

# Introduction

## PAINTING BY CANDLELIGHT IN MAO'S CHINA

**I**N 1966, CHINA'S YOUTH FEVERISHLY RESPONDED TO MAO ZEDONG'S CALL for Cultural Revolution. Relics of Old China—temples, paintings, books, and furniture—were destroyed, and authors and artists forcibly brought into line. From 1966 to 1976, an estimated 1.5 million people were harmed. Roughly the same number died. Victims were harassed and imprisoned, and some tortured to death.<sup>1</sup> At China's two premier universities, Peking and Tsinghua, more than thirty-one professors committed suicide.<sup>2</sup>

Among the most persecuted were China's painters (fig. I.1). This book focuses on seven whose stories capture Mao's assault on China's creative traditions—and the art of resistance they practiced. They are Ding Cong (1916–2009), Feng Zikai (1898–1975), Li Keran (1907–1989), Li Kuchan (1898–1983), Huang Yongyu (b. 1924), Pan Tianshou (1897–1971), and Shi Lu (1919–1982). The suffering of some artists, such as Ding Cong and Shi Lu, began prior to the Cultural Revolution. However, the wave of extremism that broke out in 1966 was more penetrating and extensive than before. It swept up virtually every famous painter in its path.

Removed from their positions as teachers and administrators, separated from their families, publicly ridiculed, and physically beaten, most anyone would lose his or her

**I.1** *Shovel Out the Art World's Revisionist Black Line* (Shanghai, 1967). Recently sacked president Liu Shaoqi is shown here with a bruised nose. Below him is a bespectacled and bearded Feng Zikai with outstretched arms still holding his blacklisted book, *Protecting Life Painting Collection*. From *Chanchu meishujie de xiuzhengzhuyi heixian*, cover. Collection of the author.

bearings. What sets these seven apart is that they remained artists in spite of the terror. They used unguarded moments to secretly paint or write poetry. Sometimes, they did not even have access to brush and paper. A shaken Pan Tianshou wrote his final poem on a discarded cigarette wrapper, using a pencil stub picked off the floor. Expressly forbidden to use a paintbrush, Ding Cong switched to scissors, skillfully transforming bits of sponge into small sculptures of animals, birds, and literary figures. He drew on the back of exhibition labels at the gallery where he served as janitor. Huang Yongyu overcame obstacles too. Authorities presumed that he would stop painting after they moved him to a tiny shed with no window except one facing a neighbor's wall. Instead, the lack of a window galvanized him to paint an "eternal" window to bring sunlight and fresh flowers into the room. Shi Lu never stopped practicing calligraphy, even during the worst phase of the Cultural Revolution, circa 1966–69. To occupy himself during "struggle meetings," he moved his head, hand, or eyes to imagine writing with a brush. He drew the character *jian* ("sharp-pointed" or "ruthless") with his fingers or toes to talk back to his accusers. He later explained these actions to his son as practicing "hand, foot, head, and eyes" calligraphy.<sup>3</sup>

Mao instigated the Cultural Revolution to dispense with real or imagined rivals and cleanse society of perceived backwardness. He accused members of his own Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of heading toward capitalism. Art became an important battleground in Mao's struggle to realize his aspirations.<sup>4</sup> His avid followers considered the visual arts vital to their revolutionary program. In their view, the goal of painting was to validate Mao's leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. Nothing in the style or content of a painting could suggest anything but fervent enthusiasm for Mao, whatever direction his policies might take. This applied to traditional Chinese ink paintings as well as oil paintings in the socialist realist style.

The demand that all art be fervently political had roots in Chinese culture prior to Communist rule. Social realism (a style of art and literature predating Stalin's socialist realism of the 1930s) gained influence in China during the early twentieth century, when activists looked abroad for new ways to mobilize popular support for dramatic change. They admired the directness and immediacy of cinema, street theater, posters, woodcuts, and oil paintings, for these formats could be used to communicate with illiterate and semiliterate audiences. Chinese ink painting, with its poetic quality and expressive brushwork, could not convey messages with the same clarity. The traditional art form required knowledge of symbols and prolonged study to unlock its meaning. Its narrow range of motifs—flowers, birds, animals, ancient figures, and landscapes—seemed disconnected to urgent social problems. As China's crisis deepened, the native painting tradition waned in popularity.

