

## Final Paper: Art Museums in Maoist China

In the first half of the twentieth century, China was ravaged by wars and rarely had a stable or powerful central government. In 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) led by Mao Zedong took power and quickly consolidated its rule over China. The CCP sought to radically transform almost all aspects of life and art and art museums were no exception. The CCP sought to reshape art and art museums according to their revolutionary political ideas. According to these principles, museums such as the Museum of the Chinese Revolution were effectively overseen by the CCP's propaganda department and there was little room for independent art. The Cultural Revolution furthered these trends when many priceless artifacts were destroyed by paramilitary Red Guards who associated the artifacts with traditional Confucian ways of thinking. The Cultural Revolution also inflicted incredible suffering on many individuals and families who were often groundlessly fingered as being counterrevolutionary. However, somewhat surprisingly institutions such as the Shanghai Museum cooperated with Red Guards to enrich their collections. The CCP also extensively utilized art-historical expertise during this time to export art for foreign exchange.

This paper will begin with a historical overview of the period as the political context had an important effects on Chinese art during this period. We will then discuss

the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and its founding in 1960 as one of the major case studies in this paper. The Shanghai Museum which opened in 1952 is the other major case study. These cases illustrate that while politics generally dominated art during this period of Chinese history; art and art museums managed to avoid complete domination and in some respects art-historical expertise became more important. This complexity problematizes the conventional narrative that Maoist China and particularly the Cultural Revolution were a terrible time for art which while accurate in many respects does not fully capture the subtleties of the period. These subtleties would become very important later on in the case of the Shanghai Museum where the curatorial expertise gained during this period placed a crucial role in the museum after 1976.

The CCP was founded in 1921 and in its early years allied with the Nationalists in fighting warlords. Yet in 1927 Chiang Kai-shek turned on the CCP which was driven out of the coastal urban centers where its support had originated. By the mid-1930s the Communists were on the run and the Nationalists had consolidated power. The Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937 at which point the CCP and Nationalists nominally formed an alliance against the Japanese. In reality, the Communists began to take territory from the Nationalists government which was forced to move its capital inland to Chongqing as Japan conquered the coastal cities. After Japan's defeat in 1945 the Chinese Civil War resumed in full force. In 1949, the Nationalists were forced to retreat to Taiwan and the People's Republic of China was founded.

The early 1950s were a time of dramatic social change in China with land reform and Communist control transforming the economy. The economy grew at a relatively

rapid pace which led Mao to order the Great Leap Forward in 1958. The Great Leap Forward turned out to be an unmitigated disaster with tens of millions starving between 1958 and 1961. Relations with the Soviet Union also worsened during this period. After the failed experiment of the Great Leap Forward life normalized somewhat in the mid-1960s until the Cultural Revolution began in 1966. The Cultural Revolution attempted to eradicate traditional influences on society which led to harassment of former land owners and destruction of many traditional artifacts. After Mao's death in 1976 the CCP became more moderate under Deng Xiaoping and independent art developed to a much greater extent.

The CCP was from its early years very aware of the importance of using culture to initially spread its popularity and later when it took power in 1949 it used similar methods to legitimize its rule. The Party even began to think about building a museum devoted to artifacts and art during its difficult years in the early 1930s when Nationalist forces had chased it out of the major cities where it had originated (The Red Line 915). Although such plans did not materialize for decades due to the turbulent political environment and continuous armed conflict it is representative of the Party's approach to power. For example when the CCP took Beijing in 1949 it began collecting items for what would eventually become the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, which would not actually open for more than a decade. The first item for the museum was the scaffolds used to execute Li Dazhao, one of the co-founders of the CCP.

The CCP also developed a type of oil painting which they called, "“revolutionary history painting” to recount and glorify the history of the party (Oil Paintings and

Politics 785). The use of oil paintings as a political tool is particularly interesting as oil paintings could have been considered a sign of individual expression influenced by the bourgeois West instead of a proper proletarian art form. Yet the CCP relied on this paintings extensively to present their preferred historical narrative to the Chinese population. Art was a particularly important medium of communication during this early years of the PRC as most of the population was rural illiterate farmers. The oil paintings were also influenced by Soviet Socialist Realism as there was widespread cultural exchange between the PRC and the Soviet Union in the 1950s. The addition of art to the Museum of the Chinese Revolution had its roots in these exchanges. Wang Yeqiu visited the Soviet Union in 1950 and was so impressed by the Soviet National Museum of the Revolution that he proposed adding oil paintings to the Museum of the Chinese Revolution (Oil Paintings and Politics 786). The next year his proposal was accepted and plans were made to commission historical oil paintings for the museum.

