



# HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE Contemporaneity

Vol 3, No 1 (2014) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2014.58  
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

## Creating National Narrative

### The Red Guard Art Exhibitions and the National Exhibitions in the Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966-1976

Winnie Tsang

#### Abstract

The artistic development in China experienced drastic changes during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. Traditional Chinese art was denounced, whereas propaganda art became predominant in shaping the public's loyalty towards the Communist Party and the country. Two major groups of art exhibitions emerged during the Revolution—the unofficial Red Guard art exhibitions organized by student activists in collaboration with local communes and art schools between 1966 and 1968, and the state-run national exhibitions from 1972 to 1975. These exhibitions were significant to this period because they were held frequently in the capital city Beijing and occasionally elsewhere, and through art they presented unique revolutionary beliefs to the Chinese people in a public setting. While the Red Guard art exhibitions and the national exhibitions certainly created different national narratives, I argue that the national exhibitions were in fact an attempt to revise the national narrative created by the Red Guard art exhibitions in order to re-establish a more utopian, consistent, and official national narrative. This paper unravels the intricate relationship between the two groups of exhibitions by comparing their exhibition venues, ideological focuses, work selection and quality editing.

#### About the Author

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# Creating National Narrative

## The Red Guard Art Exhibitions and the National Exhibitions in the Chinese Cultural Revolution 1966-1976

Winnie Tsang

Between 1966 and 1976, China underwent the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution launched by Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Claiming to revolutionize China on the surface, the Cultural Revolution was in fact a nationwide movement Mao manipulated to facilitate his own power struggle within the Communist Party by inciting the fanatic sentiments of the masses, especially young people.<sup>1</sup> Mao's advocacy of proletarian struggles against the bourgeois not only caused enormous loss of lives and shattered the social structure, but also radically challenged artistic development in China.<sup>2</sup> Traditional Chinese art was now denounced as one of the "four olds" to be

destroyed—old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits—whereas propaganda art demonstrating Mao's revolutionary thoughts dominated the art scene to shape the public's loyalty toward the Communist Party and the country.<sup>3</sup> What deserves more attention is that the art produced during the Revolution was exhibited frequently in Beijing and occasionally elsewhere to present unique national narratives to the Chinese people in a public setting.

Two major groups of art exhibitions emerged during the Cultural Revolution. The first group was the Red Guard art exhibitions held between 1966 and 1968. In 1966, Mao distinguished students supporting him as the "Red Guards," whose goals were to uproot the "four olds" and to smash capitalists within the Party.<sup>4</sup> The Red Guards played a crucial role in producing propaganda art and launching the Red Guard art exhibitions.<sup>5</sup> In 1967, the Red Guard art activities were particularly frequent with at least six art exhibitions organized.<sup>6</sup> Three of the exhibitions in 1967 were noteworthy. At the exhibition *Long Live the Victory of Mao Zedong Thought* commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Mao's talk at Yan'an held on May 23 at the National Art Museum of China, a few hundreds of works were shown

<sup>1</sup> Julia F. Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," in *Art in Turmoil*, ed. Richard King (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), 28.

<sup>2</sup> According to Lent and Xu, the number of deaths reached around one million people in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution. Many died because of the persecution and mass killing by the Red Guards, whereas others committed suicide as a result of false charges. For further information, see John A. Lent and Xu Ying, "Cartooning and China's 'Cultural Revolution,'" *Int. J. Comic Art* 7. 2 (Fall 2005): 89.

<sup>3</sup> Kuyi Shen, "Propaganda Posters and Art during the Cultural Revolution," in *Art and China's Revolution*, ed. Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 149.

<sup>4</sup> Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," 33.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Mingxian, "Hongweibing meishuyundongji dui dangdaiyishu de yingxiang," *Yishu tansuo* 19, no. 2 (April 2005): 33.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from the three exhibitions mentioned in the text, the other three Red Guard art exhibitions held in 1967 included the show entitled "Caricatures: Smashing the Reactionary Line Advocated by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping" that opened at the Beijing Planetarium on February 5, the exhibition named "Capital Red Guard Rebel Exhibition" on June 6 at the Beijing Exhibition Center, and the show "The Radiance of Chairman Mao's Thought Brightens the Anyuan Workers Movement" on October 1 held at the Museum of Revolutionary History. Detailed information of the Red Guard art exhibitions has not been fully documented in the current scholarship, and my research has not been able to locate the exact duration of each of these exhibitions. Relatively more systematic records of some of these exhibitions can be found in Wang, "Hongweibing meishuyundongji dui dangdaiyishu de yingxiang."

