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Conversations

Freedom, Suppression and Passion in Mao's Cultural Revolution

Shen Jiawei, Li Bin and Jiang Jiehong

Jiang It is my honour to invite both of you to revisit your memories about the artistic practices during the period of Cultural Revolution. The three of us are currently living in three different places – Sydney, Shanghai and Birmingham – of three different time zones; our conversation through email correspondence seems to be a classic one.

We may start from your experiences during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), in order to reflect on the most important cultural and visual revolution in the twentieth century of China. As important artists at the time, you had produced well-known artworks during the decade, for example, Li Bin's woodcut print, *Rebellion is Justified, Revolution Is No Crime* (*zaofa youli, geming wuzui*) at the beginning of Red Guards movement, and later, Shen Jiawei's painting *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland* (*Wei women weida de zuguo zhangang*) produced in 1974. Both of you were born in the year of 1949, and are those of the same age with the People's Republic of China (PRC). In 1966, you were only 17 years old. What did it mean to you when the revolution took place? Where did it come from and how did it arrive? At that time, nobody knew when exactly would the revolution end. How has that red revolution become a part of our everyday life, changed our perceptions, our language, our behaviours as well as our ways of thinking and those of art and knowledge production? I recall many years ago I have interviewed someone who is also exactly in your age. In his views, the Cultural Revolution was almost like a huge tide, arriving with thunders, covering the entire world, from sky to earth, nothing escapable; he did not have any choice, but to follow the excitements, to go along as the wave took him, without resistance or regrets. His name is Li Xianting.

Today is a good day, as our conversation starts on the Christmas Eve.[1] Responding to the topic of this issue, let's see how we can build a 'new world' together.

[1] This conversation between Shen Jiawei, Li Bin and Jiang Jiehong was conducted between 24 December 2016 and 8 February 2017 through the email correspondence, which developed first in Chinese and then edited and translated into English by the editors.

Shen Is the Cultural Revolution 'the most important cultural and visual revolution in the twentieth century of China', as you describe? If we define 'revolution' as 'demolishment' and 'subversion', then it certainly is. If we define 'revolution' as 'innovation', however, it certainly is not, and we must leave this credit and status to the modernist revolution originated in Russia and Europe. Apart from the obvious differences in the results, their motivations were all the more dissimilar. The latter was spontaneously initiated and operated by a group of artists with total freedom; whereas the artists and non-artists who participated in China's Cultural Revolution were not at all free – they were only dancing on the 'Gautama Buddha's palm'[2]. In E. H. Grombrich's view, 'there is not such a thing as art, but only artists'[3]. The Cultural Revolution brought about a brand new world to the people regarding the cultural and visual spheres. In 1966, out of certain political agendas, Mao destroyed the political system he established himself, using his wife, a former actress, to lead a small group in charge of the entire cultural and artistic scene within the country, to replace what we had before with an even more brutally controlling system.

Within the art world, the first generation of established artists of the PRC were demoted by the government as 'artists from the old society'. The second generation who received training from the Soviet Union were all sent to the 'bullpen' (*niupeng*). Therefore, we as the third generation of artists who were only beginners in art practice were all of a sudden ordered to enter the stage prematurely. According to the ideology at that time, many non-artists from the workers-peasants-soldiers participated in creative sphere, working in the name of art, while de facto in service of propaganda. In a word, the existence of the so-called Cultural Revolution new art was due to the fact that, in Chinese saying, 'there is no tiger in the mountain so monkey can claim itself to be the king'. Mao used to say: 'on a piece of blank paper, you can paint the newest and the most beautiful picture'. This metaphor is most accurate applying here in our discussion.

For me, the emergence of the Cultural Revolution was not out of nowhere: it began as the Socialist Education (*shejiao*) Working Group moved into the high school I was attending in 1964. There were three blows in a row. First of all, when the Working Group was replaced by the children of workers and peasants (*gongnong zidi*) instead of the Communist Youth League (CYL), which was not exclusively class status-oriented, I suddenly realised that I belonged to the league of second-rate citizens. Secondly, all libraries were closed permanently in 1965 (in the meantime, a large amount of foreign literatures were swept away in bookstores). Thirdly, in June 1966, I was preparing to take the Entrance Examination (*gaokao*) for art colleges, while the universities were shut down. Born in 1949, I was the elite

[2] According to the 16th century Chinese classical novel, *Journey to the West*, the powerful creature Monkey King cannot escape Buddha's palm, and here, metaphorically, Red Guard artists were under the full control of Mao.
[3] See Gombrich, E. H., *The Story of Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1995, p. 15.

student trained in the isolated ideological education of CCP, 'listening to Chairman Mao's words, and following the CCP'. Way before the abolishment of the College Entrance Examination, I was ready to go to the countryside (*xiaxiang*) and become a peasant; I even drew a self-portrait depicting myself playing a slide show for the peasants. Few years later, that scenario came true. Therefore, on 18 August 1966, when I heard about Chairman Mao meeting the Red Guards from the evening news, I immediately organised a Red Guard team with my classmates to start our career of the Cultural Revolution.

