

ASIA PACIFIC

Where Mao Meets the Mundane: Everyday Life in a Bygone China Sinosphere

By IAN JOHNSON AUG. 17, 2016

Covell Meyskens is a historian of modern China at the Naval Postgraduate School, an educational institution in California mainly aimed at active-duty military officers. He is working on a book about the Third Front, the gargantuan defense project China began in 1964 to build an industrial base in its interior, far from the more vulnerable coastal region. He also runs the photo blog “Everyday Life in Mao’s China,” a website with more than 5,000 photos and paintings depicting life in China during the first decades of Communist rule.

In an interview, Professor Meyskens discussed his blog, stereotyped views of the Maoist era and whether Mao Zedong’s rule really was totalitarian.

What interested you in the Third Front?

I wanted to work on Cold War China and industrial development. The Third Front was Maoist China’s largest industrial project, bigger than the two nearest competitors — the First Five-Year Plan and Great Leap Forward — combined. The C.C.P. [Chinese Communist Party] invested over 20 trillion renminbi [\$3 trillion] in it, and yet there is not one book that analyzes it, except for my upcoming monograph.

Why did they want to build this?

Two main reasons. First, the C.C.P. sought to develop industrial infrastructure in inland regions — railroads, mineral deposits, electrical grids, industrial plants. Second, in the wake of the first American air raids on North Vietnam in 1964, the C.C.P. leadership, especially Mao, became very concerned that the U.S. might bring the Vietnam War to China, and so they decided to build a backup industrial base in China's west. In devising this defense strategy, Mao drew on the C.C.P.'s experience of hiding in remote mountainous areas to avoid destruction by the K.M.T. [Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang, or Nationalists] during the Chinese civil war [1927-49] and Japan in World War II.

How did this lead to your blog?

I was looking for pictures of the Third Front. As a social historian, you try to imagine a time period — the physical environment, the social norms, the daily routines, the cultural values, the principal social groups, the areas of conflict. Having photos helps to stimulate the historical imagination.

Where are the images from?

They're almost all from the internet. Through persistent digital digging, I have uncovered all sorts of stuff, such as this rare photo of peasants eating leaves during the Great Leap Forward. A lot of the images come from Sina blogs and other forums where people post photos and paintings. A number of older people in China collect images, put them online and use them as illustrations for their memoirs or lay histories of Maoist China.

I have also put up paintings, which mainly come from auction websites. The paintings are especially interesting, because everyone knows Maoist propaganda, but there's also quite a bit of art which is much less didactic. Artists produced paintings, even during the Cultural Revolution, and they weren't just painting Mao portraits or Red Guards. They painted trees, industrial projects, fishing boats, gardens, birds. One particularly striking genre of drawing is comics, such as these Great Leap Forward food cartoons.

What are some of the especially telling photos?

A lot depict everyday activities, like eating a meal or window shopping. Photos also show people engaging in what might seem like normal activities, like buying fruit in Beijing, but doing so during the height of the Great Leap famine, or college students walking around Beihai Park, but doing so in 1968, during a rather violent period of the Cultural Revolution.

These sorts of images provide a different window onto what life was like for some people. We often hear about people's lives which were destroyed by political oppression, but daily life was more nuanced. Political campaigns coursed through people's lives, but they also engaged in more mundane activities, like taking their kids to the park, escorting kids to school, going to the movies or getting married.

Some scholars debate whether it's appropriate to call the Maoist period "totalitarian." What do you think?

I tend to not use the word totalitarianism. It is one of those words, like fascism, that seems to have a lot of explanatory power but can easily conceal as much as it reveals, especially since it tends to have a strong moral content and is frequently deployed to discredit whatever you're talking about.

How many of the photos are government propaganda and how many are personal photos?

It's hard to tell, because they come from other blogs that don't always cite their sources. The places where you get a fair amount of personal photos are sent-down youth. A noticeable number took cameras with them and took photos of their experiences. A number of them don't seem to serve propaganda purposes, like this one of a guy in sunglasses. Then you have pictures from big cities and family photos that don't seem to serve Communist purposes. There is also a whole genre of photos by foreign journalists, which have a different aesthetic.

Is there a risk that the official pictures show a Potemkinesque China?

Yes, the website definitely has Potemkin images, which like the fabled Soviet village depict an ideal vision of socialist life in which happiness clearly is the normative emotion. In these pictures, photographers have clearly arranged people around a camera and either asked them to smile or airbrushed cheer onto their faces, making it seem as if people in China had one unified emotional experience of socialism — a state of nearly constant joy at how their every action made a contribution, no matter how small, to socialism's global triumph and capitalism's decline into the dustbin of history.

However, it is important to remember that photographic manipulation is not unique to Maoist China. That said, the scale of photographic manipulation matters, as does the existence of government rules, formal or informal, about what sort of activities are acceptable to record and publicly circulate.

While such rules are important, it is also noteworthy that cultural workers in Maoist China were not always acting out of fear or seeking to comply with party orders. Memoirs show that some media personnel believed that photography could advance the socialist cause by portraying China not as it actually was, but as what it could be at its best. Cultural producers were also not all of one mind. In the 1950s, debates occurred about the merits of altering photos.

Local and central government media outlets also had different pressures, aspirations and resources. Even at the height of the Cultural Revolution, it was possible to take a bare-chested selfie, which, even though it paid homage to the forward-looking, self-confident, muscular military and industrial heroes of the day, authorities would have nonetheless likely labeled as counterrevolutionary.

With the 50th anniversary of the Cultural Revolution a lot of new books are coming out. Traditionally in the West, many of these books were victims' memoirs. Is your blog meant to be a corrective?

The project seeks to build a visual archive of as broad a range of experiences as possible. I also at times do not give images titles that reference campaigns like the Cultural Revolution, since there is such a strong tendency for people to think of Maoist China in terms of the main political campaigns. Campaigns were not the only way people experienced or remember the past.

That said, the blog has a number of images of iconic Cultural Revolution practices, such as Mao receiving Red Guards in Tiananmen, mass criticism sessions, people ritually reporting to Mao every morning, young children posing with guns, and Red Guards reading the Little Red Book, ransacking a church and renaming streets to make them more revolutionary. But there are also photos of lesser-known activities, such as people going to the market, Zhou Enlai attending a funeral, students practicing martial arts, a parade for Red Guard dead, portraits of the accused or Maoist-inspired protests in Hong Kong.

The blog also has several images of the Great Leap Forward, ranging from iconic backyard furnaces and public canteens to practices much less prominent in public memory, such as backyard furnaces on parade in Tiananmen, famine refugees in Hong Kong, ceremonies marking an industrial advancement, cultural performances, diplomatic visits, artists at work, a British newsreel about “weird” food shortages, backyard furnace art, Mao taking a swim at the conference where he overrode critics of the Great Leap or this C.I.A. film, which overall gives a fairly positive depiction.

A particularly surprising finding was this stunning painting. It gives a rather different representation of workers building a new road than contemporary propaganda, in which a common theme was building a road to socialism. In this particular painting, there is no clear message. There is no leader. There is no glory. There is not even much of a road. If this is propaganda, it is a rather peculiar kind.

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