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| Chinese Art of the Cultural Revolution |
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| The art of the cultural revolution in China, created during the ten-year period from 1967 to 1977, includes a large variety of visual materials in different media. Generally characterised by unambiguous and heroic images that appealed to the masses, these artworks became powerful tools of political propaganda. Most scholars attribute the beginning of the Cultural Revolution to the 1965 play *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office*. Written by Wu Han, a local Communist official, the play was a thinly veiled critique of Mao Zedong. Though semi-retired in the early 1960s, Mao was determined to hold on to power by launching a new revolution to reawaken young Chinese people and root out the counterrevolutionary and anti-proletarian elements in society. Under Mao’s directive, people, places, and things representing the Four Olds (Old Customs, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas) were targeted and violently attacked by young people wearing red armbands and carrying the *Little Red Book*, a collection of quotes by Mao. Party officials, teachers, professors, authors, and artists had their homes raided and were publically dragged out by the Red Guards for public humiliation. In addition, historical and cultural sites were desecrated and vandalised. While the real violence only lasted the first few years, it set the tone of militarism and revolutionary fervour for the next decade, which permeated through all the arts. Visual Arts The visual arts culture of this period is characterised by cacophonous yet aesthetically repetitive public displays, best exemplified by the big-character posters. Layered on the facades of many public buildings, these large posters were filled with slogans taken directly from the *Little Red Book*.  Vying for wall space with the big-character posters were large graphic posters. These colourful images found their ways into peoples’ homes next to portraits of Mao. Clear, strong, and bold graphics delineated the good from the bad, the heroes from the villains, and they would often serve as useful indicators for who or what was in and out of political favour in the Party. The accompanied text found on most posters ensured the ‘correct’ political reading of these images, leaving little room for ambiguities. The overwhelmingly dominant colour was red — the colour of revolution and the Communist Party. Images of Mao and his symbolic representations (e.g. the sun, mangos, etc.) were the most central and much repeated subjects of the graphic posters.  File: Respectfully\_Wish\_Chairman\_Mao\_Eternal\_Life.jpg  Figure 1: *Respectfully Wish Chairman Mao Eternal Life!* (1968). Poster.  Iconic images of Mao or heroes such as Lei Feng were ubiquitous and frequently repeated. For example, reproductions of the oil painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (1968) by Liu Chunhua reached every commune in China. When it arrived, it was treated as a religious icon, greeted and then paraded around by a large adoring crowd. This painting depicts an episode in early Communist mythology, when a youthful Mao travelled to the district of Anyuan to lead a miners’ strike. Having just reached the summit of a mountain, the young Mao radiates hope and revolutionary idealism. Like other posters from the period, the painting style was indebted to Soviet Social Realism and characterised by an uplifting and triumphal tone.  File: Chunhua\_Chairman\_Mao\_Goes\_to\_Anyuan.jpg  Figure 2: Liu Chunhua (1944 –). *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (1969). Poster.  Instead of a singular author, most of the posters were made by groups of propaganda workers, young people who were part of a commune who designed and executed the works together. More sophisticated posters were made on a large scale at the municipal and provincial levels and distributed throughout China and the world.  While visions of the revolutionary hero dominated, representations of class struggles persisted. The most famous one was the group of clay sculptures known as the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, permanently displayed in the former home of a landlord in Sichuan. Set up as a life-size diorama, the sculptures dramatically narrate the suffering of pre-revolution peasants at the hands of the ruthless landlords and their eventual emancipation by the People’s Liberation Army. Created by Ye Yushan and a team of sculptors from the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in 1965, copies were made and displayed in Beijing. It inspired similar didactic projects such as the *Wrath of the Serfs* (1976) at the Tibet Museum.  File: Rent\_Collection\_Courtyard.jpg  Figure 3: Ye Yushan and students from Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts. *Rent Collection Courtyard*, detail (1965). Jiang Qing and Model Operas The explicitly stated goal for the sculptural dioramas was education, and to become models for future Chinese revolutionaries. These real-life and fictional models also existed in other forms, especially in the ‘Eight Model Operas,’ which were the source for many of the themes and pictorial motifs in the visual arts of the period.  The Eight Model Operas include two ballets: *The Legend of the Red Lantern* [*Hongdeng ji*]*,* and *Shajiabang*. *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* [*Zhiqu weihu shan*]*, Raid on the White Tiger Regiment* [*Qixi baihu tuan*]*, Ode of the Dragon River* [*Longjiang song*]*, On the Dock* [*Haigang*]*, The White-Haired Girl* [*Baimao nü*]*,* and *Red Detachment of Women* [*Hongse niangzi jun*] were all promoted and approved by Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, who held absolute control in all aspects of the arts. Similar to *Rent Collection Courtyard*, the plots of many of revolutionary and modern operas — unlike the traditional Beijing operas — were about the struggles of proletarian heroes against the bourgeoisie and landlords, eventually leading to their final liberation at the hands of the People’s Liberation Army and the Communist Party. These operas travelled and were performed in every corner of China where they were often the only source of entertainment. The operas were remade into films, comic books, and concert pieces. Motifs from the operas were printed on posters, everyday objects, and textiles.  File: Invincible\_Thought\_of\_Mao\_Poster.jpg  Figure 4: *The Invincible Thought of Mao Zedong Illuminates the Stage of Revolutionary Art!* (1969). Poster showing Jiang Qing holding the *Little Red Book* and vignettes of Jiang‘s approved performing arts radiating from the head of Mao like the sun.  The aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution have recently become popular again in the works of Chinese artists who have borrowed and appropriated themes and motifs from the period with a mixture of sarcasm and nostalgia. Campy and kitschy, these works are fitting tributes to loud, mass-produced, and politically driven propaganda. For example, Wang Guanyi’s early works deployed the brazen gestures and bold colours of the Cultural Revolution posters while serving an updated message: a critique of the capitalist consumerism of Western brands that infiltrated China during the 1990s and 2000s. |
| Further reading:  (Chiu and Zheng)  (Cushing and Tompkins)  (King)  (Murck) |