

**Culture in the Cultural
Revolution: Political and
Private Art in China During
and After the Great
Proletarian Cultural
Revolution**

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The gibbous silver moon provides faint illumination in the deep blue night sky while wispy clouds float lazily through the air. A small, dark building lit warmly from inside rises in the foreground while the shadow of a tree lends a thin web of branches to the horizon. Two figures stand next to the house in a pale white beam from the moon, their backs silhouetted in the light while they gaze into the far distance. This pensive nighttime scene isn't something to be seen in the real world, rather, it is a depiction of a scene by Zhao Wenliang with oil on paper. Zhao was an artist who lived during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, an event that altered the lives of everyone in China. Art during this time was also altered due to both changes in the environment and direct attempts to change art. In the Cultural Revolution, Chinese art was greatly changed as mainstream art turned to propaganda and modernization while individual art worked as an emotional protest against the government. The Cultural Revolution itself became the inspiration for many pieces of artwork **that explored the changes in Chinese society**, even after the event ended.

One of the sources that I used is the article "China's Cultural Revolution Begins" from the database World History in Context. This source was especially helpful in giving me an overview of the events of the Cultural Revolution. It told me about some of the ideas of the Cultural Revolution as well as describing many important people involved in it. It did not give me much specific information on art in the Cultural Revolution but it was still useful in providing a background. This is a trustworthy source because it was from a database that is trusted by the school via a subscription to provide accurate information on historical events. Another source I used is a review called "Art in Turmoil." Although this source was also from World History in Context, it was considerably less useful as it was a book review on a book that

I did not have. Another source is a journal article called “The Cultural Revolution and Contemporary Chinese Art” from the site JStor. This source was especially helpful in information about political art during the Cultural Revolution and art movements in the decades after the cultural revolution. The article is a trustworthy source because it comes from a published **journal** and is provided online by a site that compiles journal articles, JStor. I also used another source from JStor called “Apolitical Art, Private Experience, and Alternative Subjectivity in China’s Cultural Revolution.” This source was helpful for information on private art during the Cultural Revolution, specifically from the Wuming Painting Group. The journal article described many paintings from this group and how the artists expressed their feelings and experiences through art. In addition to also being from the source JStor, the article is written by a member of the Wuming painting group who experienced the Cultural Revolution firsthand.

Another source I used was a book called *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* which was particularly helpful with information about the modernization of Chinese operas, specifically on the creation of the eight model operas. This is a reliable source because it was written by a Professor of Chinese at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, and was published by a university press. **Lastly, I viewed the abstract of a journal article called “Wuming: an underground art group during the Cultural Revolution.” Unfortunately, I did not have access to the full article, but I gleaned from this abstract a small amount of information regarding the Wuming painting group’s first public exhibition. This source is trustworthy because it is written by the same author as “Apolitical Art, Private Experience, and Alternative Subjectivity in China’s Cultural Revolution,” an actual member of the Wuming painting group.**

A lot of art in the Cultural Revolution was created as propaganda. The Cultural Revolution was started by Mao Zedong, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party, and Jiang Qing, Mao's third wife and a member of the Gang of Four. During this event, schools were shut down and students formed a paramilitary group called the Red Guard to fight the 'Four Olds:' old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Anyone who opposed Mao could be tortured or killed and millions of students were sent to the countryside to work ("China's Cultural Revolution Begins"). During this huge upheaval of culture, art was limited to propaganda and to reeducating China in Maoist thought. Mao wanted art to be based on the style of Soviet Socialist Realist Art, in that it should be a combination of realism and romanticism and depict how things should be in a prosperous, modern, socialist country. In the given example of Cultural Revolution propaganda, Mao's face is depicted in the center of a glowing sun which shines on a crowd of happy supporters from various groups in China. The poster represents that China would come to success under Chairman Mao. The poster contains bright colors, especially red, the international color of communism as well as a symbol of prosperity in China. Overall, mainstream art was commonly used as propaganda to support Mao's leadership (Yang).