ranging from woodcuts and cartoons to propaganda posters. Two days later, on May 25, another exhibition called *Long Live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* opened at Tiananmen Square, exhibiting around 150 works. The works included pictures that appeared in the publications of Mao's revolutionary quotes as well as woodcuts, paper cuts, and cartoons. This exhibition then toured around factories, communes, and army units in the Beijing suburbs. Then, on October 1, in celebration of the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, an exhibition entitled *Long Live the Victory of Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line* was organized at the National Art Museum of China. It was the largest scale of all other exhibitions of the same year, showcasing around 1600 works that included oil paintings, ink paintings, woodcuts, posters, sculptures, and craftworks.

In 1968, upon removing his major rivals in the Party and fearing that the factional warfare caused by the Red Guard activities would lead to further social chaos, Mao dismissed all the Red Guards and sent them to the countryside for "re-education." These Red Guards were then rusticated to become workers, peasants, and soldiers, which drew to an end the Red Guard art exhibitions. Between 1969 and 1971 there were no major exhibitions because of political turmoil within the Party. Mao was involved in another power struggle with his vice-chairman and designated successor, Lin Biao (1907–1971). The struggle ended in 1971 when Lin Biao mysteriously died in a plane crash.<sup>7</sup> Seeing the declined reputation of Mao after the constant strife within the Party, the Communist Party began to restructure itself to restore social order in the early 1970s.

During the first half of the Cultural Revolution, the former cultural organizations of the government such as the Ministry of Culture, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Chinese Artists Association responsible for directing art affairs were abolished. In 1971, the state government resumed the function of the Ministry of Culture by forming a Culture Group (國務院文化組) under the leadership of Jiang Qing, the wife of Mao, to oversee national cultural and art activities.<sup>8</sup> The second group of exhibitions emerged at this time when the Culture Group began to launch annual national exhibitions to properly represent the Communist Party and the nation. Art professionals were appointed to coordinate the national exhibitions; among them were Wang Mantian, the director of the Culture Group, and Gao Jingde, a young oil painting instructor.<sup>9</sup> Between 1972 and 1975, national exhibitions were organized every year in Beijing at the National Art Museum of China on October 1, China's National Day. The artworks were selected from all parts of China. While some of the works were done by professional artists who were recently freed from labor camps by the State Council, over half of them were produced by amateurs including rusticated youth, workers, peasants, and soldiers, who were encouraged by the state to paint.<sup>10</sup> Some of the exhibitions were specifically designated to exhibit works created by one of these groups. The national exhibitions ended with the death of Mao in September 1976, which also put an end to the Cultural Revolution.

The art exhibitions that appeared in the Cultural Revolution were a manifestation of the ideas expressed in Mao's talks at the Yan'an forum on literature and art in May 1942, in which Mao emphasized the indispensable role of revolutionary art in educating the masses

<sup>7</sup> Roderick Macfarquhar, "The Cultural Revolution," in *Art and China's Revolution*, 47.

<sup>8</sup> Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 349.

<sup>9</sup> Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

and the essential purpose of art in serving the people.<sup>11</sup> These exhibitions, whether in a museum or other public spaces, displayed Mao's values to the audience and visually educated them about his revolutionary beliefs. Exhibitions construct new ways of understanding the world.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, they institutionalize values and create narratives. While the Red Guard art exhibitions and the national exhibitions certainly created different narratives to gather support for Mao, they were closely connected, especially in the way the national exhibitions responded to the Red Guard art exhibitions. This paper will explore the intricate relationship between the two groups of exhibitions by comparing their national narratives in terms of the exhibition venue, ideological focus of works, work selection and quality editing.

