

# Art in Turmoil

The Chinese Cultural Revolution,  
1966-76



彻底  
以“三项指示”  
修正主义



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# Introduction

## Vibrant Images of a Turbulent Decade

*Richard King and Jan Walls*

Piecing together the history of the Cultural Revolution decade remains a difficult undertaking. Many histories and memoirs of the period have been written in the four decades since the Cultural Revolution began, and it has provided material for films, novels, and works of art by those who lived through it. The political campaigns, the mass rallies, and the major documents are all matters of public record. However, much remains unclear about events away from the political centre, and the motivation of the leading participants for their actions is often a matter for contentious debate. The post-Cultural Revolution national leadership has discouraged research and teaching on the period at the nation's universities and has focused public attention on the economic successes of the present rather than revisiting a past in which the ruling Communist Party was responsible for chaos and injustice. Thus, the history of the Cultural Revolution has largely been told by those writing outside China: expatriates such as the husband-and-wife team of Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, authors of *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, or Western scholars such as Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, who wrote *Mao's Last Revolution*, and Paul Clark, author of *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*.<sup>1</sup> Scholars of China's arts have tended to focus on the more cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and commercial art, literature, and film of the post-Mao years in preference to the more strident images of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Cultural Revolution art has proved strangely persistent, however, demanding attention with its return as nostalgia or kitsch in an age when the market, rather than the Communist Party, is the arbiter of popular taste.

The visual images of the Cultural Revolution do not provide a reliable documentary record of the period; they cannot be used as evidence of historical events or of popular sentiment. The arts of the Cultural Revolution were (in the official formulation of their day) a combination of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, not a picture of the world as it then was, but a vision of a utopian society to which the Communist Party (or at

least that element of the party that controlled cultural policy and the media) aspired. Histories and memoirs of the period tell a very different story, presenting the Cultural Revolution as a time of vicious internecine warfare within the ruling party, merciless persecution of officials, teachers, writers, and artists, betrayals of family members, friends, and colleagues, desperation among the youth sent to the countryside, wanton destruction of China's heritage, and barrenness and stultification in the nation's cultural life. We see a hint of the savagery of the mid-1960s in the cartoons by Red Guards that lampoon the senior officials who were among the first victims of the movement. We cite only the most famous (or notorious) of examples: Weng Rulan's 1967 *A Parade of Clowns*, discussed by Julia F. Andrews in Chapter 1, is a masterful political cartoon, showing the excellent training the young artist had received. It portrays the members of the Chinese establishment who were condemned in the early months of the Cultural Revolution in the order of their downfall, each skilfully caricatured and further identified by an individual quirk. Even as we admire the considerable skill with which the artist represented the objects of her scorn, we have to remember that few of them escaped imprisonment and torture, that many were killed or driven to suicide, and that all endured humiliation and ostracism, a poor reward indeed for their loyal service to the communist cause.

The art of the period cannot be understood without a grasp of the historical and cultural background from which it arose and of the personalities, chief among them Mao Zedong and his wife, Jiang Qing, who shaped the age and the artistic images it left behind.

### The Great Leader and the Standard-Bearer

Nowhere is the disjuncture between the historical record as it now stands and the polemic and familiar images of the Cultural Revolution more acute than in their contrasting presentations of Chairman Mao, the man who was, beyond any doubt, the instigator of the movement. The healthy, genial figure who appears on the posters surrounded by his people, and who was praised in the communist anthem "The East Is Red" as "planning happiness for the people," is now portrayed as a vindictive, reclusive hypochondriac plotting against his enemies and friends alike, and pursuing grandiose and wasteful schemes without regard for the sufferings these imposed on the people (see, for example, the memoir by his doctor Li Zhisui and the recent biography by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday).<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-1960s, as he was setting in motion what was to be his final great campaign, Mao was in his early seventies. He had been leader of the

