda posters between

1966 and 1976 prominently featured women, indicating a significant pedagogical shift in the visual discourse of the time. The thematic evolution of these posters illustrates how propaganda adapted to changing educational objectives—from ideological purification and mass mobilization to agricultural productivity, family planning, and women's liberation.

Table 1. Thematic Categories and Estimated Number of Propaganda Posters (1966–1976)

Time Period	Theme Category	Estimated Quantity (Posters)	Description
1966–1968	Criticism of Bourgeoisie and Anti-Revisionist Struggles	5,000	Teaching class struggle and political vigilance
1966–1968	Praise of Mao Zedong Thought and Red Guard Movement	8,000	Promoting ideological literacy and youth political identity
1966–1968	Revolutionary Propaganda and Mobilization	4,000	Encouraging public participation and mass movement awareness
1969–1971	Unity of Military and Civilians, and Industrial Development	6,000	Demonstrating collaborative production and military values
1969–1971	Workers, Farmers, and Soldiers Studying Chairman Mao's Works	7,000	Promoting reading and ideological education among laborers
1969–1971	Agricultural and Rural Reform	5,000	Teaching collectivization and mechanized farming
1972–1974	Internationalism and Anti-Imperialism/Anti-Revisionism	4,000	Fostering global solidarity and political perspective
1972–1974	Industrial Modernization and Exemplary Models	3,000	Promoting exemplary behavior and technical learning
1972–1974	Women's Liberation and Equality	2,000	Visual instruction on gender roles and women's participation
1975–1976	Criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius, and Destroying the Old to Build the New	4,000	Ideological critique of tradition; teaching cultural reform
1975–1976	Four Modernizations and Economic Development	3,000	Encouraging technological and vocational education
1975–1976	Commemoration of Mao Zedong and Inheritance of Revolutionary Spirit	5,000	Promoting historical memory and ideological continuity

Source: Author findings

In sum, propaganda posters during the Cultural Revolution functioned as visual educational materials—tools for shaping public consciousness, moral behavior, and gender norms. Female figures were not simply decorative; they were pedagogical agents, whose depictions carried complex instructional messages about revolution, labor, loyalty, and equality.

By embedding women into the visual narrative of national development, these posters actively participated in the state's political education project. Their widespread presence in factories, schools, communes, and homes transformed everyday environments into sites of ideological learning, exemplifying the power of visual culture in constructing civic identity and enforcing normative values. The role of propaganda art in gender and political education remains a powerful case study in understanding how governments mobilize images to teach, mold, and direct social transformation.

Results ad Discussion

The Educational Representation of Women in Cultural Revolution Propaganda Posters

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), propaganda posters functioned as key instruments of political education, with the depiction of women serving not only a symbolic ideological function but also a pedagogical role in shaping public understanding of gender, labor, and civic identity (Valjakka, 2005; Pozzi, 2018). These visual materials were strategically designed to educate the masses—particularly youth and rural populations—on socialist values, using idealized female imagery to construct normative behaviors and attitudes aligned with Maoist ideology (Lin, Y. S., 2015).

The visual portrayal of women in these posters frequently embodied the revolutionary maxim "Women Hold Up Half the Sky," offering a pedagogical narrative of gender equality and active female participation in nation-building. Women were depicted as peasants, factory workers, Red Guards, and educators—performing roles that signified productivity, resilience, and political consciousness. These portrayals served as visual lessons, disrupting traditional Confucian gender norms by presenting women as competent, independent, and ideologically committed individuals.

In an educational context, such imagery functioned as behavioral modeling tools. Posters portraying women as study group leaders, literacy promoters, or collective farm organizers emphasized their capacity not only for labor but also for civic leadership and political education. These visual cues guided viewers—especially younger audiences—toward new understandings of gender roles that aligned with state ideologies. However, while the posters advocated equality, women were still underrepresented in higher leadership roles, revealing a disparity between ideological instruction and actual educational or political access, a critical point for examining the limitations of educational equity during this period.