Jiang You first questioned 'the most important cultural and visual revolution in the twentieth century', shared your view about the 'art revolution', and pointed out that 'freedom' should be the core of artistic practice. I completely understand what you discussed, whilst I am trying to set up a contemporary context to re-examine the visual phenomenon in the era of Cultural Revolution. In such a context, we can overturn and re-interpret some existing understandings and concepts, for instance, can 'unfree' or restricted practice, or more specifically, a kind of collective production through conformed practice, still be seen an artistic? In such a process of development, the differences of technical skills between artists and amateurs perhaps were no longer important, they share the same vision of revolutionary aesthetics as well as the passion for visual practice. 17 years of closed ideological education of CCP seemed to make the Chinese society a water pipe bloated to an extreme, that even a tiny bit exit can make the water fiercely gush out. Mao poked a hole on this pipe. The whole society was therefore like an unbridled free mustang, running freely, passionately and hysterically, towards a defined direction.

You said that way before the abolishment of the College Entrance Examination you were already prepared to be a peasant in the countryside. Why? What was it like when you watched the evening news on 18 August 1966? What was your dream in art at that time? And how did it conform to your social obligations?

Shen We can follow your questions and clarify a few historical facts. 'Up to the Mountains and Down to the Villages' (*shangshan xiaxiang*) movement was launched as early as 1964, aiming mainly at those high school graduates who failed to enter universities. We had to 'have one loyal heart, while prepare for two eventualities' (*yike hongxin, liangzhong zhunbei*), and we meant it. At that time there was no television, only radio broadcasting; there were a lot of photos published on the next day's newspapers. After the broadcast in the evening of 18

August 1966, a gang of schoolmates rushed to town and knocked the cloth store's door open to buy red cloth to make red flags and armbands. In the next 12 days, the Red Guards in our school were the only senior high school students in town, thus became the picket to hold down those junior high students' radical actions of searching people's houses and confiscate their personal properties. I was head of propaganda of student union, I had the appeal to call for action to a certain extent. I hadn't taken my first lesson of the Cultural Revolution until 30 August, when two Red Guards from Beijing arrived and convened the children of workers and peasants, while using wood clubs to block us non-'red five categories' (*hong wulei*) outside the venue. Since then, I became the pseudo-object of the Cultural Revolution instead, until that December I escaped from the supervised labour camp and became the backbone of the rebels. Before Deng Xiaoping endowing completely different implications to the 'rebels' after 10 years, the label had referred to the new organisations composed of those who were persecuted by the 'anti-capitalist route (including the Bloodline Theory)' and strived to fight back at that time.

Back then I yearned to study oil painting, especially to paint those revolutionary history paintings, with examples like Soviet oil paintings that could only be seen from illustrated magazines and the important works already emerged in the early 1960s in China, for example, He Kongde's *Before the Attack* (*chuji zhiqian*), Hou Yimin's *Liu Shaoqi and the Anyuan Miners* (*Liu Shaoqi he Anyuan kuanggong*), Luo Gongliu's *Chairman Mao on Jinggang Mountain* (*Mao zhuxi zai jinggangshan shang*), Zhong Han's *By River Yan* (*Yanhe bianshang*), Du Jian's *In the Turbulence of Yellow River* (*Zai huanghe jiliu zhong*), and etc. Through practice, my interest in art and the revolutionary ideals matched perfectly.

Li In 1966, the Cultural Revolution began; to me, it seemed not to be out of nowhere.

As early as 1957, my father became a rightist. In 1959, I realised that it was due to father's rightist problem that I couldn't become the Captain of the Young Pioneers; my father in the family became my 'enemy'. Back then I really hated my father; I yelled at him, 'you are against CCP so that I can't be the Captain!' My sister was also yelling by my side, 'you are against CCP so that I can't enter CYL!' Graduated from Saint John's University in Shanghai in 1943, my father was working in the Shanghai textile system; he was stigmatised as rightist because he was at odds with the financial officer and was exiled to the suburb of Shanghai to 'reform through labour' (*laodong gaizao*) while keeping his position under scrutinisation; he could only come back home once in a while. In 1966, my father's 'rightist cap' was removed, and I became the Deputy Captain right away; I thanked Chairman Mao-CCP's 'class-line'

(*jieji luxian*) wholeheartedly. Having been receiving the education of revolutionary heroism since my childhood, I regretted that I hadn't had the opportunity to be part of the anti-Japanese war and the War of Liberation (the Chinese Civil War); I felt that I was born in the wrong time and couldn't achieve anything.