## Red Guard Art Exhibitions

"For visitors, the exhibition environment is the primary medium of communication," states Ross Loomis.<sup>13</sup> Exhibition venues shape audience's experience with the exhibitions and the exhibits, resulting in different exhibition narratives. What made the Red Guard art exhibitions unique was the fact that their exhibitions were held at different locations in Beijing, including the National Art Museum of China, Tiananmen Square, the Museum of Revolutionary History, the Beijing Planetarium, the Beijing Exhibition Center, and the factory regions in Beijing suburbs. While the unofficial nature of the exhibitions and the different combinations of organizing units at different times in part explained why the Red Guard did not have a fixed exhibition venue, the response to Mao's advocacy of making the art available to the masses also contributed to the itinerant nature of the exhibitions. These various exhibition venues, however, gave the shows a strong revolutionary character. For instance, on May 25, 1967, the outdoor exhibition entitled *Long Live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* opened in Tiananmen Square. Displaying at Tiananmen Square had a special revolutionary significance to the Red Guards. The Square was the imperial icon of the city center, the front gate of the Forbidden City. It was also where Mao made public announcements and received the Red Guards. Between August and December of 1966, there were eight occasions of Mao receiving the Red Guards coming from different parts of China at Tiananmen Square.<sup>14</sup> The estimated number of Red Guards gathering there to meet with Mao was between ten and thirteen million.<sup>15</sup> In other words, for the mainstream, the Square was a contact point between the Party and the people; for the Red Guards, it resembled a holy destination to see Mao. Exhibiting Red Guard art in the Square not only increased audience's proximity to Mao, but also reinforced Mao's revolutionary values.

As the Red Guard art exhibitions were launched spontaneously by students in collaboration with different communes or rebel units, and organizing units of each exhibition were different every time, it is logical to conclude that these exhibitions were not professionally planned and administered. In preparing for the exhibitions, the Red Guards

<sup>11</sup> Mao Tse-Tung. *Mao Tse-Tung: Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art* (Peking: People's Publishing House, 1953), 2, 26.

<sup>12</sup> Sharon Macdonald, "Introduction," in *Theorizing Museums: Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Ross J Loomis. *Museum Visitor Evaluation: New Tool for Management* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1987), 160.

<sup>14</sup> Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," 34.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 1**

Shen Yaoyi, *Advancing Through the Storm in the Footstep of Chairman Mao*, 1966. Woodblock print. Collections of Wang Mingxian.

assembled posters and works that had been popularly seen on street walls in newspapers or journals.<sup>16</sup> Many of the paintings they gathered were collectively produced by workers belonging to certain communes.<sup>17</sup> But the artists were not given official guidelines or strict supervision on the content and technical quality of the art apart from following the abstract concepts of Mao's talk on literature and art, and further editing of the work was minimal. Considering over half of the works gathered were produced by amateurs who might not have had professional training in art, divergent styles and varying technical skills were found in the works exhibited.

In terms of ideological focus, art produced by the Red Guards themselves largely served the interests of the Communist Party. The works shown in the exhibitions reflected this tendency with three ideological focuses. With Mao's revolutionary ideas so prevalent at the time, the call for revolution was a major emphasis. The woodcut print titled *Advancing Through the Storm in the Footstep of Chairman Mao* (fig. 1) made by Shen Yaoyi was exhibited in the show *Long Live the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution* on May 25, 1967 in Tiananmen Square.

<sup>16</sup> Wang, "Hongweibing meishuyundong ji dui dangdaiyishu de yingxiang," 33.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.



**Figure 2**

*Paen to the Red Guards,*  
1966.

Clay sculpture. Photograph  
collection of Wang  
Mingxian

This image was adapted from a photograph taken on the occasion of Mao receiving the Red Guards on August 18, 1966 after Mao's official declaration of the "May Sixteenth Directive" on May 16, 1966 announcing the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>18</sup> The photographed image was redeveloped as prints and an oil painting. In this black and red print, dressed in a typical army black suit with a red badge on his left sleeve reading "Red Guard," Mao dominates the space. He waves at the young Red Guards, who are holding the red books of Mao's revolutionary quotes. As Mao looks to the left, the Red Guards follow, suggesting the Red Guards' loyalty to Mao. It is important to note how popular this print was at the time because of its nature as a woodcut. Woodcuts were widely promoted by the Party as a form that could be mass-produced for propaganda purposes.<sup>19</sup> The printing house Xinhua Printing Works reproduced this print in large numbers for distribution nationwide.<sup>20</sup> Showing this print in the Red Guard art exhibition reinforced the audience's connection to this familiar image of the revolutionary leader and incited viewers' revolutionary sentiment.

