

## THE DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE PEASANT PAINTING

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Chinese Peasant Painting (CPP) is a form of post-revolutionary folk art produced by rural artists in China, depicting everyday rural life and agricultural activities. Practised nationwide, it has significant centres in Huxian (Shaanxi), Jinshan (Shanghai) and Longmen (Guangdong). In the People's Republic of China, 'peasant' historically denotes individuals residing in rural areas or engaged in agricultural production. Most Chinese peasant painters lack formal fine arts training, contributing to its distinct folk aesthetic. Influenced by traditional folk arts such as paper-cutting, embroidery and New Year Paintings, CPP is characterised by vivid colours, bold contrasts and a flattened composition. While sharing stylistic similarities, regional differences in geography and folk traditions shape its thematic variations.

In his 1942 speech *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art*, Chairman Mao Zedong asserted that literature and art should serve politics. Within this ideological framework, CPP emerged in 1958 in Pizhou (Jiangsu) and Shulu (Hebei), later evolving into a nationwide mural movement propagating political ideology and socialist enthusiasm in rural areas. Huxian Peasant Painting was once a model of 'art for workers and peasants' in China. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), it was appropriated by the Gang of Four for class struggle and used to condemn political opponents as counter-revolutionaries. However, after the Cultural Revolution, its strong political associations fostered scepticism within the Chinese art community, leading to its decline (Duan 2010).

The 'reform and opening-up' under Deng Xiaoping from the late 1970's initiated the depoliticisation and commercialisation of CPP. Jinshan Peasant Painting integrated traditional crafts with innovation in style and subject matter, contributing to the development of CPP's contemporary style. China joined the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) system in 2004. Since 2007, CPP has been widely recognised for its cultural significance and included in ICH listings, with Ansai at the provincial level and Jinshan at the municipal level among the first batch.

Under Xi Jinping's administration since 2012, CPP has been reintegrated into the political propaganda system and has benefited from new policy initiatives. Currently, CPP remains

actively practised by peasant painters, including officially recognised ICH 'inheritors' who preserve and transmit traditional techniques. Huxian has approximately 200 key practitioners, while Jinshan and Longmen each have around 30 peasant painters. Over 1,200 Huxian Peasant Paintings have received awards at national art exhibitions, with 18,700 collected by museums and collectors (Zhao 2024). The large number of practitioners and artistic recognition in Huxian underscores its strong traditions and institutional support.

Since 2013, selected CPP artworks have been adapted into propaganda posters and retitled to promote the 'Chinese Dream' and 'Core Socialist Values' by the Central Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China. The Chinese Dream envisions 'a prosperous nation, national rejuvenation, and people's well-being', while the Core Socialist Values emphasise 'prosperity, democracy, civilisation, and harmony'.

For instance, the Longmen peasant painting *Flying Kites* was retitled *Realising the Chinese Dream, Aiming High* when adapted into a propaganda poster. The image of children flying kites symbolises the pursuit of dreams, signifying national rejuvenation. CPP values align with the 'Chinese Dream', as both emphasise harmony, diligence and perseverance, rooted in Confucian tradition (Gladston 2014). Additionally, CPP has been widely utilised to promote broader policy initiatives, such as *Delivering Daily Supplies to Home-Quarantined Residents*, a Jinshan peasant painting created during the COVID-19 pandemic. It depicts community volunteers in protective gear delivering essentials to residents in lockdown. Traditional features such as stove murals and indigo-dyed calico underscore the distinctive aesthetic of Jinshan peasant painting.

Substantial investment has been allocated to CPP to safeguard its cultural heritage and enhance its marketisation as part of the Cultural Confidence and the Cultural Power Strategy under Xi Jinping. In line with this, the 19th National Congress report emphasises strengthening ICH protection. For instance, 34.5 million RMB was designated for constructing and upgrading Huxian Peasant Painting Museum to foster public engagement and experiential learning opportunities for schools, while 10 million RMB was allocated to develop the CPP Village in Jinshan as a cultural tourism hub where peasant painters create and sell their artworks

THE PROPAGANDA POSTER: REALISING THE CHINESE DREAM, AIMING HIGH. SOURCE:

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(Xu 2024). Additionally, CPP has been promoted through domestic and international exhibitions, including *The World's Affection, Chinese Dream* at the United Nations Headquarters (2014) and the *Shanghai ICH Art Exhibition* in Sydney (2024).

CPP has benefited from the National Rural Revitalisation Strategy announced in 2017, with the stated aim of prioritising thriving industries, liveable ecology, civilised rural customs and prosperous living. Consequently, CPP has been integrated into rural murals and community cultural initiatives, evolving into a form of public folk art (Zhou 2011). Moreover, its close association with rural tourism has positioned it as an artistic medium that evokes nostalgia and rural memories.

