**Art1010**

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**Transcript for lecture on Chinese Cultural Revolution**

**2. Art Revolution**

Through this lecture, let’s think about how this notion of revolution is propagated through art, and how it encourages notions of solidarity and community.

What role do artists play in furthering a revolution and perpetuating certain ideals?

How do these images permeated everyday life and were embedded into communities?

How are art forms inextricably tied to the social and historical contexts of their times?

**3. Timeline**

Here, we have a timeline of all the major historical events leading up to the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

**4. Historical Context**

After years of Civil War in China, the Chinese Communist Party established the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Chairman Mao Zedong become the nation’s new ruler. Over the next few years, he introduced several new ideas and campaigns to assert his ideologies over the people.

One such campaign was the Great Leap Forward– to convert China’s economy from an agricultural to an industrial one. He wanted to organize the peasant class and increase China’s agricultural output. He relied on farming strategies that failed and destroyed the agricultural land. He also wanted China to produce its own steel, and encourage people to set up backyard furnaces and turn their scrap metal into reusable steel. The results were a complete failure­– these backyard furnaces produced such low quality material that it was completely worthless.

What was intended to be a revolutionary agricultural and industrial reform failed to produce the necessary yield leading to a famine that killed 56 million people.

These economic failures were disastrous for Mao as a leader, and his positioned was weakened until 1967, when he called for the “Cultural Revolution” to reassert his power in the government.

**5. Cultural Revolution**

In 1967 Mao Zedong, the Communist leader of China, started another political campaign that became known as the Cultural Revolution, which lasted until his death in 1976. This campaign was in an effort to reassert his authority over the Chinese government after his positioned in the government had weakened following the failure of the Great Leap forward movement.

Mao sought to purge the country of what it saw as capitalist culture and ideology and was characterised by mass destruction of traditional art and culture. He ordered for all art and design to serve the state and imbue communist principles, catering to the “worker, peasant and soldier.”

He shut down the nation’s schools, calling for a massive youth mobilization to take current party leaders to task for their embrace of bourgeois values and lack of revolutionary spirit. In the months that followed, the movement escalated quickly as the students formed paramilitary groups called the Red Guards and attacked and harassed members of China’s elderly and intellectual population.

The Red Guards set out to destroy the "four olds": old ideas, customs, habits and culture. They spearheaded the interrogation, humiliation and beatings of teachers and intellectuals, and travelled the country destroying cultural heritage.

**6. Art of Cultural Revolution**

Mao's first target was nothing less than the destruction of all Chinese artistic traditions, and the person he chose to carry out this Cultural Revolution was his wife, Jiang Qing. She denounced all forms of films, opera and art, because, as she claimed, they were made by people opposed to her husband. She made it her task to ensure that the only work to flourish would be for propaganda purposes. Only one art form was permitted – the praise of Mao and his reforms. Writers and scholars were imprisoned, traditional artists who failed to create suitable revolutionary themes were denounced or imprisoned, and from the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 until his death in 1976, all were compelled to toe the Party line.

Artists were therefore expected to focus on creating portraits of Mao, or “Mao paintings,” which represented Mao’s effort to regain his hold after bitter political struggles within the party. Art was aimed to depict idealised narratives of the state to correct political fallout from the disasters of the 1950s, especially the widespread famine and deaths that resulted from the Great Leap Forward. and reinvigorate Communist ideology in general.

Jiang Qing insisted that the posters should be of the 'reddest of reds' – the colour of the revolution and the one to have the biggest impact with the illiterate masses. As well as promoting this cult of Mao’s personality, it was essential that the people were portrayed as happy, smiling and productive.

In *At the Happy Hearth of the Motherland* a gathering of different ethnic groups from across the country crowd around Mao. They are eager and self reliant– and the success of the revolution – proved by the abundance of produce they have with them. In the years that followed, Mao would lead the country through a decade of violent class struggles aimed at purging traditional customs and capitalism from Chinese society.

**7. Socialist realism**

In the early years of the Cultural Revolution, artists turned to a style known as socialist realism for creating portraits of Mao Zedong. A style of idealised realistic art that was developed in teh Soviet Union and used in socialist countries after World War II.

Socialist realism was introduced to China in the 1950s in order to address the lives of the working class. As Chairman Mao began to introduce policies that affected cultural production, the very style of art began to change– realism began to be transformed into revolutionary realism. After it was incorporated into the revolutionary fervour of the time, it was no longer a realism that was naturalist in tendency. Rather, it gained spiritual connotations, and provided a blueprint for the political vision of Socialism.

For some, realism appealed to Chinese national values, allowing for an escape from the pervading influence of Western culture. It appealed to the popular aspiration among Chinese artists for a modernisation of art. For intellectuals, it had a sense of presence in reality, and this in itself proved alluring. Meanwhile, it fitted with their deep desire to integrate their own ideals with their pursuit of progress for the nation.

In Unite for Greater Victory three figures stand hand-in-hand. One represents the archetypal peasant woman grasping Mao's collected works, a steel worker whose endeavour will help drive China into modern industrial times and a soldier with his gun.

Another group reflects Jiang Qing's own enthusiasm for dance and opera – like many senior communists she hankered after the glamour and sophistication of the West – and in Long Live the Triumph of Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line for Literature and Art!, characters from the model dramas which she promoted were performed to the exclusion of almost all other entertainment.

The characters stiff poses and smiles, not to mention the revolutionary outfits, all served to hide the horrible reality in the same way that party newspapers depicted the revolution as an epochal struggle to inject new life into the socialist cause.