Importantly, the concept of "revolution" conveyed in these posters was not static but evolving, and educational in nature. Early posters prioritized mass mobilization and ideological purification, serving to indoctrinate audiences in Maoist thought through symbolic pedagogy (e.g., campaigns like "Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius"). Later posters shifted toward themes of industrial and agricultural reform, reflecting the state's emphasis on economic development and practical education for modernization. Women's representation evolved accordingly—from revolutionary zealots to productive role models—mirroring a broader shift in educational messaging from ideological purity to civic and economic responsibility.

Female farmers, for instance, were not merely shown planting or harvesting—they were smiling, energetic, and positioned as the visual embodiment of agricultural success and national self-sufficiency. These representations functioned as visual teaching aids promoting both work ethics and moral values, embedding educational objectives into the everyday visual environment. The traditional symbolism of fertility was reframed within a socialist logic to emphasize women's contribution to collective productivity and national prosperity, thus serving both as gender role redefinition and ideological reinforcement.

Analyzed through a semiotic lens, these posters reveal how educational meanings were encoded into symbolic elements. Items such as red flags, Mao's Quotations, and farming tools acted as educational signifiers: the red flag symbolized ideological unity, the Little Red Book represented political literacy, and tools signified industriousness and self-reliance. When held by female figures, these signs conveyed didactic messages about the proper ideological and civic behavior expected of women and, by extension, of all citizens. The predominance of red tones in these images added emotional weight to the educational content, fostering psychological alignment with revolutionary values.

In this way, propaganda posters functioned as visual curricula, using representational strategies to teach revolutionary gender norms and civic virtues. Women were not only subjects of visual celebration but also instruments of ideological instruction, helping to shape a generation's understanding of duty, equality, and national identity. These images provided a visual language for moral and social education, effectively blending art, politics, and pedagogy into a cohesive narrative of transformation.

Ultimately, the representation of women in Cultural Revolution posters reveals the profound intersection between education, ideology, and gender construction. While these visual materials promoted an idealized vision of equality and collective labor, they also functioned as tools of social engineering, guiding public thought and behavior through carefully constructed visual narratives. From an educational standpoint, they offer critical insights into how state-sponsored visual media can influence identity formation, moral instruction, and societal expectations—particularly in contexts where formal and informal education are deeply politicized.

The Educational Symbolism of Female Imagery in Cultural Revolution Propaganda Posters

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), female imagery in propaganda posters carried layered educational symbolism, serving as a powerful instrument for moral instruction, ideological formation, and civic learning (Lin, Y. S., 2015; Avina, A. Z., 2020). These representations not only embodied revolutionary ideals but also functioned as visual tools for shaping public consciousness through both formal and informal education. In particular, the use of female figures played a critical role in teaching values such as collectivism, labor ethics, political loyalty, and gender equality—core components of Maoist educational discourse.

One striking example is the 1967 poster Chairman Mao Receiving in Person the Little Generals of the Red Guards (Figure 1), which visually communicates the educational theme of youth loyalty and political obedience. Female Red Guards are shown gathered reverently around Chairman Mao, who is positioned as the focal point of the composition. Their upward gaze and organized formation function as visual metaphors for student-teacher relationships, reinforcing hierarchical structures and the centrality of Maoist ideology in political learning. In this context, the image educates viewers—especially young women—on how to engage with authority, exemplify revolutionary conduct, and embrace ideological discipline.

Figure 1. Chairman Mao Receiving in Person the Little Generals of the Red Guards, June 1967s

Source: Authors Search

Another common theme in these posters is the portrayal of women as model laborers, which served a pedagogical purpose in the domain of vocational and moral education. In the 1972 poster March Triumphantly Along With Chairman Mao's Route on Literature and Art of Proletariats (Figure 2), a group of female textile workers is depicted diligently following instructions in a cooperative learning setting. This collective engagement symbolizes not only workplace productivity but also peer-to-peer knowledge transmission, modeling a vision of socialist labor as a space of both production and education. The visual narrative promotes concepts of selfless contribution, discipline, and technical learning—integral aspects of the state's labor education agenda.

