

**From Revolution to Commie Kitsch: (Re)-presenting
China in Contemporary British Museums through the
Visual Culture of the Cultural Revolution**

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Abstract

To date, the study of communist visual culture in the museum environment has been limited. While interest in revolutionary art continues to develop thanks to its twenty-first century appropriation and 'kitschification' in Western contexts, communist art remains problematic. Taking Saidian discourse as a theoretical starting point, this thesis explores the collection, interpretation and display of the visual culture of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in contemporary British museums. It explores the image of China in the popular consciousness and looks for intersections between the contemporary political Sino-British relationship and interpretive approaches to this material. The historiographical survey analyses contemporary primary sources to reveal images of the Cultural Revolution during three periods which correspond with mind shifts in the British response to China. Interviews with key members of curatorial staff situate the thesis in contemporary practice.

The thesis is divided into three sections. The first, the 'pre-historical' context to the main body of the thesis establishes a methodological approach, theoretical grounding and surveys the Sino-British relationship from the Enlightenment to the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Section 2 looks at the contemporary British response to the Cultural Revolution and how these visions of China were translated into exhibitionary practice. Section 3 explores the collections and practice of three case studies. It examines the different and diverse reasons for the establishment of these collections and how they have interpreted (as art, artefact or document). The thesis concludes with the argument that museums and collecting institutions have a key role to play in the difficult debate which envelopes the West's historical response to communism and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution, in the light of challenges to the grand narrative.

For my Grandma,
Stella Louise Pugh née Nield
1917-2007

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Section 1

East-West Encounters

Chapter 1: Introduction

The collection, interpretation and display of art from the People's Republic of China (PRC), and particularly that pertaining to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), are potentially problematic for museums. These objects challenge our perception of 'Chineseness' and represent a rupture in the smooth linearity of artistic development favoured by Western art history. Their style and content and the means of their production challenge accepted notions of how we perceive art. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Soviet Union have tempered our vision of communism. No longer perceived as the most sinister threat to Western democratic values, recent years have witnessed a growing appropriation and commodification of communist visual iconography. In particular, as a result of the emergence of China as an economic super-power and the willingness of its leaders to enter global politics, China's particular brand of communism has lost its potency. No longer taboo, the art of the PRC is ripe for reassessment. This thesis links art history, museology and visual culture studies to examine how museums have, through collection, interpretation and display, attempted to reveal, discuss and, perhaps, resolve some of these issues.

Museums serve as image-makers for the nation; a palimpsest upon which official social, political and cultural identities of Self and Other are constructed. Museums were borne from the modernist *episteme*, a context of knowledge – defined by Foucault – by which the world was organised according to outwardly invisible characteristics and functionality, thus legitimising the nascent human sciences and racial hierarchies through the absolutism of its scientific discourse and in turn justifying the colonialist project (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 17-18). The nascence and development of museums in the nineteenth century were imbued with modernism. In the British context,

the principal national museums – the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum – served as repositories for the heritage of the nation and its colonial possessions. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude that museums (and their collections), by virtue of their position as official bearers and disseminators of knowledge, have been and are complicit in the creation of images of China and communism. Objects within the museum have agency in the development of images of China, and, in particular, this thesis considers how the possession and display of overtly political material creates or challenges extant images of China in the West. The historical, political and cultural interplay between Britain and China has impacted upon the collection, interpretation and display of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution in contemporary British museums and thus upon the wider image of China (and communism) in the popular consciousness. Its continuing power as a tool of propaganda has the potential to subvert official histories of the PRC and to challenge received images of China and the Chinese in the West.

The Cultural Revolution has been chosen as the focus of this thesis because it represents the height of the Chinese state's control of culture. While the years 1949 – 1965 can be broadly characterised by alternating periods of control and liberalisation in the Chinese art world, the art of the decade 1966-1976, was almost universally and explicitly political: aesthetic considerations were entirely subjugated to the message. The primary aims of this project are, therefore, to i) determine the extent to which material from the Cultural Revolution is collected, why and by which institutions; ii) examine how it is interpreted, contextualised and displayed in contemporary British museums; iii) consider how a cross-section of museums have attempted to resolve the issues outlined above through interpretation and display; and iv) compare these

exhibitions with popular images of China to reveal the extent to which they are reflected or challenged in contemporary British museums.

In addition, this project touches upon a series of related issues associated with collection and display: how museums deal with difficult and controversial subjects; the role they play in mediating between the object and the audience; the role of the Other in the creation of Self and national identities; the nature, role and function of art in society; the museum as image-maker; the impact of communism (and Maoism) on the cultural history of the twentieth-century; and the appropriation of communist visual iconography. It should be reiterated that this thesis is not a sinological study; it is largely a study of Britain. China (imagined and real) is used as a Saidian device by which to examine British attitudes towards and images of the 'Other' on display. China is the subject, but Britain is the *object* of my research.

The genre of visual culture upon which this thesis focuses is imbued with the chaos and terror of the Cultural Revolution. In the West most of us are incogniscent of life under a totalitarian regime. But, to those that experienced the Cultural Revolution first hand, these objects - superficially benign - reek of that decade. As such I have an additional, more esoteric aim: that the research which comprises this thesis may go some small way towards facilitating inter-cultural dialogue about the human experience of the Cultural Revolution.

In the last decade there has been an explosion in published analyses of Chinese revolutionary art. Ellen Johnston Laing's *Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (1988) may be largely responsible for the growth in Western academic interest in this genre. Although not the first monograph to assess art of this period (see Li 1979;

Chang 1980; Lebold Cohen 1987), Laing was the first writer to, in her words, expressly seek to redress the ‘poor reception’ (Laing 1998, ix) of the art of the PRC in the West which up until that point had been routinely dismissed by writers as ‘pure propaganda or routine socialist realism’ (Laing 1998, ix). Julia F. Andrews’ *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China: 1949-1979* (1994) offered the first in-depth evaluation of the impact of politics upon the working lives of individual artists and arts administrators. In her words she examines ‘the problem of how artists coped with arbitrarily shifting political requirements’ (Andrews 1994, 2). Andrew’s work was further developed by Maria Galikowski (1998) to include a discussion of art during the early years of Deng Xiaoping’s leadership in *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984*. Melissa Schrift, in *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge* (2001), examines the Mao cult through a cultural analysis of Mao badges in both Western and Chinese contexts. Very little museological analysis of the particular issues associated with the display of communist visual culture has been published to date (and nothing specifically focused upon Chinese material), with the notable exception of Ken Teague’s 2004 paper, which recounts his experiences collecting for and curating exhibitions of communist material on behalf of the Horniman Museum, London. The original contribution to scholarship offered by this thesis - a synthetic and contextual analysis of the visual culture of the Chinese Cultural Revolution – is the placement of exhibition and museum practice (as situated knowledge), within the context of popular thinking about an Other.

This thesis is organised into three sections, and each of these is sub-divided into chapters. Section 2 (the content of each individual chapter will be delineated in closer detail in the introduction to each section) examines the period 1966-1976, the decade of the Cultural Revolution, and its impact upon the Chinese visual culture and contemporaneous images of China as perceived in Britain. Section 3 considers the

collection, interpretation and display of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution in Britain during the post-Mao era. But, to begin, this thesis commences with a series of short sub-sections which situate my research within the wider museological context: i) the overarching epistemological approach; ii) theoretical perspectives underpinning my research; iii) an explanation and exploration of terminology used throughout this thesis and its principal themes; and iv) my methodological approach. The final chapter of this introductory section offers an overview of the historical Sino-British relationship, the birth and consolidation of perceptual images of China and the reception of Chinese visual culture in Britain up to the commencement of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

A note on the format and the structure of this thesis: My objective has been to attempt to write a history of thought with a focus on representations of China in museums through collecting and interpretation. It is based on the premise that exhibition is implicitly or intentionally a manifestation of the wider socio-political and cultural context and that museum representation keys into a wider culture of image-making, therefore it is essential to examine these phenomena in close detail. I have chosen to integrate the primary data produced by exhibition analyses, interviews with key individuals, textual sources and archival resources, with a view to producing a ‘proto-book’ in manuscript. Thus, the thesis is not written in discrete sections (literature review, case studies and discussion), because this would not – in my opinion – suit the subject, nor the objective of the project. From the outset, I was aware that visual material pertaining to the Chinese Cultural Revolution is rare in British museums (for reasons elucidated later in this thesis). But, nevertheless, I have been interested to understand this absence: a goal that required a particular approach, an historical specificity, and a richly integrated narrative of change and comparison making use of a

diverse range of sources. Much of the textual material I have consulted has been used as a primary source, which has permitted me to gain insight into individual thought. The overall narrative is richly contextual, developed from contemporary accounts, subsequent analysis and academic research.

As the remainder of this introductory section shall outline, the key assumptions of social constructionism inform the body of research within which this thesis is located and as such provide its overarching epistemological framework. Crotty (1998, 58) defines social constructionism as ‘the collective generation [and] transmission of meaning’, which ‘emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things...and gives us a quite definite view of the world’. Sometimes controversial (see Hacking 1999 for a brief introduction to the so-called ‘culture wars’ of the 1990s), social constructionism contends that knowledge is contingent upon history and culture and developed through social interaction. The social constructionist approach takes a critical stance towards accepted knowledge. It challenges the notion that observation brings forth objective meaning and questions our perception of reality. It asserts that knowledge has historical and cultural specificity. It openly challenges the *positivist* approach which interprets meaning as something inherently objective (see Burr 2003 for a detailed definition of social constructionism). At its most extreme, social constructionism argues that there are no objective facts. Nothing is fixed. Only subjective ideas render the world about us *knowable*.

Specifically, this thesis contends that meaning is constructed, and closely linked, to hegemonic interests: in this respect it is rooted in Foucauldian and Saidian discourse. In his study of the historical construction of images of China in Western literature,

Mackerras (1999, 3) argues that ‘...the two theories [of Said and Foucault] are related to each other, because Said’s notion that the West ‘colonized’ knowledge about Asia means that the West devised the construct of ‘the Orient’ as part of the process of enhancing the power of the West over Asian peoples’. Since its publication in 1976, *Orientalism* has been a major influence on not only the study of the West’s historical relationship with the cultures of the East, but has also revealed the systematic construction of ideas - a ‘reservoir of accredited knowledge’ (Said 1995, 39), the colonial ‘archive’ (see Hevia 1998) - of Otherness, which in turn provide an insight into the West’s self-image. The colonial project ‘ordered’ the Orient, rendering it knowable and understandable (of which museological interpretations were outcomes). The Orient has not been represented as it is (was), but as it should be in Western minds. Empirical data counts for little; the ‘Orientalist vision’ has a life of its own, it is ‘Europe’s collective day-dream’ (Kiernan, cited by Said 1995, 52), in the ‘common possession of all who have thought about the Orient in the West’ (Said 1995, 69).

Orientalism focuses upon representations of the colonialisised Middle East in European literature. While cognisant of some differences, not least with regards to the means by which the West first experienced China through objects, rather than manuscripts and texts (see Said 1995, 52), Saidian discourse may, nevertheless, be successfully applied to the analysis of Western imaginings of China. As Chow (1993, 8) has noted, the criticism that images of China cannot be understood within the paradigm of Orientalism because it was never a full colonial possession can be dismissed. China had, what King et al (1999, 21) have described, an ‘extra-colonial’ relationship with Britain from the mid-nineteenth century, following the ceding of Hong Kong and trade concessions ‘won’ by the British in Opium War reparations. Until the return of Hong

Kong in 1997, ideas about China were subject to an ‘imperialist “shadow effect”’ (King et al, 1999, 10). While Said (1995, 66) identifies the ordered, disciplined, didactic qualities of Orientalism manifest in literature, one can argue that similar forces are evidenced in museum exhibitions of Chinese material. Saidian discourse is not without its critics (see MacKenzie, 1995; Pennycook 1998) and commentators (see Chow 1993; Tong 2000), but it remains a potent analytical tool.

In *Orientalism*, Said focuses upon negative images: manifestations of the imagined Orient which delineate ‘us’ from ‘them’. Alternative values and social mores are projected onto the Other creating a negative mirror image that defines Occidental society by casting light upon what it is not. Where the West is in ascendancy, the Other is in decline. Where European morality and justice are upstanding, debauchery and brutality hold sway in the Other. Where the West strives for greater perfection, the Other stagnates in decadence. Yet, in this respect there is a disjuncture between Saidian discourse and its application to the particular and specific example of China. But, while Saidian discourse offers a window onto an analysis of the representation of the ‘oriental’ Other, it is not the driving theoretical force behind this thesis. Hung (2003) provides an alternative, more nuanced sociological exploration of the same phenomenon with particular reference to China. He reveals that during the course of the Sino-Western historical relationship shifts in Western attitude have been as much *sinophiliac* as sinophobic. Hung’s contention is that images of China are closely influenced by long-term changes within the wider intellectual field. He argues that ‘Successive shifts of balance of forces between rival intellectual networks constituted a cyclical movement between admiration and contempt of China, and between *universalism*...and *particularism* [my italics]’ (Hung 2003, 274). Hung’s position broadly corresponds with

my understanding of the post-Enlightenment relationship between Britain and China as being characterised by *mind shifts*¹ in attitude towards China in relation to the changing socio-political environment at home. In this thesis, I shall argue this theoretical position showing how the development of images of, and the waxing and waning of interest in the Cultural Revolution, were largely as a result of the socio-political context in Britain, more so than any changes directly affected by China.

In order to frame the main discussion and before I move onto an explication of my methodological approach, it is first necessary to explain the terminology and principal themes which feature in this thesis.

China

China, as a geographical and political entity is vast and diverse. Its borders and territories are disputed and its ‘culture’ cannot be distilled into a single homogenous identity. However, I am aware that this thesis necessarily assumes a certain level of ‘essentialisation’. This position is inevitable because the study is informed by prominent and popular perceptions of China in Britain, imagined or otherwise, forged in contact with the dominant cultural groups: the Han ethnic majority and the Manchu, the last ruling dynastic class. As a consequence – and, admittedly for purposes of brevity - this thesis is geographically-limited to mainland China, excluding the ‘autonomous’ regions. The political environment of these ethnically and culturally diverse regions has necessarily taken a different course in response to local conditions. Equally divergent are Western imaginings, particularly with regards to Tibet (*Xizang*).

¹ The meaning and application of this concept will be elucidated in depth later in this section.

East and West

Throughout this thesis I use the terms East and West in order to express the ideological constructs to which they relate. Such terminology is redolent of an uncomfortably Eurocentric projection of the geopolitical world. Indeed, Said (1995, 46) argues that using the terms Western and Oriental tends to polarise and reinforce the distinction, thus limiting the human aspect of inter-cultural contact. But, while I recognise that they are problematic, I agree with Torgovnick's (1990, 21) assessment that 'We simply do not have a neutral, politically acceptable vocabulary'. They form the building blocks of how most of us imagine the world, as a map; from the perspective of the ubiquitous and superficially 'truthful' Mercator projection, veneered with scientific objectivity. As Mackerras (1999, 34) states, the West only has being when juxtaposed with the East, and vice versa. And, to paraphrase Feeley-Harnik (in Ingold 1996, 239) we have no way of knowing Others except through ourselves. For the purposes of this study, theoretically-rooted in discourses of the Other and which takes as its starting point Western (and predominantly British) imaginings of China, these terms are appropriate. But it is important to be aware that the boundaries between East and West have fluctuated over time, not least during the Cold War, when the East became geographically closer to the West than, perhaps, at any other time since the re-conquest of Spain, while becoming ideologically more distant. To avoid the geographical preconceptions the term might engender, for East one should, perhaps, read Other; that is the perceived opposite of the West's self-image.

Other

Self and Other, us and them, are equally problematic terms. Again, I take Torgovnick's view (1990, 4) (which elaborates upon Malinowski's), that 'we' refers to the 'narrative

of the empowered' (Malinowski cited by Torgovnick 1990, 4): white, literate, educated and middle class. 'We' imagines a primitive 'Them'. Thus 'We' is used 'strategically' (Torgovnick 1990, 4) throughout this thesis. As Torgovnick (1990, 4) contends, us-and-them thinking structures all discourse about Self and Other. The direct use of these terms is intended to provoke a sense of discomfort in the reader and to expose the illusion of a representative Other, exposed and 'processed...through a variety of tropes' (Torgovnick 1990, 18).

Chow (1993, 50-51) applies Lacan's *big Other* (*Autre*) to the coloniser's response to China. It implies not simply the straightforward construction of the native in opposition to the coloniser (in this, and in most cases, the West), i.e. *le autre*. It adds, to the image, the gaze and, in so doing, the native becomes as much witness to the process of colonial subjugation, as object. Thus, I use this *big*, capitalised Other throughout this thesis, in recognition of this more complex understanding of the colonial relationship, and symbolic of postmodernist self-reflexivity within which this thesis is located.

Torgovnick (1990, 9) writes 'The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist's dummy – or so we like to think'. In Darwinian hierarchies of civilisation China was rarely categorised as 'primitive' yet, nevertheless, the image of China, the *Otherness* of China, plays an important role in constructions of our self-identity; 'which we reveal in the act of defining the Other' (Torgovnick 1990, 11). The Otherness of the Cultural Revolution is threefold: geographical, temporal and ideological. The first two aspects need no further explanation, but the latter deserves further enquiry. Pearce (1995) offers an insight into attitudes about ideological difference and its impact upon collecting. She establishes a

correlation between communism in Europe and the temporally medieval and historical Gothic, what she terms ‘the Other within’. She asserts that from a modernist perspective, the collection of objects pertaining to the Other within was deemed ‘improper’, transgressive and irrational. It offered ‘inverted comment[aries] upon the normal’ (Pearce 1995, 323). In this sense, Pearce’s ‘Other within’ corresponds with the Orientalist Other in Saidian discourse. Both operate as counterpoints to European rationality and/or a ‘subversive commentary upon “normal” culture’ (Pearce 1995, 323).

Images

In serious, critical intellectual work, there are no ‘absolute beginnings’ and few unbroken continuities... What we find, instead, is an untidy but characteristic unevenness of development. What is important are the significant *breaks* – where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes... Such shifts in perspective reflect, not only the results of an internal intellectual labour, but the manner in which real historical developments and transformations are appropriate in thought, and provide Thought, not with its guarantee of ‘correctness’ but with its fundamental orientations, its conditions of existence. It is because of this complex articulation between thinking and historical reality, reflected in the social categories of thought, and the continuous dialectic between ‘knowledge’ and ‘power,’ that the breaks are worth recording.

(Hall 1980, cited by Bennett et al 1986, 19)

Although he was commenting upon the emergence of Cultural Studies in the latter half of the twentieth century, this quote from Stuart Hall's 'Cultural Studies: two paradigms' (1980) seems particularly apt. Not only does this passage illuminate the 'untidy' and continually adapted and reassimilated, but lingering patterns of image-making and ideas about China (assuming, which this thesis does, that learning is a continual process of non-passive assimilation and adaptation of one's frames of knowledge mediated by the interpretative communities to which we have a sense of belonging), Hall echoes Foucault's 'effective history', which contends that while modernist discourse understands development and progress as a smooth linear, chronological process which suppresses those aberrations which challenge or contradict the grand narrative, societal and cultural change results from sudden and catastrophic ruptures in shared frameworks of knowledge (Hooper-Greenhill 1992, 10; Foucault 1977). This corresponds with Hung's contention that mind shifts in the wider intellectual field are closely associated with the creation of new images of China.

Mackerras reminds us that images can be 'conceptual, visual, aural or olfactory, or a mixture of these' (Mackerras 1999, 7). While he concentrates on conceptual or visual images, in this thesis I consider a broad spectrum of images and image-makers, including film, advertising, literature, the print and broadcast media, the Internet, food and fashion. But what all these images share is that they are 'popular'. While Mackerras (1999, 7) argues that all relevant 'texts' (in the broadest possible sense of the word) are potential sources of images which may exert an impact on the way people perceive China, regardless how many people may actually read or see, or remember, or believe such a source, I largely focus upon those truly popular sources accessible to a broad audience.

Drawing upon Foucauldian discourse, Mackerras (1999, 4) states that the dominant power dominates ‘ideas’ and ‘truths’. The popular reflects these grand narratives regardless of their validity. As Chow (1993, 49) reminds us, ‘“false images” are going to remain with us whether or not we like it. That is not simply because they are wilfully planted there by individuals desiring to corrupt the world; rather, it is because the image itself is traditionally always regarded with suspicion, as a site of duplicity if not direct degeneration’. Perceptions of communist China can not be separated from China *per se*. Despite the radical political, social and cultural changes the Chinese people have witnessed over the last century, the PRC is still China: the thought of which triggers similar images to those which have characterised the popular British consciousness of China since the eighteenth century, if not before: exotic, mysterious, inscrutable, irrational, cruel and exploitable. These images need not have a definite footing in reality. In many ways the *reality* of China and the *idea* of China have long been divorced in popular imaginings. As Cohen (1993, 272) has put it, ‘China and its people might have been a series of ink-blot, a Rorschach test, to which responses revealed more about the responder than about China’. China, in the Western consciousness, has always been more than empirical knowledge. Mackerras (1999, 1) reminds us, ‘Images are not...the same as reality. At all times there is an infinity of realities’.

Mind shifts

Throughout this thesis I make reference to ‘mind shifts’ in the popular consciousness. Indeed, the concept underpins the narrative. This is *my* term. I use it to describe the changing attitudes towards China made explicit in the writings of Western

commentators and reports in the print media. These mind shifts are, I argue, catalysed by significant socio-political incidents, which shall be identified and analysed in depth during the following chapters of this thesis.

I have coined this term because existing nomenclature does not quite accurately describe the phenomenon to which I refer. These mind shifts are close, but not analogous to ‘paradigm shifts’ (first theorised by Kuhn in 1962 (1970)). A paradigm shift has come to describe a fundamental epistemological shift; a change from one way of thinking to another. Unlike a mind shift, it cannot be undone (see Kuhn 1970, 77). Mind shifts are more fluid, less rigid and absolute. Paradigm shifts are radical and monolithic; they segment history into how we thought before and how we think afterwards. On a grand level, they correspond, in some respects, to Foucault’s *epistemes*: at their most discrete, with Latour’s ‘black boxes’. In contrast, mind shifts are more nuanced and subtle; simmering undercurrents which tacitly influence popular opinion. Like paradigm shifts, mind shifts are subject to the dynamic affects of change, or ‘crises’, as Kuhn (1970) would put it. But, crucially, paradigm shifts are about knowledge, whereas mind shifts are about belief and *image*.²

However, it is not my intention to over-state the all pervasiveness of successive mind shifts. For the reasons outlined in the previous paragraph, it would be erroneous to claim that everyone shared the same ideas and beliefs. But they certainly have scope and impact; fuzzy-edged and unstable they might be, yet perceptible in cultural productions, a category in which I include public exhibitions and displays of objects. It is this tangible evidence of shifting ideas about and images of China, which best

² I refer the reader to the previous section in this chapter, for elucidation on what I take as the meaning of ‘image’,

articulate my argument. As such, the concept of the mind shift is closely related to the popular; the ‘widespread or generally accepted’ (Storey 2005, 262).

The popular

This thesis contends that it is within the sphere of popular culture that the influence and assimilation of Chinese communist iconography has been most apparent. Indeed, the very material artefacts which are the focus of this study were created to appeal to a mass audience, albeit in a very different context to which they are now found in the West. Thus, it is important to briefly consider what I mean by ‘popular culture’. The role it occupies in society has a bearing on the way in which abstract concepts such as the Other have been characterised and imagined.

The question of what constitutes culture has been much debated since the middle years of the last century. The emergence of Cultural Studies in the 1970s and 80s, posited that ‘culture’ is not something that only the privileged and elite could partake of, it is, in fact, ‘interwoven with all social practices, in turn, as a common form of human activity: sensuous human praxis, the activity through which men and women make history’ (Hall 1980; 1986, 25). It is worth noting that this concept of culture was much the same as that promoted by Maoist ideology, i.e. that the ‘correct’ form of culture was non-elitist, of the people and for the people, and was central to the communist project. This is hardly surprisingly when one considers the influence of Marxism in the Western intellectual field, and particularly in the spheres of sociology and cultural studies in the Sixties and Seventies.

More specifically, when this thesis discusses popular culture in the Western context, it refers not only to cinema, populist literature (like illustrated news, tabloid

papers and novels), advertising, fashion and music, but also blockbuster exhibitions aimed at a mass audience. It shall, of course, touch upon aspects of what might be perceived as ‘high’ culture, art, specialist literature, etc., but from the perspective that trends or movements in niche or counter-cultural contexts often ‘cross-over’ or ‘trickle-down’ into the realm of mass interest.

Visual culture, art and artefact

While I recognise the availability of other important and integral types of material culture dating from this era, in my analyses of exhibitions and displays, I focus almost exclusively on tangible objects; typically ceramics, paintings, textiles and paper-based ephemera (posters and textual material). This is for practical reasons; these are the things – the typical museum objects - that have survived the intervening decades since the end of the Cultural Revolution to be collected and displayed. Throughout this thesis, the object, a catalyst for images and ideas - be it poster deifying Mao, or alarm clock decorated with Red Guards – remains centre-stage as the tangible and common element across exhibitionary time and space.

I approach the art of the Cultural Revolution from a visual culturalist perspective which directs ‘attention from the art object to the culture of perception, and from elite traditions to more diffuse everyday practices and interactions’ (Pinney 2006, 131).³ This perspective moves beyond traditional art historical analysis; it encourages ‘a greater inclusivity of subject matter (from formal aesthetics to quotidian visual representation) and a theoretical readjustment that emphasized culture practice rather than artists’

³ N.B. The forms, subjects and styles of Cultural Revolution-era art will be introduced in depth later in this section (Chapter 2) and Section 2 (Chapter 4).

intentionalities and aesthetic virtue' (Pinney 2006, 131). The cultural productions of the Cultural Revolution might not fit the traditional Eurocentric canon of art, but are certainly encompassed by the broader remit of 'visual culture'.⁴ Nevertheless, there remains, in contemporary museums, a tendency to cling onto the art/artefact dichotomy: a recurring theme in this thesis and key to the exploration of the case studies which comprise section three.

I begin this thesis from the premise that the display of communist material currently follows one of two approaches, which may be defined as 'art/artefact', or 'art' (aesthetic qualities are predominant, and political meaning is neutralised in display) versus 'social history' (a materialist approach, wherein objects are predominantly used as illustrative material for 'the events of history' (Ettema 1987, cited by Moore 1997, 34)). These interpretive approaches employ divergent pedagogies and attach different traditions of value to objects. To generalise, modernism placed the art of Other cultures in the realm of ethnography borne out of evolutionary theory and scientific objectivity. 'Proper' art, so the traditional canon decreed, was rarefied, spiritual and singular. It reflected and consolidated ideas about ourselves. It conferred intellectual and moral prestige upon its owner. It represented and supported the *status quo*, the cultural habitus. Since the eighteenth-century, as the following chapter will outline, attitudes towards the arts of China have been fairly ambivalent. But, nevertheless, *communist* Chinese art, neither in subject, form nor aesthetic, conforms to the received Western canon, the legacy of which still haunts the popular-conservative understanding of art

⁴ The application of (Western) visual culturalist discourse to non-Western material is not without its critics. Pinney (2006, 139) cites Elkins' (2003) concerns in particular. However, I agree with Pinney that, as with terms like 'East', 'West' and 'Other', it is near impossible, for the Western researcher, to escape such deeply embedded paradigms (Pinney 2006, 139-140). Acknowledgment of the problematics of such an approach within a wider self-reflexive narrative, one hopes, goes some way towards salving such concerns.

(and certainly retained its potency into the late 1960s and 70s when contemporary Chinese visual culture was first encountered in Britain). It is frequently mass-produced (for the masses, by the masses, of the masses), anonymous and often collaborative. It has also, as this thesis shall demonstrate, been subsumed into the visual alphabet of Western counter-culture. Thus, empty of the values attributed to 'art', Cultural Revolution-era visual culture is anathema to the modernist Western canon.

Alternatively, revolutionary Chinese art may represent a parody of the habitus, a commentary upon the socially constructed systems of aesthetics and knowledge. To this category belong pop art and kitsch, 'begotten on the wrong side of the moral and aesthetic blanket' (Pearce 1995, 305). Objects from the Cultural Revolution may be placed into this category via the mediation of contemporary popular culture.

Recognising the aura of subterfuge that hangs over propagandist art, contemporary popular culture exploits, manipulates, emasculates and subverts overtly political and contrary ideology to suit a new role, typically a comment upon capitalism. 'The reason why it [and not other mass-produced material] arouses us is because we don't always feel like being worshipful, [to our own 'Gods' as much as those of other times and regimes] even if it is at our shrine. Humans share a giggling, sniggering streak' (Pearce 1995, 305). The phenomenon of 'commie kitsch' will be explored in greater depth in section three.

Methodology

The methodological approach I employ in thesis is qualitative and thus, analogous to its overarching social constructionist epistemology; it makes a deep and nuanced exploration of the source material, that supports a narrative which seeks to reveal the

whys and hows of image-making and representation. It is also partially historiographical: it looks at the creation and dissemination of particular historical perspectives. It considers the grand narratives as social and political constructs and analyses the subjectivity of apparently neutral observations of China, for what they might reveal of British self-image and identity.

I have analysed several examples of collections of Cultural Revolution-era visual artefacts currently held by British museums, notably the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum and the University of Westminster. These are not, strictly speaking, ‘case studies’, but they have, as Stake (2005, 445) has defined, been studied not for their intrinsic and particular facets, but in order to ‘provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization. The [individual] case is of secondary interest, it plays a supportive role, and it facilitates our understanding of something else’. These analyses are integral to the research, but their significance should not be overplayed. They are equally supported by in-depth, one-to-one interviews with key individuals, in conjunction with analysis of textual and visual material. Contemporary written documents - newspaper reports, exhibition catalogues, memoirs, archived material - have been used as critical, *primary* sources. Following the conceptual framework defined by Prior (2004), these texts are used as things, as objects in their own right, with new and *original* meanings; examined for their role in social practice. This critical, desk-based research contextualises and illuminates section three, which focuses on the analysis of key collections and exhibitions.

With reference to written taxonomies and classificatory systems – but which holds true, I think, in this context too – Prior (2004, 89) states that ‘text urges people to

act in specific directions': it 'structures' readers (Prior 2004, 89). This is not to assert that readers readily accept textually-transmitted instructions, advice or messages passively and uncritically. Instead it acknowledges the influence and impact of authority and expertise. There can be little doubt that many readers will take the word of an apparently knowledgeable and trusted writer (or publication), especially if what they read confirms and consolidates their existing beliefs. It is no great conceptual leap to suggest that media reports, for example, compel readers to think a certain way; evidenced, surely, by the enduring ability of the tabloid press to manipulate public opinion. Thus, a broad, conceptual analysis of the content of these *primary* sources – from which one might infer the messages intended for their contemporary audience – reveals a quorum of images and ideas broadly indicative of those to which British consumers were exposed, and ideas about China which they may have held. These images are explored in some depth throughout the first two sections of this thesis.

Interviews with key individuals directly involved in the curatorship and interpretation of collections, were conducted by email, telephone or in person (depending on the preference of the interviewee), and supported by follow-up questions and email correspondence. These exchanges explored the images, ideas and aims held by individuals directly involved in the phenomenon of collection, interpretation and display of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution in British museums. Questions were tailored to individuals' circumstances, but followed similar lines of enquiry. The interviewees were asked about their institution's collecting policies and the freedom of individual curators to operate autonomously. They were asked about audience reactions to displayed material, and the messages about the Cultural Revolution they felt were presented by exhibition, and attendant implications. In this thesis, the 'data' gathered from these interviews is used to situate the museological interpretation of the visual

culture of the Cultural Revolution in the contemporary socio-political context. It also reveals the influence of personal ideologies and interests upon museal representations.

For exhibition analysis, I have employed a methodology heavily influenced, although not governed by Moore's (after Pearce (1995)) conceptualisation of 'high' and popular culture, based on the quadrants 'authentic', 'artefact', 'spurious' and 'masterpiece' (see Moore 1997, 3). Against the backdrop of the rise of social history as a field of academic enquiry and the increasing democratisation of culture, during the latter quarter of the twentieth century, Moore's matrix recognises and tracks the gradual (and far from complete) movement of popular culture (the 'inauthentic', the 'spurious') into the traditional realm of 'high' art; the museum. I have simplified Moore's approach. This is largely because I look at material produced as 'art'; this is not the sub-cultural and modified material culture upon which Moore focuses. Instead - as I have alluded to in the previous sub-section of this chapter - I have concentrated on whether the interpretative approach applied, in each example, presents the objects on display as *art object* or *artefact* (the top and bottom halves of Moore's matrix respectively). Again, following Moore's (1997, 42-43) lead, I have looked for thematic narratives and in-gallery interpretative material (suggestive of an 'analytical' approach to the material, broadly correlating with the social history model); alternatively a more formalist approach, with groups of, or single objects accompanied by sparse textual material beyond basic labelling (suggestive of the art model). Additionally I have examined the aims and objectives of curatorial teams and wider institutional policy. This position will be elucidated in much greater depth - with direct reference to case studies - in Section 3.

A constructionist approach, such as that taken in this thesis, permits and encourages a level of self-reflexivity and, to bring this methodology sub-section to a conclusion, It is important for me to state clearly that I fully recognise that my research is firmly embedded in my own perspectives and viewpoints and that it is situated in the specific historical and cultural moment at which I am writing. As Isaacs (1980, 34-35) has put it:

Whether he [or she] learned it long ago from the philosophers or the poets, or more recently from the nuclear physicists, the student of human behaviour must know that the observer, his location, and his method are all undetachable parts of every observation, and that every observation remains subject to the awareness that the aspect of knowledge is constantly changing.

(Isaacs 1980, 34-35)

This thesis represents, thus, *my* interpretation of the source material, recognising, that it is only one of the ways in which this ‘data’ - exhibitionary practice and textual material - might be read.

Chapter 2: Imagining China

China, in all its semi-mythical guises popularised by apocryphal and dubious tales disseminated by medieval merchants and travellers, has fascinated and beguiled the West since the Roman Empire. Until the sixteenth century it was known only through its material goods. Silk, porcelain and tea provided tangible evidence of its existence. Produced by unknown and seemingly magical technologies, these products, enthusiastically consumed by fashionable Europeans, came to symbolise an imagined China,⁵ beginning a relationship which alternated between fascination, ambivalence and distrust. This chapter provides an introduction to the nascence, development and consolidation of such images, with a particular focus upon the reception of the visual culture of China in Britain. It will chart the developing relationship between East and West, from the commencement of regular and sustained physical (and material) contact in the sixteenth century, until the first decades of the People's Republic. This 'pre-history' will focus upon the key 'landmarks' of Sino-British contact and the imaginings of China thus engendered. Exotic, mysterious and enigmatic: extant contemporaneous images are rooted in these Orientalist fantasies and continue to mediate our ideas of 'Chineseness', which are ultimately reflected in our reception and acceptance, or otherwise, of the overtly political visual culture of the Cultural Revolution.

⁵ Indeed China's reputation for silk was enshrined in the name by which it was known to the earliest Europeans, *Serica*. Later, porcelain became so synonymous with its country of origin that it came simply known as 'china'.

The Enlightenment: Sinomania, Sinophobia

The Enlightenment, the period between the mid-seventeenth and early nineteenth century, witnessed the apotheosis, followed by the decline, in Europe's fascination with China: an oscillation between great sinophilism and growing sinophobia (see Hung 2003, 260-265). To Europeans, China was a land of paradox: both compelling and disturbing, with sinophiles and sinophobes 'drawing their ammunition from the same arsenal [of images]' (Honour 1961, 25). The writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries originally sent to China by the Vatican in order to convert the barbarian masses to Christianity, maintained their influence over European imaginings into the following century. In the Jesuit mind, China was largely 'the source of ultimate knowledge of the universe' (Hung 2003, 260) and their writings became the weapons by which frequently Jesuit-schooled philosopher-intellectuals assailed the Church and the aristocracy. Reflecting the utopianism which was to become a facet of Western imaginings during the latter half of the twentieth century, 'western curiosity about, or receptiveness to, Asian cultures often stemmed from some purely European problem or debate' (Scammell 2000, 534). In a kind of inverted Orientalism, China became a mirror for Europe: a benevolent, absolutist system of governance based upon Confucian morality, a paragon of virtue raised aloft to highlight the perceived shortcomings of the European political system. Imports of Chinese manufacture increased from the seventeenth century with the establishment of European trade stations, fuelling a vogue for all things Chinese, a 'sinomania', which found expression in so-called *chinoiserie*: a heady concoction of Chinese and generic 'oriental' motifs and exotica, as imagined and given materiality by Europeans.

Chinoiserie

To an extent, *chinoiserie*⁶ first emerged as a solution to meet the moneyed classes' demand for orientalia. But, in time, it became an entirely European evocation of a perceived and often entirely imagined pan-Asian aesthetic fused first with European baroque and from the mid-eighteenth century, the rococo (see figure 1).



Figure 1: Examples of *chinoiserie* on display in the China Export Gallery, V&A.

⁶I do not apply the term *chinoiserie* to genuine objects of Chinese manufacture, nor those produced in China for the European market (i.e. export ware).

To coin Honour's (1961, 45) particularly cogent description, *chinoiserie* was a 'chop-suey' jumble, a bagatelle of pretty fripperies and winsome motifs, the most well-known of which being the willow pattern: an entirely European creation exploited by the canny Chinese producers of export ware. As contact with China increased and the trade relationship developed into the eighteenth century, *chinoiserie* became a consolation; it compensated for and assuaged European disillusionment in the face of the 'real' China. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, there occurred a mind shift in attitudes towards China (Hung 2003, 261). Catalysed by a new generation of philosophers hostile to the Middle Kingdom in the wake of the French Revolution, this change of heart marked the nascence of the wider movement which would, some years hence, become socialism. Philosophical descendants of Charles de Secondat, the Baron de Montesquieu – progenitor of the despotic Orient vision (Hung 2003, 262) - the sinophobes, among them Diderot, Kant and Hegel, characterised Chinese society as superstitious and retarded, moribund and despotic (see Hung 2003, 262), and the Chinese people themselves untrustworthy and immoral (Mackerras 1999, 35-36). Hung (2003, 263-264) credits Europe's contemporaneous, metamorphosing self-image for this mind shift: a period of unparalleled economic, industrial, technological and colonial expansion – in contrast with the previous century which had been dogged by political and economic turmoil - contributing to a new, triumphant self-confidence. The dismantling of feudalism and rejection of absolutism – the remnants of the old society with which China was indelibly associated – brought the intellectual field into line with its new patrons, the emergent bourgeoisie. The failure of the Macartney mission in 1793 to establish a permanent British embassy in Beijing and to petition for the relaxation of trade restrictions - particularly remembered for Earl Macartney's refusal to 'kowtow' to

the Qing emperor Qianlong - compounded these negative images in Britain.

Corresponding with this shift in the intellectual field, by the late eighteenth century the vogue for *chinoiserie* was on the wane: deemed vulgar and recherché in contrast with the new taste Gothic Revival and Neo-classicism.

Thus, during this period, China was variously perceived in Europe as exotic, mysterious and virtuous, or degenerate, barbarous and stagnant. Nevertheless, for those with access to them, luxury Chinese products came to symbolise their country of origin. As such, objects of Chinese manufacture, frequently produced for foreign export, became the primary formulators of the image of China, in conjunction with travellers' tales and *chinoiserie*. Geographical distance prohibited the majority from experiencing China first-hand and, thus, challenging these images, which were, to begin with, largely positive and complimentary. China was the acme of the utopian ideal. Yet seeds of disillusionment and distrust were sown towards the end of the century. The nineteenth century brought an ever increasingly negative image of China, in parallel with a hardening of attitude in the political relationship between East and West, culminating in the abrupt caesura of the Opium Wars (1839-1843 and 1856-1860).

Nineteenth Century: Opium and Opening

In 1839, casting itself as defender of free trade and moral arbiter, Britain declared war on China in retaliation for the Qing court's refusal to permit the legal importation of opium from the Indian poppy-fields. British naval might outmatched Chinese forces. When the Treaty of Nanking (ratified in 1843) brought a close to hostilities, China had been forced to pay a humiliating indemnity of approximately 21 million dollars, cede

Hong Kong to the British and open up Canton and four other ports to trade (Pagani 1998, 24). The Second Opium War (1856-1860) broke out after the Qing court refused to accept changes to the Nanking Treaty demanded by the British, French and American governments.

As China was forcibly opened to the West, it was found wanting: ‘instead of viewing an enchanted fairy-land, we find, after all, that China is just like other countries’ wrote a disappointed Robert Fortune in 1847 (cited by Jacobson 1993, 197). The accounts of colonial functionaries, Protestant missionaries and merchants formed a vision of a country in decline, limited by an oppressive and despotic regime, where infanticide and poverty were rife, and the Chinese themselves were deceitful, dirty and infantile. These were ‘the years of estrangement’ (Sullivan 1989, 117).



Figure 2: ‘A Chinese Cage’, *Illustrated London News*, 1842.

Britain fell out of love with China, in its re-cast guise as villain of the piece. The reach of the popular press,⁷ riding a tide of national self-confidence, was crucial to the widespread dissemination of visions of China and the Chinese given form by cruel caricatures and sensationalist (and often inaccurate) reports (see figure 2).

Paradoxically, while the political reputation of China reached a new low, the image of Chinese art remained relatively untarnished. Demand for Chinese products in Britain increased as war limited the passage of trade goods (Pagani 1998, 28). But some things – the symbolic meaning of decorative motifs, the refinement of native taste – were lost in translation. There remained a distinct disparity between the aesthetic favoured by the Western market and native Chinese taste. This misreading of Chinese art, not righted until the 1930s (see Pierson 2007), meant that it was rarely assessed on its own terms, using native aesthetic values as the basis for criticism. Traditional Chinese art was bound up in concepts and symbolism difficult to translate or express in English. A philosophy of aesthetics at odds with the Western conventions of the time, it privileged expression over representation. Canton export ware, made in China by canny Chinese producers (long-versed in meeting foreign expectations)⁸, but ‘geared to the Western imagination’ (Pagani 1998, 33), remained the Chinese style of choice for European consumers: ‘taken...at face value...export ware made for the British market played an important role in reinforcing British notions of the Chinese’ (Pagani 1998, 33). For a brief period during the 1820s, a new *chinoiserie*, this time tied to the Romantic Revival movement, was taken up by the fashionable set, finding its ultimate

⁷ By the end of its first year of publication (1842), incidentally during the First Opium War, the *ILN* had a circulation of 60,000, reaching a peak in 1863, during which the issue covering the marriage of the Prince of Wales sold 310,000 copies. To put these figures into context, in the same year the most popular daily newspaper, *The Times*, sold only 70,000 copies (Bennett 2003, 1).

⁸ Chinese ceramics had long been prized in the Middle East. During the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), blue and white porcelain decorated with pseudo-Persian motifs was specifically produced by Chinese manufacturers to appeal to the Persian market (see Zheng 1984, 91-92).

expression in the Prince Regent's re-modelled Royal Pavilion at Brighton. Europeans had acquired the ability to separate their cultural imaginings of the mythical, mysterious Cathay from the contemporary reality. But it was not a serious movement; *chinoiserie* was associated with effeminate frivolity and decorative trifles. It attracted criticism from cultural commentators, most notably Macaulay (see MacKenzie 1995, 109), for being uninventive and formulaic. Chinese art – for which export ware and *chinoiserie* were perceived as an accurate reflection - appeared decadent and moribund.

Authentic Chinese art was problematic for the Western art historical canon. It belonged, if not to an entirely subjugated nation, to a culture which was, according to 'scientific' hierarchies of civilisation, inferior to the West. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the usual way of dealing with the art of the Other was to classify it as 'artefact', whereupon it became the subject of science: anthropology, ethnography, archaeology, all fields heavily influenced by Social Darwinism. But China had a written history and theory of art that pre-empted the Western canon by centuries and its visual culture correlated, to a degree, with Western notions of 'art'. As Clunas (1998, 45) states: 'A Chinese picture could be bad art, failed art, but it could not cease to be art at this point', nor so easily dismissed. A solution was to remove Chinese art from the 'progressive', smooth, linear theory of historical development favoured by Western art history. This, in itself, was a construct designed to bolster the Occidental self-image, which under self-perpetuating momentum reached ever higher and greater achievements. It was implied that Chinese art had already reached heights from which it was impossible to move on (King et al 1999, 1). Diversity and development were dealt with by being ignored. Innovation and imitation based upon Western art movements were decried as 'inauthentic'. This essentialisation of Chinese art was 'a way of

reducing the threat...[it posed] to *the* single, linear history of art as a story that takes place above all in Europe' (Clunas 1999, 135).

China Displayed: A World within a World



Figure 3: The Chinese Collection, London, *Illustrated London News*, 1842.

In Britain, exhibitions were 'tangible point[s] of intersection' for the twin, paradoxical strands of contemporaneous imaginings of China: a nation 'of unenlightened savages with whom Britain was recently at war and one which produced objects worthy of admiration' (Pagani 1998, 36). Whether it was the melodramatic sensationalism of the American showman Nathan Dunn's 'Celebrated Chinese Collection', a populist, commercial exhibition displayed in Hyde Park during the 1840s (see figure 3), the export ware interpreted as the true representation of Chinese art by the organisers of the

Great Exhibition of 1851 (see figure 4), or the academised vision presented by the South Kensington Museum (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1909) (see figure 5), the audience were advised that a visit would furnish them with an experience akin to travelling to China (see Pagani 1998, 37). The image these exhibitions imparted? A continued lack of truly representative examples of Chinese visual culture perpetuated and consolidated the view that Chinese art was exotic, yet decadent, gaudy and stagnant.



Figure 4: The Chinese Section of the Great Exhibition, 1851.

British society accepted that it was possible to know a culture through its objects. Indeed, from the renaissance cabinet of curiosities to the modernist museum, creating an ordered microcosm of the world remained the goal of collecting institutions. During the nineteenth century, in much the same way as knowledge was collected,

collated and disseminated, ‘the world itself [was]...ordered up as an endless exhibition...to generate an unprecedented effect of order and *certainly* [my italics]’ (Mitchell 1992, 290), rendering the observer’s (here, the Westerner’s) gaze (of the Other) ‘objective’. A panoptic way of seeing the world – of viewing a scene unobserved by those upon which one gazes – infiltrated architecture, travel writing, art as much as museums, but the phenomenon of international and colonial exhibitions in the century from 1851 was, perhaps, its ultimate expression. One can imagine visitors to the Great Exhibition, itself a triumphal expression of ‘benevolent’ and ‘progressive’ British imperialism gazing upon the assembled material culture of the colonies and the extra-colonial territories - which included China - from the platform constructed for that very purpose, and gleaning from that experience a sense of ownership, power and a reassertion of confident self-identity.

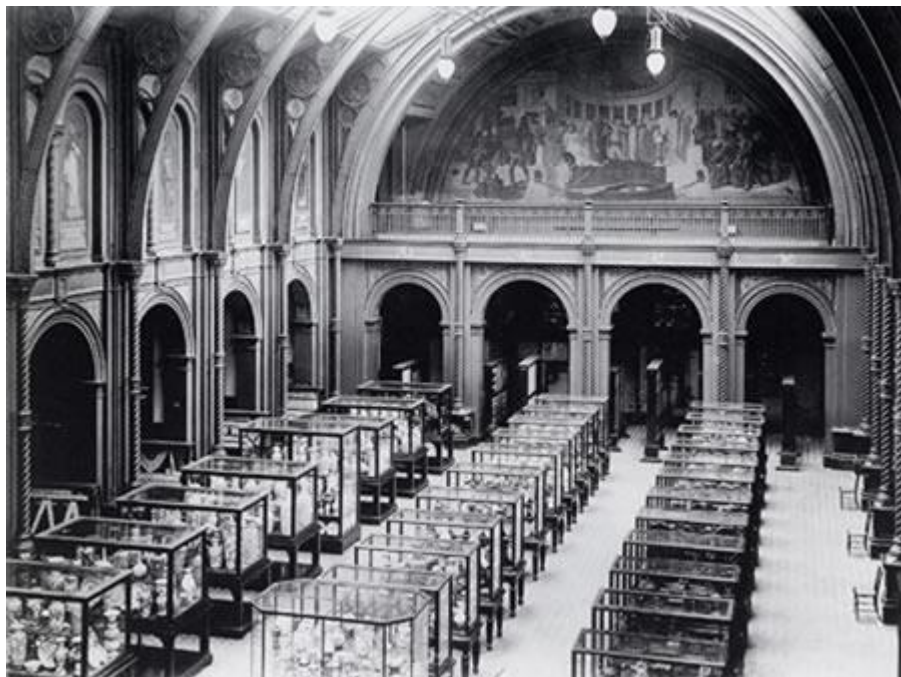


Figure 5: The South Court, V&A (c. 1886).

1900: The Boxer Uprising

The first half of the twentieth century was characterised by three strands of image-making. Each affected the formation and consolidation of the canon of images of China at the Western audience's cognitive disposal: i) the development of an academic engagement with Chinese art and the consolidation of Western ceramics connoisseurship; ii) increasing political and humanitarian engagement with Chinese art and iii) imaginings focused upon the small Chinese community in Britain. The relationship between Britain and China was, as Laurence has argued, a 'conversation, dialogue, a heteroglossia, a polyphony of cross-cultural negotiation' (Laurence 2003, 20).

The century began with the Boxer Uprising in 1900. The Boxers were a loose coalition of martial arts mystics loyal to the ailing Qing dynasty, determined to rid China of foreign influence. They sought out and attacked Westerners, Chinese converts to Christianity and those in possession of foreign imports such as lamps, clocks and matches (Spence 1999, 231). The colonial powers' response - an expeditionary force of around 20,000 Japanese, British, Russian, French and American troops - forced a peace treaty and material reparations from the Qing court. The Uprising brought Sino-British relations to a new low, prompting unprecedented negative, frequently sensational and fictional, coverage at home. The Chinese were depicted as cruel and treacherous, implanting a particular image in the minds of the British public which was to fuel the xenophobic and actively hostile response that often met the British-Chinese community.

Finding ‘Chinese eyes’⁹

After the Nationalist Revolution of 1911, China came to be perceived as a nation to be admired, rather than decried; it had overthrown the ‘difficult’ and intransigent Qing Dynasty, embraced Western democracy and entered the modern world. Indeed, so significant was the Revolution to the British perception of China and its people, that in 1912, it was presented in exhibitionary form at the ‘Pageant of China’ display held at the Crystal Palace in its post-Great Exhibition location at Sydenham (Anon 1912). A new facet to the imagineering of China emerged: a rather hypocritical need for authenticity, a search for the ‘essence’ of China in the face of rampant modernisation. To paraphrase Stewart (1993, cited by Pierson 2007, 139), objects became the means of authenticating a non-existent (imagined) past desirable because it was absent.

Nowhere was this trend more evident than in the burgeoning connoisseurship of Chinese ceramics. During the first half of the century ‘Chinese ceramics’ and ‘Chinese art’ were semantically collapsed into one another (Clunas 1998, 46). This ‘unofficial hegemony’ was, Clunas (1998, 47) argues, due to the anonymity of the potter, which legitimised a focus upon ceramics over, for example, calligraphy or painting. In parallel with Western tradition, Chinese painters and calligraphers were named. But to include them in mainstream art history would be to subvert the Eurocentric theory of artistic development. Anonymous ceramics were less problematic and could thus symbolise the whole Chinese ‘race’ (Clunas 1998, 47). But this focus may have simply reflected the relative inexperience of Western collectors, insufficiently versed in Chinese art history and theories of aesthetics to fully appreciate the finer points of painting and calligraphy (Hardie 2003, 38). I would argue that the availability and association of China with

⁹ See Laurence 2003.

ceramics in Britain, as a result of centuries of trade between East and West, was an additional factor. Private collectors, among them Sir Percival David and George Eumorfopolous, wrested the mantle of ‘taste-maker’ from museums. Attention moved away from opulent, richly-decorated polychrome wares, which had come to symbolise the perceived decadence and eventual downfall of the Qing dynasty (Clunas 1998, 47), as well as the slide into degenerative commercialism (i.e. export ware) (Pierson 2007, 97), the product of which comprised many of the extant collections of Chinese ceramics in Britain. A vogue for early Chinese ceramics – apparently imbued with the vitality and innovation of a young culture, pertaining to an imagined China of antiquity, stability and coherence (Laurence 2003, 18) - emerged, piqued by the finds of (frequently Western-led) archaeological excavations.



Figure 6: View of the 17th and 18th Century Gallery, International Exhibition of Chinese Art, Royal Academy (1935-6).

The 1935-6 *International Exhibition of Chinese Art* hosted by the Royal Academy and organised by such luminaries of British ceramic connoisseurship as Sir Percival David, was the physical expression of the newly codified discipline of Chinese art history in Britain (see figure 6). Its explicit aim was to ‘aspire to illustrate the culture of the oldest surviving civilisation in the world’ endeavouring to ‘bring together...the finest and most representative examples of the arts and crafts of China from the dawn of its history to the year 1800’ (David 1935, 239). Involving international governments, including the Nationalist government of China, and with the patronage of the leading collectors and scholars of the age, this first blockbuster exhibition of its type, featured more than 3,000 individual objects. Ceramics were, of course, represented, but visitors also had the opportunity to see paintings, calligraphy, jades, sculpture, bronzes, textiles and lacquer ware: together billed as ‘the most remarkable assemblage [of Chinese art]...that has ever been seen in Europe’ (Lytton 1935, iv). The exhibition was accompanied by an ambitious programme of public lectures (see Executive Committee 1935, xi-xii).

The International Exhibition certainly presented a more accurate image of Chinese art to the British public than they had previously encountered (which had been mediated through the display of export wares and the ubiquity of *chinoiserie*), even though this inevitably was ‘still...a Western view of Chinese culture, not that of the Chinese’ (see Pierson 2007, 157). Nevertheless, the exhibition also functioned as a public relations exercise for the young (and troubled) Republic of China. As ‘the first exhibition of art to be held in this country under direct governmental auspices’ (Anon 1935, 17) it reflected the positive Sino-British diplomatic relationship at that time.

Meanwhile national museums, among them the V&A and British Museum, relegated to role of follower rather than leader, harked back to the aesthetics of the nineteenth-century in respect of their Chinese collections and displays (Green 2002, 64). Most regard was given to objects with imperial provenance, apparently representative of a 'higher form of taste' (Pierson 2007, 138): a nostalgic, 'imperial fetish' (Pierson 2007, 138). In the wake of the Boxer Uprising, looting of imperial objects brought a number of items onto the international art market (Hevia 1999, 199-200) as did the Chinese economy's collapse in the immediate aftermath, which forced many penurious private individuals to sell their collections (Hevia 1999, 201). The bulk of the V&A's imperially provenanced holdings were acquired after 1920, including the iconic throne attributed to Qianlong and looted from the *Nan haizi* ('Southern Ponds') hunting park in 1900 (Clunas 1997, 259). Such objects played a particular role in the British psyche. Their 'capture' and possession at the heart of the British Empire went some way towards restoring a sense of British cultural superiority compromised by the failure of the Macartney mission, thus 'settling an old score with a dead Qing emperor' (Liu 1999, 217). It is certainly clear that the display of Chinese objects meant more than a straightforward appreciation of Chinese aesthetics. Even as contemporary opinion softened and as Western scholars enthusiastically sought the essence of China, the display of Chinese visual culture was far from politically neutral.

'Yellow Peril': The British-Chinese Community

China's disinterest and reluctance to embrace Western technologies and trade and the perceived jealous way in which it guarded its own 'secrets', was interpreted by the popular press as something sinister. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the

development of the 'Yellow Peril' myth; a 'Social Darwinist horror/fantasy of a global war' (Button 2006, 431), a fear that the Western world was on the cusp of invasion by hordes of Orientals bent upon retaliating for the humiliations visited upon China by Britain and the other colonial powers. This terrifying vision of the near future was to come to dominate popular images of the small British-Chinese community during the first decades of the twentieth century, achieving the height of its potency in the inter-war years.