<sup>18</sup> Tan Jingxia, *Xinzhongguo meishujingdian*: 60 (Wuhanshi: Hubei meishu chubanshe, 2004), 154.

<sup>19</sup> Yan Shanchun, "Painting Mao," in *Art and China's Revolution*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 3**

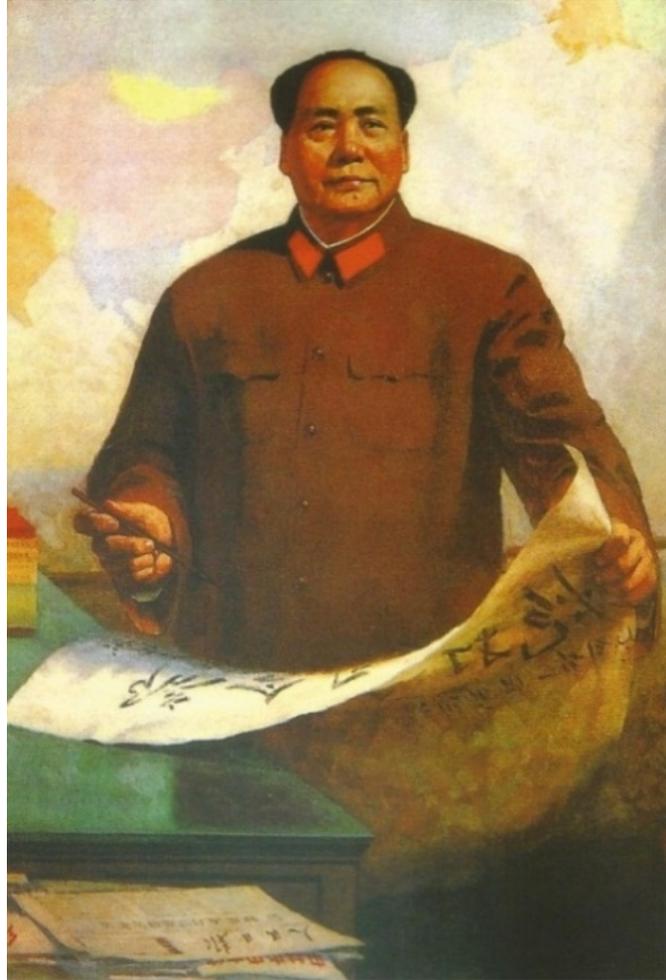
*Paeon to the Red Guards*, 1966. Clay sculpture. Photograph collection of Wang Mingxian.

The *Paeon to the Red Guards* (figs 2 and 3) is a series of sculptures illustrating the revolutionary fervor of youth in struggling against the intelligentsia. They appeared in the Red Guard art exhibition *Long Live the Victory of Chairman Mao's Revolutionary Line* held on October 1, 1967 in the National Art Museum of China. Influenced by the model sculpture series *Rent Collection Courtyard* made in 1965, which was an overt statement against bourgeois oppression of peasants, a group of art teachers, students, workers, and liberation soldiers produced these life-sized sculptures. Rendered in Socialist Realist style, this series expresses the glorious moment of the proletarian struggle by depicting the Red Guards engaging in successive scenes of revolutionary activities to uproot the "four olds."<sup>21</sup> Almost a hundred clay sculptures were made within twenty days. Unfortunately, they collapsed after the exhibition because the clay used was not durable. But the series was vigorously praised for its affecting power in portraying the Red Guards' struggles and fully reflecting the revolutionary current.<sup>22</sup> A review in the journal *New Art* written in 1967 described, ". . . although [this work] was a bit coarse, its very strong revolutionary fervor received widespread praise from the revolutionary mass."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Wang Mingxian, "The Red Guards' Fine Arts Campaign," in *Art and China's Revolution*, 196.

<sup>22</sup> Tan, *Xinzhongguo meishujingdian*: 60, 156.

<sup>23</sup>The original Chinese quote reads "儘管有些粗糙，然而由於他強烈的鬥爭氣息，而受到廣大革命群眾熱烈讚揚。" *Ibid.*, 60, 156.

