CHINA AND REVOLUTION:
HISTORY, PARODY AND MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY ART
8 AUGUST – 7 NOVEMBER 2010
Acknowledgement:

Dr Kirsten Seale, research and editorial advice
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FRONT COVER IMAGES

Shui Tianguang ‘Chinese Historical Figures 1966 – 1976’
“历史中国众生相1966-1976”水天光
2009 © Xu Weixin

Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland
为我们伟大祖国站岗
1975 oil on canvas © Shen Jiawei
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‘Posters of the Cultural Revolution’ is a research project funded by the Australian Research Council. It re-evaluates the Cultural Revolution through an analysis of propaganda in China in the 1960s and 1970s. Focussing on political posters, and eliciting perspectives from the memories of those represented in poster art, as well as professional image-makers contemporary both to that period and to the present era, the research identifies the continuing influence of propaganda as a medium for public communication, as an art form and as a visual repository of personal recollection. Oral histories and analyses of extant visual material combine in a work that refines received history.
'China and Revolution' is an exhibition that explores the relationship between poster art of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically work produced during the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (wenge), and interventions by contemporary artists whose work engages in a conscious dialogue with that period.

The exhibition emphasises connective possibilities between past revolutions and the present, and between history, memory and forgetting.

CURATORIAL ADVISORS:
- Stephanie Hemelryk Donald
  Dean, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University and Honorary Professor Chinese Media Studies, The University of Sydney
- Harriet Evans
  Professor, Chinese Cultural Studies, University of Westminster

COLLABORATING ARTISTS:
- Liu Dahong
- Xu Weixin
- Li Gongming
- Shen Jiawei

COLLABORATING FILM-MAKER:
- Leicia Petersen

PUBLIC PROGRAMS
10TH AUGUST (TUES) 6-8pm OPENING
11TH AUGUST (WED) Meet the Artists
  11-12am Mrs Leicia Petersen, Freelance film-maker
  12-1pm Professor Liu Dahong:
     Department of Fine Arts, Shanghai Normal University
  2-3pm Professor Li Gongming, Department of Fine Art History, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts
  3-4pm Mr Shen Jiawei, Sydney-based freelance artist

25TH AUGUST (WED) 12-1PM Gallery talk
  Professor John Clark
  Department of Art History and Film Studies, the University of Sydney
  Topic: Art of the Cultural Revolution - Its Art Historical Foundations

8TH SEPTEMBER (WED) 12-1PM Gallery talk
  Dr Yi Zheng
  Department of Chinese Studies, the University of Sydney
  Topic: Model Plays and Socialist Avant-Garde

22ND SEPTEMBER (WED) 12-1PM Gallery talk
  Dr Thomas Berghuis
  Department of Art History and Film Studies, the University of Sydney
  Topic: Aesthetic Revolutions in Chinese Contemporary Art

6TH OCTOBER (WED) 12-1PM Gallery talk
  Professor Stephanie Donald
  School of Media and Communication, RMIT University
  Topic: Missing histories and childhood in Cultural Revolution

20TH OCTOBER (WED) 12-1PM Gallery talk
  Jacqui Godwin
  PhD candidate
  Department of Chinese Studies, the University of Sydney
  Topic: Posters in the Early Post-Mao Era
**List of Artworks**

1. **Liu Dahong**  
   Good Friends 2008  
   Oil on canvas 40 x 50cm  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

2. **Li Gongming**  
   New Propaganda Posters in China 2010  
   Sources of images:  
   New propaganda work group  
   The problem of earth is the essential one to guarantee farmers' subsistence allowances  
   Su Dengguang, He Xiaote  
   Illegal demolition, not permitted in national laws  
   Li Bing  
   Seeking! Seek the answer to life  
   Wei Xiaoyan  
   Anti-corruption of Judiciary  
   New propaganda work group  
   Call for a harmonious countryside and a prosperous life for farmers  
   Fang Fang  
   Fight against earth pollution, help child victims  
   Yang Xiaoyan  
   Call for social justice  
   Cai Yuanhe  
   Improve medical treatments of occupational diseases, respect rights of lives  
   Silk print 130 x 1080cm  
   Guangzhou  
   Courtesy of Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

3. **Xu Weixin**  
   Chinese Historical Figures 1966 – 1976 2010  
   (reproduction based on 2006-2007 oil paintings each 100 x 250cm)  
   Print 65 x 40.5cm  
   Beijing  
   Courtesy of Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

4. **Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, Leica Petersen**  
   I cannot escape... 2010  
   Video documentary 8:46mins  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Stephanie Hemelryk Donald

5. **Liu Dahong**  
   Fairytales of the Twelfth Month 2007  
   Based on 1987 oil painting  
   Print 104.5 x 74.5cm  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Liu Dahong

6. **Liu Dahong**  
   The Awakening of Insects 2007  
   Based on 1988 oil painting  
   Print 101 x 74cm  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Liu Dahong

7. **Liu Dahong**  
   Red Calendar - 24 Seasons 2006  
   Based on 2005 oil painting  
   Calendar 38 x 58.5cm  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Liu Dahong

8. **Liu Dahong**  
   Four Seasons 2006  
   Based on 1991 oil painting  
   Print 56 x 90cm  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Liu Dahong

9. **Liu Dahong, Xia Guofu**  
   Physical Exercise on Public Announcement System - Puppet Chapter 2005  
   Video animation 4:04 mins  
   Shanghai  
   Courtesy of Liu Dahong

10. **Liu Dahong, Xia Guofu**  
    Sixteen National Congresses of Communist Party of China 2008  
    Video animation 4:35 mins  
    Shanghai  
    Courtesy of Liu Dahong

11. **Xu Weixin**  
    Oil on canvas 200 x 250cm  
    Beijing  
    Courtesy of Xu Weixin

12. **Xu Weixin**  
    Untitled 2006-2009  
    Video documentary 9:07mins  
    Beijing  
    Courtesy of Xu Weixin

13. **New propaganda work group**  
    United, the proletarian of the world 2004  
    Postcard 12 x 18cm  
    Guangzhou  
    Courtesy of Li Gongming
14. New propaganda work group
Käthe Kollwitz: Show concern for people’s sufferings 2004
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

15. New propaganda work group
All power belongs to the people 2004
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

16. New propaganda work group
My country, my motherland 2004
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

17. New propaganda work group
Fu Luofei: Show concern for people’s sufferings 2004
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

18. New propaganda work group
Call for social justice and fairness 2004
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

19. New propaganda work group
John Heartfield: Hit the evil of totalitarian politics 2004
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

20. Jun Ming
Equality and harmony 2007
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

21. Black horse advertisement
Piglet visits home 2007
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

22. Chen Kai
Migrant workers going home 2007
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

23. Liu Bin
Transport during Spring Festival 2007
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

24. Black horse advertisement
Chairman Mao laughs 2007
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

25. Fen Shi Hui
Bowl of Spring 2007
postcard 12 x 18cm
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

26. Li Gongming, Liu Jianzhao
Movement of New Propaganda Posters in China 2010
video documentary 10 mins
Guangzhou
Courtesy of Li Gongming

27. Shen Jiawei
Standing guard for Our Great Motherland 1975
poster 53 x 77cm
China
Courtesy of Shen Jiawei

28. Anonymous
Aerial drawing of Dazhai & surroundings undated
poster 74 x 47cm
China
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

29. Hanxiang
Celebrating a good harvest 1972
poster 77.5 x 53cm
Hebei
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

30. Revolutionary Rebel
Headquarters of Shanghai Workers
Down with Soviet revisionists 1967
poster 53 x 77.5cm
Shanghai
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

31. Jilin Lu Yi Revolutionary Rebel Army
Learn from the workers, peasants and soldiers 1967
poster 53 x 77cm
Jilin
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster
32. Anonymous
Hold high the revolutionary banner of proletarian criticism 1967
poster 54 x 79.5cm
Shenyang
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

33. Revolutionary Rebel
Headquarters of Shanghai Publishing System
Get rid of selfishness and develop public spirit 1967
poster 53.5 x 77.5cm
Shanghai
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

