Introduction

PAINTING BY CANDLELIGHT IN MAO'S CHINA

In 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.[1] At China's two premier universities, Peking and Tsinghua, more than thirty-one professors committed suicide.[2]

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.[3]

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.[4] 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."[5] 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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8] 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."[9] 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."[10] 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."[11] 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.[12] 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"[13] (*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.[14] 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."[15] However, Mao was not, in fact, mentally incapacitated during his final years, as he is sometimes depicted.[16] 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.[17] From Mao's perspective, the Cultural Revolution was a deliberate and integral part of his revolutionary program.

I. 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.[18] 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.[19] 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.[20]

Paintings produced at the major art academies could be confiscated from storerooms 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 *X*s, 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.[21] 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.[22] 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.[23]

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.[24]

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.[25] 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.[26] 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.[27] 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.[28] 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.[29] 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.[30] Within this environment of lessening repression, ink painters who had been severely persecuted a few years before snatched free moments to paint "by candlelight,"[31] stowing their work away until China's night subsided.

Recent scholarship has illuminated the complexities of interpreting art.[32] 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.[33] 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.[34] 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.[35] 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.[36] Once complete, paintings take on a life of their own. They ignite controversies and acquire associations that the artist scarcely anticipated.[37]

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.[38]

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.[39] 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."[40] More recently, Lisa Wedeen examined the use of leader portraits in Syria to generate obedience.[41] 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.[42] The image functions as a "highly effective tool of ideological indoctrination" and "surveillance."[43] 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."[44] 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.[45] 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.[46] 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.[47] 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."[48]

Mao himself did not always agree with his ardent defenders. Occasionally, he intervened to help accused artists.[49] 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."[50] 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.

1

Cartoonists

CHAPTER 1

Ding Cong's True Story of the Outcast Ah Q

In 1943, Ding Cong (1916–2009, fig. 1.1), also known as Xiao Ding, produced twenty-four illustrations for "The True Story of Ah Q," the famous short story by the fiction writer Lu Xun (1881–1936).[1] Published in 1921 in the vernacular rather than the literary language, Lu Xun's story of Ah Q became the defining text of the May Fourth Movement, a period of ferment and experimentation that had begun in 1919 and inspired a wave of social reform among China's youth. Ding Cong invited woodcut artist Xu Shuping to carve illustrations for the book based on images he had painted using ink and brush.[2] By illustrating the story with woodcuts—the visual medium endorsed by Lu Xun as the most expressive of ordinary people's concerns—Ding signaled his strong identification with Lu Xun's aspirations for ushering in social change. Because woodcuts were inexpensive to produce and could be widely circulated, Lu Xun urged followers to adopt this art form to advocate on behalf of society's devalued members. The plain color scheme and the raw, tactile effect of the knife's traces made

1.1 Ding Cong, circa 1980s. Known primarily as a cartoonist, Ding Cong created a series of illustrations in 1943 to illustrate Lu Xun's short story about an outcast named Ah Q. Tragically, part of Lu Xun's fictional story came true in 1957, when Ding was unfairly branded a Rightist and sent to perform hard labor in the Great Northern Wilderness in Heilongjiang. Despite the disruption to his life and career, he managed to keep his humor and imagination alive, as this photo attests. From Li Hui, *Ding Cong* (2001), 77; reproduced with permission from the artist's family.

woodcuts seem to express humanity at its most basic, a fitting platform for championing the downtrodden. The vigorous lines produced by the knife on wood symbolized the writer's pen cutting through habitual thinking. According to Lu Xun, the woodcut more than any other visual art conveyed "the soul of modern society."[3]

Ding was slightly too young to have known Lu Xun personally, although both were Shanghai residents. His allegiance grew out respect for the author's trailblazing fiction and his sponsorship of alternative art forms, including cartoons, Ding's favorite expressive medium. A 1940 photograph of Ding with friends posed under a giant portrait of Lu Xun reveals the depth of their admiration for the author.[4] Lu Xun's daring use of irony and unsparing attacks on sacred tenets of Chinese culture paved the way for Ding to embrace social satire. Ding's father, Ding Song (1879–1969), a prominent member of Shanghai art circles and a cartoonist himself, tried to prevent his eldest son from becoming a cartoonist because he thought the profession too dangerous and not lucrative enough. He went so far as to insist that no paper or brushes be given to his son, but Little Ding, as he was sometimes called, persevered against his father's wishes.[5]

Ding's illustrations of Ah Q were produced at the invitation of Chen Baichen, editor of *West China Evening Newspaper* (Huaxi wanbao) in 1944; in 1945, they were published in book form.[6] A fresh edition of his Ah Q illustrations, printed from the original woodcuts, was published in 1992. Ding was twenty-seven years old when he produced the illustrations. During the intervening years, he had suffered terribly. In 1957, he was condemned as a Rightist; banned from making art, even privately; removed from his position as editor of the prominent journal *People's Pictorial* (Renmin huabao); separated from his new wife and infant son; and exiled to a labor camp in the remote North under famine conditions. Rehabilitated in 1979, Ding snapped back from the catastrophe with seeming ease. By 1995, he was well into the second peak of his art career. Perhaps his smooth recovery was due in part to the fact that he never quit producing art despite the ban, contrary to common belief.[7]