Demonised by the media, harassed by the police, used as a political tool by trade unionists and local councillors, the perceived threat to British society that the Chinese presence posed, from gambling, drugs and vice, was used to justify the frequent verbal and physical attacks to which Chinese workers and Chinese-owned businesses were subjected to during the first decades of the twentieth century (see Rice Miller 2003). Despite this vision, largely created by tabloid journalists and pulp novelists, Britain's Chinatowns which had grown up around ports to cater for Chinese sailors and their families (Limehouse in London, Cardiff and Liverpool to name the largest), were relatively peaceable. Nevertheless, a racist image of the insidious, calculating, cruel and corrupt 'para-human' (Button 2006, 427) Chinaman came to dominate British imaginings and perpetuated into the 1950s and 1960s: the fictional exemplar of whom was Sax Rohmer's Fu Manchu. The Chinese were tolerable, even to be pitied, providing they were not on British soil. Those that were, were perceived as 'the vanguard of a horde of invaders' (Lee 1998, 108).

Humanitarianism and the Rise of the Left

In contrast, during the inter-war years, thanks to the efforts of missionaries, political activists, serious journalists, humanitarians, Chinese writers and VIPS, the lazy stereotypes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began to dispel. Disillusioned with Western society, politically sympathetic Britons sought a new Utopia in China. Many became involved in humanitarian work following Japan's invasion of Manchuria (northern China) in 1931. Fund-raising increased in intensity after the Japanese occupation of Shanghai at the commencement of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 – during which British citizens, including Sir Percival David, had been imprisoned – and, in the following year, the Nanjing Massacre.

The President of China, the increasingly dictatorial and right-wing Chiang Kai-Shek, had proven to be a disappointment: the ruling Guomindang (GMD) forces corrupt and ineffectual. For many Western observers, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its young military leader Mao Zedong¹⁰ offered the best future for China. In Britain, amongst the general populace communism was regarded with xenophobic suspicion; often characterised as a Jewish conspiracy, its adherents transgressed the social norms of the age. Promotion of abortion and vegetarianism, pacifism, mass trespass, atheism and redistribution of wealth threatened to upset the *status quo*. Communists in the workforce were regarded as rabble-rousers and trouble-makers by employers and trade-unions equally. By the outbreak of war in 1938, it was the communist allegiance to a foreign power (the Soviet Union) and pacifist stance that became most problematic. But, while never a major force at the polls, the Communist Party of Great Britain

¹⁰ N.B. This thesis uses Pinyin transliteration throughout. Adopted by the PRC in 1979, it became the international standard in 1982. Pinyin replaced Wade-Giles as the official system of romanisation for Mandarin. Thus, Peking (Wade-Giles) is rendered Beijing, Mao Tse-Tung, Mao Zedong and so on.

(CPGB) nevertheless attracted significant support from the fashionable, creative and intellectual set, against a backdrop of social deprivation, high unemployment, industrial action and the threat of home-grown fascism. Membership grew from around 6,000 in 1936, to 17,256 by January 1939 (Laybourn and Murphy 1999, 94).

Through organisations such as the Left Book Club (LBC) and the China Campaign Committee (both overseen by the publisher Victor Gollancz), the plight of the Chinese nation in the face of Japanese aggression became a key concern of the British Left during the latter half of the 1930s. Rallies, fund-raisers and boycotts of Japanese products were organised. But the visual culture of China also found a role: building upon the success of the International Exhibition of Chinese Art, in January 1938 an exhibition of Chinese Art was held at Conduit Street, London, with all the proceeds going towards medical relief. Organised by Chinese art experts, the poet and Asian art historian Laurence Binyon, and George Eumorfopoulos, the exhibition had official support from the Chinese government; the Ambassador formally opened the exhibition on the 7th January. The exhibition offered a survey of 5,000 years of Chinese culture ‘now being barbarously attacked by Japan’ (Gollancz 1938, 641). In the same *Left News* editorial (the LBC’s periodical), Gollancz advised Club members of their social, moral and ethical duty to patronise the exhibition. He wrote, ‘By visiting this beautiful exhibition members will at the same time be helping to relieve Chinese suffering’. Works on display included bronzes, ceramics, calligraphy and paintings, some from well-known collections, many of which were on public display for the first time (Anon 1937). Most, if not all of which were likely to have been early and imperial wares (as per contemporary collecting tastes). Thus, in the types of objects available and chosen for display, and the rhetoric employed by Gollancz to drum up support for the

venture, the longevity and accomplishments of Chinese culture - now at threat of extermination from invading Japanese forces - were emphasised to the British readership.

Images of Chinese Communism

The radical American journalists, Edgar Snow and Agnes Smedley, were the LBC's key authors working in the field of contemporary Chinese politics. But their influence spread beyond the circle of club members. Snow is the best known: his books endured in popularity into the 1960s and 1970s. But, in Britain, it was arguably Smedley who had most impact upon contemporary Britons' visions of the fight for the political future of China, thanks to the joint patronage of both the *Manchester Guardian* and the LBC.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded in 1921 and almost immediately became embroiled in violent confrontations with nationalist GMD forces, aside from a brief period of collaboration in the mid 1920s, when the Red and GMD armies fought side-by-side against northern warlords. After a series of military campaigns and heavy losses, the CCP abandoned its Jiangxi Soviet base set up in 1931 and embarked upon the arduous Long March, a two year retreat out of which arose many of the myths of Chinese revolutionary history. The Red Army eventually settled in Yan'an, and it was here that Smedley first met the young, charismatic leader Mao Zedong.

The GMD blockaded information about the Red Army even after the opposing sides joined forces in an United Front against the Japanese between 1937 and 1945. The

Chinese communists thus relied heavily upon a handful of sympathetic Western writers for overseas publicity. Snow saw himself as an intermediary between America and revolutionary China (Thomas 1996, 15). He achieved a ‘gigantic scoop’ (Laity 2001, 151): the first interview by a Western journalist with Mao Zedong. The resulting book *Red Star Over China* was chosen as an LBC monthly selection for October 1937. It answered, according to one contemporary reviewer, all the questions about China interested Westerners were asking (Goodman 1937, 523). Gollancz (1937, 521) described it as ‘infinitely the finest “recruiter” that the [Left Book] Club has ever had’.

China Fights Back (LBC, Dec. 1938), Smedley’s best known work after her semi-autobiographical, feminist classic *Daughter of Earth*, picked up where *Red Star Over China* left off. It comprised a series of letters and diary entries written during the previous year while Smedley was embedded with the Eighth Route Army (formerly the Red Army). Unlike Snow, Smedley never professed to be an objective observer: her writings – her books and despatches for the *Manchester Guardian* (between 1938-1941), were intentional propaganda pieces. In the words of a contemporary reviewer, she was a ‘passionate partisan’ (J.M.D.P. 1939, 6), her writing gutsy, evocative and engaging: campaigning journalism *par excellence*. Her reports focused upon the clash of the old and new in modern China. The old, represented by the right-wing militarised government, was still feudal, brutal and decadent, clinging onto power at all costs and rotten to the core. The ‘new’ China represented by the Red Army was ‘struggling to be born’ (Anon in Smedley 1934). She abhorred the hypocrisy and ostentatious lifestyles of many of her Western compatriots in China, and wrote many an impassioned description of the crippling poverty and desperation experienced by the majority of the Chinese people. In some respects, her praise of communist troops and their leaders is

hagiographic. But while some Chinese communists may have been romantic idealists, she depicted others as genuinely concerned with fighting against the injustices of contemporary Chinese society under Chiang's near military dictatorship. Such images resonated with a sympathetic British audience. These were 'new men', 'not Chinese' (Smedley 1944, 129).

It is important to reflect that in inter-war Britain a number of opposing views about Chinese communism existed concurrently. Some regarded it as a Bolshevik conspiracy, others doubted the ability of the Chinese to mobilise a popular movement. For others, communism was just another manifestation of the 'Yellow Peril'. The political response was cautious. Communism remained anathema to the establishment, and while doubts were expressed about Chiang's competence to resist Japanese aggression, the British Government was reluctant to criticise. Yet many Western observers believed in the sincerity of the Red Army and their commitment to the welfare of the Chinese people. The struggle for New China was sympathetically received and supported by the British Left. The promise of hope, a new utopian vision of the future, was found in communism. But would the support for the Chinese people have been so forthcoming had the Japanese resistance not coincided with the wider fight against fascism? Benton and Gomez (2008, 312) suggest this aspect was the single-most critical factor, the principal catalyst, for the mind-shift in British imaginings of China during this period.

The People's Republic of China, 1949-1965

Following the allied victory in the Second World War, the commencement of the Cold War led to a rupture between East and West. All the old certainties, the pre-existing world-order, the balance of power, were overturned. Two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union emerged as global politics cleaved along ideological lines. For manifold reasons Asia became the primary theatre of 'engagement' between the Cold War superpowers, in Malaya, Korea, Vietnam and Laos. While indigenous movements were undoubtedly contributory factors, it was the rise of communist China's political influence in Asia and as *parvenu* pretender to the USSR's position as lodestone of the international communist movement that is of principal concern to this thesis. China's initially close relationship, and later, unpredictable rivalry with the Soviet Union and role as enemy combatant in the Korean War (1950-1953) led to a mind shift in British imaginings: China metamorphosed from its most recent characterisation of victim, to oppressor.

After the surrender of Japan to the Allies on August 15th 1945, the uneasy collaboration between communist and Guomindang forces collapsed into civil war. Mao Zedong, appointed Chairman of the CCP in 1943, oversaw the rout of ostensibly better equipped, but war-weary Nationalist troops. Chiang Kai-Shek and the Nationalist government withdrew to the island of Taiwan, which became the last outpost of the Republic of China (ROC). On 1st October 1949, Mao stood upon a podium overlooking Tiananmen Square in Beijing and declared the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Its first decade was characterised by a period of Marxist (with Chinese 'characteristics') reconstruction, agricultural collectivisation and industrial expansion. In February 1958, the 'Great Leap Forward' was launched: an ambitious campaign of

industrial, technological and agricultural development. The Great Leap marked a turning point in the young nation's life; its course had a direct impact upon the future direction of China, fomented a schism with the Soviet Union and ultimately led to the launch of the Cultural Revolution in 1966.

Mackerras (1999, 84) has stated that as the largest culturally-distinct Western country and leading capitalist superpower, US imaginings of China achieved prominence in the post-War era. Despite being in debt to the US, in respect of the European Recovery Plan (aka the 'Marshall Plan'), I would argue that Britain was sufficiently culturally and intellectually independent of America to form its own visions of China, informed by US policy, but not necessarily controlled by it. Crucially, Britain was ambivalent towards communism. There was not the same, vociferously anti-'red' thread running through domestic socio-politics. Neither was American influence on British foreign policy assured, particularly where China was concerned: pragmatic considerations overcame ideological misgivings. Thus, in Britain, the foundation of the PRC was cautiously received. Cognisant of British economic interests in China and the future of Hong Kong as a British colony, commentators urged the Government to engage with the new regime and make tentative approaches towards the establishment of diplomatic relations (see Anon 1949; Potter 1949, 2). When Britain, the first of the Western powers to do so, formally recognised the PRC on January 6th 1950, it was largely accepted in the print media as the correct course of action in the circumstances; 'In future [,] relations with China must be conducted with the Communist government or not at all' (Anon 1950).

Chinese Revolutionary Art, 1949-1965

Culturally, the period 1949 to 1965 was broadly characterised by alternate periods of control and liberalisation in the art world, in concurrence with the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Political art based upon styles derived from both traditional genres and imported European models were interchangeably exploited by the Party. The widespread use of Socialist Realism, derived from the Soviet model, was preceded by new *nianhua* ('New Years' prints): a popular folk-art form (see figure 7). Adapted to disseminate a political message, *nianhua* had been successfully utilised by Party workers to address the rural – largely illiterate – population of the CCP-controlled areas prior to 'liberation'.

To be effective, Mao understood that art propaganda must take on '...the visual vocabulary and stylistic idiom of the masses' (Laing 1988, 16). To these ends the old 'feudal', 'superstitious', good luck and wishes for prosperity motifs rejected by the Party were replaced with revolutionary themes (Sullivan 1996, 149-150), that quickly and directly conveyed the positive aspects of life under the CCP in a format with which the average citizen was completely familiar (Laing 1988, 15-16). The immediacy of these prints – their bold, bright colours and easy, inexpensive production – made them an invaluable tool in the propaganda war, first against the Japanese and later the *Guomindang*. After the foundation of the PRC, the Party continued to support the production of new *nianhua* through state-sponsored exhibitions and competitions.



Figure 7: 'Fruits of Victory', new *nianhua* reprint of 1950s original.

By the early 1950s, with China engaged in the Korean War and with its borders closed to all except Cuba, Albania, the USSR and its satellites (Sullivan 1996, 135), the regime shifted its attention from the folk-arts to the development of Socialist Realism. Based upon the nineteenth-century European academic tradition, the genre is commonly associated with near photo-realist, large-scale oil painting, frequently depicting the Great Leader or an historic and politically significant event. Content is narrative and it's 'message' is intended to be 'read' by the viewer. The key aspect of Socialist Realism is its pursuit of an indisputable 'truth'. The emphasis on realism rendered the interpretation of the subject – be it historical event or utopian pastoral scene – 'fact'.



Figure 8: ‘Founding of the Nation’, after Dong Xiwen (revised version c.1980).

These painterly ‘truths’ were easily manipulated. Indeed, Dong Xiwen’s monumental painting, ‘Founding of the Nation’ (1953-1972), was frequently revised over the following two decades to reflect the changing membership of the Party elite (see figure 8).¹¹

Although classic Socialist Realist works were produced throughout Mao’s leadership, the ideological foundation of the genre was adapted, by wedding it to traditional brush and ink painting (*guohua*), to create a new national style which would, it was posited, ‘eradicate the gap between the people and “high-class art”’ (Andrews 1994, 25). Throughout the early 1950s, many older artists could continue working in the traditional idiom providing they assimilated traditional methods with subject matter that

¹¹ The painting was reworked three times by Dong, after its original completion in 1953. After Dong’s death other artists were charged with producing a further four versions of the painting, the last finished in 1990. See Landsberger, Stefan. n.d. ‘Dong Xiwen.’ In Stefan Landsberger’s Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages. <http://www.iisg.nl/landsberger/sheji/sj-dxw.html> (27/03/2009).

reflected the spirit of new China. Conventional *guohua* landscapes were combined with elements derived from Socialist Realism: joyful peasants toiling in the fields and shiny new industrial installations. Although traditionally *guohua* was produced and consumed by an intellectual elite, the genre was initially tolerated by the regime because it represented something uniquely Chinese, tying in with Mao's call for the 'past to serve the present'. But the continued existence of *guohua* was problematic. The didactic methods by which painting was traditionally taught – through the replication of the master's works – and its impressionistic qualities did not easily lend itself to communist ideology, nor the Party's rigidly prescribed conventions of style and content. The pursuit of technical competence and the requirement of art to present the 'truth,' led to the suppression of individual style and virtuosity, which were key attributes of traditional *guohua*.



Figure 9: 'Such Is the Beauty of Our Mountains and Streams', Fu Baoshi and Guan Shanyue, wall painting in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing (1959).

While traditional-style painting – including landscapes and bird and flower paintings with negligible political content – flourished for a short period of time in the liberal environment fostered by the ‘Hundred Flowers’ movement of 1956-7,¹² the Anti-Rightist campaign¹³ that swiftly followed, saw the re-establishment of realism as the primary vehicle for visual propaganda. These principles were consolidated during the ‘Great Leap Forward.’ Artists were sent to the countryside to undergo ‘re-education’ and were expected to document the construction of New China through their work, as well as undertake manual labour on major construction and agricultural projects.

To accompany the ‘Great Leap’ a new art theory, ‘Revolutionary Romanticism’, came to the fore, which sought to resolve some of the problems inherent in earlier attempts to assimilate *guohua* with socialist realist principles. Revolutionary Realism presented a hyper-real image of new China to its citizens (see figure 10). It sought to glorify what was new; reflecting it with success and helping it to grow (Laing 1988, 30). Permitted subjects were carefully chosen for their morale boosting potential: supreme courage in the face of adversity, or people achieving the impossible through their hard work and devotion to Mao. Given the reality of life in China during the ‘Great Leap’, with its attendant natural disasters, famine and privations, art was expected to illustrate to the people just what all their hard work and sacrifice could achieve. With the introduction of ‘Revolutionary Romanticism’ artists faced the first real crackdowns on content, method and style. The ‘liberal basis for art of the Hundred Flowers of 1956 evaporated’ (Laing 1988, 31) and the new environment enforced traditional-style artists

¹² By the mid-fifties, believing that the ongoing class struggle had begun to stall, ‘The Hundred Flowers movement’ (1956-7) - so-named after Mao’s declaration, ‘Let a hundred flowers bloom; let a hundred schools of thought contend’ – was launched. The aim was to stimulate free debate and encourage intellectuals to play a more active role in revolutionary society. However, it also provoked political criticism, which was less welcome. The movement had been suspended by mid-1957.

¹³ The Anti-Rightist Campaign from mid-1957 to the end of the decade saw the purge of those most critical of the regime during the ‘Hundred Flower’ movement, and those whom had otherwise transgressed from the ‘correct path’. Intellectuals were ‘to serve the people’, or else.

to make a ‘severe realignment’ (Laing 1988, 31). Art had to have a message, and that message had to be immediately and unambiguously understood by all that viewed it, whatever their social class or level of literacy. ‘Correct’ art was singled out for praise by the authorities: it was displayed in national exhibitions, heralded by important party members in speeches and mass-reproduced in journals and as propaganda posters (*xuanchuanhua*) to replace traditional *nianhua* in the family home. ‘In truly exemplary cases, a single work might receive all these forms of recognition; as a result, it would become better known in China than any single art object might be in the West’ (Andrews 1994, 75-77).



Figure 10: Overcome disasters and strive to meet and exceed the plan of increasing this year’s rice and cotton production (*Zhansheng zaihai wei wancheng he chao'e wancheng jinnian liangmian de zengchan jihua er fendou*), Anon (September 1959).

During the ‘Great Leap’, amateur peasant painters from Pixian in Jiangsu province ‘temporarily eclipsed’ (Laing 1988, 31) professional artists. Utilising folk art

styles and motifs these ‘artistically untutored’ (Laing 1988, 31) peasants were mobilised by the Party apparatus to record their daily lives under the new socialist regime. For Mao, the peasantry of China were ‘a clean sheet of paper...onto which “beautiful words” could be written’ (Mao 1958, cited by Schram 1991, 36). They were superior in virtue to the urban proletariat and the source of revolutionary inspiration. Thus, via the peasant painting movement, the Party cultivated the myth that China had a ‘...vigorous tradition of peasant art that could become the basis for a mass movement’ (Sullivan 1996, 147). According to one contemporary Chinese critic, their art represented ‘...an unselfconscious integration of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism – the essential ingredients of socialist realism’ (Ge Lu n.d., cited by Laing 1988, 32). Technically and aesthetically naïve, but with broad appeal and ‘an immediacy of impact.’ (critic Ge Lu n.d., cited by Sullivan 1996, 147), these works portrayed images of abundance, of giant ears of corn and gigantic fish, reminiscent of the *nianhua* on which they were based. The movement was built upon Mao’s maxim that ‘anyone could be an artist; it was not a matter of talent, but simply of the will’ (Sullivan 1996, 147) and was intended not only to eliminate the differences between town and country, workers and peasants and manual and intellectual labour (Sullivan 1996, 147), but also instil in professional artists a work ethic, at odds with the traditional detached, scholarly image of the artist in China and the concept of the artist-genius imported into China with Western modernism during the Republican era.

When the disastrous impact of the ‘Great Leap’ became apparent, Mao agreed to resign as President in 1958. For a time, under the leadership of the more liberal Liu Shaoqi, artists had breathing space to produce less explicitly political works in traditional genres, including landscapes and bird and flower paintings. But this ‘more

benign intellectual and cultural climate' (Laing 1988, 34) was but a brief respite in the cycle of Party control and liberalisation of the arts world during the first fifteen years of the PRC. For, as this thesis shall explore in the following section, the forthcoming Cultural Revolution would place unprecedented political controls upon culture.

The political demands placed upon art following the foundation of the PRC were an accelerated continuation of broader social and cultural changes which had begun to gather speed following the establishment of the Republic in 1911. And while the political content of art produced under Mao and the attendant controls enforced on the art world were unprecedented, rather than offering a complete break with the past, revolutionary art in China was the result of a pick-and-mix approach, with contributions from Soviet Socialist Realism, European Expressionism, *guohua* and the popular folk-arts of China, the culmination of which was a unique body of political art, Party-manipulated and closely designed to serve the propagandist needs of the regime. What made the Chinese example unique in Marxist-Leninist ideologies of art was the conscious adaptation of traditional genres; of making the 'old serve the new'. Arguably, its most significant impact was the blurring of the distinctions between high and low art; between the popular and the intellectual. The PRC forced a change not only in the relationship between artist and consumer, but in the class background of artists and consumers, making the production and consumption of art a more egalitarian process. Coupled with this, the role of the artist in the creative process was subverted by the new emphasis on correct political thinking. The suppression of the individual - of the concept of the artist as genius - is a key feature of Marxist ideologies of art, anathema not only to the Western canon, but a subversion of the traditional image of the scholar-artist in China. The idea of 'art for art's sake' was untenable in New China.

New China in Britain

Meanwhile, in British museums and galleries, New China was conspicuous by its absence. The Oriental Museum at Durham University and the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, SOAS, were both established in 1950 and, two years later, the V&A opened a new, dedicated Gallery of Far Eastern Art. But these developments were latter-day manifestations of the tastes, scholarship and collecting trends of the previous two decades. Admittedly, the V&A's display did begin to break the hegemony of ceramics within the field of Chinese art history. Into the new display, the designers incorporated examples of previously unfashionable genres: textiles, bronzes, cloisonné and religious sculpture, in addition to the ubiquitous ceramics (see figure 11). Following Clunas' (1997, 234) contention, it seems reasonable to conclude that this turn towards dynastic China reflected a 'retrograde' nostalgia for a time when the reality of China more closely reflected the West's understanding of Chineseness. A fascination with objects from the imperial court of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) intensified just as British political hegemony in East Asia waned.



Figure 11: The new Primary Gallery of Far Eastern Art, V&A. From *The Illustrated London News*, 20 September 1952.

To conclude, in Britain, ambivalence was the dominant reaction towards the foundation of the People's Republic of China. The British government was prepared to recognise and engage with the Chinese leadership. Hong Kong was, inevitably, a sticking point, but there was much optimism for the future of the trade relationship, the maintenance of which had defined the Sino-British relationship since the eighteenth-century. Unbiased, verifiable information from China was limited - few Westerners visited and travelled to China in the post-WW2 period - but what *was* known was analysed and disseminated, predominantly via the print media, to the British public. The

spectre of communism – particularly against the backdrop of the Cold War - negatively coloured popular images of China to a certain extent, but the USSR was the principal ‘enemy’ in that particular conflict. As the fifties progressed Mao proved he was no Soviet puppet.

In Britain, Chinese art was placed into pre-revolutionary stasis. While the political relationship with China remained undecided, new museums and exhibitions consolidated British scholarship and connoisseurship of a particular vision. Existing collections were reinterpreted, resulting in a turn towards the kind of ostentatious imperial ware of the Qing dynasty which had not been in vogue since the late nineteenth-century. Contemporary China, the art of the People’s Republic, was markedly absent. As well as reflecting the contemporary political situation, this omission mirrored long established constructions of ‘Chineseness’. Being less about the authentic object or an accurate reflection of Chinese culture and society, these were Orientalist illusions which installed British taste for *chinoiserie* and early ceramics – the Chinese art history Britain possessed – as a truthful reflection of Chinese art history lived.

The late 1950s and early 1960s were an era of economic stability and material growth. Britons were reminded by the Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in 1959 that they had ‘never had it so good.’ Life was undoubtedly more comfortable; relative peace, growing material wealth, social benefits and educational opportunities. With economic prosperity came ‘cultural liberation’ (Donnelly 2005, 24). But the growing materialism of British society also prompted soul-searching. Was Britain becoming too acquisitive, were society’s priorities confused? Nuclear proliferation on both sides of the East-West

divide continued into the early 60s, and in October of 1962 the world came its closest to all-out nuclear war, with the Cuban Missile Crisis. This dangerous standoff took the world to the brink, but ultimately resulted in a greater willingness on the part of both superpowers to curb nuclear proliferation. While in Europe there followed a growing *detente*, paradoxically the US and the USSR edged ever closer to conflict in Asia. In the mid-60s the US intervened in the Vietnam War (1959-1975), fearing a slide towards a 'Red Asia', which would represent a significant shift in the balance of world power (McMahon 2003, 101). While Britain was not prepared to send troops in support of US forces, the Vietnam War had a significant impact on British left-wing politics into the 1960s; the American involvement in Vietnam, was perceived, by many, as a futile war, which was less about 'liberation' and more a reflection of the anti-communist hysteria that characterised American domestic and international politics throughout the 1950s. At worst, it was an act of imperialism. Many, as a result of strongly held pacifist and/or anti-American sentiments, found a kinship with the Chinese. Thus, while '...the fifties were predominantly a grey, drab space: a cultural desert' (Donnelly 2005, 26), the elements that defined Sixties culture, the peace movement, iconoclasm and teen culture, were all in place by the end of the 1950s: '...what affected the West's images of China in those years was less ignorance than politics and ideology...attitudes towards China were a litmus test of one's ideological position on international issues' (Mackerras 1999, 94). This was to have ever greater import as the 1950s and early 1960s gave way to the West's own 'cultural revolution'.

Section 2

The Cultural Revolution: Utopia to dystopia

Chapter 3: Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the representation and reception of visual culture from the Chinese Cultural Revolution. A full analysis of the Cultural Revolution is beyond the scope of this thesis; a broad overview of the decade, particularly in relation to art and culture is, however, essential. Art was a visual weapon in the Chairman's ideological arsenal. At the outset it gifted Mao a serendipitous opportunity to manoeuvre against his political rivals, reassert his political influence and test the revolutionary resolve and loyalty of the Chinese people. Culture was to be a battlefield, in Galikowski's (1998, 139) words; the 'point of breakthrough', from which he would set about reforming the bourgeois ideas of the Chinese intelligentsia. What follows is a necessarily abbreviated overview of the key moments in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.¹⁴ It will provide a frame upon which to hang a discussion of present-day visions of China and particularly those manifested through the media of collecting and display.

Over the last forty years, the Cultural Revolution has preoccupied and perplexed Chinese and Western writers, attracting the scholarly attentions of many leading sinologists and political theoreticians. Cultural Revolution narratives in Britain can be organised into two periods, each broadly characterised by distinct ways of thinking about and imagining China. Bisected by Nixon's visit to China in 1972, this period offers a microcosm of Orientalist imaginings of China throughout time, from dystopia

¹⁴ I refer readers to MacFarquhar and Schoenhals' (2006) *Mao's Last Revolution*, widely accepted as the definitive work on the subject.

to utopia, and back again. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, launched in August 1966, officially came to an end with the election of a new Central Committee, the approval of a new Politburo and revised Party constitution, at the Ninth Party Congress held in April 1969. But it is generally accepted, in both China and the West, that the Cultural Revolution perpetuated beyond this date. It left an indelible mark on Chinese society, culture and politics well into the 1970s and only came to a close with Mao's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four in 1976. It is this definition, encompassing the decade 1966-1976, that is used in this thesis.

The main body of this section is divided into three chapters. The first, chapter 4, deconstructs the initial phase of the Cultural Revolution: the so-called 'manic years'. It leads with an analysis of revolutionary art during this period. It will then discuss the contemporaneous response to the Cultural Revolution in Britain which impacted upon the reception of its visual culture. Historical Western images of China were far from heterogeneous, and frequently polarised. The 60s and 70s were no exception. China was characterised as 'either Arcadian or devil-ridden' (Brady 2002, 94).

Chapter 5 focuses upon images of China as an utopian paradise, which became the most compelling and influential vision of contemporary China and its visual culture during this period. In order to contextualise this analysis, the chapter begins with an overview of the principal incidents and political campaigns of the final six years (1970-1976) of the Cultural Revolution, taking in the visit of Nixon in 1972 and leading up to its conclusion with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. It will move onto a discussion of the key themes that influenced cultural production, before looking at contemporary

British responses to the latter half of the Cultural Revolution in art, literature and popular culture.

At the nucleus of chapter 6 is the Arts Council of Great Britain's exhibition *Peasant Paintings from Hu County, Shensi Province, China*, which toured Britain between 1976 and 1977. One of the first and largest exhibitions to present revolutionary art from the PRC to a UK audience, it was one of a series of similar exhibitions which toured Europe in the mid to late seventies. As Croizier (1979, 311) has observed, together these exhibitions served as the '...vehicle for ending that era's self-imposed isolation from art in the outside world'. Such collaborations between communist states and Western countries during the wider Cold War period were rare and usually limited to high-prestige visits by the Bolshoi Ballet or the Red Army Choir (Teague 2004, 157). The Arts Council exhibition represents an unusual and significant joint venture between two nations separated not only by geography, but by what appeared at times an insurmountable ideological barrier. This chapter will examine the impact of the *Peasant Paintings* exhibition upon the media and wider audience, and use contemporary reviews and writings to determine its interpretive thrust.

Chapter 4: East-West Cultural Revolutions, 1966-1969

China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution has strengthened the world's people's determination for revolution; it is a great encouragement for the revolutionary people of the whole world in their fight against US imperialism, modern revisionism and all reactionaries. This Cultural Revolution is greater in its significance than any other revolution in history; it will greatly accelerate the historical process of the world revolution.

(*Xinhua* 1966, cited by Brady 2002, 100)

Preludes to the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'

The reasons for the Cultural Revolution are multifarious and complex, rooted in the months and years that followed the Great Leap Forward and the Anti-Rightist Movement. In particular, the Great Leap, Mao's ambitious, and ultimately flawed, programme for economic development, attracted stolid resistance and criticism from some individuals within the Party and from the PRC's (former) Soviet allies. As a result, Mao had voluntarily withdrawn from the Presidency of the People's Republic in late 1958, yet was frustrated by the leadership's reluctance to consult him on policy matters. His influence and status curbed, Mao's ideological perspective became ever more 'leftist' and hard-line. Alarmed by the direction taken by the Soviet Union post-Stalin, he perceived a similar 'revisionism' in China in the policies of Liu Shaoqi. In the

cultural sphere this was manifest in a return to traditional and 'bourgeois' themes and genres. Remedial action was required. To counteract revisionist attitudes, Mao planned a Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, that would exploit class divisions and disaffection with the current socio-political context, oust the principal 'capitalist-roaders' Liu and Deng Xiaoping, and restore Mao Zedong Thought as the principle guiding force of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), thus ensuring the 'revolutionary purity' (Harding 1991, 107) of the People's Republic.

The first three years, those of the official movement, were the most anarchic and chaotic of the decade. Harding (1991, 111-112) has identified four distinct periods of this initial 'manic' phase. Between 1964 and 1966, Mao built a power base from which to challenge, dismiss, and demote those within the Party and in the wider political, cultural and military spheres, whom he had identified as revisionists. This loose coalition of forces comprised three elements, i) the People's Liberation Army (PLA), headed by the (initially) staunchly loyal Marshal Lin Biao, who served as organisers of the Cultural Revolution and the model for the new society, ii) radical intellectuals and cultural figures, 'the doctrinal arbiters and mass mobilizers' (Harding 1991, 119) of the Cultural Revolution, organised by Jiang Qing (aka Madame Mao), who had long sought her chance to seize political influence and the favour of her erstwhile husband, and finally, iii) the disaffected and disadvantaged in society, the urban youth from 'bad' backgrounds who found their opportunities for education and progression limited in favour of the offspring of Party cadres and privileged officials, and those within the workforce who had suffered under economic schemes introduced following the Great Leap, which favoured, in terms of salary and benefits, those in permanent employment at larger industrial operations. It was the 'collective resentments, as well as individual

grievances' of this final group, that 'formed the emotional fuel for the Red Guard movement' (Harding 1991, 122). The Eleventh Plenum of August 1966, saw the commencement of the second phase, and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution proper. Mao's assault upon the Party establishment spread nationwide, with the Red Guards as its primary vehicle. This mobilisation of the youth was far from successful. Instead of working as a unified force, the Red Guards split into competing factions, wreaking havoc across the country. By the end of 1966, the political infrastructure across China faced near collapse. The next phase saw the curtailment of the violence and anarchy induced by the Red Guards and other mass organisations. Demobilised by Mao, the urban youth were sent to the countryside for 're-education' and the PLA, in what amounted to temporary martial law, took control under Mao's orders. The final phase of the initial campaign saw the reconstruction of the Chinese political system, culminating with the Ninth Party Congress in April 1969 and approval of new Central Committee, Politburo and Party constitutions. PLA officials took many of the political positions available. Lin Biao was appointed as Mao's chosen successor.

Cogs and Wheels: Art and Culture

In the world today all culture, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is in fact no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics. Proletarian literature and art are part of the whole proletarian revolutionary cause; they are, as Lenin said, cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine.

(Mao Zedong 1942)

Now as for paintings, they must serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers. The workers, peasants, and soldiers should occupy that battle front. The central ideological theme of what is painted must be quite clear, the composition must be quite simple, and the central theme must be pronounced.

(Jiang Qing 1968, cited by Schoenhals 1996, 197)

Art and culture were crucial to Mao's vision of the revolution. With the launch of the Cultural Revolution, Mao renewed his battle cry for art to serve as a weapon in the class struggle, to counter capitalist, bourgeois and old ideas. Art became the primary vehicle through which he rebuilt and reasserted his political influence in the years and months that led up to the Eleventh Plenum. Indeed, it was the opportunity (perhaps cynically engineered by Mao) afforded by the historical play *Hai Jui pa kuan* ('Hai Jui dismissed from office') by the playwright, scholar and deputy mayor of Beijing, Wu Han, which enabled Mao to make his move against the individuals and policies of the incumbent politburo which he identified as 'revisionist', and to tackle the perceived problems of dissent within the intellectual milieu. Although the play, first performed in 1961, had initially met with Mao's approval, Jiang Qing persuaded her husband that it was in fact an allegorical attack upon the Chairman (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 15). The affair, which resulted in the discredit of the Mayor of Beijing, Peng Zhen – Jiang's *bête noire* (he had dismissed her revolutionary opera project as 'politically pointless' (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 15)) and leader of the 'Group of Five' senior Party cadres appointed by Mao in 1964 to further the revolution in the cultural sphere – launched Jiang's political career. It also came to define Mao's leadership

during the coming Cultural Revolution: his ‘secretiveness’ and ‘obliqueness’ in making clear his true intent. His allies often had to second-guess Mao, ‘intuit what he wanted and to fulfil what they believed to be his aims’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 48). As a result, Mao posthumously shrugged off responsibility for the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution, escaping with his reputation relatively intact, while the blame befell his radical ground troops.

From his temporary base in the south of the country, Mao ratcheted up his assault of the Beijing party hierarchy lead by Liu Shaoqi, whom he was later to identify as #1 Capitalist Roader. He criticised Wu Han and other intellectuals as anti-Party, declared the *People’s Daily* (*Rénmín Rìbào*) - the print vehicle of the CCP - anti-Marxist and threatened the Propaganda Department with termination, should his coterie of radicals be suppressed (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 32). At the May 1966 Politburo meeting Mao installed the Central Cultural Revolution Group (CCRG), overseen by Zhou Enlai, and comprised of loyal Maoists and Jiang Qing’s new cultural clique of young, radical revolutionary Shanghainese intellectuals. The CCRG took the movement from one ‘directed principally at intellectuals, to one aimed at the Party as a whole’ (Harding 1991, 133). Thereafter, the CCRG was to become the pre-eminent organ for the promotion of the Cultural Revolution (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 46). After its creation, the CCRG assumed control over art and culture. While its nominal head was Chen Boda, appointed Director in 1966, the power was with Jiang Qing and her clique.



Figure 12: *Revolutionary proletarian Right to Rebel troops unite!* (1967)

Sanctioned art was predominantly figurative (a clear reversal of the Daoist tradition which privileged monumental landscapes over representations of human existence), depicting workers, peasants or soldiers in dynamic poses. Colours were brilliant and borderline gauche (Laing 1998, 64) (see figure 12). Red predominated, the liberal use of which was used to indicate revolutionary spirit and loyalty to Mao and the Party. Accompanying slogans were bombastic and their meaning unambiguous. Largely anonymous and sometimes collective, works of art were imbued with the spirit of the commune.

The influence of the stage thoroughly infiltrated cultural practice. Sidelined by her husband and laid-low by illness and depression, Jiang Qing failed to achieve the level of political influence she craved until the commencement of the Cultural Revolution. However, one area upon which she was able to enforce her brand of radical

ideology was the theatre. The guiding principles of the reformed performing arts was that they should portray contemporary (communist) society and promote a positive view of the proletariat, free of bourgeois and feudal elements. Between 1961 and 1966, Jiang oversaw the reform of traditional Beijing opera, resulting in the creation of eight ‘model’ operas (*yangbanxi*), ‘The Red Lantern’, ‘Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy’, ‘On the Docks’, ‘*Shajiabang*’, ‘Raid on White Tiger Regiment’, ‘Ode to Dragon River’, ‘Azalea Mountain’ and ‘Fighting on the Open Plains’. These became the ‘eleven model works’ with the addition of two ballets, ‘The Red Detachment of Women’ and ‘The White-Haired Girl’, and the musical score for the opera ‘*Shajiabang*’. Each presented a particular incident from the revolutionary history of the PRC – largely related to war and resistance - and each featured highly stylised heroic characters inspired by Mao Zedong Thought (see figure 13). The battle was hard-fought; many within the theatre and performing arts were reluctant to abandon traditional opera and make the changes proposed by Jiang. But come the Cultural Revolution, Jiang was free to install her vision of the performing arts as the height of revolutionary culture.

The ‘three prominences’ theorised by Jiang in her development of the eleven ‘model works’ - emphasise positive characters, stress their heroic attributes and, of these, highlight the main protagonist - became the standard by which the revolutionary merit of visual art was measured. As Landsberger (1998, 29) has observed, looking upon a propaganda poster dating from the Cultural Revolution is rather like observing a piece of theatre; subjects are portrayed realistically and are always flooded with light, at the centre of the ‘action’.



Figure 13: Still from *The Red Detachment of Women* (1970).

Galikowski (1998, 164-166) has identified four further features of reformed opera that were adapted for the visual arts from 1966 and which serve to illuminate the general points of Cultural Revolution art theory: i) each opera (or art work) should exist as a stand-alone entity, yet may be linked to others to tell a complete (officially sanctioned) history of the revolution; ii) the main protagonist, often the self-sacrificing, 'big and all-perfect' hero or heroine of the socialist trinity has their heroic qualities conferred upon them by the inspirational qualities of Mao Zedong Thought (the omnipresence of whom is often depicted as an unseen source of light, or brilliant sunshine, illuminating the beatific visage of the hero or heroine); iii) the introduction of technical innovations, which removed a traditional art form (that of the opera, for example) from the past into the present; and iv) simplicity and clarity were the watchwords, everything designed to be easily understood and assimilated; '...the art of the present was representational and

was founded in the artist's human experiences and practical concerns' (Andrews 1994, 316). Aspects of these four points were in evidence in the visual arts prior to 1966, but it was only with the Cultural Revolution that they were 're-introduced into cultural discourse in a particularly rigid and formulaic way, thus suppressing the possibility of pluralist creative visions' (Galikowski 1968, 169). Opportunities for personal interpretation (for both producers and audiences alike) were excised. Thusly, as an educational or propagandist weapon, the message was assured. It is not for nothing that the decade has been described as a 'big blank' by those artists who were active during the period (Andrews 1994, 314).

***'Bombard the headquarters'*¹⁵**

Mao continued to agitate from behind the scenes. He sent representatives of the CCRG to campuses in Beijing to mobilise mass support for his anti-revisionism movement. On the 25th May 1966, these actions were successful in encouraging a group of radicals at Beijing University (Beida), associated with Nie Yuanzi, a Party secretary in the philosophy department facing demotion for her 'vendetta' against the university president (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 55), to produce a *dazibao* ('big character poster')¹⁶ that criticised the leaders of the University for supporting Peng Zhen and suppressing mass discussion of the political issues raised by *Hai Jui*. On hearing of this group's action, Mao ordered that the text of their *dazibao* be broadcast and published nationwide, appended with a favourable commentary from himself. In one fell swoop he

¹⁵ Mao's 'big character poster' written in response to Nie Yuanzi's poster during the Eleventh Plenum, August 1966. See MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 90).

¹⁶ *Dazibao* ('big character posters') were large scale posters featuring calligraphed slogans. They had been a means of communication long before, but became a phenomenon during these early stages of the Cultural Revolution.

legitimised spontaneous mass protest against ‘revisionist’ officials (Harding 1991, 135). The *dazibao* movement spread across colleges and university campuses nationwide, most focusing upon educational matters, but many also accusing officials of revisionist policies, even sexual impropriety (see figure 14). Their authority eroded, discipline in universities, colleges and schools swiftly collapsed.



Figure 14: *Dazibao* (c. 1966)

The speed of these developments alarmed Liu, who – mindful of his own political position – took swift action to demonstrate his own commitment to the combat of revisionism and to recover control over the student movement. With Mao’s tacit endorsement, he suspended university enrolment for a year, ostensibly to facilitate reform of examinations and curricula, and despatched work teams of trusted cadres and former PLA officers to universities, schools, the *People’s Daily*, and other departments and cultural bodies, to lead the ‘rectification’ process. During this period, which has

come to be known as ‘The Fifty Days’, work teams, acting upon a set of guidelines endorsed by Liu (e.g. ‘Meetings should not hinder work or studies’, ‘Foreign students should not participate in the movement’, ‘People should not be hit or roughed up’) (see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 71) for the full list of guidelines) took a strict approach, banning rallies and expelling the most radical from the movement. For his part, Mao criticised Liu’s use of work teams, for restricting mass involvement in the movement and protecting higher officials – those whom Mao believed were the principal bearers of revisionism – from criticism.

In July 1966, Mao took advantage of the ensuing chaos, to triumphantly return to Beijing carried upon a wave of carefully orchestrated publicity. On the way, in his 73rd year, he famously joined participants in the annual swimming competition at the Yangtze River, Wuhan, a photo-opportunity contrived to demonstrate his physical vigour. It was his first public appearance for months and it ‘received unprecedentedly sycophantic coverage in the Chinese media’ (Harding 1991, 138). A contemporary report of the incident in *The Times* (filed by Reuters, but based upon official Chinese reports) reveals that Mao:

Watched by thousands of Chinese along the banks, ...climbed out of a speedboat into the water and remained there for more than an hour, ignoring the pleas of party officials who jumped in to keep him company....As he went, the chairman, whose “thinking” is invoked to enable the Chinese to master all sorts of practical skills, taught a girl to swim on her back and to gaze with him from the muddy water into a clear blue sky. When he climbed back into his boat Mr. Mao was in good spirits and not tired at all. (Anon 1966a)

Mao was gearing up for an ideological fight to the literal death.

On his arrival in Beijing, Mao condemned the handling of ‘the Fifty Days,’ called for the immediate withdrawal of the work teams and organised, for early August, a Central Committee Plenum, the first since 1962. The meeting would ‘endorse the measures already undertaken and legitimate his vision of a revolution against revisionism in China’ (Harding 1991, 138) and ushered in the first round of demotions and purges of Mao’s critics. Liu was stripped of his Vice-Chairmanship and demoted, for his ‘mishandling’. Marshal Lin Biao succeeded Liu as Mao’s heir apparent. The Plenum also formalised the adoption of CCRG’s widely distributed¹⁷ ‘Sixteen Point Decision on the Cultural Revolution’ produced by the Central Cultural Revolution Group. The document set forth Mao’s vision for the movement: ‘[to] struggle against and overthrow those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road, to criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois academic “authorities” and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes, and to transform education, literature and art, and all other parts of the super-structure not in correspondence with the socialist economic base’ (see Harding 1991, 142). The vehicle for the movement would be the mobilisation of the masses, principally the peasant, worker, soldier trinity, revolutionary intellectuals and revolutionary cadres. It was recognised that they would undoubtedly make mistakes, but the Party must ‘dare to boldly arouse the masses’ (CCP Central Committee 1966, cited by Schoenhals 1996, 34). Party leaders were advised to ‘Trust the masses, rely on them, and respect their initiative. Cast out fear. Don’t be afraid of disorder’ (CCP Central Committee 1966, cited by Schoenhals 1996, 36). As Mao

¹⁷ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 92) note that a recording of the ‘Sixteen Points’ was available from record shops, along with studio recordings of the *People’s Daily* article in response, and live recordings of Lin and Zhou’s speeches given at the Plenum!

himself had declared in 1927, ‘...a revolution is not a dinner party’.¹⁸ And with that he unleashed the Cultural Revolution.

The Red Guard Movement: ‘to rebel is justified (zaofan you li)’¹⁹

The very first self-named ‘Red Guard’ (*hongweibing*) organisation, was set up at a middle school attached to Tsinghua University on May 29th 1966. In response to two big-character posters sent by the group to Mao in July, the Chairman responded ‘You say it is right to rebel against reactionaries; I enthusiastically support you.’ In effect writing the Red Guard movement, organisations comprised of loyal, enthusiastic, and idealistic young people, a ‘blank check’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 87). Aching to express their loyalty to Mao, and keen to emulate the revolutionary exploits of their parents and grandparents (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 105), the Red Guards overturned centuries-old Confucian tenets of filial piety. As a movement it embodied the rejection of the past. Almost immediately after the close of the Eleventh Plenum, a series of eight massive Red Guard rallies, orchestrated by the PLA, took place in Beijing between August and November 1966. Between 12 to 13 million Red Guards (estimates vary), from all over China participated. It was these rallies that provided some of the most enduring images of the Cultural Revolution: ‘...vivid images of... enraptured young middle school students: some chanting revolutionary slogans, tears streaming down their faces; others waving their copies of Mao’s quotations at the

¹⁸ The full quote is: ‘...a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous’. Mao Zedong [*Mao Tse-tung*]: Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan, March 1927, in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. I (3rd printing; Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), pp. 23-29. Reproduced online: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1927mao.html> (15/03/2009).

¹⁹ Mao in his letter to the Tsinghua University Red Guards (July 1966), in MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 87.

distant deity reviewing them on the Gate of Heavenly Peace' (Harding 1991, 143).

Following the rallies a phase of what MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 110) describe as 'revolutionary tourism' commenced. Actively encouraged by Mao to 'ignite the fires of revolution,' Red Guards took off around the country visiting sites sacred to the revolutionary cause, such as Mao's birthplace in Shaoshan and the caves of Yan'an, facilitated by free accommodation, food and travel.

The Red Guards took to heart the inflammatory rhetoric of Cultural Revolution: the diktats to 'smash' and 'destroy' the 'four olds' – ideas, culture, customs and habits. Anything, or anyone, considered bourgeois by the Red Guards was attacked. Actions ranged from the petty, for example suggesting more revolutionary sounding names for streets and shops, or the harassment of people wearing Western fashions, to extraordinary levels of hatred and mob violence expressed against those deemed reactionary and bourgeois and their property. These so-called 'monsters and freaks' were harassed, persecuted, imprisoned, humiliated and tortured. Deaths were not uncommon, as a result of injuries inflicted during 'struggle sessions', by suicide, or neglect. Indeed, Liu Shaoqi, suffering from complications as result of diabetes, was refused adequate medical care and died in 1969.²⁰ As MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 102) note, 'Although the human toll of some of the subsequent phases of the movement was greater, it was the in-your-face nature of the "red terror" of August-September 1966 that stuck in popular memory.' China's cultural heritage suffered heavily. During the Cultural Revolution,²¹ 4,922 of Beijing's 6,843 officially designated places of cultural or historical interest were destroyed, by far the greatest number

²⁰ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 124) report that in Beijing alone, during August and September 2006, 1,772 people were murdered. In Shanghai, 704 suicides and 534 deaths related to the Cultural Revolution, were recorded for the single month of September.

²¹ N.B. It is not clear if this figure refers to the decade 1966-1976, or the official period of 'cultural revolution', 1966-1969.

between August and September 1966 (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 118). China had descended ‘into disorder, factionalism, and violence’ (Harding 1991, 147).

During the early months of 1967, with the economy facing near collapse and social disorder rife, the Red Guards were ordered home and called back to lessons. But, while action had been taken to banish the feudal and bourgeois from Chinese society, criticism of the Party establishment – the real target of Mao’s ire – had been largely deflected. For the first time, the CCRG made explicit those individuals at the top of Party hierarchy to be targeted, including Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, both of whom were accused of opposing Mao. Replacing the old systems of governance, new provincial ‘revolutionary committees’ under the overall control of the PLA were instigated. ‘In essence, the army became a national work team, with responsibility for deciding not only which cadres would survive the Cultural Revolution, but also which mass organizations deserved representation of the revolutionary committees’ (Harding 1991, 161). As such, the PLA was assigned the task of restoring a semblance of law and order, largely through the promotion of military discipline in schools, universities and workplaces. But this was frequently only achieved via extreme force. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 177-180) note a number of massacres and shootings carried out by PLA units.

By the summer of 1967, China was effectively at civil war. Factional fighting was widespread: attempts to resist and rebel against the forward march of the revolution were brutally put down. For the next eighteenth months, Chinese politics were consumed with the sometimes bloody introduction of the revolutionary committee model, to replace the former governmental system. A process hampered by ongoing

internal power struggles between the interests of the ‘three-in-one’: civilian Party cadres, led by Zhou Enlai, the radical mass organisations, represented by Jiang Qing and the CCRG, and Lin Biao’s PLA. There were distinct and fundamental ‘cleavages’ (Harding 1991, 166) between the three interest groups jockeying for Mao’s favour. The PLA won that battle, at the particular expense of the Red Guard organisations who had failed to demonstrate to Mao that they could further the revolutionary struggle without factional fighting and abuse of their position. As a result the movement was formally disbanded mid-1968. Millions of young urbanites were sent down to the countryside, to ‘learn’ from the leadership of the peasants.²²

The Red Guards thusly declawed, the onus for making revolution passed to workers and peasants, and ‘the emphasis of the Cultural Revolution shifted from the destruction of the old order to the creation of a new one’ (Harding 1991, 189). The first job of the new revolutionary committees was to ‘cleanse the class ranks.’ Indeed, the demobilisation of the Red Guard movement was just ‘the prelude to an even wider-ranging campaign of terror during which even more people were tortured, maimed, driven mad, killed or committed suicide’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 252).²³ At the Twelfth Plenum held in October 1968, Liu, described in the official documentation as ‘a renegade, traitor, and scab hiding in the Party’ (see Harding 1991, 194-195) was formally expelled from the Party. Deng Xiaoping was more fortunate; Mao personally intervened to prevent his expulsion (Harding 1991, 195). The Ninth Party Congress, held during April 1969, commended the progress of the ‘first’ Great

²² Harding (1991, 189) gives the figure of 5.4 million youths transferred to the countryside by the end of 1970. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 251) estimate that 12 million urban youth, about 10% of the urban population, were sent to the countryside between the years 1967-1979.

²³ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals quote ‘one very authoritative sociological analysis’ which estimates that around 36 million people were persecuted *in rural areas alone*, during the ‘cleanse the class ranks’ movement.

Proletarian Cultural Revolution, in ridding China of the influence of the bourgeois and intellectual and furthering the guiding role of Mao Zedong in the social, political and cultural life of the country. A new constitution was adopted, which privileged those with 'correct' worker-peasant-soldier backgrounds, and a new Politburo, comprised of military leaders and members of the CCRG was installed. At this nominal conclusion to the Cultural Revolution, China remained in a precarious political situation.

Art produced during this phase was entirely functional; it reflected and promoted the emergent personality cult of Mao and condemned the bourgeois, the feudal and the revisionist. In practice this meant that traditional imagery – birds, flowers, symbolic motifs, landscapes - and genres, subjects with no direct revolutionary content, were expunged. Thus, art produced prior to 1966, regardless of whether it had met the ideological requirements of its time, and those that had produced it, became of the past. They became, in the skewed thinking of the Red Guards, legitimate targets. To pre-empt the fate that would inevitably befall their work, some artists like the modernist Lin Fengmian, destroyed their oeuvres. Any vestige of Liu's liberal attitude towards the arts vanished, professional associations were abolished, arts journals ceased publication and art schools were closed, not to reopen until after 1970, and then only for a limited number of students with 'correct' family backgrounds.

Art students were not immune to the pull of revolutionary 'activism.' Indeed, Shen (2008, 149) has described this initial phase as being characterised by 'Red Guard and Rebel Faction Art'. As with the wider movement, art during this period was focused upon criticising the 'four olds' and promoting the new society. Red Guards at the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing, symbolically smashed instructional

plaster models, some of which were based upon Western masterpieces, with axes and shovels, before destroying the remains on a bonfire (Andrews 1994, 321-2). Faculty members were beaten, publically humiliated and imprisoned on campus in 'ox-pens', so-called after the popular Red Guard slogan 'Revolt against the capitalist ox-demons and snake-spirits.' Red Guard art, prolific, iconoclastic (except where Mao was the subject), often collaborative, was recognised as a movement in its own right. Exhibitions of paintings, posters, woodcut prints, sculpture, crafts, were mounted, and journals and booklets produced (see figure 15).²⁴ If more evidence of the total assimilation of art and ideology were needed, it can be found in the names of some of the exhibitions mounted in 1967: 'Smash the Liu Shaoqi-Deng Xiaoping Counterrevolutionary Line' (Beijing Observatory, February), 'Long Live the Victory of Mao Zedong Thought' (National Art Museum, Beijing, May) and 'Long Live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' (travelling exhibition, Beijing, May) (see Shen 2008, 149-150). The exhibition 'Long Live the Victory of Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line' at the National Art Museum in Beijing (October 1967), comprised more than 16,000 works (Wang 2008, 194). But these young artists did not escape Mao's censure. Along with their Red Guard compatriots, they too were sent down to the countryside in 1968-9 to learn from the peasants.

²⁴ Some of these were short lived, but one estimate suggests that in Beijing and Hangzhou alone there were thirty-one Red Guard art 'tabloids' in existence during the initial phase of the Cultural Revolution (Zheng 2008, 30).



Figure 15: 'Struggle with words, not with weapons!' (*Yao wendou, bu yao wudou!*), Sun Jingbo (1967).

The rejection of professionalism in all walks of life, saw the work of worker and peasant artists come to the fore at the expense of professional, 'trained' artists.

Popularised by national exhibitions and the few art journals in publication (largely *ad hoc* and controlled by Red Guard organisations), the movement spanned a range of genres and media. At the most prosaic, *dazibao* could be art, as could political cartoons

and commercial posters. Any visual means by which political propaganda could be disseminated, particularly in areas where formal communication streams were poor, or where there were high levels of illiteracy, were utilised. Culture was no longer the preserve of a closed group of 'bourgeois' and 'revisionist' intellectuals; the masses were actively encouraged to incorporate the making of art into their daily lives, not merely as a leisure pursuit, or a means of enriching cultural experience, but as integral to the new China: '...a vital step in bridging the gap between manual and mental labour, rural and urban areas, and between workers and peasants on one hand and intellectuals on the other' (Galikowski 1998, 153). Undeniably, the movement brought art and cultural opportunities to more people in China than ever before, creating 'an artistic pool of unprecedented breadth and talent.' But as Andrews goes on to remind us, the increase in numbers of active artists was accompanied by 'a marked reduction in the number of permissible styles and subjects' (Andrews 1994, 315). The Cultural Revolution brought art to the masses, their output was prolific, but, at the same time, this can not, and should not be equated with any level of personal 'freedom'.

The Cult of Mao

Bullets and shells

Are no match

For the spiritual atom bomb of Mao Zedong's thought.

(PLA aphorism c. 1966, cited by Schoenhals 1996, 189)

Throughout the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong Thought was the principal guiding force of Chinese political discourse. To these ends, the visual arts played a critical role

in the development and furtherance of a cult of Mao, actively nurtured by Lin Biao and the PLA. As his cult progressed, ‘the immaculate Mao’ (Sullivan 1996, 152) was frequently portrayed less as ‘one of the people’ and more as a deity, detached from the masses. Imbued with a pseudo-religiosity, art celebrated Mao, promoting him as infallible, omnipotent, as the lynchpin of the Cultural Revolution: ‘an irresistible force across the country’ (Yu Shifang, cited by Galikowski 1998, 145). Much of the rhetoric and visual imagery of the Cultural Revolution had religious antecedents and served to mythologise Mao’s role in the ‘liberation’ of China. Mao was ‘painted’ into historical events, taking a central role in incidents at which he had barely featured in reality. A particularly revealing example is provided by Hou Yimin’s *Liu Shaoqi and the Anyuan Miners* (1961, destroyed c. 1968, repainted 1979), which depicted the discredited Liu – ‘China’s Khrushchev’- leading the miners’ strike at Anyuan in 1922. Hou’s painting was destroyed and the story of Anyuan recast, with Mao, a peripheral figure in the real event, as the strike’s principal organiser. The myth was cemented in official revolutionary history by CAFA student Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (1967), selected by Jiang as a ‘model work’ (see figure 16): Chiu (2008, 12) reports that, over the next decade, some nine hundred million copies of the painting were produced.