34. Dai Ze
The great victory at Langfang 1975
poster 77.5 x 53cm
Shanghai
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

35. Sun Xuecheng
I accompany Granny on her way to night school 1973
poster 53 x 77cm
Tianjin
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

36. Song Wenzhi
Oiling flowers on the banks of the Yangzi River 1975
poster 77 x 54cm
Jiangsu
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster

37. Jinggangshan Community Beijing Film Academy
Our literature and art is all for the masses (White haired girl) 1967
poster 66 x 55cm
Beijing
Courtesy of Harriet Evans, collection of the University of Westminster
STEPHANIE HEMELRYK DONALD (CURATOR/RESEARCHER)
Chief Investigator of ‘Posters of the Cultural Revolution’ Research Project
Dean, School of Media and Communication, RMIT
University and Honorary Professor Chinese Media Studies, The University of Sydney
Professor Stephanie Donald is an internationally respected scholar. She was President of the Chinese Studies Association of Australia 2007-2009. Her research and writing focuses on film, media, children’s experience, and the Asia Pacific region. In recent years Stephanie has worked specifically on urban branding, intra-regional perspectives on cosmopolitanism and migration, and the idea of class in China.

HARRIET EVANS (CURATOR/RESEARCHER)
Chief Investigator of ‘Posters of the Cultural Revolution’ Research Project
Professor, Chinese Cultural Studies, University of Westminster
Professor Harriet Evans is a renowned scholar on Chinese women’s history, gender, and politics. She is co-ordinator of Asian Studies Research in the School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Languages, University of Westminster. She is also the Director of the Posters Archive at the University.

LI GONGMING (CURATOR/ARTIST)
Professor in Chinese Fine Art History
Dean, Faculty of Fine Arts History, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts
Professor Li Gongming is an artist, fine arts historian and culture critic. He is vice-chairman of the Art Theory Committee of the Guangdong Artists Association, visiting fellow at the Guangdong Art Gallery, member of Guangdong Art Gallery academic committee as well as Executive Chief Editor of magazine Gallery.

LIU DAHONG (ARTIST/FILM-MAKER)
Professor and Supervisor of PhD candidates, Fine Arts Department, Shanghai Normal University
Born in Qingdao 1962, Liu Dahong is a painter, as well as manager of the Shuangbai Studio. Liu Dahong’s work The Awakening of Insects was displayed in the 6th National Fine Arts Exhibition in 1989, and in 1990 he finished the work Three Old Work of Chairman Mao. In late 1991, he finished the work Four Seasons. He held a solo exhibition in Hong Kong in 1992 after his works of The Year of Monkey and The Illustration of the 9th Version of Broadcast Callisthenics were finished in the same year.
XU WEIXIN (ARTIST)
Professor, Deputy Dean of Art School at Renmin University
Professor Xu Weixin is member of Oil Painting Committee of the China Artists Association, and Director of China the Oil Painting Society. Xu Weixin’s artworks in recent years are committed to social and historical issues. His series Chinese Historical Figures 1966 - 1976 is over 100 oil paintings, memorialising the famous and the ordinary, the brave and the unfortunate, victims and perpetrators from the ten years of chaos. This series was featured in Beijing’s Today Art Museum 2007, and produced a great impact among Chinese artists and ideologists.

SHEN JIAWEI (ARTIST)
Shen Jiawei was born in Shanghai in 1948. He taught himself to be an artist during the Cultural Revolution. His oil painting Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland (1974) was well-known in China. He has been living and working in Sydney since 1989. His works are in public and private collections worldwide.

LEICIA PETERSEN (FILM-MAKER)
Leicia Petersen is a writer and documentarist living in Shanghai. She has worked on the Posters of the Cultural Revolution project since 2008.

LIANG MING (PROJECT COORDINATOR)
Ming has been working on the Posters of the Cultural Revolution project with Professors Donald and Evans since 2008.
China’s ‘red legacy’ surfaces in many diverse forms in contemporary China, from the official ‘red tourist’ sites that commemorate the key places and events of China’s communist revolution, to the commercial pop-publicity of music venues and bars in downtown Beijing and the market stalls selling reproduction posters of the revolution’s iconic images. It is present in the unsettling mix of nostalgia, vulnerability and terror in Zhang Xiaogang’s famous Bloodline series, in the work of Yu Youhan with his deliberate subversion of the past and its associated power-holders, in the heavy steel structures of the industrial complexes that are now home to Beijing’s 798 art district, and in the huge numbers of Cultural Revolution artifacts displayed in Fan Jianchuan’s private Anren Museum in Chengdu. Recent years have also witnessed the increasing prominence of the ‘red legacy’ in international cultural and academic debate as scholars attempt to prise open mainstream narratives of the Mao era. Apart from Ai Xiaoming’s and Hu Jie’s documentary film work, there has been very little consideration of how the posters of the Cultural Revolution, as opposed to other art forms of the time, were received by those who produced them, and by those who looked at them during the course of their everyday lives. Nor has there been much substantial work examining the ways in which the styles and colours of what might be called a ‘Cultural Revolution aesthetics’ have been adapted for use in contemporary design such as commercial advertising, site branding and, as in this exhibition, the fine arts.

A brief survey of the visual contours of Chinese posters produced since 1949 reveals a range of aesthetic and ideological influences, including nineteenth century European painting, Stalinist socialist realism, and traditional Chinese styles of painting (guohua), woodblock print and folk art. One can see the simple, strong lines of the Soviet-style posters of the 1950s, the folk New Year (nianhua) images of prosperity and harmony (which peaked, with brutal irony, during the famine years following the Great Leap Forward), the aggressively direct appeal of the black and red images of Red Guard posters, and the pastoral idylls of the early 1970s. These posters literally frame politicised narratives of China’s recent history. The idea that these images were a transparently readable visual tool serving a totalitarian regime is not sufficient an explanation of their remit, which is necessarily complicated by the multiple aesthetic sensibilities and spectatorships they called up at the time, and have continued to evoke through the dizzying political and economic changes of recent decades.

An interest in posters was the starting point for this exhibition. Indeed, the ideas shaping this exhibition date back some time, to a moment when the notion of ‘red legacy’ had minimal momentum. Its first source of inspiration was the view that poster art, commonly dismissed by cultural practitioners and academicians as little more than simplistic ‘political propaganda’, could be a potentially rich field for opening up questions about historical narratives and cultural memory. The ‘official’ view of a poster’s image has been that it operates as an idealised reflection of its politicised slogan. There are, and were, however, other viewpoints – some of which wait to be articulated in scholarship and in popular discourse. These perspectives articulate the provenance and reception of posters, reminding us that the images and interpretations invoked different interest groups and publics participating in their production. Repeated conversations with members of the Red Guard...
generation yielded evidence of how these posters could function as a visual trigger for the memories of experiences and aspirations that had been excluded from the written record of the Cultural Revolution. Fieldwork in a disadvantaged area of central Beijing revealed how those dispossessed by market reform sometimes see them as nostalgic reminders of lost promises of prosperity. Even more may condemn them as the visual cues of a regime of terror responsible for unspeakable brutalities and traumas. Whatever the individual response, posters such as those displayed in this exhibition hold out ambiguous possibilities of interpretation that help explain their continuing power and appeal.

Treating the poster as an object of ethnographic enquiry enabled the shift from a theoretical conviction that the posters of the Mao era could offer ways to reframe history, to a line of enquiry that was substantiated by fieldwork. Interviews with painters of Mao era posters, and with contemporary artists who shared this commitment to interrogating history, suggested further avenues for exploring the interactions between Mao era aesthetics and contemporary cultural practice. This exhibition features the work of three of those artists. They work from strikingly different perspectives, and with different objectives, but their allusions to a ‘Cultural Revolution aesthetic’ in their art practice are further evidence of the complex, disturbing, and often humorous legacy bequeathed by Mao’s China.