Figure 2. March Triumphantly Along With Chairman Mao's Route On Literature And Art Of Proletariats, June 1, 1972

Source: Authors Search

Beyond labor, female imagery also conveyed ideological education, particularly the internalization of Mao Zedong Thought. In the 1974 poster Drilling and Training for the Revolution, Spinning and Weaving for the People (Figure 3), a female worker stands confidently under a revolutionary slogan, exuding determination and political clarity. Her active stance and the presence of Maoist slogans function as visual reinforcements of political literacy, teaching viewers the emotional and intellectual posture expected of a loyal socialist subject. Such imagery helped to educate women and girls about their role as ideological exemplars, positioning political commitment as a key marker of citizenship and moral integrity.

Figure 3. Drilling and training for the revolution, spinning and weaving for the people, 1974

Source: Authors Search

Moreover, these posters offered an educational narrative of gender transformation, using visual representation to redefine traditional roles. By depicting women as autonomous, competent, and politically engaged, the posters functioned as gender pedagogies, teaching new social expectations regarding femininity and equality. However, this educational messaging often presented idealized gender equality that was more symbolic than practical. While women were portrayed as community leaders and productive citizens, in reality, their access to decision-making and leadership roles remained limited. This contrast between educational ideology and social reality highlights the instrumentalization of female imagery for propagandistic education rather than structural empowerment.

The interconnectedness of these symbolic functions—labor role models, ideological disciples, and symbols of equality—contributed to a cohesive educational framework for socialist womanhood. Using Peirce's semiotic model, we can interpret these symbols in educational terms: tools and uniforms represent vocational skills and work discipline; red flags symbolize ideological unity; and Mao's Quotations denote political curriculum. Each visual element becomes a teaching device, inviting viewers to internalize values through repeated exposure and emotional association.

These images also participated in what can be described as lifelong visual education, adapting over time to reflect shifting priorities in Maoist pedagogy. In the early phase of the Cultural Revolution, women were often portrayed with revolutionary fervor, emphasizing ideological zeal. Later depictions focused more on technical competence and collective productivity, in alignment with evolving national goals in economic and technological development education.

In conclusion, the symbolic representation of women in Cultural Revolution propaganda posters played a central role in state-led public education efforts. These visual materials integrated ideological, moral, vocational, and gender education into everyday life, transforming female imagery into powerful pedagogical tools. While these portrayals embodied revolutionary ideals, they also reveal how educational messaging was intertwined with political control, offering a critical lens into how visual propaganda can simultaneously inform, inspire, and limit the formation of identity and agency.

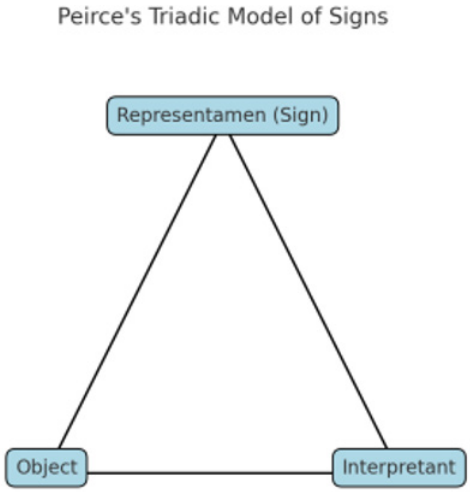
From an educational standpoint, these posters serve as a compelling case study in the use of visual culture for ideological socialization—demonstrating how images can shape collective behavior and value systems when deployed as part of a broader educational agenda.

An Educational Semiotic Analysis of Women's Imagery in Cultural Revolution Propaganda Posters

From an educational perspective, propaganda posters produced during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) served not only as political media but also as visual educational tools, carefully constructed to instruct the public in ideological, moral, and gender norms. Using Peirce's semiotic framework, these posters can be analyzed as carriers of layered pedagogical meanings, where the visual representation of women played a vital role in shaping public consciousness, especially regarding gendered civic identity and socialist virtue (Stjernfelt, 2014; Sonesson & Lenninger, 2021).

According to Peirce's model (Figure 4), every symbol is composed of three elements: the representamen (the physical form or sign), the object (what the sign refers to), and the interpretant (the meaning produced in the mind of the viewer). This triadic model offers a powerful lens through which educators and researchers can examine how propaganda functioned as a non-verbal curriculum, particularly in constructing female archetypes for public emulation.

