Panel on Poster Art from China, Cuba, and the U. S.

Andrew Jones (Professor, East Asian Languages and Cultures, U. C. Berkeley)
Lincoln Cushing (Digital Archivist and author of *Revolucion! Cuban Poster Art*)

By way of presenting examples of primarily twentieth-century poster art from the U.S., Mexico, Cuba, China, and France, Lincoln Cushing demonstrated the usefulness of posters as a tool for teaching. Posters belong to a traditionally marginalized artistic genre, he said, but they can be used to introduce a wide range of subjects in the classroom from perspectives that many students have not yet considered. Posters are meant to change people's thinking, have been used as instruments of promoting social change, and can be used to draw students' attention not only to the subjects in the posters themselves, but also to various aspects of the political, social, and cultural settings in which they were produced.

Under the Federal Arts Project in the United States, begun in 1935, artists were put to work teaching art in communities all across the country. Learning print-making allowed people to produce works of art that could be sold relatively cheaply, and the posters from this period exemplify a new, "democratic" art form that was revolutionary in the sense that it allowed a large public for the first time to own and display works of art.

In late 1930s Mexico, a group of like-minded graphic artists independent of political parties, calling themselves *Taller de Grafica Popular*, began producing prints (mostly linoleum and woodcut) for display on the street and in galleries. The prints were addressed to various national events and social issues, and the themes and motifs visible in them include the dignity of workers, depictions of skeletons and skulls (a traditional Mexican motif), and the importance of public service. (See figures below and http://www.docspopuli.org/articles/Bancroft/TGP.html)

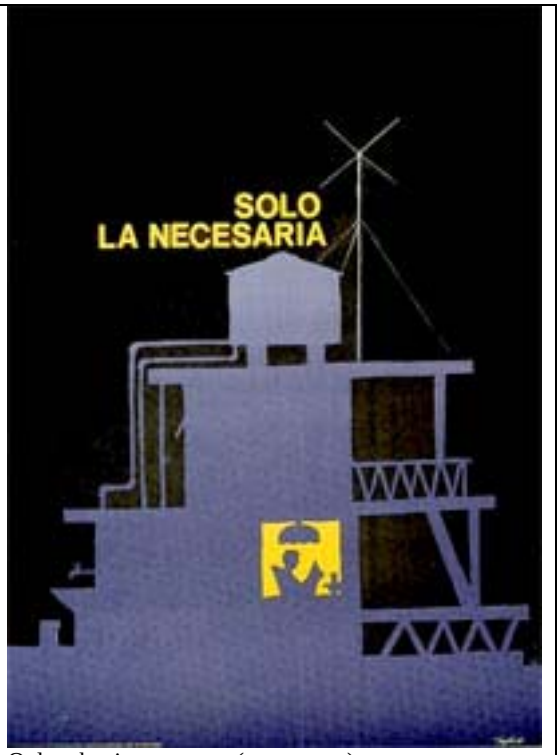
Leopoldo Méndez, "1º de mayo" - CTM" 1947


Alberto Beltrán, "Detengamos la guerra" 1951

Cuban posters made soon after the revolution were relatively unremarkable, but the Cuban

Film Institute (ICAIC) showed that artistic creativity could be effective within the movement to build a new society, and other agencies followed suit. Cushing presented examples of posters by three main producers: ICAIC, Editora Politica (a government publicity organ), and the Organization in Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). The posters are particularly impressive for their distinctive colors (see figure below left) and their creative use of concrete images to communicate abstract concepts (see figure below right). The Editora Politica posters display the breadth of creative freedom allowed to the posters' designers and not the heavy hand of bureaucratic control, and ICAIC's posters are notable for the attention they focus on the subjects of films rather than on the celebrity of the films' casts. The Cuban posters rarely rely on photographic images, and are characterized by bold graphics, bright colors, and minimal text. By being folded rather than rolled, the posters could be distributed cheaply and widely in the mail and as an insert in some other publication.
(See also http://www.docspopuli.org/CubaPosters.html)

Che and Camilo - Raul Martinez



Only what is necessary (energy use).

CHINA

Among other things, Chinese posters are recognizable for their use of red. They were produced in connection with a large variety of subjects, including advocacy for colonial liberation movements (figure below left), celebration of woman laborers (figure below right), and the political liberation of African Americans. Chinese posters also made their way all over the world, and many of their themes had an appeal that gave the posters a collateral impact far beyond the original purpose for which they were designed.

