

The Michael Schoenhals Collection

CHINA DURING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION 1966-1976

Exhibition at the University Library, May – December 2018



革命现代样板戏
八场芭蕾舞剧

向毛女 选曲

上海市舞蹈学校演出



China during the Cultural Revolution

The Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976, is a unique and turbulent period in the history of the People's Republic of China. Chairman Mao Zedong initiated the Cultural Revolution to strengthen his position within the communist party and to get rid of political opponents. Students, peasants and workers were called upon to identify enemies to Mao's political line – so-called revisionists, rightists or counter-revolutionaries. Armed with Maoist quotes, a feverish worship of the chairman, and the slogan "To Rebel Is Justified", citizens were allowed to organize, publish information, and revolutionize society. The Michael Schoenhals Collection – China during the Cultural Revolution tells the local and national story of how the Cultural Revolution unfolded.

The collector and donor, Michael Schoenhals, collected the material during the 1990's by visiting flea markets in Beijing, Shanghai and Nanjing. A smaller part of the collection was gathered by the cultural attaché at the Swedish embassy in Beijing 1966-1967 and was later donated to Michael Schoenhals. The collection contains unique material, including newsletters, criticism material, posters, caricatures, vinyl records, pictures, diaries and crime investigations made by Red Guard factions.

To order material from the collection and browse the archive record, visit www.alvin-portal.org



The celebration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Xinhua News Agency Celebration Pictures, 1969

Mao worship and disgraced political leaders

The veneration of Mao Zedong reached its heights during the Cultural Revolution and was officially promoted by the leadership. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, it had been unthinkable to criticize the party, as the party constituted the highest authority. Now, senior communist party leaders were no longer untouchable. Instead, Mao became the highest authority, placed above the party. The collection displays this feature of the Cultural Revolution through the many celebratory Mao books, political caricatures of enemies to Mao, and so-called “criticism material” about denounced political leaders.



The celebration of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Xinhua News Agency Celebration Pictures, 1969

Everyday life during the Cultural Revolution

Politics also permeated the everyday life during the Cultural Revolution. Workplaces organized political study sessions, everyday clothing expressed revolutionary commitment by the wearing of Mao badges, and class belonging as well as revolutionary identity had direct implications for people's life biographies. The politicized nature of everyday life is reflected in the diaries on display in our exhibition, which do not contain much private information. Like official propaganda and other publications, they hail Mao, discuss the content of study sessions, or ponder about how Mao Zedong thought can be implemented in everyday life.

Enemies of the people – counter-revolutionaries and revisionists

People from all walks of life were affected by the political hunt for counter-revolutionaries and revisionists. Fear for one's own safety often led people to participate in attacks on colleagues, family and friends. Investigations of suspected criminals and counter-revolutionaries were common, and investigation processes could be initiated by a workplace unit (danwei) or any other type of organization or group. The collection contains investigation cases conducted by Red Guards, work units and state institutions consisting of confessions, accusations, self-critique, auto-biographies and denunciations. Together, they contribute to advancing the knowledge of investigation processes, private life biographies, but also reflect the precarious situation that everyone faced, irrespective of their class background.



6.26 Zhuanji, magazine cover

Ministry of Health, Jinggangshan United Combat Group, 1967

The relation between arts and politics has been especially pronounced in China due to the Maoist view of art as a political tool. The role of art was to serve the needs of the people and socialism, ideals which reached their acme during the Cultural Revolution. Content and form were highly regulated; communist expression was specified down to a particular form of language, graphics and visuals. To guide artists, some works of art were officially promoted as “model works” to be emulated by other artists. Print replicas and vinyl records of some designated model works are on display in the exhibition in the form of model operas, paintings and ballets.

The Cultural Revolution is divided into two art phases. The first phase, 1966-1971, is characterized by visual art in the form of caricatures, cartoons, and woodcuts for broadsheets and posters. The themes generally range from hailing Mao to denunciation of enemies. The second phase, 1971-1976, is characterized by a centralized control of arts, but also a greater variety of art forms, such as operas, symphonies and ballets. During this period the happiness and heroism of everyday people became a common art theme. The collection contains examples of art works from both periods, but is particularly rich in caricatures and political cartoons.



On the docks, vinyl cover, China Record Company, 1972

Sources:

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Picture front page: The White Haired Girl, vinyl cover, China Record Company, date unknown

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