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INSPIRED LIVING

INSPIRED LIVING

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

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Bachelor of Arts in English, 2006

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University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

Inspired Living is a juxtaposition of old and new, contemplating the shift of values in contemporary China.

Patriotism used to be one of the key values in the Chinese people's minds, but those values have changed dramatically. Fewer people are thinking about or talking about patriotism, like sacrificing for the country or serving the people. In reality, getting rich and spending money to purchase all kinds of products, either absolute necessities or unnecessary luxuries, has become the key value of many Chinese people.

The images used in this project are all found and come from various sources, including books and the Internet. I am juxtaposing old patriotic posters, which ran through several decades in the history of People's Republic of China, with contemporary Chinese movie stills, which reflect the overwhelming status of consumerism, to portray this dramatic change. At the same time, I am questioning the value of patriotic propaganda and the value of consumerism.

With white borders and red characters, the format of this series mimics the old propaganda posters. The borrowed commercial product slogans are symbolic of the dominating strength of mass production and mass consumption, although in this series of work they are not associated with the products they are originally advertising.

The exhibition consists of eighteen digital images printed on enhanced matte paper. All the images are printed on a large scale, much larger than the real poster copy, to emphasize the larger-than-life effect of propaganda. Also, the quality of the enhanced matte paper is very similar to that of the old posters.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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Associate Professor Kristin Musnug

Associate Professor Leo Mazow

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Special thanks are due to my thesis committee members Kristin Musnug, Larry Swartwood and Leo Mazow.

Special thanks are also due to my thesis committee director Michael Peven, whom I've been working with proudly over the past three years.

Last but not the least, I like to thank my girlfriend Maryam Guppy for supporting me with her love.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my beloved parents Jianmin Li and Tianzhen Lu, who have been providing me with tremendous support and made me grow up to be who I am.

I also dedicate this paper to China, my home country, which I love from the bottom of my heart.

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I. INFLUENCES

PERSONAL HISTORY

My interest in this topic grows out of my cultural background and personal experience. In China we have a long list of patriotic educational movies that we have to watch many times throughout early education. When I was a child, I was always moved by the patriotic and heroic actions depicted in those movies, and they still resonate within me today. Therefore, in the early stages of this project, I naturally chose to use movie stills from old patriotic films instead of patriotic posters, which are used in the final work, to represent the value of patriotism.

Although I spent my first year in the MFA program doing other experimentation, I felt strongly about making art that addresses issues of contemporary China. The economy is growing fast in China, but there are also numerous problems, which will potentially cause a great amount of damage in the future. These problems include, but are not limited to, environmental pollution, income gap between rich and poor, and governmental corruption. According to my observations as an artist, the overwhelming rise of consumerism definitely contributes to these problems, even if that is not the only cause. My personal belief that artists should be socially responsible people led me to focus my art on the social issues in China.

I made my first attempt in fall 2010 to emulate traditional Chinese landscape painting (Fig.1~Fig.3) through a digital manipulation. I combined contemporary documentary photographs with the traditional painting format.

Traditional Chinese ink paintings deal with the harmony of nature and humanity.¹ Oftentimes, we see humans immersed in a natural environment with gigantic mountains and streams, which is called *Shan Shui* (mountain and water).

Harmony is still important. Building a harmonious society is a major goal in China today. However, there are several issues happening in China now, which do not have this harmony or even disrupt it. For example, many old houses are continuously being razed for the sake of economic development, which causes certain social problems. In summer 2010, I went back to China and started documenting this social issue through my camera. I shot a great number of photos of these demolished houses. Later, I put my documentary photographs into a traditional format to create a sense of irony. For example, in *Chinese landscape 3*, I enlarged one piece of a torn down wall and placed it in the background to mimic the gigantic mountain in a Chinese landscape painting, while in the foreground I enlarged a filthy ditch to mimic the water part. Between those two elements, I placed an image of people living in these old houses, expressing a potential danger that they probably have not been aware of. Through my images, I wanted to bring awareness to the public about what is happening in China.

In addition to the images themselves, I also engraved a seal, an integral part of traditional Chinese painting, and stamped it on the prints. Traditionally, the choice of seal indicates certain interests and values of the painter.² The Chinese characters I used on my seal basically meant the harmony of heaven and earth and humanity, which added another layer of irony to the work.