**8. Cult of Mao**

Suitable for propaganda, socialist realism aimed for clear, intelligible subjects and emotionally moving themes. Subjects often included peasants, soldiers, and workers—all of whom represented the central subject of Mao Zedong and the Communist Party.

The earliest published portrait of Mao Zedong was created in 1933. In this early period, portraits of Mao were most often woodblock prints and varied greatly in style. When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, portraits of Mao were standardized by the Central Propaganda Department. When the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, representations of Mao became more idealized. Artists were encouraged to create works that were “red, bright, and shining,” which translated into the use of warm tones and smooth brushwork, a style influenced by Russian socialist realism. In works of this period, Mao is often surrounded by a luminescence that seems to radiate from his body.

Mao paintings typically depicted the leader in a scenes interacting with the communities and people, such as images of him strolling through lush fields alongside smiling peasants. He was depicted in an idealized fashion, as a luminous presence at the center of the composition.

The two oil paintings that received the most attention when they were originally exhibited are Tang Xiaohe’s *Strive Forward in Wind and Tides* and Chen Yanning’s *Chairman Mao Inspects the Guangdong Countryside*. Both of these large-scale history paintings were created by young artists (in their late twenties and early thirties) and were reproduced extensively as posters.

Mao Zedong is shown here standing on a barge after his historic swim in the Yangtze River on July 16, 1966. In what many believe was an attempt to assert his political power through a demonstration of physical strength, Mao swam in the strong current of the river for more than one hour at the age of seventy-three. Posters of this painting were widely distributed in the early part of the Cultural Revolution.

This painting depicts Mao’s visit to Guangzhou in 1958 at the height of the Great Leap Forward, an economic and social plan which aimed to transform China into a modern, industrialized society. The idealized portrayal of Mao as a “saintly icon” was a common theme of this period. The year this work was created marked a transition in which professional artists replaced amateur painters as the creators of iconic Mao images. This work was enormously influential on a succeeding generation of painters, and numerous posters and copies of it were produced.

**9. Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, (1967) by Liu Chunhua**

The poster is a reproduction of the painting. In this iconic painting, a young Mao Zedong, the renowned leader of the Chinese Communist Party, makes an epic journey against a misty, mountainous landscape under a blue, cloud-sprayed sky. Mao is shown in mid-stride, his plain robe blowing in the wind, one hand clenched into a fist and with an umbrella under his right arm. Such details signify Mao as an intrepid visionary, whose journey to Anyuan exemplified his role as a great revolutionary, leading China out of the old world of feudalism and poverty towards a bright new future. Anyuan was the site of a 1922 miners strike in Jiangxi Province, to which Mao famously travelled in order to support the miners’ cause and organize workers’ rights shortly after the founding of the Chinese Communist Party.

This work was painted in 1967, when Chairman Mao was in his seventies. And yet, Chen depicts him as youthful and strong, with a look of determination on his face, therefore celebrates Mao as a revolutionary leader of the movement. Printed on 900 million posters during the Cultural Revolution, it remains the most reproduced painting in history.

**10. Eulogy to the Yellow River**

*Eulogy to the Yellow River* is a massive, serene image that portrays a sense of sheer beauty, heroism, and hope. The brushstrokes used show motion and power, while the rays of sunlight across the mountains make the entire painting glow with dazzling beauty. Yifei was quoted saying, “In the red army soldier’s rifle shoulder strap was a little piece of red fabric, like a blossoming fresh flower… I felt it was so beautiful, and heroic, as well as romantic.” (China Guardian, 2013). The soldier looks very dignified, with happiness and accomplishment on his face. He stands on the highest point in the painting, facing the viewer with his back to the landscape. Many Chinese works of art depict someone looking out over a landscape to symbolize a brighter future. It seems that Yifei painted this soldier looking toward the viewer with his back to the darker landscape to portray the idea that they have made it through the most strenuous times and can now begin to enjoy the fruits of a new society.

The scale of this painting immerses the viewer into the scene and evokes romanticized feelings of hope and heroism.

**11. New Aspects of Lake Tai**

Some artists continued to create traditional Chinese artworks, using the medium of brush and ink to paint traditional landscapes. However, these landscapes now incorporated revolutionary elements such as men and women in military uniform, model workers, and symbols of modern industrial achievement. The lithograph New Aspects of Lake Tai (1973) by artist Song Wenzhi depicts fog creeping through a sweeping valley. Traditional wooden ships with billowing sails sit on the water below, but the focus is on the radio towers and wires spanning both land and sea.

**12. Ubiquity of images**

During the Cultural Revolution overt political messages do not dominate, rather more implicit images promoting industrial progress, public health, safety, literacy, and self-improvement are inserted onto everyday objects. Everything is geared to the propagation of the chairman as an invincible figure, even messages on matchboxes which were decorated with admonitions to the people, such as to wash their hands before eating and after visiting the toilet, to grow more castor oil plants and not to drop orange peel on the street. All this was part of the control that Mao exercised over the masses.

**Legacy of the Cultural Revolution**

An estimated three million people died in the Cultural Revolution, as many as 100 million suffered starvation, torture, death and execution throughout his 40 years as leader of the Communist Party and head of state, but with his death in 1976 the mass hysteria and the terror came to an end.

The Cultural Revolution’s short-term effects may have been felt mainly in China’s cities, but its long-term effects would impact the entire country for decades to come. Mao’s large-scale attack on the party and system he had created would eventually produce a result opposite to what he intended, leading many Chinese citizens to lose faith in their government altogether.