I was incredibly thrilled when Mao Zedong met the Red Guards on 18 August 1966 – I can finally achieve something grand! I put on my self-made Red Guard armband, but only for a few hours before the 'red five categories' classmates made me take it off with their cold gaze. Few days later, the Red Guards from the Beijing Advancing South Group posted couplets (*duilian*) all over Shanghai, 'if the father is a [revolutionary] hero, the son is also a hero; if the father is a reactionary, the son is a bastard' (*laozi yingxiong er haohan, laozi fandong er hundan*). I reckoned myself as a 'bastard' and couldn't be a Red Guard, holding grudges that I was not qualified to raid other's houses. I followed the orders of my big sister from Beijing Normal University and destroyed the 'Four Olds' (*sijiu*) at my own home. I even suggested to pick out the landlords and those who are anti-CCP, rightist, and with bad status in my neighbourhood to shame parade. But as soon as someone mentioned my own father I felt ashamed to death. In mid September, I hopped on the train to Beijing by way of Nanjing. A relative warned me, 'the Red Guards at Beijing railway station are waiting for you with leather belt in hand!' I was so frightened that I went back to Shanghai. Until the end of November, I went to Beijing again. Standing amid the last procession of Red Guards received by Mao, I burst into tears and looked up. It was too distant that all I could see was Mao's red face and Lin Biao's white face.

Afterwards, the Red Guards split into Rebels and Conservatives: the rebels were against the bloodline theory. I naturally became the Rebels Red Guard, even organised a 'Steel Knife' (*Gangdao*) Combat Group focusing on printmaking. An evening in September, I drew figures with ink on a full size plywood, rapidly carved with woodcut knife, rolled it over with black printing ink, and then laid a full size red paper over it, at last removed the paper after rubbing. *Rebellion Is Justified* (*Zaofan youli*) was freshly made. Next day noon, a few dozens *Rebellion Is Justified* were spread out the classroom; quite a few were posted on the roads and streets nearby the school. A dozen days later, a white-beard old man came to our classroom, introduced himself with heavy Beijing accent, 'I am from China Art Research Institute to collect young Red Guards' artworks. Could I have a copy of this work of yours?' I was very excited, chose a most nicely printed copy, wrapped it up and handed to him. Surprisingly, my work *Rebellion Is Justified* was published on the back cover of the April 1967 issue of *China Pictorial*; it must be the old man's endeavour and recommendation.

Jiang It seems that for two of you, 1966 was an expected start of the revolution. After briefly introducing some political background, should we shift our focus of discussion to visual production? You have mentioned two very interesting directions of your practices: namely, realistic oil painting, which was initiated from Europe, filtered through the Soviet revolution, and finally formed in China as Mao's revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism; and the other, woodcut print, which can be traced back to the early twentieth century's woodcut movement advocated by Lu Xun and others, and the tradition of European expressionism, such as Käthe Kollwitz. In terms of these two strikingly different creative paths, did you both intervene in one way or another? Or did you prefer realistic oil paintings, which could be more challenging in terms of professional techniques? However, in the process of revolutionary propaganda, the practicality of disseminating the work may be as much important as creative practice. Woodcut prints surely have more advantage of convenience when it comes to reproduction, if so, how did oil painting achieve the effective impact? Through exhibitions? What's the difference between the exhibitions back then and now? They could be different in regards to the scale, audience's engagement, as well as the continuing influences afterwards. It reminds me of a recent criticism to the contemporary art exhibition openings in China, as 'nothing more than a venue where a gang of insiders can compliment each other, chitchat, take photos, post online, and leave their footprints.' If so, who would come to see the artworks and attend those exhibitions at that time? Why did they see it? How did they see it? And what did they bring back to their lives eventually?

Shen At that time many people used the form of woodcut printing to copy the profile of Mao wearing military uniform popularly appeared on newspaper, and to post everywhere. It was different to the time before the Cultural Revolution, when individuals or community were prohibited to post politics-related printing materials in China. At the same time, the rapid development of oil painting techniques was entirely caused by the need of the Cultural Revolution, i.e., the personal cult of Mao. Different levels of government administration competed to express their loyalty, erecting walls in front of their offices one after another, to create spaces inviting talented young artists or art lovers to paint huge portraits of Mao. In order to survive outdoor condition, oil paint is required. At that time, we can only paint with watercolour and gouache; there were too few kinds of industrial paint for painting, whilst acrylic only emerged in China 15 years later. After finishing every single Mao's portrait, the residual paint could then be left to the portraitist, who thereby would have enough to do a lot of further practice. This was unimaginable before the Cultural Revolution, when the average monthly salary can only afford some twenty tubes of oil paint.

