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An Impossible Utopia: People's Art and the Cultural Revolution

Molly E. Reynolds '14, Gettysburg College

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An Impossible Utopia: People's Art and the Cultural Revolution

Abstract

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution period of the People's Republic of China (1966-1976) was crucial in the creation of modern-day China. The material culture of that period mirrors the turbulent political activity of students and the directives of the Communist Party's central leadership during the height of the Mao Zedong personality cult. The commercial manufacture of posters, often the sole decoration available for the public and private spheres, offers strong examples of the design style of this time. The posters are not only indicative of the propagandistic fervor of production, but the aesthetic changes initiated in the visual and performing arts during the period as the state consciously manipulated style in an effort to create a "people's" art and envision a Marxist utopia. This paper suggests that a comprehension of folk arts and popular culture is essential for understanding the visual language of this specific geographic and political space. A new perspective on the reconciliation of reality and ideology during the Cultural Revolution is gained through an analysis of popular form and content, and reveals not only the basis of a modern mass culture, but the unprecedented unification of high and low art forms.

Keywords

Cultural Revolution, Mao, posters, Communism

Disciplines

Asian Art and Architecture | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology

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An Impossible Utopia:
People's Art and the Cultural Revolution

Molly Elena Reynolds
Art History Capstone
Spring 2014

Introduction

The personal interests and ideology of political cult figure Mao Zedong (1893-1976) were the driving force of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), an epic revolutionary period in the history of modern China, and one that often wants to be forgotten. However, because of the legacy of social pain and heavy emotions endured, coupled with the considerable amount of surviving material culture from the time, the decade endures in memory and historical study. Cultural historians have explored the recollections of those involved in the transforming decade, and this story-telling is a moving aspect of historical interpretation.¹

Approaching the other half of memory, that of imagery and materials, this paper will be exclusively concerned with a more formal and technical analysis of tangible culture, due to the enormous variation in attitude and action of citizens during this time. Cultural Revolution art works no longer needs to be seen as repetitive and tedious, a mere footnote to a historical moment, but a wealth of material for art historical study; however, it is necessary to give credence to the experiences of those who lived through these events before endeavoring on an academic pursuit.

The visual reconciliation of reality and ideology under a totalitarian government can be explored through commercial posters, the most relevant surviving printed material from the decade. The formal elements and content of these designs and reproductions indicate the aims and influences in the state-manipulated unification of the arts; their manufacture and distribution is imperative to understanding the creation of a modern mass culture. The subject of each work cannot be ignored, as art production was distinctly political, functioning both as a part of active public participation and totalitarian control; however, formal elements illuminate content, and

¹ Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012).

are worth thorough examination. Much has been written regarding the propagandistic methods used by the power platform of Chairman Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution, as well as the strict limitations placed on various traditional and fine arts as part of the effort to create a “people’s” aesthetic. A Maoist iconography has in fact been identified and interpreted in studies that deal with printed material.² Intense visual and technical developments led to the creation of a mass culture in China during the Cultural Revolution. An investigation of the intersection of fine art and popular culture will serve as background for developing the language for stylistic elements of the period, while addressing the use of commercial posters as evidence of visual unification.

The Cultural Revolution provides a valuable opportunity for art historical research which simultaneously takes into account developments in high art and popular culture, at a moment when the regulation of both seemed imperative to political authorities. The production of art at this time was a unique moment when mechanical reproduction techniques of mass culture and the intimate touch of folk artists were employed in a contest to create a national identity aligned with the wishes of one administrative Marxist ideology. Research of cultural historians has caused greater awareness of the possibilities for studying propaganda of this period in Chinese history as culture, despite the transience of materials and their political nature.³ The case for the unification of the arts during the Cultural Revolution is best proven through analysis of the distribution and elements of commercial posters, a medium that is at once transient, and yet whose contemporary existence leaves scholars a wealth of visual information to analyze. Many studies have reported the sheer amount of posters which were layered in the urban landscape, and

² Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkins, *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books LLC, 2007).

Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds., *Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1999).

³ Cushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, Evans and Donald, *Picturing Power*.

their singular availability to the population as the only permissible interior decoration for homes.⁴ The formal elements of the visual arts were affected not only by the state-manipulated aspects of culture, but the elements which often appear as a matter of creative transmission.

A form of the reconciliation of influences and aims, deftly combining traditional Chinese storytelling and modern advances, are seen in the 1971 poster *To Transform China (in the way as) Old Man Yu Removed the Mountains* (Figure 1). In the tale of foolish Old Man, a fable dating from the early centuries of Chinese civilization, the elder attempts to move mountains with his sons, only to be spited by another “wise” old man. Old Man Yu insists that the mountains do not grow, but with the work of his grandsons and great-grandsons, eventually they would be removed. Just as he used many other references from celebrated Chinese folktales in his speeches, Mao originally used this anecdote in 1945 as inspiration for the Communist Party in overcoming imperialism and feudalism, and again in 1957 in reference to an agricultural project in the *Shandong* province.⁵ Henceforward, the modernization of agriculture, which included removing mountaintops in hardly arable regions and using complex systems of irrigation, was often promoted using this story that was undoubtedly Chinese and, in this context, Maoist. Grand economic and social projects meant to transform the geography of the country were supported by an emerging nationalism.