¹ “China Online Museum,” <http://www.chinaonlinemuseum.com/painting-history.php>.

² James Cahill, “Approaches to Chinese Painting: Part II,” in *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting*, ed. James Cahill et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 6.

My current work, *Inspired Living*, is a follow-up to the Chinese landscape project. The landscape project articulated some social problems, among which the redistribution of the residents whose old houses got demolished is one of the most serious. However, I did not feel that my project was deep enough to explore the causes of those problems. I felt it necessary to take my exploration further and deeper. *Inspired Living* is my effort to look for those causes.

Personally, I think the dominating power of consumerism is part of the problem. However, the purpose of my art is not simply to say that consumerism is bad. Labeling consumerism as good or bad is an oversimplification. Consumerism certainly has its own benefits. For example, it can help to improve the standard of living by providing people with a variety of products to choose from. Also, mass production forces producers to improve their product quality in order to compete in the market.

Similarly, my work is not simply to say that patriotism is good, either. Patriotism helped China get back on the track of social development by unifying people after the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. During that period of time, China needed to rebuild the infrastructure damaged by civil war, bring hyperinflation down, and lead the people towards cooperation.³ The spirit of teamwork, sacrifice for the country, and unselfishness conveyed in those old posters certainly helped the country achieve its goal. Unfortunately, the idealized depiction of the characters in the posters did somehow limit people's thoughts rather than encourage people to free their thoughts. That is where I want to question the value of patriotism.

As an artist, my motivation for this project is to call attention to the shift of values and encourage people to slow down in a society dominated by consumerism. I hope that through

³ Stefan R. Landsberger and Marien van der Heijden, *Chinese Posters: The IISH-Landsberger Collections* (New York: Prestel Verlag, 2009), 11.

looking at my art, people will start thinking about what kind of world they are living in and questioning the value of what seems to be dominating and overwhelming in the current society.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

The American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger is one of the influences on my project. Kruger's signature style (Fig. 4) is to use large-scale found black and white photographs juxtaposed with her original texts printed on red text bars. Her idea of using a simple image combined with a text to make a strong commentary on social issues, such as religion, consumerism, racial and gender stereotypes⁴ really inspires me. Although the texts I use in my project are borrowed rather than original, I combine images with texts to create commentary as well. Kruger adds a lot of design elements into her work because she has been working as a graphic designer for many years. Similarly, my images are also deliberately designed to mimic old patriotic posters.

Contemporary Chinese art also has a significant influence on my work. More and more contemporary Chinese artists have addressed the topic of past and present in China and questioned what kind of life we live, especially given that the Chinese economy, with its capitalistic elements, is booming everyday.⁵ Among all those artists, I consider Wang Guangyi as one of the major influences. Starting in 1990s, Wang Guangyi made a *Great Criticism* (Fig. 5) series, where he combined Communist propaganda iconography (soldiers, workers, and peasants holding Chairman Mao's Little Red Book) with advertising logos for Western brands. Wang

⁴ "The Art History Archive," <http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/feminist/Barbara-Kruger.html>.

⁵ "Art Fact," <http://www.artfact.com/fine-art-genre/contemporary-chinese-art-7awl848haq>.

made this project as a response to the irony of China's new hybridity, a governmental communism and an embrace of everyday capitalism.⁶

II. APPROPRIATION

Inspired Living is my first attempt to make appropriation art. Appropriation art is the act of borrowing elements from other sources and putting them together in a new context to express new meanings.⁷ Sherrie Levine is a good example of an appropriation artist. She re-photographed the photographs of Walker Evans in 1981 and named her project *After Walker Evans*.⁸

Levine's work questioned the concept of originality and ownership.⁹ My work does not necessarily serve the same function. However, all the texts I use in this project are, like Levine's, appropriated. I copied the commercial product slogans, although they did not appear in their original fonts and colors. The wording, however, is exactly the same as the originals. Through the appropriation, I isolate the slogans from their original products and bring out a new association with consumerism.

Like texts, all my images are appropriated. I deliberately selected movie stills that portray people in the act of purchase. With a resemblance to TV commercials, these film stills became associated with consumerism. I appropriated patriotic posters to symbolize patriotic value.