The realism in Western painting had always been well received by common folks, and was taking overwhelming advantages immediately at the time. For example, the then young teacher Fang Zengxian in Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Art) who was specialised in traditional Chinese figurative painting, had to adapt to using oil paint depicting Mao and the Anyuan miners. The so-called taste of worker-peasant-soldier required that the faces of Mao, workers, peasants, and soldiers must be sanguine. Also strongly promoted by the stage make-up of model operas, it was later labelled as 'red, bright, light' (*hong guang liang*). Of course, woodcut printing was popular at the same time. In the years of 1966 and 1967, political combat was fierce, therefore the corresponding means of propaganda was a large amount of newly built sheds of wall papers for great criticism (*dapipan*) forum, most of which were set along the streets in downtown for the masses from different units to organise and publish big-character posters (*dazibao*) daily, with illustrations, all hand-drawn, some imitating the woodcut style. The permanent image was surely the huge portrait of Mao.

From 1968 to 1970, Revolutionary Committees were set up in provinces and cities; the society was settled down a bit, and began to use organisational forms to express the cult of Mao. In practice, for example, they built Victory and Long Live Mao Zedong Thoughts Memorial Mall in provincial capital cities, and in the meantime, organise professional and semi-professional painters to create revolutionary history paintings. Apart from the numerous exhibitions, oil paintings were disseminated mainly through printing materials in the forms of the New Year pictures and propaganda posters. The number of printed copies of my work *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland* as poster alone was over 500,000. It was also published on all the national papers and periodicals as well, the number of prints of which was millions, even tens of million. So as soon as the work was recognised and welcomed by the authority, it would become well-known immediately nationwide.

Li I joined the art unit of the Youth Palace in Yangpu district when I was a primary school student in my fifth year. Mr. Chen Zhiming taught us woodcut. It was kind of wonder that I was beginning to think about human body- or politics-related creation even then. I loved to go to the swimming pool to observe human bodies. I haven't seen winter swimming with my own eyes, but according to propaganda winter swimming looks even more heroic; therefore I created a woodcut print *Winter Swimming* (*Dongyong*). I didn't like sports, but I would stop when seeing the bodily movement on the ground, so I created *Playing Ball for the Revolution* (*Wei geming daqiu*), especially illustrating the slogan. Similarly, there is a board of quotations from Chairman Mao in my work *Morning Exercise* (*Chenlian*) saying, 'with determination

and no fear for sacrifice, exterminating all difficulties, strive for victory.' My later practices are all political propaganda related. During the Cultural Revolution I used to paint Chairman Mao's portrait with oil paint, but woodcut printing was convenient, and more popularly used most of the time.

After the 'January Revolution', because the Headquarter of the Northeast Shanghai Maoist Red Guards I joined was one of the 32 famous revolutionary rebellion organisations, we can print propaganda pictures in any printing house for free. I began to produce 'fake woodcut' prints: first draw ink sketch on paper, and then use white gouache to finalised the edges, imitating the visual effect of woodcut. As soon as they arrived the printing house, hundreds and hundreds of copies would be printed, and delivered to streets by three-wheeled trailers and posted on the walls at both sides of the streets.

In July 1967, I became the art editor and press photographer for the official paper of Shanghai Red Guards Congress, *Red Guards War Paper* (*Hongwei zhanbao*). I continued to use the form of 'fake woodcut' to produce quite a few mastheads and illustrations, the contents of which were all 'Long live Chairman Mao! Health Forever to Comrade Lin Biao! Protect Comrade Jiang Qing at All Cost!' On 11 August 1968, I left Shanghai to the Production and Construction Corps in Heilongjiang. The Corps was part of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's military region of Shenyang, and I was one of the 'educable children', but in fact, due to my political background I shouldn't be qualified according to the recruitment standards. When I presented a bunch of woodcut works extolling our leaders and criticising our enemies as well as our *Red Guards War Paper*, the head of recruitment didn't hesitate a bit and took me in right on the spot.