Material culture associated with Mao, including his Little Red Book and badges bearing his iconic image, took on a talismanic quality. Schrift offers anecdotal accounts of Red Guards piercing their bodies with badges, or clutching them as they leapt to their deaths (Schrift 2001, 115).



Figure 7: *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, by Liu Chunhua (1967).

Social rituals, the loyalty dance, visits to Loyalty Halls (sometimes established in former churches), or the liturgical recitation of his quotations were key facets of the early years of the Cultural Revolution (Galikowski 1998, 146-147). Statues of Mao were raised across the country. His portrait hung in public buildings, and private homes. It was worn upon the body in the form of Mao badges and millions committed nuggets of his 'wisdom' to memory. Galikowski (1998, 147) sums it up when she states 'At no other time since 1949 had there been such a fusion of art, political ideology, social consciousness and individual psychology.' The Mao Cult amounted to the deification of an essentially 'godless' communist totalitarian figure-head. One can imagine that some more conservative Western observers would find this politically manipulated, 'bastardisation' of largely Christian religious imagery and practice, amalgamated with Soviet cults of personality and aspects of traditional Chinese and Buddhist faith, distasteful, if not actively sacrilegious. But, for those determined to challenge the traditional institutions of authority in the West - the State, the Church, the Family - the opportunity to manipulate and appropriate this imagery was a gift.

***A Babel of reports from China*²⁵**

While I was studying Chinese at Cambridge from 1968 to 1971, China was closed to the outside world. The country was in the throes of the Cultural Revolution, though the only evidence of the widespread violence that accompanied it was the number of bodies found floating in the Pearl River near Hong Kong and Macao, the savage rhetoric of the People's Daily and, in

²⁵ An evocative description of the snippets of unverifiable information coming out of China at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. As used in an anonymous piece published in *The Guardian* on 10th January 1967. (Anon 1967a, 9)

London, the vision of Chinese diplomats threatening the police with capitalist baseball bats outside their embassy in Portland Place.

(Wood 2000, 11)

News of the Red Guards and the situation within China during this initial phase of the Cultural Revolution was, as one might expect, reported by the mainstream media in Britain. Yet, the tone and content of many reports were necessarily speculative. The opening salvos of the revolution went largely unreported; the number of Western journalists resident in the country numbered only a few. From the outset, China began to expel and arrest foreigners. Diplomatic staff were only ‘vaguely aware’ of the events taking place (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 60). However, from June 1966, reports of the unrest across China’s schools and universities began to attract unwelcome foreign attention. Reflecting upon these early stages of the movement, one British diplomat resident in Beijing at the time, was later to quip ‘noise in fact was the hallmark of the revolution and before long earplugs became standard embassy issue’ (Percy Cradock, cited by MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 61). In a report entitled ‘ ‘Brutal Struggles’ in Peking University’, the walls of Beida are described as being ‘festooned with coloured posters’ and of a general atmosphere that was ‘festive rather than tense’ (Anon 1966b, 8). But in the same report, *The Times* (Anon 1966b, 8) recorded that a Reuters journalist who had visited Beida, on attempting to witness the ongoing ‘proletarian cultural revolution’ there, had been asked to leave by officials. A few days later, the Chinese Foreign Ministry warned against any future attempts by Western journalists to enter the University campus without permission (Anon 1966b, 8): ‘...the noisy fairground atmosphere that gave foreigners, the illusion of good humour and

organization was achieved only by considerable behind-the-scenes activity by the Beijing Garrison' (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 61).

Western media was largely limited to regurgitating official reports released by *Xinhua*, the news agency of the PRC, 'news' coming out of Hong Kong, the Soviet Union and other communist states (which could not be trusted for veracity), and the occasional first-hand witness (diplomatic staff, long-term residents) returning to the West following their expulsion from the country. Sympathetic Westerners still resident in China were torn; unable, or unwilling to discuss the situation with family and friends in any depth. Eric Gordon, a British employee of the Foreign Languages Press chose not to mention Red Guard violence in his letters home 'partly because I felt it would be too difficult to explain to people in England how I could feel enthusiastic about the Red Guards and yet have deep reservations about their actions...whatever was happening, I still felt that China was fundamentally socialist and that it needed defending' (Gordon n.d., cited by Brady 2002, 107). A cursory analysis of *The Times*, between August 1966 and the end of 1969, reveals only occasional mention of the situation 'on the ground' in China. The coverage it did offer focused upon the plight of British citizens detained by the Chinese regime as 'spies' and diplomatic efforts to obtain their release. After 1968, the regime became increasingly xenophobic. Foreign experts welcomed in the 1950s and early 60s – translators, educators and technicians - and 'foreign friends' – active supporters of the CCP - became enemies (Brady 2002, 94). Some were deported, others were imprisoned or placed under house-arrest and refused exit visas. The *Guardian* devoted more column inches to the situation in China, although it too could only offer largely speculative analysis and official Chinese communiqués.

A report published in the Guardian's sister paper, the *Observer* in January 1967, gives an insight into the controls placed on Western reporters in China, and the inherent difficulties faced by the print media in their quest for unbiased information.

Of the forty-three foreign correspondents resident in, and confined to Peking, the nine Japanese have so far done the best job on the posters; for one thing, they can move around the city more inconspicuously than the Europeans; for another, they can read the language. The four Western news agency men have official interpreters attached to them; but these refuse to translate the posters. The European Communist reporters depend heavily on one Russian, about the only one who has the language – and no one is quite sure of the political bias he may be putting into his translations.

(Bloodworth 1967, 11)

The *Guardian* scored a coup in securing the written account of a British sociologist's month long exchange visit to China, which had corresponded with the beginning of the movement. Her report suggests that the general public's curiosity about the Red Guard movement was particularly strong. In an echo of the nineteenth century, the trickle of information seems only to have increased people's thirst for knowledge. 'Did you see any Red Guards?' and 'Were you afraid...?', Stewart and her husband were 'often' asked after their return to Britain (Stewart 1966, 8). Similarly, the *Observer's* man in Beijing, Dennis Bloodworth, describes in an article from November 1966, how a Scandinavian reporter, on arrival in Hong Kong '[is] Seized upon by lean and hungry China-watchers the moment he crosses the border' and 'pelted with abstruse political

questions about the current, often incomprehensible, upheaval in China' (Bloodworth 1966a, 9).

The *Daily Mirror* concentrated upon the most sensationalist aspects of the movement. A report based upon a Czech account of fighting between workers and Red Guards in Nanjing, describes the 'scenes of horror' that unfolded: 'Captives' fingers, noses and ears were chopped off, and their tongues were cut out' (Wills 1967a, 1). Inside, the paper follows this front-page report with a closer analysis of the Cultural Revolution to date (Wills 1967b, 7). The article is juxtaposed with a photograph of swimsuit-clad, gun-totting Vietnamese high school girls. Other reports about the situation in China are laden with jaded irony and sarcasm. A good example is a photo-article about China's youth from the point of view of a European traveller:

Order a pot of tea and you qualify for the whole impressive range of commercials. The thoughts, the songs AND the Dances. With interesting cultural symbols like the hammer and sickle. Pictures of Mao and colleagues not yet discredited beam down from the walls. Beside the sickle bearer [referring to one of the photographs] stands a girl holding a poster. It says: "Dear foreign friends. How do you do?" This is actually not a genuine thought of Mao. Politeness was a creed taught by another Chinese called Confucius a very long time ago. Only they don't mention him any more. Old Confucius was a bit of a reactionary.

(Anon 1967c, 5)

With a nod and the wink, the *Daily Mirror* and its readership conspiratorially ridicule Mao's Cultural Revolution and the duped Chinese people. The following week, another photo-article, about the Red Guard movement, arouses pathos:

They seem to believe fervently in Mao. And in his philosophy. For indoctrination begins early. The tiny tot in front of the crowd, one feels, may never know the carefree joys of childhood. Only revolution and the thoughts of Mao. And there is the tragedy of it all.

(Anon 1967d, 13)

The *Daily Mirror*, as one might expect from a tabloid, exploited visceral, emotional responses to the Cultural Revolution.

The Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER),²⁶ published out of Hong Kong, offered a more detailed analysis of the Cultural Revolution for a specialist audience, but was, nevertheless, widely read and highly influential (Mackerras 1999, 102). Although it too relied on stories circulating the city-state and the official news channels for source material. If one commentator is to be believed, the Western media based in Hong Kong had the added pitfall of having to negotiate 'the dangers of the phoney refugee who makes a living by pretending he has just come from China' (Bloodworth 1966b, 12). The information relayed by the FEER to its Western readership about the contemporary situation in the PRC remained speculative. Indeed, Harald Munthe-Kaas, a Norwegian journalist, writing in August 1966, described sinologists 'groping in the dark', at a loss to know 'what is actually going on in China' (Munthe-Kass 1966, 257). But, based

²⁶ Although primarily focused upon finance and commerce, its remit was, and remains, fairly fluid. Its editorial statement makes clear that 'it will be inevitable that this publication may at times appear to transgress its primary objective by reporting on, and dealing with, political affairs.' FEER. n.d. http://www.fear.com/new_about/introduction.html (08/01/2006)

upon the rhetoric coming out of the PRC, Western experts accurately anticipated a cataclysmic upheaval in Chinese society: the development of a peculiarly Chinese version of Marxism. Editorial pieces published on 1st and 8th September 1966 conveyed the seriousness of the situation to readers. Both highlight the extreme activities of the Red Guards and paint a picture of an urban movement out of control, while attempting to posit explanations for the unfolding crisis; the lingering spectre of imperialism, simmering resentment against the middle classes, dissatisfaction with the *status quo* (FEERa 1966, 383; FEERb 1966, 440). In addition, the 8th September issue presents eye-witness accounts from Shanghai (Anon 1966c) and Beijing (MacDougall 1966, 430). In Shanghai there were street processions and mass meetings, attacks on ‘bourgeois’ businesses and shops, looting, vandalism on the Bund and the stripping of reminders of the imperial past. In Beijing there were ‘...bands of ... [Red Guards] roving the city apparently with licence to pursue any nonconformist citizen.’ Another eye-witness account, this time from Canton (*Guangzhou*), by a member of a tour party, saw:

...a woman...being arraigned before a crowd of Red Guards and others; placed up on a table, wearing a cap and posters back and front, she was apparently accused of keeping a portrait of Khrushchev in her house along with one of Mao, meaningfully surrounded by a black border.’

(Macdougall 1966, 430)

A little later the tour party called at a People’s Store, only to find ‘to their amazement...a bonfire of books in progress up on the first floor’ (Macdougall 1966, 430). A fortnight later, the FEER published an article by Robert Tung about the

dazibao phenomenon: ‘The intensity of the present poster campaign is unequalled; apparently everyone in China has been instructed to contribute at least ten. Obviously the youths are taking full advantage of both to express their revolutionary fervour and to register complaints.’ Tung reports that Liu Shaoqi and Zhou Enlai had been attacked by poster writers: That, theoretically, even Mao could become a target. But he also describes the use of posters to register petty complaints, cast aspersions and further personal vendettas.

Naturally, the standards of the posters vary: some are intelligent and constructive; others, (like some of the more childish excesses of the Red Guards) are less so... A typical selection of some of the posters might be: “Miss Pang is too feminine and not in step with the new era!”...”Mr Chang eats too slowly. Can he not speed up to get ahead of the times?”...”What kind of relationship exists between Mr Lok and Mrs Kung? Where did they go last Friday night?”...”Mr Lee, you bastard, why don’t you give up your private job now the whole state has been nationalised? Down which road are you heading – the capitalist or the socialist?”...”Why do you study English?” (obviously addressed to students of English) “English is an instrument of the capitalists to exploit the working class!” “Mr Ting keeps a concubine. He is an agent of feudalism and capitalism, and enslaves females. His concubine is unchaste, a sexual plaything of the capitalists!”

(Tung 1966, 556).

The post-1949 relationship between Britain and China had, for the most part been mediated through, and by, the British colonial outpost and constant imperialist

thorn in the side of China, Hong Kong. Given this colonial connection, the Cultural Revolution was not as far removed from Britain as physical geography suggests. One of the catalysts for the launch of the movement, was the Soviet Union's perceived insufficiently revolutionary stance with regard to US Imperialism (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 222). Hong Kong thusly became a symbolic target of the movement, with Mao determined to demonstrate his commitment to Marxism in the face of his rival Khrushchev's apparent weakness. In a play on the meaning of Hong Kong, it was renamed 'Stinking Harbour' by some wags in China. Red Guards in Guangdong proposed it become 'Expel-the-Imperialists City.' Maoist agitation in Hong Kong in 1966 and 1967 brought the Cultural Revolution even closer to home and prompted the colonial government to introduce limited reforms and workers' rights to head off further unrest. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 224) credit the urge of some 'overseas' Chinese nationals, conscious of their comfortable, 'bourgeois' lifestyles, with agitation in Hong Kong and further field. They felt the need to assert their 'redness' in demonstrable and obvious ways, a propensity which could have provoked the events that took place in London, on August 29 1967, a bizarre battle between baseball bat and axe-wielding, Mao-quoting Chinese embassy officials, the British Police and bystanders (Anon 1967b, 1, 10) (see figure 17).

In Hong Kong the attacks were more disruptive and violent, with strikes, bombings and Chinese militia killings. British diplomatic staff within mainland China were also attacked and verbally abused.



Figure 17: Images from the altercation between Chinese Embassy staff and the British Police, August 29th 1967, published by *The Times*.

The Reuters correspondent Anthony Grey was beaten and placed under house arrest in retaliation for the imprisonment of a Chinese journalist found to have been involved in the Hong Kong riots, by the British colonial authorities. On August 22 1967, the British Mission in Beijing was raided, the inhabitants beaten and robbed, and the building immolated by crowds of Red Guards angry at the enforced closure of three Communist newspapers in Hong Kong (see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 224-227 for eyewitness accounts). The *Agence France Presses* correspondent Jean Vincent wrote in *The Times* that he had never before experienced ‘so strong an impression of living through an atmosphere of monumental violence’ (Vincent 1967, 1). These incidents, front page news at home, made a lasting impression on the British popular

consciousness, as confirmed by the quote from Woods reproduced at the start of this sub-section.

The media produced a canon of images from which the British public could draw an impression of the Cultural Revolution. Uniformed youths taking to the streets, public criticisms and humiliations, the waving of Mao's Little Red Book, great rallies, violence and hysteria: the Cultural Revolution acquired an almost mythic quality. It is unsurprising, therefore, that to sympathetic Western observers Chairman Mao, in the guise of benevolent father figure, became a hero, and the Red Guards, the very 'symbol of the revolt of the young against authority' (Harding 1991, 107) came to inspire student activism in Europe. Yet, given the level to which contemporary reports relied upon eternally optimistic Chinese propaganda, much of the detail of how we now imagine the Cultural Revolution - the political purges, the violence and destruction wreaked by the Red Guards, the denouncement of teachers, of parents, of former colleagues, the ritual humiliations and harassment that befell those out of favour, the arbitrariness of the accusations and capriciousness of the movement - comes from retrospective accounts, and so-called 'scar literature', a phenomenon which shall be looked at in closer detail later in this thesis.

Britain's Own 'Cultural Revolution'

But if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao,
You ain't going to make it with anyone anyhow.

(The Beatles, 'Revolution', 1968)

There is a danger of looking at this period in British history through what Coughlin evocatively describes as ‘Che-tinted glasses’ (Coughlin, 2006) - the Sixties is a powerful mythology in itself – but that during the 1960s Britain underwent significant social change, a ‘cultural revolution’ of sorts, is indisputable. As Marwick (1998, 15) reminds us, what happened in Britain during the 1960s was not a Marxist revolution, and cannot, therefore, be compared on an ideological footing with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Neither was it a counter-cultural revolution. Indeed, Britain’s ‘cultural revolution’ was something that happened to the *majority*. For the first time, the ‘example was no longer set from above’ (Winnock 1997, 214). The vehicles of mass culture – the print media, television, radio, film, fashion and music - exploited the zeitgeist, giving the impression that change was available to all. In retrospect, it is apparent that a growing affluence, accelerated secularisation, female emancipation, the emergence of a new, truly mass youth culture, all of which had emerged from the cultural chasm caused by the Second World War, but which gathered pace during the 1960s, had a significant impact on the cultural life of the Nation.

Of these developments, the most cogent to this thesis was the social acceptability of popular socialism, although consensus may not have been achieved with regards to what that comprised. This was an attitudinal socialism, reflected in the social, political and cultural life of the Nation. As the decade progressed, the desire for change accelerated beyond the rejection of social convention and the limitations of class, education and of parental and establishment expectations. An erosion of authority, rejection of the old world order and rebalance of cultural and social power enabled and catalysed the protest movement, which looked towards contemporaneous examples of Marxist revolution as loci of socio-political change. For a few, short years, the

counterculture embraced a utopian vision of the future which went far beyond dialectic politics. The drugs, free love and unconventionality of hippy idealism, which had grown out of the 1950s beatnik movement, masked a growing radicalism, a heady, sometimes contradictory melange of 'isms'. Pacifism, anarchism, activism, libertarianism and feminism: manifestations of a desire to act against the establishment, to bring forth a new world order. Revolution thoroughly penetrated the Western consciousness. The journalist Rosie Boycott writes of this time:

It was a whole new world, as I saw it, freed from bourgeois shackles. The aim of the counterculture was to shake up the existing situation, to change the world of the pinched grey people who lived grey lives in grey bedrooms. We wanted to elevate non-material values through the global power of rock'n'roll, and we believed we could do this through drugs, music, having fun, hanging out. Rules were simple: there were good guys and bad guys, the narcotics police were bad, governments were bad, war was bad, the mainstream media was bad. Under the powerful vibes of the good people all these would somehow fade away.

(Boycott 2006, 26)

For those that rejected capitalism, materialism and a society which they saw as 'wasteful and acquisitive' (Harding 1982, 941), China represented the opposite; a society which 'promoted socialism rather than capitalism, harmony over competition, collectivism over individualism, and egalitarianism over modernization' (Harding 1982, 945).

Schrift has identified a link between youthful left-wing radicalism, with an impulse to collect and consume Cultural Revolution-era imagery in later life. One of her American interviewees describes how his interest in Mao memorabilia was piqued as a student in the late 60s and early 70s: ‘Anything political from China was seen as quite exotic and hard to come by....There was a real shock value attached to these items in the 1960s...a sort of subliminal message that “the times were a changin’” and that almost anything was possible here in the US’s Cultural Revolution as well’ (Schrift 2001, 194). Perhaps the ‘shock’ would not have been as acute in Britain – which had never been as vociferously ‘anti-Red’ as the US - but similarly, in Britain, there was a certain cachet attached to Mao badges, posters and Maoist tracts, as visual identifiers of one’s radicalism. ‘Mao’s Little Red Book of sayings became standard content of many a student’s Afghan coat pocket’ (Lent 2001, 48). The material culture of Maoism was worn and displayed, in much the same way as it was used contemporaneously in China, as ‘concrete symbol[s] of one’s political beliefs’ (Schrift 2001, 193). This collector’s emphasis on the rarity and exoticism of these material artefacts also chimes of enduring visions of China and desire for its material artefacts: a manifestation of Orientalism masquerading under a different guise?

Although Maoism was never a serious contender in British politics, nevertheless, it is important to consider its development in the British context, in order to frame my discussion. While Soviet-style communism fell from favour in post-Stalin disillusionment, Maoism achieved widespread appeal in the West during late Sixties and early Seventies, attracting the interest and sympathy of many *outside* the communist movement. The Cultural Revolution represented an ‘unprecedented social process’. It offered a theoretical critique of the USSR *and* a practical model of an alternative,

perhaps superior experience of socialist development, and that had widespread appeal (Anderson 1980, 109). International Maoism appeared following the ideological schism between China and the USSR in the 1950s. While the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) stuck with Khrushchev, some hard-line individuals found the true direction of communism in Mao. In Britain, the first Maoist group broke away from the CPGB in 1963. The 'Committee to Defeat Revisionism', led by the New Zealand-born Michael McCreery, was small²⁷ and short-lived (it lasted barely two years), but initially attracted the support of those within the Party who felt that the revolutionary conviction of the CPGB – under influence from the USSR – had become diluted. This was a 'false start', but Maoism got 'a second wind' (Thompson 1992, 147) from student politics and the dissemination of romanticised images of the Cultural Revolution in the West. At that time there were a 'bewildering array of between eighty and ninety socialist parties, groupings, movements and papers active [in Britain]' (Laybourn & Murphy 1994, 159). The young pretenders to the CPGB's position as the key communist party in Britain did well: Trotskyist and Maoist organisations 'seized initiative' (Laybourn & Murphy 1994, 159). Over the next decade, several small pro-Chinese groups emerged; the largest – and perhaps most militant²⁸ – being the 'Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist) (CPB (ML))', formed in 1968 by a group of former CPGB members expelled from the party in 1965 and 1967 for their pro-Chinese views. However, this was – on the spectrum of political radicalism – at the extreme. Where socialism and utopian images of China had widespread currency was the student protest movement.

²⁷ Thompson reports that the Committee had no more than a couple of branches in London and a few individual supporters elsewhere in Britain (Thompson 1992, 131).

²⁸ Quoting from the Yearbook on Communist Affairs, 1972 edition (Stanford: University of California Press, 174), Alexander reports that the CPB (ML)'s leader, Reg Birch, threatened civil war in Britain. Birch is purported to have proclaimed that the party was in 'a fight to the death – the death of a class, them over us. They will not bury us. We will bury them' (cited by Alexander 2001, 93).

1968 was a touchstone year. A wave of student activism in Britain, France the US and Eastern Europe reached its apogee in Paris that May, the incidents of which have become embedded in cultural memory. May '68 was heavily inspired by Debord and the Situationist International's anarchic ideology and China played a role as a beacon of revolution: the image of Mao was pasted upon the Sorbonne. Unlike its American, French and Italian compatriots, British student activism of the late 60s was less incendiary, but nevertheless caused headaches for the authorities at a number of universities, principally Essex and London School of Economics, but also the University of East Anglia, Leicester, Birmingham, Sussex, Manchester, Cambridge and Oxford. Vietnam was a shared concern, but in the universities, activism was frequently more a reaction against the authorities, campus isolation, lack of amenities, cramped teaching facilities and opposition to staff appointments. The National Union of Students (NUS) took an active role, organising a series of protest marches and rallies against grant cuts.

More broadly, the anti-Vietnam War movement was the primary focus of the mass demonstrations and protests that occurred mid-decade onwards. A hardcore of far-left organisations acted as vocal rabble-rousers, and it was their immoderate rhetoric, so redolent of revolutionary discourse, which sealed the reputation of student activism in the late 60s, 'that the revolutionary left and the student movement were synonymous' (Thomas 2002, 280). Angered by the failure of Harold Wilson, the then British Prime Minister, to condemn American intervention in Vietnam, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC) founded by Tariq Ali and the Trotskyite periodical *The Week* (Lent 2001, 50) organised a series of mass anti-war demonstrations focused upon the American Embassy in London during 1968. Whereas the Campaign for Nuclear

Disarmament (CND) marches held during the 1950s and early 60s had been largely peaceable, the March rally culminated in running battles between protestors and the Police. ‘Suddenly the revolution seemed a little bit closer to the growing number of students inspired by visions of radical social change’ (Lent 2001, 51). Special Branch surveilled and raided the offices of the VSC. Black propaganda, believed at the time to have been propagated by MI5 (Green 1999, 267), warned of terrorist-style plots against the establishment. In a scathing editorial *The Times* advised its readership that:

There is a growing attachment to sub-violence among some of the politically impassioned young. Sub-violent behaviour (the sit-down, sit-in, pelting with flour or pennies, mobbing, hammering on the body of a car, and so on) dictates the use of physical counter-measures for the preservation of public order or the avoidance of hurt and damage. From that – whether by intent, accident, miscalculation or hysteria – overt violence very easily springs. There is usually a conflict of evidence on every particular occasion about what sparks ignites the mixture. But the mixture is highly inflammable. The methods have a natural tendency to precipitate violence. Those who organise them know that or, if they do not, they are more simple than they would like to be thought. A justification for these means of political action is sought in the theory of “institutional violence”. This, which is a tendentious label for what is more usually recognized as the operation of constitutional or customary authority, is presented as deserving retaliatory violence by the simple device of verbally attributing violence to it. The argument is grossly fallacious, but it enjoys a certain vogue.

(Anon 1968a, 9)

The Sixties may not have been the halcyon age of mass protest that the myth would have us believe, but it was certainly a decade characterised by protest on a diversity of issues. The minority Left made enough noise for their perceived threat to be taken seriously by the establishment.

The protest movement was dismissed in some quarters as ‘me-tooism’ (Thomas 2002, 280), but at the heart of student activism were genuinely held beliefs and a desire to redress perceived injustices. Facilitated by societal shifts in post-war Britain, it was about change, not revolution. The young demanded the right to free expression, to hold their own opinions, to behave and dress as they chose (Thomas 2002, 292), to challenge authority and demand their right to take part in the democratic process (the voting age was not reduced from 21 to 18 until 1970). The late sixties protest movement was not, as Thomas (2002, 296) has persuasively argued, a caesura in 1968, but a part of the wider socio-political changes that occurred in many Western countries during the post-war period. When the demanded reforms were achieved and after the US ceased operations in Vietnam - the central, uniting focus of the protest movement – the anti-war movement abated and split to pursue other issues. Student protest of the late 60s was the precursor of future activism focused upon feminism, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Thus, in the broadest sense, it did have a long-term ‘revolutionary’ impact upon British society.

Conclusion

In summary, in China, the period 1966-1969 was characterised by periods of extreme upheaval and sometimes violence at the hands of the Red Guards and other rebel

factions. Mao used his Cultural Revolution to manoeuvre against his rivals, removing them from power and reasserting his political influence. Culture was contrived to further these ends. Rigidly controlled, art took a crucial role in the development of the movement, which saw the systematic rejection of the old and the bourgeois. Roughly concurrent to the Chinese movement, Britain underwent its own 'cultural revolution', witnessing unprecedented social and cultural changes against a backdrop of a growing acceptance of socialist ideals. Maoism became the new guiding ideology of a new breed of left-wing activists. Western reporting of the unfolding events in China was limited and reliant on official, heavily biased, news sources and first-hand accounts: analysis was necessarily speculative. Even among diplomats and journalists at the 'front-line', confusion and ambiguity reigned. A focus upon the more sensational aspects of the movement, both shocked and intrigued. The lack of objective and verifiable information, helped further the myth of Mao and his Cultural Revolution, which in turn inspired utopian idealism in Britain.

The next chapter will examine the period 1970 to 1976, the second phase of the Cultural Revolution, which placed ever greater restrictions upon the cultural sphere. Nixon's 1971 visit prompted a thaw in the relationship between East and West, and an attendant shift in Western imaginings. Increased opportunities to visit and experience Mao's China first-hand, contributed to a new cultural, as well as political, engagement. The Ninth Congress in 1969 brought an end to the first half of the Cultural Revolution. Thereafter, the movement, for the most part, played out in a series of political intrigues and struggles for power and influence at the top of the leadership hierarchy. With Mao Zedong infirm and increasingly absent from day-to-day politics, Zhou Enlai and Jiang Qing, became the principal personalities of the period 1970-1976, as they jockeyed for

power and influence. But it was Lin Biao's defection and death just two years after the Ninth Congress, which preoccupied the ideological and cultural campaigns of the first few years of this period.

Chapter 5: East-West Rapprochement, 1970-1976

The Death of Lin Biao

Shortly after Lin's appointment as heir apparent, Mao appears to have begun to doubt his protégé's suitability and trustworthiness. Already critical of the PLA's over zealous approach to ridding China of revisionist and counter-revolutionary elements, Mao felt that Lin had exploited their relationship in order to expand his own personal powerbase (Hsu 2000, 710-711). If the tone of Lin's speeches and pronouncements on the leadership of the Chairman and the genius of Maoist ideology reveals anything, it is that Lin was a toady; he consistently sought to ingratiate himself with Mao. To ease his disquiet, Mao became determined that the Army would answer to no one but himself. With the support of Zhou Enlai he sought to rebuild a 'civilian party' (Hsu 2000, 710). Mao began his move against Lin by exploiting the continued factional in-fighting between the 'three-in-one' coalition of radicals, cadres and military that comprised the make-up of the CCRG: by 'throwing stones, mixing in sand, and digging up the cornerstone' (Mao 1972, cited by MacFarquhar 1991, 324). In speeches, Mao goaded Lin, making provocative and explicit accusations against him. It was 'as if he wanted to force Lin Piao to make a false move' (MacFarquhar 1991, 323). Lin's PLA support network was curtailed. The leadership of the PLA was reorganised and his high-ranking followers were removed from their military positions.

The climax to these events was Lin's death in a plane crash, apparently following an abortive coup. After the event, the propaganda machine went into over-drive. Lin and his son were accused of being in cahoots with a group of like-minded

fellow PLA officials united in their hatred of Mao. According to the official report, the co-conspirators had plotted to kill the Chairman and install a rival party headquarters under Lin Biao's leadership in Guangzhou. Upon the discovery of the abortive coup, Lin, his son and wife, boarded a flight to Moscow. On the following day, short of fuel, the plane crashed in Mongolia killing all three. Initially there was no official announcement of either the coup, or Lin's death. But it was the PRC's worst kept secret; Lin Sr and Jr's former allies were forced to write criticisms and denounce the coup's organisers. As the news spread, creating widespread shock and disbelief, some questioned the course of the Cultural Revolution, even Mao's judgement, for, after all, he had appointed Lin to second-in-command. Mao countered by arguing that struggle was an inevitable way of life: 'Lin's case was an unavoidable by-product of the law of struggle beyond the control of human will. By implication, it absolved all who had tolerated so bad a man as Liu' (Hsu 2000, 714).

The radio-silence that met Lin's death in China, had a knock-on effect upon British reporting of the incident. It was not until November 1971, that *The Times* was first able to report with any certainty that Lin was, indeed, dead (see Emery 1971, 1). Up until then, it had been speculated that Lin was suffering from an incapacitating illness which necessitated his removal from Chinese politics (Anon 1971a). In the *Observer*, MacFarquhar and Millinship (1971, 11) looked for evidence of a power struggle between Zhou Enlai and Lin Biao. *The Guardian's* Dennis Bloodworth wondered if there really had been an attempted coup and plane-crash, couching the official report in the discourse of the popular murder-mystery genre. Lin Biao was a Mao loyalist; what possibly could have been his reason for wanting to oust the Chairman? 'Was the old man disinheriting him then, giving him the perfect Agatha Christie motive for

Maocide?’ (Bloodworth 1971, 6). He concludes: ‘...the blood and thunder version of assassination, hazardous escape and nemesis in the skies over Mongolia might just be fact – if only because it makes such preposterous fiction’ (Bloodworth 1971, 6). The official version of events was not confirmed by the Chinese authorities until July the following year. Aware of the damage that Lin’s apparent treason had affected upon the legitimacy of the Cultural Revolution, various official sources advised the foreign press that Lin had been ‘two-faced’: he had ‘hood-winked’ the Chinese people into believing that he was committed to the movement and that he had attempted ‘to turn Chairman Mao into nothing but a figurehead’ (Anon 1972, 4). Was the coup real? The plane-crash a pure accident? Or, did Mao order Lin’s death? The truth is obscured by the official histories. But what these events ultimately achieved was Mao’s desired eradication of the PLA’s political influence in China.

Nixon’s Visit to China

No incident was more significant with regards to East-West relations during this period than the visit by US President Richard Nixon to China in 1972: a trip brokered in secret by his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Premier Zhou Enlai, with the assistance of the Pakistani President, Yahya Khan.²⁹ After years of discord, this *detente* occurred for pragmatic reasons. For the Chinese, who had become increasingly isolated since the Sino-Soviet split of the 1950s, it offered the opportunity to re-enter global politics, while at the same disrupting the foreign policy decisions of the Soviet Union. For Americans, a nation exhausted by overseas conflict and internal discord, the news of this breakthrough in Sino-American relations was a relief. ‘When the

²⁹ It should be noted that a full diplomatic relationship between China and the USA was not formally restored until 1978.

president...announced his forthcoming trip to Peking, the passage from the China-minuses to the China-pluses became a mad and even gay rush' (Isaacs 1980: xxv). The old stereotypes, that the Chinese were 'diabolic, crude, ugly, inhuman, threatening' were replaced with new descriptors, 'clever, charming, coping, attractive, hardworking'. Everything Chinese - food, art, fashion - became 'socially and commercially chic' (Isaacs 1980, xxv). Accordingly, figures gathered by the polling agency Gallup, indicated that while China had in 1967 been considered by 71% of the Americans questioned to be the biggest threat to the US, by 1972 this figure had fallen to 56%. The previous year, Gallup recorded that 45% of those polled agreed that China should be allowed to join the United Nations, a rise from just 8% in 1954. Isaacs notes that the biggest increase of yay-sayers was found among more usually staunchly anti-communist Republican voters (Isaacs 1980, xxvii). The Gallup polls provide a fascinating, if highly subjective, insight into ideas about the Chinese people as held by Americans during 1942, 1966 and 1972. In 1942, when the Chinese were allies against the Japanese, the Americans sampled perceived the Chinese as hardworking, brave and intelligent, but by 1966, at the commencement of the Cultural Revolution, ignorant, warlike and treacherous. By 1972, just after Nixon's visit, the adjectives chosen were considerably more positive: progressive, *artistic* and honest.

The diplomatic rehabilitation of China began apace after the announcement of Nixon's planned visit in July 1971. While Britain had recognised the PRC in 1950, and regularly exchanged charge d'affaires from 1954 until 1967 (when China withdrew its representative from Britain), the US had remained staunchly anti-Red. But that October, the PRC was – thanks to US and Pakistani support – voted into a seat at the United Nations (UN), at the expense of Taiwan (Republic of China), which until then had been

the only 'China' formally recognised by the UN. Earlier that year, the US table tennis team had accepted an invitation to play several exhibition matches in China. The following year a delegation of Chinese players travelled to the US in an exchange visit. In 1973, the US withdrew from the conflict in Vietnam. At home, in the US, this 'ping-pong diplomacy' (Harding 1982, 946), taken in tandem with Nixon's visit, reinforced the view that China was no longer an enemy and, therefore, its particular brand of communism must not be so bad either (Harding 1982, 946). The political intrigues, detailed outcomes and repercussions of Nixon's trip are beyond the scope of this thesis,³⁰ suffice it to say that the meeting of an ailing Mao and Nixon signalled a *rapprochement* between East and West that radically altered popular perceptions of China. This sensational event, for it was *that* fundamental and unforeseen, had most impact in the US, but it nevertheless represented a major shift in global power relations, not least, because the growing friendship between China and the United States calculatedly froze out the USSR.

The Sino-British relationship also took a positive direction. An editorial in *The Times* (Harris 1971a, 16) reported, with some satisfaction, that Zhou Enlai had personally apologised to the British charge d'affaires for the attack on the British mission in 1967. Later the same year, at a reception at the British mission in Beijing held to mark the Queen's birthday, the Chinese Foreign Minister, Ji Pengfei, toasted the 'continuous development of the friendship between the peoples of China and Britain' (Ji 1971, cited by Harris 1971b, 14). While not yet a direct offer of friendship between the two governments, this was an 'intermediate position' (Harris 1971b, 14) that boded well for the future. In September, Tony Benn MP, then Vice-Chairman of the Labour Party,

³⁰ See Macmillan, Margaret. 2006. *Seize the Hour: When Nixon Met Mao*. London: John Murray.

made a fortnight's visit to China, during which he met with Chinese ministers, becoming the first British politician to undertake such a trip since 1965 (Anon 1971b, 5). The following October, the Foreign Secretary Sir Alec Douglas-Home, met Ji Pengfi and Zhou Enlai in Beijing for talks and achieved the promise of cultural, sporting and educational exchanges, as well as trade negotiations. Douglas-Home was reported to have commented that the ice had been broken between China and Britain and that 'now the water is warm and we are swimming in it' (Douglas-Home 1972, cited by Woollacott 1972, 3). Britain was in negotiations to upgrade existing diplomatic relations to full ambassadorial status when Nixon's visit was announced. This aim was ultimately achieved in March 1972, when Britain announced the decision to meet Beijing's conditions and close the consulate in the Republic of China, thusly acknowledging Taiwan as a province of the People's Republic. John Addis was appointed as Britain's first Ambassador to the PRC. These events marked 'a new era' in Sino-British relations (Harris 1971a, 16). China had proven its willingness to come in from the cold.

'Criticise Lin – Criticise Confucius'

With Mao's health ailing, Zhou Enlai undertook the principal role in the Nixon visit. His profile and credibility were thus elevated, much to the chagrin of Jiang Qing and her radical supporters. Henceforth, Zhou and Jiang became embroiled in a frequently torrid struggle for power, much of which was done on the battlefield of culture. Zhou has long been credited in the West as having a moderating influence on Mao's policies during the Cultural Revolution. Today this view is increasingly under challenge, yet, it is apparent that Zhou did spearhead a relaxation of controls in certain areas from around 1972 onwards, particularly in publishing – classic Chinese novels were reprinted and available to all, some foreign works were translated for a select audience – and in

education. Students were provided with a broader theoretical range, which no longer focused entirely upon Maoist ideology (see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 349). He continued to push for ‘implicitly anti-leftist’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 354) changes, although there remained some confusion about how to characterise the nature of Lin’s revisionism, as leftist or rightist, with Zhou recommending the former, and Jiang the latter (see MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 355). Mao eventually decreed that Lin was a ‘rightist’ and emphasised the necessity of ‘in-depth denunciation’ of the ‘essence’ of Lin’s revisionist line, a statement which could be interpreted as an indirect criticism of Zhou (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 356). Mao’s decision to bring former ‘capitalist-roader #2’ Deng Xiaoping back into the fold in 1973, as understudy to Zhou during his periods of illness (he had been diagnosed with bladder cancer in 1972) followed by further rehabilitations of purged senior cadres, installed a new third leadership faction, as MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 364) describe them, the survivors. The so-called ‘beneficiaries’ of the Cultural Revolution and the radicals comprised the other factions. Concord and unity remained elusive; the radicals were determined not to share power, particularly not with Zhou Enlai, ‘...succession to Mao [was]...the prize (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 373).

The ‘Criticise Lin, Criticise Confucius’ campaign launched in the summer of 1973 was ostensibly contrived to further discredit Lin. Apparently, in the posthumous search of his personal effects, it was found that Lin had owned material which suggested that he had been a ‘closet Confucian’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 367) (see figure 18). However, the real target was Zhou, a ‘present-day Confucianist’.



Figure 18: Examples of original artwork for 'Criticism Lin, Criticism Confucius' propaganda posters in the British Museum's collection.

In 1974 the campaign transmuted into the ‘Criticise Confucianism, Appraise Legalism’ campaign, which aimed to show that the correct line of the Cultural Revolution had a clear link with an alternative ancient philosophical school, Legalism: ‘The image of Lin Biao slowly faded into the background as more and more energy was focused on creating an historical discourse in which a clear red thread appeared to link the post-Cultural Revolutionary CCP to a number of “progressive” rulers of antiquity’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 372). Much of the campaign’s output concentrated upon allegorical commentaries on contemporary ‘Confucianists’, among them Zhou and Deng Xiaoping. However, that did not stop Mao, mindful that Zhou’s cancer was terminal, from returning Deng to the Politburo. This reappointment was short-lived. Mao once again accused Deng of taking the ‘capitalist road’, replacing him with Hua Guofeng. But not before the Chairman had sought to undermine the radicals through Deng. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 396) question Mao’s motives in backing Deng at the expense of his wife and her clique. After all, ‘They, and perhaps only they, would propound and defend the ideals of the Cultural Revolution to the end.’ Nevertheless, it was Mao who first described Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wen Yuan and Wang Hongwen as the ‘Gang of Four’ and made a series of scathing attacks on the group during 1974 and 1975. By the end of 1975, Mao was seriously ill with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease. The inevitable succession crisis escalated the confrontation between the contending factions.

Jiang vs. Zhou: Art, 1970-1976

After Lin’s death, Jiang Qing and her clique assumed control over the CCRG and the artistic and cultural life of China. The cultural policies of the previous five years

continued - albeit within the context of a more orderly environment - but Lin and the moderate Zhou were now the recognised enemies. 'Homage to Mao was still obligatory' (Laing 1988, 71), although the prior predominance of the PLA as both subject and producer of art faded away, reflecting the wider political field. Amateur art once again returned to the fore. Peasant Painting and the equally formulaic Socialist Realism were to dominate cultural production until Mao's death in 1976.

Themes were heroic and dramatic. Human subjects were dynamic, strong, healthy, and indefatigable, smiling broadly or determinedly serious, be they engaged in factory or farm work, political study or at leisure. Colours were bright and gaudy. Industrial and agrarian scenes were equally utopian, scenes of abundance and advancement were *de rigueur*. Cultural production continued to follow the 'three prominences' as defined by Jiang's reformed Beijing Opera. These 'model works' continued to operate as cultural arbiters. 'The Red Detachment of Women' was performed in front of Richard Nixon and made into a film, along with 'The White-haired Girl', 'lavish spectacles shot in widescreen and eye-popping colour in an attempt to outdo the MGM musicals in scale and production values' (Macnab 2005) (see figure 13). The film versions reached new audiences. In the countryside, in addition to touring opera productions, the films - in glorious Technicolor - were shown at communal screenings, generating enormous excitement. For there was literally 'nothing else to see' (Anon n.d., cited by Macnab 2005).

During the early 70s peasant painting was revitalised at Huxian in Shaanxi province (see figures 23 and 24). Between 1972 and 1976, it became a model artist commune, nationally celebrated in much the same manner as the Daquai oilfields, or the

Dazhai agricultural commune, favourite subjects of artists during this period. An exhibition of this work toured internationally ‘giving unknowledgeable Westerners a distorted view of contemporary Chinese art’ (Laing 1988, 83), a manifestation of which will be examined in detail in the next chapter. As Jiang Qing’s pet project, peasant painting was promoted heavily at both home and abroad because it represented the triumph of socialism, the elimination of differences between town and country, workers and peasants, manual and intellectual labour: key themes of Mao Zedong Thought. ‘Mao had declared that anyone could be an artist; it was not a matter of talent, but simply of the will’ (Sullivan 1996, 147). The ostensibly amateur, untutored painters of Huxian ‘proved’ his contention. As such, peasant painters played a crucial role in the ‘Criticise Lin – Criticise Confucius’ campaign. Jiang posthumously accused Lin Biao of advocating the bourgeois view that the masses could not be creative. This ‘theory of genius’ (Laing 1988, 83) was disproved by peasant painting. Unlike their 1950s counterparts, it was later revealed (Landsberger 1999, 32) that these artists had received professional tuition and had copybooks at their disposal, but the cultural authorities promoted their paintings as ‘the spontaneous creation of untutored peasants’ (Sullivan 1996, 148). The naïve and engaging quality of the art produced by the original peasant painters of Pixian, was largely replaced with formulaic replication of set compositional features. ‘Standardization of art was desirable as a means of quelling the rise of individualism or personal style (always an elitist, bourgeois idea)’ (Laing 1988, 83).

Peasant painting was at the centre of the power struggle between Jiang and Zhou Enlai. During his period of pre-eminence, the latter approved the rehabilitation of some artists working in a traditional style. They were commissioned to decorate the walls at locations planned to play host to Nixon and his entourage. This so-called ‘Hotel School’

returned to traditional bird, flower and landscape themes. ‘There did not need to be pictures of peasants, workers, or soldiers with guns. ...Zhou claimed that there was an “inner” and an “outer” art. The former was for domestic Chinese, and the latter for foreign, international consumption’ (Laing 1988, 85).³¹

The first national exhibition of the Cultural Revolution movement held in Beijing in 1972 enshrined the predominance of peasant and worker art in the cultural canon. Indeed, the political emphasis on the proletariat ensured that most of the accepted submissions came not from professional artists, but amateurs instead (Andrews 1994, 359). Thereafter, a national exhibition promoting the best examples of politically correct work was held every year until Mao’s death. The stylistic and thematic uniformity, which reflected Jiang’s ‘rather limited taste’ (Andrews 1994, 367), dominated the Chinese art scene until 1979, when an underground avant-garde movement emerged. But, it also had an impact far beyond Chinese borders. For the style, ideology and collectivism of the art produced during this period, was to influence and inspire some members of the British left-wing, avant-garde artistic community in Britain. Before launching into that discussion, this thesis moves to contextually frame it within an analysis of the art historical and critical reception of contemporary Chinese art in the West.

Chinese Art: The Western Perspective

For many established Western art historians and critics, Chinese art history came to an abrupt halt in 1911. This was the year of the first Nationalist Revolution which brought

³¹ These paintings were later removed by Jiang and displayed as examples of ‘black’ painting, at an exhibition in Beijing during the spring of 1974 (Laing 1988, 85).

about the collapse of the Qing Dynasty. China ‘modernised’, encouraging its artists and craftspeople to engage with the Western art world, sponsoring individuals to travel to Europe to study and establish Western-style art schools. But to traditionalist Western art historians and sinologists, the direction of Chinese art in the first half of the twentieth century represented little more than moribund aping of traditional genres, or contemporary Western art. Although some artists including Qi Baishi and Li Keran achieved a little recognition in the West, in the view of many critics, Chinese art had become indelibly sullied by Western influence. It was no longer ‘authentic’ because it failed to correspond with their vision of Chinese art, which had been largely informed by the aesthetics of *chinoiserie* and export ware, not to mention contact with the ostentatious and non-native Qing court. In the post-1949 period and into the 1970s, Michael Sullivan was one of the very few of the older generation of Western writers on Chinese art to have actively engaged with revolutionary art. In 1973, Sullivan published a new edition of his 1961 book, *An Introduction to Chinese Art*. In that volume he offered a brief assessment of the contemporary arts scene in China – all of three paragraphs – depicting a country at an artistic crossroads. To the 1973 update, *The Arts of China*, he added a new chapter devoted to Twentieth Century Art. Writing after the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and Nixon’s visit, Sullivan offers a much deeper, critical analysis of revolutionary art, architecture and archaeology - albeit still only amounting to four pages of text - in which he discusses the impact of the political environment on Chinese artists and their role in the new society.

Nevertheless, Sullivan’s writing inevitably betrays a Euro-centric view of art, playing down overt political content and highlighting those aspects most appreciable and recognisable to his Western audience, for example the reinstated option to sign and

name one's work during the cultural 'thaw' overseen by Zhou Enlai after Lin Biao's disgrace, or the uplifting, spiritual aspects of art, as exemplified by Liu Chunhua's *Mao Goes to Anyuan* (see figure 16). Neither of these observations are erroneous; certainly the power and effectiveness of propaganda lies in its capacity to move and inspire, but it is interesting that he chose to focus on those aspects which have a correlation in the Western canon of art, in preference to an in-depth analysis of the aesthetic qualities and political intent of contemporaneous art from China. However, Sullivan's contribution is significant in comparison with other leading experts on Chinese art, among them Mary Tregear, William Watson and James Cahill, all of whom published tomes on Chinese art during the Cultural Revolution, or in the years immediately preceding and following that decade, yet entirely overlooked revolutionary art.

William Watson's *Style in the Arts of China* (1974) ends its narrative abruptly in 1912. Yet the collapse of the Qing Dynasty is not discussed (or even alluded to). The twentieth century is entirely absent from this study. There is not even the barest reference to the contemporary political situation in the book's introduction. Similarly, James Cahill's *Chinese Painting* (1960), ends its discussion in the eighteenth century, with no explanation, nor justification for this termination in the introduction or main text. Writing in 1980, Mary Tregear, in *Chinese Art* (1980) – which, was available, unrevised, into the mid-nineties - makes only the barest mention of post-Qing artists, giving a very brief overview of the woodblock movement inspired by European social expressionists. Her comment (in reference to the development of modernism in China during the 1920s and 30s) that 'With so much innovation and experimentation in the arts taking place everywhere else in the world, it is interesting to note that Chinese painting, on the whole, has remained self-sufficient within its own traditions' (Tregear

1980; 1995, 198) reveals that to Tregear, only Chinese art produced within the bounds of 'tradition' was legitimate for scholarly study. She goes on: 'For the present, at least, this Westernizing movement must be seen as short-lived and as having left little impression' (Tregear 1980; 1995, 198). Had this book been written in the mid-twentieth century such a statement would be excusable, but some thirty years after the foundation of the PRC it is, frankly, incredible.

These writers' omission of revolutionary art may not have been a deliberate dismissal of the work produced before and during the Cultural Revolution. Quite reasonably these writers may not have felt they had insufficient knowledge about these new genres of political art to write about them in any critical depth, not least because access to this material was contemporarily restricted. Yet, the three publications in question claim to be surveys of Chinese art. Not Tang Dynasty funerary ware, or Yuan Dynasty literati painting, but *all* of Chinese art. These are essentialised narratives based upon selections that represent those qualities considered to be authentically 'Chinese' from the authoritative perspective of the Western scholar of art, embedded in Orientalist discourse. Ignoring twentieth-century China, served to perpetuate deeply entrenched exoticised images of China and Chinese art rooted in the ancient past. It is clear that the mere fact that Sullivan even attempted a contemporaneous discussion of Maoist art as early as the mid-sixties, however minimal, was quite remarkable, given the wider context of art historical research on Chinese art at that time. Given that the primary source of information about contemporary China were the inherently propagandist publications of the Foreign Languages Press, there was a distinct lack of critical and balanced response to revolutionary Chinese art from established art historians. Thus, the mantle passed to younger, left-wing critics who were often equally uncritical and

biased, among them Guy Brett. As the next chapter will demonstrate, Brett was a key ‘mediator’ between Cultural Revolution visual culture and the exhibition-visiting British public.

Seventies Sinomania

In 1972, China was radical-chic. Beijing was a beacon of hope. Maoism was mesmerizing. Growing up in the rebellious sixties at the height of the Vietnam War protests, I had scant faith in the West. ...I reasoned, with the naïve logic of the young, that if our own governments were lying to us, their enemies must be telling the truth. ... I imagined only harmony and perfection in China.

(Wong 1996, 12)

The second half of the Cultural Revolution, the period ushered in by Nixon’s visit, created frenzied journalistic and academic interest in China, a kind of latter-day Sinomania: ‘A great deal was written and, although most works were not individually image-creating in their own time, the cumulative effect did help to alter popular images of China’ (Mackerras 1999, 101). An interesting phenomenon, critical to the development of the utopian vision to Cultural Revolution-era China that emerged in this period, was the China memoir. Reminiscent of those published in the nineteenth century and the 1930s, the authors of these first-hand accounts, most of which emerged following the reopening of diplomatic relations between the US and China, frequently wrote evocative accounts of contemporary life in China, largely positive – often with evangelical zeal - in a style somewhat couched in the derring-do and pioneering spirit of their literary predecessors. Similarly, these accounts tend, as Pennycook has identified,

to ‘reveal more about the Self than any lived experiences of the Other’ (Pennycook 1998, 174). And like their Victorian predecessors, through their writings, these new visitors revealed China to audiences at home, making ‘the reality... itself more visible than it had been since the Communist regime first came to power’ (Isaacs 1980, xiv). Albeit a heavily stage-managed version of ‘China’.

Writing in 1982, Harding argues that Americans - and it can be safely assumed many Western Europeans too - retained a largely positive view of China throughout the 1970s. Closed to most, China could manipulate the experiences of the small numbers of diplomats and delegations that made short-term visits to China after the thaw of political relations between the US and China in the early 70s. These ‘revolutionary tourists’ (Harding 1982, 947), were subject to strictly controlled itineraries which included ‘briefings’ on contemporary Chinese society as well as visits to cultural monuments, such as the Great Wall (Harding 1982, 947). Western visitors were:

...simply flattered by being introduced to leading Chinese officials; given opportunities to meet and talk with “ordinary” Chinese workers, peasants, and students; ministered to by warm and friendly guides who showed a genuine concern for their comfort and well-being; treated to the best hotels and meals that China had to offer; asked for their understanding of China’s shortcomings and their suggestions as how China might overcome them; insulated from any evidence of the worst poverty in the country; and kept busy from dawn to dusk with a program that was both interesting and varied.

(Harding 1982, 947-948.)

Thus, the abiding image these few, frequently sympathetic Westerners took from their time in China was of an egalitarian, almost utopian society; where the economic divisions between skilled and unskilled workers had been eradicated and where ‘...the basic necessities of life – food, medical care, education, shelter – were provided at minimal charge and in adequate amounts to every citizen’ (Harding 1982, 937). There were, according to these accounts, ‘no slums, no beggars, no hunger, no crime, and no flies in the new China’ (Harding 1982, 937). As ‘seeing is believing’, ‘...the favorable images produced by “revolutionary tourism” immediately became more credible than the less favorable ones produced by scholarship at a distance’ (Harding 1982, 953). Thus a lack of independent and unbiased reporting of the Cultural Revolution and conditions within China, meant that academics and journalists alike continued to rely upon reports compiled by the official Chinese press, ‘...all of which stressed the noble aims and lofty accomplishments of the Cultural Revolution’ (Harding 1982, 947).

The regime undoubtedly calculated who would be most useful to these ends, only releasing a limited number of visas. Shirley MacClaine, the American actress and left-wing activist, has written of how in October 1971 she was personally invited to visit China by the Chinese Foreign Minister at a luncheon in New York. ‘ “Actors and actresses and writers,” he said, “are capable of influencing masses of people *and* public opinion, because they represent what the people want. And they are loved besides. I think it would be a good idea for you to come to China” ’ (MacClaine 1975, 114). To China she went, heading up the first American delegation of ‘regular’ women in 1972. Many such writers were comfortable becoming mouthpieces for the PRC’s public relations drive. MacClaine admits that her goal was to make China accessible to Westerners whom were unable to travel there themselves (MacClaine 1975, 133).

Harding believes that Westerners – naively, or through lack of contradictory evidence – wanted to believe that ‘the idealistic policy pronouncements of the Chinese leadership were instantly translated into social and political reality... We confused, in other words, policy with performance, and intentions with outcomes, even though we carefully made such distinctions when we criticized our own society’ (Harding 1982, 944).

It was during this period that Edgar Snow’s seminal account of pre-revolution Chinese communism, *Red Star Over China*, regained popularity. In the 1930s it had, to all intents and purposes, begun the Western hagiology of Mao Zedong. Snow was encouraged by the Chinese regime, in spite of official US disapproval, to return to China in 1960 for the first time since the end of the Second World War. Perceived by the regime to be a strong critic of Soviet policy – indeed he was banned from entering the USSR for the duration of Stalin’s lifetime (Snow 1970, 24) - he was approached with the hope that he could reproduce his earlier success in bridging the gap between East and West, by helping to further China’s so-far failed attempts to open talks with the Eisenhower administration. Snow certainly saw himself as an intermediary: someone ‘friendly to both China and its government’ (Mackerras 1999, 91). The result was *Red China Today*, (also published as *The Other Side of the River*) first published in Britain in 1963, with a revised edition appearing in 1970, a year before Snow’s death. While it has been described as ‘in retrospect,...a futile attempt...to recreate the unique spirit, setting and effect of an earlier time when Snow and the revolution were in their buoyant youth’ (Thomas 1996, 3) it was, undoubtedly, an influential vehicle for positive images of China throughout this period.