⁶ Richard Vine, *New China New Art* (New York: Prestel, 2008), 28.

⁷ "A History of World Art," http://www.all-art.org/artists-a-appropriation_art.html.

⁸ Johanna Burton and Elisabeth Sussman, *Sherrie Levine: Mayhem* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012), 19.

⁹ Burton and Sussman, *Mayhem*, 20.

However, once they were put together with stills and slogans, they signified the meaning of advertising as well. Therefore, these posters also became associated with consumerism.

III. CHALLENGE AND DIFFICULTY

I expected my work to be straightforward, exactly like all consumer products are displayed directly in front of people's eyes. However, it has been a challenge to carry out a project that deals with Chinese history, especially when this project is aimed at a Western audience. The cultural difference makes my goal not an easy task to accomplish.

As mentioned earlier, the original plan of my project was to use stills from old Chinese patriotic educational movies. My parents grew up watching those movies. I grew up watching them, too. They have a special meaning to me personally. However, what makes sense to me and potentially to a Chinese audience does not necessarily make sense to a Western audience. To understand a movie still, viewers have to know the context. The use of a series of images might help to make the message clear. Most viewers, due to the lack of Chinese cultural experience, will have to take more effort and time to understand the patriotic meaning conveyed in those movie stills. In consequence, it will be harder for them to understand the whole message.

Simplicity and directness are important in my art. Although the use of a series of images might not destroy the visual simplicity of my work, it can certainly have a negative impact on the speed of involvement and interaction from the audience. Therefore, I had to give up the idea of using patriotic movie stills and find an alternative.

The use of the aged patriotic propaganda posters helped to solve this problem. Thousands of posters have been produced and printed since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. They influenced generations of Chinese people. Although I do not have a personal relationship with those posters (the only real copies I ever saw were being sold on the street as souvenirs long after they first came out), they always bring a nostalgic feeling to me because I know they have been around during a certain period of time in history. The facial expressions, the hand gestures, the idealized faces and bodies can be found similarly in Western propaganda posters, although those are promoting a different ideology. Therefore, the posters work better than the movie stills to help a Western audience understand the patriotic message.

On the other hand, because of the similarity of consumerism between China and the West, it is not difficult for a Western audience to understand contemporary Chinese movie stills, which resemble TV commercials, as a demonstration of consumerism.

IV. IMAGE MAKING

The images in my project are captured from various sources. Most of the poster images are found in two books, *Chinese Posters: The IISH-Landsberger Collections* and *Chinese Posters: Art From The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*. There are also two posters that I found on the Internet. I scanned the images from the books directly rather than photograph them in order to achieve a relatively high quality. I did not crop the image so viewers will recognize them as posters easily. However, I removed the original texts in order to add commercial product slogans later on.

I captured all my movie stills from online sources. All those stills are from contemporary Chinese movies. Unlike the poster images, if necessary, I cropped the movie stills to build an interesting visual relationship to the posters.

After I placed posters and movie stills on the top and bottom of a white background in Photoshop, I adjusted the colors of both images to achieve a sense of harmony. For example, I manipulated the color balance to make the top and bottom image appear similar in color tone. Through color adjustment, I tried to engage the viewer more and to accomplish a sense of order. Conceptually, however, the characters depicted in the images are meant to contrast with each other. For example, in *Feel like a woman* (Fig. 6), the idealized woman with a big smile and a healthy body is a huge contrast to the skinny leg trying on a pair of trendy shoes in a shopping mall. Therefore, a color harmony and a conceptual disharmony work together to establish a greater sense of irony.

Noticeably, multiple movie stills are used in some of the images, such as *Turning dreams into reality* (Fig. 7) and *You deserve a break today* (Fig. 8). I made this decision for both conceptual and visual considerations. Conceptually speaking, consumerism cannot be isolated from consumers' repetitive purchases. The use of sequential images helps to emphasize this repetition. That is why I show the sequential shots of a person picking meat in a grocery store in *Turning dreams into reality*. On the other hand, in *You deserve a break today*, four sequential images of a whole cart of Red Bull caffeine drink coming closer and closer to the viewers creates a visual rhythm, which resonates with the movement of the person hammering in the poster image on the top. Therefore, it not only makes a visually more interesting image but also establishes a strong connection between the poster and the stills.