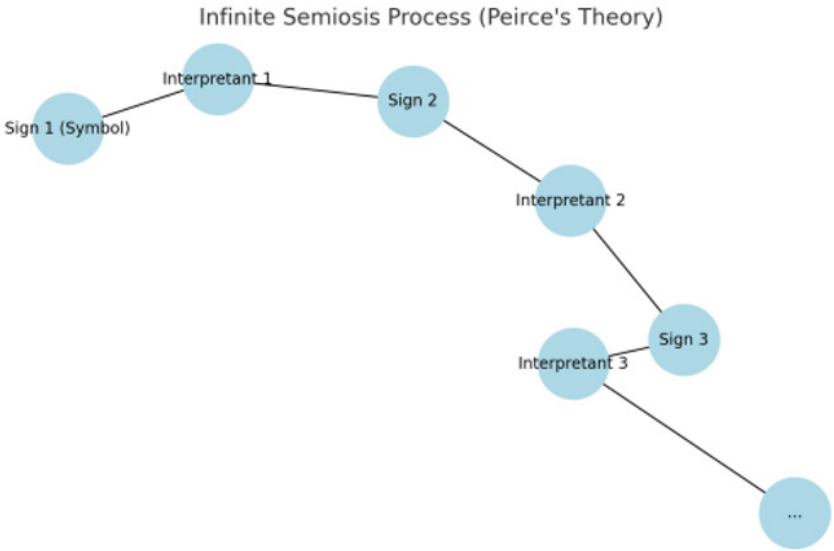
Figure 4. Peirce's semiotic theory



Source: Authors Search

Further enriching this analysis is Peirce's theory of infinite semiosis (Figure 5), which suggests that the meaning of a symbol is never fixed; rather, it is continuously reinterpreted in evolving social and historical contexts (Hilpinen, 2019). This is especially relevant to educational interpretation, as visual media used in political movements like the Cultural Revolution fostered ongoing cycles of meaning-making, allowing each generation to reinterpret gender roles, civic identity, and ideological loyalty according to changing political and cultural needs.

Figure 5 The basic structure of Peirce's infinite process theory of semiotics



Source: Authors Search

For instance, in the 1965 poster A Cotton Grower Comes to Visit (Figure 6), the central image of a healthy, determined female worker holding Mao's Red Book serves as a visual site of ideological and moral instruction. The representamen includes the woman's robust physical appearance, the crowd behind her, and the red slogans. The object refers to socialist values such as Maoist thought, collective strength, and revolutionary gender roles. The interpretant, from an educational standpoint, is the internalized message: that women should be strong, politically literate, and dedicated to the Party's cause. This visual message functions as a form of civic education, particularly effective in communities with limited access to formal schooling.

Figure 6. A cotton grower comes to visit, 1965

Source: Authors Search

A more nuanced example appears in the 1970s poster Encourage Late Marriage, Plan for Birth, Work Hard for the New Age (Figure 7), which positions a female figure at the intersection of population education, science literacy, and social planning. In Peirce's terms, the representamen includes the female figure, the work plan she holds, and the surrounding scenes of industrial and technological development. The object here is the state's population policy and modernization goals. The interpretant invites viewers to see women as central to national planning and responsible family life. In this case, the image acts as a pedagogical narrative for guiding behavioral norms around marriage, reproduction, and economic participation.

Figure 7. 'Encourage Late Marriage, Plan for Birth, Work Hard for the New Age'1970s

Source: Authors Search

The 1973 poster Strive for an Abundant Harvest, Amass Grain (Figure 8) provides another educationally symbolic representation. A smiling female farmer holds a basket of grain in the foreground, with mechanized farming in the background. This image teaches more than agricultural success—it provides a model of socialist femininity rooted in productivity, rural reform, and collective effort. Through the semiotic triad, the tools and posture of the woman (representamen) symbolize

national food security and peasant empowerment (object), while the interpretant frames female labor as patriotic, modern, and morally virtuous. In this context, the image serves as rural labor education, especially for young women in agricultural communes.

