

The Bashu School of Painting: Image Politics and Culture in the Development of the Chinese Communist Party after 1937

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Abstract

The Bashu Painting school, formally established in 2011 under Chinese government patronage, traces its roots to the ancient Ba-Shu regional culture of Sichuan and Chongqing. This study examines how, after 1937, Bashu painting evolved into a potent vehicle of CCP image politics—flourishing under successive political campaigns and serving as an instrument of state propaganda. Drawing on archival research, policy documents, semi-structured interviews with artists and curators, and a mixed-methods analytical framework (historical-textual coding, semiotic-statistical mapping, and Barthesian image-layering), we chart the School's development across three distinct eras: wartime mobilization (1937-1949), early PRC nation-building (1949-1966), and Reform-era humanism (1978-present). Findings reveal that Party-led institutions shaped the School's formal qualities, thematic content, and organizational scale, while Bashu artists negotiated ideological imperatives through technical innovation and grassroots engagement. We conclude that Bashu imagery exemplifies a mutually reinforcing dynamic of cultural governance and artistic autonomy, offering a nuanced case of how regional art under centralized regimes can both serve and subtly contest hegemonic narratives. Theoretically, this research advances understanding of image politics by integrating political history and cultural policy analysis, and proposes a model for contemporary cultural practitioners seeking to balance popular resonance with clear political objectives.

Keywords: Bashu Painting school, Fine arts, Image politics, Political mechanism, Painting, Political value

Introduction

The Bashu Painting school is a painting art organization in the Bashu region established in 2011, under the patronage of the Chinese government. Defined in the same broad sense as Bashu culture (an historic amalgamation of the ancient Chinese state of Ba and the independent Kingdom of Shu), Bashu painting refers to the genre of regional paintings in Sichuan and Chongqing (Jin, 2025). Bashu painters also include Sichuan painters in other areas and painters who graduated from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, as well as people who have been in the Bashu region for many years and have contributed to the Bashu culture. Actually, the school is not restricted to painters, and further includes printmakers, sculptors, calligraphers and other broad categories of artists. Therefore, both in terms of region and definition of art and culture, it

embodies the artistic and cultural history of Sichuan and Chongqing, and has distinct regional and contemporary characteristics (Shuqin & Haijun, 2019).

Although the Bashu culture is a major ancient Chinese culture and has a long history of over 4,800 years, its cultural presence became more visible after 1937 (Feng et al., 2023; Li, 2021). Due to the impact of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Kuomintang government, then the ruling party of China, moved to the Bashu area. Along with the large-scale cultural migration that followed, the painting art in the Bashu area developed again, laying the foundations for its future prosperity. However, around the year 2000, several factors significantly influenced Sichuan and Chongqing's artistic development, causing Bashu art to lag behind other regions (Qin & Chen, 2025; Wenjun &

Guoqiang, 2019). At this time, China's contemporary art market began rapidly globalizing, with international attention focusing heavily on artists and art districts primarily in Beijing (798 Art District) and Shanghai (M50 Art District) (McCarthy & Wang, 2016; Zhong, 2012). Sichuan and Chongqing, geographically more remote and historically less integrated with international contemporary art scenes, struggled to attract similar attention or resources. Moreover, in the early 2000s, China's cultural policy was oriented toward rapidly urbanizing coastal areas, which were prioritized for developing cultural soft power. As a result, inland regions like Sichuan received relatively fewer resources for the arts, reinforcing their peripheral status. Though culturally rich, the area was economically and geographically isolated from the major coastal economic hubs driving contemporary art. Consequently, artists and investors began flocking to China's eastern megacities, draining talent and resources from inland regions like Bashu. These changes were compounded by the devastating 2008 Sichuan Earthquake, which profoundly disrupted local communities, economies, and infrastructures.

As a result, the Sichuan government intervened to promote the establishment of the Bashu Painting school in 2011. Despite positive intentions, the move generated significant debate within Chinese artistic circles. Critics argued that genuine artistic schools historically emerge naturally, driven by organic artistic relationships rather than through governmental decree or institutional mandates. Two years prior to the establishment of the Bashu School, Zhang Xiaoling (2009), Vice President of the China National Academy of Painting, highlighted that administrative or commercial motivations alone cannot successfully establish a painting school, which must instead arise from authentic artistic practice deeply rooted in regional identity and continuity. This prevailing academic skepticism toward artificially established painting schools grew thereafter, attesting that genuine artistic identities cannot be sustained merely by government backing or media promotion (Shuhua, 2018). However, in the view of Dawei (2011), former chairman of the Chinese Artists Association, it was an important step for the people of Sichuan. In his mind, they needed to establish a unique artistic identity to enhance the province's cultural standing.

Given this controversy, the author believes that the relationship between the Bashu Painting school and the Chinese government provides a potentially enlightening case study on the cultural policy approach of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Explicitly, this paper therefore asks: 1) How have the CCP's political mechanisms influenced the formal qualities, thematic content, and institutional structures of Bashu Painting school imagery since 1937?; and 2) In what ways have these images themselves operated as instruments of political persuasion, mobilizing regional identity and reinforcing state legitimacy? By answering these questions, we aim to shed light on the broader strategies of cultural governance under the CCP and the tensions between artistic autonomy and state-sponsored cultural engineering.

Literature review

The reproducibility of images has been shown to amplify their propagandistic power—detaching art from ritual contexts allows it to reach broader audiences and forge collective will (Andersson, 2024; Benjamin, 1936). Cultural production under hegemonic regimes likewise operates as a terrain for ideological struggle, where artistic consent and dissent co-evolve within civil society (Gramsci, 1971). This interplay between dissemination and reception underscores how visual media can shape collective narratives and emotional responses. At the same time, artists must navigate these pressures, finding avenues for creative expression within the constraints imposed by political agendas. Aesthetic forms routinely embody underlying power relations, functioning as a barometer of prevailing ideologies (Bristow, 2025; Eagleton, 1990). Critiques of the culture industry warn that state-sponsored aesthetics can standardize artistic output and suppress critical autonomy in favor of mass-appeal narratives (Adorno, 1970; Görg, 2022). Moreover, work on the field of cultural production has demonstrated that institutional endorsement is inseparable from both artistic legitimacy and market value, illustrating how political mechanisms can elevate particular styles while marginalizing others (Bourdieu, 1984; Jhally, 2022). Together, these insights frame Bashu imagery as both an instrument of state-led cultural engineering and a contested space in which artists negotiate ideological imperatives through formal innovation.