In some other images, using a single movie still works better. For example, in *Feel like a woman* discussed above, the idealized upper half body and the modern lower half body form an interesting torso, which will engage the audience more.

V. THE USE OF TEXT

This is the first time I seriously introduced text into my work. In the beginning, I just used text to help the audience understand what was going on in the images. What I did was directly translate the original text of the found posters into English. However, I decided that it was not really adding another layer of conceptual meaning to my work.

It was not until I started using commercial product slogans that both the poster images and the movie stills were bound together tightly. Like the massive availability of the products, commercial slogans appear everywhere. Some slogans are becoming even more familiar to the consumers than the products themselves. Considering that, I thought the use of commercial products would really strengthen the symbolic meaning of consumerism. The final introduction of commercial product slogans can be seen as a reflection of what is changing in China now. If people walk in the streets of China today, all kinds of commercial slogans can be seen everywhere.

The reason why the poster images and the movie stills are bound together through the use of commercial slogans is because of the deliberate rather than the random selection of these slogans. For example, in *The best a man can get* (Fig. 9), the slogan is meant to apply to both the top and bottom images. The top image shows a male factory worker, with a big smile on his face, holding the Little Red Book (written by Chairman Mao and regarded as a guide for people's

thoughts during the Cultural Revolution). It indicates the importance of patriotic guidance in that particular era. In contrast, the bottom images portray a young man trying on various male products like ties and clothing in a shopping mall. It indicates the importance of consumption in contemporary society.

Similarly, in *Don't leave home without it* (Fig. 10), the top image depicts a man holding Mao Dun Lun, a book also written by Chairman Mao, while the bottom image shows a hand waving a credit card. "It" in this slogan represents the patriotic educational guidebook and the credit card, respectively. I used this particular slogan to suggest that in the past, people had to carry a patriotic educational guidebook all the time to prepare them to serve the country, but now, people have to carry a credit card, a symbol of consumerism, to prepare them for the world of mass consumption.

After I decided to use commercial slogans to represent this overwhelming sense of mass production and mass consumption, the question became what slogans should I use, Western ones or Chinese ones? The final decision was to use both the Chinese brand and Western brand slogans, since both Western and Chinese products are available in China. At the same time, the fact that more Western slogans are used throughout the project suggests the reality that Western products are common in China today.

I chose red as the color of the texts for two reasons. First, the majority of patriotic posters use red text. Second, red is often associated with communism in the West. Although the purpose of my work is dealing with patriotism in a broader sense rather than simply communism, a great amount of patriotic propaganda did happen under communist China. Therefore, the use of red color helps to take the audience back to the past.

VI. EXHIBITION

Before I set up the show, I had two choices for making prints. I could either print them on a large scale or print them on a relatively small scale but in multiples. I originally thought about printing the same image in many copies to emphasize the repetition of consumption. Also, I thought I could make my images look like products in the market. However, this seemed too repetitive, considering that there is already repetition in the image, and would possibly make viewers appreciate each individual image less.

My final decision regarding the printing was to print each individual image on a large scale. The prints average about 44 by 55 inches. Some of them are slightly bigger or smaller because of the proportion of the images themselves. The reason why I chose to print this size was that I wanted to emphasize the larger-than-life aspect of propaganda and advertisement. When the audience encounters these large prints, they will have the experience of being overwhelmed, exactly like they are overwhelmed by all kinds of products. The image quality became more or less compromised, however, because of the large scale. For example, some of the movie stills I used became more obviously pixelated. The idea, however, is more important than the sharpness of the image itself.

It's worth mentioning that there are two images, *Quality is job one* (Fig. 11) and *We bring good things to life* (Fig. 12), that I chose to print much smaller than the rest of the images. I made this decision for both visual and conceptual considerations. First, the proportion of length to width on those two images is different than most other images. Most of the images are in the shape of a square or close to a square. Those two are different in that the length is much longer

than the width. At 44 inches wide, they would end up being too long and would be too different from the others.