Although many museums commission artwork for exhibits this case was unusual in how strictly the Party proscribed the historical topics to be painted. Influenced by similar Soviet museums the organization of the museum was to follow the then orthodox view of Party history laid out in Hu Qiaomu's *Thirty years of the Chinese Communist Party*, which was based on Mao's 1940 essay, "New Democracy" (Oil Paintings and Politics 791). Some technically skilled and politically loyal painters were assigned to make paintings for the museum a task which they eagerly applied themselves due to a mixture of belief in the communist cause, desire for national recognition, and financial support.

Although there was general consensus in the Party over its history; the role of Mao in the Part proved a much more challenging topic. While the Museum of the Chinese Revolution was originally planned to open in October 1949 as part of celebrations for the PRC's 10th anniversary its opening was delayed for two years because of this dispute. The disagreement centered on whether Mao was a singular figure in the Party history or whether he was one of several important early Party leaders. Eventually the Museum opened with something closer to the latter view although Mao was still portrayed as the most important figure.

Although the dispute over Mao's centrality was particularly divisive it was far from the only politically motivated dispute during the founding of the Museum of the Chinese Revolution. Many artists struggled with the difficult task of having their works "reflect the revolutionary movement of workers, peasants, and soldiers and their revolutionary wars [against imperialism and capitalism], and portray the determination and integrity of revolutionary heroes" which was the official standard for artworks in the museums (Oil Paintings and Politics 801). Many works of art produced for the museum were rejected on these grounds although we do not have statistics on the exact number because museum archives are closed to the public. Several paintings portraying Communist martyrs were rejected for being too gloomy.

Nor did political interference in art end when the artworks were completed. For example, Dong Xiwen's 1953 oil painting *The Founding Ceremony of the Nation* features Mao Zedong addressing hundreds of thousands in Tiananmen Square gloriously announcing the formation of the People's Republic. Although contrary to history, in the

painting Mao stands along with a group of senior Communist leaders watching close by. As the painting was initially politically popular and regarded as one of China's best oil paintings over 500,000 reproductions were made within three months (Oil Paintings and Politics 783). Yet during the continuously shifting political tides of Maoist China several of the senior party leaders in the painting were purged and Dong was ordered to remove them from the painting. Although Dong died in 1973 other painters restored the images of the purged leaders in 1979.

These examples illustrate the centrality of politics to art and art museums during this period. Although technical excellence was not completely ignored it was certainly devalued compared to political correctness. As such while the Museum of the Chinese Revolution was officially under the Ministry of Culture the CCP's Propaganda Department played an even more important role (The Red Line 923). Yet there was still limited room for artistic innovation during this period. The CCP was keen to see the development of a new Chinese form of painting and as long as the paintings were sufficiently politically correct and met certain basic artistic tenets the artists had reasonable freedom. The CCP also provided technical training to young artists and encouraged artistic exchange with the Soviet Union before the Sino-Soviet Split. As part of this exchange there were exhibitions of Soviet paintings in 1954 and in 1955-56 Konstantin Maskimov, a prominent Soviet painter taught a two-year class at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Oil Paintings and Politics 789).

Although CCP controlled art had its roots in the 1930s it was not until the founding of the PRC in 1949 that the Party was able to exercise control over most artistic

activities. Once seizing power the CCP quickly went about setting up organizations to train and influence artists. The Party sought to utilize both previously sympathetic artists and previously apolitical artists to legitimize its rule through art (Galikowski 11). The CCP used a mixture of coercion and support for its preferred artists in the form of membership in new prestigious art associations and prominence in art publications and exhibitions to ensure compliance from artists (Ibid 16). As the Communists almost completely controlled access to the ways that artists could communicate with the public this was a very important incentive. Particular tensions arose over New Year pictures and traditional Chinese landscape paintings which were seen as inappropriate for the new Communist society. The Party attempted to introduce realist elements into New Year pictures but admitted that artistically these efforts were a failure (Ibid 29). While efforts to politicize traditional landscape paintings were largely similarly unsuccessful the CCP allowed a few prominent painters to continue painting traditional landscapes because they represented China's "artistic heritage" which the Party did not try to completely eradicate during this period (Ibid 35). Yet on occasion various political campaigns would target artists seen as insufficiently politically loyal.