State cultural policy fundamentally shapes the organizational and aesthetic parameters within which artistic fields evolve. By configuring both material resources and evaluative criteria, policy frameworks determine which modes of production thrive and which stylistic languages gain prominence. It has been demonstrated that art worlds depend on intricate networks of practitioners and institutions (Becker, 1982), and in Bashu, Party-led troupes, academies, and exhibitions serve as the underlying infrastructure enabling creative production (Jin, 2025). Centralized planning and professional associations have been instrumental in channeling creative practice toward national objectives (Callahan, 2004), weaving official ideology into the everyday operations of cultural institutions. Because the significance of art is always determined by its social and political context (Danto, 1981; Grba, 2022), Bashu imagery derives much of its resonance from its integration with state narratives of resistance and nation-building. At the same time, institutional authority can simultaneously preserve and instrumentalize regional traditions, raising critical questions of authenticity under state patronage (Cuno, 2000). Symbolic capital, earned through alignment with Party-sanctioned aesthetics, further translates political endorsement into cultural prestige (Bourdieu, 1984), reinforcing a cycle in which institutional support and artistic legitimacy mutually sustain each other. These insights reveal the multifaceted ways in which state policy, institutional networks, and ideological imperatives converge to shape the evolution of the Bashu Painting school.

Regional art under centralized regimes often becomes a conduit for forging national cohesion by appropriating local cultural vocabularies. CCP directives have woven minority and regional motifs into overarching propaganda efforts, illustrating the dialectic between particularity and unity (Callahan, 2004). In doing so, local forms are both celebrated for their distinctiveness and subsumed within national narratives. During the Reform era, diverse artistic expressions resurfaced under nominal liberalization, albeit within parameters carefully maintained by ideological oversight (Mittler, 2008). Barmé (1999) demonstrates that the Mao cult of personality left an indelible imprint on art institutions, embedding a model of political iconography that regional schools continue to navigate.

Drawing on the notion of the “organic intellectual,” Bashu painters emerge as intermediaries, translating top-level cultural policy into vernacular art practice (Gramsci, 1971). Yet this mediation is never neutral, as artists negotiate the tension between state imperatives and authentic local voices. Even humanistic art forms promoted in the post-Mao era can operate within a culture-industry framework, serving as vehicles of soft power rather than pure emancipatory expression, which highlights the complexity of how regional aesthetics are mobilized within centralized cultural systems (Adorno, 1970).

Research methodology

For this inquiry, we adopted a qualitative, historical–interpretive case study design in the purposively selected historic centers of Bashu culture, Chengdu and Chongqing, and traced the evolution of Bashu Painting school imagery across three politically defined eras: the Second Sino-Japanese War through to the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (1937-1949), the early PRC through to the eve of the Cultural Revolution (1949-1966), and the reform-and-opening-up period (1978-present). Our primary units of analysis are individual painters affiliated with the Bashu School (and their signature works), organized by decade of birth. We grouped artists born in successive ten-year cohorts and used purposive sampling to select works for each cohort that have received institutional recognition (museum acquisitions, national exhibition awards) and that exemplify dominant thematic currents (Table 1). Sampling sought maximum variation across media, genres, and political periods to enhance analytic transferability (Patton, 2015).

Data were gathered through a combination of documentary research, semi-structured interviews and visual analysis. We assembled an archive of Party and state cultural-policy texts (including Mao’s Yan’an Forum speeches, the Three Policies and subsequent literary-art directives), exhibition catalogues, artists’ memoirs, and critical reviews. In Chengdu and Chongqing we conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews with living painters, curators, and institutional managers, recording these on digital voice files and supplementing them with high-resolution photographic documentation of original artworks. All

materials - texts, interview transcripts, and images - were catalogued for systematic qualitative coding, with key metadata maintained in a project log and spreadsheet.

Data analysis was conducted in three qualitative ways. First, we used a historical-textual / thematic approach to code policy documents and critical literature to map shifts in official aesthetic doctrine alongside artists' self-articulated intentions using reflexive thematic analysis with iterative code development and memoing (Saldaña, 2021). Second, we applied a semiotic-structural two-axis framework - drawing on Saussure's (1983) concepts of combination and association - to index each work by period (the temporal axis) and by thematic content (the genealogical axis), constructing qualitative matrices that clarified

how political imperatives shaped subject-matter over time. Third, an iconographic procedure adapted from Panofsky (1955) was used to read each painting or print at the pre-iconographic (formal), iconographic (motif) and iconological (cultural-ideological) levels, interpreting how each work reflected and reproduced CCP political values.

To validate all data, we triangulated findings across documentary, interview, and visual data; maintaining a full audit trail of coding decisions and analytic memos; and subjecting our coding schema and interpretive conclusions to peer debriefing by two external art historians. This final report presents the findings as a descriptive analysis on the reciprocal dynamics between CCP cultural governance and the evolving imagery of the Bashu Painting school.

Table 1 Painters and works of the Bashu Painting school studied in this investigation.

