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CHINA: ART, POWER, AND REVOLUTIONS 1950-1976

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‘A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.’

Some twenty years before the Chinese Communist Party achieved power in 1949 at the end of a bloody and protracted civil war, the youthful Mao Zedong (1893-1976) wrote these words in his ‘Report on an Investigation into the Peasant Movement in Hunan’. In 1927, Mao was far from being the Great Leader he would one day be proclaimed, and few in that year outside his immediate circle would have predicted the path China’s history would take, let alone the status he himself would occupy. So it is intriguing that, in choosing activities which were for the young Mao the *opposite* of the revolution he sought, ‘painting a picture’ should be one of them, classified as an activity which was ‘refined, leisurely and gentle’. In 1927 Mao was clearly either ignorant of, or more likely did not care about, the debates within the cultural world which tried to make of art something urgent, something necessary, even something popular. These are debates which I have tried to show you something of in my previous two lectures. In this last lecture I want to turn to the period after the Communist Party came to power, and I want to try and do this in a way which keeps the art itself in the foreground of attention. So intertwined are (to quote the title of one of the major books on the field, by Julia Andrews) ‘Painters and Politics in the Peoples Republic of China’, so insistent are the claims that ‘Politics is in command’, that it takes an effort to make the disparate artworks produced during the rest of Mao’s lifetime into something other than simply illustrations of struggles happening ‘elsewhere’. This is what I want to try and do.

The violence of the revolutionary process, including for instance the violent death or expulsion of the rural landlord class, is absent from the art of the early People’s Republic. There are scenes of warfare, to be sure, like this gigantic canvas of resolute guerrillas, but it is heroism in the Anti-Japanese War of Resistance which is being commemorated here. Large scale paintings like this one, or like this image of Mao addressing the band of brothers (and a few sisters) at Yan’an, in the realist style which had been practised now for nearly half a century, were commissions of the new state, destined for museums and other state buildings in which a visual presentation of recent history was made to a new audience. The French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson captured something of that new audience in this picture of soldiers visiting an art exhibition organised immediately after the liberation of Shanghai, young men, quite possibly from a rural background being exposed, possibly for the first time, to styles of picturing which were less new than the themes they contained. ‘Liberation’, the Communist party definition of its coming to power, was a key theme, as this large painting makes manifest. The fetters are struck from the prisoners by the Red Army, light pours into the cell, and by extension enlightenment comes to a chained and battered nation. The artists of these great canvases, which show not so much the events of history as History with a capital H, shared a biography, in that both were graduates of the Hangzhou Academy of Art, led in the 1930s by the European-trained modernist Lin Fengmian (1900-1991), and both as very young men went to Yan’an to join the revolution. Both would have been in the audience when Mao Zedong delivered his ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum in Literature and Art’ in 1943. Both will have heard the message that art was a cog in the revolutionary machine, designed to serve the people, and both will have heard too the studied vagueness in what Mao said about how that was actually to be achieved. Artistically, in New China, much was still up for grabs.

What was not in doubt, and what may have been both surprising and welcome to artists who had *not* been at Yan’an, was that the arts clearly mattered to the new regime. Resources were put in, attention was paid, institutions like the All-China Federation of Literary and Arts Circles and the National Art Exhibition (both



founded in July 1949) were set up, artists were supported, in ways which had never happened under nationalist rule, never mind during the prolonged chaos of war time. The art which was approved was to flourish in New China. The corollary of course was that the art which was *not* approved was to wither, and to ensure that this happened the closure of all private art schools was enforced very early after Liberation. A Ministry of Culture pronouncement (and the existence of a Ministry of Culture was itself a novelty), dating from even before the final achievement of victory in 1949, gives a sense of the kinds of concerns which mattered. It deals with the category of 'new *nianhua*' or 'New Year Pictures', an increasingly vague term for any sort of colourful and reproduced graphic image, whether or not individual examples of the genre nodded towards the folk art of the pre-1949 period. In an aside, I just want to draw attention here to the captioning of this image of 'Enlisting in the Army' in both English and Russian, suggesting the ways in which an international (if a changed) viewership outside China itself was being envisaged for this art. As the prime agent of historical progress, the Party saw it as a right and a duty to decide what 'the people' needed. This policy document states, 'New *nianhua* should emphasize labouring people's new, happy and hard-fought lives and their appearance of health and heroism. In art we must fully utilize folk styles, and strive to capture the customs of the masses...'