Afterwards, I made a 'fake woodcut' propaganda poster, *Seeing off Shanghai Intellectuals to Heilongjiang for Revolution* (*Huansong Shanghai zhishi qingnian fu helongjiang nao geming*); it was printed hundreds of copies and posted everywhere. Wearing green military uniform with big red flower, we took bus from school to Shanghai North Train Station while the crowd of citizens welcoming us on the street. My poster could be seen all the way. Arrived in Harbin, went north to Mishan, then took automobile and tractor to the company. Being there, I'd barely done any farm work, but was busy with writing slogans, painting Chairman Mao's portraits, and composing blackboard newspapers. In the March next year, China and Soviet Union went to war over Zhenbao Island, I was recruited to build the national defence highroad at the China-Soviet border in May. I drew quite a few sketches, which were published on *Liberation Daily* in Shanghai. Later, the art editor Mr. Hong Guangwen wrote me a seven-page long letter, encouraging me not to draw 'quickies' only, but to make a real

effort to make good works. I joined the art workshop organised by the corps in Kiamusze later, and seriously created a piece of chromatographic wood print *Picking up Little Brother* (*Jie didi*) that I am still satisfied with today. It was selected to the National Art Exhibition, for me as the first time. In 1974, during the period of 'Criticise Lin, Criticise Confucius' movement, I produced my last woodcut work *Red Guards in Those Years* (*Dangnian de hongweibing*).

Jiang You both mentioned some very important points here. First of all, the process of the artistic production. In the productive development at the time, due to the scarcity of materials (painting materials like paints) the massive scale of propaganda became the new resource for practitioners to use the remnants of abundant propaganda to fulfil one's own creative needs. In other words, such top-down political assignments thus were transformed to the bottom-up spontaneous production environment. Second, the form of the artistic products. No matter it was the realistic, using 'red, bright, light' as an important criteria other than the traditional techniques, or woodcut style – be it the real one using carving techniques or the hand-drawn fake one. Looking more deeply, there may have been an overall 'form' in control, which all characters depicted in artworks including their appearances, expressions, postures and personalities conform to, and which is established as an architecture for new aesthetic experience in all other areas of arts of the Cultural Revolution, such as Model Opera and film. Third, the dissemination of the artistic products. Not only was there newly emergent official space for exhibitions, such as Long Live Mao Zedong Thoughts Memorial Halls, but also those specially set temporary walls by different working units and organisations and numerous sheds of criticism forum in the cities, which continually extended and maximised the displaying area. Therefore, after the production of oil paintings, the exhibitions in different locations as well as the posting of woodcut and hand-drawn works in public space made the political messages ubiquitous. In the meantime, there was the indispensable process of reproduction during the dissemination, that is, copied, printed and published in the forms of New Year pictures, pictorial posters, or newspapers, the massive number of which could compete with any advertisements of mega commercial brands today. Interestingly, in all these means of propagation, the direction of political winds changed constantly; everything seemed to be provisional, while the only one visual image remained permanent, that of one single person, Mao.

Shen In the pre-Cultural Revolution period of 1960s, the lecturer at Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts Zhao Yannian was the widely acknowledged successor of Yan'an woodcut style; however, he

was sent to the 'bullpen' on the eve of the Cultural Revolution. In the summer of 1969, the peasant artist Xu Feng and I finished the oil painting *Chairman Mao at the South Lake* (*Mao zhuxi zai nanhu*) at Zhejiang Academy. The revolutionary committee at the Academy sent a pedicab, with an 'ox monster and snake demon' (*niugui sheshen*) riding, delivering the work to the train station. I saw the person's badge and was shocked by the three characters 'Zhao Yan Nian'. I dared not to express anything, but only to watch him from afar with reverence.

Jiang I once interviewed two senior professors, one of which was Zhao Yannian. He showed me a series of woodcuts named *Nightmare* (*E'meng*) he made in 1989 on the theme of Cultural Revolution. All I could remember in the print was a human head held by others forcibly but would not bend down. The other one was Yan Han. He couldn't bear to look back at all; at the end, it was his grandson who gave me a small print in a bookplate form depicting what he looked like when criticised and denounced publicly with a big board hanging on his neck. I interviewed many people, who experienced the Cultural Revolution. I think for those who were born in 1920s and 30s, it was a nightmare; for those born in 1950s and 60s, it seemed to be a carnival; while for those later generation, born in 1970s and 80s, it becomes a legend, or perhaps nothing for the post-90s. Of course it was only my partial and general observation.

We discussed earlier the revolutionary nature of the visual and cultural production during the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps, this particular 'revolutionariness' can be defined from four different aspects: 1) the original motivation of subversion and rebel, 2) the newly established aesthetic system, 3) the art production and consumption through the unprecedented mass participations, and 4) the impact on the society of contemporary China.

Shen Regarding the different generations' perceptions of the Cultural Revolution, I noticed that you left out a blank for my generation of PRC, who were born in 1940s and 50s. My personal feelings and experiences, in your words, could be half 'nightmare', half 'carnival'. Since the political status of my family was office staff, neither 'red' nor 'black', and I had always been cautious and careful, plus a bit of luck, basically, I didn't encounter any major problems during the Cultural Revolution. Although my 'nightmare' was a relatively easy one, in the age of strong desire for knowledge and yearning for study, I was deprived of the opportunity of going to college; the libraries were closed down, only Mao's works were sold in the bookstores. To me, it was spiritually painful. At that time, almost every week, I would have a dream of wandering in a bookstore. Every time in my dream, as soon as I picked up a huge

pile of books I was going to buy from the shelves, I woke up right away, feeling extremely lost. After it repeated for a few years, I knew even when I was in the dream that I would not be able to take these books away.