Birth decade	Painter(s)	Representative work(s)
1900-1909	Jiang Zhaohe	<i>Refugee Picture</i> (1943)
1910-1919	Li Shaoyan, Xu Beihong	<i>Red Rock</i> illustrations (1950s)
1920-1929	Niu Wen, Lin Jun	Sichuan woodcuts (1949–1966)
1930-1939	Li Huanmin	<i>First Step on the Golden Road</i>
1940-1949	Cheng Senlin, He Duoling	Scar art prints (1978–1990s)
1950-1959	Luo Zhongli	<i>Father</i> (1980)
1960-1969	Zhang Xiaogang	<i>Urbanization</i> series (1990s–)
1970-1979	A Ge, Xiang Silou	Contemporary prints (2000s–)
1980-1989	Xu Zhongqi, Zhu Cunli	Ink paintings (2010s–)
1990-1999	Emerging Bashu painters	Works post-2011 institutionalized

Research framework

By integrating political history and political science, this study treats image politics as a function of CCP political power: the political history strand reconstructs the evolution of Party governance alongside the rise of the Bashu Painting school, providing the contextual foundation that underpins the stickiness between regional imagery and state politics,

while the political science strand examines the Party's institutional mechanisms - the structures and processes by which it produces and reproduces power - as the axis for analyzing how these mechanisms have shaped the formal qualities, thematic content, and organizational contexts of Bashu imagery. Political history reconstructs the evolution of Party governance alongside the rise of the Bashu Painting school, offering a contextual

foundation for understanding the interaction between regional imagery and state politics. Political science examines institutional mechanisms—the structures and processes through which power is articulated—to analyze how they shape, guide, and sometimes negotiate with artistic production. Within this framework, Bashu painters respond to shifting policy and historical contexts, whilst also exercising creative agency, translating political guidance through individual aesthetic judgment, emotional experience, and cultural interpretation. Conversely, Bashu images encode creators’ cognition of political life, subjective ideologies, and affective responses, transmitting them to audiences in ways that mobilize sentiment and reinforce

state legitimacy and transmit them to audiences, where they participate in shaping collective memory, cultural identity, and ideological internalization. Audience reception—through public sentiment, critical discourse, and socio-historical expectations—feeds back into the valuation and evolution of Bashu imagery, generating interpretive spaces where meaning is negotiated. Thus, rather than a one-directional model, the research posits a dynamic and reciprocal cultural-political process in which state mechanisms, artistic agency, and audience reception co-construct meaning and value. This reciprocal interaction forms the analytical foundation of the study (Figure 1).

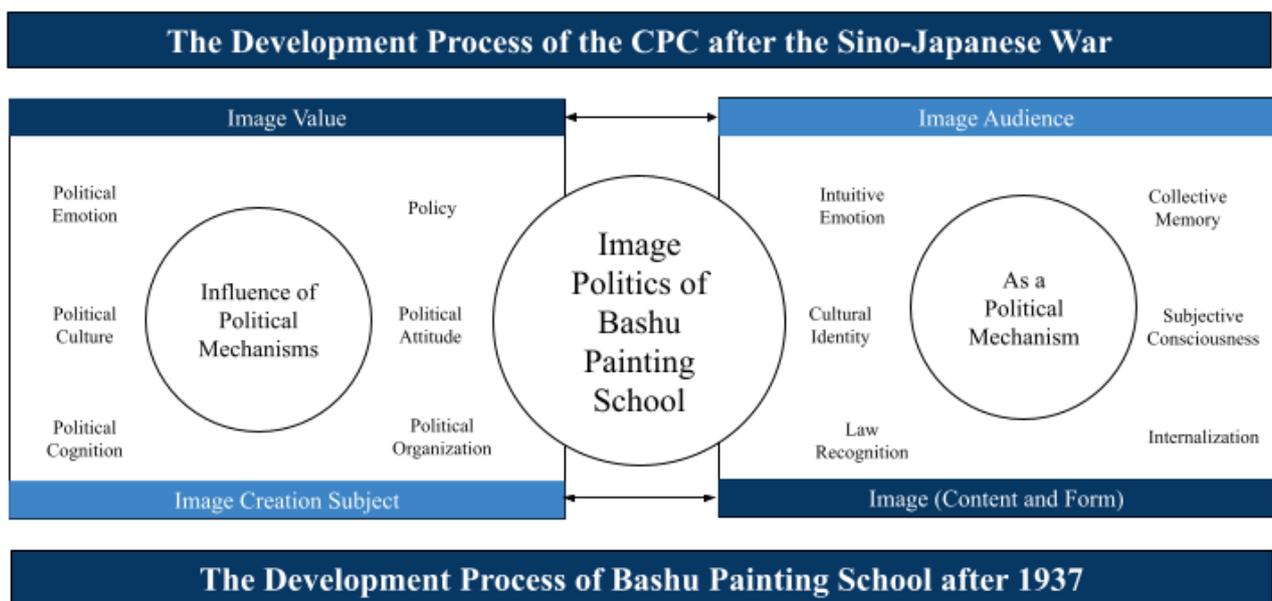


Figure 1 Research framework for examining image politics in the development of the Chinese communist party after 1937

Results

The historical development and formation of the Bashu School

The most notable evolution in the Bashu School over time is the shift in accessibility: from being confined to the court and literati, it gradually expanded over the centuries to regional workshops, grassroots commerce, and eventually the working class in the twentieth century. The Bashu culture on which the Bashu School of Painting relies can be traced back to the Baodun cultural period (~2800 BCE), a Neolithic culture in the Chengdu Plain some 4,800 years ago. The

earliest pottery unearthed from this time has rich decorative patterns, which reflects the aesthetic awakening of the Bashu people and the spiritual genesis of art and beauty. This early emphasis on intricate motifs prefigures the region’s enduring penchant for blending form and symbolism (Wang, 2024). Similarly, bronze Shang (c. 1600-1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046-256 BCE) statues unearthed in Sanxingdui, the golden Sun Bird ornament of the Jinsha Culture (~1200 BCE), and the nationally-famous painted bricks of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220 CE) attest to a continuous evolution of regional visual vocabularies, linking prehistoric ritual

forms to later literati and folk traditions (Feng, Prompongsaton & Kotchapakdee, 2024; Miller, 2022).