The gap between theory and practice can be shown if we consider the picture which actually won first prize in the initial National *Nianhua* Competition of 1951. It depicts the young female pharmaceutical factory worker Zhao Guilan (b.1930), received and congratulated by Mao and other senior Party leaders at a conference of model workers, 'heroes' of the new disposition. Based on an oil painting by Lin Gang (b.1925), not himself one of the artists who had been at Yan'an, *any* utilization of 'folk styles' in this picture is very hard to discern. In fact, it is a history painting writ small, more akin to the vast canvas depicting Mao proclaiming the People's Republic, where history was literally inscribed on the surface of the painting as purged senior leaders were successively painted out and painted back over the turbulent thirty years after its creation. The style of both 'Founding of the Nation' and 'Zhao Guilan' depends on the canons of realism which had been so argued over in the first half of the twentieth century, and there can be no doubt which school had captured the patronage of the regime. This was to be the style into which a new audience was to be educated, the style embodied in a pre-Liberation statement like Jack Chen's claim that, 'It is the prime need of China and her millions to be able to see and feel and visualise things realistically... In the creation of a realistic art the artist completely fulfils his social and political duties.'

When in 1953, at the Second Congress of Literary and Art Workers, the powerful theorist and writer Zhou Yang (1908-1989) announced that 'We request that the contents of literary and art works express the people and thoughts of the new age, and the forms express the style and vigour of the nation...', he for the first time tied this vague aspiration to the term 'socialist realism', which had been coined in the USSR in 1932. But his were views also held by intellectuals who were far from themselves being active Communists, and I think we can see here, as in other aspects of culture too, the way in which the period after 1949, for all its rhetoric of 'the New', continues themes and debates which had a lively existence long before Liberation. Such a definition of the task of the artist had little in it to discomfort Xu Beihong (1895-1953), Republican era art superstar, doyen of realism and scourge of the avant-garde, who was appointed to head the new Central Academy of Fine Arts, but who died in the very year that Zhou Yang made this speech.

Whether 'the New' in this format was what the people wanted was another matter. In fact there is evidence, based on skilful archival work by Chang-tai Hung, that they did not buy it, both figuratively and literally. New Year Pictures were still commodities, even if subsidised and cheap. We know that Party cultural bureaucrats (and maybe artists too) fretted at the stubborn unwillingness of customers, especially rural customers, to pay for imagery which was unfamiliar to them both in content and in style, and at their continued preference for those older forms of *nianhua* which were still part of the very mixed visual economy of the early People's Republic.

At the centre of Lin Gang's prize-winning picture stands a young woman, even if an unfamiliar one, surrounded by older (and much larger and better-known) men. The emancipated woman is a common visual trope in the propaganda arts of the early People's Republic, as in this poster on the right celebrating the new constitution of 1954, the first article of which proclaimed China to be 'a people's democratic state led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants'. But while women are pictured in large numbers (this poster had a print run of 140,000 copies) it is observable that after 1949 they were less often the ones doing the picturing,



and in fact there is a clear masculinisation of China's art world in the new structures of artist's associations and art schools, which contrasts rather markedly with the celebrity achieved in the popular culture of the 1920s and 1930s by star woman artists like Guan Zilan (1903-1986) and Pan Yuliang (1895-1977). This is observable right across the range of styles being used in the 1950s, and it is this variety I want to stress by turning now to the continued practice of *guohua*, or 'national painting' in China after 1949.

While some of the biggest names in this genre had left China for Taiwan or even further afield, many of the biggest names stayed, and painting in brush and ink retained a central place in the curricula of art schools. We could if we liked to see this as a cynical ploy by the regime to convince both internal and global audiences, especially in the Chinese diaspora, that the great heritage of premodern culture, even if put to new use, was to be safely curated in People's China. But this I think is to underestimate the pervasive attractiveness of this work, not least to members of the new ruling elite themselves. The continued social embeddedness of ink painting can be seen in this 1953 fan leaf by the actor Mei Lanfang (1894-1961), a talented amateur rather than a grand master of the style. One of the most prestigious and famous figures of the pre-modern 1949 cultural scene, Mei Lanfang had toured abroad to great acclaim, and was admired equally by Chaplin and Bertolt Brecht for his performances in the lead female roles of what was becoming 'traditional Chinese opera'. Were it not for the fact this fan leaf addresses its dedicatee as 'Comrade', the universal and non-gender-specific salutation of New China, we would be hard put to place it within the twentieth century, and indeed he had probably painted plenty of these.