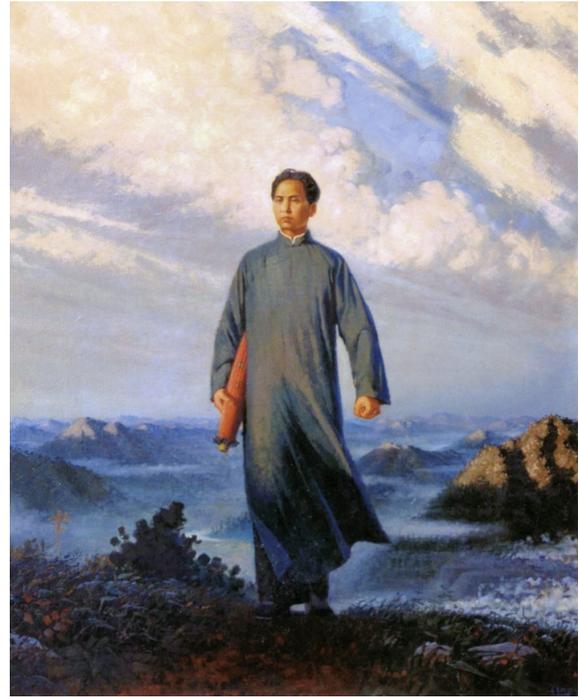


**Figure 4**

*Bombard the Headquarters—  
My Big-Character Poster*  
(now lost), 1967.  
Oil on canvas.

In support of Mao, a goal of the Red Guards was to smash the counter-revolutionaries within the Party. Criticism of Mao's rivals therefore became a focus unique to the Red Guard art exhibitions. From June to July of 1966, Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping, the vice-chairman and the secretary of the Party respectively, sent "work teams" to colleges to suppress students' revolutionary activities. In response, Mao wrote a big-character poster entitled *Bombard the Headquarters—My Big-Character Poster* on August 5 and displayed it on the door of the room where the Central Committee met to criticize the acts of Liu and Deng. A big-character poster was a poster with handwritten calligraphy that served to discredit people or policies.<sup>24</sup> This incident inspired a group of workers and peasants to create an oil painting sharing the same title as Mao's poster (fig. 4). This work was selected for the Red Guard art exhibition in the National Art Museum of China on October 1. In this painting, Mao has just finished writing his big-character poster. The way he holds the poster with his clutched hand while fixing his gaze in the distance displays his insistence on denouncing the acts of his opponents.

<sup>24</sup> Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," 33.



**Figure 5**

Liu Hunhua, *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, 1967. Oil on canvas, 220 x 180 cm. China Construction Bank.