Snow felt he was ‘professionally destroyed’ by the Cold War and his fame never quite reached the heights in the 1960s and 70s, that it had in the 30s and 40s. Nevertheless, against the backdrop of the contemporary re-emergence of Mao as a political force and an icon of revolution, Snow’s best known work, *Red Star Over China*, was revised and enlarged, and posthumously republished in Britain by Penguin in 1968, at the apogee of the protest movement. This revised version (see figure 19) was reprinted in 1972, featuring a cover which emulated the visual proforma of radical chic, Jim Fitzpatrick’s two-tone, posterised version of Korda’s famous portrait of Che Guevara. In 1979 Ch’en (55) wrote that ‘forty years after its first publication, it continues to inspire young radicals and to shape the image of Chinese communism’. Both Jan Wong, a Canadian-Chinese writer who, in 1972 was one of the first Westerners to enrol at Beijing University, and MacClaine cite the importance of Edgar Snow in the development of their utopian visions of Mao’s China. Also influential was Han Suyin, a Chinese-born novelist and historian of mixed Chinese-American heritage, famous for the novel *A Many-Splendored Thing* (1951)³² and several tomes about Mao and the Cultural Revolution. Nixon’s ground-breaking visit to the PRC was an equally potent image-maker: ‘When President Richard Nixon visited China in 1972, the hardened, cynical U.S. press corps accompanying him went ‘ga-ga.’ If you threw out a razor blade, the reports went, it would be returned to you at a later stop’ (Wong 1996, 14).

³² A fictional story of a love-affair between a British journalist and a Chinese–European woman, which gives a very positive view of the potential benefits to Chinese society that the CCP would bring. It should be noted that Han Suyin’s pro-Mao/pro-CCP tone was to change in later years.

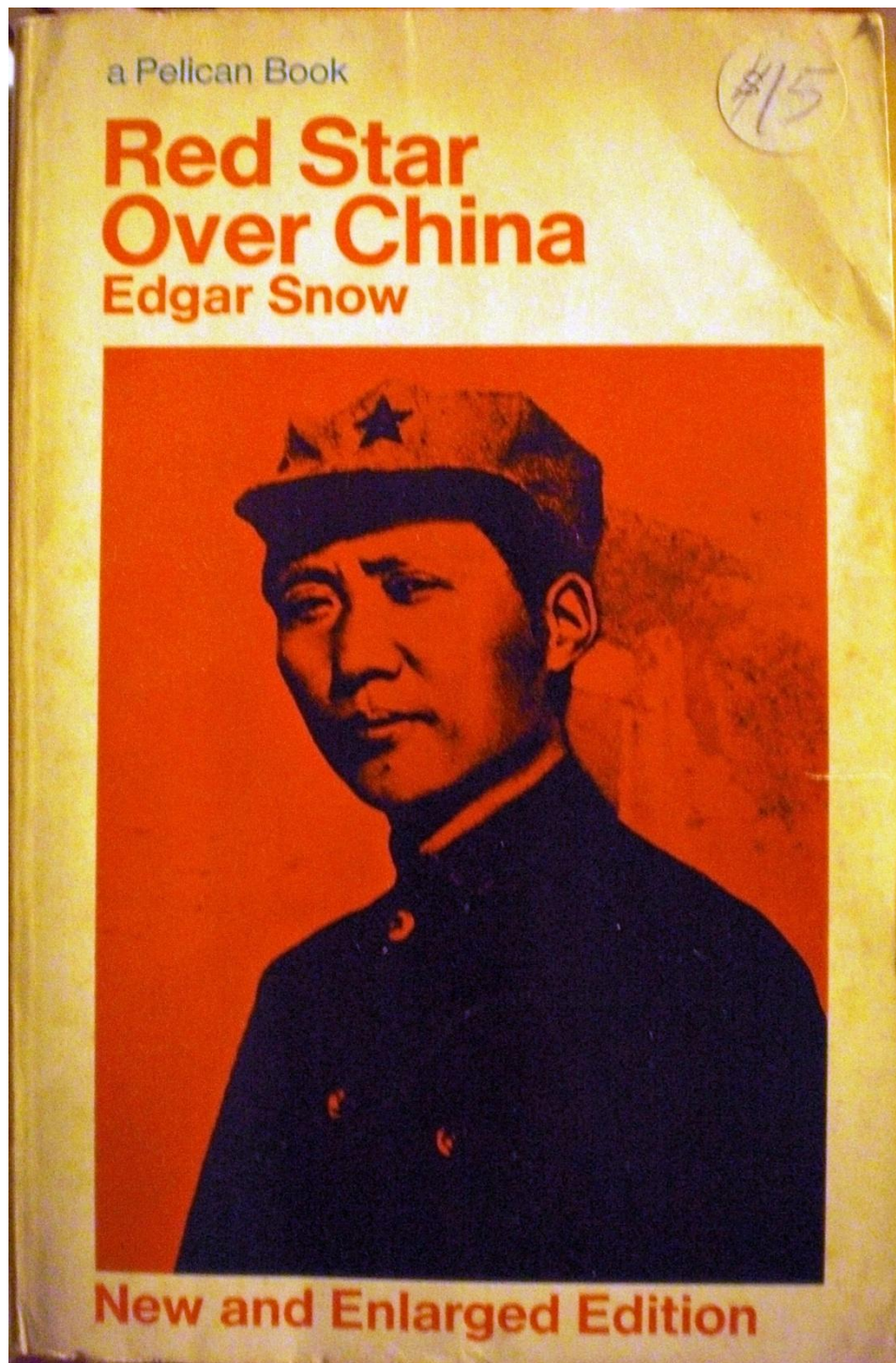


Figure 19: Cover of 1972 edition of *Red Star Over China* by Edgar Snow.

American visitors to China, and presumably their British counterparts too, came away with ‘...a sense of harmony and unity, vigor and dedication which they contrasted with the elitism, competitiveness, and moral uncertainty of their own society’ (Harding

1982, 938). Mao, and his Cultural Revolution, were described in ‘the most glowing terms.’ In reports and memoirs, he was depicted as ‘...a Chinese philosopher-king: a poet, statesman, strategist, and sage who was grappling with some of the most profound social and moral issues of modern times’ (Harding 1982, 939.) The less pleasant aspects of the Cultural Revolution were recognised, but the general consensus was that ‘...its human and economic costs were both necessary and tolerable’ (Harding 1982, 939). Upon her return to Canada after her first trip to China, despite the hardships and injustices she had witnessed, Wong was still prepared to proselytize for the PRC:

By this time I thought I was Chinese. I got myself a Chinese-American boyfriend. I went to Chinese movies and read every book I could about China. I took courses in Chinese history, philosophy and politics. That spring, I ran for president of the McGill Chinese Students Association. I won, even though I campaigned in Mao suits..., I joined the university lecture circuit, speaking to audiences in Canada and the U.S. I didn’t mention anything negative, certainly not the Pyongyang panty thief, or my confiscated Newsweeks, or my near-expulsion for seeing another foreigner. Instead, I spoke glowingly about shovelling pig manure and combating selfishness. I didn’t think it was wrong to present a one-sided picture. I was just trying to muster public support for China, which I still believed was the only place in the world doing anything right. The audiences reinforced my convictions by hanging on every word and rarely asking a critical question.

(Wong 1996, 116)

Here is evidence of a renewed utopian-Orientalism, the like of which had not meaningfully contributed to Western images of China since the eighteenth-century. As Jenkins emphasises:

...I like many others, came to have hopes about Maoist China which only partly reflected what was happening there. Our expectations about China largely reflected our concern about our own society. We focussed on China and on those things we wanted to believe in, e.g. the integration of the peasantry in national life, the growing emancipation of women, the bringing of medical care to the rural areas. We neglected to consider or explain away the persecution of the intellectuals and national minorities, forced labour camps, executions and the very real material poverty of China.

(Jenkins 1984, 2)

Retrospective apologia perhaps? Both Wong and Jenkins committed these reminiscences to paper after Mao's death in a very different climate of revisionism and figurative self-flagellation. But, what their reflections do provide is a real sense of the romanticism, idealism and utopianism projected onto Mao's China by disenchanted and disaffected Western youth. Chow has described the Western Maoist as the 'special sibling' of the Orientalist and, drawing upon Arif Dirlik, the Western interpretation of Cultural Revolution-era China as a 'Third Worldist fantasy' (Chow 1993, 10).

Amid a tide of plaudits and accolades for the Maoist regime, there was a prominent voice of scathing dissent, the Belgian-born sinologist and literary critic Pierre

Ryckmans writing as Simon Leys. He accuses Westerners of simply doing what they had always done with regards to China, of worshipping at the altar of power, supporting the status quo. He argues that by the advent of the Cultural Revolution, Mao, formerly perceived as ‘alternately non-existent or an ogre’ by Western commentators, had become as reactionary and archaic as any of his predecessors and, thus, Westerners ‘flocked to his court’ (Leys 1981, 8). I would disagree with this assessment to some extent. Certainly, as thesis has so far demonstrated, Mao – and the Chinese Communist Party – received some very complimentary coverage in Britain during the thirties and forties. But, I take Leys point, in so far as it reemphasises the blinkered idealism of sympathetic Westerners. The narrowness of their view was not always immediately apparent, even to themselves. Or, to take cynic Ley’s position, it was not in their interests to deviate from the PRC’s preferred self-vision. As ‘philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment brandished the name of Confucius’, Western so-called Maoists ‘seem equally unwilling to enquire into the historical truth of Maoism, no doubt fearing that to meet reality face to face might harm the myth that so conveniently excuses them from having to think for themselves’ (Leys 1981, 9). Leys is equally critical of the art of the Cultural Revolution. He recounts, in biting satire, an apocryphal tale about the famous Cultural Revolution model work *Mao Goes to Anyuan* (see figure 16):

The fascination of the “proletarian headquarters” with the putrefied aesthetics of the European petty bourgeoisie of the nineteenth-century, piously assimilated and retransmitted by the Soviet Union, is also manifested in painting: the masterpiece which has been presented for the admiration of the masses is a sickly oil-painting (one is tempted to call it a painting in margarine) representing “The Young Mao Tse-Tung on the Road to Anyuan”. Thus all good red families

must in future hang a revolutionary Bouguereau above the revolutionary piano. The work is so affected, so sugary and so out-of-date that one of the countless reproductions sent to Europe got lost in the Vatican and was hung in one of the Pope's waiting-rooms by a priest, who in all good faith thought it was a picture of a missionary.

(Leys 1981, 132)

But, among China watchers, Leys' jaded pessimism was uncommon. The majority moved to write and publish on the subject of the Cultural Revolution did so from a perspective of curiosity and sympathetic enthusiasm.

The growing accessibility and role of television in the creation and propagation of news and information during the 60s and 70s, coupled with increased access to the country, led to the production of some highly influential documentary films about China and Mao. Those made for, and shown on, British television increased with some rapidity from the early 70s, perhaps indicating the strength of public interest in Mao's China. Film-makers were subject to similar restrictions faced by other foreign visitors: visas and the associated permissions and certifications were difficult to get and highly prized. One can only imagine, therefore, that the lucky few were keen to maintain good relations with their hosts. But subtle criticism could be expressed provided it went undetected by the Chinese authorities. To give one example, 'Lawrence in China' presented by Anthony Lawrence, the BBC's China correspondent based in Hong Kong, recorded his one week visit to Canton in 1971 in a forty minute special shown on BBC1. Lawrence gave the Chinese authorities a list of what he wanted to see. 'They nodded politely and said "Now we will tell you what you are going to get"' (Lawrence

1983, cited by Jenkins and Grant 1984, 2). Accordingly, Lawrence and his crew received ‘a compressed and varied view of “China”’ (Jenkins & Grant 1984, 55). They visited a jade carving factory, fertiliser plant, rice producers, the site of a dam in construction, and were given insights into family planning and ‘education’ (through labour). Lawrence expresses his scepticism through subtle caveats like ‘they took me to...’, ‘they told me’, ‘all may not be as we are shown or told’ (see Jenkins and Grant 1984, 56).

A further compelling example is provided by the dramatised documentary ‘A Subject of Struggle’, made by Granada for ITV and broadcast on 26th September 1972. The eponymous ‘subject’, played by the British Chinese actress Tsai Chin (aka Irene Chow),³³ was Liu Shaoqi’s wife Wang Guangmei. Wang, a CCP mid-level cadre and former member of the work teams sent to recover control of campuses and workplaces during ‘the fifty days’ in 1966, was later seized and publically ‘struggled’ by Red Guards. The documentary was based upon ‘authentic transcripts and dialogue’ (Tweedie 1972, 9). A review by the *Guardian*’s Jill Tweedie sheds light on contemporary images of China and ideas of Chineseness, particularly that perpetual fascination with the perceived mystery of China. Nixon’s visit opened it, but China was not yet laid bare to Westerners. The programme was ‘a rare attempt to throw light on a corner of what...is a darker continent than ever Africa was’. The background philosophy is described by Tweedie (1972, 9) as ‘unfamiliar’ to the ‘English...nothing Chinese is obvious to us’. But here there is also evidence of an older vision of China in contrast to utopian idealism. A dystopian image of the Chinese as ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘inhuman’ (Tweedie 1972, 9) that owes much to the sensationalist characterisations of the Yellow

³³ At this time, Tsai Chin was, aside from her career as a recording artist, best known for her cinematic portrayal of Fu Manchu’s daughter, alongside Christopher Lee in the eponymous role.

Peril myth, although Tweddle goes on with some effort to make comprehensible the scenes dramatised on her television screen, by finding Western parallels in the behaviour of the Red Guards.

Consumption of Revolutionary Visual Culture

For some reason, the Chinese were the good guys of communism. The Russians were the bad guys. They had gulags and a menacing secret police called the KGB. The Chinese had pandas and an army in sneakers. Mao was cute, a cultural icon, like Marilyn Monroe. Andy Warhol had never made a silkscreen of Brezhnev.

(Wong 1996, 15)

In much the same way as the visual conventions of Fitzpatrick's posterised 'Che' (1967) became a trope of revolution, Cushing (2007, 16-17) argues that the 'vernacular' of the Cultural Revolution-era propaganda poster was similarly used from the late 60s and into the 70s in new Western contexts; appropriated by radical organisations including the Black Panthers and others working for the interests of the disenfranchised in society. The posters served as 'cultural tokens' of revolutionary spirit, even where the finer details of the Chinese revolution and Mao Zedong Thought were not well known. Within the context of the Western graphic movement, psychedelia, pop art and the ubiquity of the Che poster, Chinese propaganda posters found a ready-market. As one Chinese-American 70s activist has described, the style was not 'over-the-top', as it may appear to contemporary eyes: 'in the context of the seventies...it was actually pretty cool' (Louie n.d., cited by Cushing 2007, 20). For the British Maoist, posters and

publications were stocked by a small number of radical bookshops, among them 'Banner Books and Crafts' in Camden and 'Progressive Books and Periodicals' on the Old Kent Road.

The Foreign Languages Press, set up in 1952, was the primary vehicle for the dissemination of approved information about China to the outside world. It produced publications, including the famous 'Little Red Book' - Mao's quotations compiled by Lin Biao - and 'Selected Works', for Western consumption. The China Welfare Institute, an organisation set up in 1939 by Soong Ching-ling (Madame Sun Yat-Sen), published the monthly periodical *China Reconstructs*, from 1952 (since 1990 called *China Today*), in six languages (Chinese, English, French, German, Arabic and Spanish). A similar magazine *China Pictorial* (since 1951) was published monthly in a remarkable sixteen languages (Chinese, Korean, Russian, English, German, French, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Hindi, Spanish, Arabic, Swedish, Swahili, Italian and Urdu) during the Cultural Revolution. Both magazines were strongly visual, glossy magazines for the 'general interest' market. Their photo stories and articles presented regurgitated Maoist ideology and domestic propaganda, on subjects as diverse as party conferences, anti-imperialist dictums, art, sports, the visits of foreign dignitaries, science, domestic campaigns, archaeological investigations, and even offered part-work Chinese language lessons. These were by no means the only journals published in English, *Chinese Literature*, as the name suggests, focused upon art and literature, and *Chinese Medical Journal*, medical and scientific research and development. Other publications, including *Peking Review* were aimed at a more serious Western audience, providing commentaries upon Maoist ideology and policy. As one of the few means by which Westerners could access information about the Cultural Revolution, they became

highly influential in the construction of the China-Utopia vision. Reader's letters, reproduced in *China Reconstructs*, give weight to this argument:

I wish I could express my feelings about China. For many years I have had great hopes, but now I can only say that the result of all the years of struggle is greater than I had dared to hope for, and your publication is the window into which I can look and see what is happening.

E.A. Matheissen, Ipswich, England

The article "Defeating the U.S. Flying Bandits" gave the north Vietnamese viewpoint of the war in Vietnam and told the truth about American aggression. British papers and magazines almost unanimously support the U.S.A., so to read your article was a refreshing change.

Paul A. Harris, Bolton, England
(*China Reconstructs* 1966)

I've learned how hard working and friendly the people of China are. I was brought up to consider them my enemies and I thought them backward. Now I realize how advanced (in culture and science) they are I feel if we were allowed to learn more of China, the fear of communism in this country would become non-existent.

D.H., Edinburgh, U.K.
(*China Reconstructs* 1972a)

As I had studied archaeology, I was thrilled to read about the excavations and discoveries made during the cultural revolution. The article was extremely informative and welcomed by many archaeologists and museum employees in

London (I know because I am working in a museum and we have been discussing China's archaeology). China has taught me a great deal about the study of history through art, how an art object does not exist alone but must be placed in its social context where it can reveal much about social conditions.

F.W., London, U.K.
(*China Reconstructs* 1972b)

From the mid-1970s, groups of British students were given the opportunity to study in China under the aegis of the British Council, including several individuals who were to become influential figures in the development of collections of Cultural Revolution-era material culture in Britain. Among them, Frances Wood, now Head of Chinese Collections at the British Library, recorded her sometimes surreal experiences in her autobiography, *Hand Grenade Practice in Peking: My part in the Cultural Revolution* (2000). She describes her fellow members of the 'young-persons delegation' organised by an NGO, the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding (SACU), the first student group to visit China since 1966, as 'very left-wing...with the odd worker':

The trip was relentlessly political and mainly consisted of sitting in hot steamy rooms being introduced to the members of hundreds of revolutionary committees and hearing interminable accounts of the progress and achievements of the Cultural Revolution in that particular city, factory, hospital, primary school or agricultural commune.

(Wood 2000, 20)

Unlike other foreign visitors to China around this time, Wood's account suggests that her group were relatively free to go where they wished and speak to whom they liked.

One imagines, as honoured guests it was anticipated that they would proselytize on behalf of the regime upon returning to their home countries. After the month-long trip came to an end, Wood successfully reapplied to the programme and studied in Beijing for a further year with the third group of British Council students, among them Rose Kerr, who was to become Head of the Far Eastern Department at the Victoria & Albert Museum and Craig Clunas, currently Professor of the History of Art at Oxford University, both key figures in the development of the Victoria and Albert Museum's (V&A) collection of revolutionary visual culture from China.

Wood's account is particularly cogent; she records purchases made, and why. For example, she attempts to buy a new alarm clock, preferably featuring Red Guards waving little red books and flags, but 'these had become unfashionable' (Wood 2000, 123). She saw similar items on her first trip to China in 1971. Instead she has to make do with plum blossoms. On another occasion Wood and a friend bike into the city with the express purpose of buying posters:

The best was a pretty scene of the origin of Chinese whispers, showing some soldiers knee deep in a lotus pond with huge pink blowsy lotus flowers and great sea-green leaves getting in their way. They were all holding their guns up out of the water and were apparently whispering to each other, "The enemy is up front, pass it on." There was also a snow scene, painted in a more active style, which was dominated by a soldier lurching forward, his furry army hat askew. Under the hat was a blood-soaked dressing, the end of which trailed behind him.

(Wood 2000, 125-126)

Later they find some enamel mugs with edifying statements such as ‘Friendship First, Competition Second’ and an orange plastic soap-dish decorated with revolutionary landscapes and the slogans ‘Learn from Dazhai’ and ‘Learn from Daqing’ (Wood 2000, 126). But these objects were not simply souvenirs, or ideological *aides-memoire*. Wood’s collecting in China presaged her career as a museum professional. She claims it was her hobby, ‘in order not to go mad,’ yet appears to have been largely motivated by an awareness that ‘political slogans could go in and out of fashion – having bought a Lin Biao mug in 1971’ (Wood, personal communication, 2007). Indeed, she returned to Britain with an ‘unrivalled’ collection of enamel mugs featuring revolutionary slogans (Wood 2000, 217). Further evidence of this museological approach is evidenced by her donation of some objects to the Museum of Mankind (including Cultural Revolution era underwear) and the British Library (posters) (personal communication 2007). Wood insists that far from the stereotypical ardent revolutionary, she always saw the ‘funny side of things’: ‘Posters depicting ridiculous heroism, paintings or cloth with factories belching smoke, an enamel tea-cup and saucer with a pattern of tractors (bumper harvest implied) arranged neatly around the rim’ (Wood, personal communication, 2007). Aside from visual identifier of personal ideology, this quote from Wood demonstrates a parallel strand of consumption, one which was to become increasingly significant after the collapse of communism in Europe: the repositioning of Cultural Revolution-era material culture and iconography as kitsch.

Into the kitsch category fall two rather surprising examples of the European appropriation of Red Guard ‘chic’, as reported by the *Daily Mirror*. The first being a collection of outfits for men and women designed by the fashion retailer Irvine Sellars and sold on Carnaby Street, London. These ‘Red Guard Suits’, in dark blue and dark

green, were to be made available in 'rough, hard-wearing denim with mandarin collars and caps to match' (Anon 1967e, 9). In response, a journalist quipped, 'Chairman Mao, who is more Red Guard than *avant-garde*, must be smarting over the fact that because of an absurd bourgeois fad, he has suddenly become with-it. As if he didn't have enough troubles' (Ward 1967). The second example, sub-titled 'The Thoughtful Stripper', was a particularly inspired subversion, juxtaposing Red Guard moralism with European burlesque. The Parisienne stripper Vaite Wong began her cabaret act by studiously reciting passages of Mao's thoughts on the freedom of women whilst wearing regulation PLA uniform, before launching into a striptease routine. With tongue firmly-in-cheek, the *Daily Mirror* reported that 'Audiences take Vaite most seriously. So maybe it really is cunning propaganda for The Cause' (Anon 1968b, 11).

The Hong Kong Factor: Kung-fu and Takeaways

One could argue that the simple fact that ping-pong was implicated in the reopening of East-West relations, lent an eccentric, somewhat surreal twist to Western imaginings of China. Indeed, beyond revolutionary ideology and art, there was a populist, less reverent, less worthy engagement with visual culture identified as Chinese, which contributed equally to British imaginings of China in the late twentieth century. An aspect of the Sinomania that swept Britain in the 1970s in which the cross-cultural character of Hong Kong was ascendant, was the martial arts film industry. The popularity of kung-fu lay in its combination of masculinity and pseudo-Eastern mysticism, which played upon popular notions of the exotic and spiritual Orient (Clegg

1994, 37). New heroes, Bruce Lee and Kwai Chang Caine, embodied a more positive image of the Chinese male to challenge Fu Manchu.³⁴

Yet, the British-Chinese community in Britain, which had been an important focus of Orientalist imagineering earlier in the twentieth century, fell from popular consciousness, despite its growth. The 1960s and 70s saw a rapid increase in the numbers of Hong Kongese immigrants following the *Immigration Act* (1962), which allowed resident Chinese to sponsor family members and friends. The vast majority went into the catering trade, which saw a concordant boom. One reason for British-Chinese community's lack of visibility may have been due to the dispersed nature of the community. Rather than congregating within 'Chinatowns', recent immigrants often set themselves up in business in areas where there was a niche in the take-away market. Sometimes this led to isolation, sometimes to greater assimilation than may have been possible in earlier decades. Chinese food, usually modified to suit British tastes, may have been considered somewhat 'exotic' in the 1960s, yet by the late 70s it had become entrenched in British society. Indeed, such a part of British eating habits that Marks & Spencer's began to stock Chinese ready-meals in 1974 (Marks & Spencer 2009). Roberts (2002, 194-195) identifies this trajectory as complimentary to the wider political relationship with China. A surge in the publication of Chinese cookery books followed Nixon's visit.

In the 1970s students were 'either interested in Taoism or Maoism, not Chinatowns' (Lee 1998, 102) and, unsurprisingly, the Embassy of the PRC had little to do with the Chinese community; during the 1960s and 70s most ethnic Chinese

³⁴ The latter was still current; a series of films based upon Sax Rohmer's books, starring Christopher Lee as the eponymous anti-hero were released between 1965 and 1969.

immigrants to Britain came from Hong Kong. However, several pro-Beijing Chinese organisations operated in Britain. The Workers' Club, founded before the Second World War, adopted a pro-communist stance during the 1960s and raised the Red Flag over its headquarters. Within its walls were displayed communist propaganda and it became known locally as the 'Communist Club', although the organisation denied that it was a political organisation (Benton and Gomez 2008, 246). Following Maoist agitation in Hong Kong, members of the Workers' Club organised street protests against British Imperialism, learnt quotations from Mao and staged a revolutionary opera. 'Just as the Cultural Revolution in China owed its energy as much to social injustice as to Maoist instigation, so the inequalities of Chinatown and the indignities of a life spent waiting on the British were fertile ground for Red Guard-style sentiments' (Benton and Gomez 2008, 249).

Agit-art? Left-wing Radical Artists and Maoist Visual Culture

It would be naïve to argue that art criticism and the work of individual artists during this period had much impact upon the average Briton's imagination. Their influence was more subtle, and reflective of a broader counter-culture closely associated with left-wing politics and under the influence of Maoism among other revolutionary doctrines. The late 60s and early 70s witnessed a paradigm shift, from modernism to post-modernism: an opportunity for progressives *and* reactionaries (Walker 2002, 8) in all arenas of British life, not just radical politics. The 1970s were the hangover after the optimism-driven social and cultural binge that was the Sixties. Daily life became anxious and depressed; the sterling crisis, high inflation, escalating unemployment, industrial strife and the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland (Walker 2002, 13) affected the mood of the nation. The old certainties were challenged. The grand narratives were

dismantled, simultaneously stimulating and unsettling. In art history, these wider social and cultural changes were reflected by the BBC series *Ways of Seeing* – the ‘first socialist analysis of art on television’ (Walker 2002, 67) - and the accompanying book by John Berger, which helped to transform a field of study which had been impenetrably elitist. Berger’s analysis offered a broadened understanding of the definition of art. He treated so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ art equally. The book, from a populist publisher, is deliberately non-intellectual. It focuses predominantly on visual images which are used to illustrate the ‘points being made’ and can, as the ‘Notes to the reader’ explain, be read in any order (Berger 1972, 5). Its mission is to prompt the reader to question, to think for themselves.

Parallel to the increasing visibility of Afro-Asian artists working in Britain, and in the spirit of the pluralism of the Seventies and the political ideology that often accompanied it, was a nascent recognition of the visual culture of revolution as ‘art’, made manifest in exhibition and critical analysis. An early exhibition of this genre was *Art in Revolution: Soviet Art and Design Since 1917* at the Hayward Gallery in 1971. The 70s also saw a series of conferences on art and politics.³⁵ Home-grown, *ersatz* communist visual culture came into its own. Many of the artists working during this period had been at college during the 1960s and were influenced by student activism (Walker 2002, 12). An understanding that all art is ‘political’ emerged, that all art is ideological and has political implications, be it representationally complex and self-reflective, or agit-prop (Walker 2002, 4, 7). Social relevance and function were privileged over formalism. While the connection may not be explicit, it is interesting to note the similarity between this ideological standpoint and the role of art, as the ‘cogs

³⁵ These included the RCA Conference, ‘Art/Politics: Theory/Practice’ (May 1974).

and wheels' of the Chinese Revolution. In both contexts art became a weapon for social and political change.

By no means was all art produced during this period ideologically of the Left, of course, but it can be argued that left-wing art reached new heights of penetration and public awareness during this period, encouraging new 'democratic' forms of art (such as performance, audio-visual work and the increasing appropriation and manipulation of mass media images), the rise of public art, community-based projects and the unionisation of artists and designers. The controversial³⁶ League of Socialist Artists founded in London in August 1971 by self-proclaimed worker-artists and affiliated with the Maoist Marxist-Leninist Organisation of Britain (Walker 2002, 51), made explicit the link between art and Marxist revolution, producing socialist realist works and polemical manifestoes (Walker 2002, 51), and selling revolutionary posters from their headquarters in Camberwell. Another short-lived group based at Central St Martin's explored Mao's writings on art in their quest to close the gap between theory and practice through the creation of consciously political and politically conscious work (Walker 2002, 164).

Several individual artists working in Britain reflected positively upon the Chinese Cultural Revolution in their work, using the utopian vision of Mao's China as a mirror by which to expose the perceived injustices and inequalities of Britain. Victor Burgin produced a series of images accompanied by text and subtext entitled *Lei Feng* (1973-4), after the pet soldier-hero of Chinese propagandists (see figure 20). The series was exhibited at the Lisson Gallery in London, May-June 1974. *Lei Feng* comprised

³⁶ A £200 British Council grant, awarded to the LSA for members to travel to Berlin to attend the opening of a show they had curated, prompted questions in the house from an 'irate Conservative MP' (Walker 2002, 52-53).

nine copies of the same photographic image appropriated from an advert for Harvey's Bristol Cream, depicting a middle class family toasting the daughter's success as a Vogue cover model. Subtitling each image is a segment of text from a Chinese text book extolling the achievements of the eponymous hero. Accompanying the text/image is a 'meta-commentary' from Burgin in which he discusses semiotics and the creation of antitheses between East and West (Walker 2002, 120-121), particularly with reference to the concept of success. Burgin's goal, in the creation of *Lei Feng* was to explore 'the guerrilla rhetoric with which the socialist artist confronts the antithetical ideologies of the capitalist society which surrounds him' (Burgin 1976, cited by TATE n.d.).³⁷

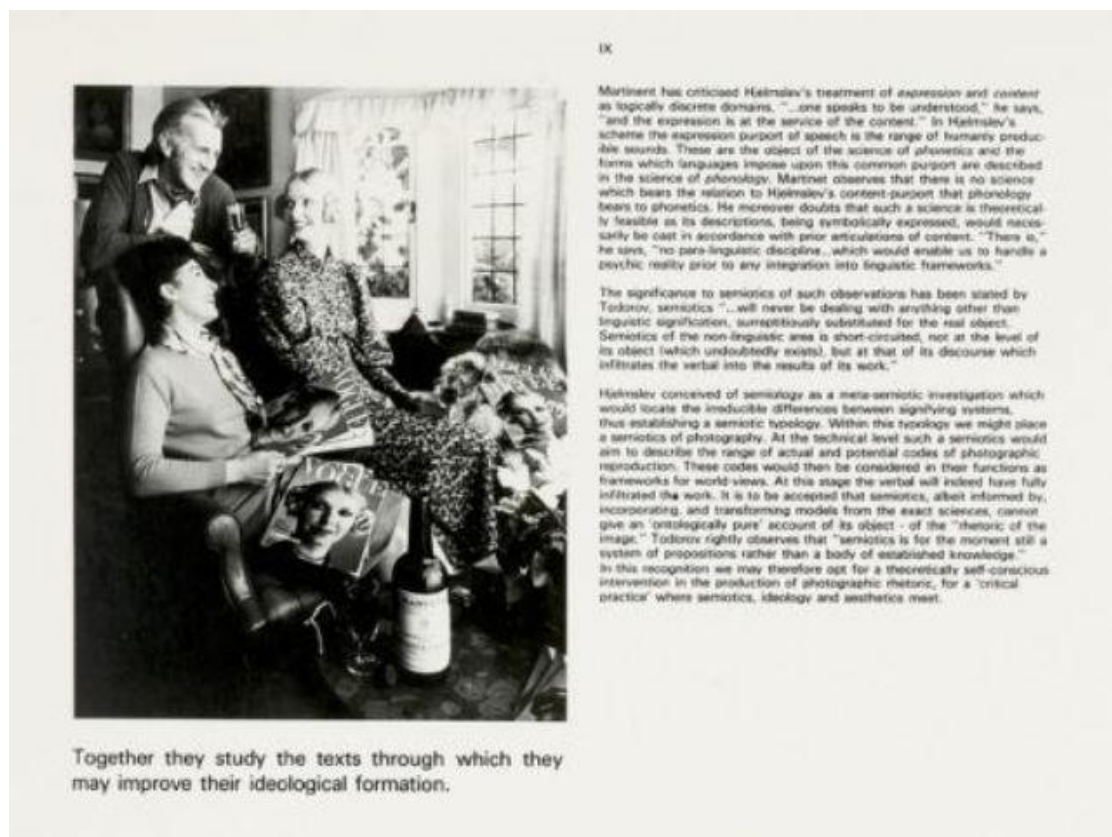


Figure 20: Image from *Lei Feng* , Victor Burgin (1974)

³⁷ Interestingly, Burgin was, at the time, a lecturer at the Polytechnic of Central London, now the University of Westminster, and home to a major Chinese poster collection (to be discussed in the next section of this thesis) from 1979.

The Philippines-born artist of Chinese descent, David Medalla, inspired by his travels in Asia and Africa where he had studied and collected national and popular art forms with his collaborator John Dugger, frequently expressed his then personal endorsement of Marxist-Maoist ideology in his work (Walker 2002, 47). Much of his work encourages audience participation, and one such project, *A Stitch in Time* (1968), exhibited/re-enacted by Medalla many times during the intervening decades, was inspired by *dazibao* (see figure 21).



Figure 21: *A Stitch in Time* (1972 performance), David Medalla.

Medalla and Dugger started their own socialist art organisation, the 'Artists' Liberation Front' (ALF) on May Day 1971. Their slogan was 'Socialist art through socialist revolution' (Walker 2002, 86). Both were involved with the 'Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding' – a largely business-led organisation – by which affiliation Dugger was permitted to visit China as part of a Society delegation in 1972. Exhilarated by the experience, he 'returned to Britain determined to adapt Maoist principles to the very different context of the West' (Walker 2002, 87). Medalla had spent eighteen months living in China during the very early seventies, by virtue of his Filipino nationality.

A journalistic record (Tisdall 1972, 10) of Dugger's trip highlights the differences he found between the life of a practising artist in Britain, and the lot of Chinese artists: differences which could, it is implied, only work for good if adopted in the West. Artists in China were, the article reports, financially supported by government, their role in society was clear; they actively participated in society and courted popularity. Mao's active engagement in the art world was perceived as a reflection of his own creative expression as a poet and a positive aspect of his leadership. The Western image of the artist as alienated loner would hold no currency in China. Yet, it remained clearly difficult for the British arts correspondent to understand Chinese revolutionary art beyond the bounds of Western art criticism. She selects the term 'agit-art' (Tisdall 1972, 10) to describe it. She also seeks to contradict the image of contemporary Chinese art in the West being enormous portraits of Mao and big character posters (which clearly carry less artistic validity in her opinion). The article ignores the plight of artists during the earlier years of the Cultural Revolution, and is keen to present a view of the contemporary Chinese art world fully engaged with Maoism within a context of mutual, mass collaboration. In response, Medalla and

Dugger performed *People Weave a House!* at the ICA during November and December 1972. The project employed the rhetoric of Maoism³⁸ ‘to raise artistic and political consciousness and to demonstrate the value of communal labour’ (Walker 2002, 89) (see figure 22).

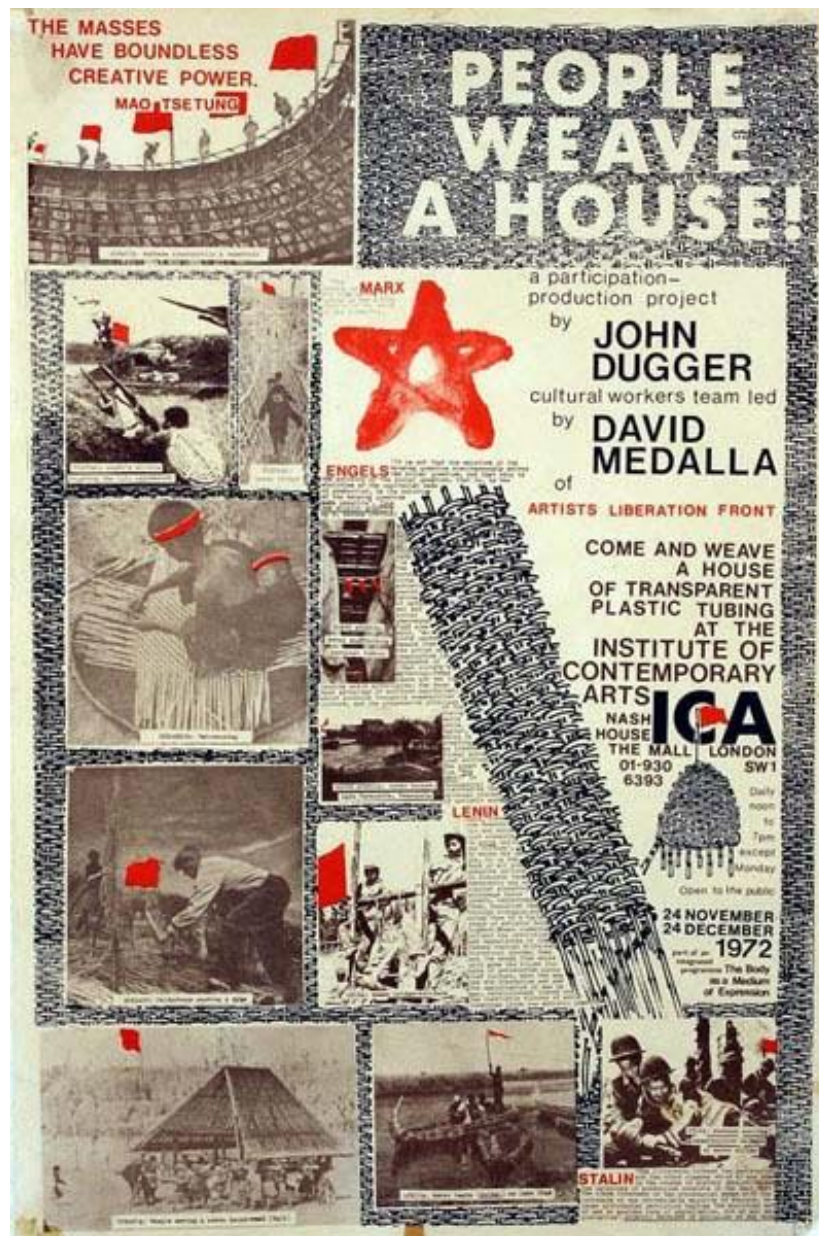


Figure 22: Publicity poster for *People Weave a House!* (1972), Dugger and Medalla.

³⁸ For example, describing the teams of workers as ‘production brigades’.

Death Throes

Zhou Enlai died on 8th January 1976 at the age of 78. Public mourning was suppressed for several months by the ‘Gang of Four’ until March, when thousands of people congregated at the Monument to the People’s Heroes on Tiananmen Square and laid handmade wreaths of paper and silk flowers. This heartfelt response alarmed the Gang of Four; ‘the people had mobilized for Zhou but equally against them’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 423). Posters and dedications left at the site mostly eulogised Zhou, but some openly criticised Jiang Qing and her clique. MacFarquhar and Schoenhals (2006, 424) note that the juxtaposition of these tributes with the portrait of Mao overlooking Tiananmen Square implicitly rejected Maoism. The removal and incineration of posters and tributes at the beginning of April prompted angry scenes and arrests. On April 5th around 1,000 people (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 425) gathered to demand the return of the wreaths and the release of those arrested. Those that ignored warnings to leave the Square were beaten up and imprisoned. When information about this first Tiananmen Incident was released three days later, the *People’s Daily*, overseen by the radical Yao Wenyuan, portrayed the incident as a crackdown upon counter-revolutionary elements. The incident unleashed a new cycle of purges and arrests around the country: anyone perceived to be harbouring counter-revolutionary ideas and/or being guilty of supporting either Zhou, or Deng, or of criticising Jiang or Mao, was investigated. A series of public rallies were organised by the radicals in an attempt to stamp down and correct counterrevolutionary and bourgeois thinking.

The End of Mao

Mao's death in 1976, at the age of 82, was preceded on July 28th by a massive earthquake centred upon northern China. While Hua Guofeng organised and led the relief mission, the radicals, aware that in a post-Mao China their days would be numbered, complained that the earthquake was overshadowing their anti-Deng, anti-Zhou campaign. Yao Wenyuan actively suppressed many articles on the relief operation from publication (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 436): 'Ten years as Mao's powerful courtiers generating the chaos of the Cultural Revolution from Beijing had infected them [the Gang of Four] with hubris... [But] The Gang controlled neither the military nor the party organizational apparatus. The Gang had forgotten that their power in Beijing was merely a reflection of Mao's, not their own, authority' (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 439). Mao died at ten minutes past midnight on 9th September 1976. The news was made public by *Xinhua* at 4pm the same day. The public response was 'muted' (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 441), a starkly different reaction than that which had met the passing of Zhou. Fearing that the Gang of Four would attempt to seize power, Hua first moved to isolate Jiang Qing, and then ordered the Gang's arrest on 4th October. With that, the Cultural Revolution concluded.

In Britain, Mao's death was reported with the respect due to a head of state. In the following days commentators wrote of his legacy. Personal feelings aside, the general consensus was that Mao had been a great leader, who had pulled China out of poverty and subjugation, to become an emergent super-power. John Gittings (1976, 1) described Mao as 'a complex man behind simple slogans'. *The Times*' obituary concluded that 'His great service to China was to give his country what it longed for after a century of chaos and indecision – the revolutionary leadership, the strategy, and

the doctrine that could inspire its regeneration' (Anon 1976a, 6). In the *Daily Mirror* Mao was described as 'a statesman, a brilliant military commander, a poet, a philosopher and politician. But to the very last Mao remained above all a peasant, a patriot and a revolutionary' (Davies 1976, 2). On 11th September, to mark Mao's state funeral, BBC2 replaced its advertised schedule with a three-hour French made-for-television film, *The Rise of Mao Tse-Tung*. After the arrest of Jiang and the other members of the Gang of Four, British papers' attention was refocused upon titbits of scandal and gossip about Jiang circulating China. How she was 'playing poker, watching foreign films, and practicing photography' (Gittings 1976b, 3) while Mao lay dying. How she had nagged her husband to death (Anon 1976b, 13). But for the most part, during this interregnum period, the British papers speculated on the future leadership of China, anticipating that the transition of power would be a protracted struggle, fraught with unrest and upheaval. The image of China they projected to their readership during these months gave an impression (justifiably so) that China had a long way to go before it reached political stability.

Conclusion

In China, the period 1970-1976 was characterised by the struggle for power, fuelled by the succession crisis prompted by the death of Lin Biao. Closed lines of communication between Britain and China reopened with Nixon's visit and the establishment of a full Sino-British diplomatic relationship. These events contributed to a shift in images of China and unleashed a tide of Sinomania: the publication of a host of books, opportunities for British students to study in China and access to its radical-chic visual culture. Through both activism and art, there ran a strong thread of left-wing consciousness. These streams of influence fed into the reception of the exhibition

Peasant Paintings from Hu County. The next chapter will go on to discuss this exhibition, and its impact upon the development of utopian visions of contemporaneous China in greater depth. As a large-scale and high profile exhibition of Cultural Revolution art in Britain, its analysis is crucial to this thesis; prior to the revision of the Cultural Revolution enforced by Deng Xiaoping's post-Mao administration, the exhibition's interpretative bent closely matched the view of the Cultural Revolution held by sympathetic observers in Britain, eager for evidence of the successful application of Marxist-Leninist ideology in practice, after the disappointing failure of Stalinism.

Chapter 6: Peasant Paintings of Hu County

Seemingly in contradiction of the battle-cry to smash the old and destroy the bourgeois that guided the initial phases of the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong had taken steps, after the initial wave of Red Guard destruction, to ensure the protection of some aspects of China's aesthetic and cultural heritage. In 1971 museums and historic sites began to reopen and archaeological investigations resumed leading to, amongst other important finds, the re-discovery of Emperor Qin Shihuangdi's tomb and his terracotta army. The PRC cultural authorities loaned a selection of these new finds, dating from the Palaeolithic (c. 6000,000-7000 BC) to the Yuan Dynasty (AD 1271-1368), to the Royal Academy following an approach by the British Government. The result was *The Times* and *Sunday Times*-sponsored exhibition, *Genius of China: an exhibition of archaeological finds of the People's Republic of China*, on show between 29th September 1973 and 23rd January 1974. The exhibition was a real coup for China, not least because it helped to challenge and salve Western concerns about the fate and protection of Chinese cultural heritage. In a preview of the exhibition, one journalist reported: '...it now seems incredible that during the Cultural Revolution Western archaeologists should have doubted the effectiveness of Mao's dictum: "Let the past serve the present," and have feared that the past of China was being smashed' (Tisdall 1973, 12).

Pre-empting any concerns that might have arisen as to the extent to which the PRC cultural authorities had interfered in the gallery interpretation and thus hijacked the exhibition for propagandist ends, were dispelled by the exhibition text's author, Peter

Hopkirk, who declared that ‘he was given a completely free hand’ (Anon 1973a, 19). Indeed, very little of ‘new’ China was in evidence at the exhibition save for the flying of the Red Flag outside Burlington House and the occasional, suspiciously polemical in-gallery statement, to the amused disappointment of the *Guardian* staff reporter who noted that ‘the Chinese exhibition at the Royal Academy is remarkably free of Mao’ (Anon, 1973a, 19). Indeed, Gittings noted that while in China ‘The political and social contexts of the finds is...a good deal more important [than]...in the West. The lessons one is supposed to draw have been rather muted in the London exhibition’ (Gittings 1973a, 5). The only concession to contemporary Chinese politics, apart from the usual acknowledgements to the Chinese cultural authorities and the reference to the PRC in the exhibition’s sub-title, was the reproduction of Mao’s pronouncement ‘Let the past serve the present’, printed on the very final page of the catalogue (see Watson 1973).

But the objects that comprised the exhibition, the bronzes, ceramics, jades, metal ware and textiles, corresponded, for the most part, with traditional ideas about Chinese art. Although these had been newly discovered and previously unseen in the West, the exhibition ultimately presented nothing of contemporary China. Despite allaying some fears - China was keen to speak back against accusations of wilful destruction and desecration - the exhibition reflected a popular image of China in Britain, constructed upon ideas about exoticism and mystery and framed by the inadvertent reinforcement of the Orientalist sub-text that China’s greatness lay in the (ancient) past. Nevertheless, the exhibition effectively kept China at the forefront of the popular consciousness. The same year, a slew of books were published in Britain about *ancient* Chinese art. So many, in fact, that Gittings was moved to quip ‘The books really require a *Which*, especially so near to Christmas’ (Gittings 1973b, 12). The exhibition had a significant

cultural legacy. Proceeds went towards the creation of an Educational Trust administered by the Great Britain China Centre (GBCC) founded in 1974, as a not-for-profit organisation seeking to 'promote mutual understanding between the UK and China.'³⁹ The GBCC was instrumental in the development of the later Peasant Painting exhibition, liaising between the Chinese Embassy and Arts Council of Great Britain.

The art of contemporary China made a low-key appearance in Britain during the summer of 1974. A small display of woodcut prints, mostly on political themes, were displayed at the then Gulbenkian Museum of Oriental Art in Durham. But, this exhibition took place far from Britain's cultural epicentre. As Brett points out in his review article, 'While the art treasures of China's past found a ready home in the Royal Academy, an exhibition of China's modern arts – the first to visit Europe – has had to head north to Durham. The discrimination reflects a reluctance among many Orientalists to concede that modern China has any art worth speaking of' (Brett 1974a, 14). Brett goes on to describe seeing woodcut prints in the flesh, instead of in reproduction in the foreign language magazines, as a 'revelation.' Crucially, '...in the original size and colours, it can make sense artistically as well as politically' (Brett 1974a, 14). Brett casts the works, with characteristic evangelical zeal, in a very positive light, singling out one particular example, 'The good daughter-in-law' as 'charming.' He concludes with a chastisement and recommendation that 'the Western art critic should swallow his unease at the mixing of politics and art and take a closer look at this graphic explosion' (Brett 1974a, 14). While little documentary evidence survives, it is clear that this small exhibition, along with the cultural exchanges developed and consolidated by *Genius of China*, paved the way for *Peasant Paintings from Hu County*:

³⁹ Great Britain China Centre (GBCC). n.d. <http://www.gbcc.org.uk/about-us.aspx> (19/01/2009).

the first *official* display of post-1949 Chinese art (Tisdall 1976), to which this thesis now turns.

The Development of the Exhibition

Archived material⁴⁰ indicates that in June 1972, the Arts Council of Great Britain began to draw up plans for an exhibition of Daoist art from China. That October, David Medalla and John Dugger, joined by the architect Romi Koshla, proposed an exhibition on the theme of ‘New China’ to the Arts Council. Hugh Shaw, Secretary-General of the Arts Council, contacted an enthusiastic Philip Rawson (the Curator of the Oriental Museum) and a decision to develop a display as an adjunct to the Daoism exhibition was made. In hindsight, this juxtaposition seems rather unlikely, but it suggests less a reluctance to engage with contemporary Chinese art, than the *savoir-faire* to second-guess the priorities of the Chinese authorities, keen to make cultural links with Britain, but on their own terms. Such an arrangement would have enabled the projection of the aesthetic identity of New China onto more traditional ideas about Chineseness held in the West.

The development of the exhibition was far from easy; the same report⁴¹ reveals that there was a great deal of internal wrangling and uncertainty as how best to approach the Chinese cultural authorities. In November 1973, the Exhibitions Sub-Committee revealed its incertitude with regards to the contemporary aspect of the exhibition, by requesting further investigation. Nevertheless, plans forged ahead. Philip Rawson was charged with making the initial approach to the Embassy of the PRC in London. A

⁴⁰ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. ‘China Exhibitions: History of Projects.’ Report initialled by Hugh Shaw (H.S.). 1st March 1976.

⁴¹ Ibid.

memo⁴² sent by Norbert Lynton, the then Director of Exhibitions at the Arts Council, to Liu Ching-hua, the Cultural Attaché of the Chinese Embassy, and dated to 9th January 1974, records that ‘Mr Philip Rawson has discussed with us his desire to present an exhibition of modern art from the People’s Republic of China in London. Lynton goes onto confirm that such a project would be of ‘considerable interest for us’ and concludes by requesting that Liu provide assistance to Rawson. A tentative opening date was scheduled for February 1977 to coincide with the Chinese Spring Festival.⁴³ Later, when this proved impossible, Shaw suggested a new date in May 1977, to correspond with 35th anniversary of Mao’s Talks at Yenan Forum on Literature and Art (when Mao first set out his vision for the role of culture in the communist state), and this appears to have become the date to which exhibition organisers initially worked.⁴⁴

In April 1975, an initial exhibition plan was drafted by Philip Rawson, presumably bringing to the project his experience of mounting the earlier exhibition in Durham. This initial plan⁴⁵ bears closer examination, as it reveals the genesis of the interpretive thrust of the exhibition: its *raison d’être*. Rawson writes that:

This exhibition will approach the achievements of the People’s Republic of China, not from the outside as spectacle. Instead, it will attempt to convey to a Western public the inner experience of developing socialist consciousness in the individual, which depends upon eradicating bourgeois attitudes. This exhibition will set out to do this by constructing “lines of personal sympathy” between Chinese and Europeans; this means establishing a strong sense of the everyday

⁴² ACA: Lynton, Norbert. 1974. ‘Memo to Liu Ching-hua.’ 9th January 1974.

⁴³ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1975. Internal memo sent from Hugh Shaw to Joanna Drew, 7 January 1975.

⁴⁴ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. Report sent from H. Shaw to Robin Campbell. After 17 March 1976.

⁴⁵ ACA: Rawson, Philip. 1975. Initial Exhibition Plan, c. April 1975.

reality and common human experience in China, to which the European may respond naturally and strongly as possible.

The exhibition was envisioned to highlight the humanity of the Chinese and to emphasise common human experience. He continues:

It is especially important that, as well as scenes of work and study and discussion, the exhibition should display the Chinese at leisure, at home, and relaxed. This will help to illustrate the way in which the intensity of work and the security of the social code balance each other.

Rawson intended to achieve this by making use of ‘whatever resources are available’. He mentions films, photographs, utensils, clothing and shop displays: a broad representation of contemporary China (the focus upon peasant painting came later). He elaborates:

The best way of achieving this seems to be by presenting the actual life of different groups within the community. These may be connected as if they were members of a family – although, of course, no single actual family may be intended.

He suggests the following sections:

The memories of the old, of the bad pre-revolutionary times, contrasted with the present lives older people may now lead...Children, their education, their

learning the ethic of work and mutual help...The life of young people within commune and factory environment, with the system broadly explained. The whole system of democratic discussion and decision...Examples of the lives of different skills...especially in those aspects which are radically different from their counterparts in Western society...Major collective efforts such as pioneering agricultural communes, large dams, new factories...The role of the Communist Party, traced step by step through its local, regional and national committees, *always engaging our understanding through the role of the human individual* [my emphasis].

Rawson's choice of words indicate the interpretative 'sympathies' of the proposed exhibition and reveal, perhaps, a utopianist personal engagement with Maoist ideology. It is hard to imagine an organisation like the Arts Council, which had been accused that same year of having an anti-left bias by the *Tribune* magazine (Shaw 1977, 10), of mounting a similar exhibition today; a willingness to engage uncritically with Maoist ideology surely demonstrates the remarkable political shifts in the East/West relationship that occurred during the early 1970s, as well as the impact of the counter-culture on the intellectual life of the Nation.

The Exhibitions Sub-Committee gave Rawson's ambitious plan its approval, with the proviso that '...if the organizers did not believe a good exhibition would be possible on seeing the material in China they should suggest that the Arts Council should withdraw from the project'.⁴⁶ The Chinese too were having doubts. Despite their initial enthusiasm, Felix Greene –journalist, and the Arts Council's 'man on the ground'

⁴⁶ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. 'China Exhibitions: History of Projects.' Report initialled by Hugh Shaw (H.S.). 1st March 1976.

in Beijing - reported that in two 'high-level' meetings, the Chinese cultural authorities had expressed concern about the likely administrative burden of such an exhibition. Their reluctance was prompted by a recent exhibition of Chinese art held in Denmark. An unhappy experience: 'Many political and factual errors had been made...I stressed that this could not possibly occur with the exhibition in London as the Arts Council's wish was to work in the closest possible collaboration with the Chinese authorities who would at every stage be in a position to help us maintain the highest standards of accuracy. This reassured them'.⁴⁷ The Arts Council's concerns appear to have been salved by Richard Cork's review, published in the *Evening Standard*, of a similar display at the Ninth Paris biennial (September 1975). The works on show were '...alive with an affirmation of the Communist system, and it is communicated so joyfully that a lot of our misgivings about art conducted according to a party-political rule book drop away'.⁴⁸ Clearly such a glowing account bolstered the Arts Council's determination to mount its own exhibition, for the Exhibition Committee requested that Philip Rawson prepare a more detailed exhibition plan and present it at the next meeting, to be attended by a delegation from the Chinese Embassy. However, on 17th November, the day before the Committee was due to convene, Philip Rawson unexpectedly withdrew from the project for personal reasons. On the same day the Chinese reneged upon the invitation to attend the meeting, citing fears that their attendance would commit them to the project. Despite these impediments, momentum was maintained and plans were made for key personnel to visit China in the spring of 1976. By February 1976, the exhibition plan had been substantially revised and developed.⁴⁹ A detailed floor plan, based upon the proposed Hayward Gallery location had been devised. Yet, even at this late stage, the focus upon peasant painting was still to be determined. What *was* proposed was a

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cork 1975, cited by Ibid.

⁴⁹ ACA: Anon. 1976. 'New China Exhibition'(draft). February 1976.

large and ambitious exhibition that would present a chronological sweep of Chinese history from the mid-nineteenth century to the contemporary, making use of the full range of exhibits outlined by Rawson in his initial plan, accompanied by films, photography, models, reconstructions and even farm-machinery.