The permeability and shape-shifting ability of all definitional categories at this time is shown by another work of the following year, 1954, which was also categorised at the time as *Zhongguo hua*, 'Chinese painting'. This is 'The Creators of the Cave Art' by Pan Jiezi (1915-2002). It depicts a scene in the remote past, back in the Tang dynasty when anonymous workers in paint created the masterpieces of wall painting preserved in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang. Even before 1949, promoted by artists who were in no way sympathetic to the Communist cause, these were in the process of becoming a new canon of China's historic cultural heritage, their impeccably proletarian creators, as well as their intrinsic artistic quality, now trumping their religious subject matter to make them a usable part of the art of the past in New China. For me this is a much more interesting, or at least a much more original, picture than Mei Lanfang's plum blossoms; even if both of them are subsumed under the homogenising label 'Chinese painting', they get there by very different routes.

That label was also capable of encompassing another work of the same year as 'Plum Blossoms', painted this time by an aged master of the genre, Qi Baishi (1864-1957). The continued popularity of and publicity given to his work, with its often vivid colours and its bold forms which were easy on the eyes of a wide range of viewers, suggests some of the ways in which a diverse field of art *practice* persisted into an era of increasingly monovocal government policy. The continued presence in Beijing, indeed the continued painterly activity, of the now ninety-year old Qi was a source of pride to that government, and he was regularly produced to meet visiting dignitaries, especially those in the field of the visual arts. Here he is meeting Sir Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) on the latter's trip to China in 1954, a reminder that even in the depths of the Cold War a certain amount of back and forth went on between China and the capitalist West. It was really only the relations between China and the United States that suffered a decisive and total rupture after 1949, and it might be argued that the loss of those connections, which in the visual arts had never been very extensive anyway, were more than made up for by the increased amount of contact China now had with the art and artists of the socialist camp.

In the same year that Spencer paid his courtesy call on Qi Baishi, a major exhibition of 'Soviet Economic and Cultural Achievements' was held in Beijing, showcasing the artistic as well as the military and industrial might of China's 'elder brother', as the Soviet Union was known officially in this early period of harmony between the two largest socialist powers. For many young Chinese artists and art students, works like Fedor Shurpin's monumental image of Stalin, or Boris Ioganson's 'In an Old Urals Factory', were the first actual oil paintings, as opposed to photographic reproduction, that they had ever seen. The importance of the Soviet relationship with China in the early 1950s is hard to overstress. Considered as a percentage of GDP, Soviet aid to China at this period actually outstripped all that the USA spent on the Marshall Plan in western Europe during those same years. Chinese artists, like Chinese surgeons and Chinese fighter pilots, studied in the USSR, just two examples being Luo Gongliu (1916-2004), painter of 'Tunnel Warfare', the first picture I showed you, and Lin Gang, artist



of the prize-winning image of model worker Zhao Guilan, who went to Leningrad in 1954. And in the same year, the Soviet artist Konstantin Maksimov (1913-1993) set up a studio within the Central Academy of Art in Beijing to provide advanced training in oil painting to a selected cadre of students and teachers. The work these men (and they do mostly seem to have been men) produced shows a fluent handling of oil paint which ought to remind us that Maksimov was by no means working with a blank slate. Take the uniform cap off of 'Railway Worker' of 1955 and you clearly have the kind of *École des beaux arts* handling of the male nude which won (the recently deceased) Xu Beihong his prizes in Paris some thirty years previously.

What *had* perhaps changed in those thirty years was the wide dissemination of this style, as used in the propaganda posters of the period. If we look at such a poster, entitled 'Conquer Every Difficulty, Build Socialism', from the same year of 1955, we see the kind of realist rendition of form that at least some Chinese artists had aspired to for decades, but now we see it produced in a print run of 35,000 copies. And in the case of this particular copy we get a glimpse of one of the hardest topics of study in all modern Chinese art, the reception of such work. An ink inscription tells us that this particular poster was a wedding gift to a young couple 'from all the comrades in the laboratory', situating both givers and recipients among the urban, technocratic stratum of society which was of such importance to the modernisation of Chinese economy. Is there an in-joke in the reference to 'conquering every difficulty' on the occasion of marriage, is there even a hint of bawdy in the image of forceful penetration? That might be going too far, even far too far, but it is worth reminding ourselves that the audiences for art in China after 1949 did still have preferences, personal as much as social, and that it was always going to be much harder for the Party-State to control the interpretation of art than it was to control its production.

