



Immerse yourself in the Chinese Cultural Revolution at the Wende Museum

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Sui Jianguo, Right Arm, 2003, bronze/ Gordon (PW)

CULVER CITY, Calif. — The Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–76) was a period of tremendous social and economic upheaval within China itself that also had deep global



reverberations. Anyone, almost anywhere, who was active politically during those years will recall young people challenging their stodgy “revisionist” elders with the fresh, pithy chants of a few choice quotes from Chairman Mao that seemed to sweep aside all reformism, all liberalism, compromise with the hated bourgeoisie, all cowardliness and timidity, in the march toward authentic anti-imperialist socialism within our own time.

Who can forget throngs of students hoisting their copies of the Little Red Book of Chairman Mao high into the sky (half of which was held up by women!) as a talisman of the coming revolution? The East in those days was a bright, resplendent red! You were enthralled by stories of the barefoot doctors bringing basic medical care into the inaccessible countryside, by the new operas and ballets featuring proletarian and peasant protagonists, by the intense “struggle sessions” aimed at rooting out the “Four Olds”—old ideas, culture, habits and customs.

And if you were the kind of person to raise impertinent questions about smashing centuries-old Buddhist statues and priceless porcelain urns from long-ago dynasties, tossing ancient religious manuscripts into bonfires, strong-arming professors into public stocks and humiliating them, and if you were asking if it was truly a productive use of the talents of engineers and scholars to send them to rural communes and force them into years of drudgery taking the people’s “night soil” out into the fields each morning, well then, that just proved how bourgeois your own thinking was!

There was something exhilarating about standing shoulder to shoulder with your uniformed comrades, reciting slogans, singing songs, marching with flying banners. Yet even then, there were some, increasingly as time went on, who looked askance at the mass psychology, the peer pressure, the obligatory groupthink.

How did it happen? And what brought it to an end?



This is the theme of the illuminating new exhibition at the Wende Museum. *(De)constructing Ideology: The Cultural Revolution and Beyond* is on view through March 12, 2023.

Mao's 1942 Lectures on Art and Literature, the written form of talks he delivered while the Red Army was still in their mountain redoubt fighting the Japanese, are held up as prime sources for the anti-bourgeois approach to culture that later manifested itself in the Cultural Revolution. He centered the class issue as the necessary esthetic principle of all art. Yes, the old mediums could still be used—poetry, novels, short stories, film, visual art, ceramics, even ballet and opera—but they had to be used to raise class consciousness and empower the triad of vital forces (workers, peasants and the people's army) toward victory over capitalist exploitation and imperialism.

In the late 1940s, after the Japanese occupation, the nation underwent an armed civil war between the nationalists and the Communists, which the latter won in 1949 when they established the People's Republic of China under the leadership of Chairman Mao Zedong. From the outset, culture was commandeered for its critical role in forwarding socialism.

What the Wende exhibition leaves out entirely is the role Soviet advisers in every field played to develop the Chinese Revolution. The Chinese were outwardly appreciative of this aid, but were conscious that the Soviets often acted as patronizing European "big brothers" who always knew best. As the rift between China and the USSR widened, Mao questioned the politics of, for example, promoting the classic ballet for which the Soviets were world-renowned, and which they taught to the Chinese, without a class angle from which the masses could derive inspiration to struggle for higher goals. So by 1966, the Great Leader, now in his seventies, announced another revolution within the cultural realm that would last until his death in 1976. On May 16, 1966, the Chairman called on the youths of China to overthrow existing academic and governmental institutions and rid the nation of its feudal traditions. Educators,



intellectuals, and cultural workers were purged from their positions, imprisoned, and branded as “capitalists,” “bourgeois,” or “revisionists.” A group of radical politicians close to Mao, including his fourth wife Jiang Qing, took control of the creation of the visual and performing arts so that they closely aligned with the Chairman’s ideology. The Cultural Revolution was marked not only by violence and the destruction of art and culture during its early years but also by the production and dissemination of iconic imagery that would spread across China and would outlast the end of the movement.

Westerners are familiar with some of the posters from the Cultural Revolutionary era, and many have seen films of such operas and ballets as *The Story of the Red Lantern*, *The White-Haired Girl*, or *The Red Detachment of Women* which represent a radical separation from the imperial Russian esthetic of *Sleeping Beauty* or *The Nutcracker* maintained so faithfully by the Soviets. Again, however, the Wende fails to mention that the Soviets also brought these genres up to date politically with ballets such as Aram Khachaturian’s 1956 *Spartacus* or operas such as Ivan Dzerzhinsky’s 1934 *Quiet Flows the Don*. There was even an opera by British composer Alan Bush, *Joe Hill: The Man Who Never Died*, which was first performed during these same Cultural Revolution years at the State Opera in East Berlin in 1970. The Chinese did not invent the conceit of class-conscious art.