Communist Party for thirty years and ruler of China for half of that time, since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Under him, the Communist Party had won victory in the Civil War against the Nationalists that had followed the Second World War and had embarked on the transition of China to become the world's most populous socialist state, bringing all aspects of the life of the nation under central control. Mao's prestige among his colleagues in the Chinese leadership had declined during the early 1960s following the Great Leap Forward campaign of the late 1950s, which had failed in its bid to propel China into the ranks of the world's most industrially advanced and militarily powerful nations and had led to the death by starvation of millions, mostly peasants in the poorer provinces, through unrealistic production targets, excessive grain levies, and massive construction projects that squandered material resources and exhausted the population. Mao's most trenchant critic in the leadership, Marshal Peng Dehuai, had been dismissed from his post for his blunt assessment of the Great Leap in 1959 when other leaders sided with Mao against him, but Mao was still obliged to give up some of his authority. Claiming to be stepping back from the front line and allowing others to direct the state, Mao formed a close alliance with Lin Biao, who succeeded Peng Dehuai as commander of the armed forces, to plan his revenge on those who were now managing the country and taking control of its huge bureaucracy. Lin Biao worked to build the cult of Mao's personality in the army, in part by his promotion of the "Little Red Book" of quotations from Mao's speeches and writings. Sensing a frustration with officialdom, particularly among the young, Mao was prepared to capitalize on it to overturn the entire system, if that was what it took to effect his return to power. He was, he told the visiting French novelist and cultural affairs minister André Malraux in 1965, alone with the people.

Mao was to launch his counterattack, the Cultural Revolution, in the field of the arts, specifically in opera. In most cultures, it would seem strange for a massive political upheaval to begin with an argument over allegorical readings of a new drama about a historical figure, but in China, and even more so in Mao's China, politics and art were irrevocably intertwined. In the early 1940s, with the Red Army confined to "revolutionary base areas" around Yan'an in the poor and mountainous Shaanxi Province, Mao had convened a forum at which he imposed his own view of the arts on the leftist intellectuals who had joined the communist cause.<sup>4</sup> For Mao, following the practice of Stalin in the Soviet Union and using Lenin's memorable metaphor, the arts were "cogs and screws" in the revolutionary machine; art was to be produced by "cultural workers" under the supervision of the

## The Art of the Cultural Revolution

*Julia F. Andrews*

The art of the Cultural Revolution documents both the extraordinary enthusiasm of Chinese artists for the movement launched by Mao Zedong in 1966 and the twists and turns of the party politics they tried to support. Yet, as the visual culture of this era, the bright, confident, and compelling images call to mind the shattered ideals and great human tragedies of the ten-year disaster. Cultural Revolution art speaks of the dreams of an idealistic generation but at the same time carries the burden of the lies it was told by its leaders. Those who lived through the period may have fond childhood memories associated with some of the images, but equally terrible visions are brought back by the sight of others.

The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was one of the most profound of the many horrors to which China's people were subjected during the twentieth century. A hideous abuse of totalitarian power, perhaps second only to that of the Nazi period in Germany, its traumas were all the greater because of the naive willingness and complicity of China's people in the abuses visited upon their fellow citizens. In Germany, the party in whose name horrendous crimes were committed was defeated, its surviving leaders were brought to swift justice, and the causes of such murderous behaviour were publicized, analyzed, condemned, and taught as warnings in the schools. In China, however, political leaders did not confront the Cultural Revolution, choosing instead to use euphemistic labels such as the "ten lost years" and addressing it in the most abstract terms. Art historians Zhang Shaoxia and Li Xiaoshan begin their discussion of Cultural Revolution art with a quotation from a 1981 Communist Party document: "History has proved that the Cultural Revolution was erroneously launched by the leadership, was used by a counter-revolutionary group, and was an internal disturbance that brought severe suffering to the nation and to the people of all its nationalities."

The burst of public lamentation concerning the tragedies of the Cultural Revolution, which assisted Deng Xiaoping in his 1979 rise to power,

was quickly shut down once he had gained control of key parts of the government. After a show trial during the fall of 1980, in which Mao's wife and three others were convicted and sentenced, many Cultural Revolution policies were revoked, and the nation, unable to look back, began rebuilding. Some, but not all, of the most vicious officials and former Red Guards were arrested and quietly sent away. The call by prominent writer and Cultural Revolution victim Ba Jin for a Cultural Revolution museum was ignored. The causes, the culprits, and the effects of the Cultural Revolution were all too well understood by those who witnessed it, but this collective experience and memory was left largely unspoken and for the most part has not been passed on to the generations that followed.

