ART AND CHINA'S REVOLUTION

艺术与中国革命

A GUIDE TO THE EXHIBITION

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The Cultural Revolution: A Global Phenomenon

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China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) was a global event. Although it was a campaign developed to wage internal struggles, by its middle years, suspicion of foreign influences was strong. Its ideology was exported through posters and Little Red Books of Chairman Mao's quotations and its effects were felt across the world. It celebrated solidarity among the world's peoples, welcomed idealistic western youth, and trained Third World revolutionaries.

China had long exerted a pull on popular imagination in the West. The very scale of China's geography, the depth of its history, and the richness of its culture all enhanced its interest to missionaries and traders in earlier years and made its twentieth-century revolutions particularly compelling stories. Partly because of the missionary connection, Americans had sympathy for the Chinese people that they never had for Russians. But China was communist and it was enhanced by the Korean War. Chinese Communism seemed especially totalitarian to many observers, some of whom viewed the government as a police state and its methods as an attempt to reach into citizens' minds with struggle sessions and thought control. Both sympathy and enmity encouraged curiosity about the Cultural Revolution.

The initial international images were murky. Crowds shouted slogans and held up Little Red Books full of quotations from Chairman Mao. There was a controversy over a play that seemed perhaps to criticize Mao. At first western attention focused on the rivalries among China's top leaders, but soon the scale of the popular mobilization made clear that this was not an ordinary succession struggle. Students denounced teachers; bureaucrats were vilified for stalling the people's revolution. The People's Liberation Army was central to the struggle.

China's Cultural Revolution was inescapably part of the 1960s. Like other upheavals of the decade, it centered importantly on youth and, as its name suggested, on conflicts over cultural traditions themselves. The struggle Lin Biao initiated against "the four olds"—old ideas, old culture, old habits, old customs—sounded attractive to those who struggled with their own "olds" around the world.

The Cultural Revolution found a ready reception among students in the United States, Europe, and much of the world. The early media images of the GPCR presented student crowds decrying government bureaucracy and youths criticizing elders, and it was easy to identify with both of these. There was a pleasing symmetry in the notion that rebellion in the West was matched by rebellion in the East. In 1967 the brief Czech rebellion would extend this sense of anti-bureaucratic mobilization by youth the world around. For a time, the Chinese seemed to be successfully smashing the forces of bureaucratic reaction that had triumphed in Eastern Europe.

In the United States, the New Left was already a growing force when the GPCR started. Though its roots were older, the Port Huron Statement that helped found the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1962 was a pivotal public declaration—and it included a rejection of the "anti-communism" that had shaped the Left, as well as the rest of the country during the Cold War. The Vietnam War was not yet a dominant issue on American campuses. In 1962, but it would quickly overshadow others. Here too, anti-communism seemed one of the sources of what many American youth regarded as a madly destructive military project and foreign policy. Although the People's Republic of China (PRC) would prove to be an inconsistent friend to Vietnam, China was seen as an equal enemy by the U.S. government and viewed as a prime boader of North Vietnam. It seemed worth exploring whether the energies of America's government might actually have some congenial ideas.

Dropping the reflexive anti-communism of the Old Left and Cold War opened the doors to a much more substantial engagement with Marx and Marxism. While for many this was more of a matter of reading groups than mobilization, there were explicitly Maoist—and Maoist—parties. The most prominent was the Progressive Labor Party (PL), a pro-China Maoist party that had split from the old Soviet-oriented Communist Party of the United States. The PL both embraced the Cultural Revolution in China and sought to infiltrate the SDS in the United States.
At home, anti-communism had been an excuse for not considering radical social reform. Stalinist bureaucracies held little attraction for American youth, but the idea of cultural revolution was another matter. Indeed, the idea of cultural revolution was already available in the West. In addition to its history within Marxism it had older roots in aesthetics, religious thought, romanticism, and earlier radicalism. Thinkers like Raymond Williams—pivotal to the transition from the Old to New Left—had combined several of these. Thorstein Veblen had used the term to describe the rise of pecuniary competition in the face of Christian morality. Anthropologists had used it to describe transformations of previously "traditional" cultures. It made immediate sense to both student radicals and hippies. And it would become a more or less general label for the nonviolent protest movements of the era. As one sociologist defined it, "cultural revolution" meant "the transformation not just of economic or political structures but of the ideas that govern social life as a whole." While some more conventional Marxists would condemn cultural revolution (including the GPCR itself) as "cultural rather than real revolution," its advocates saw it as in fact a deeper sort of revolution.