At first glance, Xu Weixin’s work speaks to two well-known strands of a Cultural Revolution narrative: namely, monumentality and suffering. His portraits are vast, as many posters were. They address their spectators on a scale and with an impact that seem vaster still when contrasted with their tiny snapshot originals. The immediacy of size could be a metaphor for the brutality and violence – both orchestrated and chaotic – of the period, which is also apparent in the demeanour of many of Xu’s faces as well as in their short autobiographical descriptions. Another look at these portraits reveals a very different interpretation that rejects the familiar ‘verdict’ on the Cultural Revolution by opening it out. Xu’s portraits are of diverse individuals, women and men, young and old, cadres, workers, soldiers, students, those who celebrated events as they unfolded, as well as those who suffered because of them. His objective is a pedagogical one, to demonstrate how experiences and memories of a historical period do not, and cannot, fit a single narrative frame. Each portrait gives a sense of interiority to its subject, present in the look in the eye, the set of the jaw. These are people that have been loved and known. Indeed, in recent iterations of Chinese Historical Figures 1966–1976, close relatives of deceased subjects have hand-written the life stories onto the canvas. This intervention clearly signals a break from the narrative that maintains that the Cultural Revolution was an exceptional time. The present and the past are linked by real people and continuing memories.

Liu Dahong also seeks to explore different approaches to memory. He works through carefully selected themes which correspond with familiar practices of China’s past, and links them with temporal and visual rhythms that traduce the standard periodization of the official version of Mao’s China. Here, the human subject in Xu’s portraits is replaced by the characteristic textbooks, calendars, slogans, physical exercises, music and iconic poster images from that time. Situated alongside cultural motifs from a longer aesthetic and folk tradition, what appears as critique and parody is, in fact, a serious challenge to the dominant temporal and thematic frameworks through which the Cultural Revolution is still widely understood.

Li Gongming’s ‘New Poster Movement’ is more direct evidence of how the posters of the Mao era continue to exercise contemporary appeal. Inspired by the conviction that posters were, and continue to be, an extremely powerful mode of communication, Li has reworked a familiar style into new contexts, subjects and needs, along with slogans that address not the poor peasants and workers of the Mao era, but the small-scale farmers and rural under-classes affected by contemporary market reform. Just as the posters ideally sought to inspire their spectators to overcome the difficulties of the present in order to forge the utopia of the future, Li’s postcards from the edge of China’s economic revolution encourage ordinary people to use this medium to address the major social and political problems of their lives.

The posters selected for the exhibition are chosen for their variety of form and address, and to underline the visual vivacity and strength of the genre, as well as the ambiguities of their appeal. Max Gallo writes, ‘Posters channel our dreams, excite our desires. For a poster to be effective it must speak to us ... It must be a code that corresponds to one of our own.’ The codes in the posters here speak of revolutionary romanticism, rural lyricism, hyperbolic movements for change. They draw their content from the enthusiasms,

policy drives and sporadic calls to action that characterised the socio-political environment of the Mao years in general, and the Cultural Revolution period in particular. The selection includes references to historical events (Down with Soviet revisionists), the romantic celebration of peasant labour, the combination of filial duty and revolutionary learning (I accompany Granny on her way to night school), the canon of cultural works (White-haired Girl), and the glorification of model industrial zones (Aerial Drawing of Dazhai). In combination, these posters give a sense of the energies, confusions, clarities, and pressures of the time. Moreover, the mix of pragmatism, lyricism and energy belies the assumption that the Cultural Revolution era was wholly chaotic. The thematic attention to production suggests that aside from the violent expressions of political redemption and the shaming of counter-revolutionaries at home and abroad, at least some of the country was still focusing on everyday necessities.

This exhibition arises from research undertaken through an Australian Research Council Discovery project. The motivation for the research is to locate the past in the present and to re-evaluate the way in which memories are fashioned and preserved through aesthetic re-use. To that end, the researchers (Donald and Evans) have worked closely with the artists represented here, and also with older artists like Shen Jiawei whose professional lives were shaped by the politics of the 1960s. Shen now lives and works in Sydney; he may be best known in Australia for his portraiture, but his contribution to this exhibition evidences his status as a contemporary Chinese artist with roots in poster aesthetics at their most persuasive. His evocation of the heroics of the revolution, and the muscularity of those figures, is a strong reminder of the power of collective national pride even in the midst of frightening levels of change.

The exhibition also includes new video works documenting Xu’s practice, and one by Petersen and Donald which explores the pedagogic work that Liu undertakes with students in Shanghai using the banal, yet nonetheless poignant, categories of ‘friendship’ and ‘old friends’. The student series Old Friends helps Liu demonstrate the potential of history to provide a moral and emotional grounding for the present. This is the purpose of the exhibition: to show past and present in an animated, and sometimes furious, conversation that takes place through aesthetic and conceptual echoes and challenges. That conversation is the beginning of history-making in a nation which depends on the past for legitimacy, and yet denies the right to memory where it is acutely required.
There is a tendency endemic to the rhetoric of history to claim that the past has led inexorably to the present. Yet, if that past is too confronting, it is sidestepped as an aberration that is non-constitutive and irrelevant to the present. Forgetfulness thus is an ironic emotional reflex; it is a mechanism for avoiding the feelings that arise through the acknowledgment of past events and actions, but that impulse to avoid is itself a product of shame, an emotion that is both national and individual. There is the shame of the perpetrator, and that of the victim or the witness. Indeed, it is the fluctuating status between victim, witness and perpetrator that renders long-term memory problematic. At what point is one’s identity fixed as good or bad? This uncertainty leads to evasion, to the shifting of blame, and eventually to the creation of a shared myth of someone else’s culpability. Since the early 1980s, the official account of the Cultural Revolution has held that it was a ten-year period of unrestrained chaos (luan), with many victims and a few key perpetrators. The work of the artists in this exhibition questions that reading of the period. They use shame as a motivation not for forgetting but for articulating new formations of memory and memorialisation. Liu Dahong’s paintings do not eschew the confusions of the Cultural Revolution, but nonetheless question the extent of evasion, and refuse to describe the ten years of chaos as essentially, or only, traumatic. For Liu, these years represent the years of his childhood and they deserve to be remembered on their own terms.

Liu is making work that speaks to his encounter with shame as a motivator for action, but the national approach to the 1960s and 1970s is fundamentally opposed to the work he undertakes. While it can be persuasively argued that shame may motivate ethical acts, it can also underpin the shamelessness of amnesia, avoidance and violence on the part of the State as well as in individual psycho-pathologies. The Chinese Communist Party’s refusal to look afresh at the events of the Cultural Revolution is located in this conceptually elusive, yet nonetheless pervasive, affect. A curtain has been drawn over the identities of perpetrator and victim.