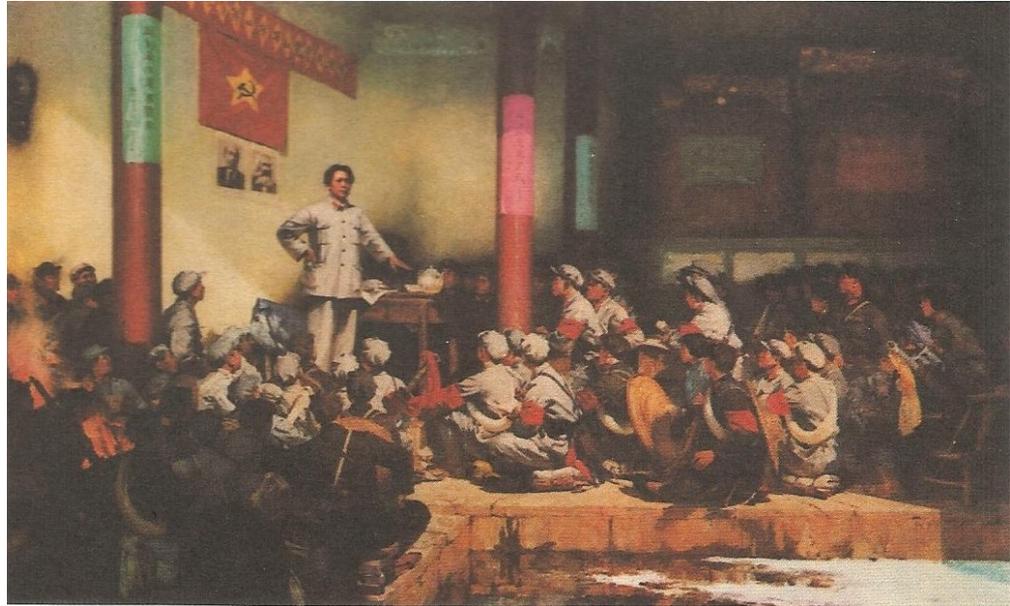
An essential focus of the Red Guard art exhibitions was to venerate Mao. This theme consistently appeared in a number of important works chosen for the exhibitions. Liu Chunhua's oil painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (fig. 5) was shown in another Red Guard art exhibition entitled *Mao Zedong's Thought Illuminates the Anyuan Workers' Movement* in October 1967 held in the Museum of Revolutionary History in Beijing. The work exemplifies people's enthusiastic admiration of Mao, almost to the point of deifying the chairman. Liu depicts the young Mao's visit to Anyuan to re-organize the coal miners in 1921, a critical moment in Mao's early political life. Set in a spectacular landscape, Mao is standing at the mountain top with his left hand in a clenched fist. The wind billows his robe but Mao remains steadfast on the ground. These pictorial treatments fashion Mao as a determined and confident young leader. The monumentality of this painting further enhances the lofty position of the image. The painting's height of over two meters forces the viewer standing in front of it to look up to see Mao's face. Highly praised by Jiang Qing, this work very soon became the model image of Mao. The popularity of this image reached its peak when the government authorized *People's Daily*, the Communist Party's official newspaper read by a large audience, to reproduce the painting as colored posters.<sup>25</sup> Later on, this portrait of Mao was mass-produced in other popular forms of propaganda items such as badges, paper-cuts, and pocket mirrors.<sup>26</sup> Liu Chunhua himself later recalled that during the Cultural Revolution there were around 900 million copies of this image printed.<sup>27</sup> Viewed as a politically significant iconographical representation of Mao, the Culture Group decided to re-exhibit this painting in the first national exhibition in 1972 in the National Art Museum of China to serve as the model painting.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," 43–44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Cai Qing, *Xinzhongguo meishujingdian*: 70 (Wuhanshi: Hubei meishu chubanshe, 2004), 5.



**Figure 6**

He Kongde, *Gutian Meeting*, 1972. Oil painting, 175 x 290 cm.

## National Exhibitions

The national exhibitions run by the Culture Group of the state seemed to respond to the Red Guard art exhibitions in every aspect. The national exhibitions not only exercised greater control on the exhibition venue, they also shifted the ideological focus of works and carefully supervised the works' technical quality, revising the national narrative established by the Red Guard art exhibitions.

Contrary to the Red Guard art exhibitions, the national exhibitions were held once every year in the same venue—the National Art Museum of China. The National Art Museum of China is at the heart of Beijing, and only a seven-minute walk from the northern edge of the Forbidden City. Founded in 1961, the Museum was one of the ten architectural projects planned at the outset of the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. In 1963, Mao inscribed a Chinese title board for the museum entrance, giving it the status of a national museum of art.<sup>29</sup> Since then, it became the venue hosting anniversary exhibitions in celebration of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Given the national significance of this venue, the National Art Museum of China legitimized its exhibitors and exhibits. To viewers, the art displayed projected a pictorial narrative that signified the permitted taste and standard of the state. Compared to the Red Guard art exhibitions that were installed in scattered spots throughout the city and the suburbs at various times within a year, the national exhibitions offered a more official and consistent curatorial image of national identity.

<sup>29</sup> "History," The National Art Museum of China, accessed November 29, 2011, [http://www.namoc.org/en/about\\_NAMOC/History/index.html](http://www.namoc.org/en/about_NAMOC/History/index.html).



**Figure 7**

Shen Jiawei, *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 189 x 158 cm. Collection of Shen Jiawei.

Like the Red Guard art exhibitions, the works in the national exhibitions continued to glorify Mao. Along with showing the oil painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (fig. 5) again in the first national exhibition in 1972 to assert Mao's supremacy, paintings such as He Kongde's *Gutian Meeting* (fig. 6) also exalted Mao's leadership. Similar to Liu Chunhua's painting, He Kongde uses a past event in the life of Mao as his subject matter, recalling the event when Mao went to the Gutian village in Fujian to present new doctrines to the Communist troops in December 1929.<sup>30</sup> The young Mao is surrounded by the rural troops who are attentively listening to his teachings. The spotlight cast on Mao highlights his importance relative to the other members. His hand gestures—right hand placed on his waist and left hand in motion—tells of his authority. The symbol of Soviet Russia on the wall behind Mao emphasizes the Socialist thought advocated by Mao. The portrayal of Mao as an authoritative military leader in this painting reminds the audience of Mao's accomplishments and contribution to the military structure even before he became the leading figure of the Cultural Revolution.