The 1960s rebellion in the United States was shaped by the earlier civil rights movement, left politics, and labor issues, but also by rock and roll, psychotropic drugs, and what Theodore Roszak labeled "counter culture." For the most part, this encouraged a misperception of China's Cultural Revolution. It was not just that Mao and others manipulated the Chinese youth; the social context was sharply different. Moreover, the Chinese Cultural Revolution stayed more directly focused on politics, even while smashing vestiges of traditional culture. Its American cousin was more apt to pursue expressive paths outside of direct connections to politics—but there were other links worth noting. One source of excitement in China's Cultural Revolution was sex. If hardly the free love touted by Americans, it was nonetheless the chance for boys and girls to go off in mixed company on long train trips, and it was not without its pleasures. And the GPCR did promote gender equality as well.

The slogan "women hold up half the sky" was appropriated readily into the emerging western feminist moment. More than this, women in China visibly moved into prominent and powerful positions and nontraditional occupations (and indeed, the later reversal of the Cultural Revolution in China would be significantly a matter of removing women from power). Chinese posters showing strong women operating heavy machinery were popular among feminists and lesbians celebrating the possibility of overthrowing gender stereotypes.
The Chinese ideas of study sessions and self-correction also reinforced the practice of “consciousness-raising,” which had roots in other movements as well, from European Marxism to Paulo Freire to American Protestantism, Pragmatism, and the psychology of self-help. Though these ideas were not limited to the feminist movement, it was there that the Chinese practices associated with cultural revolution by far gained their greatest development and most influential usage. For feminists, these ideas involved coming to understand a basic problem through collective discussion rooted in personal experience, aided perhaps by texts, but not controlled entirely by categorizations from outside. The Chinese resonance reinforced the notion that the personal was political and challenged previous Marxist discussions in which direct experience had more often been associated with false consciousness than ways to overcome it.
Some of the strongest direct political connections to the Chinese Cultural Revolution were forged by advocates for ethnically marginalized groups—in the United States, notably those of African descent. While Angela Davis would remain loyal to the Communist Party USA and thus the Soviet Union (then estranged from China), many others in the Black Panthers were moved by the GPCR. A number of Black Panthers, including Eldridge Cleaver, traveled to China and many studied Mao's texts. Indeed, the Black Panther Party sold Little Red Books as early as 1968 to raise funds as well as to encourage the study of revolutionary principles. As Kathleen Cleaver told an interviewer:

What was influential was a style, a Chinese style. By 1968 there was a sense that Chinese art was reaching out to the African liberation movement and to the Black liberation movement, at the same time that we were getting in touch with their art. During the Cultural Revolution, few activists and revolutionaries in the United States had a real appreciation of Chinese history—they read things that Mao wrote and they read things written about Mao. But it was the GPCR and the posters, along with other things coming out of China at the time, that were part of the "vibe." They were ubiquitous—they symbolized the height of revolution. That's enough.

The GPCR also coincided with the birth of new movements among Asian Americans, Pan-Asian sentiment spread on university campuses and among political activists and social service groups in many cities. Cultural Revolution imagery was common—though like pan-Asianism itself, it spread unevenly. Here again, the poster art of the Cultural Revolution was the most visible link. Beyond this, however, there was a loose sense that China represented an Asian country that was strong in itself and charting its own new directions for the future, beyond the categories of the Cold War. And, of course, this was at the height of the Vietnam War and the opposition to it, which enhanced activists' frustration with the United States as well as their desire for a positive image from Asia.

The radicals who tried to take Mao's teachings seriously were relatively few in number. The writings had a big impact because as they infiltrated the SDS they helped destroy the organization. This made it much easier for the student movement to flourish. The channels by which it had been steered in its earlier phases, to grow dramatically, but then to fizzle relatively quickly. The Chinese Cultural
Revolution actually figured more in the loose cultural politics—and styles—of the era. Little shops in San Francisco and New York sold "Mao jackets" and caps (helping to perpetuate the misperception that the style Mao helped make ubiquitous in China originated with him). GPCR posters with uplifting socialist realist art showed up on dorm room walls. Most of this took place during the first years of the 1970s.