Ding's illustrations for the Ah Q story were created during the Anti-Japanese War, a relatively positive period for his career despite the devastation. He produced the illustrations while living humbly in Chengdu, Sichuan. Japanese bombings of coastal cities had forced Shanghai residents to migrate to China's interior. Refugees like Ding had to scramble to find places to live. He and his close friend, playwright Wu Zuguang, set up makeshift living quarters in a courtyard pavilion designed for summer weather. Many fellow artists lived in close proximity. Half-jokingly, these friends came to call their informal but convivial living arrangement the House of Loafers (Erliutang, from the slang term for "loafers," *erliuzi*). In a popular folk opera admired by the group of friends, the opera's lead female used this term to scold her brother for falling asleep in the field. In jest, Ding and friends christened the place where they congregated for meals and conversation the House of Loafers, since most of them were creative people with no regular job.[8] Their lives revolved around producing art and supporting the war effort. Energized by daily interactions with playwrights, actors, and fellow cartoonists, Ding entered his most productive

period as a satirical artist. At this time he created his most famous work, a 1944 handscroll titled *Looking at Images*, which exposed the corruption of the Nationalist regime.[9] Ding was certainly not "loafing around," despite what critics later said.

"The True Story of Ah Q" is a mock-heroic tale of a life spiraling downward, the kind of biography that had no place in conventional Confucian literature.[10] The plot revolves around a low-class nobody whose inflated view of himself and lack of empathy for others worsens his predicament at every turn. A good example of Ah Q's poor judgment is his decision to make unwanted advances toward a nursemaid in the household where he holds temporary work. When his indiscretion is discovered, he is kicked out without pay and left shirtless. After word of Ah Q's sexual overtures spreads, the ladies of the village cross to the other side of the street whenever they see him. This sudden infamy puzzles Ah Q; he deludes himself into believing that his compounding misfortunes are actually "spiritual victories." His boastful attitude prevents him from understanding the dangers awaiting him. As the story progresses, Ah Q is revealed as a kind of analog for China itself and for the failed mind-set paralyzing China's response to Western and Japanese imperialism.[11]

Lu Xun tells the Ah Q story through a pretentious narrator whose pontificating manner heightens the reader's sensitivity to the inadequate lens through which Ah Q's story is told. The narrator seems strangely indifferent to what happens to Ah Q and overly concerned with fitting Ah Q's story into a standardized formula for biography. The narrator's efforts to assemble even the barest facts about his subject are largely frustrated, because no written records or family members can be found to verify Ah Q's name or place of birth. Gradually, the insufficiency of the narrator's version of events becomes shockingly apparent. By the end of the story, the reader shifts from having a good laugh at Ah Q's foolishness to sympathizing with his plight, flawed and uncultivated though the man is. Indeed, as Ah Q's hair is pulled, his head pounded, and his scrawny body manhandled, it becomes clear that the true scoundrels are the interrogators and beaters rather than Ah Q. Society looks much more criminal than the outcast. In the finale, the full measure of the world's callousness is revealed as Ah Q is hauled before a firing squad and executed for a crime he did not commit. The gawking crowd feels no emotion. If anything, the spectators felt shortchanged, as they had hoped for a beheading. Watching the village idiot get shot does not leave them sufficiently entertained.

In the opening frame of Ding's series, the man referred to as Ah Q—only an approximation since his real name has been forgotten—stands holding a pipe with his head cocked to one side (fig. 1.2). His eyes squint as he looks suspiciously toward the viewer. His expression looks pugnacious and irritable. The sleeves on his coat are way too long. Obviously, the coat was made to fit someone else, but at least he is clothed. In contrast, a shirtless and emaciated smaller Ah Q (below the standing figure) has fallen into a more desperate state. The face of this second Ah Q looks dazed and his body listless. The third Ah Q—on the other side of the picture—is in far worse condition. He has already been executed and holds his detached head in his hands. The still-vital Ah Q at the center

1.2 Ding Cong, title page for Lu Xun's 1921 "True Story of Ah Q" (1943). In the opening frame, the man referred to as Ah Q—only an approximation since his real name has been forgotten—stands holding a pipe with his head cocked to one side. His life spirals downward: a second Ah Q is shirtless and emaciated, and a third Ah Q is headless. Print from woodcut by Xu Shuping based on illustration by Ding Cong, 5 x 4 in. From Ding Cong, *Ah Q zheng zhuan manhua* (1992), 17; reproduced with permission from the artist's family.

1.3 Ding Cong, *Ah Q in Court* (1943). By the end of Lu Xun's story, the reader shifts from having a good laugh at Ah Q's foolishness to sympathizing with his plight. Print from woodcut by Xu Shuping based on illustration by Ding Cong, 5 x 4 in. From Ding Cong, *Ah Q zheng zhuan manhua* (1992), 63; reproduced with permission from the artist's family.