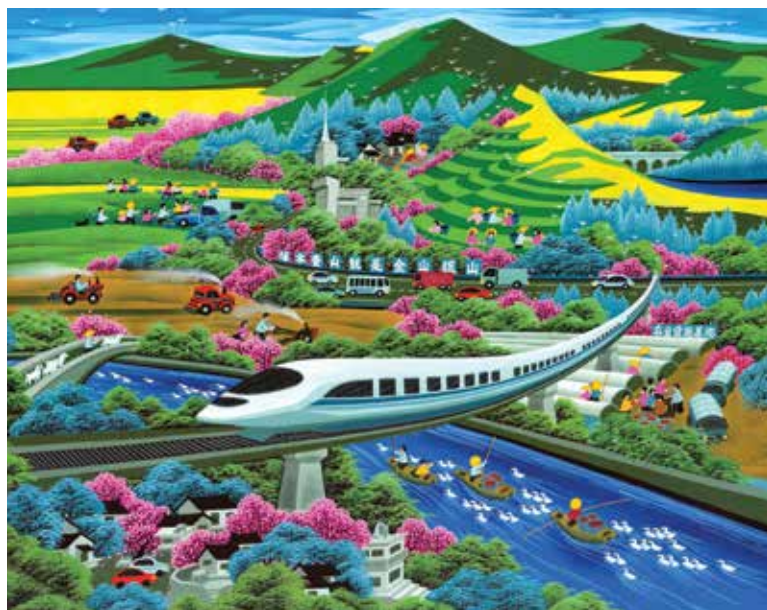


MCDONALD'S CPP-THEMED RESTAURANT. PHOTO SOURCED FROM WEIBO ([HTTPS://WEIBO.COM/1947211342/P2MJLKYLF](https://weibo.com/1947211342/P2MJLKYLF)),

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**CLEAR WATERS AND GREEN MOUNTAINS ARE AS VALUABLE AS MOUNTAINS OF GOLD AND SILVER**, WANG WENJI, HUXIAN, SHAANXI, 2021. GOUACHE ON WATERCOLOUR PAPER, 80 × 100 CM.

IMAGE COURTESY OF HUXIAN PEASANT PAINTING MUSEUM



Contemporary CPP continues to centre on the theme of a 'better life' while aligning with national strategies. For instance, the Huxian peasant painting *Clear Waters and Green Mountains Are as Valuable as Mountains of Gold and Silver* depicts a high-speed railway traversing the countryside, symbolising urban-rural integration, a key component of China's development agenda. Its vivid palette, featuring lush green mountains, clear blue waters and red blossoms, promotes Xi Jinping's ecological vision by aesthetically linking prosperity with vitality and abundance.

During the Chinese New Year 2025, both KFC and McDonald's integrated CPP into their marketing strategies, including themed packaging, advertisements, calendars and restaurant décor, with KFC adopting the theme *Beautiful Life Like Paintings*. These collaborations exemplify the recontextualisation of CPP, marking its transition from a rural symbol to a medium for international brand localisation.

Although supported by the government, CPP still encounters significant challenges. Rapid urbanisation has eroded rural landscapes and folk traditions, weakening its artistic foundation. With rural depopulation, the ageing generation of peasant painters poses pressing concerns for its continuity (Luo 2020). Financial instability is a major challenge. Even renowned Huxian peasant painters earn only 120,000–200,000 RMB annually, comparable to the local average, while typical artists earn much less and depend on secondary employment.

CPP faces commercial and creative constraints. Its designation as ICH positions it within a framework of cultural preservation, while

its integration into state political discourse reinforces its role in ideological advocacy. A government-led system of exhibitions and promotion prioritises heritage and political messaging over market engagement and artistic autonomy. With sales largely reliant on state procurement, the low social status of peasant painters further restricts their access to high-end commercial art institutions.

Although collaborations with brands like KFC have raised the visibility of CPP, they have done little to enhance its artistic prestige or secure lasting recognition in the contemporary art world. CPP's marginal status may stem from its perceived traits of repetitive motifs, didactic content and limited innovation. Yet such judgements often rely on aesthetic frameworks that marginalise the symbolic and communal value of folk traditions.

The rise of AI presents challenges to the copyright ownership of CPP. While most peasant painters adhere to traditional techniques, some younger practitioners have begun incorporating AI into their art. The surge in AI-generated CPP-style images heightens the risk of unauthorised reproduction and misuse. However, the lack of a clear legal framework governing copyright in AI-generated works creates uncertainty regarding the intellectual property rights of peasant painters.

In contemporary China, CPP has again become part of the political propaganda system while being safeguarded as an ICH. Simultaneously, it has evolved into a form of public folk art and a nostalgic symbol in rural tourism. Moreover, brand collaborations have facilitated new developmental trajectories, expanding its cultural and commercial presence. However,

**DELIVERING DAILY SUPPLIES TO HOME-QUARANTINED RESIDENTS**, LU ZHUOYAN, JINSHAN, SHANGHAI, 2020. GOUACHE ON XUAN PAPER, 60 × 60 CM.

SOURCE: THE PAPER ([HTTPS://M.THEPAPER.CN/BAIJIAHA0\\_17531297](https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiaha0_17531297))



its marketisation is constrained by state-led structures and limited engagement with contemporary art discourses.

Future efforts should explore pathways for CPP's creative adaptation, balance heritage preservation with commercial strategies, and establish a clear legal framework for the copyright of AI-generated artworks to ensure its sustainable development. However, whether these efforts will be sufficient to revitalise CPP remains uncertain, as its development continues to be shaped by broader structural and cultural dynamics.

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