In this design, every technical and artistic innovation is on full display in a fantastic rendering of the nation. Electrical towers and windmills dot the skyline. In the upper right corner, tiny toy planes fly over an operating train, and closer to the viewer, men dig a well. An irrigation system is built by all possible hands, and rows of young women, whose banner reads “Revolutionary team of iron women,” carry buckets of water. All of these are signs of China’s

⁴ Cushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 10-11.

⁵ Jing Li, “Chinese Political Propaganda Posters Collection Translation and Background,” Special Collections, Gettysburg College Musselman Library.

modernization and self-sufficiency due to the power of its citizens. Groups of farmers, workers, and Red Guard members gather with their copies of Little Red Books to discuss and presumably antagonize counterrevolutionary citizens and Party members. A crushing red fist, a sign of the aggression of political fervor at this time, is displayed during an educational meeting. Modern conveniences like the telephone, microphone and radio make an appearance. In the bottom right corner, billowing red standards lead a parade of urban workers come to aid the country peasants, half wielding shovels and the other half Little Red Books. In the upper left-hand corner, mountains in the style of traditional Chinese painting are inked with by the cheap commercial printing process, and small workers and text are superimposed on their sides. Watching over the diligent hard work, the billboard image of Mao is at once one with the people and completely elusive, like a deity. His visage was the overwhelming symbol of the Cultural Revolution, as the period was opened because of his own political wishes, and ended with the death of the giant. During this period, fine art aspects of design were reconfigured for propaganda, uniting style and content.

Important aspects of traditional Chinese painting are joined to the modern commercial printing process. The use of shifting perspective, as well as the line style of the mountains in the top left corner, are more common to Chinese composition. The complex integration of text and image, characteristic of Chinese landscape painting, is joined with the use of both cultural reference (to Old Man Yu) and the instructive nature of 20th century advertising. This visual depiction of China is as much hopeful as it is pedagogical. In this version of the People's Republic, every possible natural resource of the countryside is used in the process of industrialization and modernization. It is a utopian nation of red and green, smiling faces and constant revolutionary work to be done. Modern technologies are used to create and are

reflected in an image that is once present and future. Because of the strength of the citizens, the landscape is overcome and reconditioned, just as the traditional aspects of Chinese art were at this time transformed into an entirely new style.

Ideology of a Cultural Revolution

Precedents for revolutionary culture exist before the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949 as an integral part of the Communist Party's political agenda. Writing in 1940, in his work *On New Democracy*, Mao Zedong expressed the need to destroy "semi-feudal" and "imperialist" politics, economy, and culture.⁶ The May 4th Movement, a 1919 students' anti-imperialist movement, is credited by Mao as the beginning of the "new" culture. He cites this historical moment as that when culture shifted from being dominated by the bourgeoisie to generating a socialist revolution that was part of the world proletariat movement.⁷ Interestingly, he titles the section of his essay about this new culture "A National, Scientific, and Mass Culture." This writing is powerfully Marxist, but when new ideas for the aesthetics of this culture arise, Mao dictates that China should "assimilate" other cultures' styles, not only that of the Soviet Union, China's ally, but those of Western capitalist nations during their period of enlightenment.⁸ The great leader wished to adopt some modes of visual language from Western societies and from its allies like the Soviet Union, but to apply it in a way specific to the Chinese nation. Mao was writing in the middle of the long revolutionary period of China, while the nation was searching for a new identity. And as much as Mao determines to destroy old culture, he does make an argument for allowing the "democratic and revolutionary" elements of

⁶ Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy* (Peking (Beijing): Foreign Languages Press, 1960), 61.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

traditional Chinese culture to stay in sight.⁹ He urges that revolutionary practice and cultural movement are both mass movements, and therefore culture – whether it be language, literature, visual arts, theater, etc. – must grow closer to and be absorbed by the masses.¹⁰

In 1942, Mao Zedong came to the Communist stronghold of Yan'an, in the *Shaanxi* province, for the Conference on Literature and Art, a gathering centered on overthrowing traditional Chinese culture and replacing it with a Communist one. Yan'an was used as a base for promoting popular culture; “folk culture” was incredibly important in the revolutionary politics of the 1930s and 1940s. The words delivered by Mao in 1942 promoted the popularization of the arts, prescribing new works that would not be for the use of the intelligentsia, but the worker, peasant, and soldier. As Lu describes this mass culture transformation: “The communist regime attempted to bring about artistic synthesis of during the era of Mao by combining the technologies of urban culture...with traditional folk forms...and treated cinema as the most important art form.”¹¹ The philosophies espoused at the Yan'an Conference were exalted since the first distribution of Mao's speeches, and were revisited during the Cultural Revolution as a model for new production. During the decade, Party leadership promised the introduction of, as cultural historian Richard King writes, “a new proletarian culture true to a radical interpretation of Mao's vision of the arts”¹² he had expressed twenty-five years before. In his closing statement, Mao declared that “Proletarian literature and art are a part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; as Lenin said, they are “a screw in the whole

⁹ Mao Zedong, *On New Democracy*, 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹ Sheldon Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 157.