Early twentieth-century Chinese activists hoped that by using art as a staging ground for their ideas, they could bring about a radical transformation of the popular mind-set. Impatient for results, some Chinese progressives began to think of

art entirely for its use value and consider it most effective when it bombarded the prospective viewer by “saying the same thing over and over.”<sup>5</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, the Eight Model Performances (five operas, two ballets, and a symphony) promoted by Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, epitomized the aspiration to create a uniform standard of propaganda and immerse audiences in it.<sup>6</sup> When this goal of “reeducating” through art was pressed to an extreme, as it was by radical Maoists, art became the servant of command-style politics.

Before the Communists gained power in 1949, their politically sponsored art mainly depicted the gloom of war-torn, capitalist China; once power had been won, only praise for socialism was acceptable. Accustomed to functioning as critics of the social order, progressive artists faced a psychological adjustment after 1949. Although their living conditions were better, political sensitivities made art-making precarious.<sup>7</sup> During some periods after 1949, pressure to conform to a strict program was extreme; at other times, some artistic experimentation was encouraged. Artists had to be alert to these frequent shifts. Those tasked with painting the Great Leader had to be especially careful.<sup>8</sup> A hint of something questionable could lead to removing the painting from public view and end the painter’s career. This is precisely what happened to Shi Lu, who suffered extreme persecution on account of suspicions about his 1959 portrait of Mao.

Modern Chinese painters had to be mindful of New China’s evolving cultural identity, distancing themselves from their Confucian forebears to avoid the stigma of being branded elitist or feudal. Early twentieth-century activist and CCP founder Chen Duxiu famously admonished Chinese artists who continued to paint in the orthodox style of Qing dynasty landscape painting to stop practicing an “evil art.”<sup>9</sup> Chen argued that China’s heritage must be replaced by an entirely new cultural legacy centered on revolutionary agitation. He made a direct correlation between China’s inability to stave off foreign aggressors and the habit of “bury[ing] our heads in old books day and night.”<sup>10</sup> Inspired by such rhetoric, art students responded enthusiastically to the challenge of representing contemporary life directly rather than copying centuries-old paintings. China’s modern art academies, founded on Western methods, accelerated the exodus from traditional practice. Artists who continued to paint in ink remained vulnerable to the claim that they had not gone far enough to dispense with the old ways.

Ink painters who ventured too far out of the native tradition risked reproach for appearing servile to foreign tastes. Shi Lu and Li Keran were caught in this dilemma. Both painters cross-fertilized their practice of ink painting with techniques from other artistic genres. Li Keran had originally trained to be an oil painter, and Shi Lu had been a woodcut artist. Their inventive creations earned them fame in the 1950s, but the political tide shifted during the thaw of 1961–63. Complaints aired in the national magazine *Fine Arts* (Meishu) criticized them for making ink painting seem “messy,” “too dark,”

“wild,” and “chaotic.”<sup>11</sup> Shi Lu’s critics claimed that he was insufficiently trained in the fundamentals of traditional Chinese painting and unqualified to be hailed as standard bearer. Viewers reacted negatively to the “stifling” heaviness of the ink in Li Keran’s dense landscape paintings and their seemingly somber tone.

The pejorative language used to denounce the artistic quality of Shi Lu’s and Li Keran’s paintings in the early 1960s set a precedent for later recriminations. The emotional tenor of the earlier debate made it easy for radical Maoists to persuade youth that the “wild and black” paintings of Shi Lu and Li Keran were not simply “messy” but dangerously counterrevolutionary. Immersed in the hysterical climate of 1966, militant youth, the so-called Red Guards, came to accept that it was their heroic mission on behalf of Chairman Mao to stop “Black Painters” from producing more black paintings. Unwanted cultural expressions were considered “poisonous weeds” to be “shoveled out,” and artists were to be discarded in the same summary fashion. On Cultural Revolution–era posters, militant youth shake their fists and threaten to paint over with a brush anyone deemed conservative, including even Mao’s onetime successor, President Liu Shaoqi, denounced as “China’s Khrushchev.” During that uncompromising time, nothing could dim the luster of Mao’s creative genius. An often-reproduced portrait of a colossal Mao holding a writing brush (fig. I.2) implied that he was not merely the greatest statesman China had ever produced but also the most esteemed poet and calligrapher.<sup>12</sup> All hope for China’s future seemed to emanate from this one great man.