I completely agree that the Cultural Revolution has the intention to 'establish a brand new aesthetic system', only I feel extremely disgusted about it. In fact if we broaden our horizon, at the very beginning when CCP established a government, it began the establishment of a brand new aesthetic system guided by the Mao's *Yan'an Talk on Literature and Art*. The decade of the Cultural Revolution went to an extreme, severing the umbilical cord with the Soviet art and forming the Jiangqing plus worker-peasant-soldier mode of aesthetic system. To my personal practical experience, I always had to make the balance between four mutually related yet mutually conflicted even opposed aesthetic experiences, namely, the 'red bright light' fashion of worker-peasant-soldier, the 'lofty noble perfect' (*gao da quan*) style of the Model Opera, the revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism developed during the 17 years of PRC before the Cultural Revolution and the Soviet art model. The balance was achieved in my work *Standing Guard*. The last two aesthetic ideas actually withered during the Cultural Revolution; I brought them back in the name of 'art originated from life', following the highest instruction [from Mao].

In terms of the unprecedented public engagement you mentioned in the process of artistic production and consumption in the Cultural Revolution, we can analyse it from the following perspectives. First, it was not a new thing as it could also relate to the policy established by the *Yan'an Talk* that literature and art must serve the purpose of politics. Second, in the 17 years of PRC before the Cultural Revolution, art workers, including us art 'preppies', already internalised such pursuits in our blood. When the Red Guards movement changed the rule of the game, breaking the constraint of the leadership by traditional party organisations, we were only more passionate and willing to open our artistic activities to the public. Third, the unprecedented public engagement achieved during the Cultural Revolution had its negative consequences – it isolated the artists and the public to the weird circuit of cult for Mao to an extreme that they couldn't even help themselves. At the same time, there were also its unintended and unexpected positive consequences, that is, the popularisation of the oil painting techniques and the strong subversive psychology aroused in a fraction of young people by the extreme expansion of the culture of personal cult, which laid the ground on the levels of both ideology and technique paving the road for the 'Scar Art' (*Shanghen meishu*) starting from 1978.

The influence of the Cultural Revolution art still can't be underestimated even today. Except, in my view, the only positive influence of the popularisation of oil painting, its ghost of personal cult would grasp any opportunity to float in the official art works, which also include performance, cinema and television, in addition to fine art. In today's art world, Wang Guangyi, who appropriated the woodcut image of worker-peasant-soldier, makes jokes about the Cultural Revolution. Or, eventually, people sing *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman* (*Dahai hangxing kao duoshou*) in the Great Hall of the People with high spirit, and bring the loyalty dance back to the squares of the 21st century…

Jiang Both of you are of the same age with PRC and experienced the Cultural Revolution in your youthful age. You evolved from art lovers to professional artists by way of self-study, and had your own visual sensitivities and aesthetic judgements. According to your memories, what did the visual climax of 'red sea' (*hong haiyang*) look like? Now we surely have a lot of historical pictures of the Cultural Revolution, quite a few of which are wonderful colour pictures, for example, by Weng Naiqiang. And yet, what was the 'red sea' like? One of the reasons for me to ask this question may be that after all, most of the photos at that time were in black and white; the other is that even if colour film was available, they were precious and therefore not be used to shoot the 'normal' street scene of everyday life? As someone with adept painting skills, you perhaps would disdain those behaviours of painting and brushing the whole streets' walls red. But what kind of phenomena was it like at that time? I still remember from my childhood memory that the people's outfits were extremely monotonous: navy blue, grey or military green? They were lit up again and again by the red armbands, badges, and slogans. Do you have any memory and reflections on about such a visual milieu?

Shen The phrase of 'red sea' emerged in 1968, mainly referring to the public space covered by the colour red. While in reality, such mania was confined by the material supplies. A rather popular form was that large amount of red slogans posted on the outer walls and workshops of every unit, and also permeated into every household in the countryside. With red as base, upon which written a huge character of '*zhong*' (lit. loyalty), this form of images could been seen everywhere. Since 1966, Mao badges became bigger and bigger, and the most popular diameter of which was about 10 centimetres. Under such atmosphere, people voluntarily promoted the rituals of 'asking instructions in the morning and reporting back at night' (*zao qingshi, wan huibao*), 'loyalty dance' (*zhongzi wu*) and etc. And yet, luckily, artists like us just needed to paint Mao's portraits without attending these activities.