The appropriation of Chinese themes by student radicals in the United States reinforced the romantic side of their rebellion more than it dovetailed with "scientific Marxism." The young American radicals sought to combine individualistic freedom with communal solidarity, open self-expression with a sense of larger purpose. Not surprisingly, they understood the GPCR initially as embodying shared aspirations. This was not altogether false. However much the GPCR was in fact manipulated by older leaders, it also offered young people a chance to speak out against authorities, to develop their own slogans, to express themselves and their passions, and to experience an intense solidarity with small communities of fellow Red Guards. In each movement there was a sense that the power of the people could not be contained, an irrational enthusiasm for heroes as well as hatred of enemies, and—on at least part of most of the younger participants—a neglect of organizational infrastructures in favor of direct expression. Needless to say, neither those later stigmatized as the Gang of Four nor leaders in the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) neglected organizational infrastructures. The Red Guards ignored this to their lasting regret, for it was superior organization that allowed older leaders to outflank and manipulate them. But just as the power of infrastructure could be underestimated by mass activists in China, it could be missed by Americans who saw the GPCR as a spectacular flowering of mass democracy.

Spectacular is the key word. The GPCR was of course not just about those young Red Guards, though they did make a powerful spectacle massed in the public squares. It incorporated a range of other theatrical staged performances for audiences and cameras. New model opera like The Red Lantern and The White-haired Girl were prominent, but traditional Chinese opera had famously lacked international appeal, and this was true as well for the new opera style of the Cultural Revolution. Still, in a decade when the spread of political theater and musical performance was global, the Chinese examples were among the most prominent. Gian Carlo Menotti’s 1973

antwur opera Tian-Tu-Tu showed the influence of the general (somewhat flattened) style.

The visual styles of the Chinese Cultural Revolution traveled much better. Most famously, of course, Mao himself became a pop art icon with Andy Warhol’s 1952 series of silkscreen portraits and the attendant posters. Making Mao a cultural celebrity on a par with Marilyn Monroe owed more to Western commercialism and media saturation than to revolutionary politics. Outside China, the Cultural Revolution’s most enthusiastic fans may have been French philosophers. In France, of course, philosophers are often public figures, and so it was in the 1960s. Jean-Paul Sartre was the most famous, but the enthusiasm for Maoism and the idea of cultural revolution was widespread, and it cut across otherwise disparate schools from the Tel Quel group, led by Philippe Sollers, to a variety of structuralists and soon-to-be post-structuralists. Roland Barthes, like Sartre, made a pilgrimage to China.

Sartre was disappointed that the French proletariat was becoming less proletarian. Since the 1930s, many Marxists had begun to think that the moment for working-class radicalism had passed and there was a need for some new source for radical subjectivity and alterity. In the 1960s and 1970s the hope flourished that those whom François Fanon called “les damnés de la terre” (the wretched, or condemned, of the earth) would develop the revolutionary subjectivity to overthrow the chains not just of capitalism but of a western modernity grown stifling. Anticolonial revolutions, notably in Vietnam and especially Algeria, had encouraged hope. The Chinese Cultural Revolution focused this hope by suggesting a revolution that sought not merely political independence or a better share of economic productivity but the transformation of a whole way of life.

French oriented American theorists like Fredric Jameson expressed similar views. Jameson saw in the GPCR “a strategy for breaking the immemorial habits of subalternity and obedience which have become internalized as a kind of second nature in all the laborious and exploited classes in human history” “Maoism,” he wrote, is the “richest of all the great new ideologies of the 1960s.” For Alain Badiou, the Cultural Revolution was not merely a major political event and model. It was a “revaluation of all values.” The phrase harkens back to Nietzsche and reflects the extent to which the French Marxists of the 1960s were post-Nietzschean Marxists. They sought not merely social justice, not even liberty, equality, and fraternity; they sought a radical revaluation of civilization itself.

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(especially in its European-western variant). Of course, on this view Mao was a disappointment—having invited the Cultural Revolution and then retired in 1966, he revealed himself to be no Nietzschean Superman but just another politician.

French Maoism had a sort of headquarters in the 1960s in the École Normale Supérieure at the rue d’Ulm in Paris. Its most influential protagonist was the philosopher Louis Althusser, though some of his students took this thinking further than he did. For Althusser, Maoism offered not only theoretical inspiration but also a vehicle for criticizing the French Communist Party and its excessive loyalty to the Soviet Union. It offered the unprecedented example of a socialist revolution criticizing and rectifying itself.