Resolutely support the anti-imperialist struggle of the Asian, African and Latin American people, 1967

Strive to speed up the mechanization of agriculture, 1971

Posters from Paris and the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s show the usefulness of silk-screening as a means by which students publicly addressed current events (as well as longer-term issues) quickly and cheaply by producing posters. As Berkeley's Inkworks Press, founded in 1974, demonstrates, the success of anti-establishment publicity depended on the means of printing being owned by people committed to making it widely available for the good of the community. (See docspopuli page at http://www.docspopuli.org/IWwebcat/gallery-01.html .)

San Francisco Poster Brigade, 1979

"Women making leaflets"
From the "Women Under Capitalism Must Organize" series. Berkeley-Oakland Women's Union, 1975 (screenprint)

Andrew Jones described the Cultural Revolution in China between 1966 and 1976 as the historical context of posters and other kinds of art. He emphasized the importance of avoiding the temptation to demonize the Cultural Revolution era along lines suggested by the standard narratives of the Cultural Revolution. These narratives, some of them propounded by the Chinese Communist Party itself, the Western media, as well as by intellectuals whom the revolution victimized, portray the revolution as (1) ten years of calamity that should be put in the past, (2) an ultra-leftist aberration that (according to the Chinese government) has now been corrected, (3) a cult of personality around the figure of Mao, (4) a culture of

destruction among insane students who rebelled against authority and destroyed Chinese culture, or (5) an imposition of totalitarian control over culture by the Chinese government. Such blanket assertions don't necessarily help us gain a deeper understanding of a complex and tumultuous time. By understanding the politics and motivations and lived experience of those who participated in the Cultural Revolution, Professor Jones asserted, we can understand why many were inspired by art that is easily dismissed as empty propaganda.

The Cultural Revolution was in large part the result of a large-scale, long-term attempt by Mao to counteract ossification he perceived in the Chinese Communist Party in the 1960s. He aimed to encourage "continual revolution" by mobilizing young people dissatisfied with instruction in schools and universities. Students organized themselves into "Red Guards" and, borrowing prestige granted to them by Mao's support, attacked the party apparatus, destroyed what they saw as traces of an oppressive traditional culture, and acted violently against teachers and fellow students. Many took advantage of free railroad travel, granted to students by Mao, to leave their parents and form ties with like-minded groups of students in cities far from their own. After rivalries among groups with competing interpretations of revolutionary doctrine became volatile and violent, the Chinese government clamped down, sending urban youth to the countryside to "learn from the peasants," reducing the violence and providing employment. The number of deaths due to the Cultural Revolution is difficult to estimate.

The Cultural Revolution, like the global youth revolutions that took place all over the world in the 1960s, was concurrent with, and made use of, an exponential expansion of the mass media. By the 1970s, nine hundred million (!) loudspeakers had been set up throughout the country to broadcast music, news, and other propaganda, including to the eighty-five percent of the population who lived in rural places that had previously been hard to reach. Posters, many showing images of Mao himself, became ubiquitous and much-discussed, including among people who could not read. These posters included not only those produced under official auspices but also so-called "big-character posters" (figures below), originally produced and pasted on walls by individuals who wanted to express their own views.

Big character posters.		Bombard the capitalist headquarters, 1976.

These big-character posters, which were often more vehement, violent, and sexy than official posters, were, in Professor Jones' words, a more participatory, popular, democratic means of communication, though the government came to adopt the same style in some of its own posters. The *Little Red Book* itself, which had originally been distributed in an easily portable and durable form to Chinese soldiers, became ubiquitous as well; it circulated widely as a book, and its red color and typography, as well as the quotations it contained, found their way into many other media, including music and dance.

The **discussion** with the audience raised several points:

(1) One especially useful source of information about the Cultural Revolution in China, including excellent documentary film, can be found at <http://www.morningsun.org>.

(2) On the question of why Africa as a whole, with the notable exception of South Africa, has not produced many posters: there are many reasons, one of the most important of which is probably that publishing is not a huge industry in Africa.

(3) It is important to keep in mind that posters have been produced by many groups and for many purposes. Dr. Cushing classifies posters as "government" or "opposition" and notes that producing them is a means of popular empowerment: they are a way of provoking discussion, and they represent an attempt, often contested, to appropriate public space.

(4) On the comparison between distributing posters and disseminating information by means of the internet: the internet is a vast and expansive public space, but the things available on it are not necessarily widely read. Corporate power helps increase the audience exposure for anything available online. In some cases, the impact of displaying or distributing something online is difficult to measure, as in the case of posters distributed as electronic (e.g. pdf) files.