

# CHINESE POSTERS

## *Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*

BY LINCOLN CUSHING AND ANN TOMPKINS

SAN FRANCISCO: CHRONICLE BOOKS, 2007

144 PAGES, 170 COLOR IMAGES

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Reviewed by Susan Glosser

In *Chinese Posters: Art from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution*, Lincoln Cushing and Ann Tompkins have reproduced in full color over 150 Cultural Revolution posters from among the 500 that Tompkins donated to UC Berkeley's East Asian Library. The book's most attractive aspect for classroom use is the nicely reproduced images. There are usually three images to a page, but they are still large enough to be easily viewed. Each chapter also contains three or four full-page reproductions of the most vivid and iconic posters. This book works well as an introduction to the images of the Cultural Revolution and would make a useful and vivid addition to courses that touch on modern Chinese art, Maoist politics and propaganda, political iconography, and Maoist gender ideals.

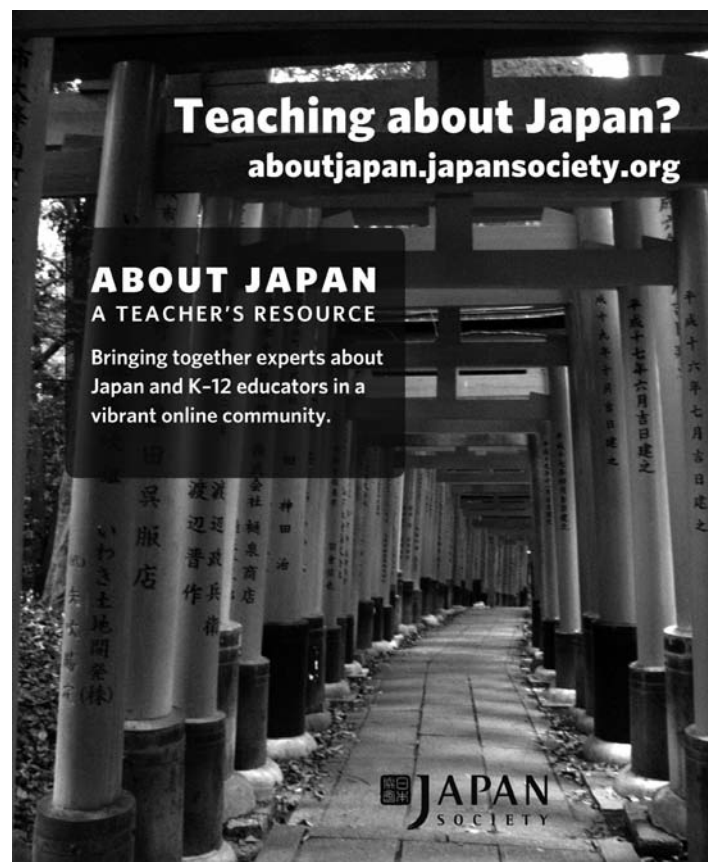
The potential for classroom use of these posters is enriched by the authors' introductions to the volume and to each of the book's seven chapters. Cushing's essay is valuable for its interesting and concise introduction to the history and iconography of the posters in China and for its discussion of perceptions of the posters in the United States. For example, he includes an instructive example of a poster in which Liu Shaoqi was brushed out and then later put back in, and he describes the attraction the posters had for members of the Black Panthers, feminists, and other social activists. Tompkins' essay offers a unique perspective on the Cultural Revolution. She spent the years between 1965 and 1970 in Beijing as an English instructor. These five years overlapped with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the bulk of her posters date from those years.

The posters are grouped into six categories: "Nature and Transformation," "Production and Mechanization," "Women Hold Up Half the Sky," "Serve the People," "Solidarity," "Politics in Command," and "After the Revolution." The index lists the posters by title. The bibliography offers a solid start on PRC art and propaganda.

Instructors should be aware of several weaknesses. The bibliography's readings on the Cultural Revolution are outdated. Yanan is described as the Communist Party base from only 1937 to 1947. Tompkins gives the impression that foot binding was still widespread in the late 1960s, and she idealizes the Cultural Revolution and focuses on her own experience to the exclusion of how this political movement

affected the Chinese. For example, she looks back at the 'speak bitterness' campaigns as "the highlight of life at the Institute" and her stint at manual labor on the Evergreen Commune as "among my happiest times in China." Tompkins also recounts without comment other resident foreigners' enthusiasm for the small iron furnaces that crowded the landscape and the "government policies that saved many lives during the famine years" during the Great Leap Forward. (28) We can't blame Tompkins' colleagues for not knowing about the waste and massive starvation of the Great Leap. After all, urban Chinese did not learn about it until its youth were sent to the countryside. Tompkins' account makes it clear that she was sheltered from the violence of the Cultural Revolution and understood little Chinese. Still, it is disturbing to read an essay that ignores the raft of scholarship and personal accounts that attest to the suffering these movements inflicted on the Chinese people. That said, Tompkins' idealization of the Cultural Revolution does offer students an excellent opportunity to examine why the Chinese and some foreign observers placed their hopes in the promised reforms of the Cultural Revolution and why some of today's younger Chinese wax nostalgic for China's worst political nightmare. ■

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