

Making the New World: The Arts of China's Cultural Revolution

Editorial

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The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Wuchan jieji wenhua da geming*), from a general understanding, was launched in 1966 by Mao Zedong for his political agenda and ended with his demise in 1976. It has been seen as a watershed, the defining period of the half-century Communist rule in China. Studies on the Cultural Revolution offer more than historical insight, and they are essential for a better understanding of China today.¹ To mark the 50th anniversary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Centre for Chinese Visual Arts (CCVA) at Birmingham City University convened a two-day international conference hosted at the Whitechapel Gallery in London. This conference, *Making the New World: The Arts of China's Cultural Revolution*, invited more than twenty contributors including researchers, curators and artists worldwide to discuss the significance of the arts and culture of the Cultural Revolution, and to reflect upon their impacts on everyday experience in China within socio-political, cultural and global contexts. On the basis of the conference contributions, this special issue has been edited through the further development of selected academic papers and conversations.²

The Cultural Revolution is an enigma.

When Mao Zedong ascended Tiananmen eight times during the summer of 1966 receiving the parade of the Red Guards, the Cultural Revolution soon reached its climax in practical expression across the country. As stated in the editorial of the *People's Daily*, 'we want to establish a new world, and must destroy the old world; we want to construct the socialist and communist new thoughts, new culture, and must criticise and eradicate the capitalist old thoughts, old culture and their influences'.³ Immediately after Mao's first inspection in Tiananmen Square on 18 August 1966, in the next morning, the Red Guards – a crowd of thousands of teenagers – rushed onto the streets to confiscate and eliminate all the 'Four Olds' (*sijiu*), by searching through temples, libraries,

¹ MacFarquhar, Roderick and Schoenhals, Michael, *Mao's Last Revolution*. London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 1.

² *Making the New World: the Arts of China's Cultural Revolution* was the 9th CCVA Annual Conference, hosted at the Whitechapel Gallery in London on 11-12 November 2016.

³ Editorial, 'Women shi Jiu shijie de pipanzhe (We Are the Critics of the Old World)', *Renmin ribao (People's Daily)*, 8 June 1966, p. 1.

bookstores, photo studios and private residences across the capital city Beijing. It became the darkest summer in the thousand-year history of Chinese culture.

The Cultural Revolution is often referred to metaphorically as a 'cultural desert' (*wenhua shamo*), and has been absent from Chinese art history, whilst most of its artistic productions are considered, indiscriminatingly, as instruments for propaganda with little artistic or cultural values. Half of a century apart, when we revisit the Cultural Revolution today, how could those outputs produced through the political campaigns be critically re-examined, and what kind of new aesthetics, ideologies and culture have been shaped through the visual, audio, performative and immersive experiences of that time? What were the relations between artists and audiences, between makers, disseminators and participants? Finally, what are the impacts of the arts of the Cultural Revolution on contemporary art, design, creative practices and visual culture within and beyond China? The Cultural Revolution has been generally seen as a *political* movement, and yet, this special edition attempts to demonstrate that it is ultimately, *cultural*.

Reposition the Cultural Revolution in the contemporary context, in fact, rather than a 'desert', the decade had arguably produced the most abundant and significant art productions in the twentieth century of China. It covered all areas of creative practices – art, design, music and performance, and its cultural productions, ranging from, for example, public sculptures to paintings (including wall and billboard paintings), with the aesthetic directions of the Soviet socialist realist style and modernised Chinese traditional ink-wash; from calligraphy to printmaking and poster art; from artefacts and ceramics to fashion and textiles; from furniture and product design to architectures, and from symphonies, musicals to the Model Operas (*yang banxi*). More importantly, the processes of these productions involved not just professionals, but also, amateurs, or in other words, the mass. In such a development, all the participants shared the same vision of the new world, of the revolutionary aesthetics and the passion for practice. In addition, the public loudspeakers, seas of big-character slogans, and people's aroused gestures and shouting demonstrated the forceful inculcation. In the political assemblies and revolutionary parades, which consisted of thousands taking place on a daily basis during the peak of the Cultural Revolution, people experienced themselves as grander than at ordinary times; they thought that they were transformed into a new world and took responsibility to liberate others from the old; they felt, and at that moment really were, assembling for Mao, and living a collective life that transports individuals beyond themselves. They conformed to certain dress codes, body movements and shapes of the matrix, visually and

spiritually, transmitting, exchanging and further accelerating their revolutionary commitment. It appeared to be the largest 'art movement' ever – original, spontaneous and singular.