¹² Richard King, *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976* (Canada: UBC Press, 2010), 13.

machine,” and therefore, the party’s work in literature and art occupies a definite, assigned position within the party’s revolutionary work as a whole.”¹³

The Red Guard: Creating a Youth Movement

During the decade-long period of the Cultural Revolution, there was a struggle within the nation to decide the social and economic direction of China after the uncontested failure of the Great Leap Forward movement (1958-1961) for collective agriculture and industrialization. Power politics would play out on a national scale beginning in the early 1960s, and would have an enormous effect on art production. During the Cultural Revolution, the argument to reject the old ideas of Chinese traditional life was emphasized, and a campaign against the Four Olds (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) was begun.¹⁴ To simply describe the frenzied actions of the Red Guard, every bit of urban life which was deemed somehow hierarchical, bourgeoisie, elitist was destroyed, given a new function, or changed in appearance.¹⁵ Rightist intellectuals were persecuted as enemies of the state; many artists were beaten and their studios looted as the movement reached a height of hysteria. By this time as well, the Sino-Russian alliance was breaking, as the nations’ relationship fractured on the international stage.¹⁶ However, the stylistic elements from formerly taught Western and Socialist Realist models were not disposed of; they had become a central part of the Party’s instructive art works and posters.

Scholars of the Cultural Revolution subject generally agree that the decade can be broken into two distinct periods of cultural aims and production. Scholar Kuiyi Shen considers the first

¹³ Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art”* (The Center for Chinese Studies: Michigan, 1980), 75.

¹⁴ Evans and Donald, *Picturing Power*, 2.

¹⁵ Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 116.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

part, 1966-1970, that of Red Guard and Rebel Faction art, and the second part, 1971-1976, that of worker-peasant-soldier art.¹⁷ There is no question that the first part was one of both criticism (of counterrevolutionary “rightists”) and glorification (of Chairman Mao Zedong). In the first years, the Red Guard youth movement hosted many exhibitions of their art, with titles such as “Smash the Liu Shaoqi-Deng Xiaoping Counterrevolutionary Line” and “Long Live the Victory of Mao Zedong Thought.”¹⁸ The Red Sea Movement covered every square inch of the nation with the face of Chairman Mao and quotations from his writing, giving way to the largest propaganda scheme and most vivid personality cult the world had ever seen at that time: today, Mao’s visage is the most reproduced in the world. Aesthetically, this period is characterized by the use of bold text and pedagogical compositions that are closely related to the imagery used in earlier Communist propaganda during wartime aggression.

The most often viewed visual works of the Revolution were *dazibao*, or big character posters, which students involved in revolutionary acts wrote usually with the intention to critique a leader found following “the capitalist road” or a counterrevolutionary teacher or administrator (Figure 2). These *dazibao* had been used since imperial times, and higher literacy rates in the 19th century increased public awareness of the form. Mao participated in this student art, creating mass mobilization of university students throughout the summer of 1966 by reinvigorating this art form. The decorative calligraphy of the bourgeoisie literati was replaced with a simplified script.¹⁹ While earlier in the history of the People’s Republic’s when the Communist Party was establishing central control, those who dissented with big character

¹⁷ Kuiyi Shen, “Propaganda Posters and Art During the Cultural Revolution,” in *Art and China’s Revolution*, Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian, eds. (New York: Asia Society, 2008), 149.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Pamela Churchill, “Mao Zedong, the masses, and the art of calligraphy: Big-Character posters during the cultural revolution,” *Concordia Undergraduate Journal of Art History* (accessed February 2014) <http://cujah.org/past-volumes/volume-ix/essay-3-volume-9/>.

posters were repressed, during the Cultural Revolution, citizens were encouraged to dissent as often as possible (if only toward leaders in the Party specified by Mao).²⁰ On August 5th, the Chairman created his own *dazibao*, to be displayed outside the Central Committee meeting room, which exclaimed, “Bombard the Capitalist Headquarters: My First Big-Character Poster,” thereby showing how the great leader was alone with the people in the effort for authentic Marxist revolutionary struggle to continue.²¹ Playing into the rebellious emotions of youth, students who excelled at calligraphy were ordered to turn against their teachers and defame, disgrace, and carry on intellectual and philosophical debate using these posters. Whereas before the Cultural Revolution, students in urban Beijing might be aware of or occasionally create *dazibao*, during the Revolution there was an absolute inundation. I would argue that the overwhelming use of *dazibao* highlights one aesthetic value of Cultural Revolution artforms: the integration of text and image that encourages social participation and strict adherence to Maoist philosophy.

In order to understand the astounding unification in artistic production which occurred, one must consider the hands who controlled that production, and their aims in consciously manipulating style. The Cultural Revolution is thought to have begun in May 1966, when the Party’s Central Committee removed the Cultural Revolution Group, which had been formed in 1964, and replaced it with the Cultural Revolution Small Group. The work of the CRG had been that of political critic, a watchdog for corruption and “bourgeois tendencies among academics and bureaucrats.”²² The establishment of the CRSG immediately followed the Central Committee’s publishing of a document which gave exact theory and direction for the process of

²⁰ Pamela Churchill, “Mao Zedong, the masses, and the art of calligraphy.”

²¹ Julia F. Andrews, “The Art of the Cultural Revolution,” in *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976*, Richard King, ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 33.

²² Cushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 5.

continuous revolution.²³ Jiang Qing, Mao's wife and Politburo member, was given the position of deputy director of the new Small Group, which replaced the entire Propaganda Department. The Cultural Revolution Small Group, would be the arbiter of popular culture, and lead huge projects in a number of the arts. Cultural historian Barbara Mittler gives the best summation of the breadth and unification of the new commercial art production:

...it is significant that propaganda art made use of some of the most popular art forms such as Beijing Opera and peasant painting, in addition to selecting genres from high art such as ballet dancing or oil painting, artistic forms which were then popularized. It was this variety and the particular choice of genres favored by different groups in the population that helped make this art acceptable, while structurally...it contained quite a few of the elements characteristic of popular culture."²⁴

Printing Images for the Masses

The tradition of mechanical reproduction of images began in China during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907), with the introduction of woodblock printing. Printing documents advocating social change during the time of turbulent political upheaval period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a paramount necessity as leaders of the Nationalist and Communist Parties rallied citizens.²⁵ However, the mass communication function enacted by the Communist Party made it so that the commercial posters "evolved into a distinct form," especially during the highly controlled period of the Cultural Revolution.²⁶

The sheer amount of material culture reported during this period is incredible, but feasible due to the technological advances and control by the Communist Party and the division of aims for various levels of production. The Communist party gained control of the commercial

²³ Churchill, "Mao Zedong, the masses, and the art of calligraphy."

²⁴ Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 12.

²⁵ Kuiyi, "Propaganda Posters," 150.

²⁶ Cushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 7.

publishing industry based mainly in Shanghai, and the possibility of printing full-color pictures by the thousands was realized.²⁷ Posters from the period can be broken into three types: *xuanchuanhua* (propaganda posters), *nianhua* (New Year's prints) and *huapian* (reproductions).²⁸ The *xuanchuanhua* were crafted carefully under the mandated style for use of mass mobilization. The *nianhua*, evocative of the most popular form of two-dimensional home décor, were meant for purchase at the end of the year, and to hang in homes and outdoors for the coming celebration. *Huapian* were “inspirational” images available year round; work units and individuals bought these reproductions of peasant paintings and oil or ink paintings. Although these distinctions exist, the three kinds of posters were all used propagandistically during this time, and often adhered to similar styles. It was part of the converging of styles from all over the country, in varying degrees in urban and rural areas, due to the manipulation of the central government but carried out by professional and amateur artists working in groups.

Technically, those posters considered *xuanchuanhua* were only designed and released by printers to forward very specific instructions regarding ideology and political movements. The medium for such works was gouache on paper, the popular medium for advertisements and political posters. The vivid colors are a reflection of Western advertising and *nianhua* popularity; but the compositional designs are more often the direct result of exposure to Soviet propaganda posters.²⁹ These elements can also be seen in other people's arts movements in Western countries, such as the Federal Arts Project launched by the Works Progress Administration of the United States during the Great Depression.³⁰ *Xuanchuanhua* were displayed in public buildings and government agencies. During the height of Red Guard rage

²⁷ Kuiyi, “Propaganda Posters,” 152.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Cushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 8.

and action, design studios were taken apart and reused, just as artist's studios and homes of the bourgeoisie were looted and goods confiscated, and as the entire Propaganda Department had been displaced by the Cultural Small Group.³¹ Woodblock prints of the the first two years of the Revolution were often student-crafted red and black compositions, images that appear violent and furious compared to posters created after this first aggressive period (Figure 3).

One major factor which created a mass culture was the mechanical reproduction of works (*huapian*) deemed "model" by the central Communist Party leadership. When a certain work caught the public's attention at a national exhibition, fit the ideological criteria, and displayed a masterful skill, the government would release large numbers of copies of the work for public display and consumption.³² The reproduction of oil paintings in the second half of the Cultural Revolution coincided with the growing concern for aesthetic perfection associated with Jiang Qing's model theatrical works. This multiplicity of model works made it that much easier for artist-workers to recognize certain visual elements and copy them in future works. As control of artistic production remained at a high level but emphasis in political movements moved from militant student groups to ideas of a worker-peasant-soldier society and education, aesthetics became less marked by hyper-violent, angry imagery and more by a depiction of a utopian Socialist state.

Peasant Painting: People's Art

This period is marked by the fact that professional artists were no longer permitted to freely create their own work, unless commissioned by the government, as every image was loaded with political meaning. Instead, trained artists were sent to the countryside, just as

³¹ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution*, 11.

³² Kuiyi, "Propaganda Posters," 154.

students were in the post-aggression period, to teach and learn from peasants. Because class differences were technically eliminated, it was vital that levels of society once kept separate performed labor as equals; not only manual labor, but cultural activities, like painting. Scholar Ellen Johnston Laing uses appropriate language when she reports that instead of disappearing entirely, professional art-making was “submerged” into peasant painting practices.³³ Two-dimensional art forms like woodblock prints were normally anonymous in this period, and were the product of group creation. Peasants and workers who would never have had the chance to participate in the arts if not for the CPC’s philosophy received instruction in theater, printmaking, and painting. Resources like *Renwu hua pu* (a manual for figure depiction) were common for teaching the lower classes to draw the human figure at work.³⁴ These kinds of manuals became popular in the early 1970s, and led to many instances of “Chinese painting,” as it was then called, or, explained by Laing: “an amalgamation of traditional Chinese brush techniques with a modified Western chiaroscuro.”³⁵ Traditional peasant crafts of the past were not characterized by realism (Socialist or otherwise), but rather by stylized vegetation with accompanying symbols of happiness and abundance like bats, fish, fruits and flowers. During the Great Leap Forward, the first phase of peasant painting, the artistic efforts of peasant-artists from provinces like Jiangsu were tentative, comic-strip-esque images that used the common elements of traditional representation. These elements included “written phrases to explain and support the visual image,” and often lacked perspective and a focal point.³⁶ Ko Lu, editor of *Meishu*, the leading art journal of the time, wrote in reference to peasant painting in 1958: “...its