In March 1976, J.F. Ford, from the Great Britain-China Centre (GBCC), wrote to Joanna Drew, the Director of Exhibitions at the Arts Council, to advise that the Chinese Embassy had contacted the GBCC with a proposal to lend a selection of peasant paintings, currently on tour in Sweden, for an exhibition in London. Ford requested that as ‘the best qualified’ to do so, the Arts Council took on the arrangements, with the full accord of the Chinese Embassy and Cultural Department of the PRC.⁵⁰ The Embassy proposed to make the paintings available, thereafter, for display elsewhere in Britain into the following January. In addition, the Embassy would arrange for two Chinese painters to accompany the exhibition. Unsurprisingly, the Arts Council abandoned plans for a broader, more ambitious exhibition in favour of this smaller, yet significant display, which had the crucial support of the Chinese authorities. This last point is critical, for, in a retrospective memo dated to 1st March 1976, Shaw was already expressing his belief that ‘it would be much better and more interesting to have an exhibition from China and RC [Robin Campbell] agreed that it would be bad to have an inferior external Chinese exhibition’.⁵¹ Indeed, the date of the exhibition’s opening was brought forward to 1976, apparently at the insistence of the Chinese, impatient to make arrangements for *their* exhibition, presumably with a view to maintaining greater control over its content and message. Sometime after 17th March 1976, Shaw wrote to Robin Campbell, the Arts Council’s Art Director that: ‘...perhaps

⁵⁰ ACA: Ford, J.F. 1976. Letter to Joanna Drew. 10th March 1976.

⁵¹ Shaw, Hugh. 1976. Memo sent by Shaw to Andrew Dempsey. 1st March 1976.

they [the Chinese] are beginning to suspect a bit of feet dragging and are trying, politely and in a friendly spirit as always in my experience, to force the issue'.⁵²

At the outset, the exhibition – which arrived in Britain via the Ostasiatiska Museet in Stockholm - was programmed to be shown at four locations in England and Wales between August and December 1976. Its first and second outings were fairly low-key, at temporary exhibition sites, and featured just a selection of paintings: first at the Billingham Folklore Festival, near Stockton-on-Tees (13th August – 25th September 1976), and then at the annual art festival organised by L.G. Harris & Co., a household and decorating brush manufacturer based in Bromsgrove (2nd – 10th October 1976). This was followed by a showing at University College, Cardiff (16th October – 6th November 1976). Towards the end of the year, the exhibition arrived in London. Even as late as August 1976, it was billed to appear at the ICA, but by November the venue had been transferred to the Warehouse Gallery in Covent Garden (18th November – 23rd December 1976). The reason for this late substitution is not made clear in the Arts Council archives, although a note on file suggests that a date clash may have been responsible.⁵³ But Tisdall hits upon the likely reason when she reveals in her review article that the Chinese Embassy had taken exception to the ICA's planned performance of the play *The Tragedy of Mao in the Lin Piao Period (History of the Tenth Struggle)* by Roger Howard at the same time as the exhibition (Tisdall 1976, 10). Lin was most definitely *persona non grata*; he had been struck from China's revolutionary history. However, the incident clearly did not dent relations too badly as the Chinese authorities allowed the exhibition to remain in Britain into 1977. Thus, in addition to two showings

⁵² ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. Report sent from H. Shaw to Robin Campbell. After 17 March 1976.

⁵³ An annotation reads: 'Embassy subsequently (1 May) decided that ICA should be offered Nov-Dec as only possibility .' In ACA: Anon. 1976.. Notes on meeting between Ms Hsieh Heng and Mr Wong on 20 April 1976.

at the Hayward Gallery, it travelled to Nottingham Castle Museum, Birmingham Central Library's Readers' Lounge and finally to the Scottish Arts Council Gallery in Edinburgh for short runs, before transferring to Australia.⁵⁴

Interpretive Approach

The full exhibition comprised seventy-eight original paintings and two woodblock prints. The majority of the works, a selection made by the Chinese authorities, were painted circa 1973 by sixty amateur artists. Of around half the exhibits⁵⁵ had been shown at the China Art Gallery, Beijing in 1973, at an exhibition of peasant paintings that had attracted over two million visitors (Sullivan 1996, 148). It featured several works which were to become well known in the West, among them 'Our Commune's Fishpond' by Dong Zhengyi (see figure 23) and Liu Zhide's 'A Veteran Party Secretary' (see figure 24).

⁵⁴ The exhibition finally reached the US in 1978 and went on display at the Otis Art Institute in LA (see Cushing 2007, 22).

⁵⁵ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. Internal Arts Council Memo from H. Shaw to Joanna Drew, 26 March 1976.



Figure 23: *Our Commune's Fishpond*, Dong Zhenyi (1974).

Fraser notes that several examples of Huxian (Hu county or Huhsien in the Wade-Giles system of transliteration) peasant paintings were printed with English, French, Spanish and German captions (Fraser 1977, 3) and were regularly reproduced in English-language journals and magazines aimed at a sympathetic Western audience (Fraser 1977, 4). The ever pragmatic Zhou Enlai argued that traditional art could be produced when intended for export, as a means of bolstering the Chinese economy (Cushing 2007, 9). Similar considerations were applied to revolutionary art, with posters intended for foreign markets printed on better quality paper (Cushing 2007, 11) than those produced for domestic consumption.



Figure 24: A Veteran Party Secretary, Liu Zhide (c. 1974)

The art critic Guy Brett was employed by the Arts Council to write the text for the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue. Brett had travelled to China in 1974 to meet contemporary Chinese artists and had written extensively on the subject, becoming one of its most prominent advocates in Britain. He was also a controversial figure. In 1975, after ten years as the paper's art critic, he was sacked by *The Time's* art editor, John Higgins, who had cited '...the increasing political content of [Brett's] recent pieces' as one of the reasons for his dismissal (McNay 1975, 10). In a letter to Brett,

excerpts of which were published in *The Guardian*, Higgins determined that since Brett had returned from his visit to China the previous year; a ‘creeping red peril’ had been evident in his writings (McNay 1975, 10). In a review of the 1974 exhibition of political woodblock prints at the Oriental Museum, Durham, Brett asserts a positive image of art from the PRC, attempting to position it within the context of Western art history and uses the revolutionary *nianhua* and industrial landscapes on display, to critique the Western art market. His write-up highlights young, Western avant-garde artists’ interest in the art of the ‘Third World’, revealing the attraction of these works to a younger Western audience. ‘They [young and well-known artists] see them [artistic developments in ‘Third World’ countries] as an example of not as much on the formal or technical level of art, as the sociological: an example of artists taking a daring, responsible role and having a fruitful relationship with their audience’ (Brett 1974b, 11). For Brett, the development of their unique style is spontaneous and inspired; even ‘though – as we now know – the Huxian peasant painters had professional assistance and access to copybooks. Personal sympathy with Maoist ideologies of art is, thus, evident.

While the exhibition catalogue cannot replicate the atmosphere of the original exhibition, in conjunction with archival materials, it can reveal the overall interpretative standpoint of the curatorial team. Individual paintings are reproduced in black and white (with larger colour versions of the ‘highlights’ at the back of the catalogue), each accompanied by a short text offering a brief analysis of composition and content. Short quotes concerned with culture, from Mao, Lenin, Marx and Lu Xun, are used throughout the text providing an ideological framework. The whole is prefaced by a short introduction by Brett. Ostensibly, his analysis adopts a neutral perspective, but a

pro-Mao (or at the very least, pro-PRC) position may be detected, when one considers it in conjunction with his earlier previous writings on the subject, and an element of critical ‘reading-between-the-lines’. In setting the social and cultural scene for the British audience, he draws upon the stock images propagated by the Chinese Communist Party and in so doing, reproduces the hyperbolic Party rhetoric favoured by the Foreign Languages Press:

The tremendous human energy that was released in the Chinese peasants’ revolution has been sustained, and even increased, because the peasants have seen real improvements in their own lives. In the step by step move from individual to collective agriculture they are discovering a blossoming of their own powers and confidence, not only in their farming, which is changing the face of the old landscape, but in gradually building up schools, health services, culture – the way of life as a whole.

(Brett 1977, 5)

While Brett notes that most of the works on show are, in spirit, ‘universally optimistic and happy’ (Brett 1977, 7) – and in so doing implies that they present a hyper-real, sanitised reflection of a ‘truth’ - he otherwise appears to otherwise unquestioningly accept Party ‘speak’. In discussing the intrusion of leisure into scenes of work, Brett regurgitates the Party’s justification of the ‘Great Leap’ in the 1950s and later, collectivisation during the Cultural Revolution, the triumph of man over nature: ‘...the heavy-sounding word Labour seems inappropriate: it no longer appears as a Herculean struggle against the intractable earth but as something light and sportive, convivial, no longer excessively masculine...bound up with relations of co-operation between people’

(Brett 1977, 8). His own idealisation of Maoism is evidenced by his poetic description of the Chinese Revolution:

As the peasants took control of their own lives, their art could lose its pious superstition but keep its fantasy, its dream, basing it this time on the new economic realities which are the foundation of the life of the whole people. The joining of this fantasy and this fact is the source of the energy in many of these paintings: one can see the innovations the painters have made to bring this about.

(Brett 1977, 7)

Brett was a critic of the Western art world; he rallies against ‘internationalism’ and the commercial machinations of the art market in his review of the Durham exhibition. Here too he accuses the idea of the artist (conceptualised as ‘the isolated genius’) as ‘tyrannical because he intimidates them [amateurs] from themselves producing’ (Brett 1977, 6). Scorn for so-called ‘low art’ (where Brett presumably feels Western critics would position peasant art) also comes under his examination. Firstly, he rebukes criticisms made of peasant painting, its naïvety and amateurship and then states, ‘To look down on peasant art as primitive and want it to conform to an idea of “high art” is an equally dangerous attitude. Both come from an academic view of correctness and incorrectness and are innocent of the complex way forms act on the mind and senses’ (Brett 1977, 9). While Brett’s views are redolent of CCP rhetoric, they also reflect the contemporaneous influence of post-modern, post-colonial discourse in the West; the blurring of the boundaries between high and low art and the study of the ‘everyday’. But conversely, despite championing these ‘peasant’ works as ‘art’, Brett

makes little attempt at offering a rounded critique of the individual artists' painterly skills, which one would expect from a critical analysis. This suggests that peasant art from China is still Other, in Brett's eyes and, by extension, the audiences', even though it is at odds with the traditional Western image of China: a vision of dynastic China. But, it is an Other, a *utopian* Other, which is immune from (his) criticism. At face-value, the Cultural Revolution - apogee of the communist revolution - had done nothing to dent the prevailing Orientalist discourse which had pervaded the study of Chinese art since the Enlightenment.

It is useful to consider Brett's introduction to the exhibition catalogue in tandem with Croizier's analysis of literature on Cultural Revolution-era art. Croizier, writing in 1979, asserts that political art from China has been 'largely ignored' (Croizier 1979, 303) by Western art historians and critics, even reviled as an 'extreme vulgarisation of the arts' (Croizier 1979, 303). Art produced during the Cultural Revolution was deemed to have minimal aesthetic value and little political importance, which is ironic given Mao's assertion (after Lenin) in 1942 that 'proletarian literature and art were...cogs and wheels in the whole revolutionary machine' (Mao 1967, 25). This attitude reveals more than simply the opinion that propagandist art is sullied and cast irrelevant by its political associations. It also reflects the continuance of a paternalistic attitude towards the Other, which persisted well into the twentieth century, and the negative images which characterised images of China in Britain from the Opium Wars onwards. However, Croizier clearly values the art produced during the Cultural Revolution and deems it worthy of study. In his review of a West German publication (Scheck, Frank Rainer (ed.), 1975. *Chinesische Malerei seit Kulturrevolution: Eine Dokumentation* [Chinese Paintings since the Cultural Revolution], Cologne: M. Dumont Schauberg), he agrees

with the author's assessment that 'any Western bourgeois attraction to Chinese political art as camp or radical chic' is distasteful (Croizier 1979, 305). 'For all its exaggerations and crudities, this art is deadly serious in its purposes, and should be taken seriously by anyone interested in recent Chinese history' (Croizier 1979, 305).

Nevertheless, Croizier is critical of much of the art produced under Jiang Qing's auspices, in particular the 'excessive concern with popularization and politicization...suppressed depth, nuance, and subtlety in artistic expression' (Croizier 1979, 306). Neither are these images 'striking nor thought provoking' (Croizier 1979, 306). 'The insistence on pictorial realism...the avoidance of any stylisation that might approach abstraction, the need to be safely conventional in form and content – all made for an art that is basically dull and unsatisfying' (Croizier 1979, 306). Writing after the death of Mao and the arrest of the 'Gang of Four', he pins the blame firmly on Jiang Qing and her zealous determination to revolutionise all aspects of cultural and artistic endeavour, pre-empting the contemporaneous Chinese position: Deng Xiaoping famously proclaimed that the Cultural Revolution was '70% good, 30% bad'. 'In its latter stages...the Cultural Revolution often seemed to be an induced or stage-managed revolution [calling to mind Jiang's revolutionary operas]...Chiang Ch'ing's [Jiang Qing] simplistic application of Mao's principles about art serving the people paralysed rather than stimulated the kind of bold creativity he had called for' (Croizier 1979, 306).

Crucially Croizier reserves his muted praise for peasant paintings from Huxian. He highlights 'a certain exuberance and daring' (Croizier 1979, 310) which he feels is missing from the work of professional artists during this era, citing as a possible reason for this, peasant artists' status as non-professionals: '...these peasant artists were freer

of conventions and freer of ideological restrictions' (Croizier 1979, 310). This suggests that these artists' status as 'peasants', as amateurs, as revolutionary 'cogs', imbues their work, not only with propagandist value (on behalf of the CCP, by pictorially presenting a hyper-realistic vision of the revolution's success in agriculture, technology, culture and society), but also, in slight contradiction of Brett's remarks that it was anathema to the Western art world, buys into the West's need for authenticity in Other cultures. This 'native' Chinese artistic style, which is 'revitalising' (Croizier 1979, 309) the post-1949 Chinese art world is, on the face of it, unsullied by Western influence, as opposed to graphic propaganda posters (with their roots in commercial advertising) and Soviet-inspired Socialist Realism. Although, as Sullivan has shown (Sullivan 1996, 147), the idea that peasant painting had its roots in a folk tradition, was a myth promulgated by the Chinese cultural authorities. Croizier too, while he heralds peasant art as a truly 'new, popular art' (Croizier 1979, 309), questions its authenticity, drawing links between peasant painting and tourist or commercial art produced in developing countries and by indigenous societies (Croizier 1979, 309). With their growing international profile, Croizier asks if the peasant painters will retain their non-professional status, and crucially their connection with the land: '...the art of the Hu Hsien peasants has become integrated into a much larger world than their traditional villages, and has left traditional peasant art far behind' (Croizier 1979, 310). Of course, this glosses over the fundamental 'fraud' at the heart of 1970s peasant painting. In contrast to its Great Leap precedent it was frequently produced in collaboration with, if not under direct supervision from, professional artists. Whether this information was known to Western critics and audiences at the time of the exhibition, however, is a moot point. It demonstrates the broad acceptance of the authenticity and realism of the works produced (with allowances given for the occasional mote of artistic licence).

While Brett demonstrates a somewhat naïve understanding of the political controls on the art world during the Cultural Revolution, his words reflect the wider image of Mao's China in the West at this time, largely formed from official reports and the reminiscences of sympathetic visitors who experienced a highly stage-managed version of China created by the Chinese authorities. Similarly, the exhibition catalogue presents peasant paintings at face value. Emphasising the democratisation and popularisation of art in China and the principles of communality, amateurism and the triumph of man's will over nature, which the collective farms ostensibly represented in Communist ideology, Brett paints a utopian vision of the lives of the peasants and the role of peasant painters in the new Chinese society: 'As the land was irrigated and the soil enriched, as denser crops grew, as better houses were built, clinics, libraries, games-pitches – painting grew too' (Brett 1977, 6). While Brett recognises that the profusion of produce depicted in these works is 'fantastic', he regards these stylistic conventions as having roots in the 'success' of (since discredited and ultimately disastrous) agricultural innovations, such as close planting (Brett 1977, 8). Contrast this vision with the depiction of rural life described in any one of the many first-hand accounts of the Cultural Revolution published in the West since the 1980s. In her semi-autobiographical novel *Red Azalea*,⁵⁶ Anchee Min evocatively describes life on a collective farm during the early 70s as one long struggle against nature (and the Party); an endless cycle of hard-graft, overshadowed by the constant threat of famine and disease. Brett's analysis skirts around the fundamental ideological aspects of the peasant painting, which suggests a continuing reluctance to engage with the work beyond aesthetic considerations, a distaste of prosaic politics. As Rifkin implies, these works were

⁵⁶ *Red Azalea* is part of the so-called 'scar literature' genre, novels of suffering under Mao, frequently with an autobiographical element. A publishing phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s, it will be discussed in greater depth in the next section.

weapons in an ideological conflict between East and West, as much as at home (Rifkin 1977, 17).

Propaganda by Exhibition?

Why were the Chinese *so* keen for British audiences to experience peasant painting? It was, after all, just one genre of contemporary Chinese painting, albeit the most endorsed and promoted by the Chinese cultural authorities. As Laing (1988, 83) points out, the focus upon peasant painting had the potential to distort Westerners' impressions of contemporary Chinese art. Reproductions in English-language publications provided a rounder view for those with more than a passing interest, but in reality Westerners had very little access to examples of post-1949 Chinese art. This was not simply because art from the PRC was dismissed or deliberately ignored. The US embargo on the import of Chinese-made goods, which was not lifted until 1972, disrupted Western familiarity with post-1949 art from China (Sullivan 2006: x).

In order to shed some light upon this question, the Horniman Museum provides a useful comparison. In a discussion of a number of exhibitions of non-Chinese communist material held at the museum, between 1967 and 1997, Teague reveals that the cultural authorities of the then People's Republic of Mongolia constantly intervened and scrutinised the selection of material collected by Teague on behalf of the Horniman in the late 70s (Teague 2004, 159). In his words, the curators 'merely amplified the basic core [of the material made available]' (Teague 2004, 162). Interestingly, the atheist Mongolian authorities were keen to ensure that material relating to Buddhism and native beliefs was included in the material for the Horniman (Teague 2004, 160). This is a significant point. While the Mongolian authorities saw the potential

technological and economic benefits of fostering a cultural link between themselves and the UK – indeed, they demanded technological support in reciprocation (Teague 2004, 159) - did they also envision the Horniman's exhibition as a means by which to promote Mongolia to the global community? Teague asserts that the absence of more recognisably propagandist material, such as Socialist Realist painting, was a reflection of the Mongolian authorities' 'recognition of its sterility' (Teague 2004, 162). Regardless of the validity of this judgement, it is clear that Socialist Realism did not, at that time, present the Mongolian regime's desired face of communism. This has important implications for the study of the choice of peasant painting. In many ways it too defied Western expectations of communist art, in its adaptation of traditional folk genres, which lent a veneer of cultural authenticity and its lack of explicit propagandist context, at least outside its intended context. Teague believes that such exhibitions served to 'legitimise the Communist regimes...that is to serve in effect as propaganda' (Teague 2004, 165). Even as late as the 1990s, the idea that the display of this material could constitute 'propaganda for the Communists' occurred to at least one visitor (Teague 2004, 157). Similarly, the peasant paintings that travelled to Britain in 1976 did have an integral role to play in contemporary Chinese politics, in the cultural policies which followed Lin's death. As a result, one can characterise the exhibition of peasant paintings in Europe, coming as it did after the death of Zhou and straddling the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of the Gang of Four, as the dénouement of the struggle for cultural supremacy between Zhou Enlai's moderates and Jiang Qing's radicals.

The exhibition had a clear political role for the British too. In a memo to Donna Kipling (Publications Office), Shaw advises that 'Edward Heath [the British Prime Minister] has pointed out that the cockpit of the world has now moved to the Pacific.

Sales of our catalogues [of the exhibition] to the Chinese community here and the Chinese abroad would help to enhance our prestige, on which, in turn, our continuing ability to borrow art works against ever stiffer world competition ultimately depends'.⁵⁷ As a travelling exhibition *Peasant Painting* additionally met the Arts Council's key theme for 1976-77, to widen access to art for all, especially in the regions (see Shaw 1977). It is interesting to note Roy Shaw's preoccupation with the politicisation of art and cultural democracy in that year's Annual Report. It is equally surprising that given the wider political climate in Britain at that time, and the choice of such a politically-charged exhibition, that Shaw goes on to declare that the 'only time' he had heard politics discussed at the Arts Council that year was during a Drama Panel general seminar on Theatre and Politics 'which produced vigorous if inconclusive discussion' (Shaw 1977, 10). One can only assume, thus, that while the organisers and associated committees of the Arts Council may have not explicitly referred to the political aspect of peasant painting in public, they were comfortable with the ideology expressed, or at the very least, felt able to look past it. 1976 was, in many ways, the Arts Council's *annus horribilus*; that year it had become mired in the controversy engendered by the ICA exhibition *Prostitution* by the COUM Transmission art collective, which later transmuted into the notorious punk band 'Throbbing Gristle'. In comparison, *Peasant Paintings* was far from contentious.

The Exhibition's Reception

From the outset, the exhibition was envisioned to symbolise and enhance the burgeoning political relationship between Britain and China, but also to further cultural

⁵⁷ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. Memo sent from Hugh Shaw to Donna Kipling. 20 August 1976.

understanding between East and West. Arts Council documents reveal the key aim that in-gallery interpretation should ‘...make their content both clear and understandable to a British audience’.⁵⁸ While, in retrospect, it is difficult to assess the impact of the exhibition on visitors, evidence suggests it was generally well received and that the exhibition’s aims were broadly achieved; the Arts Council collected comments left by visitors to the showing in Bromsgrove and press reviews, from across the political spectrum. The consensus reaction from the press suggests a positive reaction to the aesthetic qualities of the paintings, if ideologically their inherent messages were more suspect.⁵⁹

The Chinese show is above all a delightful burst of energy...delightful in its happiness, enthusiasm, energy, fast-acquired graphic skills, detail, variety, colour, liveliness, optimism, confidence; *and with all the more implicit warnings for the West* [my emphasis].

Michael Shepherd, *Sunday Telegraph*, 28 November 1976.

Only the bleakest Scrooge could avoid being exhilarated by the crop of Chinese Peasant Paintings at the Warehouse Gallery...these paintings from Hu county are a mixture of the ideal and the everyday...Throughout ...there is a sense of warmth, delight and playfulness...they bring a sense of sunshine, a vivid, affirmative outburst.

William Feaver, *The Observer*, 21 November 1976.

⁵⁸ ACA: Shaw, Hugh. 1976. Report sent from H. Shaw to Robin Campbell.

⁵⁹ N.B. These quotes are taken from an anonymous, undated archived document entitled ‘What the Press Says’. ACA: Anon. n.d. ‘What the Press Say’.

The paintings were accepted as accurately reflecting New China, with the implication that Britain would do well to pay attention to the benefits of Maoist ideology:

These are people's paintings for the people, in bright colours and crisp forms, propaganda for the way of life that is certainly bringing to the Chinese as a whole a hitherto unprecedented material benefit.

Marina Vaizey, *The Sunday Times*, 21 November 1976.

...First of all, these paintings are in praise of work, co-operation and radical thought about society; no message could be more relevant to us today ...

Michael Shepherd, *Sunday Telegraph*, 28 November 1976.

There is...the astonishment at finding how attractive these paintings are, how much they tell us about a form of communism which positively encourages workers to think of themselves as spare-time artists able to express the social meaning of their labour in visual terms... These pictures are the first fruits of an agricultural society attempting to give the visual imagination a position in its daily life infinitely more central than anything which our fragmented culture has to offer.

Richard Cork, *Evening Standard*, 9 December 1976.

But, if in the minority, dissenting views were expressed:

The biggest laugh is that the Arts Council has completely missed the point by insulting the workers with enshrinement in a de luxe capitalist catalogue. What any of this to do with art, God knows.

(John McEwen, *The Spectator*, 4 December 1976.

The public were less convinced, frequently pointing out the falsity and contrived propagandist nature of the paintings, comparing them unfavourably with the work of local children also on display:⁶⁰

Are these pictures merely propaganda, or do the Chinese always smile?

The Huhsien peasant paintings turned out to be third-rate propaganda, produced on a conveyor belt with a conspicuous lack of talent or imagination of even primitive life... The children at South Bromsgrove High School could teach those talentless propagandists [sic] peasants a thing or too.

I enjoyed the exhibition but found the Huhsien paintings very stereotyped on the whole.

Is art, any art, a valid platform for polemic?

Others made a distinction between the peasant paintings and objects that had attributes that were more traditionally recognisably as Chinese:

⁶⁰ N.B. These comments were collated by L. G. Harris & Co., Ltd., Bromsgrove, in an anonymous, undated archived document entitled 'Comments Upon Exhibition 1976'. ACA: Anon. n.d. 'Comments on exhibition'.

We welcome the chance of seeing some beautiful porcelain and traditional Chinese embroidery, papercuts and paintings – but the contemporary peasant paintings (and commentary) were too, too politically slanted.

Other visitors valued the contact with contemporary Chinese art that the exhibition afforded:

No matter what criticism of the modern Chinese paintings can be made they are undoubtedly an indication of the devotion of the Chinese to a new way of life and more illustrative of its results than much newspaper information and many books.

Good to see the happiness and satisfaction on the worker's [sic] faces and to admire the artistry and skill shown in their works.

Very stimulating exhibition, especially the new Chinese works. Thoroughly enjoyable, since they are so unusual; paintings of strong integrity, from a culture so different from our own.

My wife and I thoroughly enjoyed our visit to this lovely exhibition...And how invigorating it is to see the Chinese paintings and to get just a little insight into the life of rural China today.

Audience figures for the exhibition were not recorded. The grass roots interest generated by the exhibition cannot be determined. Yet, it did not suffer from a want of publicity. If the audience reaction was diffident, the exhibition, billed as the first of its kind, captured the keen attention of different sectors of the print and broadcast media. An edition of Radio 4's *Kaleidoscope* arts programme - broadcast on Wednesday, 17th November 1976 – featured an interview with Elizabeth Mobius of the GBCC.⁶¹ A transcript of the radio programme indicates that particular attention was paid to the communality of Chinese life, which is unsurprisingly given that the paintings were produced from within the commune system. This particular focus keys into two different, but related, streams of thought particularly prevalent during the late 60s and 70s: the idea of pure-Marxism in practice and the development and idealism of the incipient commune and self-sufficiency movements in Britain. Alternative ways of life were a reaction against the perceived growing materialism of British society, a left-over branch of the hippy movement and the emergent green movement, but also as a means of resisting and coping with economic recession, strikes, power-cuts, hyper-inflation and growing unemployment. These were concepts that appealed to anti-conformists with Leftist sympathies. Beckett (2007) writes that in Britain, 'there was [during the seventies] ... a preoccupation with national decline and a dwindling faith in the future'. The hope and promise of the 1960s were replaced by a tangible sense of disappointment in the present. Nostalgia for earlier, seemingly happier, more community-driven times, became a preoccupation of eclectic and cannibalistic contemporary popular culture. It is, thus, unsurprising, that images produced by peasant painters would strike a chord. Early on in the interview, Mobius makes the comment, 'I think you can learn a tremendous amount about commune life [via the paintings]. You can see the work side,

⁶¹ ACA: Anon. 1976. *Kaleidoscope*, broadcast on Wednesday, 17th November 1976, BBC Radio 4. Transcript.

the harvesting, tending pigs, tending goats. But you also see the fun side of life as well, singing and dancing, sports, recreation, night classes'.⁶² Jacky Gillott, the presenter, describes the paintings variously as 'startling' and 'enchanted'.⁶³ This response suggests that the intended message for their original audiences traversed the culture gap intact. However, when Gillott and Mobius single out 'The new look of our piggery' by Wang Yung-yi and 'Tending Goats' by Bai Tianxue for particular praise, they inevitably fall-back upon familiar genres of traditional Chinese painting. They highlight what they identify to be elements that indicate the continuation and survival of the type of representation seen in pre-revolutionary scroll paintings, such as the rendering of the fish in 'Our Commune's Fishpond' by Dong Zhengyi (see figure 23) being '...absolutely perfect. They're glowing. They're immaculate. ...And this one sort of feels oneself harking back to the old scroll paintings, where you would find a pine tree on which every single pine needle had been perfectly stroked and dotted. And so one certainly sees the persistence, the capability for detail that the Chinese have in their paintings, and I think that comes over very well indeed'.⁶⁴ These observations are not inaccurate; although superficially very different, revolutionary art genres had not entirely broken with Chinese aesthetic tradition. But it is an observation, which in this context, is very telling; the discussion turns back towards these more familiar politically-neutralised ways of thinking and talking about Chinese art.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be drawn from the Arts Council exhibition of Peasant Painting?

How does the vision of China created by the exhibition fit with the prevailing attitude in

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Britain towards Cultural Revolution-era China in the 1970s? In his introduction (and in his review of the 1974 exhibition at the Oriental Museum in Durham), Brett adopts an almost paternalistic tone in his idealised descriptions of the everyday lives of the masses, reflecting the West's largely positive attitude towards China during this period. By highlighting the collectivisation of the countryside and the mutual co-operation of the peasants, he implicitly decries capitalist and materialist Western society, thus positioning his analysis within an Orientalist discourse by using peasant painting as a foil to show us what we are not. By avoiding a balanced, in-depth discussion of socio-political context, he absolves the role of the Chinese regime in the production and promotion of peasant painting and lends the works a superficial veneer of kitsch - what Rennert writing in Fraser (1977) describes as 'cuteness' (Rennert in Fraser 1977, 6) - thus making the works on show more palatable for a Western audience with culturally embedded pre-conceptions of not only what 'art' is and should be, but of the communist Other. The exhibition effectively confirmed the sympathetic vision of Maoist China which had perpetuated since the late 1960s. The works on show provided 'evidence' that Maoism worked and that the Cultural Revolution was a genuine success.

So, can Peasant Paintings of Hu County be dismissed as mere propaganda? The exhibition was based upon one mounted in Beijing in October and November 1973 and was organised in partnership with the government of the PRC, the Chinese Embassy in London and three UK-based organisations dedicated to promulgating friendship and co-operation between China and Britain: The Anglo-Chinese Educational Institute, the Society for Anglo-Chinese Understanding and the Great Britain-China Centre. The implicit influence of the Chinese authorities on the selection of, and interpretative approach to, the works displayed is undeniable. Certainly the exhibition was taken as

irrefutable and stirring evidence of the success of the proletariat dictatorship by at least one self-confessed Maoist art critic.⁶⁵ ‘It [the exhibition] has also presented in a living way the possibility, indeed necessity, of building an alternative to the decaying, anti-people bourgeois and imperialist art which predominates like a deadweight in Britain and the entire capitalist world’ (Rifkin 1977, 17). Croizier asserts that art produced during the Cultural Revolution cannot be divorced from its political context; ‘any stylistic or structuralist analysis which ignores the content of the art will distort its meaning’ (Croizier 1979, 305). He goes on to draw similarities between this attitude and the Western habit of appropriating the art of Other cultures ‘having excised their original social or religious meanings’ (Croizier 1979, 305); for example the influence of African art on the Cubist movement. But, the evidence provided by the catalogue suggests that the curators of the exhibition employed an interpretative strategy which largely ignored the inherent propagandist value of the paintings. While Brett highlights some stylistic conventions, for example a fantastical representation of giant turnips (‘A Rich Turnip Crop’, by Zhu Huiling), the underpinning ideology which provides inspiration for this painting, is not explored.

Mao’s death and the arrest of the Gang of Four brought a close to the Cultural Revolution, but certainly not to its continued impact upon Chinese society, culture and politics. New interpretations of the decade emerged as political contexts, in both China and Britain, shifted into the 1980s and beyond. The next section will analyse the development of three key collections of Cultural Revolution-era material culture held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, the University of Westminster and the British

⁶⁵ Rifkin (n.d.) has described his ‘incipient Maoism’ in the early 1970s. Rifkin, Adrian. n.d. ‘Me, Myself, I’. <http://www.gai-savoir.net> (10/02/2009).

Museum, leading into a discussion of how this material has been interpreted and displayed to contemporary British audiences.

Section 3

Collection, Interpretation and Display

Chapter 7: Introduction

Section 3 of this thesis considers the collection, interpretation and display of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution in Britain during the post-Mao era. The discussion focuses upon three London-based collections, held by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the British Museum and the University of Westminster. But these are, by no means, the only such examples. Nationally there are a number of extant collections and individual pieces in public, or publically-accessible institutions: a small selection of Mao badges and ceramic figures are held by the South-East Asia Museum at the University of Hull. The Museum of East Asian Art at Bath has a ‘very large’ ivory sculpture depicting a group of soldiers crossing a stream (Laxton 2006, personal communication). Royal Museums Scotland (RMS) has a sole object, a ceramic Mao bust (Shen 2005, personal communication), but did play host to a major exhibition, *Mao: Art for the Masses* (May 2003–March 2004), comprised of objects from the Peter and Susan Wain collection, which have also been displayed at a number of commercial exhibitions, most recently the NEC Antiques Fair in March 2008.⁶⁶ The Horniman Museum in London has a small number of apolitical paper-cuts dating to the period during the 1970s when, under the aegis of Zhou Enlai, controls upon art were relaxed.⁶⁷ There is even a Red Guard doll on display at Pollocks Toy Museum, London.

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford holds the self-professed, ‘foremost’ collection of modern and contemporary Chinese art in Europe (Brown 2007, viii): a selection of twentieth century Chinese prints and brush paintings in the literati tradition, the ilk of

⁶⁶ Unfortunately Mr Wain declined to be interviewed during the course of my research.

⁶⁷ See online collections: <http://collections.horniman.ac.uk/index.php?page=objectlist&id=51313> (16/04/2009).

which the museum has acquired since the 1950s (Brown 2007, viii). These holdings were, in 1995, augmented by the donation of the Reyes collection (see Vainker 1996), comprising 130 landscape paintings which largely predate the communist revolution. Similar material, a selection of works from the collection of Michael Sullivan, the art historian and early champion of contemporary Chinese art, was displayed at the Ashmolean in the gallery which bears his name and that of his late wife Khoan, between November 2001 and May 2002. Again, these works predominantly pre- or post-date the Cultural Revolution: any evidence of the influence of Maoist ideology is, where apparent, minimal and restricted to the occasional flash of red or the depiction of an industrial installation in the distance. In 2006 and 2007, a decade after the donation of the Reyes collection, the museum acquired a number of twentieth century woodblock prints. These were exhibited in a two-part exhibition *Chinese Prints 1950-2006* in October 2007 and February 2008. A significant proportion pertain to the social expressionist Lu Xun school, 1940s *nianhua*, or were produced post-Mao. Although many of these have political content, comparatively few prints in the collection were produced during the Cultural Revolution (see He and Vainker 2007). Thus, while the Ashmolean may have the largest collection of twentieth century Chinese art in Britain today, it specifically addresses the literati tradition. Overtly political material, such as that produced during the Cultural Revolution, is largely absent. The Ashmolean, and its collection has, therefore, apart from this brief aside, been excluded from this thesis.

Thus, there is not a complete paucity of Cultural Revolution-era visual culture in British museums and collecting institutions, but what is available is distributed sparsely and its presence has been rarely the result of active, focused collection. In contrast, the conglomerations of material held by the V&A, British Museum and University of

Westminster stand out; each collection has been the subject of concerted and deliberate collecting and each has employed a particular approach towards interpretation which shall be elucidated in this section. The Asian Department at the V&A holds a diverse collection of post-1949 material artefacts from China linked by broad, overarching political themes: high-quality ceramics, textiles, Mao badges, mugs, propaganda posters, hanging scrolls and revolutionary paper-cuts (see figure 25).



Figure 25: Examples of revolutionary papercuts, V&A (c.1965-1970).

The majority dates from the decade we now call the Cultural Revolution. The British Museum's collection includes revolutionary textiles and ceramics, posters, original artwork and a comparatively large number of Mao badges. The China Poster Collection at the University of Westminster comprises around 600 posters, for the most part produced at the height of the Cultural Revolution. The University also holds an enormous quantity and breadth of other ephemera: books, photographs, badges, children's games and paper-cuts. As the chapters in this section will reveal, the University of Westminster collection – unlike its counterparts at the V&A and, to a lesser extent, the British Museum – is comprised of predominantly mass-produced material for the domestic market: everyday ephemera, the stuff of daily life that pragmatic museums have been traditionally reluctant to collect. As such, the collection provides a fascinating insight into the quotidian life of the Cultural Revolution. Although the University is not a displaying institution, as a site of academic specialism, coupled with regular loans to institutions and off-site museums and galleries, the collection is highly relevant to this thesis.

I do not intend to detail here other such collections and exhibitions, at institutions in North America, Australia, Europe and China. To reiterate, this thesis specifically focuses upon British collections and British imaginings. Suffice it to say that a number of large collections exist outside the UK, at the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, the Ann Tompkins and Lincoln Cushing Chinese Poster Collection at U.C. Berkeley, and the Jianchuan Museum, Chengdu to name but four.

Following the methodology established in the previous sections of this thesis, the next chapters will place the collections, their interpretation and incidences of their display within a broader historical narrative. Chapter 9 will consider the continued development of these collections against the backdrop of British attitudes towards China during a decade that witnessed the Tiananmen Square Incident of July 4th 1989, the fall of communism in Europe and the return of Hong Kong from British sovereignty to Chinese rule in 1997. The tenth, and final chapter of this section, will analyse the collection, interpretation and display of Cultural Revolution-era material culture at all three institutions from the turn of the millennium until 2008, the year of the Beijing Olympics. But first, in order to contextualise the development of these collections, Chapter 8 will provide an overview of the principal political events that had a direct influence upon the retrospective appraisal of the Cultural Revolution. This will inform a discussion of the shifting images of that decade prevalent in the West during the late 1970s and 1980s, a period of time bookended by two significant and image-making incidents which took place at the symbolic centre of the People's Republic of China, Tiananmen Square. The first, as discussed in the previous section, the protests and demonstrations that met the death of Premier Zhou Enlai, and the last, the brutal crackdown of democracy protests on the 4th June 1989. As such, the following chapter examines the appraisal of and the judgement made upon the Cultural Revolution in the post-Mao era, against the backdrop of the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping, a period which began with the 'deMaoification' of China, just as two collections of Cultural Revolution material culture in Britain, at the V&A and the University of Westminster (or, the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) as it then known) were conceived.

Chapter 8: Revision and Reform: Retrospective Appraisals of the Cultural Revolution

Following Mao Zedong's death and the arrest of the Gang of Four, Premier Hua Guofeng was installed as Chairman of the PRC. But it was not until the economic reformer Deng Xiaoping assumed the *de facto* leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1981, that the legacy of Mao and the influence of the infamous 'Gang of Four' were excised from the arts. Conversely Hua, Mao's chosen, but ineffectual successor, was determined to honour the memory of his mentor by continuing to steer China on the course set by the Maoist vision. But, he met opposition from the Party; its membership was equally resolved to undo the damage wreaked upon China by the Cultural Revolution. They looked towards Deng, a tried and tested moderate, to rebuild the country. Purged by Mao towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng thusly avoided the indelible stain of that decade. Under pressure from senior officials Hua was compelled to rehabilitate and reappoint Deng as Vice-Chairman of the Party, Vice-Premier and PLA chief of staff, restoring him to third-in-command (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 452). As time passed, Hua's commitment to the Maoist line, and consistent calls for further 'cultural revolutions', alarmed the Party. As a consequence, Deng garnered more grassroots and party-level political support (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 453). From 1978, *dazibao* expressing support for Deng as the ideological successor to Zhou Enlai, appeared upon the so-called 'Democracy Wall' in Beijing. This tide of support left Hua's position untenable and at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee in December 1978, Deng effectively assumed power. Over the next few years Hua was forced to cede his titles one-by-one to Deng and his allies culminating, in 1982, with the loss of his 'face-saving' (MacFarquhar and

Schoenhals 2006, 453) position as Party Vice-Chairman. ‘Mao’s attempt to put in place a human guarantor of his legacy had failed’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 453).

With Deng at the helm, a programme of rehabilitation and reform was launched. The Cultural Revolution’s victims were, sometimes posthumously, welcomed back into the fold. Even capitalist-roader #1 Liu Shaoqi, was exonerated and his ashes passed to his widow Wang Guangmei in May 1980 (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 454). The verdict on Jiang Qing and her ‘Gang of Four’, who went on trial late November 1980 to January 1981, was a foregone conclusion. Jiang was sentenced to death, later suspended for two years ‘to encourage repentance’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 455) and commuted to life imprisonment in 1983. Her fellow ‘gang’ members – Zhang Chunqiao, Wang Hongwen and Yao Wenyuan - were also given long-term prison sentences.⁶⁸ With the worst culprits thus identified and punished, Deng avoided a major purge, preferring instead to ‘emphazise harmony and turn the country away from political struggle’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 456). A noble stance, perhaps, but one which, in tandem with the *Resolution on Party History*, issued to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the foundation of the CCP on 1st July 1981, drew a line under the Cultural Revolution, prohibiting further enquiry into the rights and wrongs of that decade.

The *Resolution* set the official line, indeed the *only* permissible line, on the Cultural Revolution. It ‘boldly’ (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 457) asserted that Mao Zedong was ultimately responsible for the ‘grave error’ of the Cultural Revolution; his erroneous appraisal that counter-revolutionary and ‘bourgeois’ elements had

⁶⁸In 1991, Jiang Qing apparently committed suicide while undergoing hospital treatment for throat cancer. Zhang died in prison of liver disease in 1992. Wang and Yao bore out their sentences and were released during the first years of the new century.

infiltrated the leadership, conformed to neither Marxist-Leninism, nor Chinese ‘reality’. The resulting confusion between ‘right and wrong’ had been exploited by ‘opportunists, careerists and conspirators’. This state of affairs, the *Resolution* asserted, ultimately led to ‘domestic turmoil’ which ‘brought catastrophe to the Party, the state and the whole people’. But, while at the height of his ‘prestige’, Mao’s arrogance led him to make ‘mistakes’ he remained ‘respected and beloved’, ‘a great Marxist and a great proletarian revolutionary, strategist and theorist’ (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 1981). His positive contribution outweighed his mistakes: to discredit Mao, the Great Leader, would be to discredit the Party and the State. The legitimacy of the Party rested upon Mao’s revolutionary achievements (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals 2006, 457). Thus, in the final judgement, the official assessment deemed that ‘His [Mao’s] merits are primary and his errors secondary’ (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 1981). Echoing Mao’s own assessment of Stalin, Deng was to declare that the Great Helmsman was ‘70% good, 30% bad’: the principal responsibility for the worst excesses were placed firmly at the doors of the Jiang Qing, Lin Biao, their allies and co-conspirators. Yet, the *Resolution* also served to demystify and desanctify Mao (Hsu 2000, 778-9), leaving Deng free to launch his programme of ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’. The new mantra? ‘To get rich is glorious’.

From Hou Wenge to ‘Beijing Spring’: Transition in the Arts

The legacy of the Cultural Revolution – the strictly enforced conventions of genre and subject - continued to be felt in the sphere of cultural production (see Andrews 1994, 378) during the immediate post-Mao period. Hua, the man to whom Mao had entrusted his legacy, used art to legitimise his chairmanship: the most popular theme (Andrews

1994, 379), aside from criticism of the Gang of Four, was the visual reiteration of Mao's deathbed averment to Hua 'With you in charge, I am at ease' (see figure 26). Thus, the *hou wenge* period, meaning *post*-Cultural Revolution, a term coined by the Chinese critics Gao Minglu and Zhou Yan (Andrews 1994, 383), was a continuation of the 'icon-making movement' (Gao and Zhou 1991, cited by Andrews 1994, 384). However, the rise of Deng Xiaoping heralded a new period of relaxation in the cultural sphere. At the Fourth Congress of Writers and Artists/Third Plenary session of the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Workers (May and June 1978), cultural workers were encouraged to think more creatively, to reflect post-Mao China, support the 'Four Modernisations' (Deng's programme of reform in agriculture, industry, technology and defence), and to 'plough new ground' (Deng 1978, cited by Galikowski 1998, 189). A 'general trend...of slowly gathering courage in criticism of once sacrosanct symbols' (Dittmer 2002, 8) providing it advanced Chinese socialist modernisation, was permitted, although, in practice, tolerable criticism was largely restricted to the crimes of the Gang of Four in isolation of the rest of the Party leadership (Dittmer 2002, 8). Older artists and administrators were rehabilitated, new arts journals were published and a series of unofficial and international art exhibitions held. By 1979 a nascent avant-garde emerged, exemplified by the influential underground 'Stars' group (*Xingxing*) – a collective of young, largely amateur (Galikowski 1998) and socially-aware artists closely associated with the so-called 'Democracy Wall'. This 'Beijing Spring' was short-lived – the cultural sphere was subject to periodic crackdowns as the 1980s progressed – but the 'cultural straitjacket' (Hsu 2000, 779) imposed upon the arts during the Cultural Revolution had been loosened.



Figure 26: *With you in charge, I am at ease*, Anon (1977).

In prescience of the *Resolution on Party History*, the ‘Mao pulping process’ (Schrift 2001, 157) had begun in earnest following the arrest of the Gang of Four. Shortly after the second anniversary of his death, Mao’s quotations were removed from newspaper mastheads (Hsu 2000, 779) and out-of-date posters, particularly those wishing Mao long life (Barmé 1996, 7), were withdrawn. Attention then focused upon objects deemed to ‘detract from the glorious image of...Chairman Mao’. Substandard, damaged, soiled pieces, or those featuring Lin Biao’s image or thoughts, were to be given over to the relevant authorities for disposal (see Barmé 1996, cited by Schrift 2001, 157-158). While the production, distribution and circulation of Mao badges had been curtailed after Mao pleaded ‘Give me back my airplanes’ in 1969, vast numbers of badges, testament to their popularity during the initial manic phase of the Cultural Revolution, remained in circulation. In the re-evaluation that followed Mao’s death, serious collectors and ordinary citizens alike, were ordered to hand over their badges.

Nevertheless, some ‘insubordinate collectors’ managed to retain their collections. Other canny collectors added to their collections by paying scrap merchants more for the badges than they were worth as recycled materials (Schrift 2001, 73). In February 1979 Chinese and foreign-language copies of Mao’s ‘Quotations’ (aka the ‘Little Red Book’) were withdrawn from sale and pulped, by decree of the Department of Propaganda. Foreign exports ceased (Barmé 2006, 7). By spring 1980, most official portraits of Mao displayed in public places had been removed (Hsu 2000, 780). China had been thoroughly ‘deMaoified’.

A New Dystopia: ‘the end of a love affair’⁶⁹

We went to China half wanting to find a place to live till we died. We went with hoping minds, not just open ones, and we found a people desperately crippled by their environment. Those who were most decent were most trampled upon, those most honest, most tricked. Imagination was suffocated, intelligence encumbered with slogans. Bare survival, mental far more than physical, filled the horizon. In many ways, we were ourselves crippled in turn. Whatever we had of faith in human nature or of hope for a humane future is far, far dimmer now. Our lives have been ripped raggedly in half.

(Kenneson 1982, 18)

We are beginning to distinguish goals from achievements, rhetoric from reality, and programs from outcomes.

(Harding 1982, 951)

⁶⁹ Hooper 1983.

While I agree with Mackerras' (1999, 116) view that during the period 1976-1989 China was largely characterised in the West as a peaceable, non-expansionist nation and seeking the necessary stability to modernise, the retrospective reception of the Cultural Revolution and the immediate post-Mao era, produced quite the opposite impression, even if Deng was perceived by Western observers as a reformer and pragmatist (see Mackerras 1999, 118). Writing in 1982, Harding charts the deterioration of the image of China in the US, but one can safely assume his thoughts can be broadly applied to the British and European context too. The fascination with and idealisation of China engendered by the Nixon visit and left-wing, intellectual sympathy with Maoist ideology and opposition to US imperialism in Asia, gave way to 'something more cynical' and 'objective' (Harding 1982, 935).

Paradoxically, while the more relaxed Deng-era ushered in changes which served to improve daily life, China's image in the West worsened, to which Harding (1982, 949) credits the attendant rise of dissent and criticism at all levels of Chinese society: 'Indeed, in few other countries...have political leaders moved so quickly and so completely from self-admiration to self-flagellation as in post-Mao China' (Harding 1982, 950). It is fascinating to note the extent to which Western attitudes fell into line with official Chinese interpretations. As overt expressions of loyalty to Mao had been *de rigueur* in the late 60s, self-reproach, particularly for actions made and beliefs held during the Cultural Revolution, became the new requisite position. Finding parallels with Western intellectuals' post-Second World War disillusionment with the Soviet Union, Harding adds that this new air of self-criticism encouraged unflattering Western accounts and helped to suppress favourable ones (Harding 1982, 950). Apparent

examples of the progressiveness of Mao's China, highlighted by Western commentators in the 1970s, were recast as evidence for its failure. The poverty of the Chinese people, which had been 'ennobling' became 'debasing', Beijing was transformed from a city of 'verdant' beauty rivalling Paris, to a dystopian vision of Stalinist alienation (see Harding 1982, 941-942). This tendency echoes the eternal paradox in Western imaginings of China identified by Pennycook (1998, 173): a fixed discourse which simultaneously embraces and rejects China's Otherness.

During the previous decade, the accounts of 'revolutionary tourists' had been privileged over observations made at distance. As Harding (1982, 953) reminds us, seeing is, after all, believing. Thus, as Western visitors were increasingly left to their own devices and no longer subject to the limitations on travel previously exerted by the Chinese authorities, the accounts of disillusioned and jaded long-term Western residents 'No longer given the cocoon-like "honoured guest" treatment (Hooper 1983, 165), achieved a new currency. In general, while these 'insider' accounts of China inevitably provided readers with more information about daily life in China than their early 70s short-term counterparts ever could, they furthered an image of China as hierarchical, corrupt and incompetent, even when the author identified a kinship with ordinary Chinese citizens. This was in direct contrast with earlier, favourable accounts. A preoccupation with the subjugation of the Chinese people (ironically during a period of relative liberalisation) and attendant focus upon the incipient democracy movement (see Hooper 1983), reflected the attitudinal shift in Sino-Chinese relations. The veil had been lifted.

But, while the political and cultural changes that occurred in China from the late 70s were catalysts, as Harding notes ‘the more critical images of China [were] only partly the result of changes in China itself’ (Harding 1982, 944). The ‘death’ of the Left, the shift towards the Right, exemplified in Britain by the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, undoubtedly played an equal role in the displacement of largely positive images of China with predominantly negative perceptions in the dominant Western narrative of the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, on at least one, infamous occasion, to be ‘Maoist’ was used as an insult. In 1976, the then (Labour) Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey, accused his left-wing opponents as being ‘out of their tiny Chinese minds’ (Thompson 2008). To borrow Harding’s (1982, 934) metaphor, images of China underwent yet another pendulum shift. But he sounds a note of caution. In much the same way as China had been romanticised in the late 60s and early 70s, this reappraisal led to similarly ‘sweeping moral judgements’ (Harding 1982, 952). One Orientalist vision was simply replaced by another. After a decade of *detente*, a reintensification of the Cold War during the late 70s and early 80s, coupled with the rise of conservatism on both sides of the Atlantic, reignited popular anti-communist sentiment, which undoubtedly had an impact upon the reception of communist China. Hooper (1983) identifies a strong tendency in early 80s insider accounts to make clear and strident ‘extreme statements’ about China based upon sweeping generalisations: American accounts (as ever, British observers were more restrained) exhibited a ‘cultural chauvinism’ (Hooper 1983, 166) seldom apparent since the 1950s. Once again, China became the (negative) mirror image of the (virtuous) West.

Further evidence is found in the dismay that some contemporary Western visitors expressed when the reality failed to live up to their utopian expectations of

China, as the evocative quote from James Kenneson, given at the start of this section, reveals. Kenneson and his wife lived and worked at a university in Zhengzhou, Henan province, for nearly a year and in an article entitled ‘China Stinks’ written for *Harper’s* (Knesson 1982), reveals not just his disappointment on discovering that China was not the utopian paradise he had imagined, but the boredom, lack of trust and stunted dreams of the Chinese people he had met. Harding (1982, 952) contends that China came to be a ‘scapegoat for our own misconceptions...What is being reassessed and discredited in these accounts is less China itself than the delusions that we brought to China in the first place’. The need to overlook less savoury aspects of the Cultural Revolution - to present a view of China as ‘without flaw or blemish’ - argues Harding (1982, 952), was a means of making recompense for past negativity. Conversely, after Mao, there was a similar need to portray the decade 1966-1976 as one of abject failure in order to ‘correct the naiveté and euphoria of the Cultural Revolution decade... Idealization is being remedied through denigration’ (Harding 1982, 952). The genuine achievements of the post-1949 China were overlooked, or denied. ‘Once it was “in” to romanticize the PRC; now, it is equally chic to debunk it’ (Harding 1982, 954). Thus, a grand narrative of the decade of Cultural Revolution - that it had been a ‘bad thing,’ an unreserved tragedy, a ‘monumental error’ (Harding 1991, 110) – came to dominate Western perceptions of the Cultural Revolution, largely unchallenged, for the next twenty years.

Against the ‘Prejudices of Fashion’: Collecting the Cultural Revolution in the Post-Mao era

During the late seventies, at approximately the same time, two British institutions began to collect the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution: the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL), renamed the University of

Westminster in 1992. Both collections were borne out of the West's cultural and ideological engagement with Maoism during the previous decade. They were instigated by individuals who had direct experience of Cultural Revolution-era China and both institutions recognised an inherent value in this material, but for different reasons. At the PCL, the collection was to become a teaching aid for students studying modern Chinese politics. The V&A, on the other hand, was in the midst of an institutional drive towards collecting the twentieth century. For both purposes Cultural Revolution-era material was valuable; it was available, at an affordable price and - harking back to the original intent behind its production - was able to convey a sense of the experience of that decade, more evocatively and more directly than any tome of political studies.

Victoria and Albert Museum

When Rose Kerr, former Head of the Far Eastern Department at the V&A, writes that the Department, in direct contradiction to the 'prejudices of fashion', set aside a sizable portion of the annual budget to acquire examples of contemporary Chinese art (Kerr 1985, 321), she reflects upon the problematic nature of revolutionary art from China. When an institution-wide policy towards collecting the contemporary was introduced after the appointment of Sir Roy Strong as Director in 1977, the objects acquired by the Far Eastern Department to represent China were not just contemporary, they were still resonant of Mao and the Cultural Revolution. However, within a few years, Deng's 'deMaoification' of China – and the attendant shift in fashionable politics at home - placed this material in the past: the natural territory of museum curatorship.

At first the collection predominantly comprised the miscellaneous objects collected and purchased by members of the then curatorial team on their visits to China. Later, a more active and coordinated effort was made to develop a representative collection of political art and design from China, augmented by donations from private individuals. This may be interpreted as a bold attempt to document this extraordinary period of history, in reflection of the post-modernist interest in the power of the everyday to visually define and evoke society at a given point in history (Pearce 1995, 147-149). However, Craig Clunas – former Deputy Curator in the Far Eastern Department, and now Percival David Professor of Chinese Art at SOAS – has revealed that it was a more pragmatic consideration; the museum collected anything ‘we could get our hands on’ (Clunas, personal communication, 2007). The subject matter was less important than the process of collection, acquisition, and value for money. In Clunas’ words:

...when we were acquiring stuff in the [late 70s and 80s], we were acquiring it because we felt...we’re going to do the twentieth century and this is what the twentieth century does. The issue was more about collecting twentieth century China, and it turned out to be political...it simply reflected that’s what there was from twentieth century China. Had there been other stuff we would have been just as happy to collect that it seems to me, but that’s what there [was].⁷⁰

(Clunas, personal communication, 2007)

⁷⁰ It should be noted that contemporary objects of a more traditional style were also collected on behalf of the V&A, including a large cloisonné vase acquired by Kerr in 1984 (see Pearce, 1991, 88) and a group of high quality ceramics dating from post-1949 era and decorated with non-political subjects (see Kerr, 2000, 95-104).

He continues, ‘...the situation as of ’79 [when Clunas began employment in the Department] was nothing [i.e. collections representing contemporary China], and myself and other people who worked there felt we’ve got to start somewhere, well here’s some stuff’ (Clunas, personal communication, 2007). Clunas, himself, contributed a small number of ceramics and other miscellaneous items - ‘it was pretty trivial and pretty small scale’ - acquired during his student days in China and on subsequent visits during the 1980s. Rose Kerr, elaborates:

It was appropriate to bring collections up-to-date, and to acquire object-based evidence for important cultural phases in countries’ histories. Cultural Revolution items were self-evidently significant, and objects collected by me had impeccable provenance!