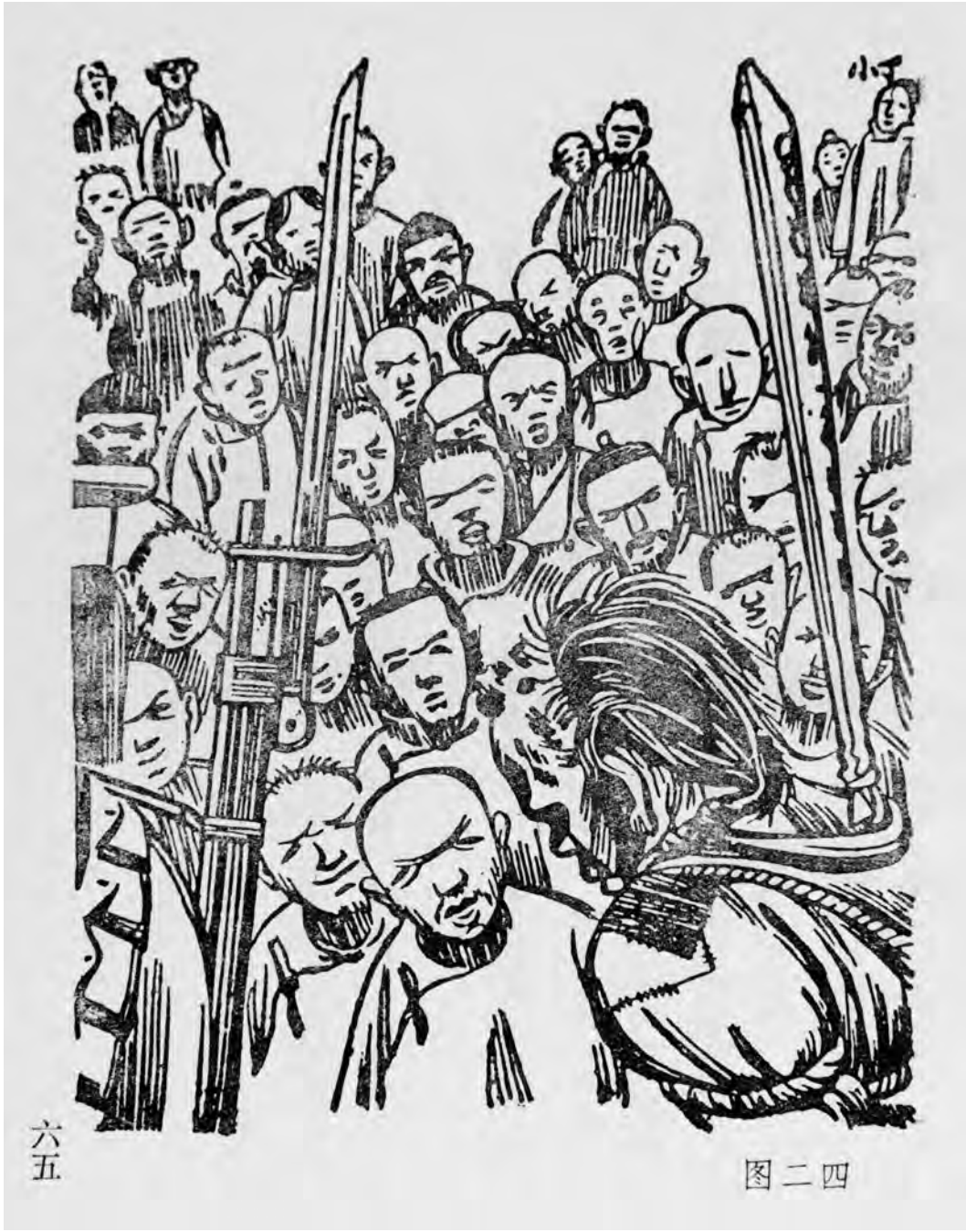
stands sandwiched between the letters of his name. His physical appearance is unkempt, but he projects assuredness, if not dignity. Ding's portrayal does not deny that Ah Q is a fool, but he is a fool with presence. He seems to be a stubbornly resilient person still declaring his self-worth. The three Ah Qs represent different stages in the snuffing out of a life. The figures form a trinity. Ding uses this design to suggest the gravitas of a religious icon and urges us to remember Ah Q's name rather than consign him to namelessness.

The playful quality of Ding's calligraphy for Ah Q's name lifts the mood of this otherwise somber picture. In fact, the bottom line of the foreign letter *Q* and the outer line of the Chinese character *Ah* tilt inward like donkey tails and make one think, humorously, of the queue on the back of Ah Q's head. Some sources say that Lu Xun adopted the letter *Q* for his title character because it looks like a blank face with a queue.[12] By the time Lu Xun wrote the Ah Q story in 1921, the braided pigtail was a laughable relic of the imperial era, a mark of subjugation imposed on Chinese men by their Manchu conquerors during the Qing dynasty. Ding made skillful use of its negative associations to lampoon Ah Q's physical appearance by exaggerating his long braid and the ringworm scars on his shaven forehead. However, the cartoonish quality of Ding's Ah Q remains muted. To capture the essence of Lu Xun's story, Ding had to be careful not to go too far in mocking Ah Q. He humanized Ah Q enough to coax readers to imagine themselves as Ah Q and, thus, make the mental correction necessary to feel sympathy for him.