³³ Ellen Johnston Laing, “Chinese Peasant Painting, 1958 – 1976: Amateur and Professional,” *Art International*, vol. 27 (1984): 2, accessed January 2014, EBSCO Art Index Retrospective.

³⁴ Iris Wachs and Chang Tsong-zung, *Half a Century of Chinese Woodblock Prints: From the Communist Revolution to the Open-Door Policy and Beyond 1945-1998* (Israel: Defus Omani Offset, Ltd., 1999), 54-55.

³⁵ Laing, “Chinese Peasant Painting,” 9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

mass appeal is undoubted...They have an immediacy of impact.”³⁷ These same words could be used to describe all artistic projects from the same period, and the value of that simple, direct peasant aesthetic can be found in the action-driven commercial posters from the Cultural Revolution. The influence of professional teachers familiar with the active Western compositions of history paintings and grand Socialist Realism on peasants, who had a proclivity for using text to further an illustration’s meaning, are indicative of edifying, united aesthetic of this period.

Peasant paintings from the *Huxian* province are among the most famous “folk” arts developed during this period. The ability of peasants to partake in painting was not seen by Maoist philosophy as an impediment to economic development, but rather an important part of social and economic betterment. After the first fragments of art education from Chen Shiheng, a recent art school graduate, in the late part of the Great Leap Forward, involvement rose once the Cultural Revolution began and orders were given from above to increase participation.³⁸ Although some traditional forms of folk arts were prominent in *Huxian*, it was “not particularly rich in folk art traditions,” and this could be a reason for the Party’s interest in building the peasant painters up as the National Model during the Cultural Revolution.³⁹ For a unification of styles to occur which would ultimately lead to a cohesive image of Maoist China, these arts had to develop in an area where influence would not upset deeply entrenched visual traditions.

In peasant painting there exists a tension between formal elements; that is, the professional, Western-influenced instructors were confronted by peasants’ interpretation of

³⁷ Laing, “Chinese Peasant Painting,” 7.

³⁸ Ralph Croizier, “Hu Xian Peasant Painting,” *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976*, Richard King, ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 139.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

proportion and style.⁴⁰ Oftentimes Western figural depictions united with the peasant stylistic traditions of lack of definition between ground and sky spaces, and repeated, decorative appearance of animals (tending to animals was the a principal theme).⁴¹ Like other oil paintings and popular images, peasant paintings were featured on posters and sent to international exhibitions for display. The poster version of Liu Zhigui's 1974 work *After the Bumper Harvest* is one example of a peasant painting highly influenced by professional aesthetics, whereas a work like Li Zhenhua's *The Brigade's Ducks* follows the compositional elements that mark folk traditions (see Figures 4 and 5). In *After the Bumper Harvest*, leaders of a production brigade discuss the successful harvest; the vantage point is from outside the window of the meeting room. The light which comes from the lamp hanging above the seated group is extremely precise, coming out of the shade with exact angles. Faces are smiling and notably formulaic. The Communist Party's star hangs above, and various red accessories are seen in the room. Outside the window, the signs of abundance are obvious. Bags of produce sit, ready to be saved or transported, and golden-orange corn takes up a third of the composition, framing the group indoors. On the right-hand side, a piece of machinery, indicative of innovations in agriculture, sits underneath a harvest moon. This combination of happy peasant, new technologies, and traditional Chinese symbolism is present in other peasant paintings and commercial posters of the time.

In *The Brigade's Ducks*, the peasant artist has used conventions more familiar to rural citizens. There is hardly any perspective used, except for the indication of two girls sitting on a pond bank. Beautiful, stylized purple flowers grow out of healthy green grasses, bending toward the water from the right-hand side. In the pond, ducks of various shades peck at the water and

⁴⁰ Ralph Croizier, "Hu Xian Peasant Painting," 141.

⁴¹ Laing, "Chinese Peasant Painting," 11.

flap about in an arrangement that is chaotic if not unpleasant to the viewer. The verticality of the girl figure in a red shirt and rolled blue pants ground the figures in the foreground. The longer a viewer observes the work, it appears that the layers of ducks – who, though in chaotic arrangement, are ultimately designed in lines – are meant to create a kind of depth that is understood by the mind if not by the eye. *Communal Fish Pond*, the most popular peasant painting with Western audiences (a second version of the image was gifted to U.S. President Richard Nixon during his 1972 visit to China) contains this formal element as well (Figure 6).⁴²