Liu Dahong’s work since 1991 is that of a working artist and teacher making sense, pedagogically and artistically, of his own past. His response to enforced national forgetfulness is to replay the images and sounds of the period as a vibrant landscape of childhood, then again as the return of confusion, and then once more as farce. In his video Radio Exercises (2008), Liu satirises the early morning exercise regimes broadcast by megaphone over the radio throughout his youth. The call to exercise is a call to participate: in continuing revolution, in the betterment of the revolutionary subject, and in the promotion of the ideal worker-body. There was no choice in the matter. Those who recognise their own pasts in the film are likely to laugh—and in viewings with a largely mainland Chinese audience of a certain age, laughter is the key response. Liu’s film is most compelling for those who suffered/enjoyed the exercise regimes. It may also create a frisson of nostalgia for those who are too young to remember the 1960s or even 1980s, but have themselves been compelled to exercise in the mornings at school, or as workers outside supermarkets and restaurants. Liu insists on remembering through directly addressing the body, bypassing the politically careful and socialised intellect. The film places the body-that-remembers in an emotional geopolitics of continuing revolution which is complicated by the inclusion of texts that quote key slogans and...
movements of the period; ‘Down with Monsters and Demons’, for instance, was the key phrase in the 1 June 1966 editorial of the People’s Daily which sparked the Red Guard onslaught on powerful cadres and intellectuals. Liu has said that he made the film in this form so it would be attractive to younger people, and also because it echoes the mode of the picture books, cartoons and big-character wall posters of the time. The piece is, however, less straightforward than a childish entertainment – it is, rather, a postmodern pastiche of Chineseness. The generation of animated ancient Xian tomb warriors, folk-religious was the key phrase in the 1 June 1966 wall posters of the time. The piece is, to younger people, and also because Cultural Revolution is also a refusal to allow an entire generation to remember its childhood in any detail, and to work openly from that memory as adults. A generation is thus stalled in its tracks, and this hiatus, in turn, prevents the emotional maturation of the nation and the generations that follow. This is evident in the nostalgia that is prevalent even amongst the urban young, who carry Cultural Revolution paraphernalia, and wear Red Guard bags and hats to look chic. In spite of the continuing official demand that the Cultural Revolution is written off as ‘ten years of chaos’ the zhiqing (sent-down youth) generations are cyclically and insistently nostalgic. Meanwhile, a swathe of cultural works in China and the diaspora during the 1980s and 1990s use the period as a backdrop for telling stories about growing up, discovering sexuality, feeling victimised, being betrayed. Whilst certainly not encouraged by the Chinese cultural bureaux, these kinds of works do not actively threaten the status quo; all generations will to a degree find their moment to claim emotional turmoil as their own particular experience (although the Tiananmen generation went too far – by spatialising it in the city and in the seat of power). We might even see the various movements of cultural memorialisation – the misty poets, the wound literature and films, the pop art – as a form of carnivalesque, working on the licensed periphery of official structures of attention. More importantly, these interventions introduce zhiqing nostalgia to a new group for whom early memories will be somatically and structurally significant, but who have fewer stories to tell of their own sufferings, given their relative youth at the time.

Liu Dahong belongs to this group. Born in 1962, he was admitted to the art school in Shandong at the age of 16 in an early post-Cultural Revolution intake. He acknowledges that a fixation on the period 1966–1976 informs his contributions to the memory-seeking art of the early 1990s, and now has a strong impact on both his art and his teaching. Fairytales of the Twelfth Month (1987/2007) (recently released as a print) is a jumble of image-text that refers to the city scrolls of the Sung dynasty, but without the order, and the sense of a city in harmony with its own activities, that the scroll mode allows. Fairytales is an emotional landscape of memories, an image-text which prioritises the flat ontology of childish ways and perspectives. The radish in the middle of the painting might be about playing with rabbits, or it may symbolise something someone has told him about the rural famine of the year before he was born. Maybe it is an image brought back when his own child, in a strange retreat of going down to the country, digs up radishes on Children’s Day (also held on 1 June, the day that unleashed the attacks on ‘Monsters and Demons’). There, too, in the top of the painting is Shanshan hongxing ‘Shining red star’ the eponymous hero of the 1974
The past and of going over and over familiar ground does not nullify Mao. It allows and extends Mao’s image–status into the twenty-first century. The script that both precedes and proceeds from the shame-pride-anger affect, and which characterises China’s view of itself in the world, is constantly re-embedded as farce. The story of the Old Man who Moved Mountains is one familiar to anyone even vaguely aware of the influence of Maoist-Marxist-Leninist thought in the 1960s. It is about, literally, changing the landscape of the times, and it relies on revolutionary emotional energy to carry through that project – once as history (in 1945–1949) and the second time as non-history (in 1966–69). That the story celebrates foolishness over wisdom, and relies for its triumph on the intervention of heavenly agents, reveals the perversity of the project. It is this condition to which artists like Liu are subject, and which their art contests.

The art of the Cultural Revolution, and reactions to it during the 1990s and more recently, have become a vast topic in contemporary Chinese art and cultural history and have generated a large literature. The following short text will review parts of the content and approach of one recent survey by two undoubted experts, the first of whom is a well-known collector, Wang Mingxian and Yan Shanxiang’s book on the Cultural Revolution, titled 1966–1976 and part of the series Illustrated History of the Art of New China (2000). ¹ is an important indicator as to how Cultural Revolution art is and is not discussed in China. The issues it raises may be representative of wider ones because it is part of a larger field of recent surveys, which include popular and generally accessible illustrated works, of Chinese modern and contemporary art. ²

The prelude of 1966–1976 is a brief description of the context for Cultural Revolution art using that cites texts contemporary with the events of 1966. There is no discussion or analysis of the political motivations for the Cultural Revolution itself, but the authors’ citation of Chen Boda’s 1966 article, published in the Party theoretical journal Hongqi, emphasises the importance of art and literature as the fields in which an understanding of the Cultural Revolution is to be worked out. (Chen was head of the Cultural Revolution Group and sentenced to prison after the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976.) When the Cultural Revolution began officially in the art world in June 1966 many masses and cadres wrote big-character newsletters fiercely denouncing Cai Ruohong (an art theorist formerly close to the Propaganda Department of the Party), Hua Junwu (Secretary of the National Artists’ Association), and Wang Zhaowen (art theorist and historian). The book includes further treatment of these textual attacks in Chapter Four’s analysis of critiques of ‘Black Art and Literature’.

The destructive impact of the Cultural Revolution is measured early on. Wang and Yan cite a 1958 survey for Beijing that gives a figure of 6843 cultural relics or ‘heritage’ sites in Beijing, of which 4922 were destroyed according to a second cultural relics survey in the 1980s. Although they do not give the percentage of the destruction, it is clearly acceptable for Wang and Yan to suggest the extent of the destruction from the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Their prelude ends with a Party Centre directive from May 1967 on the preservation of cultural relics and books, and thus an outside reader could infer that around 70% of the cultural stock of Beijing was destroyed in that eleven-month period.

Chapter One is devoted to a study of art activities by Red Guards. Two things need to be noted from the outset. Firstly, a lot of the material in Red Guard newspapers is simply unavailable to outsiders, and may not even be available in public library collections in China. The authors have collected these materials and impressively tabulated them. ³ Secondly, the period

³ Wang and Yan, 022–023. There is some discussion in English of Red Guard art publications in the standard survey by Julia F. Andrews, Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1979 (Berkeley,
is off limits to many other recently published art histories. The chronology in one such publication leaves out the year 1967 altogether. This is despite the large and massively attended art exhibitions held during that year. Wang and Yan see it as their task to explain Cultural Revolution art in terms of its own development and later readers will be indebted to their diligence in pursuing materials, even though in 2000, on the surface at least, they may not have been able to publish more serious questions and answers.

The catalogues for some of the exhibitions claim that 70% of the artists were workers, peasants and soldiers. The question needs to be asked by a later analyst: who were the 30% who were not workers, peasants and soldiers? It would appear from anecdotal comments by various artists I have interviewed independently that art students and the younger art teachers, many of whom were sent to the countryside earlier in 1964 in the Social Education campaign, were among this group. In other words, people talented in art who might otherwise have tried to get into art school and actual former art students were active in these exhibitions. The idea, much before widespread recognition in the National Fine Arts Exhibition (1962–1972). Thus the idea that military painters were any different in the period of training and level of technical skills to professional painters trained by the art schools becomes solely one of political interpretation.

Many scholars, I suspect, have touched the edges of the lives of those affected by the Cultural Revolution (but who were not directly involved), yet can only disclose what has been made known publically. For example, the full horror of the treatment of some of these leaders like Zhou Yang, himself already inculpated by his own anti-rightist accusations of Jiang Feng in 1957, beggars belief. However, in the case of the humiliations inflicted on Zhou (only one case amongst many), they can only await disclosure by the interviewers of their own records.

of leaders. The multiple variations of images of Mao are carefully collated and illustrated, and we are introduced somewhat elliptically to the work of two actual Red Guard artists: Shen Yaoyi from the Graphic Arts Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and Wang Weizheng, a Red Guard from the Central Academy of Crafts. Unfortunately, Wang and Yan do not appear to wish to exercise art historical interpretation here, and the notion of ‘allegory’ as it is understood in Western European art and literature could have been usefully invoked. Some Chinese readers have also wanted to invoke Chinese body language or the gestures of the Beijing Opera to explain the physical hand gestures of Mao Zedong. Whichever is the case, these works represent the far more critical visual inheritance of nineteenth century European nationalist painting through Soviet art. The allegory of power and hegemony over visual space is found elsewhere in images of a whole range of nationalist leaders, including Hitler and Stalin.