There are two other images, *The best a man can get* and *New world. New thinking* (Fig. 13), that were printed a little bigger because of their strong iconic symbolism. With the person holding the Little Red Book and the red flag, those two images are particularly powerful since the iconography of the Little Red Book and the red flag dominates many patriotic posters.

The flow of the entire series is important to me. I wanted it to be one after another. Like watching TV commercials, one after another, sometimes it is hard to follow and digest. I decided to just use the two walls in the gallery without using the moving walls in order to accomplish the effect of being straightforward and direct. Similarly, if people go to a supermarket, all the products are displayed in front of the consumers. This effect of being visually straightforward will lead the audience to associate my work conceptually with consumerism.

To me, the use of a credit card is an important symbol in the world of consumption. I wanted to emphasize this in the whole sequence of images. That is why I used *Don't leave home without it* as the first image of the exhibition. Towards the end, *You deserve a break today* reflects on the idea that I want people to slow down a little bit and start thinking about the business and crowdedness of consumer society.

Regarding the order of the images in between, I tried to place them in a way that is able to help to express the concept better. My whole project covers all aspects of consumerism, from everyday use products to luxury products. So I deliberately separated images that portray men, women and couples in the action of purchase. Also, I separated images that portray the purchase of different products, from common grocery to high-end commodity.

VII. CONCLUSION

Inspired Living addresses the relationship between an artist and social issues. Through the appropriated images and texts of the past and present, I try to pull the audience back and forth to bring awareness about the shift of values in China today. I hope that my work overwhelms the audience with a sense of being in the world of consumption. I also hope that my work leads people to think about and question the dominating value in their current society. Although the current project only deals with the issues of China, I am certainly open to expand it to a universal level in the future, since consumerism is universal.

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Figure 1, *Chinese landscape I*, digital print, 2010