A screening of *The White-Haired Girl* took place at the Wende Dec. 11 as one of a number of adjunct events, lectures and panels accompanying the exhibition, and it was remarkable in many ways. A viewer is immediately struck by the continuation, into this revolutionary genre, of female dancers *en pointe* that, at least to me, summoned up visions of ancient Chinese female foot-binding. No “barefoot ballerinas” here! But there they were, with their grand jetés and pirouettes, except now in scenes with the Red Army and the peasants with their rifles, pistols and red banners fighting the evil landlords who are audibly shot offstage. At the discussion afterward, balletomanes in the audience observed that though true these classi ↑

Russian ballet techniques were employed, with very little use of Chinese folk dance, it was a shocking novelty to see women performing with the athleticism normally associated with male dancers.

For a decade during the Cultural Revolution, almost all Western art was banned, and a very limited number of such “model” films, ballets, operas, were available to be seen. The “merch” associated with them was ubiquitous—novelizations, handbooks, posters, comics, children’s picture books, and even ceramics. Mao, either his profile, or his heroic larger-than-life presence, or the red sun with which he was identified, was simply everywhere. This was Cult of the Personality writ in very large characters, comparable only to what the Soviets did with their canonizations of Lenin and Stalin.

Among the main features of *(De)constructing Ideology* are the large number of plates, decorative urns, porcelain plaques and figurative ceramics from China’s porcelain capital of Jingdezhen. The exhibition explores the history and artistic production of imagery from the period while investigating the circumstances of production, the relationship between art and ideology, and the agency of the artists working within restrictive frameworks. If all your home lacked was a lamp stand with a figurine of the White-Haired Girl, well, now your every last desire could be satisfied.

The exhibition also looks at the afterlife of the movement through contemporary art, where Chinese artists have appropriated and adapted the iconic images from this period for their own use today. Some of it is ironic, some a respectful testament to a formative period in these artists’ own lives, some critical. In many cases, a skeptical eye is politically acceptable, for even the Chinese Communist Party itself officially denounced the Cultural Revolution as a “mistake” in 1981, only five years after the Great Helmsman’s passing.





Mao's Little Red Book | eBay

Seeing the plethora of material culture emanating from the period (and this is but a small sample of what was produced), I was reminded of impressions I've often had both here in the U.S. and touring abroad, of the sheer amount of human effort that went into non-productive activity such as churches and temples. Many cities in Europe have elaborate Baroque churches on practically every other

corner, or so it seems. True, it kept artisans and construction workers employed, but was that the point?

No. I believe the point was to manufacture, enforce and monopolize mass public adherence, to the exclusion, in China, of every other influence, feudal, religious, nihilist, bourgeois or "revisionist." The idea was, for a whole generation, to inculcate loyalty, one might say submission, to the party and state. Heresy was not allowed.

What is so striking is that it was precisely during Mao's own lifetime, and during the Cultural Revolution, that apparently without seeming contradiction, China opened up to the West and revised critical, principled aspects of its foreign policy. As early as 1968, for example, at the [↑]

height of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, China (quoting from the catalogue) “had reevaluated its international policies and withdrew its support in order to focus its military resources on the Soviet Union.” The Wende shows 1972 clips of President and Mrs. Nixon in China, as well as of Henry Kissinger being warmly greeted by Mao in 1973. And in that same year, Mao’s China was among the first countries to recognize Gen. Augusto Pinochet in the aftermath of violently overthrowing the Socialist President Salvador Allende of Chile. I recall how revolted I felt when I heard that. If nothing else had disenchanted me with the Cultural Revolution before that, it was the final blow. Maybe the mass consensus and unquestioning fealty had to be fully consolidated before the leadership could afford the luxury of itself diverging from its ostensible working-class and internationalist line.

And yet, and yet. Look at today’s China, less than 50 years after the Cultural Revolution ended. Never before in human history have so many millions of people been lifted up from abject rural poverty. China’s life expectancy now exceeds that of the United States! The U.S. sacrificed over a million of its people to COVID—one out of every 300—and China suffered under 10,000 reported deaths with five times our population.

Obviously, socialism there has its “Chinese characteristics,” and how would it not? But could its successes have been achieved without the loyalty to its Communist Party leadership, manufactured as it might have been—as it needed to have been—over a period of decades? And if that is the case, would it not be the height of Western arrogance to mutter about the Chinese lack of “freedom” and democratic “rights” when the West is hardly doing much better and may well be backsliding into worse if the MAGAts and their friends in other countries get their way? These are not easy questions to answer, but are well worth considering.

(De)constructing Ideology: The Cultural Revolution and Beyond is supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The Wende Museum is located at 10808 Culver Blvd., Cul



City, CA 90230, and can be reached by phone at (310) 216-1600. For further information, and for the full online catalogue of the exhibition, go to info@wendemuseum.org. The museum is open to the public Fri., Sat. and Sun. from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is free, and there is plenty of parking.

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