At the theoretical level, Althusser combined influence from Gramsci with the example of the GPCR to develop his account of “ideological state apparatuses” and the need for a specific ideological struggle to overthrow them. He denounced the “economism” of the Soviet-inspired communists. He combined Maoism with a return to Marx’s own writings (especially the later Marx) to argue for a communism that would not merely seek economic gains but also the purging of all market relationships. Equally, Mao’s critique of Confucian humanism (itself in part a critique of Lin Biao during their GPCR struggles) was one of the sources for Althusser’s own challenge to humanism generally and humanist readings of Marx in particular. He insisted on a sharp “epistemological break” between the humanism of Marx’s early writings and the mature, scientific Marx. Althusser denounced the humanism of both dissidents within the Soviet bloc and much of the noncommunist Left outside. Along with it, he denounced the “empiricism” of those who did not grasp that the insight that would guide revolution came not from the study of society as it exists but from theory.

Althusser’s emphasis on theory privileged intellectuals in a way that Chinese Maoism did not. Stickling to the theoretical level was perhaps a way for Althusser and his colleagues to avoid an outright break with the French Communist Party. Many students in France, however, had no such loyalty to that agent of the Stalinist past. Embracing the Maoist notion of the “creative masses,” they sought alliances with workers; embracing the equality (Maoist notion that violence was essential to revolutionary change, they declared themselves ready to smash the old order. They also seized on the Maoist idea of the “investigation” as a way of combining the theoretical insight of intellectuals with the practical understanding of the masses. Avoiding more abstract social science techniques in an
effort to learn directly from workers, a series of Investigation Groups went out from the écoles and universities in the summer of 1967 to "help the people speak."

When the Investigation Groups returned, they found themselves locked in a struggle with the mostly older central leaders of the Marxist Left. Those who had gone out to the fields and factories were fond of citing Mao's dictum that "Who does not investigate has no right to speak." And to many students, their struggles seemed directly analogous to the Cultural Revolution in China; they were young activists citing Mao against older party leaders. And they were building direct ties to the workers and peasants that the party leaders lacked. The GPCR was all the more visible because, in September 1967, Jean-Luc Godard's film La Chinoise was released. Focusing on five Chinese youth studying Mao's texts, this gave the GPCR individual faces, bright colors, and the pop song "Mao, Mao."

The Investigation Groups quickly denounced the "theoricism" of Althusser and other older leaders. Althusser responded by accusing the students of "inflatable Lévi-Strauss" (though he also began to pay more attention to people like Regis Dehny and Robert Linnhart, who knew something about practical action as well as theory). At the same time, with the (formerly) French but now U.S.) Vietnam War intensifying, the student organizers also built alliances with activists on behalf of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front. In May 1968, they and many other students took to the streets in protests that inevitably challenged a more conservative notion of left-wing politics as well as the right-wing parties in power.

The protests of 1968 self-consciously emulated both French revolutionary and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Indeed, the two were already linked by the appropriation of the Paris Commune of 1871 into Chinese Communist teachings. The events of 1871, often presented as a paradigm example of revolutionary struggle (albeit unsuccessfully), had in fact been incorporated into the iconography of Marxist revolution and were represented on GPCR posters. In 1968 French (and other European) protesters produced "Red Guards" of their own and occasionally wore red arm bands in emulation of the Chinese.

It was an aspect of those anti-hierarchical days that the French student protesters imagined themselves counterparts to the top Chinese leadership. Of course, just who were the top leaders of China was in fact a subject of contention. And just as the French protests were gathering steam, some of those Chinese leaders were moving to try to tame their own youthful protesters (while keeping the name "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" for themselves). One group of Parisians sent a telegram:

POLITBUREAU OF THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY GATE OF CELESTIAL PEACE BEIJING:

Neither the theoretical nor the practical influences nor the Intense factional splits were limited to France, of course, though it produced particularly dramatic examples of each. Maoist parties became prominent in Norway, Italy, and other European countries, sometimes winning electoral office and lasting long after the Cultural Revolution itself. Already in spring of 1968, however, Turin students calling themselves Red Guards in emulation of the GPCR turned the university into a focal point of rebellion, criticizing revisionist communists as well as capitalists. They extended their movement into the Fiat factory, and the loosely Chinese-identified movement spread throughout the country. The radicalism of Turin's Red Guards came eventually to inform today's more anarchistic struggles over globalization. It reminds us that part of what the Chinese Cultural Revolution symbolized abroad was decentralized protest from below (despite later evidence showing the great extent to which this protest was manipulated from above). It also symbolized direct popular political participation rather than waiting for the action of more centrally organized left-wing parties. The very international spread of 1960s radicalism encouraged and was in turn encouraged by a view of borders as reflections of the self-interest of governments and economic elites. The people, it was felt, could readily unite across these borders just as images of radical action flowed across them and some activists traveled to join barricades in foreign cities.
Indeed, engagement with the Chinese Cultural Revolution spread not just to the West but through the developing world. China had been a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement, though initially not one of its main leaders. This group was more important to countries directly engaged in decolonization, and it immediately galvanized support throughout Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and eventually in parts of Latin America. At first China also seemed close to the Soviet camp. The Cultural Revolution, however, came on the heels of China's break with the Soviet Union in 1960. China began to position itself as the "other" superpower and the home of a truer communism. It was a friend to national liberation movements in several countries (though it was also in conflict with India).