The impact of the arts produced during the Cultural Revolution has been extended into contemporary everyday life in China, where a new generation of Chinese leaders have made a dramatic turn to develop a capitalist market economy under the name of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Although the party has never intended to give up its control over artistic affairs, its cultural policies have been oscillating between extremely strict and relatively relaxed depending on the political situation until recently.⁴ For example, Chinese artists began to have more 'space' to resume a 'relative' freedom in art practice, while contemporary art in China has become increasingly visible in the international arena. Conversely, in many cases, the visibility was first built on legacies of the Cultural Revolution, either dominantly or implicitly. Without this particular reference, we would have seen a completely different platform of Chinese contemporary arts practices. Today, furthermore, we see the shadow of the Cultural Revolution everywhere in Chinese daily existence, for example, its visual vocabularies and aesthetic approaches appropriated in design crafting Maoist motif; billboard propagandas to promote the new political ideas such as Harmonious Society (*Hexie shehui*) or the latest, China Dream (*Zhongguo meng*); and in broader and livelier representations, morning exercises in schools, shops and restaurants, and fashionably, the new styles of urban life, such as middle-aged women (*dama*)'s square dancing and old men's (*daye*) pavement calligraphic writing performance. Inherited from the revolutionary era, a collective excitement can be easily reminded, stimulated and, transformed by the different agendas, objectives and beliefs.

This issue includes a range of papers received from a variety of subject areas to foster new understandings of the Cultural Revolution through interdisciplinary perspectives and to develop the discussions on its cultural policy, artists and productions of paintings, posters, photography, music, the Model Opera and architecture. In addition, it also generates a series of conversations between the researchers and those who personally participated, experienced and witnessed the Cultural Revolution.

⁴ On 15 October 2014, President Xi Jinping gave a speech on the role of the arts in China at a meeting in Beijing with leading artists, propaganda officials and representatives of the armed forces, drawing parallels to that Mao Zedong's landmark talks delivered at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942. As China's most powerful leader in decades, Xi shared his vision for Chinese society under his rule, reiterated the Communist Party's lasting doctrine that the arts must serve a social purpose, and granted a set space for art and cultural productions.

When is ‘contemporary’ in the context of Chinese art? It is widely acknowledged that Chinese contemporary art started only after the death of Mao and the fall of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and consequently, the production of the two successive Star Art Exhibitions (*xingxing meizhan*) in 1979 and 1980 unsealed this new chapter of Chinese art. There probably have been two reasons of making such a clear division, but both of them are to be reconsidered. First, it seems to be too simplistic, to attribute the advent of Chinese contemporary art to the natural termination of Mao’s regime, as if contemporary art could only be produced outside totalitarianism, or as if after Mao, China is no longer autocrat. Although intellectual freedom is seen essential in developing contemporary art practice, it is not a prerequisite. On the contrary, contemporary art has its potential to grow in any circumstances, to demonstrate and lead creative and critical thinking. Second, since the Open-door policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, China began to meet the West and its world of art. This timeframe implies seemingly that contemporary art in China could be only be understood as a consequence of the Western influence, if not just a copy of the foreign. At the same time, it neglects the momentum and the plurality of contemporary art that have been evident in the different parts of the globe. China’s meeting with the world of course did not happen overnight, and yet, in fact, for example, in the late 1970s and even the 1980s, there was still a lot of oppression in China anyway with only a limited range of information and knowledge available. Contemporary art in China did not take place then either to necessarily demonstrate the ‘freedom’ or to respond the Western development, since it was already there, in forms that are rooted in Chinese culture and outside Western discourses or any analytical systems available. Through the appropriations of the iconography of Mao and the colour red, as we all know, Chinese contemporary art in the early development first raised its visibility in the 1990s international art world. But it is more important to reassess this extraordinary movement of the Cultural Revolution beyond conventional studies as the origin of Chinese contemporary art, the relationships between art and non-art, between artists (amateurs and professionals), participants and audience, between conformity and rebellions, and between art and everyday life.

This issue has been edited to offer some critical understandings of the Cultural Revolution and its arts, and in the meantime, it provides an opportunity to develop original perspectives to redefine contemporary art in China since the Cultural Revolution. We must express our gratitude to all the contributors to the conference that formed a foundation for this edition, the speakers during the two-day event, in particular, the two keynotes Richard King and Shen Jiawei; the panel chairs and the reviewers of the conference including Chris Berry, Craig Clunas, Harriet Evans, Jonathan Harris and Wu Hung; and Iwona Blazwick, Sofia Victorino and their professional team at the Whitechapel Gallery for their invitation and support.