Style Mandates and Influences

Jiang Qing may have been the standard-bearer of the Cultural Revolution, but Mao was its face. The Cultural Revolution was the aging Chairman’s carefully positioned political power play. Mao’s philosophy was potent and did not allow for nonconformists. The goals for literary and visual creation dictated at Yan’an were used as the foundation for all proletarian artworks. Therefore, the instructions for propaganda and art-making were handed down from the Cultural Revolution Small Group, and the mandated formal style was extremely precise. As art historian Julia Andrews has noted, designs were to be “bright, and should be illuminated in such a way as to imply that Mao himself was the primary source of light.”⁴³ A Red Guard booklet entitled *Long Live Chairman Mao: Selections of Woodcut Portraits of Chairman Mao* was put together by Red Guards from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, and this group of fifty four portraits was “a visual bible for Red Guard illustrators.”⁴⁴ Cool colors were avoided, and red was the preferred dominant hue. Already the symbol of revolution and socialism, the “red sun” was

⁴² Ralph Croizier, “Hu Xian Peasant Painting,” 151.

⁴³ Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press/Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1994), 360.

⁴⁴ Kuiyi, “Propaganda Posters,” 150.

an icon of Mao ideology. The new posters often featured woodcut illustrations, watercolor paintings with graphic outlines, and had a strong instructive nature. Many were influenced by Soviet Socialist Realist works, a style that had been appropriated by the Chinese government because of its simultaneous promotion of the value of workers and the wisdom of Communist leadership. Text was a vital part of the design, often a piece of Mao's poetry or an anti-imperialist slogan. Posters were not just produced through groups within the Party, but by Red Guard individuals. Once the cult of Mao was established, "visible manifestations of Maoism continued to prevail."⁴⁵ These manifestations included buttons, posters, poetry, the Little Red Book, amongst the symbolism of Mao and a socialist China. The end of the furious cult-building led to the utopian imagery that followed.

Just as Western formulas for advertising had entered China during the early twentieth century, so too did formal elements. Despite the fact that Jiang Qing demonized Western art styles as too decadent (prompting one scholar to write that "no Chinese authority has ever spoken so disparagingly of Western culture yet with so little knowledge of it"), there are elements present in figure and composition which are clearly a result of exposure to and purposeful use of Western styles.⁴⁶ As Paul Clark states in his well-known work, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: The History*: "Cultural practice between 1966 and 1976 had deep roots in the Chinese experience not simply after 1949 but since China's nineteenth-century encounter with Western power and culture."⁴⁷

It is well known that the Chinese looked to their Russian Communist counter-parts for leadership in the arts during the early period of the Republic. Western compositional patterns that might remind viewers of Renaissance painting were transferred to Chinese artists via the

⁴⁵ Alan Lawrance, *China Under Communism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 76.

⁴⁶ Richard King, "Introduction," *Art In Turmoil*, 7.

⁴⁷ Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5.

Socialist Realist school. In the 1968 poster *The renegade traitor and scab Liu Shaoqi must forever be expelled from the Party!* the strong, muscular arms of the Red Guard youth are reminiscent of a Michelangelo fresco (Figure 7). This poster is an example of the transition period between the militant early years of the Cultural Revolution and the later blend of styles. Earlier black and red designs featured similar composition: an enormous figure with massive musculature creates a strong line from the top right to the lower left, often because of the indication of a smashing action. The lower corner of the composition is home to whatever counterrevolutionary or imperialist enemy is crawling away, small and ridiculed as a caricature (Figure 3). This kind of composition is a hand-me-down from the military posters of revolutionary times and the World War II anti-Japanese campaigns. Most interestingly is the acquirement of paintbrushes by revolutionary figures during the 1966-1968 period; in *The renegade traitor* poster, and in others, the angry student brandishing a paintbrush is just as active a figure as he who wields a spade or weapon. The figural style has deviated from the original black and red posters because of the medium switch to gouache, which allows for more subtle shading. These heavily outlined figures are reminiscent of comic books; the story of revolutionary heroes is more easily told by this bold, active composition.

The Impossible Utopia

The second period represents a shift away from militarism to exhibitions of actual workers, soldiers, and peasants. The visual characteristics of this period were closely linked to the stylistic elements of the model theatric works touted by Jiang Qing. The increased value of aesthetics was tied to political events: in the first years, it was critical for Mao to reaffirm his place as the great leader of the Chinese people; his face alone represented a new socialist China.

In the second phase of the Cultural Revolution, when it was thought that the revolution had been successful (and was declared as such by Mao in 1968), it was necessary to educate youth sent to the countryside and other citizens as to their role in the new society of worker-soldier-peasant. Posters were made by the people and depicted the activities of the masses, all while upholding Maoist ideology. The feeling that in viewing posters from this period, that one is simultaneously looking at what is as well as what will be, is well-cited by many scholars. The paradoxical representation of the present and future is visualized in the compositional elements, and signals the transition from past, traditional forms of art through the present to the future mass culture that has characteristics of Western models.