During the Sui (581-618 CE) and Tang (618–907 CE) periods, Bashu painting ushered in a period of greater prosperity due to the special opportunity of a cultural migration inland. The mass influx of court officials and literati following the an Lushan Rebellion (755-763 CE) injected metropolitan techniques and iconographies into local workshops (Chamney, 2012). Those who entered Shu included high-ranking officials, dignitaries, and literati - all of whom had extraordinary skills (Farmer, 2008). Their influence is seen in the murals and figure paintings of Wu Daozi (680-759 CE) and his disciples Lu Lengjia, Sun Wei, and Diao Guangyin, whose synthesis of northern brushwork and southern sensibility created a lineage of masters who transmitted and localized these styles for generations (Hung, 2022).

By the time of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period (907-979 CE), three major schools had emerged: Central Plains, Western Shu, and Southern Tang (937-975 CE). Under the Former and Later Shu regimes (907-925; 934-965), court patronage and the establishment of a state painting academy elevated folk painters' social status, driving technical innovation and securing Bashu's reputation as a dynamic nexus of artistic production (Ping, 2022). Bashu painting thus reached a new height during these sixty years, as regional identity and political authority became mutually reinforcing in the visual arts.

Subsequently, the Bashu painting circles in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) produced a core group whose innovations reshaped Chinese painting. The Xishu Painting school, pioneered by Huang Quan (903-965) and his son Huang Jing, synthesized meticulous brushwork with bold coloration, formalizing layered washes and dynamic compositions that became the Song standard for *huaniao* (flower-and-bird) painting and exerted profound influence on both court and regional workshops (Zhang, 2017). After Huang Quan, Zhao Chang (active mid-11th century) refined direct sketching from life, expanding the expressive range of natural motifs. Wen Tong (1019-1079), founder of the Zhou Bamboo School, and Su Shi (1037-1101), whose writings theorized literati painting, integrated calligraphic spontaneity into bamboo and landscape imagery, signaling the rise of scholar-artists (Huashuai,

2023). Concurrently, Zen-inspired ink painting by Mu Xi (c. 1040-1107) flourished, traveling to Japan and becoming revered as a national treasure - underscoring Bashu's role as a conduit for Sino-Japanese cultural exchange (Arata, 2019).

During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, grassroots art forms proliferated across Sichuan and Chongqing. Folk painters (often anonymously) decorated temples and public spaces with vibrant murals and woodblock prints blending Buddhist iconography and local legend. The Guanyin Temple murals in Xinjin, the Jiange Jueyuan Temple frescoes, and the New Year prints of Mianzhu, Jiajiang, and Liangping circulated widely in rural markets, fostering a shared visual language among commoners and reinforcing regional identity (Weidner, 2001; Zhao, 2014). Although the names of these artisans have largely been lost, their work demonstrates the enduring vitality of popular visual culture in Bashu and its capacity to sustain communal traditions outside elite patronage.

After the fall of Wuhan during the Second Sino-Japanese War in October 1938, Chongqing was designated the wartime capital, triggering an unprecedented westward cultural migration. Entire universities, art academies, and research institutes relocated to Sichuan and Chongqing, bringing with them professors, students, and intellectuals (Cai et al., 2022). This influx dwarfed earlier inland migrations, transforming Bashu into China's *de facto* cultural center. Leading painters from Beijing and Shanghai - among them Xu Beihong, Jiang Zhaohe, and Li Shaoyan - settled in the Bashu region, where they pioneered new subject matter and refined realist techniques in response to wartime exigencies (Taylor & Yang, 2020). Under the banner of 'art for national salvation', artists wielded woodblock knives as propaganda tools, producing posters and prints that rallied civilian morale and documented refugee suffering (Fang, 2019). Concurrently, art schools in Chongqing and Chengdu expanded their curricula, training a generation of printmakers and ink painters whose work would define modern Sichuan art (Zhang, 2019). Material shortages, particularly the scarcity of oil paints, further accelerated a turn toward ink and woodblock media, catalyzing a distinctive Bashu printmaking movement whose bold chiaroscuro and expressive line would endure long after the war's end (Radius, 1938).

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Sichuan printmaking expanded dramatically under state patronage, inheriting the wartime woodcut tradition and the Yan’an spirit of proletarian realism (Andrews, 1994). Illustrators such as Li Shaoyan, whose woodcuts for Luo Guangbin and Yang Yiyan’s revolutionary novel *Red Rock* (1958) set a national standard for modern literary illustration, left an indelible mark on Chinese art history (Dowdey, 1998; Lu, 2007). Under the leadership of Jiu and Ziwen at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts, successive generations of printmakers were trained, establishing the institutional infrastructure that would sustain Sichuan’s printmaking excellence for decades.

With Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening Up beginning in 1978, scar art (*shānghén yìshù*) emerged as the emblem of ideological emancipation, led by Bashu figures such as Cheng Senlin and He Duoling, who used personal and collective trauma to critique the Cultural Revolution (Ho Hing-Kay, 2000; Torresin, 2021). By the early 1990s, these currents coalesced into the New Generation, New Scar, and Psychological Realism movements, cementing Bashu’s role at the forefront of contemporary Chinese art (Jiang & Liang, 2017). So synonymous had Bashu painting become with cutting-edge practice that contemporaries quipped, “If you don’t understand Sichuan dialect, don’t engage in contemporary art.”

Amid early-21st-century globalization and the ascendancy of coastal art hubs, Bashu painting entered a period of relative marginalization, shaped by its geographically remote position, weaker integration into contemporary art circuits, limited resource access, and

the talent outflow toward rapidly urbanizing coastal centers. Only in 2011, when the Sichuan Provincial Committee of the CCP formally launched the Bashu Painting school, did the region’s art scene regain momentum (Ta, 2020). This directive - codified in the communiqué of the Ninth Plenary Session of the Ninth Sichuan Provincial Committee - elevated the School as a flagship of provincial cultural revitalization, embedding Bashu painting within a broader state-sponsored heritage strategy. Thus, due to its closeness to the community and its woven past, Bashu painting served as a particularly effective medium for political communication by the Communist Party during this period of cultural repositioning.