Export laws promulgated by the new Communist government also played an important role in redefining the Chinese art canon. Artworks made before 1795 were not allowed to be exported and were considered in some sense public property while anything post-1795 could be exported (Lu 49). Anything to be exported had to be inspected by customs officials who were typically museum employees. This empowered museum employees at the expense of art dealers who had to with a lengthy bureaucratic

process to export any art. Experts were hired to inspect potential exports and to train more workers capable of these tasks. Objects were also classified into three tiers corresponding roughly to museum quality, usable for cultural endeavors such as film companies or libraries, and not worth preserving. While shifting government policy put many art dealers and formerly elite households in dire financial straits the Shanghai Museum received generous funding to allow it to expand its collection largely from the previously mentioned groups (Ibid 69). Several large art dealers were accused of smuggling art for export and the Shanghai Museum was able to confiscate their collections. While the Shanghai Museum was enriching its collection through confiscations and pressured donations it claimed that its acquisitions were voluntary donations given out of a newfound sense of nationalism among collectors (Ibid 99).

During this period the Shanghai Museum also established a conservation department. Conservators worked on the museum's collection but also took orders from outside collectors. Not only did this allow the Shanghai Museum to learn more about the quality of private collections it also allowed the state to essentially eliminate the market of private restorers (Ibid 114). The Shanghai Museum also enriched its collection by salvaging more than ten thousand bronze relics from the scrap metal produced during the Great Leap Forward (Ibid 124). At the same time the Shanghai Museum further developed its training program as most of its senior staff was getting old. The training focused on hands-on experience with artifacts instead of theoretical knowledge of art as the former was considered more proper for a proletarian institution. This enabled Shanghai to increase its number of art inspectors and thus allow more pieces to be

exported. As foreign exchange was hard to obtain during this time this proved the value of the museum to the state (Ibid 145). The Shanghai Museum also played an important role in setting prices for artworks during this period.

In the late 1950s the Shanghai Museum gained interest in ethnic minority art as part of the PRC's policy that its fifty-five minority groups were an integral part of the nation. The export of pre-1949 minority artifacts was prohibited (Ibid 157). This was just one of many ways in which PRC policy shaped the Chinese art canon. The Shanghai Museum had gained enough prominence that it was able to refuse most of Beijing's requests for items for the openings of the Museum of the Chinese Revolution and the Chinese History Museum which was unprecedented (Ibid 165).

The CCP's policies towards artists generally followed its more general policy towards intellectuals. There was a liberalization of what was considered acceptable during the Hundred Flowers Campaign and then a subsequent reversal during the Anti-Rightist Campaign. Several prominent artists such as Jiang Feng, the most senior political figure in an important art association were labeled as rightists and massively demoted or sent to re-education camps (Ibid 77). Oftentimes victims of purges were not targeted solely because of ideological or artistic differences but also in part due to factional struggles.

After the horrors of the Great Leap Forward, Mao's influence within the party was diminished. In 1966, Mao began the Cultural Revolution as a way to regain his former influence. Paramilitary youth groups called Red Guards began an assault on anything associated with tradition or bourgeois capitalism. The previously precarious position of

traditional Chinese art further deteriorated as Red Guards attacked its practitioners as feudal elites. Estimates of deaths caused by the Cultural Revolution vary but are typically between one and two million (Song 2). Many individuals committed suicide after harassment and public shaming by Red Guards. Priceless artifacts were destroyed when Red Guards ransacked households (King and Walls 8).