(Kerr, personal communication, 2007)

This last point is important. For while genuine Mao-era material was available to the museum at low cost during the late 70s and early 80s, ‘Faking of the material started quite early, and even genuine objects acquired on the open market had less associated information about time and place of manufacture’ (Kerr, personal communication, 2007). It is worth remembering too that the ‘deMaoification’ of China instigated in the late 70s reduced the pool of genuine material available for subsequent acquisition. Thus, at the nascence of the collection, the Far Eastern Department drew upon the objects already in the possession of individual staff members whom had visited and studied in China following the East-West rapprochement heralded by Nixon’s visit.

Despite the apparent insouciance that met the initial acquisition of this material, it did reflect broader patterns of acquisition at the V&A. As a museum devoted to the collection of examples of good *design* from around the world since its inception, the V&A was, and remains, an entirely appropriate venue for such a collection largely comprised of mass, populist and ephemeral material. For example, the museum has actively collected posters from around the world from its earliest days. Art nouveau advertisements, transport posters, 1960s psychedelia, election campaign posters and Second World War propaganda are all represented in its collections and have been exhibited on a regular basis. An exhibition of British and Foreign Posters was held in 1931, which led to further acquisitions and gifts. A number of smaller specialist poster temporary and touring exhibitions were put on at the V&A and its satellite institution the Bethnal Green Museum, in the intervening years, including London Transport Posters in 1949, Mucha posters in 1963 and, in 1990, an exhibition of political posters from the USSR and Eastern Bloc (see Timmers 1998). Neither was the focus upon objects pertaining to socialism a particularly radical departure, for the V&A has long had Leftist associations. According to Wilk (1997, 349), the Circulation Department, which was responsible for the acquisition of much of the contemporary material in the collections prior to 1977, had its 'own culture', heavily influenced by the Left. Between 1947 and 1960 its Keeper, Peter Floud, was an active member of the Communist Party. Tracing its origins to nineteenth-century philanthropism and the advocacy of informal education for the masses and as a vehicle for the dissemination of the self-image of the modernist imperialist nation-state, the V&A has been an inherently political institution since its inception as the South Kensington Museum in 1852. Institutional politics also played a significant role in the development of the PCL collection, to which this chapter now turns.

Chinese Visual Aids Project, Polytechnic of Central London

The PCL ‘Chinese Visual Aids Project’ began in 1979 as the pet project of the journalist (latterly the *Guardian*’s East Asia Editor) and China specialist, John Gittings.⁷¹ Gittings began to collect examples of Maoist visual culture in 1971 during his first trip to China. By the late 1970s he was employed as a lecturer in Chinese politics at the PCL, an institution with a definite left-wing bent, to which Gittings gifted his collection of posters to serve as teaching aids for students of Chinese political history. A venture which might have seemed erroneous at other higher education institutions, found its natural home at the PCL, initially in the Chinese Section of the School of Languages and latterly the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD). Thus, in its inception, the collection was inherently ‘political’ (Wang, personal communication, 2008). Its holdings were augmented by Anna Merton latterly a full-time member of staff responsible for the collection, under Gittings as Director whom, like her peers at the V&A, had studied in China during 1974. From the outset, the Chinese Visual Aids Project actively solicited donations and loans from Gitting’s friends and colleagues who had lived in, or visited, China.

Selections of posters from China Visual Aids Project collection were first exhibited, as an inchoate entity, in April 1979 (‘Chinese Popular Art and Political Culture’) at the PCL’s Regent Street building. The introduction to revolutionary Chinese art given in the accompanying booklet, describes the works on show as having arisen from that ‘*visionary* upheaval [my emphasis]’ and that the Cultural Revolution

⁷¹ N.B. Unless otherwise stated, the research for this section was compiled from information in the China Poster Collection archive held at the University of Westminster.

had inspired ‘exciting new art by workers and peasants’. Visual culture was advocated as an important means by which Westerners could learn about and understand contemporary China, hence ‘visual aids’ in the then name of the collection. This exhibition (and collection) was the successor to *Peasant Painting of Hu County* and was situated within the same evangelising pro-Mao rhetoric. Despite contemporaneous revisionist representations of the Cultural Revolution, this textual material suggests there remained a lingering nostalgic sympathy for Maoist ideology in some quarters.

The following year, a further exhibition of the posters was held at the London College of Printing (7th-16th May, 1980). *Nianhua* from the collection were displayed at PCL on February 1981, to mark Chinese New Year. A notice displayed at the former suggests that exhibition of the collection was intended to promote public interest in the subject and augment the fiscal and cultural value attached to the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution; it highlighted the limited availability of similar material in China, as well as in Britain:

THE POSTERS AND OTHER ARTICLES IN THIS EXHIBITION ARE NOT
AVAILABLE FOR SALE. MOST OF THEM ARE NO LONGER TO BE
FOUND ON SALE IN CHINA EITHER.

SOME CURRENT POSTERS, PAPER-CUTS ETC. ARE AVAILABLE FROM
THE GUANGHWA BOOKSHOP, 9 NEWPORT PLACE, LONDON, WC2.⁷²

⁷² Incidentally, the Guanghai Bookshop, established in 1971, is still operating from its base in the heart of London’s Chinatown.

WE SHALL BE GLAD TO HEAR FROM ANY VISITORS WHO HAVE
THEIR OWN COLLECTIONS OF CHINESE POSTERS OR OTHER FORMS
OF POPULAR ART.

At this early stage in the collection's development, display was taken as an opportunity to augment the collection.

To return to Kerr's comment, the collection of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution in the late 70s and early 80s was 'against the prejudices of fashion'. Had these collections been conceived and developed just five years earlier, both the V&A and PCL collections might have keyed into the zeitgeist. But, post-Mao revisionism had a significant impact upon Western imaginings of the Cultural Revolution in Britain. The utopian vision that, generally speaking, had dominated the contemporaneous narrative of the decade 1966-76, had been overturned. This was, quite possibly, a contributory factor in the time lag between accession and display. Indeed, Gittings recounts:

Diplomats from the Chinese embassy in London invited to the PCL's exhibition found it hard to hide their incredulity at, and even distaste for, the organizers' interest.

(Gittings 1999, 29)

There was a long gap between exhibitions of material from the PCL collection. After 1981 it was not publically exhibited again until 1999 (although it should be reiterated that preservation and display were not the guiding principals of the PCL collection). Objects from the V&A collection were not put on show *at all* until the 1990s. The

material was clearly considered sufficiently valid, by both institutions, to collect, but the time was not yet right for their public display. Nevertheless, the development of both collections was a bold statement. The inherent validity conferred upon this material by its entrance into a collection, raised it from mere detritus of a failed, contentious ideology, to important historical and/or aesthetic object.

The Tiananmen Square ‘incident’ or ‘massacre’, depending upon one’s perspective (in China referred to, if ever, as the ‘June 4th Incident’, or the euphemistic ‘Political Turmoil between Spring and Summer of 1989’) was a water-shed incident in late twentieth-century British perceptions of China. In the wake of the military crackdown upon pro-democracy protestors, the PRC, which had as the eighties progressed been increasingly viewed as a country advancing towards democracy and capitalism (Mackerras 1999, 138), was roundly condemned by the global community. Almost universally, the vision of China changed for the worse. It revitalised and reinforced dystopian narratives of the Cultural Revolution. But, it also served to raise the profile of a country which, bereft of the iconic Mao Zedong, had begun to slip from the popular consciousness.

Chapter 9: After Tiananmen

“Tell the world,” they said to us.⁷³

The Tiananmen Square Incident was not the first time the limits of Deng’s regime had been tested; during 1985, 1986 and 1987 disgruntled and disaffected citizens staged regular protests. Against the backdrop of Deng’s economic ‘modernisation’, which, as the decade progressed, was undermined by corruption, destabilising migration from the countryside to the cities and an unwieldy bureaucracy, China’s youth, in particular, were baffled by the ‘shifting landscape’, the new ‘unabashedly materialistic’ society (Spence 1999, 678, 693). But, as Spence (1999, 699) notes, ‘Nothing like [the Tiananmen Square Incident] had been seen before’ in China; in the year of its fortieth anniversary, the events of spring and summer 1989 challenged the legitimacy of the Party, and posed the most substantial threat to the PRC in its history.

As in 1976, the protest was catalysed by the death of a popular and moderate leader, in this case, Hu Yaobang. Hu, who had passed away on 15th April 1989, had become Party Chairman under Deng in 1981, but was later dismissed; scapegoated in the political fallout following the student-led demonstrations of 1986 and 1987. Thousands of mourners, predominantly comprised of students and intellectuals, but joined by sympathetic urban workers, gathered in Tiananmen Square. Over the next seven weeks, the demonstration evolved into a protest against the authoritarianism of the Chinese state. Embarrassingly for the Party hierarchy, the demonstrations coincided

⁷³ Adie, Kate. 1989. Report: ‘Massacre in Tiananmen Square’, BBC News [TV], 4th June 1989. http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_6570000/newsid_6571700/6571755.stm?bw=bb&mp=wm&news=1&bbcws=1 (21/04/2009)

with, and disrupted, the state visit of President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union (the hero of the demonstrators for his commitment to glasnost). An estimated 3,000 hunger-strikers (see Spence 1999, 699) exerted pressure on the regime, while the Party attempted and failed to defuse and disperse the protest. The world's print and broadcast media watched as 'ambulances raced in' (Spence 1999, 699) to attend to dangerously weak hunger strikers.

Faced with a pro-democracy demonstration with broad popular appeal at Tiananmen Square, the symbolic heart of the People's Republic, the regime, still headed by the elderly Deng Xiaoping and Premier Li Peng (appointed in 1987 after Hu's dismissal), launched an overwhelming military crackdown of the protests in the early morning of 4th June, having imposed martial law a fortnight earlier. Reports of what happened next vary depending upon the source, but it is apparent that a great number of people were injured or killed on the Square and in the surrounding streets, perhaps as many as several thousand.⁷⁴ In the wake of the crackdown, leaders of the pro-democracy movement and other 'dissidents', were arrested and imprisoned - some were executed - or fled to exile in Taiwan and the West. Their supporters in the government were purged. Foreign journalists were temporarily banned from the country. Yet the events of 4th June received unprecedented coverage in the Western media, which was on the side of the students from the beginning; their protest seemed to conform with Western values of freedom and democracy: a cause which was embodied in the 'Goddess of Democracy' (*Minzhu nushen*) (Mackerras 1999, 138), the paper-mâché sculpture made by CAFA students and modelled upon the Statue of Liberty, 'freedom's

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch (2007) estimates that some 2,000 people were killed in and around Tiananmen Square, and in other Chinese cities during the crackdown of pro-democracy demonstrations.

most powerful beacon' (Rosett 1989, cited by Mackerras 1999, 139).⁷⁵ 'The confluence of events [Gorbachev's visit] brought numerous Western journalists into the thick of the movement' (Mackerras 1999, 139), often at great personal cost. In *The Guardian*, Mirsky (1989a) recounts how he was set upon by a group of armed police, targeted because he was a foreigner. A photographer working for *Agence Press France*, the French news agency, was shot, although not seriously injured (Mirsky 1989a). Western journalists were 'thrust...onto center-stage' (Zuckerman 1989, cited by Mackerras, 139). Kate Adie's reporting for the BBC, from the frontline and a nearby hospital, provided British viewers with the kind of insider reporting that had never before been seen from within China. Stuart Franklin's haunting image of a lone protestor (aka 'Tank Man') defiantly standing in the path of an oncoming PLA tank, was to become an icon of twentieth-century photo-journalism.

The brutality of the crackdown and the repressive measures taken by the Party to quell further unrest in the days and weeks that followed, echoed the darkest days of the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping and his leadership was forever sullied by the events of 1989. His image as a moderate, pragmatic, restrained leader with whom the West could do business, was shattered. The Party leadership were characterised as two-dimensional story-book villains, 'cruel old men, caring naught for the people, or apparently for anything but their own power' (Mackerras 1999, 140). A *Guardian* headline from 4th June illustrates this point: 'China's old men use force to stay in power' wrote Jonathan Mirsky (1989b). He continues, 'The Chinese Government, Communist Party and army have lost all legitimacy and are depending on force for the continued existence of the handful of old men who have seized power here [Beijing]' (Mirsky

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that several small ceramic reproductions of the 'Goddess' have been acquired by the British Museum and are stored alongside the museum's collection of Cultural Revolution ceramics.

1989b). So much for their ‘dribbling’ and ‘croaking’ leaders (Mirsky 1989b), the Chinese people, on the other hand, were characterised in the press coverage as courageous, spirited and decent in spite of their contemptible government: ‘What we see now in Peking is a mass of citizens, workers, and students who have long been described as interested only in TV sets, washing machines and motor cycles but who turn out to be ready to use their all to fight for liberty’ (Mirsky 1989b). These images hark back to those of the 1930s and 40s, quite different from the images of brainwashed, faceless hordes, unquestionably willing to do the bidding of their ruler that characterised reports of China during the first half of the Cultural Revolution. The message was clear: the Chinese people were the true revolutionaries – not the veteran ‘Long Marchers’ in power - prepared to eschew materialism and economic wealth for self-determination and justice: a glimmer of hope, an inspiration, in the morass of late Thatcherite Britain perhaps, for the downtrodden, unfashionable, nostalgic Left?

After initial expressions of horror and condemnation, a tangible sense of disappointment with the Chinese leadership emerged among Western observers and commentators. Mackerras (1999, 141) draws a link between the reaction to the events of 1989, and the foundation of the PRC in 1949; the idea that China had turned away from the West, let ‘us’ down, after a period of apparent *entente*. Indeed, in response to the Tiananmen Incident the UN and European Union imposed embargos on the sale of arms to China, which remains in place today. Western tourists and businesses ‘shunned’ China (Mackerras 1999, 143): ‘The massacre [was] the event that made Westerners wake up to themselves about the evils of communist rule in China’ (Mackerras 1999, 144). As Rey Chow (1998, 93-94) has persuasively argued, when a crisis happens in China, the ‘Cold War narrative’ of suspicion and mistrust ‘returns with a vengeance’.

Chow calls this process of demonisation the ‘ “King Kong Syndrome” to refer to the structure of cross-cultural, cross-racial representation aimed at producing “China” as a spectacular primitive monster whose despotism necessitates the salvation of its people by outsiders’ (Chow 1998, 94), here, Western democracy.

The incidents of the 4th June continue to influence the image of China in the popular consciousness. ‘Tiananmen Square’ remains shorthand for state brutality. But, 1989 was a watershed year for other reasons. For it witnessed a series of largely peaceable, revolutions in Eastern Europe. One by one, over the course of a just a few months in the autumn of 1989, Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania overturned their respective communist regimes, and the political map of Europe. These events effectively sounded the death-knell for the Soviet Union, which collapsed two years later. The Cold War came to an abrupt halt. Communism, it seemed, had been defeated in Europe. As such an evocative image of the ideological separation of East and West, it was the breach of the Berlin Wall on 9th November which had the most psychological impact. It came to symbolise the end of communism and the advent of a new era of democratic freedom in Europe. It also marked the commencement of a new commodification and appropriation of communist iconography (a process echoed within China in the mid-90s with the ‘political pop’ movement) in which the people of the former communist states were complicit: a process which would have implications for the future interpretation of communist visual culture in the museum environment.

The Tiananmen Square Incident corresponded with a programme of redisplay and reinterpretation of Chinese material at the V&A. Curatorial staff could never have

anticipated the increased public awareness of China that the regime's actions would bring, nor the negativity of the images it produced. Indeed, research commissioned by the museum and carried out by National Opinion Polls (NOP), just a matter of weeks before June 4th, had shown that GCSE students, in particular, felt China had no relevance to their lives. The report's authors, quite reasonably concluded that had the research been carried out a few months later, the respondents might have expressed a different reaction (NOP 1989, 9). But, while, as the following shall elucidate, the twentieth century was largely absent from the new Tsui Gallery, the result of this research, its development brought into sharper focus the separation of dynastic China, from the contemporary in the museum environment. Not only did it reflect the museum's new approach towards the display and interpretation of objects from East Asia, it inadvertently revealed (unconscious) prejudices towards the visual culture of the PRC.

T.T. Tsui Gallery



Figure 27: The T.T. Tsui Gallery, V&A.

The V&A opened a new gallery of Chinese art, the T.T. Tsui Gallery, in 1991 (see figure 27). The redevelopment was part of the Far Eastern Department's wider programme of sponsored refurbishment, which included the new Toshiba Gallery of Japanese Art (1986), and the Samsung Gallery of Korean Art (1992). In the planning stages since the late eighties, the Tsui Gallery replaced the previous China gallery which, to all intents and purposes, had not changed since the 1950s (Kerr 1991a, 114). It presented the material artefacts of dynastic China in a dramatically different manner to

the old display which was arranged chronologically with a focus upon ceramics. Confronted with an ageing gallery and a forty year-old concept, the broad aim of the design team was to confront audiences' preconceptions of China by utilising the collection in an innovative way, with two main objectives: 1) to emphasise the richness, breadth and longevity of Chinese culture; and 2) to de-mystify the collection, cutting through popular Orientalist misconceptions and stereotypes of Chinese art and culture (Kerr, personal communication, 2000).

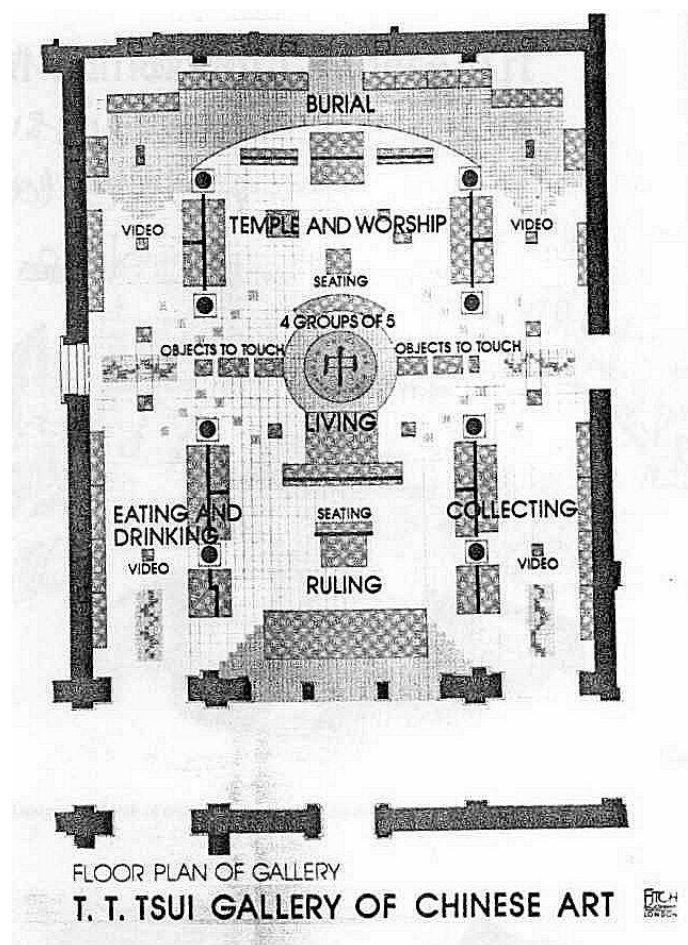


Figure 28: Floor plan of the T. T. Tsui Gallery of Chinese Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, showing themed areas.

They achieved this by utilising an object-based thematic approach and a variety of techniques to subtly contextualise the objects, without detracting from their aesthetic qualities (a concession perhaps to traditionalists). The design team devised six themes

from the ideas developed from audience research: Burial, Temple and Worship, Living, Eating and Drinking, Ruling, Collecting (see figure 28). In Kerr's words these provided 'excellent reference points for art objects in the collection' (Kerr 1991b, 21).

This thematic approach was quite a departure for the V&A, which has traditionally privileged the aesthetic over historical context. It was not without its critics. One of the most vociferous in print was Peter Hardie (1991, 23), the then curator responsible for Chinese material at Bristol Museum and City Gallery. Hardie bemoaned the V&A's rejection of the chronological approach, arguing that the new thematic interpretation restored the stereotype of a timeless, unchanging China. However, audience research had made clear that the lack of contextualisation in the previous display, had limited visitors' enjoyment and understanding of Chinese art and culture. The thematic approach directly addressed this 'lack', by loosing the shackles of conventional and traditional modernist display which, certainly in the case of ceramics, was informed by Western connoisseurship with an emphasis upon linear development and a prescribed system of aesthetics. Later evaluative research vindicated the new design. The thematic approach had successfully met the curatorial aims and objectives: on exit 77% of visitors in the sample agreed that they were more aware of Chinese art and culture and 71% were keen to find out more as a result (McManus and Khan 1992, 47-48). Indeed, one visitor asked 'Was all this stuff here before? It just goes to show how much there is that needs better displaying' (McManus and Khan 1992, 23).

Meanwhile, the V&A's Far Eastern Department continued to develop its collection of post-1949 material culture. In December 1990, Simon Kwan, the Hong Kong-based architect and collector of Chinese porcelain, gifted a group of around 60

Maoist-era, high-quality porcelain pieces, the first major donation to the collection. Kwan had been collecting from his base in Hong Kong since the early 80s. While some pieces date from the 1950s and post-Mao period, most of the porcelains were produced during the Cultural Revolution, although not all are immediately ‘political.’ A porcelain plaque (FE.37-1990), for example, roughly dated to 1966-76, is decorated with a revolutionary landscape depicting the mountains of Jinggangshan, site of a celebrated episode in Chinese communist historiography. Many pieces are signed, or attributed to named artists, and were produced at the ancient kiln complex at Jingdezhen. Traditional themes – landscapes, birds, flowers, horses – feature, as do heavily romanticised, Socialist Realist depictions of ‘happy minorities,’ a good example being the porcelain plaque (attributed to the artists Fu Yaosheng and Zhu Guangxi, FE.23.1990) decorated in enamels, with Tibetans and PLA soldiers at the foot of the Potala Palace in Lhasa celebrating the ‘liberation’ of Tibet in 1959 together.

Simon Kwan’s gift was valuable to the museum, not least because the objects it comprised were assuredly genuine. Kerr (2000, 100) writes that Kwan collected his ceramics during the early 1980s before this type of material was fashionable and widely reproduced: the implication being that the credibility of the Kwan gift is beyond reproach. Although compelling, this was not the only factor in the museum’s acceptance of the Kwan gift. While some pieces from the Kwan gift have been described in the museum records as ‘ordinary’ on the advice of Kerr in her capacity as former Head of the Department, or of the opinion of Zhai Xiaoxiang, identified as a Senior Master potter from Jingdezhen, most are quality wares intended for high-ranking Party officials, visiting dignitaries, ‘foreign guests’ and otherwise VIPs. These are not, to paraphrase Evans with reference to another exhibition of similar, high-quality material,

‘art for the masses’ (personal communication, 2008).⁷⁶ Indeed, the Kwan collection includes two pieces featuring China’s ‘foreign friends’: Ho Chi Minh (FE. 33-1990) and the Ayatollah Khomeini (FE.35-1990). A comment in the accession record for the former suggests that it may have been made as an official, or diplomatic gift. This bias may simply reflect the realities of the ‘working life’ of this material. Comparatively little of what was produced for the mass, popular market, survived its original context, let alone the purge of material artefacts in the period following Mao’s death. Badges may have only survived because of their inherent collectability, their symbolic currency, in spite of their usually lowly base materials and mass production. Thus, the quality of the pieces which comprise the V&A collection has implications for its representative value, if that was indeed the motivation behind the collection. For, the V&A, not unreasonably, applied the classic criteria of curatorship to this genre of material. Serving as the guiding principle of the acquisitions policy were the ‘challenging parameters’ of the British public’s taste, with an eye upon future relevance and aesthetic value (Kerr 2000, 95-96): basic tenets of collecting on behalf of a national museum. But, for Kerr (2000, 95-96) of crucial importance when selecting an object for collection is its status, its cultural *and* aesthetic value, in its original context. Thus, we can surmise from these comments that the V&A actively sought out high-quality, high-status objects. While the object of these efforts was the visual culture of socialism, the museum’s collecting policy was necessarily conservative.

To return to Hardie’s criticisms of the T.T. Tsui Gallery, if any aspect of the gallery *did* emphasise the perceived ‘allochronism’ (see Birth 2008) - to borrow a term from anthropology - of Chinese culture from the Western perspective, it was the lack of

⁷⁶ The exhibition to which this comment refers was *Mao: Art for the Masses*, Royal Museums Scotland (May 2003 - March 2004).

the contemporary, the absence of the twentieth century. The gallery, which professed to aid visitors in gaining a deeper understanding of China, almost exclusively focused upon dynastic China. The omission of the People's Republic within the narrative of that key display, the focus of the Chinese collections within the museum, had the potential to perpetuate modernist images and stereotypes of China, in spite of the best efforts of the curatorial team. While a small, frequently rotating display of pieces from the twentieth century was exhibited in a reflexive section entitled 'What the Museum Collects Now', those objects tended to reflect older traditions in choice of decoration, material and subject matter. The radical changes and turmoil visited upon China during the twentieth century were conspicuous by their absence. Yet the V&A was concurrently developing its collection of post-1949 visual culture. Which poses the question, why were a selection of these objects *not* displayed in the T.T. Tsui Gallery?

In an earlier chapter I wrote that the art of China has frequently been marginalised by the Western art historical paradigm. In particular, the incorporation of Western influences, be they in terms of material, style or content, have been dismissed as hollow imitation. For many Western critics, Chinese art history effectively ended with the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1911 after which, according to Sullivan (2006, xxviii), contemporary art from China was negatively perceived to be 'either traditional and invariable, and hence of little historical interest, or ... a feeble attempt to copy Western art.' Coupled with this notion of authenticity, is the cult of the artist-genius, working freely outside the bounds of materialist society and the political influence of the State. In addition, is the perceived ability of great art to affect a spiritual 'liberation' from the mundane and commonplace (Duncan 1992, 109), which suggests a disavowal of overt political content. The art produced in Maoist China transgresses these values.

Explicitly political, it was produced according to strict conventions prescribed by a totalitarian state, often collaboratively and frequently anonymously. These factors prevent the assimilation of Maoist art into the dominant Eurocentric art historical narrative. But in addition to that, revolutionary art also subverts prevailing Western images of China and what constitutes Chinese art, represented at the V&A by the display of dynastic China in the Tsui Gallery. A further barrier is its populist nature, in that it was produced in order to have mass appeal for a mass audience *and* because, at times since the 1960s, it has been appropriated by Western popular culture. As Moore (1997, 4) states, it has only been relatively recently that popular culture has emerged as a genuine object for study and display. The rise and growth of social history, of ‘history from below’, over the past thirty to forty years has challenged the concept that museums exist to reflect the most valuable, the most unique: objects pertaining to so-called ‘high’ culture. This has led to the revaluation of a great deal of material culture as historically and culturally significant. But it is also apparent that while these trends have been ascendant with regards to the study and analysis of Western popular culture, I would argue that the popular culture of the Other has largely been ignored in British museums, with the effect that ‘traditional’ ideas about Chinese art and design are rarely challenged. Additionally, the modernist museum has long been associated with objectivity and scientific detachment. While museologists have revealed that museums are, conversely, inherently political institutions, the legacy of the museum-as-temple to the arts remains and with that the idea that a museum visit should be an inherently uplifting, near spiritual experience. Thus objects such as those that comprise the V&A’s collection of post-1949 Chinese visual culture, associated with difficult periods in history and political ideologies alien to our own, are distinctly problematic. But a

solution of sorts to these apparently insurmountable tensions between conflicting images and ideas of Chineseness was found at the V&A.

Revolutionary Art on Display: The Twentieth Century Design Gallery at the V&A

The Tsui Gallery emphasised the scope and longevity of Chinese art and culture. But it created a particular image of an ancient, beautiful, harmonious China: a vision that complimented the PRC's contemporaneous tiger economy self-image. By excising the twentieth century from the gallery space, the V&A need not engage with the more uncomfortable and less familiar aspects of twentieth century Chinese history. However, a small number of pieces from the museum's collection of post-1949 visual culture did find a role in the new Twentieth Century Design Gallery which opened, a year later, in 1992. This display remained, more or less in the same form with similar content, for the next fifteen years, until its removal for gallery redevelopment towards the end of 2008.⁷⁷ It blazed a trail for future exhibitions of revolutionary art from China. The development of the gallery met with some controversy within the museum. Wilk (1997, 353) states that a few were uncomfortable with the general policy of collecting objects less than fifty years old. However, the gallery did reflect the institutional drive to collect the contemporary, which was further strengthened during the tenure of Strong's successor, Dame Elizabeth Esteve-Coll. In 1989 Esteve-Coll oversaw the instigation of a museum-wide acquisitions policy which echoed the museum's founding mission to collect the best examples of contemporary art and design. Indeed, according to Wilk (1997, 352), most of what the museum collected, throughout the nineties, was twentieth century in date of manufacture.

⁷⁷ N.B. In 2009 the display was reinstalled, in a somewhat altered form, in an adjacent gallery.

Style as Statement

The gallery took a global view of twentieth century design, arranged thematically within a chronological narrative. The *Style as Statement* section, comprising a two-sided display case, the reverse of which included a small number of Cultural Revolution-era porcelain mugs and Mao badges, explored the role of design in countercultural contexts between the 1960s and 1980s (see figure 29). While it predominantly featured objects from Britain, there were also pieces from the USA and Eastern Europe, as well as China. Consciously or otherwise, this juxtaposition reflected the dominant ideologies of the Cold War, the East-West spilt along ideological and geographical lines. It suggests that both ‘sides’ – while representing opposing political ideologies – were preoccupied with similar themes and concerns. Indeed there is a clear correlation between 1950s Americana, with its yearning for a better way of life and preoccupation with space and technological advancement, and its Soviet counterpart. Identity and image were the key themes of this section of the display, as this extract from an accompanying text panel reveals:

...Frequently the image has expressed an attitude to established society, which has sometimes been a reforming one. Ironically, in these instances the social role has become transposed from designer to consumer.

These objects demonstrate the role of design both in the expression of aspiration and of social identity. In doing this they present design as an identifying uniform.

Two covered mugs and nine porcelain transfer-printed Mao badges of varying sizes and consecutive accession numbers (see figure 30), were displayed alongside images of Bob Dylan, David Bowie and Sex Pistols' album covers, a group of 'Solidarity' and other politically-themed and campaign badges, themed mugs (Comic Relief, Miners' Strike and Liverpool FC), and copies of the 80s and 90s style magazines 'iD' and 'The Face'.

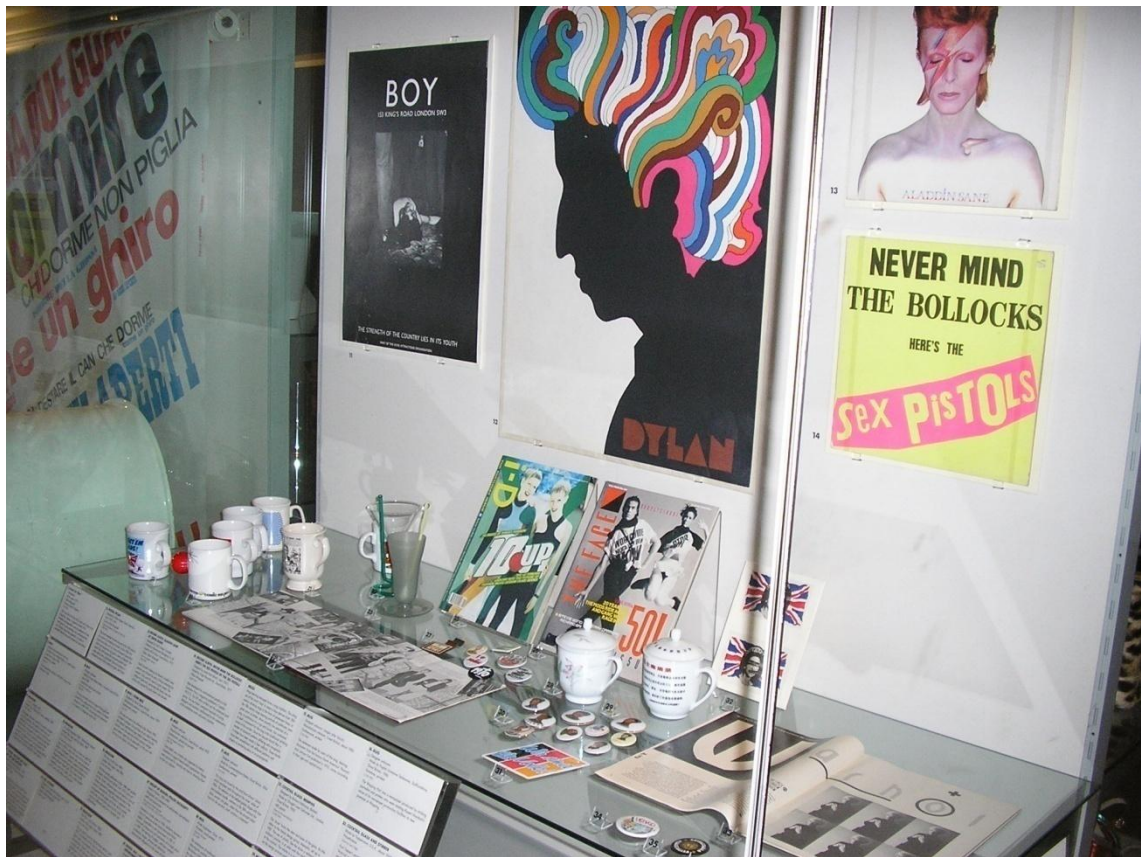


Figure 29: *Style as Statement*, Twentieth Century Design Gallery, V&A.



Figure 30: Detail of Mao badges and covered mugs.

Made c.1966 at various ceramic centres in China, the badges (FE.135-143-1988) depict Mao at various stages of his adult life based upon widely disseminated official portraits,

in PLA uniform and red-star adorned hat, or as a young idealistic man in scholars' robes standing in a traditional landscape. The latter image was derived from the oil painting *Mao Goes to Anyuan*, a copy of which Clunas purchased in China during the 1970s and later loaned to the museum for the *Power of the Poster* exhibition held at the V&A in 1998.⁷⁸ The accompanying text read:

During the Cultural Revolution, the outward sign of boundless loyalty to Chairman Mao was the wearing of his image, usually on lapel badges. A small number of centrally-approved images of Mao, at various stages in his career, were manufactured in immense quantities and in a very wide variety of media.

This statement appears to contradict the earlier assertion that the interpretive focus of this display was British youth and sub-cultures. But instead, the inclusion of these examples of Cultural Revolution memorabilia was emblematic of the role and influence of the Maoism on the West's own parallel 'cultural revolution' in the 60s and 70s; the wearing of Mao badges, or ownership of propaganda posters from China, were signifiers of a personal ideology allied to the anti-establishment Left. It can be argued, therefore, that Mao badges were as much a part of the uniform of the 60s and 70s youth movement in the West, as they were in China. The fact that objects which were so closely associated with the deification of Mao were displayed alongside Western visual culture resonant of youth radicalisation, left-wing political campaigning and popular cultural icons with their own devoted fan base is telling.

⁷⁸ The temporary exhibition *The Power of the Poster* (2 April - 26 July 1998) showcased the diversity of the V&A's collection of graphics. It was just the most recent of a series of exhibitions in the V&A's history devoted to poster art. In recent decades the museum has focused on acquiring posters on political, social and environmental themes, including examples dating from the anti-Vietnam War movement and the overthrow of communism in Eastern Europe (see Timmers 1998).

The mugs were among the earliest acquisitions to the collection. Their exact date of manufacture is, as with the badges, difficult to pinpoint exactly, especially as their decorative elements make no direct reference to contemporary events. For example, the quote from Mao's Talks at Yan'an that adorns the mug numbered 29 (see figure 30) could have appeared on similar items at any point following the foundation of the PRC in 1949. However, the second mug (numbered 28, see figure 30), is likely to date from the early Deng period. Hand-painted with a traditional flower (water lily or lotus design), it reflects the reintroduction of traditional themes in subject matter following the Cultural Revolution. Incidentally both mugs were made at Jingdezhen, indicating they are top-quality wares, perhaps produced for local dignitaries and honoured foreign guests, or made available for sale at the state-owned 'Friendship Stores' opened in major cities to cater for foreign visitors in the 70s after the thaw in East-West relations. Both mugs were given to the V&A by John Ayers, Keeper of the Far Eastern Department from the Department's foundation in 1970 until 1982. Ayers first visited China in 1975 as a member of a delegation of British museum professionals (see Ayers, 1995). What ties these mugs to the Mao badges and the other objects with which they were juxtaposed, was perfectly summed up by the display text:

The mug form here is of no consequence; the message is all.

Design and the State

The second section of the Twentieth Design Gallery which featured objects from the Cultural Revolution was entitled *Design and the State*. A standing porcelain figure of Mao and a plate depicting an idealised Socialist Realist style portrait of a PLA soldier cleaning his rifle were displayed alongside mid-century 'utility' and Festival of Britain-

era ceramics and textiles from Britain and the US (see figure 31). This section linked art produced in China for explicit propagandist purposes and design closely tied to governmental priorities in Britain and America, during a roughly similar time period. The figure of a middle-aged Mao (FE.34-100) was donated to the museum as part of the Kwan gift (see figure 32). Its role in the display was to be indicative of the mid-century cult of personality, as the accompanying text made clear:



Figure 31: *Design and the State*, Twentieth Century Design Gallery, V&A.

The visible presence of Chairman Mao, on lapel badges, posters, massive outdoor statues and smaller indoor images like this underpinned the cult of the personality across the face of China. The collective or anonymous nature of all forms of endeavour was stressed by the state, and the creator of this ubiquitous

image remains, as with so much modern Chinese material, firmly and deliberately unknown.

Alongside the standing figure of Mao was placed a high quality porcelain ‘display plate’ (FE.39-1990) made at Jingdezhen and decorated by a named artist, Zhang Wenzhao (b. 1932), again part of the Kwan gift (see figure 32). It predates the Cultural Revolution (the estimated date range of its manufacture is given as 1955-1965), but its subject matter, a PLA soldier in winter uniform – identified as the ubiquitous Lei Feng in the accession records – was a popular motif of self-sacrifice and loyalty to Mao during the initial, manic phase of the Cultural Revolution.

What themes can be drawn from an analysis of the exhibition? What did the interpretive approach of the curatorial team say about China? How might this have impacted upon visitor’s perceptions of ‘Chineseness’? Audiences are not passive sponges waiting to absorb unfiltered knowledge from a single, authoritative source. So, one can only surmise how visitors might react or assimilate the information they receive upon viewing the exhibition into their existing frameworks of knowledge. My assessment is that visitors with little prior knowledge of communist China would come away with scant ‘new’ ideas about China, assuming they located (and recognised) the Chinese items in the Twentieth Century Design Gallery to begin with. It could be argued that those with a particular interest in China would head straight for the T.T. Tsui Gallery within the museum unaware that Chinese objects were on display elsewhere (unless they had a sufficiently enthusiastic interest in twentieth century design to stumble upon them by chance).



Figure 32: Detail of Mao figure and Lei Feng plate.

Those that did find them might take from the exhibition an impression that Mao Zedong was an icon of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, or that the State was closely linked

with the production of art and design in mid-century China, as it was in Britain and America. Even, that the Chinese manufacture porcelain, for that is the material from which all of the selected objects on view are made, thus emphasising the long-standing association between China and 'china'. All are valid assessments. But crucially, because of its physical separation, the predominant (albeit unintended) message was that revolutionary art cannot represent the 'real' China and is not *really* inherently 'Chinese.' Instead, it is an aberration, a hiccup in the China's rich and long artistic tradition.

So, why, in this instance, did the V&A separate dynastic and revolutionary Chinese collections in display? Was it a continued reluctance to classify this material as 'art'? Given the V&A's remit to operate as a repository of good design, this seems unlikely; the museum had thusly transgressed modernist classifications of art by collecting European posters amongst other ephemeral genre. Instead, I believe that the stated aims of the curatorial team behind the Tsui Gallery may provide the key. Their overall objective in challenging stereotypes of China, was to create a positive image with which diverse audiences could engage. In the West we are conditioned to reject the ideologies of communism and regard it as a threat to the concepts of democracy and freedom. In 1991, the contemporaneous narrative of the Cultural Revolution, coupled with the prevailing image of Chinese communism as oppressive and brutal, was overwhelmingly negative. 'The collapse of the USSR..., has merely mollified rather than removed this perception from Western attitudes' (Teague 2004, 162). To include the material artefacts of recent Chinese political history in the new Tsui Gallery might have been a step too far for the curatorial team (and, perhaps, for the Hong Kong-based sponsor).

During her employment at the V&A, Rose Kerr (personal communication, 2001) confirmed that few visitors ever publicly questioned the presence of propagandist works in this section of the gallery. She concluded, thus, that Cultural Revolution China was – in a cultural sense – simply too far removed from the experiences of the British public to render it imaginable. The strongest negative reaction she experienced had been the rather ‘sheepish’ attitude of representatives from the Chinese Embassy when confronted with this material on show during events to mark the Hong Kong handover. Yet, at the same time, the museum clearly felt it necessary to justify its public display. Writing in 1995, Verity Wilson – the then Assistant Curator of the Far Eastern Department – recognised that ‘some eyebrows might be raised’ at the inclusion of political material alongside ‘more obviously “important” objects’. Her justification? With particular reference to a lacquer dish (FE.6.1990) dating from the Cultural Revolution and depicting the revolutionary hero and PLA soldier Cai Yongxiang, Wilson argues that ‘the uneasy fit between the radicalism of the subject matter and the conservatism of technique and style of execution is powerfully redolent of the impasse reached by design in socialist China at this turbulent period’ (Wilson 1995, 62-63). One can surmise from these comments that during this phase of its development, the collection was particularly valued for its power to represent this clash between technique and subject as a facet of twentieth century design.

It is also clear that the preparedness of museums to present controversial interpretations or objects lies in the will of individual museum professionals. Such an attitude seems to have imbued the Twentieth Century Design Gallery, evidence for which could be found in the explicit recognition – reflecting the ‘new’ museological

discourse of the 1990s - that the twin processes of selection and interpretation are intertwined and far from neutral. A self-reflexive statement displayed within the gallery read:

The display of any gallery involves many choices in selection, commentary and design. The display is an interpretation reflecting the concerns of its times and of its organisers. This gallery sets out to stimulate debate about the significance of objects, not to define an orthodoxy.

Undoubtedly changes in curatorial provision will impact upon the material chosen for collection and display, as will the way in which objects are interpreted. With the departure of key personnel - coupled with changes in institutional policy - it is reasonable to conclude that the impetus for active engagement with a particular collection, its development and display, might also shift.

During this period, the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution was used within the context of a cross-cultural exploration of the influence of the State on artistic production, in the Twentieth Century Design Gallery. This was, in itself, a 'great leap forward' in the presentation of Chinese art. The incorporation of Chinese art, the art of an Other – doubly so in this case by virtue of geography and ideology - in an exhibition which cut across cultural boundaries, is evidence of the extent to which the museum had, in practice, begun to break free of the conventions imposed by its modernist beginnings. In terms of the collection itself, perhaps the biggest influence on why and when it was collected, was the institutional shift towards collecting the twentieth century. But it also reflected the interests of the curatorial team at that time. While Craig

Clunas states that ‘that’s what there was’, it seems likely that the fact that both he and the then Head of the Department, Rose Kerr, had studied in China during the Cultural Revolution and already possessed the beginnings of a collection of post-1949 Chinese visual culture, had a big influence on the acquisition process. The influence of the individual in curatorial departments cannot be underestimated.

As Clunas states, the processes of collecting and display are ‘essentially affirmatory’ (personal communication, 2007). As such, collections of Cultural Revolution-era material culture have the potential to provoke strong negative reactions. He gives the example of a Falun Gong supporter in attendance at a lecture on propaganda posters, who ‘forcibly’ argued that ‘these things’ should not even be spoken about (Clunas, personal communication, 2007). While China is reluctant to address these issues, ‘it is very difficult to raise any kind of discussion’. However, he goes on to state that ‘the visual embodiment of messages is something that the V&A’s graphic collections are legitimately interested in’ be they political or commercial (in the case of advertising): ‘It’s never just pure design.’ Despite contributing to the collection himself, Craig Clunas believes that it is possible to fetishise the Cultural Revolution and that objects from that period are not necessarily as interesting as the material culture of the 1950s and early 60s. Nevertheless, this is the era in which the V&A collection excels. While it remains largely uncatalogued,⁷⁹ it operates as a time capsule, ready to be ‘reopened’ when the time *is* right.

⁷⁹ The exception being the collection of revolutionary papercuts which have been documented in an article by Andrew Bolton, ‘Chinese Papercuts from the Cultural Revolution at the Victoria and Albert Museum,’ in *Orientations*, November-December 1997, 79-87, and in the V&A publication *Chinese Papercuts: A Selection* by Ruth Bottomley, 1994.

Light and Dark: Two Views of China

In his last decade, Deng Xiaoping remained paramount leader of China. But, increasingly frail, he rarely appeared in public after the Tiananmen Square Incident, and not at all after 1994. He was said to be spending time with his grandchildren (Spence 1999, 723). China was effectively run by Li Peng and Jiang Zemin, President from 1993. When Deng died of respiratory failure on February 19, 1997 at the age of 92, the Chinese public's response was muted. Spence (1993, 724) notes that Deng had never shown contrition for the deaths that occurred as a result of the events of 1989. The leadership passed quietly to Jiang.

The British media's response to Deng's death fore-grounded the two, frequently contradictory images of China prevalent at that time in the British consciousness. Deng was inextricably tied to both: China, the oft-touted 'economic miracle', the emergent economic super-power, and China, violator of human rights (Mackerras 1999, 138). These tropes continue to dominate the vision of China in the popular consciousness and the political relationship between East and West. Western images of China have rarely been homogenous. Apparently contradictory visions have happily co-existed throughout the history of the East-West relationship. But, at the end of the twentieth century, these two perspectives were particularly marked, exposing the tension between the pursuance of fiscal reward and morality. Perfectly illustrating this point, on the day following the announcement of Deng's death, the *Guardian* published extracts from Downing Street and US President Bill Clinton's eulogies, juxtaposed with Amnesty International's response:

An extraordinary figure on the world stage over the past two decades.

President Clinton

He played a key role in the process which led to the joint declaration on Hong Kong in 1984, embodying his visionary concept of ‘one country two systems.’

Downing Street

His legacy also includes well-oiled machinery of repression.

Amnesty International

(Anon, 1997)

As in China, Deng’s uncomfortable relationship with Mao Zedong and the harsh treatment meted out to him and his family during the Cultural Revolution, undoubtedly served to enhance his profile in the West. As did his economic pragmatism and preparedness to engage in trade with the West, thus overturning a centuries-old image of the Chinese dating back to the abortive Macartney mission of 1793. Deng was also, in contrast with Mao, urbane and European-educated and, like Zhou Enlai, a skilled and outward-looking statesman. In the final assessment, his legacy, as it was perceived in Britain, was best summed up in the closing comments of an obituary written for *The Guardian*, by the Chinese dissident Professor Su Shaozhi:

We may conclude that Deng’s “merits outweigh his faults” (the opposite verdict to that which must be passed on Mao) but political reform was his Achilles heel.

(Su, 1997)

Yet, despite the passing years and the death of its progenitor, the grand narrative of the Cultural Revolution – the perspective set in stone by the 1981 *Resolution* – continued to dominate British popular perceptions of that decade. This was in no small part due to the emergence of so-called ‘scar literature’, or ‘literature of the wounded’ (*shanghen wenxue*), a genre based upon the reminiscences and experiences of those that experienced the worst of the Cultural Revolution first-hand.

Scars: The Role of the Victim Memoir in Western Imaginings of the Cultural Revolution

Named after a short story by Lu Xinhua published in 1978 during the brief period of cultural liberalisation at the end of the 1970s, ‘scar literature’ depicted the ‘sufferings of honest people’ (Fokkema 1991, 613). It had a clear political purpose; it fed into the wider process of national catharsis. On its transference to the West, it became a publishing phenomenon of the 1980s and 90s. The genre came to encompass ‘victim’ memoirs, frequently written by women in exile: Nien Cheng (*Life and Death in Shanghai* (1987)), Anchee Min (*Red Azalea* (1994)) and Jung Chang (*Wild Swans* (1991)) to name but three of the most prominent. Their success lies in the genre’s accessibility. It utilises ‘novelistic techniques’, dialogue and sympathetic characters (Kong 1999, 240) and follows established narratives of good triumphing over evil. It renders ‘history’ accessible and meaningful on a personal level. Dramatic and engaging, scar literature is, as Kong (1999, 239) has argued, ‘an excellent means to enter the “strange” Chinese world’.

Yet, Kong (1999, 240) questions the validity of these works as historical accounts. Winterton (2007) argues that these ‘Nightmares of the Cultural Revolution’ frequently employ similar formulaic plots and characters:

...the wicked petty tyrant..., a populace happy to chant “Your plans to restore a bourgeois society have been revealed and smashed” one day and something close to the opposite the next, Western literary classics hidden under mattresses and treasured as bulwarks against the Red Guard onslaught, senior academics being made to crawl through the mud to collect animal droppings, the persecution of “black” (as opposed to “red”) families and their eventual banishment to remote mountain areas, and the meeting up of the hero with some kindred spirit (who invariably also has Western books secreted about his person)...*The formula requires horrors* [my emphasis].

(Winterton 2007)

In the particular case of *Wild Swans*, Kong argues that Jung Chang’s account strays ‘over the border between self-invention and idealized justifications’ (Kong 1999, 241): criticisms which were to discredit her later biography of Mao Zedong. The regime is always bad, her family always the innocent victims. The ‘real complexity’ of the Cultural Revolution is not explored (Kong 1991, 241). *Wild Swans*, the most successful of its genre,⁸⁰ presents a black and white account informed by hindsight, which fits snugly within the dominant narrative of the Cultural Revolution.

⁸⁰ Jung Chang’s award-winning memoir has sold in excess of 10 million copies worldwide (Brown 2007).

It has been suggested that Western publishing houses' enthusiasm for scar literature and victim memoirs, was indicative of an 'an on-going New Cold War, a veiled propaganda campaign waged through the corridors of literature' (Winterton 2007). While not seeking to deny the authenticity and validity of these accounts the same commentator (a correspondent for the *Taipei Times*, a left-leaning, pro-Taiwanese Independence English-language newspaper), questions 'the motives of those who flood the market with accounts of those terrible years. History has undoubtedly provided the ammunition, but who's firing the guns, and at whom?' (Winterton, 2007). I am less inclined to agree with this summation. Simply, it made good economic sense for publishers to cash in on the popularity of the genre. But while the popularity of Cultural Revolution narratives appears to have been a time-specific phenomenon, similar themes – survivors beating oppressive backgrounds, escaping their tormentors to bear witness to evil - will undoubtedly continue to beguile the readers of popular literature – one is reminded of the recent 'fashion' for 'misery lit', exemplified by Dave Pelzer's *A Child Called It* (1995). But, what is clearly apparent is that 'scar literature' reflects and consolidates popular ideas about the Cultural Revolution: that it was entirely *bad*, a totalitarian nightmare, a time when individuality was suppressed and personal freedom was absent.

The Return of Hong Kong

Deng's death placed Jiang Zemin centre stage when Britain, after 156 years of colonialism, formally returned Hong Kong to mainland Chinese rule at midnight on 30th June 1997 at a ceremony attended by the Chinese leadership, the new British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Prince Charles and the last Governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten.

The event was a significant milestone in the Sino-British political relationship and ‘another spectacular moment for China watching’ (Chow 1998, 93) for a global audience still fascinated (if also a little repelled) with the PRC. After two years of talks, the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Premier Zhao Ziyang signed the *Joint Declaration on Hong Kong* on 19th December 1984, which formalised the arrangements for the handover. If anything represented the faith placed in Deng’s regime, that was it. Nevertheless, the forthcoming handover loomed over Hong Kong residents, British expats and Chinese, who feared the coming transfer of sovereignty. These concerns were only augmented by the PRC’s heavy-handling of the pro-democracy movement on the mainland. Many in Hong Kong, which had a long tradition of independence and pro-democracy activism, perceived the transfer as the exchange of one imperialist regime for another. As an economic hotspot, with a free market economy, the implications of the coming communist regime caused further concern: what methods of coercion would Beijing use to rein in and contain Hong Kong’s ‘independence’? The promised ‘one country, two systems’, which Beijing assured would preserve the Hong Kong life-style, guaranteeing a high degree of political autonomy, an elected legislature, an independent judiciary and a capitalist economy for fifty years (see CAMB n.d.), did little to assuage these concerns. In 1990, and in response to fears raised by the Tiananmen Square incident, Britain announced – much to the chagrin of Beijing – that a limited number of 50,000 British passports would be issued to Hong Kong Chinese. Many believed that this was a decision that the Conservative government was morally obligated to make. But it did prompt a xenophobic backlash. Fearing a wave of mass immigration, a backbench revolt of Tory MPs, led by the former party chairman, Norman Tebbit (Travis 1990), unsuccessfully challenged the decision.

Chow (1998, 93) argues that the handover engendered ‘Twin feelings of mournfulness and fearfulness’ in Britain. While, for the Chinese, the handover represented the ‘symbolic closure of the historic British aggression against China’ (Chow 1998, 96), British despatches were almost universally sentimental: lingering upon Chris Patten’s tearful goodbyes, the exit of the British dignitaries aboard the royal yacht *Britannia*, on its final journey, and the end of empire (see Higgins 1997; Vines 1997; Leslie 1997; Dowdney 1997). The following day Chinese troops entered the territory, in what Chow (1998, 94) reminds us, was a perfectly legal move. Nevertheless, the British media interpreted it as an invasion and a portentous sign of things to come. The ‘King Kong Syndrome’ had (temporarily) returned to British representations of the People’s Republic. Ultimately, many of the fears expressed during this period were unfounded. But the legacy of the handover was the re-ignition of popular interest in China, ‘Chineseness’ and dystopian tropes of revolution, as the new millennium approached.

Mao: Icon to Irony

The V&A added to its collection throughout the 1990s. While despatched to China on behalf on the museum to acquire Hong Kong handover memorabilia (handkerchiefs, badges, plates, t-shirts, etc.) for the collection in 1997, Andrew Bolton, then Curator of Contemporary Chinese Fashion, acquired six further Cultural Revolution-era Mao badges. Nineteen propaganda posters were purchased direct from the Director of the Liaoning Paper Art Company in 1998. Most date from the Cultural Revolution, and offer a tantalising insight into extant deposits of genuine material in China, some twenty years following Mao’s death and Deng’s ‘purge’ of Cultural Revolution relics. A group of fifteen peasant paintings, dating from 1965 to 1976, including an early example of a

celebrated Huxian peasant painting, were also purchased in 1998, presumably at auction. In 1999 Gordon Barrass,⁸¹ diplomat, writer and collector of Chinese art, gifted a group of six silk pictures, wall hangings featuring revolutionary calligraphy in Mao's hand, and cotton 'Red Guard' armbands. In the same year a selection of similar items were donated by fellow collector Peter Wain and another, unnamed private individual.

The turn of the millennium saw the first and, to date, only substantial exhibition of material from the V&A's collection. The temporary exhibition, *Mao: From Icon to Irony* (October 1999 and April 2000) ran alongside *Fashioning Mao*, another temporary display which examined the contemporary commodification of the Mao image by fashion designers Vivienne Tam and Flora Cheong-Leen. The exhibition featured eighteen pieces from the V&A collection, supplemented by an additional eighteen objects, or groups of objects, lent by private collectors. Curated by Andrew Bolton, the exhibition and its linked study day entitled *The East is Red: Art, politics and culture in the People's Republic of China*, was organised to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the PRC. The exhibition approached the material from a design history perspective. It charted the development of the iconic use of the image of Mao Zedong from 1949 to the present day, with a particular focus on how revolutionary themes had been iconoclastically recycled by contemporary Chinese artists. The exhibition comprised contemporary Mao memorabilia and political kitsch, juxtaposed with Cultural Revolution-era objects, including badges in various media, desk plaques,

⁸¹ Barrass had served at the British Embassy in Beijing from 1970-72 and, in 1973, became joint head of the Anglo-French delegation which negotiated the exhibition which became *Genius of China* on its transfer to the Royal Academy in 1973 (Greene 2002, 7).

a silk picture and a porcelain figure of Mao. Contemporary objects included mugs, a watch and a Shanghai Tang t-shirt.⁸²

According to Kerr (2000, personal communication) the exhibition attracted a significant and predominantly young audience. Given the negative connotations of communism in the Western context and the poor image of China engendered by the Tiananmen Square Incident, I had imagined that visitors might have been confused, angered or distressed when presented with this material; it offered a very different image of China from that delivered by other displays within the museum. However, Kerr (personal communication, 2000) revealed that many visitors appeared to only have a vague understanding, or knowledge of the Cultural Revolution. It had not infiltrated the public consciousness to the same degree as images of ancient China, contemporaneously undergoing a renaissance thanks to the popularity of martial arts films like Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). The consensus response to the exhibition was rooted in a lack of empathy for the political context. Some even found the images funny, or absurd. Kerr's (personal communication, 2007) explanation reveals a truth about the brevity of historical memory: 'The Cultural Revolution is a long time ago to anyone under the age of thirty'. The aesthetics of Maoist visual culture are so far removed from 'our' ideas about China and Chinese art - grounded in pre-revolutionary China - to render them unfathomable.