The development of Bashu Painting after 1937

1937-1949 was a period of rapid growth of Chinese ink painting and woodcut prints in the Bashu style; 1949-1966 was the flourishing period of Bashu woodblock prints (Sichuan prints); 1978 onwards saw the emergence of scar art, the prosperity of Bashu oil painting and the revival of Bashu printmaking. The development process of Bashu Painting school images in these three periods closely corresponds to the major development periods of the Chinese Communist Party after 1937: 1937-1949, when the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out, a critical period related to the survival of the country and the struggle for political power; 1949-1966, when the Chinese Communist Party took power and the founding of New China; after 1978, the period of China’s opening up after the reform of the Communist Party of China (Figure 2).

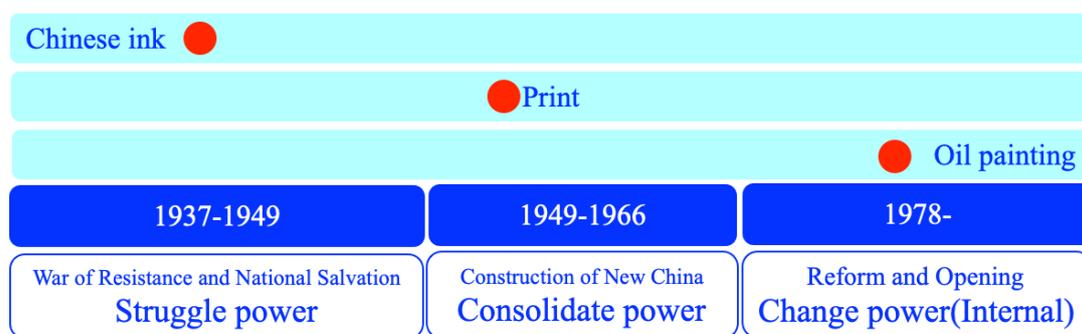


Figure 2 The development phases of Bashu painting after 1937

Sample of Bashu Painting school's image politics

We have selected the following three samples for scrutiny in this paper. These three samples are reflective of the wider part of our investigation and the main body of Bashu Painting school images identified by the Chinese Communist regime. We have selected one image from each of the three political periods.

Sample 1: Jiang Zhaohe's "Refugee Picture"

Zhaohe (1904-1986), a native of Sichuan, was a master of Chinese realistic figure painting in the 20th century. His representative work *Refugee Picture* (Figure 3) was produced in 1943 and is widely considered the greatest figure painting in China in the 20th century. It is now housed in the National Art Museum of China.

Under Xu Beihong's mentorship, Zhaohe honed a powerful realist figure style that he would deploy in response to the Japanese invasion. Shocked by the scale of civilian suffering, Jiang conceived *Refugee Picture* in 1941 and spent the next two years sketching life in occupied Shanghai, Nanjing, and other wartime refuges. Completed in 1943, the work assembles over a hundred

ink-rendered figures - clusters of homeless families huddled on the left, exhausted mothers cradling infants in the foreground, wounded laborers leaning on crutches and makeshift bandages in the central register, and dislocated intellectuals identifiable by their long gowns and book satchels on the right. Through meticulous attention to individual expressions of despair, fatigue, and defiance — from the downcast gaze of mothers clutching infants in the left register, to the slumped shoulders and bandaged limbs of laborers at center, and the tense, upright postures of scholars on the right shielding children and possessions — Jiang transforms collective trauma into an immersive visual narrative. His situational staging, stark chiaroscuro, and unflinching detail — seen in emaciated faces, dirt-streaked clothing, and tightly-gripped bundles of meager belongings — invite viewers into the refugees' plight, forging deep empathy and crystallizing popular resolve. In this way, "Refugee Picture" stands as a masterpiece of modern Chinese ink painting and a potent instrument of wartime propaganda, galvanizing national sentiment against aggression.



Figure 3 Chinese ink painting

Source: Zhaohe (1943)

When *Refugee Picture* premiered in Beijing in 1943, Japanese military police forcibly shut down the exhibition and banned the work. A brief showing in Shanghai in 1944 ended with its confiscation by the Japanese military police, who disapproved of the negative light in which it portrayed Japanese rule. The painting disappeared until 1953, when half of the composition was recovered (Hetschold 2023, p. 336). In 1988, Xiao Qiong - Jiang Zhaohe's family member - donated the surviving fragment to the National Art Museum of China. The stark imagery of emaciated refugees huddled amid ruins and the ominous silhouettes of occupying soldiers viscerally conveyed the invaders' brutality, igniting widespread indignation and deepening collective resolve. By linking individual suffering to national survival, *Refugee Picture* became a landmark of modern Chinese ink realism and a powerful catalyst for wartime solidarity.

Refugee Picture cemented Jiang Zhaohe's reputation as China's foremost realist figure painter. In the years that followed, he shaped the next generation of artists through professorships at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, the National Academy of Art in Beijing, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Jiang also assumed numerous leadership and advisory roles: he was twice elected to the directorship of the Chinese Artists Association (2nd and 3rd sessions) and served as a consultant during its 4th session; he sat on the executive committee of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles; and he contributed to cultural policymaking as a member of the 3rd through 6th National Committees of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. His appointment to the Central Cultural and Educational Committee of the China Democratic League and to the Academy of Chinese Painting Research Institute further attest to his stature.