The Cultural Revolution quickly caught the attention of several Asian and African countries. While China had not been a European colony in the way most of the others had been, a wide range of activists saw the Cultural Revolution as speaking to concerns of their own homelands. In the first place, many countries inherited bureaucracies from their former colonial rulers, and activists saw these as now supporting exploitative elites who gave only lip service to the cause of national liberation. Secondly, many activists were concerned with the extent to which old habits of thought continued to fetter their peoples. After long periods of European rule, many colonized peoples had incorporated a sense of their own inferiority, a sense of deference toward those who dominated them, and a sense that exploitative social structures were inevitable. Mao had already spoken to these activists with his insistence that Marxism could be adapted to peasant struggles rather than limited to the proletariat of advanced capitalist societies. Franz Fanon had articulated a partially similar idea in racial terms. However, the heritage of domination was hard to shake off. Violent struggle might be necessary to cleanse the former colonies of this heritage. Now the Cultural Revolution gave a name to this sort of struggle.

African leaders like Abbudurhan Mohammed Babu and Julius Nyerere traveled to China. Some younger leaders like Isias Afwerke—the future leader of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and President of Eritrea—trained for extended periods during the GPCR. They learned not only guerrilla tactics but also a broader orientation to collective struggle. The Chinese connection was particularly important to the ideology of the Eritreans (and, to some extent, their then-friends, the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front) because they struggled against an Ethiopian regime that had allied itself with the Soviet Union.
The Chinese Cultural Revolution also influenced tactics of struggle elsewhere in the world. Many African movements incorporated theater and arts performances into efforts to build national solidarity and break with remnants of colonial government. "The East is Red" some proclaimed, directly borrowing from China; others borrowed fewer phrases but echoed the celebration of ordinary people as "creative masses" and the call for those with more education or professional skill to submit themselves to the discipline of "democratic centralism."

The fruits of these tactics were mixed. The 1970s and 1980s dealt a series of crushing defeats to the Left. The USSR spent its last twenty years facing growing stagnation internally and making increasingly reactionary attempts to shore up its influence abroad. China's own opening to the West coincided with an era of critique of the Cultural Revolution, rehabilitation of its wounded (that is the restoration of the reputations and careers of the older generation), and increasing celebration of a capitalist path.

Nonetheless, the GPCR was the first big experiment in "continuous revolution"—putting into practice the notion that really deep social transformation could not be accomplished simply by an initial political revolution, nor even by transfer of ownership of economic assets, but would require sustained struggle to change inherited culture. Marxists had debated this in early twentieth-century Russia. Mao had written about it during the early years of the Chinese Revolution and in fact, described the May 4th movement of 1919 as China's first cultural revolution. Indeed, the idea of cultural revolution was older still, and not limited to Marxists. The conservative sociologist Ferdinand LePlay called the transformation of the family in the nineteenth century a cultural revolution. In a way, the European Enlightenment was a cultural revolution, and some later thinkers described it in those terms and explicitly sought to continue it.

Perhaps the greatest impact was the radical democracy that seemed present in the early phases of the Cultural Revolution and moved many around the world. It is important not to dismiss this dimension of the Cultural Revolution. It may have ended in disaster, and it may have always been subject to manipulation from elite groups contending for power. But it also involved significant self-mobilization from below. For many Red Guards and others who joined its mass mobilizations, the revolution was an unprecedented occasion for direct participation in politics. As an experience of personal engagement, active public communication, and the forging of new connections around the country, it was transformative and remained a reference point not just for the errors that later governments condemned but also for the idea of a really popular politics. The GPCR in no sense promoted liberal democracy (with the emphasis on rule of law and protection of individual rights that that term implies), but it was in some important ways democratic. And for many, at least for a time, it was inspiring.

Notes

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