Mao: From Icon to Irony marked the end of this initial phase of collecting at the V&A. Although, as we shall see later in this section, the museum continued to acquire pieces from time-to-time throughout the next decade, the price of genuine material and

⁸² Photographs are, unfortunately unavailable, but I have been able to access the original exhibition text, in conjunction with the accession books, to supplement my own notes made on visiting the exhibition.

changes in personnel within the Far Eastern Department led to new priorities, most notably contemporary, avant-garde art from China. In contrast, collecting at the University of Westminster was revitalised at the turn of the century and joined by the British Museum: the youngest but, arguably, most vital collection of the three institutions today.

Chapter 10: Human Rights and Bragging Rights: Images of China from the Turn of the Millennium to the Olympic Games

China's burgeoning economy continued to dominate British images of China into the twenty-first century. But concerns about China's human rights record and the environmental impact of the country's rapid industrial and economic growth, began to penetrate the British public's awareness of the PRC. The tension created by the inherent hypocrisy in at once exploiting the Chinese economy and condemning its human rights and environmental record, was the principal progenitor of images of China in the last decade. The 1995 Channel 4 undercover documentary *The Dying Rooms*, in which the film-makers Kate Blewett and Brian Woods exposed the dreadful conditions and 'systematic neglect' at Chinese orphanages, was 'one of those documentaries that stays with you long after you've seen it'.⁸³ It had an enormous emotional impact and was tremendously damaging to the image of China in Britain at the time, and into the new century. In 2001, John Gittings, founder of the Westminster collection, wrote:

Beijing continues to get a bad press abroad whenever stories of child neglect surface....a British tabloid published a picture of a dead baby abandoned in a ditch - allegedly outside a Chinese police station. Such stories reinforce stock images of a communist regime which imposes population controls by force and of a callous attitude towards the weak and helpless. Both images contain an element of truth but fail to acknowledge the sincere efforts being made by many government officials and ordinary Chinese. (Gittings

2001)

⁸³ Channel 4. n.d. *The Dying Rooms*. http://www.channel4.com/fourdocs/archive/the_dying_room.html (03/05/2009)

The outcry that met *The Dying Rooms* opened the flood-gates. With alarming regularity, during the first years of the new century the British media reported incidence after incidence of human rights abuse in China, be it child-labour, failing safety standards in the mining industry, the suppression of Falun Gong, or the tainting of food and pharmaceutical products. At the turn of the millennium, China was executing an extraordinarily high number of prisoners. In 2002, Amnesty International estimated a minimum of 1,939 death sentences and 1,356 confirmed executions in China during 2000: on average 37 people were executed each week, in total more than that carried out by the rest of the world put together.⁸⁴ In 2001 the overall number of known executions in China leapt to 2,468, accounting for more than 90% of known executions globally.⁸⁵ From 2001, until the PRC admitted to the practice in 2005 (Macartney 2005), a particularly ‘hot’ China topic was the ‘harvesting’ of executed prisoners’ organs for transplant (see Select Committee on Foreign Affairs 2006). Media outlets describe the practice in gruesome detail: the BBC reported extracts of an interview with a dissident former doctor, whom had revealed that:

...prisoners selected to be donors were tested before execution for suitability and then shot in the back of the head so as not to damage their heart, liver, kidneys or skin.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Amnesty. 2002a. ‘People’s Republic of China: the death penalty in 2000’. <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ASA17/032/2002/en/5c04855e-d80c-11dd-9df8-936c90684588/asa170322002en.html> (05/05/2009)

⁸⁵ Amnesty. 2002b. ‘Death Penalty News: March 2002.’ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/ACT53/002/2002/en/d6b1550b-d872-11dd-9df8-936c90684588/act530022002en.html> (05/05/2009).

⁸⁶ BBC News. 2001. ‘China fury at organ snatching ‘lies’.’ BBC News. Thursday, 28th June 2001. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/1411389.stm> (03/05/2009).

To the general public these incidents might have confirmed old stereotypes: nineteenth-century characterisations of the Chinese as ‘inhuman’ and insensitive to suffering.

The environmental impact of China’s rapid industrialisation also came under the spotlight of the Western media:

Western politicians queue up to sing its praises. Economists regard it with awe and delight. Other countries are desperate to imitate it. Yet there is another side to China's exploding, double-digit-growth miracle economy - it is turning into one of the greatest environmental threats the earth has ever faced.

(McCarthy 2005)

The Three Gorges Dam hydroelectricity plant, the world’s largest, on the Yangtze River basin, garnered particular ire. In the planning for decades, but completed in 2006, the project displaced some 700,000 people (Watts 2003). ‘Always highly politicised’ in the Western media, the project became ‘virtually synonymous with corruption, secrecy, financial incompetence and a leadership that refuses to allow its people's wishes to impede the realisation of ambitious and lucrative state plans’ (Watts 2003).

The fluctuating tensions between China and its neighbours also characterised the first decade of the twenty-first century. An aggressive, posturing China in 2001 caused concern when its military forces simulated an invasion of Taiwan, which ratcheted up the tension between the PRC, the Republic of China (ROC) and its Western allies. The East-West relationship was already strained, following, what many believe was the deliberate bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces, on 7th May

1999. In 2005, angry mass anti-Japanese protests broke out across China, after a new school text book appeared to gloss over Japanese wartime atrocities in China. The image of a militarily-strong, nationalistic China came to the fore.

In 2001 it was announced that Beijing had been awarded the XXIX Summer Olympiad. It was, with all probability, the most contentious choice for a host city since the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Officially, the British Government argued that the decision was entirely the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) to make. Opposition MPs were more willing to present their personal views and those of their constituents. The published comments of Menzies Campbell, the then Liberal Democrat Spokesman for Foreign Affairs – and former Olympic athlete – reflected the general consensus, that while there were 'strong reasons' to hold the Games in China, 'the IOC would need to have copper-bottomed guarantees about human rights' (Campbell 2001, cited by Katwala 2001). The Princess Royal, as one of Britain's two representatives at the IOC, chose to vote against Beijing, on the grounds of China's poor human rights record (Campbell 2001).

In 2008, the eyes of the world truly were upon China. Given the negativity that had come to be attached to the image of the country in Britain during the first years of the twenty-first century, from the Western perspective the Beijing Olympics offered the PRC a perceived opportunity to neutralise these negative visions and promote a more positive self-image to the global community, even if this was not necessarily part of the Chinese government's master plan; as Susan Brownell (2009) has pointed out, if that had, in fact, been the case, the bid would have developed by the Central Propaganda Department. But, in the run-up to the Games, a series of incidences threatened to derail

its successful reception. In March, just five months before the opening ceremony, worst fears seemed to have been realised when anti-Chinese demonstrations broke out in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet and among Tibetan exiles in Sichuan province. Protestors, angry at the PRC's continued 'occupation' of China, rioted and attacked Han Chinese-run businesses. The regime put down the demonstrations by military force and blamed the unrest on the 'Dalai clique', those that it believed were seeking to reinstall the Dalai Lama as spiritual and political leader. Western journalists and news agencies were temporarily banned from entering the affected regions, with the exception of *The Economist's* British Beijing correspondent James Miles, who happened to be in Lhasa when the riots broke out. His gold dust, first-hand accounts were widely syndicated. The British media '[Dusted] off the hoary oppositions between the free and the unfree worlds' (Mishra 2008) and portrayed the uprising as a fight for religious freedom and self-determination. The reality was more complex, but it served to remind commentators, politicians and the general public alike, that China remained, despite its capitalist economy, a one-party communist state.

The Western media's portrayal of the unrest in Tibet fed an ugly wave of Chinese nationalism. An angry, but active, minority of internet 'trolls', attacked the web presence of Western news agencies and organisations deemed to have unfairly portrayed China, by leaving inflammatory and jingoistic comments. This response renewed the focus upon Internet censorship in China which had arguably caused most controversy in the West when, in 2006, the search engine Google, agreed, in return for greater access to the Chinese market, to filter out search results made from within China that referenced politically sensitive web content.⁸⁷ *The Guardian* reported this as

⁸⁷ BBC News. 2006. 'Google censors itself for China'. BBC News Channel. Wednesday, 25th January 2006 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4645596.stm> (04/05/2009).

encompassing a diverse range of material including pornography, information pertaining to the Tiananmen Square Incident and access to, amongst others, the websites of the BBC and Amnesty International (Watts 2006). Many observers were appalled; despite the Internet giant's protestations that the greater good was served by providing information in China (Watts 2006), to many, Google had broken its self-imposed cardinal rule 'Don't be evil', by joining its competitors Microsoft and Yahoo! in blocking access to online material euphemistically deemed 'unhealthy' by the Chinese authorities. Google had become 'another brick in the great firewall of China' (Watts 2006).

China's trade relationship with the Sudanese government, then embroiled in the Darfur conflict, earned the Beijing Games the dubious title 'the genocide Olympics' from some quarters of the Western media. Multiple threatened boycotts of the Games never materialised, but the Olympic torch relay was disrupted on several occasions, most notably in Paris, San Francisco and London, as it passed through twenty countries on its symbolic journey from Olympia in Greece to Beijing, thus evidencing the strength of anti-Chinese feeling held by some sections of the activist community. In the run-up to the games, environmental concerns too rose to the fore, with concerns expressed by some athletes and organisations – most notably the Ethiopian long-distance runner Haile Gebrselassie – about Beijing's air quality and health implications for competitors. The IOC challenged the Chinese authorities to drastically reduce pollution levels to acceptable levels⁸⁸ which was ultimately achieved with the imposition of emergency measures for the fortnight of the Games.

⁸⁸ IOC. 2007. 'Beijing 2008 – 500 Days to Go'. 27 March 2007.
http://www.olympic.org/uk/news/olympic_news/full_story_uk.asp?id=2113 (01/06/2009).

Ultimately, the Beijing Olympics and Paralympics passed without serious incident. Given what became the rather hackneyed title ‘China’s coming out party’ by the Western media (Lee 2008), the Games impressed and bedazzled in equal measure. Zhang Yimou’s - described by the *New York Times* as China’s Leni Riefenstahl (Barboza 2008) - opening and closing ceremonies were spectacular, but also presented a closely choreographed, particular vision of China:

And the China it celebrated was ancient (the 5000-year history), civilized (the arts and crafts), inventive (the four great inventions), adventurous (the silk roads), hospitable (the Confucian chant about cherishing guests from afar), technologically accomplished (the astronaut), and innocent and hopeful (the school children). It wore love, peace, and harmony proudly on its sleeve. What more could the world ask for?

(Lee 2008)

Interestingly, Lee (2008) goes on to suggest the ceremonies subtly brought to mind the Cultural Revolution:

Given how much of the “Chineseness” in the program belonged to the category of “invented” or at least airbrushed tradition, the surreally synchronized movements of thousands of people was perhaps the most “signature” of the Chinese touches. The antecedents are much closer in history and more vivid in memory: we need only recall the images of mass formations dressed in regulation garb, chanting in unison, marching in lockstep, waving the little red book, or doing what George Orwell calls “physical jerks.” To date, only the

North Koreans can rival the Chinese in staging such spectacles of sheer numbers. It is the totalitarian aesthetic at its most beguiling and frightening. It is the power of ritual.

(Lee 2008)

Indeed, Barmé (2008a) reports that Zhang used a quotation from Mao to describe the ceremony's overall direction: 'using the past to serve the present and the foreign to serve China' (Zhang Yimou 2008, cited by Barmé 2008a). Barmé (2008b) accordingly notes the equal influence of 'Cecil B. DeMille scale' Hollywood productions upon the mass rallies and performances characteristic of the Maoist era. He also extends Lee's (2008) observation by providing specific examples where the aesthetic legacy of Mao was visible, notably the large calligraphic scroll unveiled during the performance, reminiscent – to Barmé's mind at least – of the painted backdrop to Chairman Mao's statue in the Mao Memorial Hall (Barmé 2008a). Whether this was immediately recognisable to the Western audience is highly debatable. Yet, the aesthetics evoked by the opening ceremony might have reignited long buried visual memories of that era. Charles Moore (2008) writing in *The Telegraph* commented that 'Spectacular sporting displays are the classic means of projecting totalitarian power without talking about it', extrapolating a lineage to the Beijing Games of 2008 from the Munich Olympics of 1936. He continues in a vein reminiscent of the Yellow Peril narratives of the previous century:

What we are witnessing is impressive, but also frightening. If China really does become top nation, nothing in our history will have prepared us for such a thing. And nothing in its history suggests that freedom will be on its agenda.

Similar sentiments were expressed by those at the other end of the political spectrum (if not as transparently). *The Guardian*'s editorial advised readers that 'Not even an outstandingly prepared and executed Olympic games opening ceremony - and yesterday's spectacular in Beijing was undoubtedly that - can avoid being both magnificent and unsettling at the same time' (Anon 2008a). The opening ceremony owed 'something to Albert Speer' (Anon 2008a) with its 'fearsomely disciplined dancing' and 'precision kitsch' (Anon 2008a). Beneath the smiling, welcoming exterior, British commentators expressed an uncertainty about China's motives; they detected a perceived insincerity and inherent hypocrisy. Indeed, as Barmé has pointed out (2008b), it was never assured that the watching global audience would perceive the authorities' intended messages about China in the twenty-first century, as indeed is borne out by the journalistic comments above. Not least because 'The Party is not only rewriting the past to suit its present needs; it is also rewriting the history of radical iconoclasm that marked most of the country's 20th century' (Barmé 2008b). China's 'autocratic habit' (Barmé 2008b) failed to bury the legacy of the Maoist era. But, as Susan Brownell (2009) has pointed out, China had never promised to address human rights issues, amongst other Western admonitions, in the run-up to the Games. That cause was projected onto the Olympiad by the West. What the Beijing Olympics did successfully achieve was the promotion of a particular 'look and image', the China brand (Susan Brownell 2009). 'For foreigners visiting Beijing' Setzekorn (2008) contends, '...the Olympic experience was an almost picture-perfect blend of idealized chinoiserie and ultra-modern convenience'.

China Now

2008 also brought Britain's largest ever Chinese cultural festival, organised by the Sino-British business community with the explicit support of both governments. *China Now*, a collection of nationwide, independent events collated by the festival organisers, had the explicit aim of showcasing 'the very best of modern China'⁸⁹ to the British public and furthering the Sino-British relationship, undoubtedly investing in the enhanced profile brought by the Olympic Games. It was a clear signal that China was keen to promote a new self-image to the international community. Among the 1200 events that comprised the festival most cogent to this thesis were *China Design Now* at the V&A (15 March - 13 July 2008) and *The First Emperor* at the British Museum (13 September 2007 – 6 April 2008); both major exhibitions, the result of years of negotiation and collaboration between British and Chinese cultural authorities. A detailed analysis of either exhibition is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is interesting to note two aspects which may help to elucidate the position of the material artefacts of the Cultural Revolution in exhibitionary practice.

Considering that the principal goal of the *China Now* festival was to present an image of a 'vibrant, dynamic and fast-evolving nation' (Anon 2008b) the focus of the *The First Emperor*, the ancient Qin Emperor Shihuangdi and his terracotta army, seems rather incongruous. The excavation of the Qin Emperor's tomb complex in Xi'an province, discovered during the early 70s, certainly created enduring images of ancient China in the West, and the loan agreement was definitely a coup for the British Museum. But the exhibition said little of the contemporary nation, if one discounts the

⁸⁹ Anon 2008b. 'China Now'. <http://www.chinanow.org.uk/> (02/06/2009).

two incidences during which it became the subject of protests by environmentalists and pro-Tibet activists.⁹⁰ Unless one makes the rather facetious connection that it represented ‘...some overly sophisticate and disturbingly relativist claim to “understand” the fact that China today is a rapidly developing economy presided over by a brutal, undemocratic regime’, as the *Guardian*’s art critic, Jonathan Jones (2008) put it.

China Design Now, on the other hand, did present examples of contemporary Chinese art and design, including a whole section devoted to the architecture of the forthcoming Beijing Olympics. But, the curatorial team took a typically V&A approach to the material: aesthetics privileged over social meaning and function, even when the material begged for contextualisation. The interpretation of the objects on display backgrounded frequent visual and textual references to Maoist iconography such as those that appeared in Ji Ji’s T-shirt designs for his Shirtflag collection, reminiscent of revolutionary paper-cuts and scenes from model operas (see figure 33).

⁹⁰ Anon 2008c. ‘Tibet protest hits warrior show’. BBC News. Tuesday, 18 March 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/london/7303158.stm> (02/06/2009).



Figure 33: Shirtflag t-shirts (r) on display, *China Design Now*, V&A.

The potential outcome of this strategy was that the Western audience would fail to apprehend the subtle commentary on the relationship between communism and capitalism in contemporary China which would resonate with a Chinese audience. Nor the conscious subversion that the recycling and manipulation of such loaded symbolism represents; the art and the ideology are so inextricably linked that without access to information about both facets, the impact of the whole is diminished. In fact, the influence of the PRC cultural authorities, if not direct, was palpable, especially in the final section which dealt with contemporary architecture, with its emphasis upon ‘green’ technologies and the PRC’s development of Tibet: thinly veiled propaganda that sought to challenge some of the current negative images of China. The overall interpretive approach employed by the curators barely challenged this official narrative. While their intention may have been honourable - to raise the profile of, and confer

museum-worthy value upon, graphic design and mass culture, not to mention present an image of contemporary China as a vibrant, forward-thinking, vogueish locus of enormous creative output - the failure to really engage with the meanings inherent in the objects on display was ultimately to their detriment. There is a wider issue here; the bypass of potentially controversial positions and themes to avoid causing 'embarrassment' to the Chinese authorities. At least in this researcher's mind, there was a tendency towards self-censorship evident in the textual material that supported *China Design Now*. While the museum clearly endeavoured to remain neutral and objective throughout, the 'voice' of the PRC, in the choice of material displayed and the messages projected about contemporary China, was barely muted.

For this very reason, the media reaction to *China Now* was sometimes critical. Indeed, the inherent hypocrisy of, on the one hand, heralding the Chinese economic miracle, while, at the same time, damning the regime for its poor human rights and environmental record, was noted by at least one commentator. 'Isn't it a bit rich' asked Jones (2008), that China 'is being so assiduously courted by so many museums and galleries?' He suggests that 'we' display a blindness towards the reality of the PRC in our seeming obsession for all things Chinese, highlighting once again the tension with reality that our images of China engender. This ability to suspend knowledge for the sake of neutrality and an ultimately unachievable objectivity is intimately linked with Western consumption of the aesthetics of revolution.

Commie Chic and Commie Kitsch

Laugh at the hammer and sickle/It is antique, oh it is antique.

(Manic Street Preachers, 'Freedom of Speech Won't Feed My Children,' 2001)

Westerners appear to be fascinated by the legacy of communism. Indeed, a facet of the European tourist industry caters for an apparently significant tranche of consumers keen to experience communist culture first-hand often with ironic intent, now it is in the past and non-threatening. In Berlin one can take a Trabi-tour⁹¹ of the former eastern sector. Or, how about a visit to a Soviet bunker in Lithuania (Ginanne Brownell 2009)? The fad is not solely restricted to Europe. Tourists may hire Jiang Qing's limousine for a tour of Beijing. The deal includes:

Russian caviar, French champagne and copies of the Little Red Book on the velvet upholstery... After "cultural revolution crusin'", the tour guide – dressed in the full regalia of the Red Detachment of Women – may point you towards a bar furnished like the chairman's headquarters where you can enjoy a "Mao tai", eat Mao's favourite dish (roast pork with bitter melon) or buy any of a number of "Mao-mentos", from official Communist party cigarettes to the chairman's cologne, which the limo company has labelled "Essence of Manchurian Pine, hints of Red Guard leather, mist of Mongolian wind".

(Joffe-Walt 2006)

⁹¹ The Trabant (or 'Trabi'), East German-made automobile and butt of Western jokes, is one of the most enduring icons of the East Germany.

While newly democratic nations seek to abandon the communist past and work towards the construction of a new cultural identity, the West insists upon raking over the detritus; endlessly appropriating, assimilating and recycling communist aesthetics to create new icons of ironic consumerism. While it would be inaccurate to state that ‘ostalgie’ – which refers specifically to nostalgia for the products and culture of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), but works well as a descriptor for the wider phenomenon - is confined to the West (indeed, the film which reflected and perhaps consolidated cathartic GDR-nostalgia, *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003) was produced in Germany), the emasculation of the symbolic power of communism these activities represent, I would argue, reassert the triumph of West over East and reaffirm to ‘ourselves’ the West’s perceived political and cultural superiority.

All this suggests that the act of possessing, manipulating and assimilating the visual culture of a ‘defeated’ ideology operates on much the same psychological level as the theft and destruction of culturally significant objects from palaces and museums as an act of conquest. As with objects looted from the Summer Palace in 1860, destined to be displayed at the colonial centres of London and Paris (see Hevia 1994, 334), these ‘trophy of war’ become symbolic of the defeated regime. By possessing them, manipulating them and subverting their meaning, we (re)gain the control and power of their old symbolic or ideological meanings. Drawing upon Bourdieuan discourse, this process may be explicated as a transference of symbolic capital; that is, the honour, prestige and legitimacy held by an authoritative individual, or institution (see Forest and Johnson 2002). The use of communist iconography in fashionable contexts, is a similar phenomenon. Both trophy of war, both (not necessarily consciously) symbolising the

defeat and humiliation of their originating culture or nation. But this conjecture does not fully explain the appeal to the contemporary consumer.

In post-socialist Europe, the charm of communist iconography may well lie in its perceived alliance with 'kitsch', a German word meaning worthless, or tawdry. It refers today to decorative objects which are 'popular' in a derogative sense: unrefined, frequently mass-(re)produced, vulgar, overly garish and sentimental, designed to appeal to those in possession of unsophisticated taste and thusly, cynically produced for the sole aim of financial gain. The usage and denotation of 'kitsch' was codified by Clement Greenberg in his seminal 1939 article 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch'. Greenberg struggled to understand how the same culture could simultaneously produce 'a poem by T.S. Eliot and a Tin Pan Alley song' (Greenberg, 1939). His Marxian analysis concluded that the contemporaneous European avant-garde, closely associated with the Left, sought to relieve art of bourgeois conventionality in order to serve as a catalyst for the forward movement of culture. Kitsch was its 'rearguard' (Greenberg 1939, 11), the product of an urbanised and industrialised society: an 'ersatz' culture tailored to the needs of newly literate, but uncultured, city-dwellers (Greenberg 1939, 12). It comprised everything that the avant-garde had left behind: the conservative, the banal, the debased and the moribund. Formulaic, 'spurious' and 'mechanical', it offered a 'vicarious experience'. It 'pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money' (Greenberg 1939, 12). It borrows from established culture, converts and dilutes 'the daring, esoteric art and literature of yesterday', to comprise 'the popular art and literature of today' (Greenberg 1939, 12). Kitsch is 'synthetic art' (Greenberg 1939, 17).

Presaging the semantic collapse of communist visual culture into ‘kitsch’, Greenberg, writing in the 1930s, naturally referred to Soviet art when arguing that Socialist Realism blurred the distinction between art and reality. But, his observations remain valid when transported to the new geographical location of China. The characteristics of Socialist Realism facilitate the immediate identification of the subject, requiring no reflection or ‘conditioning’ (Greenberg 1939, 19) (as an abstract by Picasso might). It tells a story. It presents a dramatic, ‘pre-digested’ hyper-reality (see Greenberg 1939, 16). It offers the ‘uncultivated’ audience ‘a short cut to the pleasure of art’ (Greenberg 1939, 17): qualities which also ensure the effectiveness of visual propaganda which relies upon the clarity and immediacy of its message. According to Greenberg, Kitsch operates in a similar manner. It is the Western equivalent of Socialist Realism: it is culture of the masses. The specific term ‘communist kitsch’ – to describe Soviet propaganda - was popularised after the Czech author Milan Kundera’s 1982 novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. To Kundera (1984, 248), kitsch is the ‘absolute denial of shit’. ‘[It] excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence’. Thus, all which is moral and good. Badness (reality) is expunged: ‘the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme’ (Kundera 1984, 250). Communist kitsch is contrived to promote a sense of ‘togetherness’, of a prescribed ideal and shared experience. It is designed to provoke an emotional response:

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass!

The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!

It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

(Kundera 1984, 251)

In this postmodernist era, where the boundaries between high and low are more fluid, the formerly derogatory term *kitsch* has been rectified: the aesthetic of kitsch is consumed from a position of detached, but knowing irony. It is gimmicky, ‘dubbed “communist chic” by the Mao-stalgic and “commie kitch [sic]” by those who take it with a dab of irony’ (Joffe-Walt 2006). To quote Kundera, ‘As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power’ (Kundera 1984, 256).

In contemporary Western popular culture, the art and design of communism has become little more than revolutionary kitsch, devoid of its original, albeit multiple, meanings (depending on the viewer’s/consumer’s – in the broadest possible sense – cultural background and personal ideologies). It has been thoroughly commodified, assimilated and appropriated. Two examples from advertising will elucidate this contention.



Figure 34: Still from advertisement for Cherokee clothing range, Tesco (2005).

In Autumn/Winter 2005 Tesco ran a television advertisement for its Cherokee Clothing range (see figure 34). Visually, it specifically referenced the iconography of Soviet propaganda in an ironic and humorous way. Soviet-styled models strike dynamic poses, only to be interrupted by pop-up price tags advertising the cheap and cheerful cost of the Russian-inspired clothes they wear.

The Churches Advertising Network's (CAN) controversial *Meek. Mild. As If* campaign for Easter 1999, on behalf of the Church of England, referenced Jim Fitzpatrick's iconic, posterised version of Alberto 'Korda' Díaz Gutiérrez' famous 1960 photograph of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. It featured – in the place of the Argentinean

communist (read ‘godless’) revolutionary, a bearded Christ bedecked with a crown of thorns (see figure 23). The message being that:

Jesus was not crucified for being meek and mild. He challenged authority. He was given a crown of thorns in a cruel parody of his claims about proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Our poster has the most arresting picture our advertisers could find to convey all this – the image deliberately imitates the style of the well-known poster of Che Guevara.⁹²

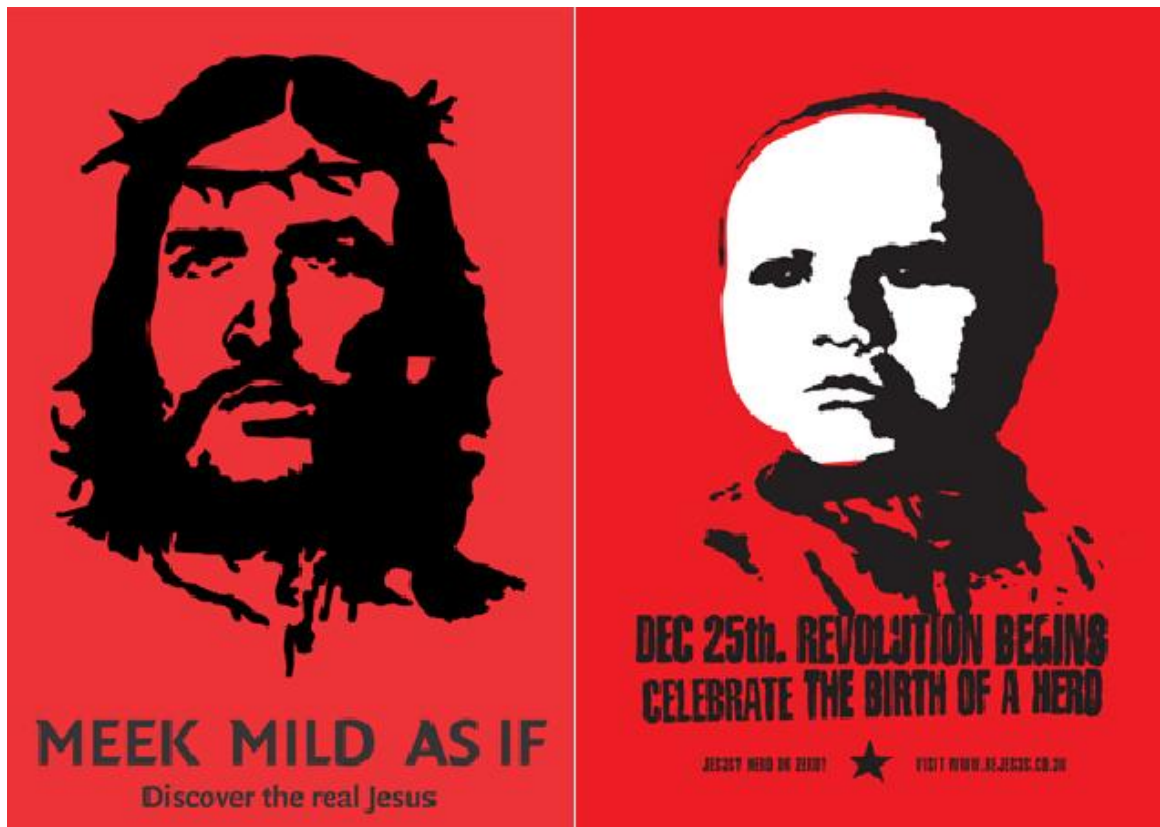


Figure 35: Churches Advertising Network (CAN) campaign posters, Easter 1999 (l) and Christmas 2005 (r).

⁹² Churches Advertising Network (CAN). 1999. ‘Meek. Mild. As If’. <http://www.churchads.org.uk/past/1999/index.html> (02/06/2009).

CAN revisited the Che aesthetic for its Christmas 2005 campaign. This time Che transmogrified into the newborn baby Jesus, accompanied by the slogan *Dec 25th. Revolution Begins. Celebrate the Birth of a Hero* (see figure 35). There is something of Mao about the image; the round face, the hint of a receding hairline formed by shadow.



Figure 36: Contemporary pencil cases by ‘Dumpling Dynasty’, on sale in Leicester gift shop (August 2008).

The specific iconography of Maoism has also appeared in dichotomous commercial, parodic and unlikely juxtapositions: on pencil cases (see figure 36), or in advertisements for hair-care products (see figure 37) to mention just two examples, the latter as a trope of conformity.



Figure 37: Stills from advertisement for VO5 'Extreme Style, Break the Mould' (2006).

This evidence leads one to conclude that we have thoroughly assimilated the visual iconography of communism into our popular culture. We deracinate it, manipulate it, emasculate it. The ultimate irony: the capitalist West has commodified communism.

A useful comparison is that of the aforementioned posterised image of Che Guevara. As a politically-neutralised pop-cultural icon, the Che image has moved beyond the realm of left-wing political activism into capitalist material production. When Ariel Dorfman asks 'Is it conceivable that [Che Guevara] can be comfortably transmogrified into a symbol of [non-specific] rebellion precisely because he is no longer dangerous (Dorfman 1999 cited in Ziff 2006, 115)?' I answer 'yes'. This observation rings equally true for appropriated revolutionary iconography from China. But, unlike the regents of the original Che image, China has been unofficially complicit in the commodification of the iconography of the Cultural Revolution. The quantities of

spurious revolutionary material produced in contemporary China is astonishing, if the sheer number of products available on the auction site eBay on any given day are anything to go by. Producers identified a market in this material as early as the 1990s (Kerr, personal communication, 2007); initially to feed the new home-grown craze for Mao memorabilia prompted by the centenary of his birth in 1993. However, there was also a ready Western market for this material. Chinese-made reproductions of Cultural Revolution visual culture satisfy a ready market for revolutionary ‘exotica’. These commercial reuses of Cultural Revolution iconography are sometimes juxtaposed with meaningless Chinese characters and pseudo-revolutionary slogans (see figure 36). This updated Orientalism, or neo-*chinoiserie*, exploits the iconography and visual tropes of an exoticised Other culture – here, the Cultural Revolution, just as alien to ‘us’ as dynastic China - by employing them in new contexts, far removed from their ‘original’ cultural and ideological contexts of consumption. China has long served Western markets with a particular vision of the ‘Orient’. This is simply a modification for the new millennium. ‘Yes, Mao's image is now an iconic commodity used by enterprising Chinese capitalists. Irony can be so ironic’ (Gimbel, 2007).

Commodification foregrounds the ethical considerations that affect the consumption of this material. Superficially empty of political and ideological connotations and frequently used and worn innocently, but nevertheless rooted in historical events, the iconography of the Cultural Revolution and its contemporary appropriation is an ethical grey-area. One online commentator recently discussed the morality of using and manipulating revolutionary iconography in new, unlikely contexts:

Just because you can buy a Mao shirt in Beijing does not mean you should wear it. Especially if you're some American Hipster... Yes, he's an icon. But for what? When I sit on the metro in DC and see people with Mao shirts, I want to lean over and ask them about their feelings on the Great Famine or the Cultural Revolution.

(‘Jennie’ 2007)

Is innocence of the facts an excuse? Can such iconography ever be apolitical? Can one, as Jenne (2007) has asked ‘de-fang a tyrant by turning him into kitsch?’

The CCP came up with the rather neat figure of 70% correct and 30% incorrect. But how does one split a canvas 70/30? Does this mean it is okay to wear a silkscreened Mao t-shirt 70% of the time? Does it mean the next time I'm at Panjiayuan Market [flea market known for reproductions of Maoist material artefacts] in Beijing, I should ask for a 30% discount on a Mao cigarette lighter that plays “Dong Fang Hong” [The East is Red]⁹³ when it lights?

(Jenne 2007)

The extent to which the iconography of communism has been emptied of ‘meaning’ by the twin forces of ideological transcendence and Western consumerism, and the consequential complexities thus engendered, is demonstrated when such material is taken out of its adopted context and into a locale where its symbolism is still resonant of its original ideological meaning. In 2007, the Hollywood actress Cameron Diaz, not known for her radical politics, was compelled to apologise unreservedly after

⁹³ Ubiquitous choral anthem popularised during the Cultural Revolution from the musical of the same name.

being photographed at Machu Picchu in Peru carrying a military-chic khaki messenger bag emblazoned with a red star and the slogan 'Serve the People'. Diaz was, apparently, unaware that such imagery could evoke distressing memories of the Maoist 'Shining Path' guerrilla insurgency of the eighties and early nineties: "I sincerely apologise to anyone I may have inadvertently offended" said Diaz, "The bag was a purchase I made *as a tourist in China*"[my italics]'.⁹⁴

The utopian fantasy nominally offered by communist ideology continues to capture the imagination. Its theoretical tenets of equality, a united workforce, shared ownership and communality undoubtedly appeal. Despite having access to more accurate information about the realities of life under communism, China has remained just distant enough (spatially and ideologically) to develop a veneer of 'cool', to generate the myth that Mao created a socialist Utopia. Why have these images perpetuated in Western sub-cultural (and increasing pop-cultural) contexts? Is it because those students and intellectuals who bought into Maoism in the 1960s and 1970s have gone on to work in the creative industries that promote and repackage sub-cultural coolness for a mass audience, the 'rebel sell' as Heath and Potter (2005) would put it? Or is it simply because owning, displaying and wearing objects which pertain to communism are not exactly taboo, but just dangerously rebellious enough to produce 'an enjoyable emotional *frisson*' (Pearce 1995, 323)? The voidance of meaning facilitated by commodification has, in tandem with the passing of time, created a potent, yet malleable visual code, which can, depending upon the needs of those making use of it, represent a two-dimensional utopian idealism, or dystopian nightmare: either way discharged of its potentially 'dangerous' ideological content.

⁹⁴ BBC News. 2007. 'Diaz apologises for Maoist slogan'. In BBC News, Monday, 25th June 2007. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6236142.stm> (25/04/2009).

British Museum: Development of the Collection

The third collection upon which this section focuses comprises the British Museum's holdings of Cultural Revolution and post-1949 Chinese visual culture. In comparison with the V&A and University of Westminster, the British Museum came late to the collection of post-1949 and Cultural Revolution-era material, but its holdings – textiles, ceramics, approximately 100 posters and original artwork, paper-cuts, *nianhua* and badges - now rival both the V&A and Westminster collections.



Figure 38: Joseph E. Hotung Gallery, British Museum.

In 1992, just one year after the Victoria and Albert Museum's T.T. Tsui Gallery opened, the Joseph E. Hotung Gallery, devoted to the British Museum's Asian collections and sponsored by the eponymous Hong Kongese philanthropist, was opened (see figure 38). Spatially arranged to evoke the Mercator projection, (dynastic) Chinese material was displayed to the right of that of South and South-East Asia, either side of a circular, central floor well.⁹⁵ The Hotung Gallery replaced the previous display of 'Oriental antiquities,' most recently updated in the late 1970s, which shared the same gallery space in the Edward VIII wing of the museum with European collections until 1977. The new display was envisioned by the curatorial team to emphasise the great achievements of Chinese culture and its long artistic tradition. Echoing the Tsui Gallery, the material was organised according to a thematic schemata, with an overarching narrative that emphasised religious faith and trade. Ancient Zhou bronzes and Tang dynasty funerary figures were displayed alongside delicate export wares and objects of religious devotion. But, in contrast to the Tsui Gallery, the Hotung Gallery failed so resolutely to escape its modernist predecessor, by falling back upon Western norms of displaying the Other with its core chronology that focused upon the material artefacts of the Song, Ming and Qing dynasties.

So far, so similar, however, the British Museum approaches its Chinese collections markedly differently from the V&A in two, principal ways, firstly, in its interpretive approach towards its Chinese collections. There is a distinct division, in the Western canon, between art and material culture. The classic art approach is to emphasise the ahistoric, aesthetic qualities of an individual piece, represented in this thesis by the V&A. The British Museum, on the other hand, leans towards the material

⁹⁵ See Michaelson (1992) for a detailed history of the development, and previous incarnations, of the Joseph E. Hotung Gallery.

culture approach, which correlates with archaeological interpretation: the object is typically interrogated for what it can reveal about human history and development. These different approaches distinguish between the museums – even if the average visitor is unaware of these distinctions – and are historically embedded in their respective institutional cultures. Secondly, and of most cogency to this thesis, was the joined-up approach to the development of the British Museum’s collection of twentieth century and latterly post-1949 and Cultural Revolution-era visual culture.

The inception of the British Museum’s collection of post-1949 and Cultural Revolution-era visual culture lies in a decision taken to collect contemporary material by the then director David Wilson in the 1970s, and roughly contemporary with the Victoria and Albert Museum’s own turn towards the twentieth century.⁹⁶ But its roots go deeper. Carey (2003) has argued that the British Museum at its inception, looked as much to the present as the past. It was only in the nineteenth century, when an epistemological shift towards historical consciousness occurred, that the museum came to be associated with antiquities. The collection of revolutionary art from China was a continuation of the British Museum’s long-standing tradition of acquiring pictorial prints from China, which began with the inclusion of around 70 seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prints in Sir Hans Sloane’s founding collection (Farrer 2000, 105). In an article written at the turn of the twenty-first century, a former curator within the Department of Asian Art, Anne Farrer, explores the development of the British Museum’s collection of Chinese prints. While, she asserts, Chinese prints were not a standard category of collecting by Western museums, she argues that the British Museum is unique in that it has ‘a broad historical and cultural approach to acquisition

⁹⁶ Unless otherwise stated, I owe Mary Ginsburg (personal communication, 2006) for much of the background information for this sub-section.

inherited from the omnivorous collecting of its founder Sir Hans Sloane' (Farrer 2000, 106). While not reflecting a planned programme of acquisition – Farrer reveals that much of the British Museum's holdings comprise pre-formed collections purchased by the museum as the opportunity has arisen - this history of collecting 'provided an historical basis' for the acquisition of twentieth century prints (Farrer 2000, 106-107).

While the V&A and the University of Westminster may have pioneered the specific and particular collection of explicitly political material from China in the UK, the British Museum blazed a trail for the acquisition of political material from Asia. The museum holds significant collections of war art by Vietnamese artists and North Korean art, as well as some Soviet Mongolian posters. With regards to China it has particularly strong holdings of 1940s anti-Japanese and post-Cultural Revolution Chinese art and design. These collections were made with a view to demonstrating the continuation of, or innovations within, traditional-style art, with a particular emphasis on the assimilation of Western influence, with an eye on the broader goal of 'representing as comprehensive a history as possible of the development of all cultures' (Carey 1991, 6). Thus, the collection comprises, amongst earlier examples of woodblock prints, so-called 'artist prints' - inspired by the work of European social realist artists like Käthe Kollwitz - by followers of Lu Xun's New Woodcut Movement. By 2000, the museum held approximately 750 pre-communist woodcuts and propaganda prints. This is unexpected, for received wisdom would suggest that the British Museum would eschew non-Western material that displays 'modern' or Western influence, demanding instead an ahistoric authenticity. Indeed, a former curator has spoken of the 'nineteenth-century assumptions' which continued to influence the British Museum's approach to collections into the twentieth century. In her words, 'European notions of authenticity

threatened to impose a straitjacket on what was acquired from non-western sources, insisting upon a spurious ethnicity in other societies which denied them the right of change and assimilation, in contradistinction to a western avant-garde which was partly characterised by its receptivity to non-western material culture' (Carey 2003). But, in the twenty-first century, as a self-branded 'universal museum' (see MacGregor, 2004), the British Museum has a clear remit to collect world history: a philosophical standpoint that provides a broader scope, in terms of acquisition and display, than the design-focused V&A. As Jessica Harrison-Hall – a curator within the Department of Asia - has said with specific reference to the Vietnamese collection, '...the British Museum is here to display and interpret the cultures of the world. Vietnam has played an important role in world history' (Harrison-Hall, 2003). Indeed, it seemed to her that 'The historical nature of the material ...[was]... more appropriate to the British Museum than to the design orientated V&A' (Harrison-Hall, 2003). One must assume that the same justifications were applied to the development of the collection of twentieth-century Chinese prints.

Twentieth century print art has been acquired since the 1940s, because 'more than any other category [it] has reflected cultural change in China and has embodied the major developments of Chinese artistic expression this century' (Farrer 2000,105). As an unambiguous medium of CCP propaganda, arguably these prints reveal more about the regime than other synchronic examples of Chinese material culture. Limited high-quality prints produced by a named individual are not the same as ephemeral, mass-produced posters, of course, and are reflective – more broadly – of not only the British Museum's holdings (particularly rich in European prints), but also of Eurocentric hierarchies of art. But this preparedness to collect political art and thus to accord value

to it, afforded the British Museum a precedent to justify the collection of post-1949 visual (mass) culture, where it could be incorporated into a representative collection. An ingrained institutional and departmental collecting philosophy thus provided a ready crucible for the development of a collection of communist art from China, far removed from the rather arbitrary approach taken towards similar material at the V&A.



Figure 39: 'Study well, progress day by day!' (*Hao hao xue xi, tian tian xiang shang*) (1972)

Additionally, the initial concentration upon artists' prints and the purchase of material from pre-existing collections made within China, avoided the problematic proliferation

of fakes and reproductions that stunted the active growth of the V&A collection from the mid-1990s.

In 2002, three years after his gift to the V&A, Gordon Barrass donated his collection of contemporary calligraphic art from China upon which he had collaborated with the British Museum since 1993 (Greene 2002, 7). Included in the gift were twenty-seven propaganda posters (including some duplicates) on the themes of learning and writing, mostly dating from the Cultural Revolution (see figures 39 and 40). These became the germ of the post-1949 collection. In the following years, new acquisitions were made on an *ad hoc* basis. But, given the existing holdings of political art from Asia, it made sense to actively collect the Cultural Revolution. In September 2006, the British Museum purchased approximately seventy posters on a variety of themes at Bloomsbury Auctions, London: ‘The biggest privately owned archive of Chinese propaganda posters to ever appear on the market [554 lots of 2600 individual posters]...Amassed by several generations of a single Chinese family living in China’ (Bloomsbury Auctions 2006). At the same auction the University of Westminster took the opportunity to augment its collection of posters. The V&A, in consultation with the University of Westminster and British Museum colleagues agreed that ‘it would be good to have a collection more concentrated in one, or two institutions, which already [had] substantial material for research and for care (Zhang, personal communication, 2008). Although, the V&A did acquire four posters with a view to the forthcoming *Cold War Modern* exhibition, in essence it passed the baton to the British Museum and the China Poster Collection at the University of Westminster.



Figure 40: Selection of posters, mostly dating from the 1960s and 1970s gifted to the British Museum by Gordon Barrass.

Mary Ginsberg, the curator responsible for the collection (at the time of my research), was keen to extend and develop the collection. Individual curators at the British Museum have been free to collect within their interests in consultation with

colleagues, providing they can offer a strong intellectual and aesthetic justification for it, which accounts for the several map drawers of 1980s Chinese stationary held within the Department of Asia! While Ginsberg maintains, likewise Craig Clunas (personal communication, 2007), that the more ‘artistically interesting’ material of the Maoist era was produced during the 1950s (Ginsberg, personal communication, 2007) and that the art of the Cultural Revolution is, from that perspective, not so interesting, she forcibly argues for it to be collected and contextualised in exhibition: situated in the social and political environment of its production. There is, she asserts, a ‘basic lack of knowledge here [in Britain] about China before, say, 1990’ (Ginsberg, personal communication, 2007). In evidence, she recounts an anecdote:

I gave a lecture once at the PDF [Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art] about Chinese propaganda art. Went through all the eras of 20thC [sic], examples of the art, etc. At the end, the only question anyone asked was, “When was the Cultural Revolution?” And this was an audience of people interested in China... When people I know think of China, they think terracotta warriors and China-takes-over-the-world-economy. Not much in between.

(Ginsberg, personal communication, 2007)

Perhaps this is why Ginsberg and her colleague Helen Wang, Curator of East Asian Money felt it necessary in 2008, amid the nation-wide *China Now* festival, to interject a smattering of twentieth century political art as a counterpoint to the more traditional, blockbuster-fodder image of China represented by the British Museum’s *First Emperor* exhibition. The ‘First Emperor’ of the title referred to Qin Shihuangdi, the almost mythic leader of a newly unified China. In his lifetime, Mao Zedong was oft compared

(with his approval) to the *Qin* Emperor. In the run up to the opening of the exhibition, Ginsberg said that it was ‘tempting’ to put on a small display of Mao material at the same time (Ginsberg, personal communication, 2006). An exhibition was to emerge from this initial plan, *Icons of Revolution*, but not until the *First Emperor* had closed. With reference to the British Museum’s collection of Vietnamese War art, Buchanan (2003) has said, ‘...public institutions need to be sensitive to how the country of origin will perceive the acquisition’, especially when the objects pertain to a ‘traumatic...time of the country’s history’. Against a backdrop of unprecedented cultural exchange between China and Britain, one assumes similar concerns were paramount. Similarly, Ginsberg has stated that many museums simply do not know what to do with political material, let alone what to ‘say’ about Mao: ‘China doesn’t yet seem to know how it wants to explain or exhibit it. Who does it offend to display this material – and do you care whom you offend?’ (Ginsberg, personal communication, 2007). Such an exhibition would need to be clear in exactly what it wanted to say. Not least because:

If you’re going to show something politically tricky, the object is already tricky to some of the knowledgeable members of your audience. Showing a portrait of Qu Yuan⁹⁷ made during the Cultural Revolution would have been quite clear to the authorities who might be visiting from Beijing, but Joe Brit wouldn’t have the slightest idea unless you told him why.

(Ginsberg, personal communication, 2007)

⁹⁷ Qu Yuan was an ancient poet and inspiration to later Confucian scholars, initially feted by the Communist regime for his unbending patriotism, but rejected during the Cultural Revolution. More recently there have been controversial calls within China to replace Mao’s visage with Qu’s on bank notes.

Despite these concerns, there was – in my discussions with Ginsberg and Helen Wang – a clear sense that a knowledge of the Cultural Revolution is still, despite official Chinese ‘amnesia’, crucial towards an understanding of contemporary China. The British Museum’s collection of Mao badges was to become the vehicle for an exhibition entitled *Icons of Revolution: Mao badges then and now* that sought to actively engage with this very issue.

British Museum: Icons of Revolution

Little of the British Museum’s collection of post-1949 visual culture from China had ever been displayed in public until 2008. In December 2000, a standing figure of Mao and a Cultural Revolution-era polychrome figure featured in the inaugural exhibition held in the Joseph Hotung Great Court Gallery. A group of six high-quality ceramic decorative tiles in red and black featuring subjects on the ‘Big Criticism’ theme were to be displayed in the same exhibition, but were removed at the last moment (Ginsberg, personal communication, 2006) for reasons unknown (see figure 41). In addition to prints, posters, ceramics and miscellanea, the museum, under the aegis of Department of Coins and Medals and Curator Helen Wang, holds a ‘modest’ collection of badges, no more than 350. It is worth noting that ‘serious’ Chinese collections of Mao badges start at around 10,000 individual pieces.⁹⁸ As Wang (2008a) explains in her recent catalogue of the collection, it began as a group of 128 badges, the earliest pair of which was donated to the museum in 1978 (two circular badges featuring the profile of Mao in

⁹⁸ The British Museum’s collection of badges *in total* comprises more than 12,000 individual objects, most of which have entered the collection since the 1980s, although acquisition of badges began in 1906. See British Museum. 2008. ‘Icons of Revolution: Mao Badges then and now: A Coins and Medals display.’ Press release. http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/news_and_press_releases/press_releases/2008/icons_of_revolution.aspx. (15/04/2008)

gold, one on a red, sunray background (CM 1978, 0705.111) and the other on a stippled gold background (CM 1978, 0705.121)), several of which were donated by former British Museum and, interestingly, V&A curatorial staff, among them Jessica Rawson, Anne Farrer, John Addis and Andrew Bolton.



Figure 41: One of six ceramic tiles on a 'Big Criticism' theme.

Following the publication of an article penned by Wang on the subject of the museum's badges in a Chinese journal (Wang 2008a, iv), she was approached by Mr Sheng Guanxi of the Zhoushan Numismatic Society, who gifted 200 duplicates from his personal collection to the museum in 2004. The original collection, plus Sheng's gift, was further augmented by gifts of badges during the 2000s by private individuals,

including Penny Brooke - Director of the Great Britain China Centre - who had studied in China during the 1970s (Wang 2008a, 51). These and other political coins, medals and badges collected by the British Museum serve to 'provide future generations with a concise, yet highly evocative summary of changing political and social attitudes' (Carey 1991, 11). This seems as good as any a justification for their collection and display.

Icons of Revolution was intended by Wang to present the key visual iconography of the Cultural Revolution: to reveal its antecedents and development, and the perpetuation of its symbolic value into the twenty-first century. She comments that 'everyday life [in Cultural Revolution-era China] was saturated with symbolic imagery' (Wang 2008a, ix), thus one cannot begin to comprehend the Cultural Revolution without an awareness of the *meaning* behind the iconography. The link between image and text in revolutionary visual culture is key to this understanding, but while some of the more oblique slogans and allusions would be clear to their original intended audience, contemporary visitors generally require additional background information to fully engage with the objects on display. When I spoke to her in January 2008, while the exhibition was still in its planning stages, Wang said she was keen to explore through the medium of display, how the Cultural Revolution material fitted with the rest of the China collection in the British Museum collection. The exhibition would, she planned, go some way towards explaining what contemporary China *is* and how the Cultural Revolution fits into the development of the PRC. As far as my research has determined these objectives - the situation of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution within a broader discussion of Chinese art *and* political history – made the exhibition unique in Britain to date.

During the same period Wang was engaged in writing the first comprehensive catalogue of Mao badges and their symbolism in the English language, based upon the format of Chinese numismatic catalogues. Her publication not only features a photographic image of the front and back of each badge, but also an in-depth description of the symbolism used and explanation of the inscription on each badge, in three ‘languages:’ English, *pinyin* (romanised Mandarin) and *hanzi* (Chinese characters). *Chairman Mao Badges: Symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution* (Wang 2008a) is not a catalogue of the exhibition. It is a research document and aimed at a specialist audience, but it does compliment the exhibition, demonstrating the depth of Wang’s enquiry into the British Museum’s collection of Mao badges and the institutional value which this scholarly attention thus ascribes to the objects. It is important to (re)note that, to date, a similar venture is yet to be attempted at the V&A. Once again, the museums reveal their fundamental selves through their treatment of the objects in their care: one predominantly aesthetic (even if historical) and the other, historical (where aesthetics reflect historically useful information, on such themes as communication and power).

The exhibition, which ran between 10th April and 14th September 2008, was situated in gallery 69a, a space for temporary displays adjacent to the Greek and Roman Life Gallery, and the Department of Coins and Medals, which accounts for the location. It featured badges, and other material, predominantly from the British Museum’s collection, but also objects on loan from private collectors. It began with a central, introductory case (see figures 42 and 43), featuring a number of Mao badges accompanied by an image of the ‘model’ painting *Mao Goes to Anyuan*, upon which four badges were based, reinforcing the importance of this painting and the

representations of the Great Helmsman it inspired during the Cultural Revolution. The accompanying text described how this image was adapted for use on badges and went on to highlight the key iconography associated with badges: the five-pointed red star, the cogwheel and ears of grain, pine branches and the flag of the PRC. This information served to provide the audience with a smattering of insider nous, in order to begin to 'read' the symbolism and meaning integral to the badges.

The body of the exhibition was displayed in one long case down the entire left-hand side of the gallery and a crescent-shaped case to the right (see figure 44). The end of each of the wall cases was faced with a text panel briefly describing the four overarching key themes around which the exhibition was organised. The first, 'Mao and the Chinese Communist Party' was divided into three broadly chronological sections, linking the early visual iconography of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) with the Mao cult of the Cultural Revolution, clearly meeting the exhibition curator's aims to explore the origins of these symbols. The narrative began with the introduction of the key iconography of Chinese communism during the 1930s, via a display of early banknotes and coins from the communist held areas of China, in a section entitled 'International Icons of the 1930s'.



Figure 42: *Icons of Revolution*, central introductory display case.



Figure 31: Selection of 1960s Mao badges from the British Museum collection, displayed in the exhibition Icons of Revolution.



Figure 44: Right-hand case featuring the themes ‘Mao and the Chinese Communist Party’ and ‘Icons of the Cultural Revolution’.

The text made the connection between the early Chinese communist movement and international communism, by highlighting the usage of internationally recognised symbols of revolution: the red flag, the hammer & sickle, the raised fist and the Comintern globe.⁹⁹ This was followed by a section, ‘Chinese icons of the 1930s-40s,’ that looked more closely at Chinese-specific iconography, again as featured on bank notes and coinage. ‘Traditional’ images like the Great Wall and pagodas, were interspersed with representations of an industrialised New China. Again, the text made an explicit link between the symbolism used on these bank notes and coins, and Mao badges of the 1960s. The section highlighted the concepts of Chinese identity during

⁹⁹ Comintern: a portmanteau word for ‘Communist International’, the international organisation of communist parties, founded and headed by the Soviet regime.

wartime and the development of revolutionary landmarks, again linking them with popular badge themes. The final section charted the development of Mao badges during the 1960s. Those chosen for display demonstrated the coming together of international symbols of revolution and home-grown iconography. This section concluded the first quarter of the exhibition. The remaining half of the right-hand wall case was given over to the theme, 'Icons of the Cultural Revolution.'