Sample 2: Li Huanmin's "First Step on the Golden Road" 1963 (mimeograph print)

Huanmin (1930-2016) emerged from Yuyao, Zhejiang, to become a celebrated printmaker. After enrolling at the National Peking Art College in 1947 and

graduating from the Central Academy of Fine Arts' art class in 1951, he was dispatched to the Sichuan Artists Association, where he quickly earned the rank of national first-class artist. His landmark mimeograph and color print, *First Step on the Golden Road* (1963) (Figure 2), captures the triumphant spirit of Tibet's peaceful liberation¹ in 1959: two Tibetan girls stride forward along a stylized golden path, their faces alight with joy, set against a sun-drenched landscape rendered in bold, flat planes of color. Li renders the girls with delicate pointillist strokes so that their uplifted eyes and flowing robes convey exuberant gratitude and steadfast resolve. Since its debut, the print has been a fixture of the National Art Museum of China's exhibitions, where it continues to affirm the legitimacy of New China's ethnic policies and to promote a shared identity across China's diverse regions. Awarded first prize at that year's National Youth Art Exhibition and later acquired by the National Art Museum of China, the work exemplifies the fusion of folk aesthetics and socialist-realist content. Its clean lines, rhythmic composition, and radiant palette celebrate the state-promoted ideal of ethnic unity under the new regime, while also reflecting the Party's narrative of harmonious national integration. At the same time, scholarly literature outside mainland China has characterized the 1950s–60s Tibetan experience as marked by coercion and conflict, particularly in relation to the 1959 uprising and subsequent policies (e.g., Barnett, 2009; Goldstein, 1997). This tension underscores how the image operates simultaneously as political symbolism and artistic innovation, firmly establishing Li Huanmin's place in the Bashu Painting school's pantheon.

Subsequently, building on the success of *First Step on the Golden Road* and his broader Tibetan oeuvre, Li Huanmin quickly became a leading figure in China's printmaking community. He was elected vice-chairman of the Chinese Artists Association and vice-chairman of the Chinese Printmakers Association, and he served as party secretary and executive vice-chairman of the Sichuan Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Within Sichuan's premier art institutions, he was vice-chairman

¹ Peaceful liberation is the official term used in PRC historiography; see e.g., State Council Information Office, 2021.

of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute and curator of the Sichuan Art Exhibition Hall, while also acting as a long-standing consultant to the Chinese Artists Association and honorary chairman of the Sichuan Artists Association. Through these roles - spanning

policymaking, education, and exhibition leadership - Li Huanmin shaped the trajectory of modern Chinese printmaking and embodied the Bashu Painting school's ascent to national prominence.

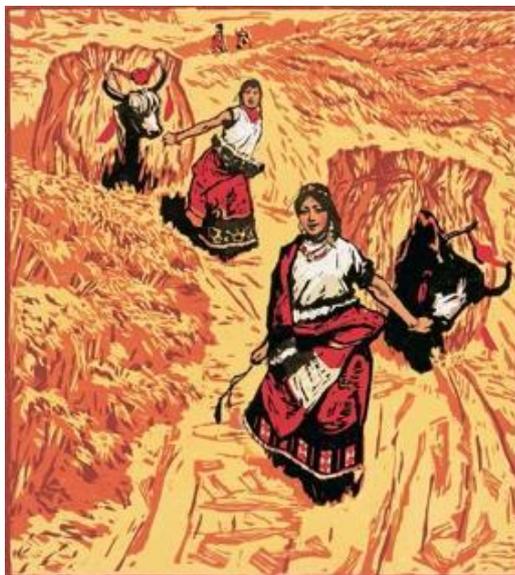


Figure 4 “First Step on the Golden Road” by Li Huanmin (1963) - mimeograph print

Sample 3: Luo Zhongli's “Father”

Zhongli (b. 1948, Chongqing) is one of China's most influential contemporary oil painters and a respected educator. After completing his studies at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1982, he was rapidly designated a national first-class artist. His signature work, *Father* (1980), won first prize at the Second National Youth Art Exhibition and has been hailed as a landmark in modern Chinese portraiture. In this monumental oil painting, Luo enlarges the figure of an aged farmer to nearly life-size, rendering every weathered wrinkle and calloused hand with searing realism. By elevating an ordinary peasant to heroic stature, *Father* resonates as both a tribute to rural resilience and a subtle commentary on China's social transformations. Its acquisition by the National Art Museum of China affirmed Luo Zhongli's pivotal role in the Bashu Painting school and in the broader narrative of late-20th-century Chinese art.

Zhongli conceived *Father* in 1980 as an homage to the elderly farmers he encountered during his years as an “educated youth” in the Daba Mountains. The monumental canvas - nearly life-size - focuses on a single, stooped figure whose deeply etched wrinkles,

cracked lips, and roughened hands gripping a simple bowl are rendered with painstaking realism. Luo's textured impasto and restrained earth-toned palette evoke tactile sensations: the coarse weave of the farmer's jacket, the faint aroma of tobacco lingering on his skin, even the metallic click of a ballpoint pen tucked behind his ear. By enlarging this humble subject to heroic proportions, Luo transforms an everyday peasant into a universal emblem of rural endurance and dignity. Painted on the eve of China's reform and opening-up, *Father* embodies the era's humanistic turn - “emancipate the mind, seek truth from facts, unite as one” - inviting viewers to confront the overlooked labor and resilience of the countryside. In its sensory immediacy and profound empathy, *Father* not only cemented Luo's standing within the Bashu Painting school but also redefined the possibilities of contemporary Chinese portraiture.

In the 1980s, Zhongli emerged as one of the most influential figures in China's painting world. He held successive leadership roles in the Chinese Artists Association, serving as executive director, then director, and later vice-chairman. He also presided over the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. At home in Chongqing,

he chaired both the Chongqing Artists Association and the Chongqing Federation of Literary and Art Circles. Luo's stature extended into national politics as a delegate to the 9th, 10th, and 11th National People's Congress, and he continued to shape artistic policy as a consultant to the Chinese Artists Association and as

vice-chairman of the China Oil Painting Society. As an academic consultant to the Sichuan Bashu Painting school Promotion Association and one of the inaugural cohort of distinguished Bashu Painting school representatives, Zhongli has both embodied and advanced the region's artistic legacy.