During the Cultural Revolution, modernization of various art forms occurred, with the key focus being on Chinese opera. Although the modernization of operas was already in progress before the Communists took power, it became a focus before and during the Cultural Revolution because opera was popular and traditional. However, old stories could not easily be transformed into modern tales, and multiple attempts, such as basing the stories on history, were made at modernizing the operas. In 1964, a convention was held where multiple opera companies performed 35 different operas, most of which were adapted from film scripts, straight plays, or

novels. The shows performed at the convention got reviewed and critiqued by leaders such as Jiang Qing. This event showed progress in the modernization of opera as well as attracting younger audiences who preferred the less traditional stories. After further revision, the first five of eight model operas began to be widely promoted, such as “The Red Lantern,” “Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy,” and “On the Docks.”. These operas were set from 1929 through the modern day, and featured heroic characters to appeal to audiences as well as adapting tunes from songs such as “East is Red,” Mao’s theme song. An example of the modernization was that military characters’ swords and spears were replaced with pistols and rifles. In comparison to traditional operas, the stories of these model operas were more contemporary, as they focused on more modern events such as the Korean war and the second Sino-Japanese war. In addition, the characters were from the three main classes: workers, peasants, and soldiers, rather than being nobles, scholars, and maidens. Lastly, music in the modernized operas often included Western instruments rather than being solely traditional Chinese instruments. One example of a modernized production is the aforementioned “The Red Lantern.” This production was adapted from the script of a film called “The Revolution has Successors.” It tells the story of a railway worker, Li Yuhe, and his family during the Sino-Japanese war. Li Yuhe is a signaller for trains who also uses his red signalling lantern to communicate with underground Chinese Communist fighters. When Li Yuhe is captured and interrogated by the Japanese, he sacrifices his life rather than giving information to the enemy. However, he had already passed the red lantern onto his daughter, Li Tiemei, who works to continue the revolution. In the modernization, the focus was set on making the main characters into model heroes who embodied Chinese Communist Party ideals. In addition, the choreographies and music were modernized in the aforementioned ways.

One difference between the modernization and the original script was the death of Li Tiemei and Grandma Li. In the original, they die in a cramped prison, but in the revised opera, they die on an execution ground in a pine grove, which symbolizes eternity (Clark).

Private Artists during the Cultural Revolution created paintings that represented their emotions and experiences in a time when individual expression was limited. In the Cultural Revolution, the state attempted to limit private thought by forcing people to confess in public self-criticisms and by using confessions and diaries as proof of thought crimes. The Wuming Painting Group was an underground group consisting of self-taught laborers that contested the state's efforts by creating private, subjective images. Although these pieces contained common subjects like landscapes, houses, still-lives, and portraits, they opposed the state by conveying the artists' individual emotions. One example is a painting by Wang Aihe, an artist in the Wuming Painting Group, called *Home*, which was created after the separation of her family. The painting depicts the home where she grew up, a building that is dark, crumbling, and abandoned. However, the artist's own analysis of the painting explains that through brushwork, colors, and composition, *Home* expressed her feelings of "exuberance, restlessness, and anxiety," as well as her desire to leave the home that had turned from a warm shelter to merely a cold shed. The artist also explains that although the spindly tree behind this dilapidated building provides no shelter due to its lack of leaves or flowers, its thin branches that reach into the sky like outstretched arms represent her longing to leave the house that is no longer a home. Overall, Wang's painting reveals that private art was used to counter the state's elimination of individual thought by expressing her emotions about her home (Wang).

Private artists depicted their experiences in the Cultural Revolution through paintings of both personal and everyday subjects. As shown with Wang Aihe, the Cultural Revolution broke apart families in addition to suppressing individual thought. The Wuming artist Zhao Wenliang also had his family taken apart when his parents, sister, and children were sent to different parts of the country. Now living alone, Zhao chose to live in a small, dark room because it was further from the scrutiny of the government and he could paint without being constantly monitored. In his painting “Melody of Homesickness,” Zhao expresses a longing for a lost home. The piece is set in a wintery night and depicts the silhouettes of two figures, Zhao and his daughter, outside a warmly lit home. The painting appealed to many Chinese men and women at the time who had fractured families due to the Cultural Revolution, and the imaginary home displayed in the painting was like a refuge or substitute for these people who had lost a tangible home. Although Zhao Wenliang depicts casual subjects such as a house, people, and moonlight, his painting tells his story as well as being relatable to people throughout China. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Wuming painting group held an exhibition in Beijing in 1979, where many pieces from different members of the group were displayed to the public without all of the restrictions and dangers that had plagued the artists before (Wang).