Now, five decades later, the campaign against “Black Painters” seems baffling, even surrealistic. Artists incarcerated in “cowsheds”<sup>13</sup> (*niupeng*) and persecuted to death because of their artwork? It sounds preposterous! According to the party’s own retrospective evaluation in 1981, the Cultural Revolution was a catastrophe caused by Mao and exacerbated by his wife, Jiang Qing (the most notorious member of the “Gang of Four”). Promulgated under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, this report (pronouncing Mao 70 percent good and 30 percent bad) aimed to salvage the Communist Party’s legitimacy by attributing the mistaken direction of the Cultural Revolution to Mao’s extremism in his old age.<sup>14</sup> The current Chinese government does not defend the Cultural Revolution, but neither will it allow a deep probing of its causes or effects. Today, publications on the topic in China are still subject to censorship.

While oral history remains one of the most important avenues for retrieving information about the Cultural Revolution, the seasoned interviewer realizes that even decades later some information remains too sensitive to be disclosed. Personal and emotional considerations combine with caution to make survivors and their families reluctant to share all they remember. Trauma can make victims fall silent. Out of respect for the artist’s privacy, even third parties familiar with the circumstances of a painting’s creation may not reveal all they know. As records frozen in time, paintings or poems, when studied closely, may disclose more than will surviving witnesses.



**I.2** Wang Weizheng, portrait of Chairman Mao holding a calligraphy brush (ca. 1967). The inscription, in Mao's calligraphy, is the slogan "Bombard the headquarters" from Mao's August 5, 1966, big-character-poster launching the Cultural Revolution. Silk cloth, 16 x 10.5 in. Given to the author by painter Liu Chunhua in 1995.

Obstacles preventing serious investigation of the Cultural Revolution lead many to shrug off the entire era as a decade of "madness."<sup>15</sup> However, Mao was not, in fact, mentally incapacitated during his final years, as he is sometimes depicted.<sup>16</sup> Until his death in September 1976, he remained proud of the Cultural Revolution and wished to continue promoting its radical agenda, even after it was clear that the movement had damaged the economy and put national security at risk. Mao tried to establish a successor who would support the Cultural Revolution but failed to find one capable of keeping it going. Clearly, the Cultural Revolution was something that Mao cherished and considered necessary. He even claimed in June 1976 that it was one of his two supreme achievements, the other being his unification of China in 1949.<sup>17</sup> From Mao's perspective, the Cultural Revolution was a deliberate and integral part of his revolutionary program.



**1.3** Mass criticism special bulletin (Tianjin rebel groups, September 1967). The captions read: “Follow closely Chairman Mao’s magnificent strategic plan,” “Chairman Mao says: You must concern yourselves with national affairs and advance the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the fullest degree,” and “What enemy in the world can match the strength of the army when united with the people?” From *Dapipan lietou manhua zhuanji*, cover. Collection of the author.

Why Mao wanted the Cultural Revolution and what it accomplished continue to be sources of historical controversy. According to political scientist Roderick MacFarquhar, Mao instigated the upheaval but had no master plan for it.<sup>18</sup> If he intended only to remove perceived rivals Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping from power, the turmoil could have ended after a few years. That Mao continued to stoke the fire of Cultural Revolution until his death suggests that he perceived it as a final push to implant his ideological legacy and to instill radicalism in the heart of every youth. Mao felt a sense of historic mission as the founder of a new age. He sought to harness the energy of the Chinese population to build a heroic future. After his Great Leap Forward policies of 1958–61 resulted in famine and he was sidelined from active leadership, Mao saw the larger Communist revolution as endangered; the Cultural Revolution was his means of combating the perceived “revisionism” of his heir, Liu Shaoqi, and Stalin’s heir, Khrushchev.

