



THE CULTURE OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

Personality Cult and Political Design in Mao Zedong's China

Museum of Ethnology, Vienna

February 18 - September 19, 2011

Curator of the exhibition: Helmut Opletal

Millions of people in China and abroad were fascinated by China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but it also caused much anguish and terror. It was a time of mass rallies, the Red Guards, an almost obsessive personality cult centered on Mao Zedong as the leader of the Revolution, and an egalitarian society. But it was also a time of political persecution and the destruction of priceless cultural artifacts.

With the help of an exceptional collection of every-day objects, photographs and documents "The Culture of the Cultural Revolution" illustrates how the slogans and symbols of Mao's personality cult were omnipresent in contemporary China - from small pins to *Little Red Books* to every-day objects decorated with propaganda images.

The exhibition explains the Cultural Revolution - the eventful episode in Chinese contemporary history that preceded the country's opening and present-day economic success story. To European visitors much may at first look like "kitsch" or romantic idealization, things like the alarm clock with a female Red Guard waving her *Little Red Book* to count the seconds, posters showing Mao cuddling babies, or a fluorescent heart of Mao. But there are also children's books in which elementary school-children agitate against political "enemies", that contain war propaganda or caricatures showing "counter revolutionaries" impaled, crushed or trampled to death.

Many of the objects on show come from the extensive collection assembled by Helmut Opletal that was acquired by the Museum of Ethnology in 2005. This is augmented by other collections and acquisitions as well as by loans from private collections. Helmut Opletal, an expert on China and a former ORF radio journalist, is the curator of the exhibition. Between 1973 and 1985 he spent several years as a student in China and later worked there as a journalist, experiencing first-hand the end of the Cultural Revolution and the era of Mao Zedong.

The Cultural Revolution was highly destructive - everything "old", "bourgeois" or "feudal" was to be eradicated, intellectuals and artists were persecuted, millions of people badly

abused and often tortured to death. On the other hand, a multi-faceted popular culture was created that focused on the adoration of Chairman Mao and the propagandistic idealization of politics, and that evolved into something almost like a religion or a cult.

The exhibition “The Culture of the Cultural Revolution” documents both of these contradictory sides - “dream and terror” in the words of Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, a professor of Sinology at the University of Vienna. Until now there has not been a critical analysis of the period in China itself, and an exhibition like this one that not only displays objects but places them in their social context is still inconceivable in Shanghai or Beijing. “It seems impossible to combine the ideal and the bloody reality of the Cultural Revolution in a single image”, writes Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “which is why one is always ignored and the other celebrated. There is still no universally accepted view of the Cultural Revolution among scholars, just as there is no basic consensus in Chinese society”.

For the official People’s Republic of China, Mao Zedong is primarily the - on the whole revered - founder of the Revolution. Beginning around 1993, the centenary of the birth of the “Great Leader”, China witnessed a Mao-nostalgia that created new forms of commemoration within the country. The Chinese began to collect souvenirs of the Cultural Revolution, and “Mao” became a commercial object, a commodity, an investment. Contemporary propaganda images or Chinese avant-garde art that focus on Mao and the Cultural Revolution also achieve top prices at auction. In this show, this aspect will be illustrated by loans from the Swiss Sigg Collection and the Essl Museum in Klosterneuburg.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution reverberated throughout Europe in the student revolts of 1968. Maoist groups carried posters of the “Great Leader” and imitated its rituals and symbols. In China, Mao was frequently depicted as the “red sun” that outshines the whole world, and calendars and posters showed foreigners wearing Mao pins happily waving *Little Red Books* (Mao’s collected sayings).

For the curator, Helmut Opletal, the last word on this complex subject of Chinese and international contemporary history has not yet been spoken. Some of the objects on show emphasize similarities with other authoritarian societies and personality cults, and he hopes to “focus attention on the relationship between politics and everyday life, between those in power and ordinary citizens, between mass hysteria and the individual’s responsibility, between utopia and social reality – in China and everywhere else”.

Director-general Sabine Haag said: “The exhibition ‘The Culture of the Cultural Revolution’ hopes to increase our understanding of China during the 1960s and ‘70s, as seen from



today's vantage point", a China at the turn of the 21st century "that is about to become a new global power, one that wants to be accepted as at least the equal of the other world powers on either side of the Atlantic".