We are reminded forcefully of this if we consider another poster, again from 1955, entitled 'Looking at Chrysanthemums'. Here the socialist utopia, in flat contradiction of Mao's 1927 dictum about revolution as violence, displays a scene which is 'leisurely and gentle... temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous'. The woman is probably not a mother of four (though this was long before the post-Mao one-child policy) but represents a childcare worker; the parents are both engaged in productive labour perhaps in the large building with the clock tower from which the red flag flutters in the background. The children, two of whom wear the neckerchiefs of 'Young Pioneers' (founded in 1949 on the Soviet model) enjoy a colourful display of giant blooms, the chrysanthemum referencing wishes for longevity. It had born this auspicious meaning in Chinese art for centuries, but its continued use here is striking, and all the more so when we learn that this poster went through many editions on its way to selling some 2,396,000 copies between 1955 and 1957. That slightly puts the 35,000 copies of 'Conquer Every Difficulty, Build Socialism' into perspective, and gives us a sense of consumer preferences. The party's insistence on newness, on everything starting again, had to negotiate with the impossibility of starting again with a new population, or even with new artists. It was to be many years before a cadre of artists 'born under the red flag' (i.e. after 1949) came into being, and in fact the artist of 'Looking at Chrysanthemums, Zhang Yuqing (1909-1993), had mutated from a successful career as a producer of advertising imagery in the Republican period to a producer of softly-pedalled political imagery in the People's Republic.

If images that were 'gentle' remained popular among domestic consumers, it is worth considering how 'Chinese art' appeared in the 1950s on the global stage, from which (Cold War or no Cold War) it was by no means absent. I have already mentioned Stanley Spencer's presence in China, along with other British cultural figures who are covered in Patrick Wright's 2010 book *Passport to Peking*. But the number of visitors from western Europe was dwarfed by those from the 'socialist camp', and from the so-called unaligned nations. The reason the National Gallery in Prague today has one of the best collections of twentieth century Chinese ink painting is simply that visiting Czech and Slovak artists bought it directly from its makers, in the course of several visits through the 1950s. The work they acquired totally ignores painting in oils in favour of 'Chinese painting' i.e. brush and ink on paper, and is marked by a preference for lyrical scenes, flowers or landscapes. The image on the left, by Guan Shanyue (1912-2000) is a good deal *less* explicitly political than the art he was producing in war time, and the same could be said even more strongly of this sensitive study of a little girl reading, by Jiang Zhaohe (1904-1986), the artist of a monumental and harrowing scroll of the sufferings of wartime refugees, which I showed in my last lecture.



It was not just artists from eastern Europe who made their way to China. As early as October 1952 the Asia and Pacific Rim Peace Conference was held in Beijing, attracting 367 delegates from 37 countries, including such famous literary names as the Chilean Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), and the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet (1902-1963). The Chilean muralist José Venturelli (1924-1988) was appointed General Secretary of this body, and set up an office in Beijing in 1953, staying for more than 10 years. The presence of Latin American artists of considerable renown (and often of strong leftist sympathies) in the People's Republic has been the object of special study by Zheng Shengtian, to whom I owe this picture of the great Mexican muralist David Siqueiros (1896-1974) in Beijing in 1956, when he attacked Soviet art and praised the works of the Chinese tradition. In that same year the Mexican National Plastic Art Front held a major show in Beijing, of 138 paintings and 258 prints, including at least one work by Siqueiros himself which is now in MoMA in New York. A year later a volume on Mexican art was published by a Beijing publishing house, while Venturelli continued to act as a conduit to Chinese artists of contemporary work, lecturing on his 1961 Havana murals for the Ministry of Health to eager audiences.

Chinese artists who were sufficiently in favour also had opportunities for supervised travel, in addition to those sent to the USSR to study. Despite what we might imagine about socialist realism having the upper hand, it was mostly artists working in 'Chinese painting' who received these opportunities to represent China on a global stage. Here is a picture of Indian cotton pickers, surrounded by the distinctive edgy graphics of Shi Lu (1919-1982), while this misty landscape makes a brave stab at depicting in *guobua* mode the unlovely industrial city of Gottwaldov (now Zlin) in Czechoslovakia. Both were painted on the occasion of official trips overseas, designed by the state to cement ties with nations viewed favourably, or fit to be courted.