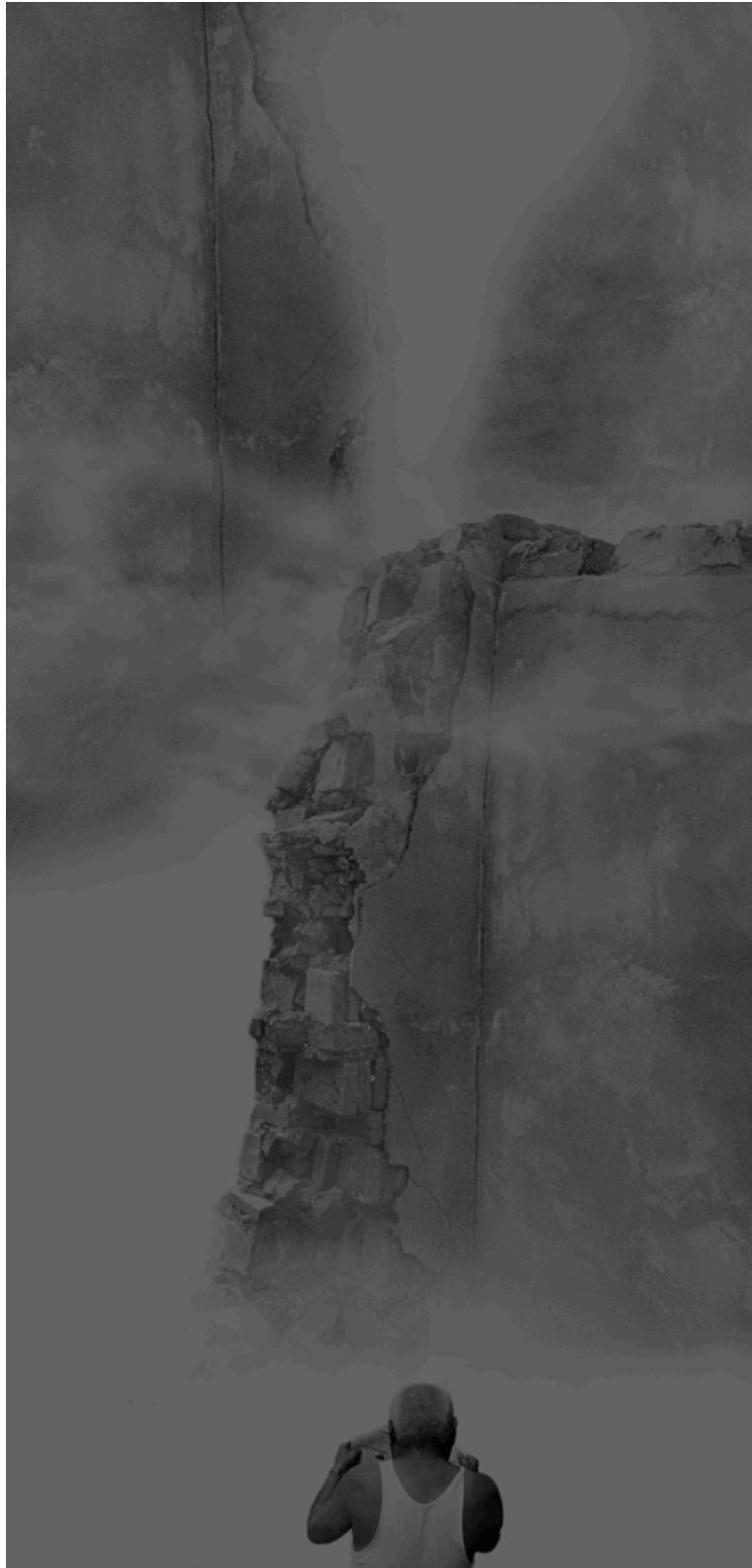


Figure 2, *Chinese landscape 2*, digital print, 2010



Figure 3, *Chinese landscape 3*, digital print, 2010



Figure 4, Barbara Kruger, *I shop therefore I am*, 1987



Figure 5, Wang Guangyi, *Coca Cola*, 2004



Feel like a woman

Figure 6, *Feel like a woman*, digital print, 2012



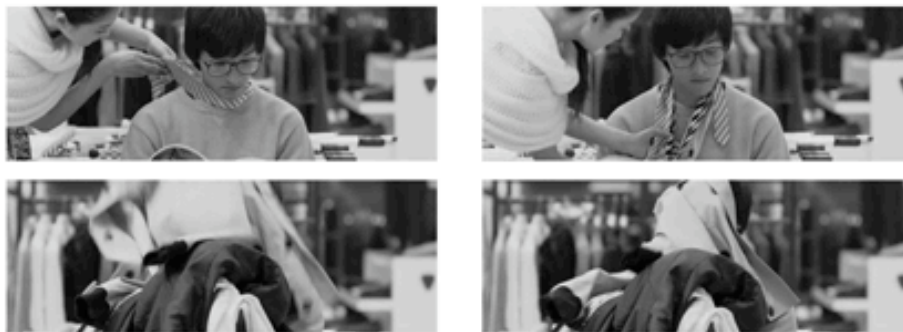
Turning dreams into reality

Figure 7, *Turning dreams into reality*, digital print, 2012



You deserve a break today

Figure 8, *You deserve a break today*, digital print, 2012



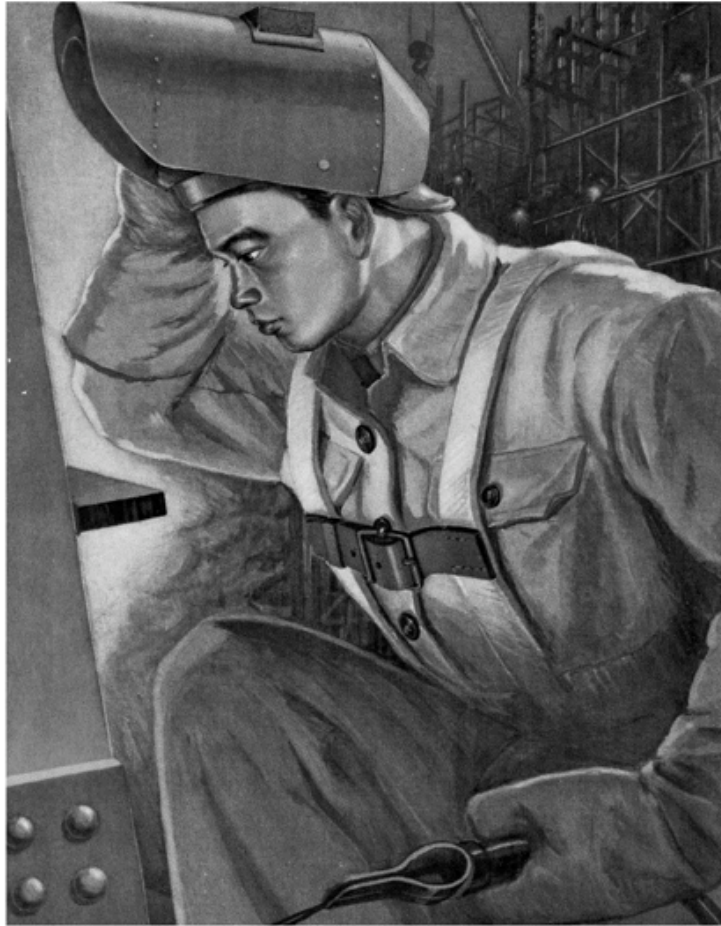
