

ART IN TURMOIL: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76. *Contemporary Chinese Studies. Edited by Richard King; with Ralph Croizier, Shengtian Zheng and Scott Watson.* Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010. xii, 282 pp. (B&W photos, coloured photos, illus.) US\$32.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-7748-1543-7.

This fine book is a welcome addition to the growing body of new research on the cultural products of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. It pays particular attention to the visual arts but also includes studies of the model operas and ballets and a brief glance at fiction. The introduction by Richard King and Jan Walls gives helpful political and social background, and more specific detail can be found in the individual chapters. A generous number of illustrations, many in colour, are also provided.

The distance in time and social transformation between China during the Cultural Revolution and today encourages reconsiderations of the visual arts, not least because of their remarkable survival in original and refigured forms. The introduction, for instance, after drawing attention to the huge gap between artistic representations of the period and the reality of life at the time, raises a provocative question: Do these “ghosts” now threaten post-socialist China? The book does not provide an answer, but many of its chapters highlight the persistence of Cultural Revolution art forms decades after their supposed demise.

In her opening chapter, Julia F. Andrews, like other contributors to this collection, stresses the brutality of the Cultural Revolution, noting the contrast between German openness about national responsibility for their recent past and the failure of current Chinese politicians to face up to communist misrule. She rejects the phrase “the ten lost years,” preferring to see the period not as an aberration but as an accumulation of existing trends, and points out the tendency of Red Guard organizations in 1966-68 to replicate the bureaucratic habits that they ostensibly opposed. Andrews concludes with reflections on the revival of Cultural Revolution iconography, or “fictionalized remembrance”: “That the Cultural Revolution images—happy pictures masking a tragic reality—were often fiction themselves has been forgotten. Those that survive have outlived the truth that has not” (57).

Chapters by Britta Erickson and Ralph Croizier examine the changing interpretations or representations of Cultural Revolution works over several decades. Erickson contrasts the early series of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* sculptures with Cai Guo-Qiang’s *Venice’s Rent Collection Courtyard* in terms of audience expectations and reception, collective authorship and copyright, and class-based rhetoric and current nationalist rhetoric. Croizier is equally illuminating on Hu Xian peasant painting, tackling the “relationship between mass spontaneity and guidance from above” (137). I would be inclined to differentiate between the professional painters who were involved in their production through teaching and collaboration, and the party’s cultural authorities, local and central, whose intervention then and now in vigorously

promoting these products needs a stronger word than guidance. Croizier sees the continuance of peasant painting as not just a matter of local choice by individual painters but the result of new central policies “to validate the party as a protector of Chinese national identity in the face of renewed Western cultural inroads” (153).

A fascinating interlude is provided by two short memoirs by Chinese painters now resident in Canada, Shengtian Zheng and Gu Xiong. At the time of the Cultural Revolution, the former was a young art teacher in Hangzhou, the latter a Chongqing schoolboy sent to the countryside. Both then found refuge in art; neither now suffer from nostalgia.

The remaining chapters focus on the artistic and social contexts in which the works originally appeared. Shelley Drake Hawks writes an impassioned account of the tragic life of the painter Shi Lu, and Bai Di examines gender issues in *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Red Detachment of Women*. Paul Clark draws attention to the number of performance presentations throughout the Cultural Revolution and to the narrowness of their contents and styles. While few scholars now believe that only eight model works were performed during this period, from the audience perspective there was little choice in theatrical entertainment. Propaganda art is not as easy to produce as it may seem.

In his concluding chapter, Richard King draws together the visual, performing and literary arts in works featuring “an exemplary hero ready for literal or metaphorical battle” (203). Unfortunately for its promoters, these victorious battles turned out to be mere fantasies, “evaporating the instant that the real battle was joined” (215). The perpetual battlefront mentality of the Cultural Revolution forms one of the great contrasts with today’s “harmonious development”: Is it being suggested that the latter is equally a fantasy of politicians divorced from reality?

Readers may wish to take issue with some passages. One may doubt whether “politics and art” are “irrevocably intertwined” in China significantly more than in other countries (54). And were the middle generation in the 1950s and 1960s “idealistic” or was their apparent commitment to building socialism simply self-interest? Was it “trust and idealism” that led them into disaster, or fear and passive obedience? (29). The swift response to the economic reforms of the 1980s onwards does not suggest a weary, disappointed population but one responding in relief at their escape from oppressive interference in daily life. The book would also be improved by more care in editing, especially in regard to translating special terms. The apostrophe in Hanyu Pinyin is misused, and the index is incomplete.

These are minor quibbles. The level of scholarship throughout is high, with extensive reading in Chinese-language primary and secondary sources combined with personal experience. It is recommended reading for all students of contemporary Chinese culture and society.