After the Cultural Revolution, fine arts movements developed that focused on a more honest depiction of life in China. When Mao Zedong died in 1976, Deng Xiaoping, the General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, took power and arrested the Gang of Four, ending the Cultural Revolution (“China’s Cultural Revolution Begins”). However, its effects persisted both in the changes that were made during the event and in the memories of the Chinese people. With art becoming less restricted, two movements sprang up: Rustic Realism, which focused on

depicting rural life, and Scar Art, which focused on the emotional scarring of the urban youth. One example of the first movement, Rustic Realism, was the painting “Father” by Luo Zhongli, which depicted an old peasant in a realistic style. Unlike the figures depicted in Cultural Revolution propaganda, this man was not idealized and happy, instead, he was aged and wrinkled. In addition to overturning the idealization used to promote Mao, “Father” was a large scale portrait, something that had previously only been allowed for the Chairman himself, and this painting was therefore seen by some Chinese as a parody (Yang).

Some pieces of art that were created after the Cultural Revolution were intended to mock the state. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao reformed the written language to try to increase literacy. Inspired by this manipulation of the written word, a printmaker named Xu Bing created a collection of books, scrolls, and wall hangings called “A Book from the Sky.” These pieces were written in antique fonts to make them look ancient and official, but they contained only nonsensical writings. Because written word connects to power in China, these meaningless but official looking texts were a jab at the state. “A Book from the Sky” is displayed in a unique fashion, with the many written texts that Xu created hanging from walls and ceilings or lying on the floor (Yang). Another artist that mocked the government during the Cultural Revolution was Wang Guanyi, who created a series of Political Pop Art. As China moved towards a market-driven economy, the state began to promote consumerism to improve the economic situation, a direct contrast to how propaganda had been used during the Cultural Revolution to denounce materialism. Wang’s pieces combined common images from Cultural Revolution propaganda posters with modern logos, as well as mimicking the bright colors and the mass produced feeling of said posters. However, because these parodies supported the emerging ideas

rather than the old ones from the Cultural Revolution, they mocked the old propaganda by effectively employing those styles for the opposite purpose. One example is his painting, “Great Criticism: Coca Cola,” which used the logo for Coca Cola and figures commonly used in propaganda from the three classes: worker, peasant, and soldier. Unlike in propaganda though, in this piece, these figures support materialistic consumption rather than opposing it, relating to how Wang’s art supported more modern ideas such as the merge of communist ideology and consumerism (Yang).

In conclusion, both mainstream, political art as well as private art were affected by the Cultural Revolution. Propaganda emerged as the primary type of mainstream art with the purpose of glorifying Chairman Mao, while other forms such as opera were modernized to help support the Chinese Communist Party. Meanwhile, private art turned to self-expression both by displaying individual artists’ emotions and experiences. Even with the Cultural Revolution’s end, art could not revert to what it was before the event, and instead art movements inspired by both the effects and the aftermath as well as pieces that mocked the state during the Cultural Revolution emerged in the artistic scene. Analyses of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution often focus on the politics and important figures, but it is necessary to explore this important event’s effect on Chinese culture. The changes to paintings, operas, and other forms of art will be long-lasting, either through the continuation of the movements or through the inspiration of the pieces themselves.



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"Home" by Aihe Wang

WANG, AIHE. "Apolitical Art, Private Experience, and Alternative Subjectivity in China's Cultural Revolution." *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (100), 2014, pp. 27–36. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24055648.



