

Reading Revolution: Art and Literacy During China's Cultural Revolution.

Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

21 June-30 September, 2016.



Zhou Ruizhuang 周 Ruizhuang (1930-). *A Lifetime of Revolution, a Lifetime of Studying the Works of Chairman Mao* (干一辈子革命, 读一辈子毛主席的书). Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, January 1966 (Seventh Printing).

The exhibition *Reading Revolution: Art and Literacy During China's Cultural Revolution*, on display at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library from 21 June to 30 September 2016, curated by University of Toronto Associate Professor of Chinese & East Asian Art Jennifer Purtle and Elizabeth Ridolfo, Special Project Librarian of the Thomas Fisher Library, accompanied by a lush, colour catalogue, with descriptions of 50 of the unprecedented [217 objects](#), is well-timed and wide-ranging, a glorious celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1969), and a testament to the variety of books, posters, audio recordings, and objects generously donated to the University by [Mark Gayn](#) (1909-1981) and his wife Susan (b. 1921).

The exhibition and catalogue, prepared collaboratively by Purtle and Ridolfo, proceed intriguingly by advancing the hypothesis that the unique brand of anti-Revisionist Marxism-Leninism espoused in the People's Republic of China under the leadership of the late Chairman of the Communist Party, Mao Tse-tung (1893-1976), had a global effect on literacy, the likes of which are difficult to perceive among members of English-speaking nations. Beginning with a case of copies of different early printings of *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (1966, first Chinese edition; first, [second](#), and third printings), which correlates with a catalogue essay written by Purtle on the rapid growth of literacy in China that took place

over the latter half of the twentieth century, the curators point to a remarkable reality that few generalists outside of East Asian studies are likely to know: Chinese languages are logographic, in that the symbols of a script-character “represent meaning rather than sound” (17); as such, the “correlation of sound and meaning must be learned by rote,” a practice naturally fitting to the didactic ideals of a communist nation, where all “peasants, workers, and soldiers” must learn to live in accordance with the governing classes’ vision of a better life for all – they must see, learn, and act on a unified message (17-19). This is exactly what Mao’s *Quotations* serves to achieve, they argue, with its 427 quotations in 33 topical chapters – pithy expressions, slogans, maxims lifted from Mao’s denser and more full-bodied collected works – having an aphoristic quality, to be imprinted on the quotidian doings of China’s post-Confucian official class literate culture: each citizen of the new republic owns a “talismans of literacy,” and around the simple sayings of this ‘Little Red Book’ (so called because of its red-vinyl wrapper) evolves a visual system of *aide-mémoire* for beginner readers – graphic art with words, not banners (22) – crystalizing the expressed principles of any one of the Chairman’s policy endorsements.

Where the exhibition and catalogue are most effective is in their expression of cultural convergences, their integration of mixed-media, and their discussion of a wide range of literary and textual artifacts together, making a genuine bid for the value of [LAM management](#). In tracing Gayn’s background as a Russian Jew born Mark Julius Ginsbourg in Barim, a “small town near the Manchurian-Mongolian border,” Ridolfo comments on how Gayn found his calling for journalism “while reading a Russian style wall newspaper” – this is a very clever connection in light of Gayn’s later habits poster-collecting (8). Ridolfo notes that Gayn “conducted an extensive interview with [Mao Tse-tung] lasting 10 hours, with only a short break for lunch,” conveying much about early CPC privilege for foreign journalists, the Party’s commendable willingness to communicate openly (9). ‘Living Newspapers’ receive some minor coverage, with the exhibition and catalogue including photographic images taken by Gayn and his wife previously uploaded to the Fisher Library’s [Flickr account](#) (44; links: [1](#), [2](#)). North American scholars would probably associate the ‘living newspaper’ movement with 1930s America, before the spread of cinematic news reels (e.g., the Federal Theatre Project’s *Triple-A Plowed Under* [1936]); but, through Gayn, it is clear that such performative news drama outlasted film to the late 1960s. Most visually striking of the cultural analogues, [Well Pressed: Some Thoughts on Visiting the 12,000 Ton Hydraulic Press](#)