That Ding's illustrations contributed something fresh to the conversation on Ah Q is most salient in the last two plates of the series. The twenty-third woodcut captures the poignant moment when authorities interrogate Ah Q in connection with a robbery of the Zhao household (fig. 1.3). Ah Q is a likely suspect, because he had fallen into trouble with the Zhao household before and tried unsuccessfully to join a band of revolutionaries who probably were the real culprits. This is one crime that Ah Q did not commit, yet Ah Q is not articulate enough to defend himself in court. A stern judge presses him to say or write something in his defense. All Ah Q can muster is a circle, and even that is not well drawn.

Ding has designed this scene so that Ah Q faces the viewer as he writes his imperfect circle. His face looks innocent and childlike, as does his crawling posture. If our eyes move leftward across the slope of Ah Q's shoulders, up the long arm and over the bent head of the robed attendant, down to the soldier's feet (which appear to ride on Ah Q's back), up to the bald judge at his desk, and back to Ah Q's piece of paper, they will have made a complete circuit. This design approximates a heart and echoes the circle that Ah Q writes on the page. It is Ding's technique for expressing solidarity with Ah Q. We viewers form the heart and make the circle with our eyes. The circle represents Ah Q's identity. It is the best he can do. Engrossed in the task of holding the brush for the first time, he looks sympathetic despite his awkwardness. Ah Q never had the chance to develop literacy; now his life will be brought to a swift close.

Whereas Lu Xun's text emphasized the "wolf-like" stare and "ant-like" uniformity of the crowd watching Ah Q's execution, Ding's final plate shows confidence in the public's power of discernment (fig. 1.4). In Ding's version, the onlookers are decent



1.4 Ding Cong, *Ah Q's Execution* (1943). In this final illustration in the series, Ding depicts the moment just before a firing squad takes Ah Q's life for a crime he did not commit. The typically foolish Ah Q, with head bowed, accepts his fate, as two rifles close in on him like scissor blades. Unlike Lu Xun's story, which emphasizes the crowd's callousness, Ding presents onlookers as compassionate and discerning. Print from woodcut by Xu Shuping based on illustration by Ding Cong, 5 x 4 in. From Ding Cong, *Ah Q zheng zhuan manhua* (1992), 65; reproduced with permission from the artist's family.

people coming to terms with the tragic spectacle. Their faces are individualized; their eyes and expressions show concern. A reckoning seems to have taken place: the people recognize Ah Q's humanity. They see themselves in the accused. Ah Q looks humbled too. In his last moments, his head is lowered and his face partially hidden from view. This design directs our gaze out toward the crowd. The spectators watching the execution remind us of ourselves looking at these illustrations. We are left with a collective injunction to remember the consequences of averting our eyes and turning our backs on Mr. Nobody.

In 1957, Ding Cong was labeled a Rightist after he advocated for more independence for artists. He was not a Communist Party member, but as founding editor of a leading art pictorial, his opinion carried weight in painting and photography circles. During the brief thaw accompanying the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1956–57, Ding had offered a candid assessment of the lack of scope for the arts under Communist rule. He proposed the establishment of a new kind of art publication, expansively titled *Ten Thousand Phenomena* (Wan xiang), to be placed under the creative control of editors rather than bureaucrats.[13] Party authorities feared the destabilizing impact of intellectual critiques like Ding's. They mounted a crackdown against anyone expressing a dissenting view. Mao authorized a purge of some 550,000 critics, removing from office and sending into exile much of the nation's top scientific and artistic talent.[14]

During the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957, the once-humorous self-appellation House of Loafers, describing Ding and his friends during the war years, was revived to incriminate him and his salon-style gatherings. He was accused of forming an illicit opposition group. As a result, Ding, the playwright Wu Zuguang, and fellow cartoonist Huang Miaozi were among hundreds exiled to the Great Northern Wilderness in Heilongjiang and sentenced to hard labor. The "Loafers" spent three harrowing years there in 1957–60. Upon arriving at the labor camp, Ding joined others in shoveling out a reservoir. After half a year, he was fortunate to be recruited as the backroom editor and illustrator of a local army-sponsored magazine for farmers. He received no salary, but it gave him access to art supplies and reduced his physical labor to half-time. His editing duties included escorting the manuscript to the printing press in another town. He discovered that he could make use of unsupervised time during his travels to do occasional sketching.[15]

The artwork that Ding prepared anonymously to contribute to the magazine had to conform to a strict ideological agenda. For example, he created a highly stylized portrait of settlers bringing industry to the wilderness. In contrast to the heroic art he produced for the magazine, Ding secretly sketched ordinary people in the midst of their daily activities.[16] He could hastily sketch a scene only when others were busy watching something else. For example, he drew schoolchildren from the back as they faced the teacher or theatergoers watching opera on an outdoor stage.