In the Red Guard art exhibitions, there was a heavy emphasis on revolutionary emotions and criticism against the Party's enemies. This tone, however, diminished in the national exhibitions, possibly because most of Mao's rivals had been purged by 1971. What the national exhibitions focused on instead was a more utopian vision of people contributing to Communist society, which paralleled the Party's new direction to maintain a more stable political condition in the early 1970s. The oil painting *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland* (fig. 7) exhibited in the 1974 national exhibition received Jiang Qing's attention and high recognition. The painter Shen Jiawei was a sent-down youth and an amateur painter. He began attending art classes organized in Heilongjiang in 1973. His work depicts the heroic contribution of a few rusticated youth who were sent-down soldiers in Heilongjiang, near the Siberian border. Shen depicts three young soldiers standing on a tower roof in extremely cold weather, alertly performing their duties. Their stern facial expressions and poised gestures demonstrate their fearlessness in devoting their youth to guard the frontier of their motherland. The grandeur of the snowy land in the background further romanticizes the heroism of youth.

Tang Muli's *Acupuncture Anesthesia* (fig. 8) in the first national exhibition offered another idealized picture of Communist society. Tang Muli was also a sent-down youth who worked in a dairy farm in the suburb of Shanghai. Like Shen Jiawei, he attended art classes for sent-down youth in his spare time after work where he discovered his gift for painting. In 1971, he was commissioned by the Health Department to produce a finer version of an accepted work depicting the administration of acupuncture. His large painting was a collaborative effort, which involved the decisions of six members from the Department, including the artist himself, to arrive at an approved storyline. The group members made a few decisions with the artist: the surgery had to be a lung surgery, the patient had to smile so as to imply the effectiveness of acupuncture, and the nurse would not wear a mask in order to show her smile to indicate her happiness at work.<sup>31</sup> The smile of the nurse and the patient certainly turns a stressful moment into a relaxed and pleasant one. Such idealizing treatment of the content of this painting not only sought to magnify the effectiveness of the Chinese medical treatment, but also to fabricate an ideal scene of medical workers making contributions to the Communist life with passion.

<sup>30</sup> Cai Qing, *Xinzhongguo meishujingdian*, 70, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 357–359 and Tang, Muli, "Chongzai tianyajiu: Huiyi youhuazhencimazuide chuanguozuojingguo," *Women zheyidai: 40 Hou shanghai youhua jia yishuwenxianji* (Shanghai: Shanghai jinxiuwenzhang chubanzhe, 2011), 268–271.



**Figure 8**

Tang Muli, *Acupuncture Anesthesia*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 165 x 229 cm. Collection of the National Museum of China.

Not only were the works' content closely inspected, the technical quality of selected works was also more strictly monitored for the national exhibitions to ensure a greater consistency in style and technique, which appeared to be a direct response to the disorganized Red Guard art exhibitions. Jiang Qing laid down the guidelines as to what criteria the work should fulfill in order to be accepted to the national exhibitions. There were two major requirements: correct political message and high technical standard.<sup>32</sup> Jiang Qing also suggested the Principles of Three Prominences—"red, smooth, luminescent"—which meant that in depicting Chairman Mao or the main protagonist, artists should portray him or her as red, bright, and shining.<sup>33</sup> These guidelines were disseminated to art authorities in all provinces. The Culture Group then sent officials to visit provinces to look for suitable works according to the official requirements on contents and technical skills. There were also commissioned works that involved different officials' decisions about their contents. Tang Muli's painting (fig. 8) is a good example of such cases.

What is intriguing is the formation of Painting Correction Groups for different genres such as oil painting and *guohua* (national painting). Owing to the fact that more than half of the selected works were done by amateurs that expressed appealing political messages but demonstrated poor painting skills, Painting Correction Groups were formed to refine the

<sup>32</sup> Andrews, "The Art of the Cultural Revolution," 47.