(February, 1966), a poster by China's foremost cartoonist of the twentieth-century, Zhang Leping (1910-1992), depicts American President Lyndon B. Johnson (1908-1973) with the visual features of *Sanmao* (tr. "Three Hairs"), a cartoon of a small, starving child, about to be crushed by the competing forces of North and South Vietnam, figured by the platen and coffin of the press. The visual implication of aligning U.S. with Japanese interests, playing upon the satirical use of Sanmao from the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), is very shrewd, justifying the curators' one-off selection of a poster with no précis text regurgitated from Mao's *Quotations*. And of course legendary Canadian physician, and alumnus of University of Toronto, Norman Bethune (1890-1939), devotee to Maoist teachings of self-sacrifice for the greater good, gets a case all to himself (case 5; see Mao's essay "In Memory of Norman Bethune" [1939], reprinted [here](#), 337-384).

It is hard for me to stress enough the significant innovative work done by Purtle and Ridolfo and Fisher Library Staff for reaching out to new and repeat library patrons, both for how they have chosen to distribute parts of the exhibition and what they have chosen to include. For example, the exhibition contains posters done in woodblock printing – both monochrome and multicolour – images painted in gouache, in the *Social Realist style*, personal photographs, cups, [games](#), toys, [pins, and badges](#), many collected by Gayn during his visits to China in 1965, 1967, and 1971 (10), when the social and cultural upheavals of revolution were greatest, items that "have never been shown, and are now scarce both in and outside of China" (6). Most striking, this "sharp-eyed chronicler" was so open minded as to admit into his purview fragile, traditionalist papercuts, from which the exhibition and catalogue's main graphic is derived (*Worker, Peasant, and Soldier with Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* [c. 1968]) and a tiny but realistically featured machine gun wind-up toy, a gift to any student fascinated by gender discourse, the role of homeland defence in rural life, and the identity signifiers of activist guerilla fighting ("*Girl Gunner Doll, wind-up toy*" [c. 1967]).

In several respects, Purtle and Ridolfo have triumphed masterfully, in bringing their chosen subject of interest outside the walls of the library, in winning over new patrons and engaging new target audiences. Apparently originating in part from an advanced fourth-year seminar class led by Purtle, "Exhibiting China" (FAH465H1), *Reading Revolution* has won interest among students (106). Complemented by Justin G. Shiller's lecture, '*A Revolution is not a Dinner Party': The Challenges of Collecting Mao*, the 2016 John Seltzer and Mark Seltzer Memorial Lecture for the Friends of the Fisher, the exhibition has gained currency among



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collectors and donors. Truly advancing the university's mission for exploring the Marshall McLuhan-derived concept of 'city as classroom,' *Reading Revolution* accompanies a thrilling audio guide, downloadable from [SoundCloud](#), letting interested parties listen to songs of the revolution even after library hours - one melody, "The East is Red," is dangerously catchy (track 7, [here](#)). A large number of Gayn's collected posters and [postcards](#), his woodblock prints and papercuts - his memorabilia keying us into the obstacles and triumphs of perhaps the largest cultural turning point of political thought from the twentieth century - are freely downloadable, in surrogate, most outside copyright, through Flickr ([papercuts](#), [posters](#)).

Be sure to drop by the Thomas Fisher Library to examine the items of the Gayn collection. Otherwise, see them [online](#) or [listen](#) to them. Fifty years on from the Chinese Cultural Revolution many still look new, and the others embody a meaningful nostalgia, palpable to anyone aware of and sensitive to the items' place in history.

Exhibition and Catalogue by Jennifer Purtle and Elizabeth Ridolfo, with the contribution of Stephen Qiao. Toronto: Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library (Printed by Coach House Press), 2016. 114p., ill.

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