Figure 5 "Father" by Zhongli (1980) - oil painting

The formation of Bashu images under the influence of the political mechanism of the CPC

In 1937, the CPC launched a series of cultural campaigns centered on the slogans 'Resist Japan and Save the Nation' and 'Serve the People'. With the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Party fully integrated literature and art into its propaganda apparatus, issuing foundational documents such as the Outline on the Party's Propaganda and Agitation Work (1942), the Decision on the Implementation of the Party's Literary and Art Policies (1942), the Instructions on Developing Cultural Movements (1942), and the Instructions on Military Literary and Art Work (1942). Following the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Party continued to shape artistic production under Mao Zedong's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art (1942) and through new directives including the Common Program (1949), the Three Major Cultural Policies of the early 1950s, the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956), and the Directive on Education Work (1951). In the reform and opening-up era beginning in 1978, the CPC instituted cultural rehabilitation,

educational restoration, and academic reconstruction to redress the Cultural Revolution's excesses and promote a new era of intellectual renewal.

A series of cultural policies were executed through Party-led art organizations. During the twelve years of war (if including the Chinese Civil War until 1949), the CPC established the Luyi Printmaking Corps under the Eighth Route Army's political department and promoted the relocation and expansion of key institutions: National Central University (relocated to Chongqing), Chongqing Art College, Sichuan Provincial Art College, and Chongqing China Art School. These academies, together with folk collectives such as the Chongqing Woodcut Research Association, formed the strategic backbone of the anti-Japanese propaganda network. After 1949, the newly founded Chinese Artists Association consolidated these military art troupes and regional schools, leading to the establishment of the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (1951), the Art Department of Southwest Normal University, and the art faculty of the Southwest Minority College; together, they coalesced into the Sichuan Printmaking Group. With the onset of reform and opening-up in 1978, the Sichuan

Academy of Fine Arts spearheaded a major expansion, founding nearly one hundred new art departments, while the Chinese Artists Association and affiliated bodies intensified exchange exhibitions, journal publishing, and professional networking, ultimately crystallizing into the Sichuan Painting school movement.

The war brought about earth-shaking changes in people's lives, and caused tremendous changes in the environment for the survival and development of art. All industries withered. Everywhere were the ruins of the war and the displaced people. Facing a broken society, the Bashu creators deeply sympathized with the tragic suffering of their compatriots, and their feelings of resisting the war and saving the country became stronger with each passing day. As the national crisis continued to deepen, the call for 'art for the sake of the Anti-Japanese War' reflected the political cognition and attitude of image creation. During this period, the Communist Party of China's regime showed unprecedented care and recognition for minority areas. This recognition, care, and assistance enhanced artists' understanding of various ethnic minorities during the New China period. During this period, the sentiment of national rejuvenation and concern and sympathy for people including ethnic minorities were the strong political emotions of the Bashu School's image creators.

After 1978, with the end of the Cultural Revolution, political restrictions were loosened. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has gradually begun to criticize and reflect on the challenges caused by the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution brought deep pain to the Chinese people. People's emotions are in urgent need of catharsis, and the revival of human consciousness is the biggest common feature of literature and art in this period, that is, respect for people and respect for people's rights to survival and development. Therefore, during this period, the main body of the Bashu Painting school's image creation was re-adjusted to produce a balanced political cognition that was better and more suitable for the new society, the new political situation, and the new era. Their sense of humanity had been revived in collective rule, and they had a strong sense of wanting to express feelings and political attitude of rebellion against the Cultural Revolution and prior political errors (Andrews, 2010; van Dijk 2025).

Discussion

Through the concerted action of CCP political mechanisms—ranging from wartime propaganda directives to institutional patronage—Bashu Painting school artists internalized and articulated explicit political values in their work. This dynamic reflects Benjamin's (1936) contention that the reproducibility of images amplifies their propagandistic power, enabling art to forge collective will beyond its ritual origins. In the wartime period of 1937-1949, their ink paintings and woodcuts conveyed profound empathy for civilian suffering alongside an impassioned call to resist invasion and safeguard the nation. During the early PRC era (1949-1966), imagery shifted to celebrate solidarity with ethnic minorities, express optimism for national rejuvenation, and affirm the legitimacy of the new Communist regime. Following the Reform and Opening Up period (post-1978), Bashu artworks embraced a renewed humanistic focus—portraying the dignity of ordinary people—while tacitly endorsing the Party's modernization and reform agenda. In this evolution, Gramsci's (1971) notion of the organic intellectual is evident, as painters mediated between top-down ideology and grassroots sensibilities. The sections that follow examine this process across four dimensions: the expanding scale of the Bashu artistic community under Party guidance, the rising quality and professionalization of its practitioners, the evolving direction of its thematic and aesthetic orientations in alignment with shifting political priorities, and the enduring political value of its imagery in shaping public sentiment and reinforcing state legitimacy.

Development scale

Since 1937, a constellation of CCP cultural policies and institutional frameworks has continually reinforced and enlarged the Bashu Painting school's creative community. Becker's (1982) analysis of art worlds underscores how Party-led troupes, academies, and exhibitions function as vital infrastructures, enabling sustained networks of practitioners and resources in the Bashu region. During the Anti-Japanese War, veteran Bashu artists channeled their artistic fervor into works that galvanized civilian resolve and embodied the Party's ideal of a benevolent regime. In the early PRC era (1949-1966), painters devoted their energies to images that honored workers, peasants, and

soldiers, mirroring the new regime's construction priorities. After the 1978 Reform and Opening Up, both emerging and established artists redirected their passion toward themes of humanistic revival, ideological emancipation, empirical truth-seeking, and collective solidarity. By establishing and sustaining army art troupes, artists' associations, art academies, and folk art collectives, the CCP provided an organizational backbone that not only fostered enduring, intrinsic motivation among Bashu painters but also attracted successive waves of like-minded talents—thereby scaling the School's reach and impact across China.