Such trips were one of the perks available to successful members of the Chinese Artists Association, membership of which was a prerequisite for the exhibition or publication of work. The corollary of this was that expulsion from the Association closed off any possibility of an audience for an artist's work, a sanction which was deployed on a number of occasions against artists in the Anti-Rightist and Hundred Flowers Campaigns of the later 1950s. To take just one example, a working-class upbringing, an impeccable political background, a raft of senior offices in the arts bureaucracy, even time spent at Yan'an, the revolution's sacred cradle, could not save the printmaker Jiang Feng (1910-1982) when he apparently made known his views about the moribund nature of the 'Chinese painting' tradition in 1957. His fate may not have matched that of those caught up in Stalin's murderous purges, and he went on to die full of years and honours in 1982, but artists were by no means exempt from the reach of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, which blighted careers across a range of fields.

The damage it did was on a very minor scale compared to that of the appalling famine attendant on the 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958-9, but it was the rural masses, not the urban intelligentsia or even working class, who died in their millions as a result of its misguided policies. It is a macabre thought but artists, or at least some artists, were indirect beneficiaries of allied policies to create at this very time a number of massive building projects, all of which called for adornment with art on a grandiose scale. A photograph shows the sculptor Hua Tianyou (1901-1986) at work on one of the panels decorating the base of the Monument to the People's Heroes, which still stands in Tiananmen Square today. One of the eight major revolutionary episodes pictured there, a canon of modern Chinese history which has the Communist victory as its culmination, shows the May 4th demonstration of 1919. A young woman, presumably herself a student, poses in the student uniform of the early Republic, as the artist (Paris trained, and himself the head of the Central Academy's sculpture department) puts the finishing touches to his clay model. As a reminder of just how compressed the eventful short twentieth century of modern Chinese history was, consider that Hua Tianyou was himself already eighteen at the time of the events he is picturing, the same sort of age as his model posing a mere forty years later.

The so-called 'Ten Great Buildings' of the Great Leap era included the Great Hall of the People, for which artworks on an equivalently monumental scale were commissioned. And this time they were in the 'national painting' style, very much *not* the socialist realism by now associated with a Soviet Union rapidly turning from friend and patron to competitor and ultimately to enemy. At the top of the main staircase of the Great Hall the visitor encounters 'This Land so Rich in Beauty', a painting which takes its title from a line in one of Mao Zedong's own poems in the classical-romantic-heroic mode, and which is on a scale to match the panache of his language. The picture is nine metres across and five-and-a-half metres high, much larger than anything ever



executed in ink and colours on paper before, and its format (what your computer appropriately calls 'landscape') depends not on premodern prototypes of the hanging or horizontal scroll, but rather on the proportions of a European *grand machine*. To try and parse this into 'Chinese' or 'western' seems to me to be largely a waste of time, it is what it is. Not quite as huge, but equally grandiose in scope, is 'Fighting in Northern Shaanxi' by Shi Lu, where the arid landscape of the Yan'an region is surveyed imperiously by the figure of Mao, dominating all he surveys. The fiasco of the Great Leap had led, in the enigmatic inner councils of the Party, to a diminution in Mao's sovereign authority; it is in this context that we get a large-scale oil painting celebrating another veteran revolutionary, China's President at the time Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969). He is shown here striding purposefully into history as the instigator of the first communist-led strike in China's history, back in 1922; over 172,000 copies of this image were printed for distribution in the early 1960s. 'This Land so Rich in Beauty' and 'Comrade Liu Shaoqi and the Workers of Anyuan' are both prestigious state commissions, which share very little in formal or stylistic terms beyond their very large size.