At the Central Academy of Fine Arts, four faculty members were beaten and imprisoned in makeshift campus prisons (Andrews 36). Plaster casts of European and Asian sculptures were hacked with axes and then burned. The Cultural Revolution also almost completely shut down the production of not explicitly political art although there were some dissidents who resisted such as Shi Lu (Hawks 59). Although certain works of art from the period have become internationally famous it was generally a dark period for artistic production in China.

While there was initial fear among employees of the Shanghai Museum that Red Guards would destroy parts of the collection, the museum ended up collaborating with Red Guard raids to enrich its collection. Lu argues, "While some argue that cultural institutions buffered the PRC's ancient relics from the worst of the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai Museum employees' work throughout the 1960s show that converting seized property into public assets was the institutions' true legacy" (172). As part of the museum's strategy to keep out Red Guards and preserve its collection it set up its own team of Red Guards to dissuade other Red Guards from entering and closed its doors on August 24th, 1996 (Ibid 177).

As Red Guards would often raid houses and destroy or expropriate artworks the Shanghai Museum petitioned Shanghai's mayor for the right to go along on raids and take whatever artworks the Red Guards had seized. The mayor accepted the petition and museum staff began sleeping at the museum so they could send the appropriate art experts to accompany raids at any hour of day. While museum employees claimed and still maintain that the objects were voluntarily donated owners who often had repeatedly refused to donate the objects in the past disagreed with that assessment. Lu notes that while museum employees "regarded Red Guards as irresponsible students who "didn't know anything" ...[they] followed the same set of state policies regarding the search and seizure of private property, and even worked together to maximize the efficiency of specific raids" (195). In some cases, private collectors claimed they had donated their collections to the Shanghai Museum to avoid Red Guards from destroying them even in the absence of actual agreements with the museum (Ibid 192).

The turmoil of the Cultural Revolution also disrupted the art market as fear of Red Guards and being labeled counterrevolutionary scared off both domestic collectors and international dealers. To earn valuable foreign exchange the state-owned Arts and Crafts Company began using mail-order catalogs to sell items. The foreign exchange earned by these exports and the Shanghai Museum's role in them helps explain why the museum retained political support throughout the Cultural Revolution.

While the Shanghai Museum was enriching its collection it was also undergoing internal purges. Big character posters leveled accusations against museum employees of clinging to traditional ideas or being insufficiently dedicated to the Communist cause.

After a big character poster accused Hu Bo, head of the cataloging department of smuggling artworks Hu went home and committed suicide (Ibid 206). Other employees were sent to do hard labor.

Although the raiding of individual homes quieted down after 1966 a huge amount of items had been seized which still had to be sorted. As there were a massive number of objects to be sorted and relatively few individuals capable of appraising, the sorting committee struggled to find enough appraisers. Objects were sorted into pre or post 1795 due to export laws and valuable items were either sent to museums or exported. The poor conditions that confiscated items were kept in led to the ruin of some objects.

As the PRC was in dire financial straits by 1970 and was preparing for possible war with the Soviet Union it decided to export as much art as possible. As part of that policy the state Arts and Crafts Company began only selling in bulk. International demand boomed and there was rapid price inflation in Chinese antiques. As the Cultural Revolution had somewhat calmed down at this point Hong Kong art dealers again traveled to the Mainland to buy artifacts which they later sold to buyers around the World. However, Shanghai Museum staff eventually convinced the government that bulk selling would not maximize profits and that exporting the best post-1795 artworks was unwise.

The calming of the Cultural Revolution also allowed the Shanghai Museum to reopen in 1972. The Shanghai Museum also began welcoming international visitors as China began improving its diplomatic relations with Western nations. Although the Shanghai Museum displayed many confiscated items it did not display any provenance

information which they argued would undermine the “scientific value” of their work (Lu 247). One particularly important confiscated object was the Qin Standard, a volumetric measuring device. Museum exhibits argued that as the Qin Standard allowed China to advance to a centralized state and contemporary Communist policies would allow China to advance from feudalism (Ibid 248).

The Cultural Revolution also upended the museum’s internal hierarchy. Senior staff often had politically questionable backgrounds in the pre-1949 era and were forced to step aside. Although junior staff lacked the expertise of senior staff they were forced to do best as they could. This also allowed them to gain valuable expertise that proved useful when they would later take senior positions in the museum.