Most historians agree that the Cultural Revolution was launched by Mao Zedong with the goal of removing his rivals in the party. Because he came to view his most senior colleague, President Liu Shaoqi, as an opponent yet was unable to rally Communist Party support for his purge, he mobilized millions of students to destroy the party apparatus. His goals were not known to most of his supporters in 1966, and his failure to control the activity he set in motion led to massive human suffering and loss of life.<sup>2</sup>

Three generations suffered in the terrors that began in 1966. Members of the first generation, who had grown up in the Republic of China (1911-49) and had assisted the communist regime to take power, had already reached retirement age by 1966 and had nothing left but their reputations, on the basis of which they contributed their opinions and knowledge to the new society. It was easy to deprive them of their good names by dragging them before crowds that publicly humiliated them and only slightly more difficult to hasten their departure from this world by withholding proper nutrition and needed medical care. The second-generation victims, then in their forties or fifties, had idealistically contributed their adult lives to building New China. They happily sent their teenage children to Beijing in 1966 to see Chairman Mao at Tian'anmen Square, but then, at the peak of their creative and professional careers, they too were seized, humiliated, and denounced. Many were exiled to rural areas for as long as a dozen years. Prohibited or otherwise unable to pursue the specialties for which they had been trained, few had retained the skills or creativity to resume their work when they returned to their homes after the Cultural Revolution. They survived, but that was all, and most have been too scarred to let others know what happened to them. The world will never see the scientific discoveries they might have made, the books they might have written, or the images they might have painted.

Finally, the youngest, the post-war baby boom generation, who grew up entirely in Mao's China, suffered in a different way. Because schools were closed or radically restructured, the formal learning of all children was interrupted and in many cases terminated. Most of China's baby boom generation lost its chance for education and a normal career. Some, as Red Guards, had abandoned all humane scruples to carry out Mao's most vicious and paranoid retribution, actions that in some cases led to the deaths of his imagined or real enemies. Red Guards participated in publicly humiliating and even torturing their elders, as well as in fighting to the death against heretics in other Red Guard factions believed to be less loyal to Chairman Mao. In the end, once Mao's destructive acts were successfully carried out, the Red Guards were discarded and sent out of the cities for "re-education," to live as peasants, workers, or soldiers in China's most remote or impoverished areas. There, they learned to farm, to survive on the most meagre of rations, and to endure the abuse of the local officials, before whose absolute power they were helpless. Only a small percentage of the brightest, most self-motivated, or best-connected were able to re-enter the educational system when the Cultural Revolution concluded in 1976. The vast majority, left behind as farmers or labourers in rusting factories, form the huge cohort of unskilled and now unemployed labourers who have been forced into an impoverished early retirement by the new economic policies. The silence of most members of this generation comes from a mixture of disillusionment, shame, and fear.

It is on the human wreckage left by the Cultural Revolution that China is building its twenty-first century. Silence on the part of those who know what happened has made it possible for China and its new generation to emerge, since about 1993, on the world economic, political, and military stage as a new nation, one that seems to have no modern history and to lack the baggage of the past. It is probably much too late to provide any meaningful recompense to those whose lives were destroyed, though the new economic possibilities opened to the younger generation may restore some measure of hope to damaged families. However, the failure to document what happened, and how it happened, deprives China and the world of a necessary admonition about what can transpire if the crimes of political leaders are ignored, propaganda is unchallenged, and patriotism is misused for cynical ends. It was the trust and idealism of China's citizens that permitted them to be so willingly led into disaster.

The Cultural Revolution also destroyed China's traditional culture in a way that the most iconoclastic reformers of the early twentieth century

could not have imagined. Although most old art and archaeological sites survived the campaigns against the “four olds” (*sijiu*), the people who practised and taught traditional forms of art, and who understood the culture of the past, were thoroughly demoralized, their spirits broken and their passion wiped away. The entire succeeding generation was taught to ridicule tradition rather than respect it. Replacing traditional art with a new socialist imagery had been on Mao’s agenda since the 1940s, but, during the Cultural Revolution, China’s steady progress in this direction was brought to its culmination. With the close supervision of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, all old art was replaced by socialist images executed in a uniform style.