Ten years after its coming to power, the Communist Party proved unwilling to dictate a single style as appropriate for the art of New China in all contexts, preferring to patronise a range of types of picturing, depending on context and circumstance. Neither oil painting nor national painting dominated the scene to the exclusion of the other. Both could be (and were) defended by their partisans in terms which drew on a range of resources, among them patriotism, but also the Yan'an Forum's internally incoherent call for popularisation and at the same time the raising of standards. Art produced by non-professionals, by the people themselves, was certainly beginning to be heavily promoted, as in this 1960 photograph of a peasant woman at work on a picture. But at the same time, often within the privileged confines of elite art schools, a degree of formal experimentation remained open to those who toed the line in other ways. Whether in the vibrant, almost expressionist colour schemes of a Lin Fengmian still life, or the attempts by Luo Gongliu to translate brush and ink formulae of great antiquity in the modelling of landscape into the medium of oil paint, the thing which seems to me inescapable is that the Chinese painting of this period just does not all look the same. This is not to posit some conscious liberalism on the part of the Party and its cultural bureaucracy, but rather to recognise the simple fact that within certain broad parameters artists who were approved of had a certain leeway to conform in their own way. Again a slightly cynical reading of this observable pluralism might be to argue that, as long as the Party did not define a single clear formula for the visual arts, it was free to retrospectively condemn anything it later decided it did not like, thus keeping artists, in common with all other cultural workers, perpetually watchful of their own practice, and uncertain as to what might or might not get them into trouble.

That uncertainty probably deepened as the 1960s unfolded, and signs emerged that not only was Mao regaining authority over his senior colleagues, but that this return was to be accompanied by a ratcheting up of revolutionary fervour and a return to the spartan atmosphere of continuous struggle in which he had come to power. A reminder of the revolution as an act of violence, as the opposite of the dinner party or the painting or the essay, was very much part of this agenda. So in 1963 we find the painter Li Keran (1907-1989) being made the target for vociferous published criticism that his work was 'wild, weird, chaotic and black'; certainly the almost frenzied pattern making of this work gives plenty of scope to a burgeoning style of what I might call paranoid art criticism, which could see this figure staring into blackness as expressing a coded, or not so coded, desperation at the current state of affairs, and hence at the rule of the party responsible for them. The 'to the people' cry which had echoed periodically through China's cultural world since well back in the century was now to be raised insistently once more. The German photographer Emil Shulthess captured this in a photograph he took in 1964, showing art students in the city of Wuhan sketching from the life, not in the art studio but amid the noise and smoke of the steel mill, with artists and models here being indistinguishable from one another in dress and appearance. And by the middle of the 1960s we see evidence of an increasingly tight grip on artistic practice, which may be what lies behind one of the more bizarre paintings from the whole of China's twentieth century, entitled 'Celebrate the Success of Our Nation's Glorious Atomic Bomb Explosion!'. China's achievement of nuclear weapons was undoubtedly a cause of significant patriotic pride for many people; it was the refusal of Nikita Krushchev to share their technology with China which was one serious precipitating cause of the increasingly acrimonious rift between the two major powers of the socialist world. The Party took the credit for this raising of China's status as a serious player on the global stage, and this remember at a time when the People's Republic remained excluded at American insistence from the United Nations. It has been suggested that the artist of 'Celebrate the Success...', the veteran 'national painting' artist Wu Hufan (1894-1968), who had



been a major art world figure prior to 1949, painted this uncanny image out of sheer exasperation at he demands for contemporary subjects being made of him. This may be so, but if we compare the picture with one of his landscapes from just six years earlier we see similarities as well as differences. The roiling brushwork in both pictures is about the fixing in pictorial form of *qi*, of energy, and it might be presumptuous of us to assume that our horror at the commemoration of a weapon of mass destruction had to be shared.

Just three years after painting the mushroom cloud, Wu Hufan was dead by his own hand, committing suicide in hospital following the savage condemnation he received in the opening stages of another explosion of sorts, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. So firmly fixed in our minds are the images of this period as one of destruction, of brutality and chaos, that it is necessary to pause and ask whether there is any point in talking about it at all in the context of China's art. My justification in doing so here is not simply to try and recuperate the art made at this time, or even to bathe it in the warm glow of kitschy nostalgia, though the latter reaction is certainly widespread today, especially in China itself. What I want to do at the very least, as I have done throughout these lectures, is to see it not as some madness out of nowhere, but as an event which had historical roots deeper than those into the immediate past. Consider what we might think of as the archetypal Cultural Revolution scene, as a man takes a sledgehammer to one of the name boards over a main gate of the shrine of Confucius at Qufu in Shandong Province, sometime between 1966 and 1968. The onlookers display various degrees of engagement; some of them look stunned, some of them look dubious, as 'the old' is violently shattered to make way for 'the new'. If we look closely into the photograph we can see a slogan painted on a wall, it says 'Down with Confucius Ltd!'. This disrespectful yoking of the ancient sage to the idea of a shady business operation was not a new slogan, it was rather a resurfacing of the rallying cry of the more extreme wing of early Republican intellectuals, it was a cry echoing over the decades from May 4th. No-one in that photograph could remember 1919, but Mao Zedong certainly could, and his demand that China finally get rid of the 'Four Olds' (old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits of the exploiting classes to corrupt the masses) was similarly one that would have been recognisable to many radicals of his generation, the generation to which the persecuted painter Wu Hufan equally belonged.