To mobilize two loyal constituencies—youth and soldiers—Mao needed to stir up righteous anger against China’s cultural and political elite (fig. I.3). To get the Cultural Revolution going, he fostered a drama that contrasted the “black” counterrevolutionary mentality with “red” revolutionary virtue. “Struggle” rituals were established in every locality to make clear distinctions between those who should be denounced and those who should lead, under the terms of the new society.

Within this callously conceived political theater, the senior-generation ink painters found themselves cast in the role of old-style Confucian intellectuals. They became foils for the values that Mao and his allies wanted to cultivate in youth, the so-called revolutionary successors. A hallmark of Mao Zedong thought was its aspiration to reach inside the subjective world of every Chinese person to “wash out” thoughts.<sup>19</sup> At the outset of Communist rule, elder intellectuals were considered capable of “thought reform”; however, as Mao aged, his quest to make socialism final became more reckless. A battle-weary Mao sought to purge all the stubborn relics from the body politic.

Within this morality tale, the older-generation artists became analogs for the ghosts of the past still inhibiting progress. Castigated in the vocabulary of the time as “reactionary academic authorities” or “stinking ninth-category intellectuals” or “ox demons and snake spirits,” these artists were made to look like the sinister remnants of a thoroughly discredited but stubbornly lingering Confucian order. The elder generation of artists and their paintings gave the protagonists of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards, someone to ridicule and something concrete to stomp into dust. Singling out individuals as surrogates for Confucius and then shaming them in a public denunciation drama gave each community a way to show solidarity with the Chairman’s vision for a revolutionary culture severed from the past. Cartoonists who had argued for reduced governmental interference were similarly denounced as traitors.<sup>20</sup>

Paintings produced at the major art academies could be confiscated from store-rooms or the painter’s home and used as fodder for inflated claims. A self-expressive painting could become a persuasive stage prop within the theatrics of a “struggle

session.” For example, a painting like Pan Tianshou’s *Plum Tree and Moon* (fig. 6.6), crossed out with big Xs, made a dramatic display, one that might convince at least some impressionable people that the artist harbored “black” intentions. Chinese tradition held that “outer” appearances reflected “inner” qualities.<sup>21</sup> Thus a painting that looked decidedly black in its appearance, as Pan’s heavily inked painting certainly did, could make accusations that he was a criminal seem palpable. Like a diary, another self-revealing form of expression used to document “counterrevolutionary thinking,” paintings revealed intimacies and eccentricities endangering their makers. Condemned paintings became analogs for Communism’s hidden enemy, a robust selfhood (“excessive bourgeois individualism”). A painting displaying an emphatic personal aesthetic signaled a personality unlikely to go along with revolutionary discipline, and thus, a “foot-dragger.”

Until the advent of professional painting as a modern vocation in the early twentieth century, painting was primarily a leisure activity—and a highly esteemed one. In China, much more than in the West, painting was closely interwoven with poetry, calligraphy, and seal making; all these aesthetic practices were united in the same framework and were designed to interrelate.<sup>22</sup> Poetry’s partnership with painting remained a defining element in the radically reconstituted practice of Chinese painting initiated during the early twentieth century. Painters such as Shi Lu, Pan Tianshou, and Feng Zikai, who wrote their own poems and inscribed them next to an image, demonstrated that modern Chinese painting should not be disentangled from its collaboration with poetry, seal making, and calligraphy. To them, painting’s combination with these art forms was what made it Chinese.<sup>23</sup>

Because appreciating it to the fullest extent required reading inscriptions and understanding symbols, bureaucrats found traditional Chinese painting difficult to police. Dangerous meanings could escape their attention. To eliminate the prospect, militants discouraged art that was complicated. When Mao set in motion the old imperial purging mechanism “to burn the books and bury the scholars,” traditional Chinese painters and their images fell victim to these exterminatory impulses. Once the process was unleashed, persecution spared no one.<sup>24</sup>

