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Glory Days

U of T art show presents a nostalgic look back at an impossible dream

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A viewer takes in the exhibit at the U of T Art

Centre. Bodi Bold

A new exhibit at the University of Toronto Art Centre aims to illuminate a dynamic and turbulent period in Chinese history. "Workforce: Representing labour in Chinese propaganda posters", curated by Elizabeth Parke, a Ph.D. candidate in art history, shows 16 Chinese propaganda posters, all but one from the time of the Cultural Revolution (1963-67).

"Work was seen as a heroic and necessary part of nation building," Parke said in an interview with the newspaper. The posters depict the Communist Party's official narrative of revolutionary optimism. They feature triumphant ironworkers, teenage girls standing beside brand new tractors, and dedicated intellectuals learning to do farm work. Parke said that she deliberately stayed away from images of the iconic visage of Mao. Her exhibit focuses instead on the lesser known, beautiful depictions of common people doing manual labour.

Parke explained that the artists worked together in painting academies and were tasked with creating visual images that would inspire the masses. The Maoist dream never materialized, but with the later ascent of capitalism in China, these images, saccharine fantasy or not, have become some of the most enduring images of their time, especially to those who never lived through the struggles of that period. The rapid path to modernization glorified in the collection of posters has occurred, but ironically much of it was under capitalism.

Parke found the posters at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library in a collection donated by Mark Gayn, a reporter and expert on China. Gayn, a globe-trotting journalist who held positions at Newsweek, Time Magazine, The Washington Post, and The Toronto Star, was born near the Manchurian-Mongolian border, went to public school in China, and is alleged to have had two private meetings with Mao. His archives of leftist ephemera are so vast that many more exhibits could be culled from their depths.

Although the posters are more than 40 years-old, and were produced for domestic Chinese consumption like most goods

produced during Maoist times—which were not exported but used at home—they clearly have contemporary significance. Now, China's workforce makes our stuff, and China is colloquially referred to as the factory for the world, while the Chinese government avoids publicly promoting idyllic visions of the future.

The attempt to achieve might and prosperity, both in the Maoist era and in contemporary China, has focused on harnessing the labour of the common worker. The Maoist era forced rural workers to join farming communes, whereas contemporary China allows 100 million rural migrants to work in coastal factory towns without the job security, collective education and health care of the Maoist era.

The poster's depiction of healthy and beautiful bodies performing manual labour in pristine natural settings stands in contrast to the bleak working conditions of many factory workers in modern China. Even as quality of life has increased for many, the nation has gone from being among the most equal in the world—the general equality of citizens is the one thing that the posters portray accurately—to being one of the least equal nations in the world in terms of income equality. The workforce is anything but united. But the workers keep on working.

"Workforce: Representing labour in Chinese propaganda posters" will run until April 21 at the University of Toronto Arts Centre. The Mark Gayn Papers are available to U of T students at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

Additional Info

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