Red became the primary colour responding to the traditional Chinese festive atmosphere, in addition to the trumpets and drums, both Chinese and Western ones, celebrating the announcements of the highest instructions that vibrated the air every other day. I was of course no exception to the custom to be excited all day long. The colours of the outfits were just like what you remembered, only that the green military uniform were not popularised in the army until 1970s; the military uniform in 1960s were more yellowish khaki, the colour of which would fade away after being washed for only a few times. But we were all proud of being able to wear the old uniforms asked from the officials of the local propaganda team; they looked cool when being washed to white, a bit ragged; it would be even better if there was some trace of the military rank abolished in 1965 on the shoulder, i.e. the cloth ring used to fixate the epaulet.

Jiang Would Mr. Li share some visual memories as well about the 'red sea'? Could you, as the first hand witnesses of the Cultural Revolution, especially the producers and transmitters of the said 'red', offer some further thoughts? I wrote some time ago about the colour red in the Cultural Revolution. First, it is not a physical red, but an ideological and spiritual one; second, it is a dynamic red, moveable, rather than a fixed, static one; and after all, consequently, it is not a *colour*, but precisely, an *action*.

Li The visual form of the 'red sea' was interesting: at first it was usually red background with black characters on top, but this form soon disappeared. Like the earliest armband wore by Zhou Enlai, or the one that the Red Guard Song Binbin put on Mao Zedong's arm on 18 August were both with red cloth and black characters. But in all the photos published later the they were all altered with yellow characters, since then accordingly, all the Red Guards armbands appeared uniformly as red background and yellow characters. Similarly, the huge slogans extolling Mao Zedong on the streets in cities and countryside as well as in factories and schools were all in red background and white characters, or red characters on white papers; we could barely see any red background with black characters. I think there was a reason for it. Black ink of calligraphy on red paper was a traditional visual form celebrating Chinese festivals, this change perhaps was deliberately designed during the Cultural Revolution to avoid confusing with the past; or could it be a 'break' away from the old tradition?

Shen As an individual, I recalled myself as being in a special position during the years. On the one hand, I thought of myself as a sincere proletariat revolutionary soldier; the colour red was my colour, and I was proud of it; On the other hand, as a pragmatist who read a lot of books, had some common senses, and was not that crazy (for sure when looking back today it was not much of a difference), I was aloof and sceptic to the popular activities of the 'mango affair', 'Mao badge mania', 'loyalty dance', 'red sea', 'asking instructions in the morning and reporting back at night', and etc., and would make sarcastic remarks within a small group of trusted friends. Such attitude was fairly common in the communities of young intellectuals; we thought highly of ourselves, and were opposed to the revolutionary 'workers-peasants-soldiers' who blindly conformed to the idea. One of the positive results was the birth of *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland*. I indeed intended to create the true revolutionary painting in order to distinguish from (not oppose to) the 'red bright light' style of 'worker-peasant-soldier' art at that time.

Meanwhile, I was striving to believe what Mao said that the 'worker-peasant-soldier' was the greatest, and I myself was one of the insignificant bourgeoisies who needed reform. Therefore, when dealing with the ordinary labouring masses, we sincerely mingled with them in everyday life; it was the same for Li Bin in this respect. Both of us were very unfashionable (*tu*) in terms of dressing and behaviours, and we don't change much even today. The consciousness of being the 'revolutionary nobleman' was only latent in the deep of our spirit. During the Cultural Revolution, many artworks produced by the like of us 'revolutionary (spiritual) nobleman' were also directly serving Mao's Cultural Revolution movements in terms of the overall situation, and adding fuel to the flames for his personal cult.

All of the art workers in China at that time were 'red', or thought of themselves as 'red'; once someone was criticised by the authority as 'black artist', he must feel extremely humiliated and defended himself as having a red heart fully devoted to the party, which was usually indeed the case. It was a huge achievement of Mao's ideological reform accomplished through the 30 years from the Yan'an Rectification Movement to the Cultural Revolution; the awe and fear induced by the Confucius self-reflection and the traditional loyalty to one's master squeezed the authentic humanity to the bottom of spirit, many of which were distorted forever and haven't been able to recovered even till today. The red art of the Cultural Revolution was created by such human beings and infused to the mind of the proletariat masses.

Jiang First of all, I think Mr. Shen's experience of the red is very important, as it was advanced and worth being proud of, and yet, at the same time, backward and foolish. In fact, the red you discussed here was more a conceptual one, the red as a correct direction according to the political agenda, an absolute category, a verdict on one's ideology and belief.