And yet the need to create a compelling political theater led radical Maoists to shape persecution to suit their revolutionary program. The objects of struggle needed to be persuasive analogs for stubborn old “ghosts.” The paintings they targeted needed to appear disloyal. So the apparently ludicrous and shrill accusation that a genuine Communist believer like Shi Lu was actually a “reactionary academic authority” had some basis. He was a member of the educated class who commanded authority based on cultural accomplishment. He posed a threat to the razing of history because he had the talent and conviction to defend civilization’s enduring values. Historically, Chinese traditional painting was a sanctuary for independent thinking. Personality registered visually in certain subject matter, such as the eyes of an eagle or the twist of a flower stem.

The artists hardest hit by the Cultural Revolution were the stubbornly creative ones. They saw themselves as defenders of Chinese culture's spiritual resources.<sup>25</sup> The painters pejoratively called "Confucians" were not necessarily tied to the old wisdom. They thought of tradition as open to fresh possibilities. Shi Lu, Feng Zikai, and Li Keran considered it essential to forge links with world art.<sup>26</sup> All of the painters profiled in this book were social progressives, either committed communists or fellow travelers. Their art was not overtly political, but it was artistically penetrating.<sup>27</sup> What distinguished this group was that they were the potential leaders of an alternative, less extreme communism, one that was more compatible with independent thinking, respect for nature, and historical preservation. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, they stood out as important contributors to the impassioned project of modernizing Chinese art. Reflecting on their words and images helps to make posterity more appreciative of the human talent that was diminished or lost.

During the Cultural Revolution, creativity did not die out. Particularly in the fields of dance and revolutionary opera, the party sponsored lively new art forms.<sup>28</sup> Idealistic songs, military-style clothing, badges, and posters praising Mao still hold appeal today. What happened outside of official channels was also significant. Banned writings and condemned images circulated despite tight censorship; some national policies were thwarted at the local level.<sup>29</sup> Most of the violence associated with the Cultural Revolution occurred during the first three years (1966–69). The terror and the chaos of the first phase then gave way to a milder, although still dangerous, second phase (1969–71) and third phase (1971–76). Having the privacy to create secret art or literature was more common during the latter two periods. For example, adventurous young poets like Bei Dao and Duo Duo, who gained fame in the 1980s, experienced the early 1970s as a time of experimentation. Society's disarray gave them the opportunity to read voraciously and develop new ideas.<sup>30</sup> Within this environment of lessening repression, ink painters who had been severely persecuted a few years before snatched free moments to paint "by candlelight,"<sup>31</sup> stowing their work away until China's night subsided.

Recent scholarship has illuminated the complexities of interpreting art.<sup>32</sup> Environmental factors, political biases, prior knowledge, and social background profoundly shape how a person views a specific artwork. Still, there are some common reactions. The visual effect of a painting's composition or its physical properties engender certain responses.<sup>33</sup> For example, the illumination of a face or the central positioning of a figure are two universally recognized techniques for conveying status in a picture.<sup>34</sup> Only some paintings express clear messages. Many artists purposely leave space for viewers to create their own meaning. Their goal is to stir the imagination and allow art to speak for itself. In repressive states, artists have an added incentive to retain an air of mystery about their work. To protect themselves and their confidantes, they deliberately craft ambiguous images so that hostile parties will not detect politically

sensitive content.<sup>35</sup> When artists feel safe to openly discuss their work, their commentary enriches subsequent discourse. However, much of the creative process is intuitive. Artists' memories of their thoughts and actions may be limited or difficult to verbalize.<sup>36</sup> Once complete, paintings take on a life of their own. They ignite controversies and acquire associations that the artist scarcely anticipated.<sup>37</sup>