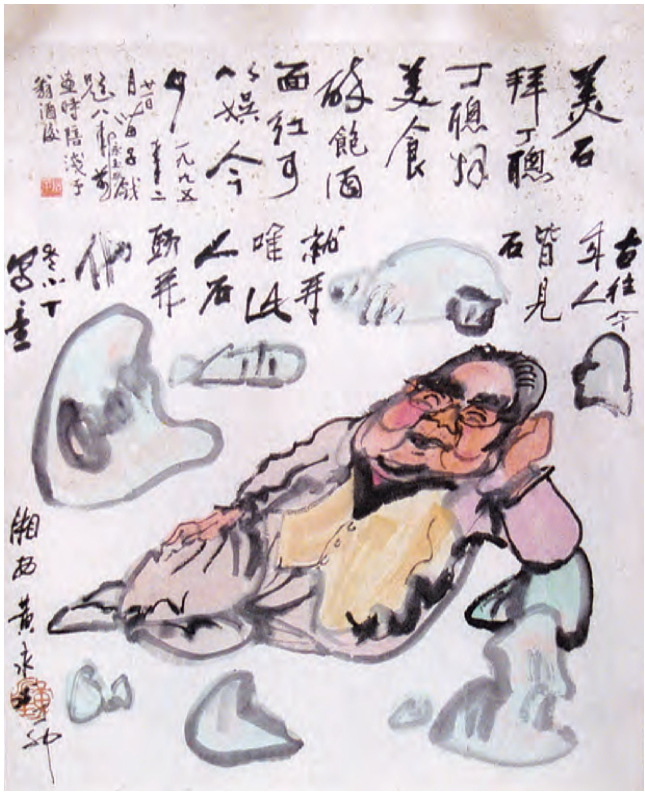
By 1959–60, the excesses of the Great Leap Forward had produced a massive shortfall of food; populations in the arid North were particularly vulnerable. Initially, Ding had been separated from his friends, but as the famine worsened, his friends were brought

to the same place. Food was extremely scarce, and Ding remembered Huang Miaozi's face being swollen from malnutrition.[17] Had authorities not intervened to bring them back to Beijing in 1960, Ding and his friends faced certain death.

After returning to Beijing in 1960, Ding still suffered under the Rightist stigma. He earned a very low salary and was not entrusted with any responsibilities other than office work. In 1967–68, he was again swept up in a political tornado and was sent out to the countryside to a so-called May 7 Cadre School. According to Mao's instructions, these were to be places for reeducating intellectuals and cadres "to strengthen their intellectual and emotional ties to the laboring people."[18] Ding's job was to raise pigs and goats. He was strictly warned not to "pick up a paint brush," because it was presumed that he would use it to oppose the Communist Party. Ding simply could not lose his connection to art, for it was the one thing that gave him sustenance. He saw an old woman using scissors to cut a sponge to make small folk sculptures. Since he was not prohibited from using scissors, he followed the old woman's lead and began making sponge sculptures. He cut model busts of admired father figures Lu Xun and Maxim Gorky. This experiment with a local folk art proved deeply satisfying for him. It took him about two hours to complete each sculpture. He did it for fun in his spare time and gave away many as gifts. What he cut in sponge evoked the feeling of paintings. Many of his subjects—dogs, cats, roosters, or hens, for example—were more typically represented in brush and ink.

In 1976, Ding returned to Beijing, and his situation improved. However, suspicions about him lingered, and he was not exonerated until the spring of 1979. During those years when unjust political stigmas still held him back, he worked as the custodian for the National Art Museum of China, hanging paintings and making exhibition labels for other painters. At that time, paper was scarce. Ding did not have sufficient status to use official art supplies. However, there was no rule against his using the backs of discarded labels. They were only small index cards, but he used them to draft illustrations for Lu Xun's short stories, including "Diary of a Madman" and "My Old Home," while home on sick leave.[19]

Before his Rightist label was removed, Ding continued to make art invoking Lu Xun. He wanted to avoid trouble, and Lu Xun was considered a safe subject. Although the actual Lu Xun was a nuanced thinker who maintained an independent stance toward the Communist Party, in death his rebellious tone was used to affirm whatever Mao proposed.[20] Some even claimed that Lu Xun would have approved of the Cultural Revolution.[21] However, Ding understood that Lu Xun, despite his strong rejection of Chinese tradition earlier in the century, would not have endorsed the extremism of Mao's Cultural Revolution. His stories aimed to curb the cruelty of the mob. Ding repeatedly paid homage to Lu Xun in his art, because he admired the author's use of humor and satire to awaken audiences to social problems. Illustrating Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" early in his career focused Ding on the importance of showing respect for marginalized members of society. When Ding's own life fell apart during