Using the example of the red armband, Mr. Li discussed the metaphor of the colour red in details. The form of red paper and yellow characters was a visual statement to break away from the Chinese traditional festive form of red paper and black (ink) characters. In addition, could there be two other potential possibilities? On the one hand, the colour red always played a positive role in the whole visual movement, as opposed to the colour black. Such information could be obtained from many wall posters visually: for example, Mao (his image and words) was always presented in red whilst his antagonists (their names and crimes) were always denounced with black. Therefore, it would be clearer to signify its referent by removing the colour black from the red armband. On the other hand, Mao was always symbolically praised as the red sun, while the colour yellow (or gold) seemingly was applied as the colour of the sun's radiance? Due to these two reasons, it made the whole design brightly 'correct', while visually echoing the red sun. If this is the case, then the writings in yellow are not only literary, but more importantly, they are visual, representing the sunlight, the source of life breeding people's spiritual life.

Apart from our reflections on the experience of the Cultural Revolution in those years, I would like to ask you both to talk about the impact of the Cultural Revolution on contemporary China. Its influence on Chinese contemporary art doesn't need any more elaboration. Many years ago, I discussed Chinese contemporary art in this aspect.[4] In your views, apart from art, in the more general cultural context, what does the Cultural Revolution have left for us today?

Shen I used to think the Cultural Revolution mindset would have faded out after 50 years, however, once people smell the left-turning signal from the top, they can pick up the leftist club immediately. The generation may be younger, the way of being leftist may vary a bit, but their foolishness remains the same. Last year China People's Revolution Military Museum invited me to create a historical painting *Conference at Lianghekou*. I painted it according to the historical facts and delivered it for review; the leading cadre demanded to 'polish a little more on the image of Mao'. My colleague at the Military Museum felt for me and told me

[4] See for example, *The Revolution Continues: New Art from China*. London: the Saatchi Gallery and Jonathan Cape, 2008.

what he encountered similarly. He once did a historical painting with Mao's image for a museum in Nanchang; even if he completely followed loyally Mao's photos without any changes, the painting could not be passed by the local authority after three times. At last the cadre provided a model photograph for him to copy – ironically, it was not even actual Mao, but the Mao played by the movie star Tang Guoqiang.

At another time, I stood in front of my own painting in the gallery of the military museum, a military official of age thirty or so passed by in a rush and uttered briefly, 'this Chairman Mao doesn't look like the real one,' and then he added, 'the author must have some problems!' before he left. In fact, the image of Mao I painted was not only very lifelike, but also, it was beautified a little in order to pass the censorship. Why do people (it seems to be quite a few of them) still feel unsatisfied? It shows that Mao's image as saint is deeply rooted. Mao in people's memories is the one reinterpreted during the Cultural Revolution according to the 'red bright light' model. Most of the Chinese people are still living in this aesthetic framework shaped in the Cultural Revolution, unconsciously and helplessly.

Jiang There has been such a 'stereotype' of the image of leader shaped in people's mind, through the perception and understanding of the appearance of Mao in the official propaganda. Mao has been represented more 'realistically' in photographs (often manipulated even in those pre-digital era) in newspapers and pictorials, and portrayed through illustrated posters and wall paintings and indeed performed in movies and television even today. These representations, in various visual forms and with whatever media, have developed an idealised identity of the Chairman, the only 'legitimatised' reference that people conformed with to imagine and re-imagine the leader of the nation. Any rare, unofficial, unfamiliar pictures, no matter if they are genuine of the subject, would be seen alienated, or even as a treat, to such a conformity, and therefore considered 'illegal', to be obliterated.

Li In these years, we can still often see restaurants and hotels designed with the theme of the Red Era, and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution in movies and TV shows, and even more terrifying, on some popular social media such as WeChat. For example, recently, in a county of Hunan, there were several crime suspects being publicly detained, arrested, and put to shame parade standing in the patrol wagon with a board hung on their necks. Another example, a court in Sichuan pronounced judgement in public, while the defendant were observed by the participating public on a makeshift platform in the residence district.

Shen In fact, the Cultural Revolution shaped or reshaped the soul of several generations, which was Mao's unequivocal purpose and he was quite successful in this respect. However, it was not as positive as the way it promoted, but quite the contrary. Humanity is born with two sides: altruism and egoism. Mao downright exploited the altruistic part in the humanity of Chinese people to serve his political purposes. When people realised they were ripped off, it was about time for egoism to have its way. People could not be cheated over and over again in their lives, so in the late Cultural Revolution, everybody was used to telling lies when it came to political issues or even in everyday life, dealing with the world in double personalities, which continues till now and is the root of the total corruption within the party and beyond.

Jiang Let's imagine that 50 years ago, this very same day, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing. That was an age full of suppression and subversion, while a strange kind of freedom was born and grown at the same. You devoted all your passion, for your youth and ideal.