A painting's meaning, although it varies from viewer to viewer, is not so indeterminate that a substantive interpretation of it cannot be achieved. Besides establishing the basic facts about an artwork, one must study visual details and inscriptions, consider multiple readings of the imagery, assess overall trends affecting art and artists, and consider the work's subject matter in relation to Chinese, Soviet, and Western iconography. Interviewing the artist, or his or her students, colleagues, or family members, about a given artwork offers insights about the thinking of the artist and the circumstances of the work's creation, such as whether it was painted secretly or on official assignment. Obtaining this context helps us enter into the imaginative world of these paintings and the artists' mental states, allowing us to better assess the psychological impact of repression on them. Then, a more complete narrative of the Cultural Revolution can emerge to fill the void of official silences.<sup>38</sup>

Gaze theory contributes to my interpretation of Shi Lu's famous cliff-side portrait of Mao, discussed in chapter 8 (fig. I.4). The feminist theorist Laura Mulvey first used the term "male gaze" to describe the way directors trivialized and objectified women in cinema through control of the camera.<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault identified another pernicious gaze: state-sponsored surveillance, functioning like "thousands of eyes posted everywhere," punishing nonconformity, encouraging self-censorship, and leaving "no zone of shade."<sup>40</sup> More recently, Lisa Wedeen examined the use of leader portraits in Syria to generate obedience.<sup>41</sup> These theorists define the gaze as a tool of domination, because the recipient of the gaze is made to feel accountable to the gazer's expectations.

A powerful gaze emanates from Mao's portrait overlooking Tiananmen Square. In this iconic representation astride the headquarters of Communist rule and the old imperial palace, Mao's eyes stare out as if he is eternally watching.<sup>42</sup> The image functions as a "highly effective tool of ideological indoctrination" and "surveillance."<sup>43</sup> From the 1950s through the 1970s, Mao's portrait hung in practically every classroom, meeting place, and home. Mao's "great gaze" seemed to examine "every single thought or action, at anytime, anywhere."<sup>44</sup> Shi Lu's painting of Mao (fig. 8.2) was different. It did not plainly show Mao's eyes. Instead, Mao's back is partially turned, and the domineering gaze is directed out toward the vista.<sup>45</sup> Shi Lu's unusual choice to portray Mao mostly from the back and relatively tiny had implications for official reactions to the painting. Absent the customary frontal view and colossal size, this image of Mao lacked an imposing presence and seemed to suggest psychological aloofness.<sup>46</sup> Not seeing Mao's face stirred the viewer's memory and imagination, leaving room for unauthorized thinking. In 1959, Shi Lu's painting of Mao had been commissioned for



**I.4** Shi Lu's 1959 painting *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* displayed in the National Museum of China, Tiananmen Square, Beijing, 2016. Photography by Jon Burris.

display inside the Museum of Chinese Revolution (Zhongguo Geming Bowuguan; now National Museum of China) situated on one side of Tiananmen Square. Paintings in this museum, located at the very heart of the political district, were supervised carefully to reflect current ideology and ensure that Mao's supreme status was showcased.<sup>47</sup> In 1964, when Shi Lu's painting of Mao was targeted for criticism, the cult around Mao was intensifying. This painting fell short of soaring expectations regarding how Mao should be depicted. Chinese authorities "feared unclear messages."<sup>48</sup>

Mao himself did not always agree with his ardent defenders. Occasionally, he intervened to help accused artists.<sup>49</sup> In his 1942 "Yan'an Talks," Mao set out an ambitious vision for art and literature in the new Communist era. In those speeches, which became fundamental doctrine, Mao emphasized the ideological dimension of art, particularly the goal that art should reflect the class perspective of workers, peasants, and soldiers. He called for political content to be expressed using the "highest possible perfection of artistic form," because otherwise it would have "no force."<sup>50</sup> Policy makers labored to meet Mao's high expectations for art, but the sands were always shifting. This fickleness in political life had a profound impact on artists. Gradually, it led them to question reigning ideologies and rediscover ancient Chinese philosophy

and forbidden styles of modern art. The experience of being criticized or persecuted opened their eyes to injustices and freed them from their usual obligation, when the regime held them in favor, to paint on assignment. Instead they produced counter-images, resituating the gaze at the level of individual consciousness and asserting the right to live and think independently. Today, their paintings of ironically winking or sad-eyed birds, weather-beaten trees, acrobatic flowers, open windows, and self-portraits reveal a private art of resistance.