The art of the Cultural Revolution may be divided into two periods that correspond with the political history of the movement. The first period lasted from its outbreak in 1966 until the mysterious death of Mao’s chosen successor Lin Biao, killed as he and his family tried to flee China by air in September of 1971. This phase produced visual art primarily focused on destroying the old culture and system, and on codifying the cult of Mao, in whose name the destruction was carried out. Much of this art was ephemeral, consisting of cartoons, drawings, gouache drafts, or woodcuts produced for broadsheets or posters. A great deal of it seems to emulate the wartime publications made by art workers at the communist base in Yan’an, a high point in Mao’s revolutionary career, and thus revives the iconoclastic art trends of early years of the People’s Republic, including the Korean War era. It sought authenticity in wartime revolutionary styles and images. The early Cultural Revolution also produced the iconic images of Mao Zedong that became permanent elements of the nation’s visual landscape. The second period of Cultural Revolution art, from 1971 to 1976, saw Mao’s actress-wife, Jiang Qing, assert more centralized control over a re-established art bureaucracy, which yielded images now made in the mediums of high art, such as oil on canvas or ink on Chinese paper, as well as a remarkably uniform national style. Although images of Mao’s benevolence continued to be produced, vignettes of the heroism and happiness of everyday people became much more common, a way of implementing Mao’s dictum that art should serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. Thus, art moved from models of revolutionary artistic activity and revolutionary artistic styles developed by the Eighth Route Army and veterans of the Lu Xun Academy of Arts and Literature in Yan’an during the late 1930s and 1940s to a more academic socialist manner. In subject matter, the concerns of Cultural Revolution artists seem to repeat at a radically accelerated pace and miniature scale the developments of the preceding decades of Chinese communist history: first, a call to arms; second, praise for the leadership; third, a quasi-historical phase,

including praise for martyrs and exemplary communists; and finally, praise for the unity of the people and the regime.

The Chinese of the 1960s and 1970s lived in a world ornamented with inspiring visual and auditory images, from posters to broadcast music to movies and local propaganda dramas, the entire society as though (or actually) in pursuit of a utopian fantasy. At the same time, the practical needs of material existence, such as food and clothing, became ever more difficult to obtain. An entire generation grew up nourished by the same music, that of the model theatrical works of the Cultural Revolution, and the same imagery – Cultural Revolution cartoons, posters, and paintings – and all artists were trained to paint in essentially the same style. This art, like the policies that produced it, may trace its origins and aesthetic principles to the earlier history of the Communist Party, and like them, it is the result of a continuous development pushed onto an extremist byway.

The Cultural Revolution was not simply a ten-year aberration, as the euphemism the “ten lost years” implies. Instead, it built very directly on the procedures and system put in place by the Communist Party during the preceding twenty-five years, a system on which the party based its legitimacy and in which all party leaders were complicit. Political purges, arrests, and thought reform conducted within the party during the 1940s and throughout society during the 1950s provided the groundwork for the massive persecutions that took place between 1966 and 1976. The Anti-rightist Campaign of 1957, in which all work units (*danwei*) were ordered to identify between 5 and 20 percent of their staff as anti-party rightists, might be viewed as a trial run for the purges of the Cultural Revolution. People from all walks of life were condemned, often on fabricated charges, and their families and friends threatened with retribution for any attempt at defence. The party’s enormous propaganda machine rolled out such detailed and often-repeated accounts of the alleged crimes that people learned to recite them from memory. Demonizing the victims through propaganda was effective, and the victims, or “rightists,” came to be viewed as something “other,” less than human and not worthy of sympathy. Notable, in retrospect, is the vigour with which party members pursued attacks on their colleagues and the weakness of any defence of the rightists. The few people who loyally insisted on the innocence of their colleagues or family members were immediately labelled rightists themselves and removed from the scene. Trust in the government and fear for their own safety led colleagues and even family members to assist in patently unfair attacks. Numerous examples may be found of wives or husbands who divorced their “rightist” spouses, changed the names of their children, and completely cut off contact. Acceptance of

the government's claims and its right to persecute its citizens laid the groundwork for what would follow during the Cultural Revolution.