Development quality

Under successive CCP cultural campaigns and institutional initiatives, both the number and caliber of Bashu Painting school practitioners increased markedly. During the twelve-year Anti-Japanese War, the Party-led Luyi Printmaking Corps cultivated foundational talents—Li Shaoyan, Niu Wen, Lin Jun—and supported folk-art leaders such as Feng Zhongtie. This mirrors Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital, where alignment with state-sanctioned aesthetics translated into both prestige and resources for artists. Concurrently, Xu Beihong's sponsorship of new art academies in Chengdu and Chongqing nurtured realist painters like Jiang Zhaohe and Cen Xuegong. After 1949, the Chinese Artists Association and its Sichuan branch, under Li Shaoyan's chairmanship, absorbed emerging printmakers (Li Huanmin, Xu Kuang) and fostered a cohesive propaganda network. The Sichuan Fine Arts Institute further enhanced technical expertise by recruiting printmakers Jiang She, Xie Ziwen, Lu Lin and oil painters Liu Guoshu, Wei Chuanyi. With the Reform and Opening Up era's expansion of academic freedoms, the revitalized Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts and Sichuan Artists Association incubated a vibrant new generation—Cheng Senlin's scar artists, He Duoling's educated-youth proponents, Luo Zhongli's rural portraitists, Zhang Xiaogang's urban commentators, and printmakers A Ge, Xiang Silou, Xu Zhongqi, Zhu Cunli, and Luo Yun—thereby elevating Bashu imagery's technical sophistication, thematic diversity, and national prominence.

Development direction

Through its evolving cultural policies and institutional directives, the CCP has continuously steered Bashu Painting school artists toward themes and forms that resonate with—and serve—the broader populace. By mandating immersive fieldwork, creators were urged to document workers', peasants', and soldiers' daily lives and translate those experiences into accessible visual narratives. In the wartime era (1937-1949), this produced searing anti-Japanese works such as Jiang Zhaohe's *Refugee Picture* and *Dad Never Comes*, alongside Li Shaoyan's *Reconstruction* and *120 Division woodcut series*—each galvanizing public resolve against invasion. Between 1949 and 1966, painters like Niu Wen (*Tibetan People*, *The East Is Red*, *Morning Sun*), Li Huanmin (*First Step on the Golden Road*), and Xu Kuang (*Waiting for Ferry*, *Rural Primary School*) enacted the new regime's priorities by celebrating national unity and ethnic solidarity. As Eagleton (1990) posits, these aesthetic choices serve as a barometer of power relations, reflecting the underlying ideological currents of each period. In the Reform and Opening Up period (post-1978), even without prescriptive mandates, figures such as Cheng Senlin (*Snow*), He Duoling (*When the Spring Breeze Has Awakened*), and Luo Zhongli (*Father*) crafted humanistic portraits that both adhered to public aesthetics and secured top national prizes. Collectively, these phases demonstrate how CCP political mechanisms—whether explicit policy or institutional patronage—have shaped the formal direction, thematic content, and mass appeal of Bashu imagery, underpinning the School's enduring vitality and political effectiveness.

Political value

For the CCP, mass support is the cornerstone of party and state legitimacy, and throughout the three key eras after 1937, Bashu School imagery served as an indispensable tool for ideological transmission and popular mobilization. During the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1949), realist ink paintings and woodcuts graphically exposed enemy atrocities, celebrated civilian solidarity, and crystallized patriotic resolve—establishing art's role as a rallying cry for national salvation. In the early PRC period (1949-1966), artists turned their focus to workers, peasants, soldiers, and

ethnic minorities, deploying prints, oil paintings, and murals to glorify socialist construction, reinforce revolutionary leadership, and foster a unified identity under the new regime. However, Adorno (1970) warns that such state-sponsored aesthetics can risk standardizing expression and curtailing critical autonomy, highlighting the dual nature of propaganda art as both mobilizing and constraining. After 1978, scar art, educated-youth works, and rural portraits confronted the Cultural Revolution's traumas and championed themes of humanistic renewal, "emancipate the mind," and collective unity, aligning with reform-era policy. By combining forms that resonate with popular aesthetics and content rich in empathy and political conviction, Bashu School images not only signaled artists' allegiance to the CCP but also actively shaped public sentiment, encouraged political participation, and reinforced state power—functions that Party institutions have consistently endorsed through awards, exhibitions, and organizational support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of the Bashu Painting school across the three key eras since 1937 demonstrates a deeply reciprocal relationship with the Chinese Communist Party's cultural apparatus. By aligning its imagery with successive political campaigns—from wartime "art for national salvation," through early-PRC nation-building, to Reform-era humanism—the School not only amplified CCP messages and mobilized popular sentiment, but also benefited from sustained institutional support. In turn, Party sponsorship and policy guidance fostered the School's technical innovation, expanded its network of artists, and elevated its national prominence. This mutually reinforcing dynamic—whereby Bashu works served as both vehicles of political persuasion and beneficiaries of state patronage—explains why the CCP invested in creating and developing the Bashu Painting school as a flagship of regional soft power.

Moreover, the Bashu case offers valuable insights for contemporary cultural governance. Its trajectory—from top-level strategic design to grassroots artistic practice—illustrates how coherent policy frameworks, immersive field engagement, and adherence to popular aesthetics can generate enduring creative vitality and effective propaganda. By distilling these historical

lessons, policymakers and cultural practitioners can devise modern image-politics strategies that balance artistic autonomy with clear political objectives, ensuring that visual culture remains both resonant with the public and aligned with broader social goals.

Limitations and recommendations

Despite illuminating the Bashu Painting school's historical interplay with CCP cultural policies, this study is limited by its lack of empirical assessment of the School's current artist cohort and their political literacy, the absence of systematic data on how different audience segments receive and interpret Bashu imagery, the omission of a formal content-innovation framework aligned with contemporary social needs, the failure to benchmark artistic quality against Xi Jinping's call for "artistic fine works," and the neglect of the School's integration with modern media technologies. To address these gaps, future efforts should recruit and cultivate a broader range of image-media professionals, strengthen creators' political and aesthetic literacy, segment audiences and "prescribe the right image" according to evolving tastes, develop a dynamic content system that foregrounds popular demands and new-era development themes, pursue continual self-realization and life-rooted humanistic depth in artistic practice, adhere to public-aesthetic principles to produce high-quality works, and actively leverage contemporary media technologies and the visual culture industry to extend Bashu imagery's reach and relevance.

CRediT author statement

Wang Yueying: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, writing of the original draft, writing—review & editing, visualization, supervision and project administration.
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Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

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