A more serious problem arises in this chapter, one that is found in other areas of Chinese modern art history: attribution of dates, sizes, media and the current ownership and location for paintings is missing. In particular, an illustration (ill.073) of a declaration by Mao Zedong in 1928 omits the details that all the artists are from the Peoples Liberation Army, that the painting is dated 1973, and that it was first published in Meishu Ziliao (Art Materials) in 1973. One can only deduce that this art publication was under the direct control of Jiang Qing in Shanghai, and that its publication was one part of a series of high-level political manoeuvres which are not declared in
this book. The understanding of these images as part of a highly motivated art discourse is further impeded by the absence of a date for another image of Mao Zedong on a bridge outside Tian’an Men (ill.080), thus assimilating the intentions of ill.073 and ill.080 (The latter image was painted by a group of former Central Academy of Fine Arts painters who had been specially invited back to Beijing in 1972). Clearly it is not possible to do proper art historical analysis about images imbricated in such a complex political nexus, even though images of Lin Biao and Jiang Qing are shown in a section at the end of this chapter, possibly for the first time since 1976.10

Wang and Yan produce one of the most interesting and, with regard to 1967, irreplaceable compilations of texts and images from the Cultural Revolution.

10 Further chapters treat the origins and reception of the painting by Liu Chunhua Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan, the critique of ‘Black Literature and Art’ of Liu Xiaoqi and others in the art world including publication of retrospective attacks on the directions of art struggles (i.e. conflicting policies) and on particular art works, on youth art including details of some then young artists like Liu Borong and Shen Jiawei. The issues of worker peasant and soldiers’ art as well as those of works produced by professional painters are given separate chapters, as are sculpture and architecture. Works from the national arts exhibitions between 1972 and 1975 are collectively illustrated.

However, their work suffers from a dearth of careful art historical analysis, and from the constraints on what can or cannot be said about political debates, leadership conflicts, and the interventions of politicians and politics in art. Despite giving an indication of the material loss of cultural capital, we do not learn much about the actual junior persons who, as Red Guards, led art struggles, or the actual experiences of those senior artists and art theorists who suffered in the Cultural Revolution.
'Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.'

Karl Marx

Yang Dechang’s prize-winning film Yi Yi (2000), which begins with a wedding and ends with a funeral, views the cycles of history through the patterns of family life. Early in the film NJ, the father, is about to step into a hotel elevator, when out steps the woman he was once going to marry but hasn’t seen for thirty years. Before their encounter can take its course, the elevator doors open once more to dislodge a mutual friend who interrupts them with his own surprise at seeing the couple together again (Figure 1).

A few meaningless words later, the woman goes her own way and the men are about to ride back up in the elevator when the father’s friend exclaims, ‘I’ve forgotten my first own love. Why do I remember yours?’ and then, realizing his distraction, asks himself, ‘ Eh, what did I come down for?’

This is one plot trigger in a film loaded with memories, forgetting, and efforts at retrieval. Another essential element of the plot is triggered early in the film when (at the very moment when NJ has forgotten what he was looking for) his daughter forgets his instructions to carry out the garbage, leaving the family’s aged matriarch to complete the task. The consequence is that she suffers a stroke, which leaves her comatose. Led one by one (yi yi) to talk to the recumbent grandmother, as if reporting to an ancestral image at the family altar, the family members soon realise how little they have to say about lives that have come to seem like empty routines in the sterilised environment of Taipei’s modern ‘economic miracle.’ Absent the grandmother’s unifying force, each begins to go their own way – one by one – the older generation in an effort to recover the lost or forgotten purpose of their lives, the younger generation, telling, down paths that mirror their parents’ past trajectories. NJ pursues the lost girlfriend and history repeats itself: at one point he says to her, ‘The first time I held your hand, we were at a railroad crossing, going to the movies. I reached for you, ashamed of my sweaty palm. Now I’m holding your hand again. Only it is a different place, a different time, a different age, but the same sweaty palm’ (Figure 2).

At this very moment his daughter, in a different place and of a different age, is holding hands for the first time with her ill-chosen boyfriend (Figure 3). Life parodies itself here, twice over, but perhaps to good effect. Travelling down memory lane, history rewinds for NJ, and he realises at last why this relationship didn’t work out in the first place.

Eventually, out of the multiple and often parallel narrative strands of people exploring and seeking to correct past mistakes, the complex generational fabric is woven back together again with a realization that mistakes and limitations are life’s own way, to be forgotten and relearned, repeated and relived, in each generation. NJ’s wife returns from her failed pursuit of nirvana in a mountain-top monastery to gain enlightenment – however small – at home: ‘I’ve come to realise things are not really so complicated. Why did they ever seem so?’ NJ responds, ‘While you were away, I had a chance to relive part of my youth. My first thought was that I could make things turn out differently. But they turned out the same, or not much different. I suddenly realised that...
Yi Yi is a conservative but refreshing critique of the shortcomings of the traditional Chinese view of the passage of time as steeped in idealised memory (huai gu, or nostalgia on steroids) and of the perception of history as ever in decline except when briefly and periodically refreshed by dynastic renewal. Traditionally, the best that can be said of the present is that it could be worse, as the future surely will be; the worst is that history, as Marx once wrote, goes from bad to ridiculous, transforming tragedy into farce. In Yi Yi, the entire range of one-by-one pursuits that only lead back to their point of departure seem, in the long run, like an elaborate if understated farce that highlights the simple truth of life’s predictable phases and uncontrollable patterns. History, despite its accumulation of accidents and incidents, holds to a fairly steady course.

In Taiwan, where a convoluted history has eased into a stable modernity, it is not hard to hold such a view. In the People’s Republic, what unites a history that ranges from the taboo subject of the manifest failures of Maoism (the tragedies of the anti-Rightist movement, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution) to the qualified success of post-socialism (success in capital formation, bitter disappointment in human rights) is the fact that, for most people, the past is whatever the government says it is. The biochemistry of forgetting is complicated and still in the early stages of research, but the politics of forgetting is simplified by the banning of alternative histories and the suppression of complaint. Celebration of the regime remains the order of the day, year after year. It is hard to improve on the parody of something that already parodies itself so well, but some official performances are especially hard to beat, like this People’s Liberation Army routine celebrating the 50th birthday of the People’s Republic (Figure 4), or the ‘reliably soporific Chinese New Year television gala’ (as the New York Times put it) in the 60th year of the People’s Republic, which featured ‘merry members of the Uighur minority belting out praise for Communist Party policies’ only months after the violent Uighur uprising in Xinjiang province.4

A dissident view of this history, from Mao to now, conforms to the Marxian tragedy-to-farce formulation, out of which has emerged the arch strategy of artistic parody that, given the government’s unsurpassed mastery of farce, one might call counter-farce. One of the chief rhetorical strategies of contemporary Chinese art has been to stage mis-remembrances of the past in order to hint at the forgotten history hidden behind official narratives and to extend a skeptical public re-reading into the realm of ‘settled’ truths. It is relatively easy to compile a list of contemporary artworks founded on such a strategy: the paintings and prints of Yu Youhan (Figures 5 and 6) and Li Shan, mocking the propagandist art of the Mao years; the photographs of Zhao Shaoruo and Wang G-insong; the studied deviousness of Jiang Wen’s films, whose narrator in In the Heat of the Sun (1994) argues that the Cultural Revolution was really a blast while repeatedly confessing to being an inveterate liar, demonstrating to the audience how gullible it is, and all the while linking today’s entrepreneurial

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leadership to the political elite of those days gone by.\textsuperscript{5}

While the economic success of the post-Mao era may be a more difficult target for the satirist than Maoist propaganda, nothing hits the mark more squarely than a digital photograph by Hong Hao (Figure 7), which aims not at the shortcomings of the era – the hundreds of millions left behind, dispossessed and preyed upon – but at the shortcomings of the success itself. Hong’s subject is manipulation itself, a parody of parodies. He appears in most of his ‘own’ photographs not as a militant Maoist, but as the consummate consumer, as elegantly mannered as a fine Bronzino portrait, whilst modelled more contemporaneously on trendy advertising that targets the connoisseur of de luxe products in the new New China. In Mr. Hong, Please Come In the artist advertises the good life with a gathering of exotic goods that speak to the inculcation of global desires: Ionic and Corinthian columns; Gothic, South Asian, and pseudo-Egyptian temple models; American cigar-store Indians and African sculptures; a canine status symbol whose posture carefully complements his master’s own.