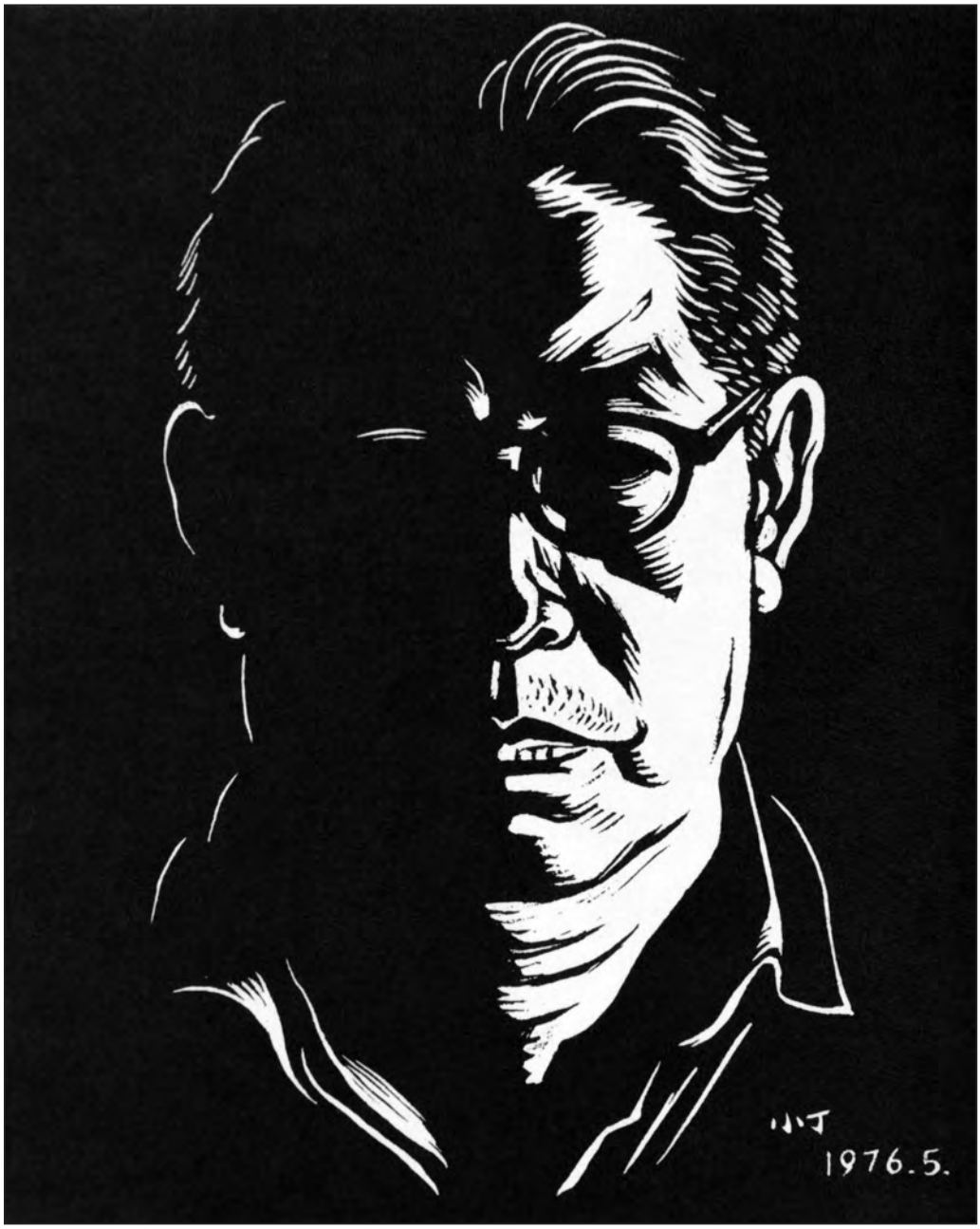


1.5 Huang Yongyu, *Portrait of Ding Cong Honoring His Rock-Like Character* (early 1990s). Inscribed by fellow artists Huang Yongyu and Huang Miaozi, commemorating their shared experience of adversity. Ink and color on paper, approx. 42 x 23 in. Gift of Huang Yongyu to Ding Cong. Photographed by author with Ding Cong's permission in 2004.

his middle years, Lu Xun became a positive fixture in his imagination, reminding him of his self-worth and his duty to stay connected to art. Compared to other persecuted artists, Ding survived the catastrophe relatively unscathed, in spite of the long separation from his family and profession, and the derision under which he lived.[22]

As a tribute to Ding's steadfastness, a friend from the "Loafer" contingent, Huang Yongyu, painted a portrait of Ding as a "rock" of integrity (fig. 1.5).[23] Huang's painting was coinscribed by Ding's old friend and fellow Rightist, Huang Miaozi, at a gathering of old friends in Beijing during the early 1990s. Like Ding, Huang Yongyu survived the political disaster admirably. However, Ding suffered for a longer period and under harsher circumstances. In his tribute, Huang Yongyu makes note of Ding's superiority, deferring to him as the premier authority on how to hold on to one's integrity and artistic sensibility. He depicts Ding as the largest rock among lesser rocks. According to his inscription, only "this person is so rock-like that even the rocks bow to him." Huang Miaozi's inscription pronounces Ding "the art world's beautiful rock."