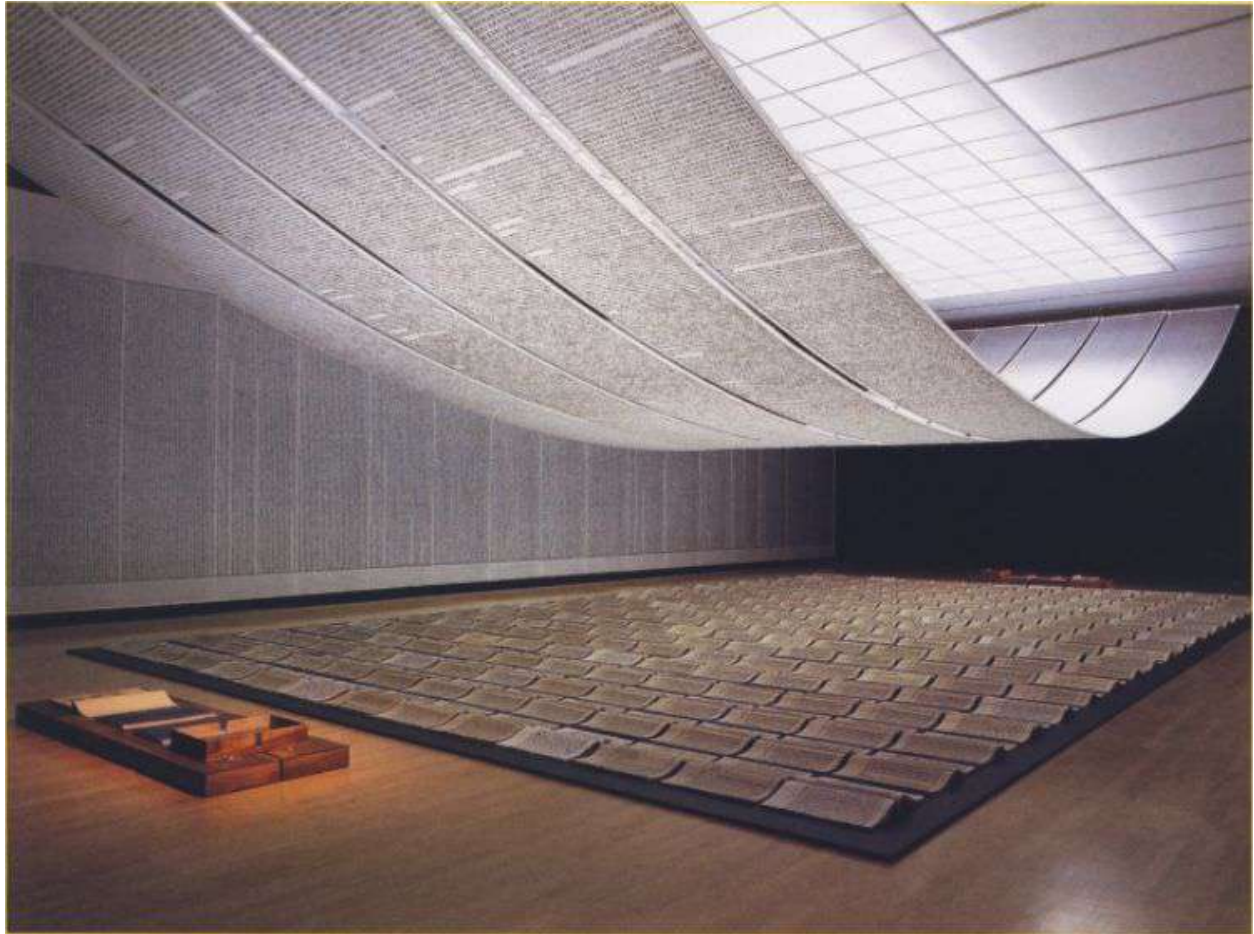
"Melody of Homesickness" by Zhao Wenliang

WANG, AIHE. "Apolitical Art, Private Experience, and Alternative Subjectivity in China's Cultural Revolution." *China Perspectives*, no. 4 (100), 2014, pp. 27–36. *JSTOR*, [JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24055648](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24055648).



"Father" by Luo Zhongli

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"A Book from the Sky" by Xu Bing

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“Great Criticism: Coca Cola” by Wang Guanyi

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