An exploration of the iconographic use of green and red is quite fitting for entering a discussion of the next phase of the Cultural Revolution. Red was the hue chosen by the Communist Party not only in China, but in other nations, to represent Marxism and revolution. The red sun was a simultaneous symbol for Mao, whose rays would spill onto the Chinese people new prosperity, as well as of China itself. The use of this symbolism is critically important to understanding the visual elements of Chinese art at this time. The element of the color red bleeding into the environment was a new aspect of revolutionary style. A precedent for this technique can be seen in its conscious use in the 1959 monumental landscape painting *This Land so Rich in Beauty*, that hangs in the Great Hall of the People (Figure 8). Painted in ink on paper by renowned artists Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue and a host of assistants, the composition features a red sun rising in the east whose coloration seeps through the landscape, carefully blended with the blue-green tones of ink. This quality is apparent in other landscapes of the period. Mao is present not only in the red color of the sun, but the vantage point of the work: he is hovering above the landscape (as his face is commonly depicted in more commercial designs),

watching over the nation. His poetry is written in the top left part of the painting, carefully detailed by the painters in his calligraphy style.

But how to elevate the everyday experience of Chinese laborers into robust Marxist models? Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom makes a point in his short but effective article response that the posters which illustrate ordinary people performing everyday work or ritual can be truly revolutionary.⁴⁸ He also deftly touches upon the temporal paradox of art works of this time, that their subjects and imagery are firmly set in the present, due to seemingly mundane details, while also looking toward the future, which is always vivid, bright, and utopian.

Artists' use of greens and green-blues throughout this period in the visual arts and film is indicative of the utopian qualities that were commended by the Party leadership. Iris Wachs and Chang Tsong-Zung credit the *guohua* painting *A Great Wall of Green Forests*, a work of Guan Shanyue which was praised by critics, for popularizing the use of green in landscapes.⁴⁹ The rich use of green and red can be found in commercial prints like *Learn from Dazhai in Agriculture*, where the visualization of a utopian agricultural state is coupled with a persistent red tint in the ground, fields, and in the shirt of the central female figure (Figure 9). While the political iconography is not as obvious, the grand ideals of the leading political line is figured in the coloration and composition. Not only that, but the color of the persimmons, a symbol of prosperity, hanging over the doorway is mirrored in the complexions of the family, and the mountain landscape with electric tower. Green-blues contrast with these warm tones to create a composition that at once catches the eye of the viewer, but aids in telling the story of Chinese prosperity in the age of technological and agricultural innovation.

⁴⁸ Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Comment," *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2010): 360-364, accessed February 1, 2014, <http://vcu.sagepub.com/content/9/3/360>, 363.

⁴⁹ Wachs and Chang, *Half a Century of Chinese Woodblock Prints*, 61.

While malachite green and blue dominated landscape prints of the early 1970s, so too did the colors gain prominence in film. Laikwan Pang's enlightening article "Colour and Utopia" gives evidence for the importance of the use of green in film both aesthetically and technically. He argues that film production "demonstrated a unique feature of propaganda culture during the Cultural Revolution - aesthetic perfectionism was upheld so strongly that aesthetics became almost independent from the original political grounds."⁵⁰ The color has a two-fold meaning. On one hand, the tone delivers a utopian quality seemingly science-fiction in quality; on the other, the production of this green tone requires a type of film whose appearance signals the commercial achievements of China's industry.⁵¹

The photography of Zhang Yaxin sheds light on the question of desired color quality for the model works. The photographer was working for Xinhua News Agency in 1966 when Jiang Qing recruited him as the premier photographer for documenting images from the theater Model Works, before any of the works were developed into films.⁵² The shortage of color film at this time made its usage extremely restricted; Zhang was the *only* photographer at this time allowed unlimited access to the valuable commodity.⁵³ In a photograph from *Raid from the White Tiger Regiment* (1971), the red of standards has purposefully been reflected in the bright, eerie backdrop, as well as clouds in a blue sky (Figure 10). A verdant landscape lies behind the precise edges of the dancer's bodies. Zhang Yaxin's stills were those used on the materials sold

⁵⁰ Laikwan Pang, "Colour and Utopia: The Filmic Portrayal of Harvest in Late Cultural Revolution Narrative Films," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, vol. 6, no. 3 (2012): 263-282 (accessed January 2014)
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=8d81e3b7-70b4-4d90-9e74-92c324526e67%40sessionmgr4001&vid=4&hid=4106>, 274.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

⁵² Alyssa Coppelman, "Rare Color Photos of the 1960s Chinese Operas," *Slate*, last modified Feb. 26th, 2013, accessed Feb. 2014,
http://www.slate.com/blogs/ behold/2013/02/26/zhang_yaxin_documenting_china_s_model_operas_during_the_cultural_revolution.html.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

for mass cultural consumption, with a prevailing Marxist ideology that necessitated precise style mandates.

What is the importance of this latest use of red and green? The colors are those which since ancient Chinese times have symbolized the universe.⁵⁴ As Chang writes, “Green in China traditionally has symbolized life, just as red has symbolized happiness, warmth, vitality, and male virility.”⁵⁵ In this way, images of the nation released during this late Cultural Revolution period transmitted the ideal of a self-sufficient China, all under a Communist leadership and philosophy, through aesthetic elements that signified traditional culture that would be easily understood by a Chinese citizen at that time. Obsession with visual quality on the part of Jiang Qing and other cultural leadership also indicates the power struggles taking place, as the Gang of Four struggled to remain calm as Mao’s health was failing.