It is fitting that Ding's friends prepared a portrait in his honor, because Ding became known as a master portraitist after his rehabilitation in 1979. For over twenty-five years, he drew almost every contributor's portrait for the leading journal *Reading* (Du shu). His portraits form a who's who of China's art and literary circles.[24]



1.6 Ding Cong, self-portrait (May 1976). The enigmatic treatment of his own face looks to be a protest against the disruption to his life. Here is Ding's face, by his own hand, projecting an identity all his own. White pigment on black paper evoking the appearance of a woodcut, dimensions unknown. From Li Hui, *Ding Cong* (2001), 76; photographed with permission of the artist's family.

According to Chen Seyi, who interviewed him about his creative process, Ding was extremely conscientious about studying his subject's likeness from various angles. His practice was to ask for two photographs, one frontal and one profile, before making the portrait. His most distinctive contribution was the treatment around the eyes, capturing the spirit of his subject's personality.[25] Sometimes he drew with a pen and other times with a Chinese brush. Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera and José Orozco and the Spaniard painter Francisco Goya influenced his sensitive treatment of facial expressions.[26]

In addition to portraiture, Ding devoted himself to making cartoons during the second peak of his career. After he was exonerated in 1979, he was offered his old position back as editor of *People's Pictorial*, the same journal that he edited prior to being labeled a Rightist. He declined because he wanted to devote himself full-time to cartoons, the medium that he loved most but never had the opportunity to pursue as more than a spare-time endeavor.[27]

For twenty-two years, Ding had been unjustly made into a pariah, losing his profession, salary, and home life. During his middle years, the downward spiral of his life resembled Ah Q's. Although he never called himself Ah Q, his friend Huang Yongyu once used Ah Q as a self-reference in an essay. Discussing a time during the Cultural Revolution when friends shunned him, Huang described feeling as though he were Ah Q: "Some drew a line separating themselves from me in meetings; others retained their friendship but were afraid to express it."[28] Huang was crushed by the betrayal of some of his friends and particularly grateful for those who stuck by him. His tribute to Ding as a rock acknowledged Ding's unfaltering quality not only as a loyal friend but also as a fellow sufferer whose stoicism was superior to his own.

Ding's self-respect is conspicuous in his self-portraits. There are at least five among his extant works. Revolutionary politics discouraged focus on the self, so the number of self-portraits he made is surprising. All have the same pose, as if intended as a series. Beginning in 1943, the year he produced the Ah Q illustrations, Ding arranged every self-portrait similarly: as a candid front view of his face down to his collar. In all but one of the published examples, his wide, bespectacled face is sober and unsmiling. In one particularly interesting one dated May 1976, Ding drew his face and collar against a black background, with half of his face sketched in white and the other half blank except for a few sketchy outlines (fig. 1.6). According to Li Hui, who published a reproduction of this self-portrait, Ding used white pigment on paper to evoke the feeling of a woodcut.[29] By choosing to make his self-portrait resemble a woodcut, Ding suggested a link between himself and the downtrodden.

Judging from the date, Ding must have created this self-portrait upon his return home from labor reform after the political atmosphere eased; otherwise, the risk of creating something so experimental would have been unthinkable. The enigmatic treatment of his own face looks to be a protest against the disruption to his life. Half of his life potential had been wasted by persecution, leaving his "face" half-developed.

1.7 Ding Cong, *Statue of the Perfect Citizen* (1945). In his early career, Ding boldly challenged Nationalist rule with cartoons like this one, showing a person with locked lips and ears stuffed with cash. Cartoon. From Li Hui, *Ding Cong* (2001), 29; photographed with permission of artist's family.