The first section of this second theme, looked at the role of 'Mao Zedong Thought' in everyday life during the Cultural Revolution. Alongside copies of Mao's *Selected Works* - his 'Little Red Book' - were displayed a receipt from Xinhua Bookshop (the official bookshop of the PRC), showing the eight political and ideological categories by which books were categorised, revolutionary song cards, featuring quotations from Mao, a ration book and ticket, again sporting Mao Zedong Thought. Finally, within the case were displayed a pair of Mao badges decorated with quotations. The panel demonstrated the level to which Mao's words infiltrated everyday life during the height of the Mao cult. Reflecting the British Museum's extensive holdings of bank notes and coinage, the final part of this section examined money (*renminbi* – translated as 'people's money') during the Cultural Revolution, with designs based upon Socialist Realist images reminiscent of the propaganda posters of the era, featuring aspects of New China, but not Mao: aeroplanes, ships, ears of corn, workers in the countryside and industrial installations. The reverse side of the central case featured a brief introduction to the importance of radio as a vital means for the dissemination of the ideology of the Cultural Revolution. The text panel featured a reproduction of a broadcasting schedule from 1967, which began with the song *The East is Red* and closed with the *Internationale*. The narrative highlighted the repetitiveness

of the radio schedule, with quotations by Mao, revolutionary songs and documentaries about the lives of PLA soldiers and Red Guards dominating the airwaves.

The narrative then moved to the left-hand, crescent-shaped display case which was divided into two themes (see figure 45). The first was ‘Landmarks of Revolution.’ Significant landmarks and landscapes associated with Chinese revolutionary history, were – and remain - sites of pilgrimage, where visitors could buy souvenirs of their trip.



Figure 45: Left--hand case featuring the themes ‘Landmarks of Revolution’ and ‘New Symbols of China’.

The most important of these was Tiananmen Square, known in the West for its central role in the 1989 ‘Incident’, but in China as the location of Mao’s declaration of the foundation of the People’s Republic in 1949. In the first case were a number of bank

notes (dating from the 1950s and early 1960s, but still in circulation during the Cultural Revolution) featuring depictions of the Square and a series of Mao badges from the Cultural Revolution depicting Mao against a Tiananmen backdrop. The inclusion of a pair of objects dating from the 1990s, reflected the exhibition's aim to show how the iconography of the Cultural Revolution perpetuated after Mao's death: both the heart-shaped necklace and souvenir medal featured very similar representations of Mao and Tiananmen as the Mao badges displayed above them. The following section focused upon the key landmarks associated with Chinese communist revolutionary history and how they were subsumed into the revolutionary iconography of the PRC. Shaoshan in Hunan province, the most famous of these 'revolutionary sacred sites', advised the accompanying text, was Mao's birthplace and the location of the largest Mao badge factory, which has in recent years become a near theme park dedicated to the Chairman; Jinggangshan, a mountain range in Jiangxi where the PLA was formed; Yan'an, the communist base during the civil war; and Tiananmen Square. Each of the objects, badges and souvenir bookmarks displayed in this section featured one of these landmarks. The addition of a 'Red Tourism' guide book from 2007, demonstrated the continuing allure of these sites of 'pilgrimage.' The final section of this theme explored National Day (1st October and the anniversary of the foundation of the PRC) as its focus. It was, and remains, the principal public holiday of the communist State. The objects - a selection of badges, a design copy-book - the type of which were used extensively throughout the Cultural Revolution - a 50-yuan note, produced to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the People's Republic, were all produced to mark National Day.

The final section of the exhibition was, perhaps for this thesis, the most interesting, because it demonstrated the extent to which the exhibition reflected upon the popular appropriation of Maoist iconography. ‘New Symbols of China’ specifically looked at contemporary uses of communist symbolism in *China*. The first part considered how National Congresses of the PRC, the vehicle by which the CCP takes decisions about leadership and constitutional matters, have been materially commemorated. Being so closely connected with the identity of the CCP it is unsurprising that these (now) five-yearly events have become a significant theme for designers. The 1st Congress, hastily convened on a boat on Lake Nanhu in Zhejiang province, is frequently referenced by the boat motif and was represented in the exhibition by a badge and a photograph of a stylised woodblock print dating from 1981 entitled ‘Sunrise’ by Shi Handing (b.1930). The other badges and bank note on display in this section prominently featured the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square, where the National Congresses have been held since 1969.

The penultimate part explored how particular flowers, loaded with symbolic meaning, have been utilised as decorative (and ideological) motifs. At the forefront is the sunflower, used prominently during the Cultural Revolution to stand for the Chinese people bathe in the radiant ‘sunshine’ of Mao Zedong Thought. The pine, plum and chrysanthemum have their roots in traditional Chinese visual symbolism, standing for steadfastness, survival in adversity and longevity respectively. A selection of badges and coins displaying these motifs were exhibited. The final section featured a number of contemporary objects (from China) that utilised revolutionary decorative themes, most notably two tin mugs exclusively produced for the V&A, by the Shanghai-based retailer ‘Madame Mao’s Dowry.’



Figure 46: Tin mugs produced for the V&A by ‘Madame Mao’s Dowry’.

The mugs commemorate the 2008 Beijing Olympics and subtly satirise Deng Xiaoping’s ‘capitalism without democracy’, by manipulating the bombastic slogans and visual iconography of the Cultural Revolution (see figure 46). The accompanying text traced the genesis of the popular – and often ironic - use of Cultural Revolution-era imagery in China to a Guangzhou taxi driver involved in a traffic accident. Escaping unscathed, he attributed his good fortune to a Mao talisman produced to commemorate the centenary of the Great Helmsman’s birth in 1993. A similar amulet is featured in the exhibition alongside a cassette tape of revolutionary songs revived in the 1990s, a banknote commemorating the 50th anniversary of the PRC and contemporary reproductions of Mao badges.

To what extent did the exhibition meet Wang's aims to examine i) the origins and perpetuation into the post-Mao era of Cultural Revolution-era iconography; and ii) to explore how this collection fits with the rest of the museum's Chinese holdings. Both aims are linked and to some extent were achieved. To tackle the latter first, while the textual, in-gallery material pinpointed the aspects of Chinese revolutionary iconography that had roots in traditional Chinese culture, for example the use of symbolic flowers and trees, the exhibition provided no material examples of this as evidence. An opportunity to visually demonstrate this decorative lineage, perhaps by displaying a *Qing* polychrome ceramic decorated with similar motifs alongside a piece from the Cultural Revolution, was missed. There is evidence to suggest that had the exhibition not been limited by its temporary status and the size of the gallery, the museum might have chosen to display objects from dynastic and Twentieth Century China, if not side-by-side, in close contact; until recent development work at the museum, a selection of explicitly propagandist objects, including posters, paintings and ceramics from North Korea were displayed in a corridor gallery adjacent to the main *Korea Foundation Gallery* (room 67). A group of Soviet Supremacist porcelain pieces dating from the 1920s is on permanent display in room 48, alongside other examples of twentieth century European ceramics (see figure 47). However, the exhibition still went further towards linking the art history of twentieth century China with its antecedents, challenging a normally intransigent rupture following the 1911 National Revolution commonly perceptible in European exhibitions of Chinese material and in art historical writing.



Figure 47: Soviet Supremacist ceramics on display at the British Museum.

The exhibition was, perhaps, more successful in meeting its first aim; it explicitly recognised the history of this iconography, from its earnest beginnings to contemporary appropriation. In a British Museum press release the often ‘ironic twist’ applied to communist imagery in the West was highlighted (see British Museum, 2008),

but this aspect was not fully explored in the exhibition itself. It chose instead to concentrate on more ‘serious’ and official applications of revolutionary iconography to contemporary material objects. As an element of her research into the collection, Wang collected examples of the reappropriation of Mao badges and their associated iconography both within and outside China. In an article written for the *British Museum Magazine* (Wang 2008b) she notes some examples of retailers from Paperchase to Pizza Hut who have used Cultural Revolution-era iconography for product ranges and advertising campaigns. Thus, if an aspect of the exhibition’s intention was to highlight this phenomena, in Wang’s words, the ‘robust sense of irony,’ the clash of communism and capitalism that permeates these new (re)presentations of the visual imagery of communism and the Cultural Revolution, how successfully did it achieve it? Did it, as Wang asserts, give people with no personal experience of ‘that time’ sufficient contextual information – which is ‘not part of general knowledge’ - in order to make sense of what they saw?’ (Wang 2008b, 35) By her own admission ‘Thousands of different designs and inscriptions appear on Mao badges’ (Wang 2008a, 35). A single exhibition cannot offer more than a brief overview, but it might sufficiently engage visitors’ interest to prompt them to find out more, perhaps buy Wang’s catalogue which provides the information otherwise ‘missing’. The key element of the exhibition was to show where the iconography of the Cultural Revolution can now be found, how and where it is still in usage in a multitude of contexts; serious everyday applications (Mao’s image on bank notes), as mystical protection (car talismans), as kitsch. This it achieved.

To conclude, there can be no doubt that the exhibition, for the most part, successfully met its aims. It took an effective stance on Cultural Revolution-era visual

culture, achievable given the scope of the collection and the limitations posed by the gallery space available, providing interested visitors with an introduction not just to the Cultural Revolution, but providing them with the cognitive ‘tools’ to facilitate a deeper engagement with and understanding of the material on display. It presented a different, but complimentary ‘image’ of China, partially bridging the gap between dynastic and contemporary China, and provided a useful counterpoint to *The First Emperor*, which would have been only more effective had the opportunity to mount *Icons of Revolution* during the blockbuster exhibition’s run materialised. As Frances Wood (personal communication, 2007) has commented, how can you explain the Cultural Revolution – a period of unprecedented upheaval – on an exhibition text panel? A focus here, on the meaning of objects and their symbolism, allowed the curator to present a more effective and balanced discussion of this material. Crucially, the exhibition demonstrated what could be done with a comparatively small and unrepresentative collection. Given the nature of the subject matter and the prevailing contemporary, popular relationship with this type of material in Britain today, the exhibition had the potential, nevertheless, to be received as mere kitsch; descriptors like ‘quirky’ and allusions to pop art (‘I rather think this exhibition would have appealed to Andy Warhol!’) litter an online review for example:¹⁰⁰ more evidence that one cannot guarantee, regardless of careful planning, that the audience will perceive the intended ‘message.’ *Icons of Revolution* did, however, represent a ‘great leap forward’ in the presentation of the visual culture of revolutionary China in Britain. It will surely provide a useful prototype for future exhibitions. The exhibition was no cursory exploration; it was thoughtful and well-executed given the limitations of the gallery space and its location within the museum. The British Museum demonstrated its willingness to address the continuous history of

¹⁰⁰ ‘Andrea’. 2008. ‘The East is Red.’ In *The London Traveller*. URL: <http://www.thelondontraveler.com/the-east-is-red/> (15/04/2008)

China in ways not mirrored in art historical literature and exhibition. Meanwhile, the University of Westminster collection underwent a shift in purpose.

University of Westminster

To make them visible, to reform their publicness, to picture their power.

(Evans and Donald 1999, 21)

In the intervening decades the University of Westminster collection continued to develop. Gittings and Merton actively sought donations and loans from friends and colleagues, whom had lived in or visited China. A group of posters dating from 1966-67 came to the collection on permanent loan from Paul Crook – currently a Senior Producer with the BBC World Service - who spent his adolescence in China during the 60s and 70s (Evans and Donald 1999, 6). Today the collection comprises around 600 posters (more than 500 are available to browse online at <http://www.china-posters.org/>) making it the largest – certainly in public hands - and quite possibly the most accessible of its type in the UK (see figures 12, 16, 23, 26). The majority of posters in the collection were produced at the height of the Cultural Revolution in the late 60s and early 70s, through to the early 80s when the propaganda poster fell out of favour in China as a means of disseminating policy and ideology. In addition to being broadly representative with regards to subject matter, the collection also features examples of most of the different techniques and styles utilised in propagandist art of the 60s and 70s, apart from *dazibao* and one-off ‘cartoon’ posters (Evans & Donald 1999, 8). Their

subject matter, sometimes subversive and ‘dubious’, and mode of production and display, has lead to very few of these types of poster art surviving.

An enormous quantity and breadth of other ephemera has entered the collection over the last thirty years. Much of this material remains uncatalogued (Evans, personal communication, 2008) – the posters remain top priority – but nevertheless provides a fascinating insight into the quotidian life of the Cultural Revolution: copy books, photographic slides, a small number of Mao badges, books of postcards, predominantly dating from the mid- to late 1970s, some – published by the Foreign Languages Press - for the foreign market, featuring icons like Mao and Lu Xun, revolutionary landmarks, including Yan’an, and landscapes, peasant paintings, historic buildings, industrial developments, paintings on revolutionary themes, woodcuts, and scenes from the model operas. There are mounted black and white photographs of Chinese landscapes and reproductions of paintings in the traditional style, by Ling Fengmian and Xu Beihong (both rehabilitated by the Deng in the late 70s). There are albums of papercuts, many featuring traditional subjects, such as flowers and birds, landscapes, ancient beauties, dancers, acrobats, ethnic minorities and scenes from ‘Journey to the West.’ It is likely that many of these were purchased in Britain; they are marked with post-decimal sterling prices in pencil. A small number of *nianhua* on traditional and revolutionary themes also feature, along with folded fans decorated with traditional landscapes, calligraphic wall-hangings, paper calendars, bookmarks, cartoon strips, screen-printed fabric wall-hangings and handkerchiefs sporting designs reflective of the technological and sporting aspirations of the Chinese State in the late 70s (space, science, women in work, sport). English-language travel guides (dating from 1974), exercise books, maps of China, printed paper bags, photos of Chinese film stars, children’s picture books

(some on revolutionary themes) and toys including a game that comprises a replica gun and Gang of Four emblazoned targets, and another which depicts a couple of boys sabotaging US forces. There are also some more unusual and surprising objects including a handmade bra, sandals and cotton facemask, a tea brick, even 'Male Vitality Pills'. Of the most recent acquisitions is a large format papercut featuring the profiles of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin and Mao purchased in Beijing during June 2007, succinctly illustrating the perpetuation of Cultural Revolution and post-1949 iconography into the present day.

The guiding principal of the collection throughout its existence, has been Gitting's belief that posters can act 'as a guide to the rapid shifts in political culture' (Gittings 1999, 29) during the closed years of the Cultural Revolution. This echoes the visual culturalist perspective: that the visual can be read in order to reveal its social life (Pinney 2006, 132). As such, the collection remains a teaching resource, now under the administration of the Centre for the Study of Democracy, and is unique in Britain as such. But under the curatorship of Dr Katie Hill (since 2003),¹⁰¹ the collection has repositioned itself as an archive of Cultural Revolution-era visual culture. Publicity material emphasises its 'considerable value' as an international resource for research in a range of disciplines including art history, political rhetoric, Chinese history and politics, poster art, graphic design, visual culture and non-Western twentieth century representation (University of Westminster n.d.) and bills itself as 'the only substantial collection of contemporary Chinese popular art in the world'.¹⁰² Indeed, while the initial purpose of the collection sets it apart from its counterparts at the V&A and British Museum - as a teaching collection it was intended to be used as an active resource, thus

¹⁰¹ During the course of my fieldwork, Dr Hill was on study leave in China.

¹⁰² From <http://www.china-posters.org/articles/research.htm> (29/08/2009).

subject to the destructive forces of regular use – the collection has transmuted into a research collection; a distinction which implies shifting attitudes towards this material with the passing of time, and the increasing interest in and desire to collect the ‘everyday’ and its attributed value. Its rarity and uniqueness is thus implied.

This shift in emphasis has been facilitated by the relative independence of the collection within the wider institution: Unlike their museum-based colleagues, the members of academic staff with curatorial responsibility for the China Poster Collection are not subject to institutional collecting policies and are free to collect what they wish without consultation to the wider University authorities. A mixed blessing, as the collection receives very little institutional support beyond ‘very limited funds’ (Evans, personal communication, 2008) provided by the University Trustees, supplemented by the ‘slight income’ generated by image rights for documentary films and books. As Professor Harriet Evans (personal communication, 2008) - Head of Asian Studies, Centre of the Study of Democracy, since 1998 - has commented, the success of the collection to date has been largely due to the individual efforts of its curators. Indeed, ‘This is an exceptionally rich collection, which deserves more publicity’ (Evans, personal communication, 2008). Yet, in its recast role as a specialist collection, the collection remains useful to the University. It can be argued that new universities, in an effort to compete with established institutions, have actively sought to ‘materialise’ their identity through the development of collections. The material of mass, popular, even mildly subversive cultural movements seem to better fit the identities of these ‘young pretenders’. Keying into the cultural zeitgeist and the growing academic interest

in the everyday, such collections may attract funding to institutions that lack the weighty research portfolios of the established, elite universities.¹⁰³

Although pieces from the collection were not displayed in public for eighteen years after their last outing in 1981, it has today become the most accessible of the collections detailed in this thesis. A recent project has been to design and launch a stand-alone searchable website (<http://www.china-posters.org/>) devoted to the collection, and its archives. Those wishing to view the collection in person are actively encouraged to do so by appointment. The China Poster Collection is thus, broadly accessible to both researchers and the general public, even though little of the collection is ever on public display in the traditional sense. Having said that, during the last decade pieces from the collection have featured in two, significant exhibitions.

Picturing Power: Posters of the Cultural Revolution, was a touring exhibition developed in partnership with Indiana and Ohio State Universities and featured around just 10% of the total collection at that time. While the exhibition did not tour outside the US, Ohio State University hosted an online exhibition based upon its physical counterpart that remains publically accessible to Internet users worldwide.¹⁰⁴ The edited volume published to coincide with the exhibition, *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (1999), consolidated the University of Westminster's lead in scholarly, *multidisciplinary* research into Cultural Revolution-era material. It situated the study of visual culture at the centre of Cultural Revolution research in the West, recognising and reflecting upon the central role of the arts in Maoist China as the 'cogs and wheels' of revolution. This academic perspective

¹⁰³ I owe Prof. Simon Knell for this observation.

¹⁰⁴ See <http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/poster/exhibintro.html> (02/05/2009).

was reflected in the interpretive approach of this and the later exhibition *The Political Body*, which put forth, as its curators made explicit, a ‘methodological solution’ to the frequent – and unsatisfactory – separation between art and politics. It provided a ‘shifting model of analysis that [acknowledged] both political and aesthetic qualities’ (Evans and Donald 1999, 10). Evans and Donald contend that outside the original temporal and spatial context of these objects’ production and consumption, there occurs ‘A certain slippage’ (Evans and Donald 1999, 11) between content, form and politics. As such, ‘political analyses’ are rendered essential in the display environment (Evans and Donald, 1999, 12): one step further than the British Museum’s later approach to its display of Mao badges and a very different emphasis from the largely aesthetic interpretation of similar material at the V&A.

Donald and Evans aimed to use the exhibition, and the accompanying publication, to deliver a more nuanced, multi- and inter-disciplinary appraisal of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution in the light of the growing body of literature that offered a revised assessment of the Cultural Revolution that challenged popularised, frequently ideologically-biased and essentialised analyses of the period (for example see Gao 2008), not least in order to problematise the relationship between the reality of life during the Cultural Revolution and the images projected by its visual culture. Neither the posterised representation of the model worker, peasant or soldier, nor stock footage of Red Guards in Tiananmen Square can stand for the average Chinese person and their experience. Neither is revolutionary art ‘all the same.’ Evans and Donald (1999, 20) thus advocate ‘a close analysis of visual and other primary materials...to explode [this] notion’.

Five years later in 2004, pieces from the collection were again placed on public display, this time in Britain. The Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB)-funded exhibition *The Political Body: Posters from the People's Republic of China in the 1960s and 1970s*, was held at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, between 15th April and 25 June 2004.¹⁰⁵ The collection was used to explore the

...powerful and complex visual discourse that was at the heart of the production and performance of China's Cultural Revolution. The posters invite us to think about the changing meaning of the political body across time, space and place.

(Evans 2004, 3)

The exhibition linked the poster collection and the recent research of Katie Hill into the male body in performance art, by exploring the role of the Cultural Revolution in the development of contemporary Chinese art, specifically the 'performative' nature of the body as expressed by the Chinese Socialist Realist genre. How 'the body is made to act as a political tool' (Hill 2004, 6): from the 'totalitarian', physically masculine body of the early Cultural Revolution through to the 'softer' representations of women engaged in science, technology, agriculture and industry – tropes of 'modernity' (Hill 2004, 6-8). The exhibition elucidated a trajectory of lineage from the aesthetics of the Cultural Revolution to the contemporary and not just, as the British Museum exhibition presented, in terms of overtly political and ideological art. *The Political Body* begs the question, if the Cultural Revolution continues to influence and affect contemporary artistic production in China, why is its social and political legacy denied?

¹⁰⁵ A glossy 64-page colour catalogue was produced to accompany the exhibition.

Natalie Siulam Wong, former Assistant Curator, evocatively describes in her contribution to the exhibition catalogue how material culture can illuminate our past and our present. Wong highlights a particular poster in the collection which depicts ‘an angry man amongst a crowd of demonstrators with a Mao badge and Little Red Book, holding out a bloody corpse with a banner reading: “Fiercely resist the fascist brutality of British rule in Hong Kong”’ (Wong 2004, 18). It compelled her to ask her parents about their experiences of living in Hong Kong at the height of the Cultural Revolution: a period which had not featured in her Hong Kong education and was alien to her own experiences of growing up in the territories. Thus, the exhibition asserted that the collection and display of this material is essential. It can often bear witness to events officially erased from public memory, while at the same time, as Wong points out, mediate between *their* ‘historical “reality” and the lens through which history is viewed in the present’ (Wong 2004, 19). At the very least, as Evans and Donald (1991, 1) state, we will know what people *saw* during the Cultural Revolution. Visual artefacts remain the primary means by which we, in this geographically, ideologically and temporally-shifted contemporary, can ‘experience’ that decade. The founder of the collection, John Gittings, emphasises this point. Posters and *dazibao* were the few media through which foreign visitors to China during the Cultural Revolution, otherwise closeted by the regime, could have any sort of sensory engagement with their surroundings. These ‘reference points...were emphatic and exuberant, often stating topics with greater emphasis and clarity than our own guides’ (Gittings 1999, 27). Posters offered a sometimes visceral, sometimes inspirational insight into the ‘everyday discourse’ (Gittings 1999, 28) of Mao’s China. A perspective otherwise lacking from limited contemporaneous Western experience.

More recently, along with the British Museum, the University of Westminster has recommenced active collection of propaganda posters, picking up a ‘considerable purchase’ (Evans, personal communication, 2008) at the 2006 Bloomsbury Auction. Increasingly, the Westminster collection is focusing upon the less fashionable subject areas of the revolutionary genre, the subjects overlooked by, in Evan’s words (personal communication, 2008), the ‘big bucks:’ women, sports, health and education – all rich areas of visual culture, but less favoured by collectors than the iconic images of Mao, or the worker-peasant-soldier trinity. This turn towards what may be, rather unsatisfactorily termed the ‘domestic’, is reflective of Evans and Hills’ academic interests, and those of their students (the collection remains a teaching resource), as much as their value for money.

The collection is in the process of being re-catalogued, to take into account recent acquisitions. The existing system organises the posters alphanumerically, by subject matter: agriculture, art, children, Four Modernisations (from the Deng era), Health, Education & Society, Industry & Commerce, International Relations, Leaders, Military & Sports, National Festival & Patriotism, National Minorities, New Years Pictures (*nianhua*), Personalities, Politics, Revolutionary History, and Women. Harriet Evans (personal communication, 2008) is keen to assert that these categorisations are inherited, arbitrary classifications and not based upon Chinese categories. As such they are not particularly useful, not least because most of the posters within the collection could easily fit in any number of the categories. Evans, writing with Stephanie Donald, asks exactly this question in her introductory chapter to *Picturing Power*. Should the posters be organised and described by their political messages, their aesthetics or formal pictorial qualities? Each of these categories can be further broken down. ‘Politics’ may

refer to overt subject matter, period of production, political innuendo. Ultimately, can politics ever be separated from the aesthetic, given the context of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist inspired production? (Evans & Donald 1999, 9). Could this tension between form and content be an alternative explanation for the reluctance to collect and interpret this material in the museum environment? This certainly appears to have been an obstacle for the V&A. In contrast, the China Poster Collection has taken on the challenge to develop a more satisfactory interpretive approach.

Outside the bounds of the ‘rules’ of curatorship, the University of Westminster has been able to ‘transgress’ those conventions that restrict museums. Compared with the cachet and profile of the national museums, the Chinese Poster Collection – in its almost autonomous status from the University authorities - is less likely to feel a responsibility towards maintaining a good Sino-British diplomatic relationship. This is not to say, of course, that those responsible would actively court contention with the PRC, but simply that it is situated outside the norms of curatorship, of which museological practice and tradition are inescapable constants. What has been collected tends to reflect the ‘best,’ the most creative, representative, valuable, unique. The simple fact is that what most attracts individual curators and specialists is most likely to be displayed. Connoisseurship and expertise are the watchwords. Thus, as we have already seen, what has been collected of the Cultural Revolution reflects these considerations. One only needs to be reminded of Evan’s assessment of the *Art for the Masses* exhibition hosted by Royal Museums Scotland in 2003-4 which, despite its name, comprised high quality material produced in small quantities in mind of foreign diplomats and party officials and most definitely *not* the masses. As a student in China during the 1970s, Evans recounts that she saw nothing of that type of material (personal

communication, 2007). There were, as the collections held by the V&A, British Museum and University of Westminster demonstrate, two different manifestations of the Cultural Revolution visual culture: the elite and the mass. While these differences may be too subtle for the average visitor with limited specialist knowledge to determine, they are fundamental. While the visual propagandist techniques adapted and devised in the field by the CCP during the anti-Japanese campaign and civil war influenced all levels of artistic production – particularly in terms of theme and style – all art was not equal. A truly comprehensive exhibition of Cultural Revolution material would have to recognise and transcend the high/low dichotomy and seek to challenge and explode the prevailing image of the Cultural Revolution in the popular consciousness: that image conflated from an incendiary and evocative cocktail of ‘scar literature’, Cold War propaganda and long-standing racism and mythology. A willingness to explore the Cultural Revolution within the context of contemporary China, coupled with a more nuanced understanding of the Cultural Revolution and crucially, collaboration between the different collecting institutions, would be required to achieve such a venture. With reference to posters, Harriet Evan’s argues:

...it means pulling apart (deconstructing) the contents, styles and forms of posters etc to try to think through their lined but different meanings, in relation to their intended audiences, i.e. it signifies a problematisation of the CR [sic] and of Mao’s China in a way that the notion of ‘propaganda’ generally associated with poster art of this sort obscures.

(Evans, personal communication, 2008)

Perhaps more so than her V&A and British Museum colleagues, Evans (personal communication, 2008) persuasively argues that the Cultural Revolution remains more than ever a ‘fantastically important’ period from which to collect. She cites a number of reasons why: i) its significance in the political and cultural history of the PRC; ii) it sheds light on the diversity (style, form, etc) of the visual culture of the period (and thus, belies some of the Western stereotypes of the era); iii) it (particularly this collection) sheds light on the elite nature of much of the finer porcelain and lacquer artefacts produced during the decade; iv) posters were a dominant visual discourse of the revolution and to ignore them (in particular) is to ignore the methods by which the revolution was produced and disseminated; v) for the impact that the artefacts of this period has on contemporary imaginings of the Cultural Revolution, as evidenced by their influence and reproduction in diverse commercial media, internationally and in China; vi) for the ‘silences’ that such artefacts reveal, the posters are as significant for what they omit, as much for what they contain; vii) they beg all sorts of questions about the nature of cross-cultural design, aesthetic and graphic influences on Chinese revolutionary art; and finally viii) for their international impact and the export of ‘revolution’ without China (in Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America). In accord with Ginsberg and Wang she is clear on one particular point: this material must be displayed and interpreted within the wider context of the PRC. To not do so would be to ‘reify’ (even mythologise) the Cultural Revolution. Otherwise there is, she argues while citing her colleague Katie Hill, a danger that the Cultural Revolution might be essentialised. In contrast, she contends, one must place the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution on the trajectory of political art in the twentieth century before and after the Maoist period.

As such, Evans believes that the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution has a ‘vital role to play in facilitating discussion’ about the Cultural Revolution, given the ‘polarised positions of current debate’. Yet, it is impossible to get away from the inherent difficulties and barriers associated with the interpretation and display of this material. Evans cogently summarises the primary factors: ‘A combination of ideological antipathy and a sense that Mao’s China is no longer of contemporary relevance, and [a] possible desire not to antagonise the Chinese authorities, limits the funding possibilities’ (Evans, personal communication, 2008). There was not a single homogenous aesthetic, nor lived, experience of the Cultural Revolution. ‘Our’ vision has, as I hope previous chapters in this thesis have helped to illuminate, been affected by Britain’s (various) ideological positions vis-à-vis post-1949 China. The catch-all, popularist image of ‘art for the masses’ tells only a half truth. It permits us to pass over, decry as undeserving of scholarly attention, disregard and categorise this material as kitsch, an irrelevant aberration, ‘not art,’ exactly because we continue to fail to engage with it on more than a superficial level. Thus, context is key, as is preparedness to challenge the prevailing view, to risk courting controversy.

Evans (personal communication, 2008) contends that the collection ‘doesn’t aim to give any messages’ about the Cultural Revolution. But, while the ethos behind the collection may not be to give any explicit ideological messages about the Cultural Revolution, there is a tangible sense that it has a self-aware goal to further the scholarly significance of the posters as documents of social and political culture in China during the latter part of Mao’s leadership. These posters have transcended ephemerality and outlived the original intentions of their designers and political ‘masters’. They have ‘entered the international time and space of collection, categorization, and display.

Placing these posters in a permanent collection is an indication of their aesthetic merit, their historical importance, and their enduring appeal to the memory, and possibly the nostalgia, of the collector and spectator' (Evans & Donald 1999, 9).

Victoria & Albert Museum

While the British Museum and the University of Westminster have actively sought to develop their respective collections in recent years, the V&A collection has remained in relative stasis. Yet despite the dismantling of the Twentieth Century Design Galleries in 2008, which removed Cultural Revolution-era objects from public display, there is evidence that this is neither permanent, nor desired by museum personnel. While in the past an exhibition provisionally titled 'China in an Age of Revolutions' was proposed, but not taken up (Kerr, personal communication, 2007), the V&A's collection of post-1949 and Cultural Revolution-era visual culture is yet to have been displayed *en masse* in anything resembling, in Kerr's words (personal communication, 2007), 'serious exhibition'. But, tentative plans are afoot for a dedicated gallery of graphic art, which will include propagandist material from Asia (Zhang, personal communication, 2008). Most significantly, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have invaded the Tsui Gallery. Contemporary pieces of decorative art from mainland China and Taiwan are displayed in the central corridor of the gallery, in a new section entitled 'Modern Living'. It must be stated that these objects – glassware, embroidery, ceramics, lacquer and furniture - are far from everyday domestic objects. Of far more cogency to this thesis, is the inclusion of a single subtly political Cultural Revolution-era ceramic in the main body of the gallery: a 1969 standing, polychrome figure from the Kwan collection of Li Tiemei, heroine of the model opera 'The Red Lantern' (see figure 48).



Figure 48: Ceramic figures of Lu Xun (t) and Li Tiemei (b) on display in the Tsui Gallery, V&A.

The figure is displayed alongside a seated figure of a smoking Lu Xun made in 1984 (see figure 48), a 1976 plaque decorated with a panda amongst bamboo executed in a traditional style, and a large ceramic sculpture by the artist Xu Yihui entitled 'The Little Red Book' (1994); a piece of political pop satirising the 'emptiness' of revolutionary history. The Li Tiemei figure is a top-quality piece. Made at the ancient kilns of Jingdezhen it would not have been intended for mass consumption, like most ceramics in the V&A collection. But it has political intent. Li Tiemei was, rather akin to Lei Feng, a role-model for young girls. The inclusion of this figure in a gallery space assuredly reserved for dynastic China is a significant gesture, which goes some way towards closing the gap between the typical separation of pre- and post- revolutionary China in the museum context.

These small concessions to twentieth century China are not the only example, in recent years of the V&A making in-roads into its favoured modernist, aesthetic interpretive approach. In 2008 this tradition was partially deconstructed by the temporary exhibition *Cold War Modern* (25 September 2008 - 11 January 2009), which explored European and North American art and design during the years 1945-1970. It was the culmination of a four-year research project undertaken by curators Jane Pavitt and David Crowley (Pavitt, personal communication, 2009). The central premise of the exhibition was that 'Art and design were not peripheral symptoms of politics during the Cold War: they played a central role in representing and sometimes challenging the dominant political and social ideas of the age'.¹⁰⁶ It reflected the material manifestations

¹⁰⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum. 2008. 'Cold War Modern'. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/microsites/cold-war-modern/> (02/06/2009).

of ‘anxiety and hope’¹⁰⁷ that characterised the period on both sides of the ideological divide, highlighting the sometimes symbiotic relationship between East and West.

The Cultural Revolution was explored in the exhibition from the perspective of late-Sixties political activism in Europe and the attendant romanticisation of ‘the exploits and ideals of revolutionaries in China and Cuba and liberation movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America’ (Anon 2008d), in a corner of ‘Revolution’, the sixth section of the exhibition. Accompanied by excerpts from the prominent French Maoist Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 film *La Chinoise* on continuous loop (see figure 49), the display featured few objects, the sum total being a 1967 woodblock printed propaganda poster, featuring the typical slogan ‘Down with US Imperialism. Down with Soviet revisionism,’ and Mao suit, both from private collections (see figure 50).



Figure 49: Still from *La Chinoise*, Jean-Luc Godard (Dir.) (1968).

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.



Figure 50: 'Down with US Imperialism, Down with Soviet Revisionism', Anon (1967).

This is noteworthy; I had been advised by Hongxing Zhang that two posters had been purchased at the 2006 Bloomsbury auction specifically with this exhibition in mind

(Zhang, personal communication, 2008). It appears that these were overlooked in favour of these objects from outside the museum's collection. Indeed, only 20% of the total objects on display in the exhibition were from the V&A's own collections. The curators relied instead upon nearly 50 lenders, including the Pompidou Centre, Paris, MOMA in New York, a number of German federal museums, and other collecting institutions in Italy, Croatia, Poland, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Russia and the US (Pavitt, personal communication, 2009).



Figure 51: 'American Interior No. 7', Erró (Gudmundur Gudmundsson) (1968).

These objects were displayed adjacent to those pertaining to the Cuban Revolution and the Prague Spring, and close to a work entitled 'American Interior No. 7' (1968) by the

Icelandic artist Erró (Gudmundur Gudmundsson), that suggests that there was already a self-reflexive aspect to the love affair with revolution contemporaneous to the mid-Sixties. In flat planes of colour reminiscent of both capitalist advertising and Socialist Realist graphic propaganda, the painting depicts a fashionable 1960s fitted bedroom suite, as one might have seen in North America, Britain and Northern Europe, yet one wall appears to be papered with the images of revolutionaries from all over the world, in the genre of Cultural Revolution-era representations of the worker-peasant-soldier trinity (see figure 51). Erró's message is ambiguous. As Crowley asks, is this an image of the West surrounded by its enemies, or an early comment upon so-called radical chic? (Crowley 2008, 219)

Although the curator Jane Pavitt has maintained that, given the context of the V&A, *Cold War Modern* was not 'a show on the material culture of the Cold War', and that instead it represented 'the idea of cold war modernity as a series of projections about future possible societies' (Pavitt, personal communication, 2009), the exhibition did, in my view, represent a departure for the V&A in its previous presentations of the Cultural Revolution. Specifically objects and their interpretation were placed within an historiographic, loosely chronological narrative, which engaged with the politics and ideology inherent in the production and cultural meaning of those objects. It also demonstrated, very effectively, the utopia/dystopia dichotomy in representations of the Cultural Revolution and how they have shifted over the last forty years. Because, while placing the objects within an interpretative narrative which examined the hope placed in communism by the counter-culture to bring about a more equitable society, the display positioned itself within the current dominant narrative of the Cultural Revolution; that it was a 'bad thing.' The accompanying text panel makes clear the narrative bias:

[The Cultural Revolution was] Mao's own answer to his *mismanagement*. The reality of the Cultural Revolution was *appalling violence and chaos*... Western fascination with images of the Cultural Revolution often *failed to acknowledge the brutalities of its effects* [my emphases].

Conclusion

This section has sought to analyse the collection, interpretation and display of the material artefacts of the Cultural Revolution in British museums over the last thirty years, over which time these collections have transferred from store room to public display. To these ends it has examined three publically-accessible, London-based collections of politically-explicit material. The discussion has been set against the backdrop of the major mind shift in images of the decade 1966-76, concurrent with Deng Xiaoping's accession to power and in line with the official Chinese narrative of the Cultural Revolution and the legacy of Mao Zedong as constituted by the 1981 *Resolution on Party History*. The 'deMaoification' of China coincided with the inception and early development of collections of Cultural Revolution-era visual culture in Britain. Later the collapse of communism in Europe, the kitschification of revolutionary material culture, the Tiananmen Square Incident and the Beijing Olympics all contributed to the wider image of revolutionary China in the popular consciousness and, in consequence, influenced paradigms of display and interpretation.

Several factors were complicit in the decision to collect and exhibit: wider institutional policy, availability, value for money, the didactic potential of the material.

But by far the most crucial input came from the interests and commitment of individual curatorial staff at each institution. There is a consensus that such material was, and is, important to collect, even if the collecting institutions can not agree how best to interpret it. The V&A have, in line with institutional tradition, predominantly applied an aesthetic interpretative approach, focusing upon form and neutralising the political function of the material. The British Museum, with its philosophical position as a universal museum with its roots in the twin disciplines of archaeology and anthropology, has treated the artefacts of the Cultural Revolution rather differently, emphasising their value as objects of documentary evidence, for what they can reveal about the socio-political context of their production and use. The China Poster Collection at the University of Westminster has in recent years trod a different path to that exemplified by its national museum counterparts; it straddles art versus artefact interpretations and seeks a new, multidisciplinary methodology towards the reading of the material artefacts of the Cultural Revolution. Art and politics in Mao's China were, as I have previously stated in this thesis, inextricably linked. One aspect can not be fully understood without the 'input' of the other. As such it does not fit within classic curatorship. In particular reference to Vietnamese War paintings, Buchanan (2003) has stated 'It is not being exhibited because of lack of artistic merit but because the majority of mainstream museums do not have a category for it: it falls somewhere between curators responsible for ethnology or pots and curators of contemporary art who tend to be ethnocentric and driven by fashion'. Thus, a locus of experimental and fluid scholarship outside the historical boundaries of museum-based curatorship, such as the University of Westminster, may well be the most appropriate site for the development of new ways of seeing this material in the context of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

This final and concluding chapter revisits the aims and objectives set out in the introduction, synthesises the arguments put forth in the previous sections, considers the broader implications of this research project and looks towards potential directions for future exhibitions. This has been a richly interdisciplinary study, touching upon art history, museology, media and visual culture studies. In this final chapter I shall place greater emphasis on the museological aspects of the thesis. Following the theoretical perspectives outlined in the introductory section, this thesis has yoked the interpretation of collections of Cultural Revolution-era visual culture to the wider socio-political context; the Sino-British relationship and popular imaginings of China in the British popular consciousness.

This thesis has sought to understand British museological representations of Cultural Revolution-era China through the collection, interpretation and display of Chinese art of that period in Britain. However, rather than focus on insular and introspective institutional readings, I set out to situate this study in the context of broader and changing conceptions of China in the popular consciousness. This was achieved using diverse resources including contemporary accounts, interviews and the study of collections. Rather than concentrating on detached and decontextualised museological activity, my aim was to locate my research in broader and often more far reaching, practices of representation. In order to achieve this seamlessly, the more traditional thesis construction - an arrangement of literature review, historical contextualisation, case studies, discussion and conclusion – was abandoned in favour of

integrating all this work into an historical narrative which revealed the interplay between political change in China and Britain, and various forms of representation, with a focus upon museums.

Museums and Memorials

Since the earliest contact between East and West, China's size, complexity, frequent isolation, cultural and linguistic distinctiveness have permitted it to retain an exotic and mysterious aura for Europeans. At times it has been represented as a utopian ideal, at others, a dystopian nightmare. It has functioned throughout history as a mirror for the West, reflecting back at us what we believe we are, and what we believe we are not. We continue to separate the image of China from the reality: the China of the imagination operates as a utopian Sinophiliac trope as it did in the eighteenth-century, glossed with a veneer of Orientalist imaginings. At the same time it can be a vision of an Orwellian dystopia, reminiscent of negative characterisations prevalent in the nineteenth century. These polar, essentialised, fickle perceptions exist in tandem, consciously and knowingly removed from the heterogeneous reality of contemporary China. The boundaries between image and reality are always blurred, permitting at times the co-existence of contradicting images: in 2008, for example, the dystopic China generated by the Tibet riots sat alongside the Utopia of the Beijing Olympics.

Lennon and Foley's (2000) examination of 'dark tourism' is helpful in understanding the British reception of China in this period, even if the display of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution cannot be equated with the usual subject matter of 'dark tourism' (sites of massacres and recent battles, former concentration camps).

Dislocated from its original context and site of production it at first appears the very antithesis of these dark ‘materials’. The heterotopical effect of orthodox museum display and the subjugation of art to ideology sets apart the audience, eliciting little emotional or visceral response: audiences become detached observers. As with any museum engagement with art, to *fully* appreciate its meaning and its significance, the visitor is required to possess prior knowledge, in this case of the Cultural Revolution. This is not to suggest, however, that this art does not have aesthetic merit for British audiences. If the political context is absent from the display, the objects will remain, as Lennon and Foley (2000, 64-65) have put it, ‘mute’ – at least as regards realising the political intent which dominates that object’s construction. As a consequence, the object falls victim to vague imaginings based upon news items and popular cultural appropriations of iconography. While debate within China is stifled - the ‘ugly past’ thrown off (Gao 2008, 31) - Western museums, as potential sites of mediation between people and objects, and history and narrative, offer an opportunity to openly engage with the difficult legacy of the Cultural Revolution. The museum may operate as ‘a public forum for discussion’, it can offer a ‘surrogate home...for debates that would otherwise be placeless’ (Williams 2007, 130). For, to quote Baudrillard (1988, cited by Lennon and Foley 2000, 40), ‘Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself.’ This, however, requires another form of interpretation and an appraisal of whether the visual culture of Cultural Revolution described in this thesis should be required or permitted to operate as memorials to its victims (see Williams 2007).

Yet the human aspect which is frequently characteristic of physical memorials, the ‘familial significance’ which leads the visitor ‘beyond their own materiality and back in time to the persons and events it commemorates’ (Williams 2007, 6), could be

exploited to facilitate visitor engagement. I mention this conceptual framing of dark tourism here, because I feel that it suggests possible future directions for the development of narratives of the Cultural Revolution in the museum, which go beyond the established art/artefact dichotomy. Objects, particularly those loaded with such a complexity of socio-political, cultural and historical meaning as those pertaining to the Cultural Revolution, fail to provide all the answers. They cannot, in themselves, as the limitations of the aesthetic interpretive approach demonstrate, provide any explanation for that decade. For the same reason they provide, on their own, scant material for an 'artefact'/social history exhibition. But, due to the political and cultural purges which occurred throughout and immediately after the Cultural Revolution and the lack of verifiable evidence made available to Westerners, other types of documentary and contextualising material are missing. As such, the object becomes secondary, it offers little practical application and may ultimately slip from view, to permanent storage, or deaccession. However, while the Cultural Revolution remains in living memory, individual voices may revitalise and advance new approaches to the interpretation of its visual culture. Techniques employed in dark tourism, such as the use of personal stories to drive the accompanying interpretation, may help to straddle the art/artefact divide, challenge the view that the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution is somehow distasteful or corrupt, and overcome the inherent 'muteness' of the aesthetic approach which is, inevitably, favoured by museums (this is, after all, 'art', whichever way one looks at it). An additional benefit of the marriage of object with individual testimony is that it may facilitate inter-cultural dialogue.

The new museology of the late 1980s and 1990s challenged the hegemony of modernist discourse and its influence upon museum practice. The turn of the

millennium brought about a similar transformation in the interpretation of the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution: the V&A ceased to actively collect; the University of Westminster and the British Museum now took the lead and in so doing looked beyond the aesthetic to the social and ideological. While a certain reticence on the part of the British Museum was discernible - a reluctance to make a statement about Mao while his legacy remains unresolved (and while the museum was in prestigious loan negotiations with the Chinese cultural authorities¹⁰⁸) – this, in itself, foregrounds the different approach of the British Museum to the V&A; the recognition that this material cannot, in interpretation, be separated from its inherent ideology and political context.

Of the three institutions, the China Poster Collection at the University of Westminster has most effectively accomplished a resolution of the tension between aesthetics and politics. In its current activities it is moving towards what is, in my opinion, a more balanced and accurate narrative of the Cultural Revolution which cuts through the overwhelmingly negative images popularised during the post-Mao era, asks difficult questions of the material held by the China Poster collection, and is prepared to engage with potentially controversial aspects of interpreting the Cultural Revolution. By taking a visual culturalist approach, the objects are ‘read’ for what they reveal of their social lives and for what they document of the context of their production and use. As such, neither the aesthetic, nor the ideological is privileged over the other: both are

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the Chinese cultural authorities try to dictate the interpretive thrust of any exhibition featuring loan objects from the PRC. Reports at the time (Anon 2007) accused the Chinese authorities of attempting to censor the Museum für Asiatische Kunst’s 2007 exhibition of Tibetan artefacts, seeking to excise any mention of the political situation vis-à-vis China and Tibet from the textual commentary. More recently, the Chinese Ministry of Culture vetoed previously arranged loans of revolutionary art from 100 Chinese museums to the Asia Society Museum in New York, for its international exhibition *Art and China’s Revolution* (September 2008 - January 2009). The Cultural Revolution was deemed by the cultural authorities to be too sensitive an issue in year of the Beijing Olympics (Kaufmann 2008).

treated as equally important, accurately reflecting the extent to which these aspects were intertwined in Maoist ideologies of art. As an example, the current oral history project, *Posters of the Cultural Revolution: Contemporary Chinese Perspectives on an Era of Propaganda* led by Dr Katie Hill, seeks to re-evaluate the decade by ‘eliciting perspectives from the memories of those represented in poster art, as well as professional image-makers’ to contribute to ‘a critical review of the received history of the period’ (University of Westminster n.d.). In effect, the University is adding elements of intangible heritage – reminiscences and personal testimonies – to its physical collection. In the future, these will allow for a far deeper and nuanced interpretation of the posters and ephemera that comprise the China Poster Collection. As such, the University of Westminster looks set to transcend the problems associated with the either/or art/artefact approaches that have otherwise limited the success of previous attempts to find a satisfactory approach to the display of this material in British museums. Instead, this project will focus on the human context; the producers, the contemporary consumers and the meanings *they* ascribe to the material (which will likely combine aesthetic, as well as ideological considerations). Such a project should be approached with caution; some thirty years after Mao’s death, individuals’ memories may be unreliable, or they may not feel able to express or honestly reflect upon their experiences. However, the reminiscences gathered will undoubtedly help to overcome a lack of verifiable, contemporaneous eye-witness reports and documentary film and photography.

In contrast, memorialisation is an alien notion to the V&A and British Museum, at least as regards objects which seem to remain in some senses politically alive. Does a political or ethical motive prevent these museums from engaging with the socio-

political context of the Cultural Revolution? This thesis contends that this visual culture cannot be understood, nor appreciated without reference to its often culturally-specific symbolism, inherent ideological content and political function. Museums need to provide opportunities for their audiences' to acquire sufficient cultural capital if they are to impart anything of China at the height of Maoism. These objects, which appear so divorced from the images of (traditional) Chinese aesthetics with which we, in the West, are familiar, simply cannot speak for themselves. For an audience weary of the constant simulation of contemporary media culture, the 'reality gap' (Levi 1993, cited by Foley and Lennon 2000, 156) between incidents as they were and as they are represented, objects offer a 'real' experience (Lennon and Foley 2000, 147). Just as the eighteenth-century moneyed classes 'knew' China by means of its material traded goods, in the twenty-first century 'we' know the Cultural Revolution through its visual culture. Being, now, temporally as well as a geographically and ideologically Other, contact with objects remains the principal means by which we can experience a tangible, human connection with the past, even if they can not *reconstitute* an historic event (Williams 2007, 49).

As Williams (2007, 50) has put it 'The existence of objects from that time, in a concrete present location, makes the reality of [the] event [here, the Cultural Revolution] not easily done away with', despite the best efforts of the official narrative of Chinese revolutionary history. The fate of the material culture of communism in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states during the 1990s, has been well-documented (see Mulvey and Lewis 1994; Forrest and Johnson, 2002; Lankauskas, 2006). Emphasising this point, in a memorandum submitted to the Government's Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, Julian Spalding – curator, broadcaster and author - wrote an impassioned plea for museums to

refocus collections from ‘old things’ and ‘old thoughts’ (Spalding 2006) to objects which ‘serve people’s needs’ (Spalding 2006). Into this category he placed contemporary culture, digital imagery, objects pertaining to faith and our changing relationship with the natural environment. But of most cogency to this thesis was his final call:

We need a museum that helps us understand contemporary politics. The ideas of Communism shaped, both negatively and positively, the whole of twentieth century culture – but where can you go to understand it? The British Museum aims to be a museum of world culture – yet it throws no light on this subject even though Communism was cooked up in its own reading room! The British Museum has collected the odd Soviet pot and Chinese poster, but like most museums, it collects in outmoded categories, many laid down during the eighteenth century, and misses the big story.

(Spalding 2006)

While much work has been done to bridge this gap over the intervening years since the publication of his memorandum and the British Museum now counts among its holdings of communist visual culture considerably more than just ‘the odd Soviet pot and Chinese poster’, Spalding’s contention highlights the significance of communism in the social, political and cultural history of the twentieth century. Thus, for this reason alone, the visual culture of communism has a key role to play in facilitating the understanding of recent world history.

New Narratives, New Directions

Writing in 1991, Harding (1991, 201) wondered how, given the diametrically opposed interpretations of the Cultural Revolution before and after Deng's accession to power, the Cultural Revolution could ever be portrayed accurately and fairly. The grand narrative of the decade - that the Cultural Revolution was a 'bad thing,' an unreserved tragedy, or a 'monumental error' (Harding 1991, 110) - achieved a level of dominance and apparent validity that stuck largely unchallenged over the last twenty years.

However, these certainties are increasingly challenged. A shift in attitudes towards the Cultural Revolution is the result of a number of factors, not least the necessary time-lag which, it appears, society requires in order to engage with difficult history, but also the evolution of a new economically powerful and globally relevant China. But there also seems to have been a tangible shift in the wake of the publication, in 2005, of Jung Chang's weighty, scathing biography of the Chairman, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, co-authored by her husband, Jon Halliday. Although the book was received with some considerable approval by non-specialist reviewers (see Fenby 2005), many experts in the field were more critical, exposing Chang and Halliday's work as deficient in academic rigour, founded upon suspect research and reflecting what some have interpreted as an entirely subjective, personal grudge against Mao Zedong (see Spence 2005; Benton and Tsang 2005; Gao 2008). Thus, Chang's biography of Mao can be interpreted as a watershed in Western Sinology. An alternative, more balanced narrative of the Cultural Revolution has since emerged, one which recognises that representations of the Cultural Revolution are subject to the contemporary political and ideological context.

Its most notable proponent, the Chinese-born, Australia-based scholar Mobo Gao (2008), has offered a more subtle analysis of the genuine benefits that Cultural Revolution policy brought to those in the countryside, the silent majority. Far from Mao apologist – Gao and his family of educated petty landowners suffered persecution during the Cultural Revolution – he nevertheless seeks to reveal the construction of the Cultural Revolution as a politicised, historical event. He exposes the political agendas and sense of entitlement demanded by specific and influential (with regards to their impact on Western popular perceptions of the Cultural Revolution) groups of writers, including those authors of ‘scar literature’ (Chinese writers working in exile), from particular class backgrounds with little claim to retrospectively represent the experience of all Chinese. In contrast to the discourse of the grand narrative, the decade 1966 to 1976 brought prosperity and significant improvements in the standard of living to the peasantry, not least by broadening access to and participation in art and the creative industries on a mass scale. Drawing upon the Foucauldian understanding of history as politically expedient, selected, subjective, ideologically rooted in *and* articulative of the present (Gao 2008 36), Gao reveals that behind the two-dimensional grand narrative - that the Cultural Revolution was a universally ‘bad thing’ - exist many diverse and often contradictory views which threaten to erode the monolithic ‘ten years of calamity’ (*shi nian haojie*) orthodoxy. The University of Westminster in its current research projects has shown that it is willing to play a key role in the development and dissemination of these new narratives. As has the British Museum in its interpretation of Maoist visual culture not as the caesura in traditional aesthetics it may first appear. Nor in representing the Cultural Revolution as an isolated aberration, but integral to an understanding of contemporary Chinese politics, society and culture.

Future Considerations

The case studies presented here have elucidated several of the issues surrounding to the collection and display of overtly political visual culture. As the V&A was to discover, the availability of the genuine artefact is limited. The authenticity of objects offered for sale, be it via online auction site, or street-side stall in China, is doubtful. That which is certifiably genuine is, thusly, vastly inflated in monetary value. Authenticity matters in the museum context; the integrity of the museum collection is a cultural given. Thus perceived doubts over the provenance of newly collected material, could quite reasonably dissuade museums from starting or adding to existing collections. As might the existence of cultural exchange programmes and contemporary political relationships; the unresolved socio-political and cultural legacy of the Cultural Revolution within China; and a lack of verifiable, contextualising documentation. One should not forget that this material is, thusly, problematic and has unique difficulties associated with it. (It may be surprising that this material is collected and displayed at all, when one imagines that it might be preferable for some curators and institutions, less than confident about how best to interpret it, to avoid it altogether.)

A related issue is ‘museumisation’. When an everyday object enters the museum space it may be dehistoricised, divorced from its original purpose and social life. Its meaning, to paraphrase Quirke (2007) is often ‘anaesthetised’. Disengagement with and disavowal of politics from the aesthetic maintains a pretence of objectivity. Thus is the case with the material artefacts of the Cultural Revolution. Their superficial, aesthetic characteristics belie the cultural meanings attached to them. Without attendant human stories a sense of their real meaning can not be recovered (indeed, it would be an error to take these objects at face value, for in truth, they lie). Thus, their importance as

records of an extraordinary period in Chinese history can quite easily be missed. Their power lies in the knowledge of their inception, creation, production and utilisation, which makes them culturally and historically valuable. The collection process is affirmatory (Clunas, personal communication, 2007). It must, therefore, be – as Dunn (1999, 35) advocates – ‘self-conscious’. The motivation for the acquisition must be recorded, justified and communicated to the audience, so that this affirmation is not misinterpreted as an endorsement of the ideology, as much as the art. Museums are bound by their modernist beginnings. Objectivity, distance, disinterestedness are constraints which implicitly construct a political position for the institution when confronted with the challenge of representing political material. The act of sterilising the object, of neutering and censoring its meaning is inherently political. The museum space is far from neutral: interpretation is ideological.

In the final assessment, why should British museums collect the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution? In China, since the *Resolution on Party History* (1981) set the party line on Mao Zedong and, by extension, the Cultural Revolution, a collective, official amnesia has hung over that decade. So why should we, in the West, care? As *Icons of Revolution* at the British Museum attempted to show, the Cultural Revolution casts a shadow upon contemporary Chinese politics, society and culture, to which the West is economically so tied: to paraphrase David Crowley,¹⁰⁹ this is *our* history too. The utilisation of objects, as media for the dissemination of knowledge, is familiar and comfortable, particularly with regards to information about China, with which the West has a centuries-old material engagement. The visual culture of the Cultural Revolution may challenge pervasive Orientalist ideas about China: a sense of ‘Chinese-ness’ which

¹⁰⁹ Crowley, David (2010), *Star City: The Futurological Congress*, 12 February, Nottingham.

reveals more about ourselves and our deeply rooted paternalistic attitudes towards art, than any reality of China in the twenty-first century. As Mobo Gao has commented upon prevailing Western attitudes towards Chinese propagandist art, ‘One might hate the context of this kind of art, one might even hate its form: but to say that there was no artistic creativity during the Cultural Revolution is to create a myth’ (Gao 2008, 28).

Finally, in returning to the intention I outlined in the introduction to this thesis – to go some small way towards facilitating inter-cultural dialogue between East and West - I am reminded of a Hong Kongese colleague’s response to my research. To paraphrase, she commented that Westerners must write about and speak of the Cultural Revolution, because ‘we’ Chinese are still unable to do so. What better justification can there be for British museums to collect, display and interpret the visual culture of the Cultural Revolution?

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