Figure 8 Strive for an abundant harvest, amass grain, 1973

Source: Authors Search

These posters—through their composition, iconography, and repetition—constituted an unofficial public curriculum, particularly effective in a context where ideological education extended well beyond the classroom. Tools, postures, clothing, and facial expressions became pedagogical signs, shaping behavior and moral reasoning through visual familiarity and state reinforcement.

However, the idealized portrayals of women—as diligent workers, committed revolutionaries, and nurturing planners—often concealed the contradictions of educational messaging. While advocating equality and inclusion, the posters rarely addressed women's systemic limitations in leadership, intellectual autonomy, or institutional power. The educational function of these posters thus operated on two levels: it empowered through symbolism while also constraining through selective representation, reflecting the dual role of visual propaganda as both didactic tool and ideological filter.

By applying Peirce's semiotics, it becomes clear that the posters encouraged viewers to adopt values such as collectivism, self-discipline, and loyalty not through explicit instruction but via symbolic persuasion. Each female figure functioned as a moral exemplar, reinforcing an idealized, state-approved version of womanhood meant to be internalized through repeated viewing and community discussion.

In summary, this semiotic analysis of women's images in Cultural Revolution posters reveals their function as educational texts, embedded in a broader state-sponsored program of moral, civic, and gender instruction. These posters were not only political messages but interactive visual lessons—tools for shaping public cognition and aligning personal identity with collective national goals.

Their enduring relevance lies in the way they demonstrate the power of visual education to construct social realities, inform cultural expectations, and guide collective thought. For educators and scholars, these images offer a compelling case study in how governments use semiotic strategies to deliver informal yet impactful political and civic education to wide audiences, especially in transitional or authoritarian contexts.

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of women in Cultural Revolution propaganda posters through the lens of educational semiotics, revealing how visual imagery functioned as a pedagogical mechanism within the ideological education system of Maoist China. Drawing on Peirce's semiotic theory, the analysis demonstrates how female figures were not merely artistic or

symbolic icons, but educational instruments deliberately constructed to promote political loyalty, labor ethics, and socialist gender norms. As part of a broader state-directed visual curriculum, these posters played a crucial role in shaping civic identity, moral values, and behavioral expectations across various segments of the population.

By depicting women as Red Guards, model workers, political participants, and maternal planners, propaganda posters constructed an idealized narrative of revolutionary womanhood that served both instructive and normative purposes. These portrayals acted as visual lessons in gender equality, collectivist responsibility, and ideological conformity, particularly effective in communities with limited access to formal education. Posters were displayed in schools, workplaces, communes, and homes—transforming everyday environments into politicized learning spaces. Women's images, often imbued with symbols such as red flags, Mao's Quotations, tools, and agricultural bounty, became didactic signs meant to instill values and behaviors aligned with the Party's vision of socialist progress.

Through Peirce's concept of infinite semiosis, the study further illustrates how these representations continually evolved in meaning, responding to shifts in political priorities and societal needs. Female imagery transitioned from revolutionary fervor in the early years to technical expertise and social planning in later stages, reflecting a broader transformation in educational focus—from ideological purity to economic modernization and population management.

Importantly, the posters presented an aspirational vision of gender equality that, while powerful in symbolic terms, often masked enduring structural inequalities. Women were visually celebrated as leaders and contributors to national development, but their actual opportunities for political authority and educational advancement remained constrained. This gap between representation and reality highlights the dual role of propaganda art as both a vehicle of empowerment and a tool of ideological control.

From an educational standpoint, the analysis affirms that visual media—particularly under authoritarian or transitional regimes—can serve as a powerful form of informal education, capable of shaping collective behavior, identity, and social norms. The case of female imagery in Cultural Revolution posters offers important insights into how governments use semiotic strategies not only to disseminate ideology but to build and enforce educational narratives that align the personal with the political.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the interdisciplinary fields of educational studies, semiotics, gender theory, and visual culture by framing propaganda art as an active site of learning and meaning-making. It invites further inquiry into the pedagogical power of images in other historical and political contexts, and encourages critical reflection on how education can be shaped by visual symbols far beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

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