Nothing is left out and everything is an imitation of the real thing in this well-organised culture-clutter. In a pose that is studiously off-centre, yet exquisitely supercilious and self-conscious, looking up from would-be absorption in his reading and his culture of collecting with a diffident, gently turned hand to cheek, Hong Hao primarily advertises himself - self-centeredness itself. Among the upper border, small Chinese characters tell us that ‘A gentle tone readily allows Mr. Hong to enter a peaceful reverie.’ The exaggerated ‘PLEASE’ in ‘Come in Mr. Hong,’ ‘Qing jinru,’ drips with an affectionation that parodies the entire thing in the scripts and fonts of Eastern and Western hemispheres. Such is the critique, the mockery of an age, that it turns the photograph’s shallowness into critical depth, while threatening, through its own studied cleverness, to draw the depth back into its own shallowness.

As it turns out, what has been appropriated here are not just gathered items but the entire photograph, which was taken intact from a commercial photograph by San Francisco photographer Christopher Irion (Figure 8). The American photographer was surprised to learn from me that this work, unrequested and unacknowledged, and with the digital insertion of a Chinese stranger, is selling for thousands of dollars on the international market. This sly critique on ownership and one-upmanship, on staging and authenticity, frames the artist’s judgment on China’s post-Socialist modernity: success for the few, and a culture not begged but mostly borrowed or stolen. Of course, one can hardly be shocked by this; nothing is more stable throughout the course of Chinese (or any other) history than the practice of artistic ‘borrowing,’ which, after all, constitutes a time-honoured form of cultural memory.\textsuperscript{5} For my comments elsewhere on Yu Youhan, Zhao Shaoxing, and Wang Qingsong, see Jerome Silbergeld, ‘China Seen by the Chinese: Documentary Photography, 1951-2003,’ in Silbergeld, Humanism in China: A Contemporary Record of Photography (New York: China Institute in America, 2009); on Li Shan, see Jerome Silbergeld, Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 35-39; for In the Heat of the Sun, see Silbergeld, Body in Question.
From a macro-observation, political propaganda posters do not belong to totalitarian regimes alone. Before the TV era, when a government urgently wanted its citizens to understand its policies visually, undoubtedly the best way was to use propaganda posters. An interesting example from 1914 in the UK, which was seen everywhere in the early days of WWI is a poster of a soldier pointing his finger at viewers: Britons. [image of soldier] wants YOU. Join your country’s army! This soldier was Lord Kitchener, the Defence Minister at that time. Three years later, James Montgomery Flagg, an American artist, borrowed this image to create his notorious Uncle Sam, who also pointed at the viewer, ordering: I want you for U.S. Army. Again, three years after that, Dmitry Moor, a Soviet Russian artist, made a similar version: a Red Army soldier wearing a Budyonny cap, pointing at viewers, and asking: ‘Did you register to be a volunteer?’

Around 1970, Mao sent all Chinese high-school students down to the country to become farmers. Of these millions of young people, one, Jing Xunhua (金训华), lost his life when he tried to save some collective property from the flooded Heilongjiang (Amure) River. A poster depicting this young hero was created by “Yi Zhong” (遇中), the pseudonym of two Shanghai artists Xu Chunzhong (徐纯中) and Chen Yifei (陈逸飞). If an older American viewer saw this picture, he would recall a very similar version: a WWII poster created by an unknown American artist in 1943. We have just begun to fight! Considering many American magazines from WWII could still be seen in Cultural Units and family homes in Shanghai in the 1960s, we can presume that there must be some influence between these two posters. In a very popular Soviet poster made in 1941, Nation-Mother is calling, the mother’s left hand appears exactly the same as the soldier’s left hand in the American poster. In this case, the American artist copied the Russian artist.

The three decades from 1949 to 1979 were the golden age of political propaganda posters in China. When the CCP, under Mao’s leadership, gained power in China in 1949, they announced their foreign policy as yi-mian-dao (一边倒) ‘depending on one side only (the Soviet side)’, thus Chinese propaganda posters also followed the poster styles of the USSR.

Increasingly, however, Chinese propaganda posters presented their own distinct features. There were three different types of commercial poster existing in China before 1949. Aside from the Western style poster, there were two sorts nian-hua (年画), New Year pictorial prints, which were popular with ordinary people. As a way to celebrate New Year, it is a tradition that people, however poor they are, always bought one or more pieces of nian-hua back home to replace the previous nian-hua on the wall. One old and purely Chinese style of nian-hua was the colourful woodcut print, mostly with ancient stories and Peking Opera figures as the subject matter. Another new and colonial style of nian-hua, also called yue-fen-pai (月份牌), which means calendar pictures was created by a group of Shanghai based artists and developed in the early twentieth century. They used watercolor and charcoal, and mixed Western and folk techniques to create a kitsch style with the motif of a beautiful fashionable woman. The CCP’s new regime successfully transformed these two sorts of nian-hua into special kinds of posters that serviced political propaganda. Two senior masters of yue-fen-pai nian-hua, Li Mubai (李慕白) and Jin Xuechen (金雪尘), continued to work for the new government for decades, but of course,
The Speech on the Arts Forum in Yan-an (1942). Its simplified principle was: Arts in the service of proletarian politics; arts in the service of workers, farmers and soldiers. There were no freelance artists existing in Mao’s China; everyone belonged to a ‘Unit’. Artists worked for the Party-state alone and were paid wages by the government. Any art work that was thought not to identify with the Party’s policy would not be allowed to be published or exhibited, and the author would be in trouble with the authorities. Political propaganda posters were always closely examined by the Party’s Propaganda Departments.

Chinese poster artists working in these three decades can be roughly thought of as belonging to three separate generations. The first generation had established their names and own styles before 1949 and were educated in, or influenced by, Europe, United States or Japan. The styles of the second generation, who rose to prominence in the 1950s and 1960s, were mostly influenced by Soviet art. The third generation were former ‘Red Guards’, also called zhi-qing (知青, educated youth or ex-students who were working in farms or factories during the Cultural Revolution. They missed the opportunity to receive formal art training, and were self-taught because universities in China were closed from 1966 to 1975.

On 1 October 1949, the master of the first generation of these artists, Jiang Zhao-he (蒋兆和), made a watercolor painting. The Chinese people have stood up forever from now. (中国人民从此站起来了). This work could be considered the first propaganda poster in Mao’s new China. In comparison with his earlier work Liu-min Tu (流民图), War Refugees (1940), one believes that he genuinely welcomed the ‘liberation’. His work was not only made on the Party’s order, but also to express the artist’s own pride and happiness.

Ha Qiong-wen (哈琼文) was a celebrated poster master of the second generation of artists. Even today his posters hold a place in contemporary memory.

Li Bin (李斌) was a 17-year-old high school student in 1966 when he became a ‘Red Guard’. He made a woodcut print, Zao-fan-you-li (造反有理) Rebellion is reasonable, which was published on the back cover of Ren-min Hua-bao (人民画报), People’s Pictorial Magazine, a Chinese version of Life magazine that had a circulation of one million. This picture could be seen even in London’s Hyde Park that year.