<sup>33</sup> Shen, "Propaganda Posters and Art," 158.

accepted works.<sup>34</sup> These groups consisted of professional painters from various art academies in different parts of China appointed by the Culture Group. As the system required, these professionals, who were from the same region as the artists whose works were chosen, were to accompany the works from the original provinces to Beijing and to “correct” any problematic parts of the works if they were considered technically inadequate by the jury. If the correction was still not satisfactory, a professional from another province would give further help.<sup>35</sup> The paintings discussed earlier had indeed been repainted by the Correction Groups. He Kongde’s *Gutian Meeting*, (fig. 6) for example, had the right political message but the Committee decided that the face of Mao should be more smoothly painted, so the Correction Group repainted Mao’s face so that it looked smoother and brighter than the others.<sup>36</sup> Shen Jiawei’s *Standing Guard for Our Great Motherland* (fig. 7) was also revised by the Correction Group. The Group, based on the Principles of Three Prominences, repainted the face of the two main characters standing at the front to make their skin look redder, smoother, and lighter with fiercer expressions, a decision that displeased Shen.<sup>37</sup> There was also a Painting Correction Group for *guohua* in the 1973 exhibition. Zhou Sicong, a graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, was once assigned to repaint an ink painting produced by a worker with the subject matter of an actress trying on her ballet slippers before an opera performance at the factory. Since the worker did not have adequate skills to depict the subject with anatomical accuracy, Zhou had to make an entirely new painting according to the original work’s composition, and the work was still displayed under the worker’s name in the national exhibition.<sup>38</sup> This very idea of forming official correction groups to edit the colors, to determine what to include and exclude, or even to replace the work with another done by a professional hand was significant to the creation process of national narratives for the national exhibitions. The notion of editing artists’ works to make figures or story lines fit certain criteria implies the intention to create and re-construct an idealized and utopian narrative of Communism to represent the nation. This high degree of editing and revision to exhibition materials was not commonly found in the Red Guard art exhibitions.

## Conclusion

In comparing the two groups of exhibitions that emerged during the Cultural Revolution, art exhibited in the Red Guard art exhibitions was filled with strong revolutionary spirit and criticism. In terms of artistic quality and organization of the exhibitions, the Red Guards, however, gave an ambitious yet disorganized effort in administering the exhibitions to present Maoist revolutionary thoughts. In contrast, the state-run national exhibitions offered a more idealized national vision by portraying the social contributions of heroic youth. Moreover, through stricter supervision on works’ content and quality, and a more organized system of coordinating the shows, the national exhibitions constructed a more consistent and official national identity. In my research, I have not been able to locate official documents publicly stating that the resumption of the state’s control over art exhibitions was a direct result of the chaotic condition of the Red Guard art exhibitions, nor do I know if such documents even exist. But considering the differences between the two groups of exhibitions

<sup>34</sup> Andrews, “The Art of the Cultural Revolution,” 47.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 50.

in terms of exhibition venue, ideological focus of works, work selection and quality editing, I believe that the national exhibitions were the state's attempt to revise the unofficial and chaotic national narrative of the Red Guard art exhibitions in order to re-establish a more utopian, consistent, and official national narrative and to restore social order. It is, however, important to note that despite the different narratives of the two groups of exhibitions, what remained unchanged was the supremacy of Mao, which could be testified by the display of the painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* in both exhibitions.

Although more recent research has paid attention to specific groups of propaganda posters or paintings produced during the Cultural Revolution and how contemporary Chinese artists have re-worked the icons of Cultural Revolution art, scholarship and discussion of art exhibitions held during this period are still rather limited, and many questions such as the reception of the art itself and the specific curatorial practice of each individual exhibition remain unanswered. The complicated politics during the period and the inadequacy of surviving information about the exhibitions make the study of this area both challenging and exciting. What is necessary for the study of this topic is perhaps more scholarly recognition of the exhibitions that took place during this disturbing period as significant attempts in institutionalizing and promulgating revolutionary values to the general public in large scale settings. Rather than understanding them as by-products of a politically failed moment in the past, it is important to acknowledge that these exhibitions are in fact major carriers of ideas of a unique historical moment in China that still have repercussions today, and it is the hope of this project to inspire new interests and perspectives of the art and the exhibitions during this period when China was internally so explosive and yet remained so isolated from the world.



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