So I want to go on and look in context at the art of the Cultural Revolution. But first, the correction of a pervasive myth. China's *older* cultural heritage, in the shape of the art of the past, suffered relatively little damage in the late 1960s and 1970s, with the important exception of certain religious buildings and images, particularly in Tibet. No major museum was damaged at this period. No early scroll painting or work of calligraphy or ceramic or bronze known to have existed in a public collection prior to 1966 was lost in the Cultural Revolution. In fact, China's museums were one of the turmoil's major beneficiaries, as work seized from private individuals ended up in their collections; this is true of the significant collection of old masters belonging to Wu Hufan himself, which ended up in the Shanghai Museum. It was arguably art of the twentieth century which bore the brunt, and much contemporary and recent work was destroyed, sometimes by artists themselves to avoid censure; for instance the Mexican works donated in the 1950s to the Chinese People's Association for Friendship all appear to have been lost at this time. But the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution was above all a *human* tragedy, with the destruction of human life far outweighing the losses of artworks. People suffered more than paintings. And despite our images of persecuted intellectuals, many of whom did indeed have an appalling time in the late 1960s, imprisoned, denied medical treatment, and some of whom were permanently scarred mentally and physically, it was predominantly ordinary people who paid with their lives for the sanctioned breakdown of order. Setting aside a small number of tragic suicides, like that of Wu Hufan, no major Chinese artist was actually killed in the violence.

For people like Wu Hufan, trouble was already on the horizon in February 1966 when Jiang Qing (1914-1991), Mao's wife emerged from decades of her low-profile life to make a speech praising 'Rent Collection Courtyard', a collective and immersive installation of sculptures depicting the oppression of the peasantry by an exploitative landlord class in pre-Liberation China. The publication of her speech in April was one of the first calls for a 'Cultural Revolution'. The phrase was not original, it was a direct quote from a Lenin essay of 1923 entitled, 'Better Fewer, But Better'. In the next month the Cultural Revolution Small Group was formed, the high leaders Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) were attacked as 'revisionists', and by the middle of June all institutions of higher education were closed, and mayhem was in full swing. So it might seem tasteless to think



about the visual arts in formal terms, but I want again to make the point that a degree of plurality of styles continued, even flourished, in the midst of that mayhem.

Two posters very close in date give a sense of this. We could trace the one on the left back through the oil painting of the post-1949 period to its Republican predecessors, and ultimately back to academic realism of the nineteenth century, while the one on the right relates much more to the avant-garde woodcut of the 1930s, a style that had been more or less proscribed after 1949 even though many senior artists of the regime had once been practitioners of it. No-one was thinking much about artistic policy as the situation span into bloodshed, but benign neglect alone does not explain the existence of two such very different types of image essentially conveying the same message. Both of these were equally part of public visual culture, something which cannot be said of a private artistic expression like this very small, almost anguished image in oils painted for the eyes of the artist and perhaps intimate friends alone. The date which is its title refers to the 'bloody terror' the artist later associated with that day, when for the first time Mao met the crowds of young people assembled as Red Guards in Tiananmen Square. The production of artworks in a range of styles lauding Mao and lauding the Cultural Revolution itself was widespread at this time, the fervour of the artist's commitment replacing any notions of skill or training in assessing the value of an individual image. But that was to change remarkably quickly, and although the 'Ten Years of Chaos' of current Communist Party historiography remains a more diverse period than the label would suggest, military rule under firm party control replaced the Red Guard era as the 1960s drew to a close. This brought with it a narrowing of the range of acceptable styles *and* subject matters. There now, as some had been advocating throughout the century, was to be no place for 'Chinese painting'. Even as early as 1968, when the 1967 painting of 'Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan' by Liu Chunhua (b. 1944) was reproduced on the cover of *China Pictorial*, the type of realism that was now called 'revolutionary romanticism' enjoyed a sort of hegemony across a range of visual media. This hegemony was backed up by distribution on a scale never before matched in China. Perhaps as many as nine hundred million copies of this particular image of the youthful Chairman, to whom was now ascribed the Anyuan Miner's strike which had in fact been organised by the vanquished 'number one revisionist' Liu Shaoqi, were produced. It seems likely that very few people in China had not seen it in these years; it is certainly one of the most reproduced oil paintings of all time. Similarly, Mao Zedong must be one of the most pictured people of all time. Merely by *not* picturing him, and by not employing the 'red, bright, shining' palette which was mandated for most published images, the painter Shi Zhenyu (b. 1946) was by definition operating below the radar of official notice, and to his considerable risk. Risky too was the allusion to non-mimetic styles of brushwork, which draw attention to themselves as marks, and despite the fact that it is in oils this little landscape of a Beijing park shares a conceptual basis with the now-invisible practice of 'national painting' which intellectuals of the early Republican era might well have recognised.