During the ‘Cultural Revolution’, some oil paintings, which were not originally designed to be posters, were published in the millions once picked up by Madame Mao (江青). Examples of these include Chairman Mao going to An-yuan (1968) by Liu Chun-hua (刘春华), and Standing guard for our great motherland (1974) by Shen Jiawei (沈嘉蔚).

This shows the great difference between the totalitarian society and the democratic society. In Mao’s China, politics controlled all types of art. Any and every painting was a part of Party propaganda. If printed in poster size, it was just a standard political poster. In other countries, propaganda posters could be seen only in public places, but in Mao’s China, with the aid of the nian-hua tradition, propaganda posters went into every family home, and were renewed automatically every year without the government paying for it. Millions of copies of even the lower-priced posters were sold, bringing big profits to the government-run publishing houses. Authors of the posters received a low royalty (1949 to 1965), or nothing at all (1966 to 1977). This kind of ‘Pan-posterism’ was not seen in Stalin’s Russia or Hitler’s Germany, only in Mao’s China during the years of the ‘Cultural Revolution’.

During these years, Chinese people lived their whole day with political slogans: listening to slogans, reciting slogans, looking at slogans. It was a mad time. When a thing reaches its extreme, it reverses its course. Extremeness led to extinction of the Chinese propaganda poster art.

Since 1979, China has entered the post-Mao era. The market economy replaced the planned economy step by step. Freelance artists appeared everywhere. The age of TV arrived. The 1980s were the last days of the political propaganda posters, and in the new century they finally disappeared, to be replaced by the commercial advertisements that blot out the sky and cover up the earth in today’s China.
When I returned to Shanghai from a visit to Qingdao in Shandong over the Chinese New Year, I realised how I could use my trip to the mountains as a footnote for this year’s China & Revolution exhibition in Australia.

My hometown has a famous Daoist mountain called Laoshan which I visit a few times whenever I return to Qingdao. This year I was not going to go since it had had the biggest snowfall in seven years, but when I heard that a new site called Mt Mao had been added, I gladly set off for it.

The car went as far as Xifu, and then it was an easy walk up the mountain on the cement path. I followed a neat set of stairs called the Revolution Road, beside which was a series of Good Deeds, Mao Zedong propaganda posters that could compare well with my Red Calendar in 24 Seasons. I remembered the god making movement that I saw on a trip from Changsha, in Hunan province to Mao’s hometown in Shaoshan a few years ago. I didn’t expect that this red storm would blow so quickly to the shores of the East Sea, and instead of seeing the blue-black heads of Daoist monks, all I could see were red flags sprouting from the hills. In the distance there was a rock which really does look slightly like Mao wearing a Sun Yat Sen uniform and, at 8.3 meters high, matches Mao’s age (83) when he died, making it the only
totally natural statue of Mao standing in the country. An advertisement for it has been already been erected at the airport so it obviously has a great deal of development value. At the bottom of the mountain, a great number of Rustic Happiness restaurants have been built in anticipation of the hordes of visitors coming from all directions. Mao’s grandson, Mao Xinyu, has already jumped on the bandwagon; you can see his portly figure at the groundbreaking ceremony in one of the posters on Revolution Road.

I climbed the mountain on the third day of the New Year, which is when married daughters traditionally visit their mother’s home, and hence there was a continuous stream of people, old and young, coming to worship Mao. There are so many money-obsessed people nowadays; China has a god of wealth and culture called Zhuogong and a god of wealth and war called Guangong both of whom you can worship everywhere. Now there is a Mao god of wealth who combines culture and war since he has the fearful ability to exorcise evil spirits (according to my taxi driver). The power of the latest god is impossible to resist, so this year I also bought a so-called No.1 Seal of China, a replica of Mao’s jade seal, to put in the corner of my house to keep the house safe, since this year is my zodiac year and I badly need to fight the devil with another devil.

In fact, the religion of Mao has always prevailed. Since the time when he talked about the east wind overwhelming the west wind, his bullwhip has waved over the mainland for 60 years, a full circle of the Chinese calendar, and this is what impelled me to make Red Calendar in 24 Seasons. Mao changed almost everything, from the Chinese Lunar Calendar, the Yellow Calendar – which is about harmony between humans and nature – to the Red Calendar, which is about people combating heaven, earth and other people. Without any exaggeration, my Red Calendar in 24 Seasons can be seen as a history filled with the tears and blood of the republic. In those red years, no matter whether you were the chairman of the country or an ordinary person, you could only survive by unconditionally believing in Mao.

At least three generations of people were manipulated by Mao, and this is the central theme of Four Seasons. The four seasons of Mao’s life dictated the fate of a billion people, including me (I was born in 1962). Fairytales of the Twelfth Month was based on the impressions of my childhood. At that time Mao was the sun, waving to us every day, just as in Autumn of my Four Seasons. After his death in 1976, the religion of Mao was questioned, and a large number of new thoughts gushed out. The unprecedented social crisis caused the birth of another painting of mine, The Awakening of Insects. The Cultural Revolution was Mao’s magnum opus, the eruption of Mt Mao. Its after effects are the source of the disease of contemporary Chinese society and billions of people still live in the volcanic ash. This is why so many of my paintings cannot be without him; this is a psychosis. Mao was not fair and for this reason we should dig into Mt Mao and not stop.

Let’s carry forward the spirit of Mao’s story Yugong yishan, digging and digging, generation after generation.
In 1966, I was class representative for the second grade. Shortly after the Cultural Revolution started, the school held a motivation meeting in the sports field for all students and staff. I stood on the little dirt platform that was usually used for directing the exercises, and read a speech drafted by the leaders of the school to the whole school. I cannot remember the details of the content, but I do remember the slogans that I yelled at the end of the speech: Long live the Cultural Revolution! Long live Chairman Mao!

Next, we joined the Little Red Guards so that we could imitate big brother Red Guards in criticising and denouncing landlords, searching people’s homes, and confiscating their possessions. Our homeroom teacher’s name was Liu Bing and she was a kind person with glasses. Nobody knew who spread the news that she was the daughter of a landlord. After finding this out our hearts filled with anger. It was unbearable that we, the descendants of the revolution, should be educated by a descendant of the class enemy. In that era we were all brainwashed into believing that landlords, as members of the exploiting classes, were the personal enemy of the people, the lowest social rank.

So we students discussed how we could make her suffer. At that time I was already interested in painting and had decided to be a painter when I grew up. I heroically volunteered to paint a portrait of the homeroom teacher in the current fashion of caricaturing people in authority. In the painting, there was a green-faced and long-toothed woman with the name of the homeroom teacher.

That night we stuck the portrait on the blackboard. Early the next morning, teacher Liu walked into the classroom and immediately saw the cartoon. Her face became pale, but she didn’t say anything and continued to teach in front of the blackboard and her portrait. We were very proud of ourselves and in high spirits, since we felt that the daughter of the class enemy had been punished, as she deserved.

Only after I grew up did I gradually understand the depression that the teacher must have felt having to face the students who had changed into her enemy over night. I began to understand why so many people committed suicide.

Now, when I am talking about this event and when I am in the process of working on the project of Chinese’s Historical Figures 1966-1976, only then can my feeling of guilt for having destroyed the dignity of other people be reduced.

During the Cultural Revolution, as ordinary people, were we not part of the cruelty, or accomplices to it? Shouldn’t we resolve to repent and examine ourselves and our actions?

After many years, I am giving myself another chance to repent by painting portraits that scrutinise the Cultural Revolution. What is the meaning of this in relation to the first portrait that caricatured my teacher back then?

This is also the question that people often ask me: why do you paint about the Cultural Revolution? What meaning and purpose does it have?

My answer is this: it is to redeem my innermost self, and this is the most significant part of this project; everything else is secondary.
Initially planned in 2002, the New Propaganda Poster Creation Movement gradually became a reality. After some years of development, it still continues to develop in China.

From 1949, propaganda poster art in China played an important role in the area of ideological education, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when it became the medium through which the whole society was symbolised pictorially. In the 1980s, propaganda poster art gradually became neglected, and even forgotten.