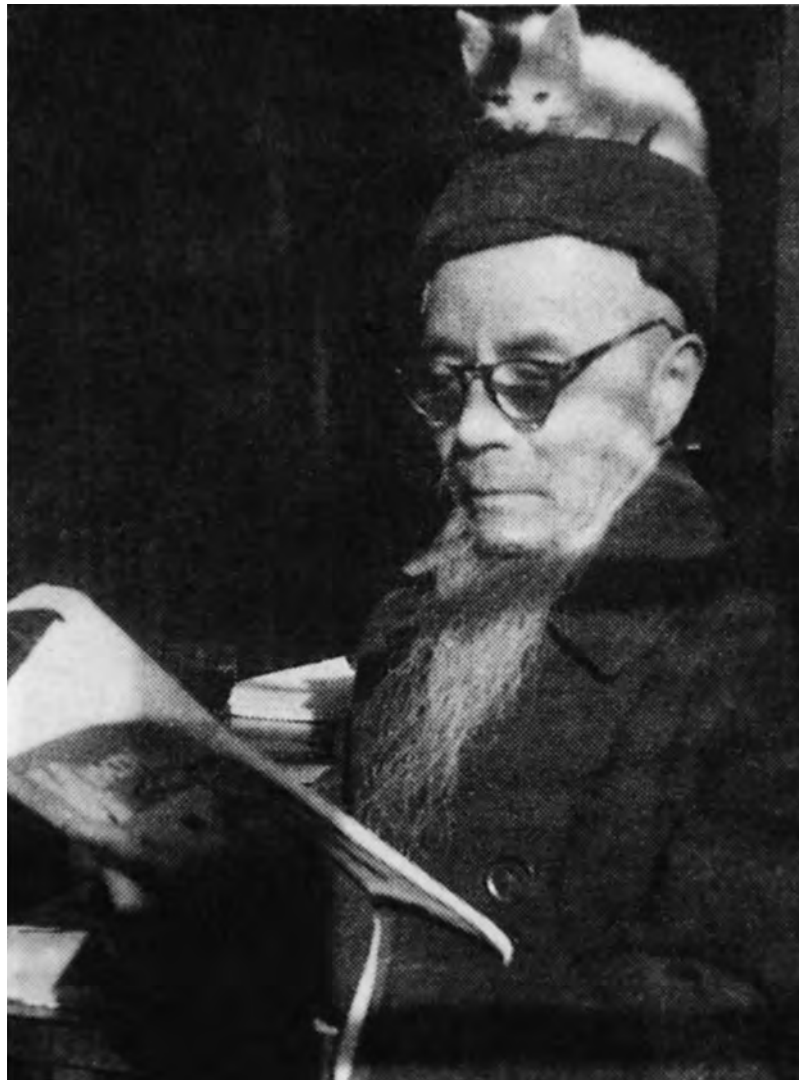
1.8 Ding Cong, *Supervision* (1987). Following his rehabilitation after the Cultural Revolution, Ding returned to making satirical cartoons. Here the shadow of a stern, oversized cadre stands disapprovingly over the artist as he draws. Cartoon. From Li Hui, *Ding Cong* (2001), 87; photographed with permission of artist's family.

Alternatively, the black-and-white contrast dividing his face could be a rebuttal to the idea that "thought reform" could change him. Here is Ding's own face, by his own hand, projecting an identity all his own, consistent over the span of his life. He remained the same person regardless of circumstances—black or white, Rightist or not. Tragedy registers honestly on his face, much like a Rembrandt self-portrait.

Before the Communist era, Ding's cartoons focused on the repression of the individual. One famous cartoon criticized censorship under Chiang Kai-shek's rule. He portrayed a person whose lips were locked shut and his ears stuffed with cash, calling it *Statue of the Perfect Citizen* (fig. 1.7).[30] In another cartoon from the 1940s, Ding pointed to the hypocrisy of the so-called public servant who fails to recognize the true cost of his extravagant lifestyle. A well-fed couple rides on the back of an emaciated, crawling person. Among the figures on his famous 1944 handscroll *Looking at Images*, Ding portrayed the glaring eyeball of a censor looking through a magnifying glass.[31] Decades later, after he was rehabilitated, Ding returned to the same themes that had earlier brought him trouble. In a cartoon dated 1987, he defended the autonomy of the artist—not the bureaucrat—to decide. The shadow of a stern, oversized cadre stands disapprovingly over the artist as he draws (fig. 1.8).

In a preface written on April 29, 1944, to accompany the publication of Ding's illustrations of the Ah Q story, the famed author Mao Dun endorsed the young artist as a talented illustrator.[32] Mao Dun noted that Ding had succeeded on two counts: his images capture the essence of Ah Q as Lu Xun had conceived him and also contribute something new from Ding's own personality and artistic vision. This evaluation recognized that Ding's illustrations endowed the Ah Q story with a more expansive sensibility. Ah Q is typically remembered for his despicable qualities, but in Ding's treatment, the less studied dimension of the story—urging readers to respect Ah Q more rather than less—is brought out to the fullest extent.[33]

When Ding later suffered a fate similar to Ah Q's, he revealed himself to be vastly different from Lu Xun's fictional character. Ah Q never mustered the strength to rise out of adversity. In contrast, future generations will remember Ding Cong as "the art world's beautiful rock," an unfaltering artist who transcended catastrophe.



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COVER: Li Keran, *Stubborn Buffalo*, detail (1962). Art historian and painter Sun Meilan interprets this stubborn water buffalo, tugging back at the rope, as an expression of the artist's striving for independence. Sun is one of Li Keran's students. Ink and color on paper, 26.6 x 17.5 in. Courtesy of Li Keran Academy of Painting.

FRONTISPIECE: Wang Naizhuang, *Painting by Candlelight* (1995). Wang taught art at Tsinghua University in Beijing and studied calligraphy under Li Kuchan. The phrase means painting as one wishes during the quiet of the night. Ink on paper, painted on reverse side soaking through to the front, 38.5 x 20.5 in. Gift made for the author.

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