

Visualising Socialism in Postsocialist China

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Abstract of paper:

In today's China, collective villages—that is, villages that maintain a highly centralised model of production, income distribution and redistribution—are the 'socialist other' at odds with the post-Mao market reforms. They are counter-hegemonic expressions in Gramsci's language, or 'spaces of representation' that signify possibilities in Lefebvre's spatial model. Li Changping, a prominent rural advocate, estimated in 2016 that there were 7000 collective villages in China, being 1% of all villages. The symbol of this ostensibly grassroots movement of collectivisation is Nanjie Village of Henan Province, which pioneered collectivisation notwithstanding political pressure in the 1980s. It is now branded as a site for visitors to 'experience the superiority of red culture'. This tourism venture helps explain why Nanjie displays a rich visual culture. It consists of a large number of propaganda billboards with visual images, monumental installations, an exhibition hall, and replicas of buildings deemed to be of historical value.

This paper aims to examine what is a 'socialist other' of postsocialist China through analysing Nanjie's visual culture. Two questions are asked. First, how is socialism represented in the visual culture? Second, how did Nanjie's admirers, critics, and the central government interact with such culture? The approaches of intertextuality and intervisuality are adopted to answer the first question. Based on data collected by the author on site, it is found that Nanjie's visual representations are largely transposed from two Maoist sign systems: the revolutionary discourse of the Communist Party of China and the discourse of the Cultural Revolution. To answer the second question, critical discourse analysis is employed to examine the speeches and writings of Nanjie's admirers, critics and the central government that comment on its visual culture. The data is mainly drawn from the *Nanjie Village Newspaper* as well as local and national newspapers with relevant reports. It is found that they focused on selective components of the visual culture in order to formulate and justify their interpretations of socialism. Their choice of selection reflected their position within the power structure and their view on China's post-Mao reform agenda. This study hopes to contribute to the understanding of the role of visual culture in the construction of 'otherness' in China.