PRESS PHOTOGRAPHS

Alarm Clock

The arm of a female Red Guard moves a Little Red Book to count the seconds, a banner is inscribed with "Long live Chairman Mao"
 Watch-making factory Beijing, c. 1970. Helmut Opletal Collection, Vienna
 © KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Tea Pot

Porcelain, inscribed with a slogan from Mao: "Let's get to work ourselves to be warmly dressed and well fed", Lisheng Manufactory, Liling (Hunan Province), dated 1967. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
 © KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Tea Cup

Enamel, Large-Masses Brand, female Red Guard, inscription: "Setting off into the countryside to join a work brigade", Shanghai, dated 1969. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
 © KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Biscuit Tin

Metal sheet, features the most popular characters from the model opera "The Red Lantern". The Wellbeing-of-the-People Food Company no. 4, Shanghai, c. 1970. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
 © KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Pillow Cover

Cotton, with traditional hand embroidery and lines from a poem by Mao Zedong "Ode to the Plum Blossom", northern China, middle of the 1960s. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Record Player

Manufacturer's label "The East is Red, Model 101", and quotes from Chairman Mao on the lid. c. 1970. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Collector's Box for Mao Pins

Cardboard and foam pad, inscription: "Long Live the Great Leader, Great Teacher, Great Commander and Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao! May he live long, long, long!"
c. 1968. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Badge showing Chairman Mao

Plastic, fluorescent portrait of Mao, with sunflowers and the character "loyalty". Hefei (Anhui Province), c. 1968. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



“Anti-Imperialist Game”

featuring the Vietnam War, Mao’s slogan: “People of the world, rise up and crush the US invaders and all their lackeys ...” and the inscription “Drown the US imperialists in the bottomless ocean of the people’s war”.
Wuxi (Jiangsu Province), c. 1970.
Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Toy Soldier with Hand Grenade
Rubber

acquired in 1975 in Shanghai.
Claudia Lux Collection, Berlin
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Caricatures

From a Red Guards newspaper published October 13, 1967, lampooning among others President Liu Shaoqi and Party Secretary, Deng Xiaoping, Helmut Opletal Collection, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Vase

Porcelain, featuring depictions of young people sent into the countryside, Liling (Hunan Province), dated 1976. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna
© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



“Snow Dome”

Mao's birthplace, symbolic gold bars and US cents; inscription: “a good person - peace for life”, c. 2000. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna

© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Calendar

Caption: “The Peoples of the World Love the Works of Chairman Mao”, China National Textiles Import & Export Corp., Calendar page for July 1968. Museum of Ethnology, Vienna

© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Game: “The Gang of Four”:

Cardboard targets featuring caricatures of the deposed Politburo-members Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, Jiang Qing and Wang Hongwen, late 1970s, acquired in 1979 in Nanking. Helmut Opletal Collection, Vienna

© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM



Statue of Mao

Caption: “Group picture of the foreign students graduating in 1975 at Beijing University”, Helmut Opletal (in printed T-shirt) is standing in the back row, second on the left of Mao

© KHM mit MVK und ÖTM





OPENING HOURS

Museum of Ethnology

1010 Vienna, Heldenplatz

Daily except Tuesdays

10 am – 6 pm

Library

Mondays and Tuesdays 10 am – 4 pm

Wednesdays 10 am – 6 pm

Thursdays 10 am – 4 pm

closed Fridays

ENTRANCE FEES

Adults	€ 8,-
Concessions	€ 6,-
Vienna card	€ 7,-
Groups of 10 or over, p.p.	€ 6,-
Ticket for guided tour	€ 2,-
Children under 19	free
Annual Ticket	€ 29,-

GUIDED TOURS

Christine Kaufmann

Tel. +43 (0)664 605 14 -5050

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

A catalogue in German will be published in conjunction with the exhibition.

PRESS OFFICE

Nina Auinger-Sutterlüty, MAS

Head of the Dept. for Communication and Marketing

Kunsthistorisches Museum mit MVK und ÖTM

1010 Vienna, Burgring 5

Tel.: + 43 1 525 24 – 4021

Fax: + 43 1 525 24 – 4098

e-mail: nina.auinger@khm.at

www.khm.at

www.ethno-museum.ac.at