It was only after the Cultural Revolution, with the wisdom of hindsight, that these "movements" to rectify political thinking, which dated all the way back to the early 1940s at the Yan'an communist base, were understood as part of a continuum. Privately, many individuals came to realize that their own words of condemnation in the Anti-rightist Campaign constituted not loyalty to the party, but betrayal of the innocent, a perspective gained by suffering a similar fate themselves in 1966 or 1967. Since virtually every party official had been involved in implementing these movements, exposing them would have required admissions of culpability that the party as a whole was not willing to make. From this viewpoint, a thorough analysis of the Cultural Revolution would require a hard look at the history of the Communist Party and the past activities of its subsequent leaders, including Deng Xiaoping, who ruled China from 1979 to 1989 and retained substantial power until his death in 1997.

### The First Phase (1966-71)

The first phase of Cultural Revolution art (1966-71), produced spontaneously and quickly, supported the ever-developing political movements as they responded to every new directive or suggestion from Mao and his close supporters, including his wife, Jiang Qing.<sup>3</sup> In February 1966, Jiang Qing held a conference on military arts and literature at which praise for the thought of Chairman Mao was the dominant theme. She singled out the *Rent Collection Courtyard*, a life-sized sculptural installation made at the Sichuan Arts Academy, as a "model" for the art world, the first such canonization in the Cultural Revolution. This installation, and its subsequent history, is the subject of Chapter 5, by Britta Erickson in this volume. Jiang Qing's critical stance was justified, according to the Red Guards, by the approval of workers, peasants, and soldiers.

Late in the spring of 1966, the party, on Mao's orders, issued a paper referred to as the "May Sixteenth Directive." It criticized Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping for "having let all of the ox-demons and snake-spirits out of their cages," for "stuffing up our newspapers, broadcasts, periodicals, books, textbooks, performances, works of literature and art, films, plays, operas, art, music, dance, and so forth," and for refusing to accept the leadership of the proletariat.<sup>4</sup> Four high Communist Party officials were dismissed: Army Chief of Staff Luo Ruiqing, Beijing Mayor Peng Zhen, head of the Central Propaganda Department Lu Dingyi, and Director of the Communist Party

Central Committee Office Yang Shangkun.<sup>5</sup> Staffing shifts were made throughout the propaganda apparatus so that major newspapers became more responsive to Mao's wishes. A new Cultural Revolution Small Group was appointed directly under the Standing Committee of the Politburo to direct the movement.

The most frequently seen, yet transitory, art form of the period may have been the big-character posters (*dazibao*) handwritten in bold calligraphy to attack the person or policy to be discredited. Young people who had learned the traditional skills of calligraphy were much sought after, urged to turn their talents against their own birthright. Of course, the messages conveyed by the posters were intended to take pride of place, but the somewhat less revolutionary attraction of style seems to have been appreciated as well, as witnessed by the many stories of posters written by well-known calligraphers disappearing almost as quickly as they were displayed.

On 1 June, Mao approved broadcast of the text of a big-character poster that denounced the president of Beijing University. In the view of the Red Guards, he personally launched the Cultural Revolution by this act.<sup>6</sup> With Mao's support withdrawn from college administrations and party committees, most collapsed. Student activists, garbed in Yan'an-style faded army uniforms, marched from school to school in demonstrations against academic administrators. Wide leather belts with heavy buckles, a standard part of the costume, were used by some students as weapons against those who failed to pay proper respect.

By mid-June, all schools were closed. On 4 June, some middle school students at Qinghua University wrote a big-character poster with the slogan "Rebellion is justified!" (Figure 1.1). The title "Red Guard" was recognized by Mao on 1 August as the name for student activists who supported him.<sup>7</sup> A meeting of Maoist members of the Communist Party's Central Committee in early August set forth guidelines on the goals of the Red Guard movement. The Red Guards were mandated, first, to overthrow those within the party who had taken the capitalist road and, second, to uproot and destroy the "four olds." On 5 August, Mao himself displayed a big-character poster on the door of the room where the Central Committee met, calling upon the Red Guards to "bombard the headquarters" (*paoda silingbu*) of his party opponents who exercised "bourgeois dictatorship."<sup>8</sup> The four olds were defined as old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits of the exploiting classes to corrupt the masses.<sup>9</sup> Normal cultural activity in the capital largely ceased as students and teachers organized to support the Red Guard movement.

Over the course of 1967, well-known artists were attacked in the press and in their studios.<sup>10</sup> In general, all who reached adulthood before 1949 had