The best a man can get

Figure 9, *The best a man can get*, digital print, 2012



Don't leave home without it

Figure 10, *Don't leave home without it*, digital print, 2012



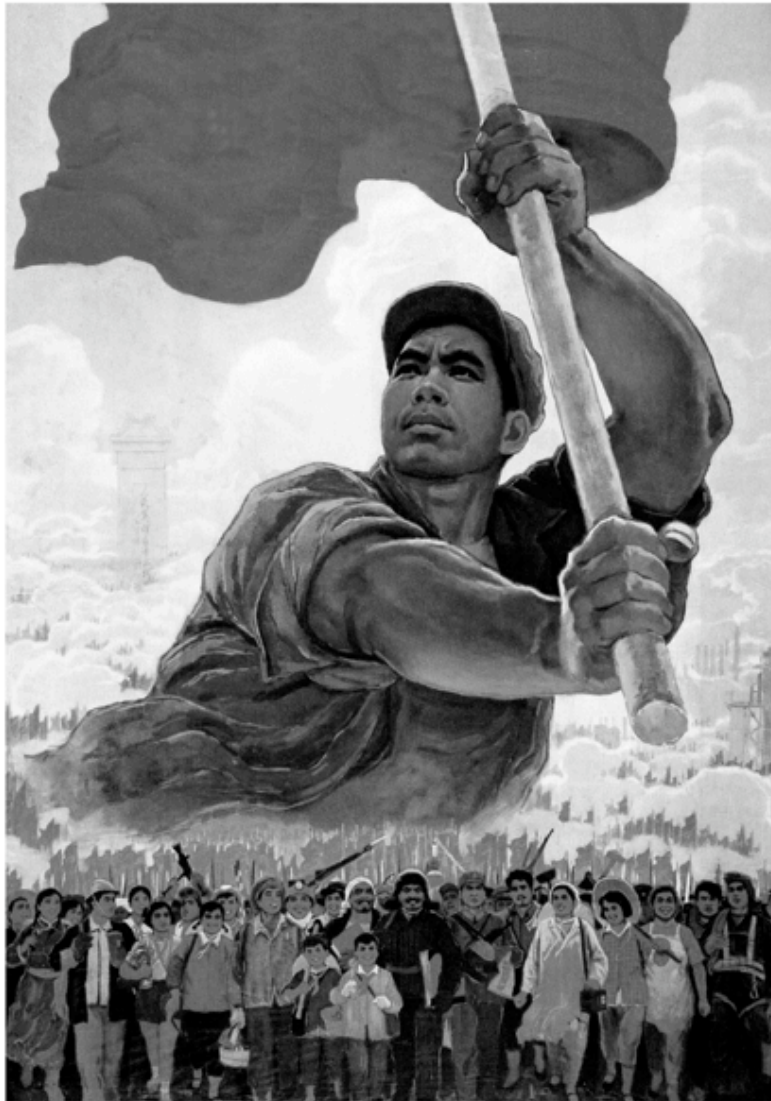
Quality is job one

Figure 11, *Quality is job one*, digital print, 2012



We bring good things to life

Figure 12, *We bring good things to life*, digital print, 2012



New world. New thinking

Figure 13, *New world. New thinking*, digital print, 2012



Figure 14, exhibition 1, Fine Arts Gallery, 2012



Figure 15, exhibition 2, Fine Arts Gallery, 2012