Although the Shanghai Museum appears to have profited considerably from the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution it is less clear if this was true of Chinese art museums in general. Unfortunately, English language work on this question appears almost non-existent. What remains clear is that the role of art and art museums during the Cultural Revolution was more complex than conventionally thought. Maoist China and the Cultural Revolution in particular was not so much a conflict between politically minded officials and Red Guards on one side and artists and art museums on the other but a complete free-for-all. Art museums were happy to ally with Red Guards if it meant enriching their collections. The state was happy to utilize knowledge of antiques and traditional Chinese art if it could produce foreign exchange. Artists and museum employees denounced their co-workers when politically expedient. Even though the Shanghai Museum maintained a remarkable degree of organization that greatly expanded its collection influence it was

not without large human costs for many individuals both inside and outside the museum. In the final analysis, the true legacy of the Cultural Revolution is the terrible human toil it inflicted on Chinese citizens and intellectuals in particular. It seems that like many Western art museums the provenance of the Shanghai Museum's collection is closely tied to violence and looting. After 1976 the Shanghai Museum faced many claims for restitution which like many Western museums it only partially fulfilled.

Much as the CCP created the Museum of the Chinese Revolution to present its version of history in recent years dissident groups in China and Hong Kong have created their own museums to remember the Cultural Revolution and the June 4th Tiananmen Square Massacre. The idea for a museum dedicated to the Cultural Revolution was initially conceived by Ba Jin, a famous Chinese author who was brutally persecuted during the Cultural Revolution which also saw the death of his wife after she was denied medical care. Although Ba was later rehabilitated he never forgot the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and suggested the construction of a museum to ensure it was never repeated. In 2005, a small private museum to the Cultural Revolution was built in Guangdong (Coonan). The museum contains hundreds of engravings depicting the events of the Cultural Revolution.

While the museum dedicated to the Cultural Revolution managed to slip past the censors in Mainland China the museum dedicated to June 4th had to be built in Hong Kong. While the June 4 Memorial Museum is only 800 square feet its very existence is testament to the existence of a group of citizens determined to remember June 4th. Even though free speech is theoretically protected in Hong Kong there were doubts whether

the museum would be able to open after other tenants in the same building as the museum complained citing safety concerns. Allegedly Communist Party officials were behind these efforts (Leung and Steinfield). A Chinese dissident living in the United States was also denied entrance to Hong Kong when he attempted to attend the museum's opening. Whether the June 4 Memorial Museum will be as successful in shaping perceptions of China's history as the Museum of the Chinese Revolution was remains to be seen but reveals the politically charged nature of museums.

## Works Cited

- Andrews, Julia F. "The Art of the Cultural Revolution." *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (2010): 27-57.
- Coonan, Clifford. "China's first Cultural Revolution museum exposes Mao's war on 'bourgeois culture'". *Independent*. 21 Feb. 2006. Web. 16 May 2014.
- Galikowski, Maria. *Art and Politics in China, 1949-1984*. Chinese University Press, 1998.
- Hawks, Shelley Drake. "Summoning Confucius: Inside Shi Lu's Imagination". *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (2010): 58-90.
- Hung, Chang-Tai. "Oil Paintings and Politics: Weaving a Heroic Tale of the Chinese Communist Revolution." *Comparative studies in society and history* 49.04 (2007): 783-814.
- Hung, Chang-tai. "The Red Line: Creating a Museum of the Chinese Revolution." *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005): 914-933.
- Leung, Hannah, and Jemimah Steinfeld. "Inside the Hong Kong museum dedicated to the Tiananmen Square massacre". *Index*. May 7 2014. Web. May 16 2014.
- Lu, Di Yin. "Seizing Civilization: Antiquities in Shanghai's Custody, 1949-1996." (2012). Harvard Dissertation.
- King, Richard, and Jan Walls. "Introduction: Vibrant Images of a Turbulent Decade." *Art in Turmoil. The Chinese Cultural Revolution* (2010): 3-24.
- Yongyi, Song. "Chronology of Mass Killings during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)." (2011).

MIT OpenCourseWare  
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21W.022.03 Writing and Experience: Reading and Writing Autobiography  
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.