



The Red Sun in Our Hearts

Socialist Realism from the Chinese Cultural Revolution



“... people always take some ancient and some foreign [art]works as their models, but that’s no good. Those feudal and bourgeois things cannot serve the Chinese revolution.”¹

– Excerpt from speech by Jiang Qing at the Central Academy of Art, 1966.

A NEW POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The People’s Republic of China (PRC) emerged on October 1, 1949 after decades of intense civil war, Japanese occupation, and Western colonial rule. With the country largely in economic disarray, Mao Zedong’s Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was charged with rebuilding the nation under a new political framework. Chairman Mao’s vision for a modern, rapidly industrialized China – one which could rival the Soviet Union and the United States – called for radical economic and social policies to achieve his vision.

WAGING ARTISTIC WARFARE

Early in his career, Mao fervently professed the political necessity of controlling artistic production. In May of 1942 at the *Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*, he succinctly stated his position on the efficacy of the arts as a powerful means by which the PRC

might achieve rapid socialization and national solidarity:

“There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics...[our purpose is] to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.”²

Acting on Mao’s call for art that unites and educates, the CCP infused everything from the visual arts and literature to music and theatrical production with Maoist ideology. But it was Mao’s very image – the living embodiment of the CCP and the necessities of “continuous revolution” – that would become the most enduring image of the new government.



MAO FOR THE MASSES: 1966-1976

Perhaps no other era in recent Chinese history was this axiom applied with greater effect than during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Mao's radical, often catastrophic, campaigns of social and economic reform leveraged the visual arts on a scale never before seen in human history.³ Mao's very likeness and ideology flooded the nation with an estimated 10.8 billion government-sanctioned posters and texts depicting every subject imaginable: from agricultural advances under the newly established commune and land reform policies, to party loyalty and national solidarity against capitalism and anti-communism, political posters relied upon repetition of content, quasi-realism, and sheer quantity to convey their messages with success.⁴

SOCIALIST REALISM

The driving force behind the posters and their visual persuasiveness was Socialist Realism, the official artistic style adopted by the CCP. Socialist Realism rejected classical Chinese painting – the “ancient” referred to in Jiang Qing's 1966 speech – as well as Western forms of modernism and abstraction, in favor of Soviet-inspired aesthetics and its inherent political function. Bold color palettes, realistically rendered subject matter, and repetition of visual elements and slogans made for appealing graphic design. This was especially important during an era of increasing literacy and the introduction of newly simplified Chinese characters.

Mao's reputation and visual likeness was a carefully guarded asset of the CCP, and political poster design was certainly without exception.⁵ He often appears as a benevolent father figure, tending to children or listening intently to peasants about their presumptive concerns or successes. Other depictions of Mao present him as an omnipotent, larger-than-life figure, with brilliant rays of light often emanating from a floating or decontextualized portrait. By inserting Mao's image within what often appears as a generic picture plane devoid of geographic markers, Mao's “...appeal and his claim to greatness is universalized, and he becomes the true hyperbolic and superhuman image” that we still recognize to this day.⁶

MAO IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Mao remains one of the most recognizable symbols of modern China. When newspapers began printing historic photographs of the Mao-Nixon diplomatic meetings in 1972, American pop artist Andy Warhol seized the opportunity to create a series of screenprints and monumental wallpaper installations featuring the enigmatic political leader. Mao's likeness figured perfectly within Warhol's conceptual framework: who better to illuminate in silkscreen than one of the most illustrated figures of the 20th century? The CCP's mass media machine was the perfect counterpart to the celebrity-driven advertising industry in the West.

Although the PRC eased some of its policy restrictions on artmaking, altering or critiquing Mao's immutable reputation is still not one of them.⁷ As recently as 2012, art museums in Beijing and Shanghai banned images of Mao from the retrospective traveling exhibition *Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal*. "We had hoped to include our Mao paintings in the exhibition to show Warhol's keen interest in Chinese culture," said Andy Warhol Museum director Eric Shiner in a statement. He added, "We understand that certain imagery is still not able to be shown in China and we respect our host institutions' decisions."⁸

Craig Hadley
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¹ Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 203.

² Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1976), 299-301.

³ Many scholars estimate that the Great Leap Forward, Mao's earlier economic policies to rapidly industrialize the nation from 1958-1961, resulted in an estimated 30-45 million deaths due to famine. See NPR's November 10, 2012 article: *A Grim Chronicle of China's Great Famine*. Scholars and anti-communists were condemned to hard labor, imprisoned, or publicly shamed ("struggled against") by Mao's young Red Guards – youth and university students he called upon to eliminate political opposition – during the Cultural Revolution.

⁴ Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China's Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 108.

⁵ Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 273-274.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁷ See also Ai Weiwei's 2010-11 exhibition at the Tate Modern. The installation featured millions of porcelain hand painted sunflower seeds created by artists in Jingdezhen – a direct reference to the proletariat "sunflowers" who suffered under the Cultural Revolution. He has been the target of intense police surveillance in recent years.

⁸ Doug Meigs, *Warhol's Mao Works Censored in China*, *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2013, accessed September 14, 2015, <http://blogs.wsj.com/scene/2013/03/25/warhols-mao-works-censored-in-china/>.



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THE RED SUN IN OUR HEARTS

February 1 – May 12, 2016

DePauw University • Richard E. Peeler Art Center

Gallery hours: Mon.-Fri., 10 am-4 pm; Sat. 11 am-5 pm; Sun. 1-4 pm

Location: 10 West Hanna Street, Greencastle, IN 46135-0037

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