In 2002, I proposed the concept of a New Propaganda Poster which would be principally defined by the following ideas: 1) It 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; 2) The works will be produced by new means, taking advantage of new technologies to differentiate them from the hand-painted posters of the past. 3) The printed posters will be distributed only in small numbers; the message will be conveyed largely through publication in the media and exhibition in galleries. This will differentiate the new propaganda poster from the huge street posters that were printed and displayed in large numbers in order to serve their purpose as propaganda.

The most important new element is the guidance of libertarian values, drawing experience from the critical nature and creative methods of the Left Wing art movement to expose and criticise the widespread repression and inequality of contemporary Chinese society, and to call for social justice and equity.

In terms of artistic methods, I suggested that artists learn from the more reasonable aspects of the artistic methods of the Cultural Revolution, such as putting the subject first and penetrating life. The method of expression and artistic language should be simple, clear and easy to understand, and able to arouse ordinary people. These can all be inspired by the Cultural Revolution posters. In addition, we always invite sociologists, artists, workers, farmers, businessmen, civil servants, entrepreneurs and office workers to participate in the selection of the best works and to attend conferences. We emphasise participation from people in all walks of life.

For years, the New Propaganda Poster Movement has attracted many participants. It has also dealt with larger social issues. Subjects have ranged from social justice and equity to public welfare, and participants are not only artists and art students, but all people who wish to take part in creating images.

I will briefly review the history of the development of the New Propaganda Poster Movement in China below.

I initially proposed the idea of holding a New Propaganda Poster Exhibition at a meeting in the Guangdong Art Gallery in February 2002. I later proposed the idea at a conference at the Chinese Art University (Hangzhou), and again at a presentation at the Painting Department at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. The latter proposal made a big impact on the students.

In June 2004, after discussion with the Guangdong Art Gallery, we decided to hold a New Poster Exhibition: Calling for Social Justice and Equity. Many media outlets participated as well. We sent out a notice for submissions through different channels in order to collect works from all over the country.

On the 29 June 2004, the Southern Metropolis Daily (Guangzhou) published a whole page on New Propaganda Poster activity including an interview with me called New Values: Promoting the Progress of Society, as well as an interview...
with Hu Bing, a young teacher from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts and an assistant in this project, titled New Experiences: Expressing the Soul of the Times. On 19 September, I held a presentation at Guangdong Art Gallery called Contemporary Art and Social Responsibility. On 25 September, at one of the internet cafés in Guangzhou, an event called Creating New Posters with On Site Computers was held to guide students to produce posters using web resources. Students from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Huanan Normal University, Guangzhou University and Huanan Agriculture University participated in the event.

Since September 2004, news reports and some New Propaganda Poster works have been published on the websites Tianya (Hiakou, Hainan), Open-up Time (Guangzhou) etc. On 28 October 2004, the exhibition committee rated works collected from all over the country. Many of the works were about social issues, for example: workers’ rights, problems in the countryside, children unable to attend school, the credibility of the government and equity in the judiciary. Many works were made with computer technology, and the styles demonstrated great variety. The committee in the end chose more than 60 works for the exhibition.

The exhibition New Propaganda Posters Exhibition: Calling for Social Justice and Equity was scheduled to open between 25 November and 28 December 2004 at Guangdong Art Gallery. This exhibition was forcibly cancelled due to pressure from the government. A conference scheduled on 27 November to coincide with the exhibition was also cancelled.

However, on 30 November 2004, Southern Metropolis Daily published an article called New Posters: Reality Confronting Idealism, which outlined details of the event and opinions from planners, committee members and participants. An interview with me called Intellectuals Should Hold the Responsibility of Social Criticism was published as well. In the interview, I talked about how cultural development needs to be critiqued by intellectuals and that contemporary arts need to re-establish flesh and blood connections with people.

In December 2004, Art League Net (Beijing) and Art League Net Forum at Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts published articles discussing New Propaganda Posters. On 3 March 2005, the presentation that I gave at Guangzhou Zhongshan University on Contemporary Art and Caring for Social Problems introduced the work and activities of the New Propaganda Poster Movement. This presentation was broadcast on Hong Kong Phoenix TV on 26 March.

From 21 May to 3 June 2005, the Exhibition of New Propaganda Posters Concerning Disadvantaged Groups was held at the stadium of Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. On 14 November, a group of students from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts held an exhibition in the countryside, titled The Game Beside the Field, which produced a more direct connection between the New Propaganda Poster art and disadvantaged groups and farmers. The exhibition questioned the rationality of present art activities and the distribution and usage of social public resources. Some of the New Posters were put on the walls in the village and attracted a great number of villagers. On 14 December, I gave a speech at China Art Academy in Hangzhou called Public Art and the Social Justice Movement.

Before the Chinese traditional Spring Festival in 2007, I started work on New Posters – New Year Cards for Public Welfare which organised artists to create New Year cards in order to help working parents defend their rights and to obtain back payments, and to raise social concern about disadvantaged groups. Artists created six sets of New Year cards. We printed 10,000 copies and distributed them for free to public interest groups and people at the bottom of the social ladder. On 4 February 2007, the Southern Metropolis Daily reported this activity under the title of A Trial of Art Intervening in Society and published our announcement that we were distributing the cards for free, which aroused a big response in the public.

Next, before Spring Festival 2007, I planned an event which involved going to Yangxi County Guangdong to make New Propaganda Posters. This event was jointly held with the Liao Bingxiong Foundation. On 9 and 10 February, we created and painted the works Farmers Studying the Constitution, Establishing Farmers Associations, Solving the Land Problems of the Chinese Countryside and these artworks were welcomed by local farmers. On 17 January 2007, The Southern Daily (Guangzhou) reported this event under the name of Member of the Committee of CPPCC Leading Team to Paint New Murals in the Countryside – Professor Li Gongming from Academy of Fine Arts went to Yangxi to Paint the New Countryside.

In October 2007, I gave a talk on the New Propaganda Poster Movement at a conference called Contemporary Chinese Propaganda Posters held at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, University of Westminster (London). In July 2009, I attended the biennial conference of the CSAA at the University of Sydney and introduced the latest development of the New Propaganda Poster Movement.
In September 2009, I started planning *New Propaganda Poster Collection: The Unspoken Pain and Hope of the Chinese People*, 2009. The works will be exhibited at Sydney University’s gallery in August 2010. This project focuses on major social events that have occurred in China this year, including defending consumers’ rights, opposing the violent removal of private houses, opposing land pollution, improving treatment for occupational diseases, respecting the right to free speech on the internet, fighting for democracy, and resisting the abuse of public power; such events reflect the problems that are most frequently highlighted as issues in contemporary China. We can say that this event was different from the past activities of the New Propaganda Poster Movement because it focused on specific events exposing central issues of China.

From this historical review of the development of the New Propaganda Poster Movement, I believe a few points are worthy of study and reflection by western scholars who research Chinese arts and society. First: the basic stand of the New Propaganda Poster Movement undoubtedly belongs to liberalism and not the neo-Left-Wing as some people have incorrectly claimed. However, the new posters have drawn resources from the art styles that have historically been associated with socialist art. Second: The New Propaganda Poster Movement has been largely independent from, and marginal to, the current environment of Chinese ideology, public opinion and freedom of art creation. However, in recent years the government has been using identical slogans, such as social justice, fairness, and liberal opinions, in the official media. Except for the cancellation of the 2004 exhibition this has protected the movement from direct government interference.

Third, looking from the point of view of the development of Chinese contemporary arts, the New Propaganda Poster Movement is a very unique case. In terms of target and taste, it doesn’t belong to mainstream contemporary arts and it doesn’t have anything to do with the art market. It is the most intense and radical experiment in Chinese contemporary arts. We have the right to say that the New Poster Movement is the outcome of the reality of Chinese society, and at the same time, it is also the outstanding symbol of the turning of Chinese contemporary arts toward sociology.

I believe the development of the New Propaganda Poster Movement in China will combine with the development of a civil society, and will continue to drive China towards a democratic constitutional society.

Guangzhou, 19th March 2010