

of T's rarely seen Chinese propaganda collection



Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

When art history PhD candidate **Elizabeth Parke** discovered a massive collection of posters from the eve of China's Cultural Revolution at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, her first thought was, "I wish somebody could show these somewhere." It wasn't long before she decided to be the one to do so.

Now showing at the University of Toronto Art Centre is *workforce: representing labour in Chinese propaganda posters*, an exhibition of 16 artworks that present vivid depictions of the theme of work as state propaganda. Curated by Parke, the exhibition examines representations of the worker to reconsider the toiling body in Chinese artistic production and to illuminate how ideas of work are mobilized in the name of nation-building.

"I wanted to move the focus of the posters away from kitsch and look at what else they are telling us," said Parke. "China has a workforce unrivalled in size, and in its move to become an industrialized nation, it succeeded based on its workforce."

Produced between the years 1963-1967, the posters convey the importance of work at the time. The figures portrayed are idealized and engaged in activities such as planting rice, breaking rocks, and ironworking – all tasks vital to China's goal at the time of catching up with England and surpassing America. Parke believes it's worth



reconsidering how we think about work during the contemporary era of globalization fuelled by dematerialized capital.

She culled the featured works down from the nearly 200 boxes of personal papers, manuscripts, photographs, posters and Mao Zedong badges donated to U of T by renowned journalist Mark Gayn. It's the only known collection of propaganda posters of its size in Canada, and possibly the second or third largest in North America.

Gayn had spent many years as a journalist with the Toronto Daily Star, the New York Times Magazine, the Washington Post, Le Monde, and the Chicago Daily News. His extensive travels through Asia and the Soviet Union earned him a reputation as one of the world's most knowledgeable commentators on these areas.

"The hardest part was figuring out how to do justice to the collection," Parke said. "I wanted to show what we have here at U of T and still maintain a tight theme."

The exhibition is sponsored in part by the Faculty of Arts & Science Dean's Student Initiative Fund. The fund provides financial support for initiatives that aspire to create dialogue and foster a greater sense of community through special events, lectures, or other forms of community engagement. Parke timed it to coincide with the annual meeting of the Association of Asian Studies, the premier conference for Asia scholars in North America, at which she organized a panel of leading scholars of the Cultural Revolution to discuss the unique collection with an international audience.

"I most want people who see the exhibit to recognize the excitement of this collection," she said.

Workforce runs until April 21.

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By Sean Bettam