The modernization of Chinese opera was the cornerstone of cultural production for the Revolution. Jiang Qing is generally credited with the development of the eight original Revolutionary Model Opera Works (and indeed, her exacting attitude toward producers of the film versions are well-documented). However, Paul Clark has researched more thoroughly about the developments and experimentation in opera that preceded the Cultural Revolution. Throughout the early 20th century, new operas were reshaped to create greater focus and mimicked the narrative arc of popular Shanghai-made films.⁵⁶ This art form was used to spread progressive messages and modernize national culture. During the Cultural Revolution, the model theatrical works were spread throughout the provinces, as citizens from varying social strata were encouraged to perform, and to learn to sing revolutionary songs.⁵⁷ The works, such

⁵⁴ Wachs and Chang, *Half a Century of Chinese Woodblock Prints*, 61.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 12.

⁵⁷ Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution*, 2.

as *The Red Detachment of Women* and *The Legend of the Red Lantern*, used modern legends of revolutionary acts to celebrate the achievements of a group, rather than entirely celebrating the individual. The state organization of troupes was much like that of the political bureaucracy, and guaranteed the continual relevance of the works, as they were consumed and became part of the national consciousness.⁵⁸ The “Three Prominences,” formulated by Jiang Qing, were the prescribed staging for the original model works, and for the visual elements of the decade: “stress positive characters, the heroic in them, and stress the more central of the main characters.”⁵⁹ Images from these works were displayed on all kinds of memorabilia, and the elements of poster designs from this period that appear to reference the theater are a result of the popularity of the performing arts.

Revolutionary Mass Culture

I hope the conclusions drawn in addressing some of the most important elements of Cultural Revolution material culture advance the argument to prevent this period of China’s history from being labelled “the ten lost years” of culture. This amazingly emotional and politically charged era of art-making, while at once communal and compulsory, can be seen for its contributions to the development of mass culture. The expulsion of the imagery of this period from the public consciousness seems impossible, and the influence of Maoist iconography is seen in the works of contemporary artists today. The influence of the aesthetic elements themselves are a question for further research.

The form and content of the commercial prints from this time are indicative of Cultural Revolution style. Every art form is somehow linked to industry and machinery, expressing the

⁵⁸ Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 13.

⁵⁹ Cushing and Tompkins, *Chinese Posters*, 8.

modernization of the economy and the ability of man to overcome the landscape. Even in peasant painting, Laing makes a curious point about the appearance of agricultural subjects whose style is “constructed of a few strong, bold shapes, usually rigidly repeated in neat and regular sequences.”⁶⁰ She argues that these paintings are reflective of the farming life, wherein fields are neatly subdivided and orderly in order to have a successful harvest. In this way, Chinese life is depicted in a utopian way. The true power of the written word was used by students and the government against counterrevolutionary enemies, to chaotic and violent effect. Traditional Chinese painting was subsumed by Western figural depictions and combined to create a new design style typified by narrative, instruction, and celebration of Marxist ideology. While the content of these works are vital, the formal elements bolster the aims of the Communist Party and Mao Zedong.

In the time period from 1966-1976, peasants and civilians alike were pushed to create revolutionary art works, which connects folk and fine arts. The impact of Western figural styles combined with national Chinese ideas to create vivid depictions of a new China. While it is debated as to whether the Cultural Revolution was a revolution administered from above or should be considered a grassroots experimentation with revolutionary ideas of culture, the direct manipulation of Mao Zedong cannot be discounted in any measure.⁶¹ Today, his face is still constantly reproduced in the recycling of pop culture and reappropriated by contemporary artists struggling with the place of such an icon in their personal and national history. Sheldon Lu makes an interesting point of stating that rather than remaining a cult figure, Mao has been commodified in modern-day China.⁶² Mass, fine, and folk cultures have been able to take

⁶⁰ Laing, “Chinese Peasant Painting,” 12.

⁶¹ Lawrance, *China Under Communism*, 80.

⁶² Sheldon H. Lu, *China, Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 202.

various paths away from total unification in the post-Tiananmen generations.⁶³ While past narratives of the Cultural Revolution counted these years as culturally lost or worth forgetting, the conceiving of revolutionary culture that reached its apex during the ten-year period has cultural implications for China today.⁶⁴ The horrors, but also the development of a very specific style, driven by social and political desires, of Mao's regime cannot be forgotten.

Conclusion

By analyzing the aesthetic elements of Cultural Revolution art forms, which were at once highly manipulated and the site for creative liberation, we have seen some of the outcomes, conscious and unconscious, that stem from the unprecedented unification of the arts. This unification was the outcome of a control of both stifling artistic production (in the case of professional artists) and encouraging artistic endeavors from the revolutionary strata of society, the peasants, workers, and soldiers.

The control exerted by the Party leadership during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution over the creation of images was integral in modernizing media in China, even as attempts at modernizing agriculture and industry had mixed results. In a modern world where the commercial aspect of the arts is a greater consideration than ever before, the importance of the artistic consolidation performed in China from 1966-1976 cannot be denied. The Chinese totalitarian approach to creation, which at once breaks tradition and creates new iconographies, is a repulse to the concerns of Western art critics writing during the early twentieth century pertaining to mechanical reproduction and the loss of "aura" in the visual arts. The inundation of imagery present during the Cultural Revolution was due to the acceleration of compulsory

⁶³ Lu, *China*, 202.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 210-211.

Marxist political frenzy, but is a case of visual language which can be firmly placed in the development of considering twentieth century popular culture.

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