The historian Frank Dikötter, in his study of the Cultural Revolution, has referred to the early 1970s as the 'grey years' succeeding the 'red years' of chaotic fighting and the 'black years' of military rule and repression. This characterisation may well be right for the politics of the era, but almost in compensation the visual arts of the period became brighter and brighter, even as subject matters became more diversified. The phenomenon of 'peasant painting' particularly associated with the county of Huxian in Shaanxi province, was much promoted in these years, and exhibitions of it began to be sent abroad as the People's Republic attempted to normalise its relations with a range of countries, including Britain. Although always scrupulously captioned at the time as the work of amateur painters of impeccable class backgrounds, we know today that a number of rusticated professional artists were involved in their production. There is still work to be done in thinking about the ways in which a wider range of rural subjects, often very charming in their rustic realism, a sort of Chinese Lowry, as well as the unimpeachable nature of the artists named, allowed for a wider range of styles and manners. Even now, not all pictures looked the same in formal terms. But what they shared was production for reproduction, and it was through reproduction as posters and 'New Year pictures' that their messages were sent and received, perhaps again with more diversity of response than we are aware of. For instance, If I had the time I could parse down the 1974 *nianhua* 'Report on Graduation' into dozens of mutually-reinforcing messages about the policy of sending educated youth to the countryside and encouraging those who had received a higher education (for universities and colleges had by now reopened) to return there. There is an almost hysteric insistence in a picture like this, and one has to wonder of the audience to be convinced of the rightness of Party policy did not in fact consist primarily of the Party itself, or at least of those defining its aims. If I juxtapose it now with a photograph



from the same year of a student of Beijing Languages Institute, pausing in his not-so-laborious labours, a sort of Marie-Antionette of the wheat harvest, I do so to make the point that a picture like 'Report on Graduation' manages to be at one and the same time totally realistic *and* totally false, in its capturing of 'how things were' at one point in China's recent past. A point when, as that same student was told by his teachers, the Cultural Revolution was long over, 'victoriously concluded'.

The death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the coup d'état in the Party's highest reaches which imprisoned his one-powerful widow and her closest collaborators, also recast 1974 as part of the undifferentiated 'Ten Years of Chaos'. So I close this lecture, and this series, with two images from that year. One is an image of heroic troops manning the border with a still-hostile Russia. Widely exhibited and published at the time, it later suffered near destruction on the grounds of having been highly praised by the now detested and unmentionable Jiang Qing. The other, unseen until much more recently, shows a very private group of friends sketching on the beach on a semi-clandestine weekend excursion. Today both works are much reproduced, equally written into histories of modern Chinese art. Today both are themselves history, in a China changed in all sorts of ways. The art of that China of today has changed in all sorts of ways too. But in showing you something of the art which preceded the contemporary, I hope I have done enough to convince you that no simplistic formula, and no single reductive slogan, will encompass all of what the creativity of China's artists has been able to give us, to enjoy, to debate, and to ponder.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

- Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949-1979* (Berkeley, 1994)
Craig Clunas, *Art in China* 2nd edition (Oxford, 2009)
Lü Peng, *A History of Art in 20th-Century China* (Milan, 2010)
Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China* (Berkeley, 1996)
Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian eds., *Art and China's Revolution* (New York, 2008)

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