

## China and Revolution: History, Parody and Memory in Contemporary Art

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China's Great Cultural Proletarian Revolution has come to life in central Melbourne with the opening of the "China and Revolution" poster exhibition at the RMIT Gallery on 344 Swanston Street. Baby boomers, who can remember the excitement of making revolution in the 1960s, will experience a sense of nostalgia on entering the first gallery, which features actual posters of the era. Here one can see a little girl, who is learning her Chinese characters by the light of a kerosene lamp, encouraging her illiterate grandmother to go to night school. In another poster, a teenage Red Guard is holding high Mao's little Red Book, and proclaiming his joy in learning from the workers, peasants and soldiers. But there is much more to this illuminating exhibition than a naive nostalgia for the revolutionary past.

The Curator of the Exhibition is Professor Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Dean of the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. "China and Revolution" is part of her ARC funded research project, "Posters of the Cultural Revolution". Far from being of historical interest only, the exhibition is very much about "parody" and "memory", about the recreation and analysis of this troubling period by talented and courageous artists. Their artistic works offer much food for thought on struggle, violence, power and victimization in contemporary China.

As demonstrated in the first part of the exhibition, posters were a tool of revolutionary factions, including that headed by Jiang Qing, wife of Communist Party boss, Chairman Mao. Jiang kept a close watch on the artistic output of the era, as witnessed in the poster by Shen Jiawei, "Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland, 1975". This features two PLA guards in fur hats and great coats standing guard in the icy wastes by the border with the USSR. Jiang Qing had called for all art to follow her guidelines for "revolutionary realism", otherwise known as "red, bright and shiny" (*hong, guang, liang*). Unfortunately, Shen's original depiction of the faces, based on his real life experience in Manchuria, did not conform to the guidelines, and he was forced to repaint them to add a revolutionary glow. In any case, after Jiang Qing's fall from favour in 1976, Shen's poster disappeared and was only retrieved some years later.

The Cultural Revolution involved the active participation, indeed victimization, of millions of people. In "Chinese Historical Figures 1966 -1976", Xu Weixin seeks to recuperate the faces of some survivors from this period. His "Figures" comprise head and shoulder portraits of individuals in black and white, with biographical information written into the background. In many cases the individuals are deceased. These moving portraits testify to the resilience of both victims and survivors. In the absence of any (official) museum of the period in mainland China, the portraits are vital links in the commemoration of a painful past.

Many of the artists were children or adolescents during the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps this is why posters composed decades after the end of the end of the turmoil often have a mythic or fantastic quality. One example is Liu Dahong's "Four Seasons" a set of four posters to represent the four seasons of Mao's epic life, completed in 2006. In "Spring" we see Mao as a youthful god-like figure, appearing with a halo, an imperial dragon flying over him. In "Summer", he stands on a lotus in a pool, like Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, while nymphs float in the sky above. In "Autumn", a triumphant Mao set against

a dark red background, receives the adulation of the crowd. In “Winter”, however, Mao stands as a tiny figure, bowed down with age and infirmity, watched by ghouls and demons in a grey background of withered trees. Liu Dahong was born in Shandong in 1962. His “Fairytale of the Twelfth Month” (1987/2007) is a fabulous jumbled montage of events of the 1960s as viewed by a child. In the top right hand corner an image of Mao, crowned by the sun, appears as a beneficent glow. Scenes of people travelling, gesticulating, playing and fighting, of shiny giant turnips and other produce, dot the crazy jumbled streets.

Another suite of posters borrow the techniques and motifs of the Cultural Revolution era to point to sobering contemporary realities. Li Gongming, professor of Chinese Fine Art History at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, is a leading figure in the New Propaganda Poster Creation Movement. He explains the goals of this movement in the Exhibition Catalogue. The New Propaganda Poster, he proclaims, “is not the propaganda tool of a political movement as in the past, but a type of critical thinking that is derived from real life”. Li’s posters, with their raised fists, red slogans, and cartoon-like figures, are reminiscent of propaganda posters of the past, but seek to give a voice to the disenfranchised Chinese labouring classes. His posters point to systematic abuses of the contemporary period—the violent removal of people from their homes to make way for new developments, pollution and occupational health, defence of consumer rights, calls for democracy and resistance to the abuse of public power.

The exhibition first opened in Sydney in August 2010. The Melbourne showing ended on 19 March 2011. Both exhibitions were enriched with a series of events, including interviews with the artists, multimedia showings, and background lectures by specialists.

The Cultural Revolution is elided in official Chinese history and excised from the textbooks. But this exhibition demonstrates that it is still raw and painful for those who suffered during that period, who lost family members and friends, or who were deprived of educational opportunities. It also represented a time of dynamism and excitement, of revolutionary sacrifice and altruism, when “the workers, peasants and soldiers” were given a brief heady moment of freedom and power. If you missed out on viewing the exhibition then watch out for future publications. The ‘propaganda’ poster movement now has an agenda and momentum entirely of its own making. It is a movement we cannot afford to ignore.