What Did the Cultural Revolution Look Like?
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Many people outside of China get their first ideas about the Cultural Revolution from reading memoirs or works of fiction that deal with the years 1966-1969 or the final decade of the Maoist era (1966-1976). It is also possible, though, to start to grapple with the meaning of that complex and traumatic period via its visual culture, and finding out about a new exhibit and a new online collection (new to me at least) has inspired this Top Five List. It includes some sites that have been mentioned before at China Beat, but seem worth referring to again.

1. The always alert Danwei bloggers have just alerted their readers to a fascinating website devoted to Cultural Revolution photographs. It’s well worth checking out their post or going straight to the website by a Cornell professor that they praise.

2. The Asia Society has a new exhibit up on “Art and China’s Revolution” (it runs through January 11), which is introduced well by Emily Parker in a recent Wall Street Journal piece that comes with a slide show, made up of powerful images on display. More images from the same show are available to click through courtesy of the New York Times.

3. I know I’m biased, since I’ve worked as a consultant on various Long Bow Group projects, but the website associated with that organization’s award-winning documentary “Morning Sun” (a film by Carma Hinton, Geremie Barmé, and Richard Gordon that was recently screened at the Asia Society to accompany the exhibit alluded to above) remains the single best place to go for a visual introduction to Cultural Revolution.

4. Posters were a particularly powerful vehicle through which images and ideas were conveyed during the Cultural Revolution, of course, and the Danwei post mentioned earlier directs readers to the excellent online displays created by Stefan Landsberger. But another place to turn if you just can’t get enough of these materials is the virtual version of a late 1990s traveling exhibit of materials from the wonderful collection held at the University of Westminster (full disclosure: I was one of the exhibit’s co-curators). This is the same collection that served as the basis for Picturing Power in the People’s Republic of China, a book edited by historian and gender studies scholar Harriet Evans and media studies scholar Stephanie Donald that includes many color images and chapters by the likes of art historian Craig Clunas, longtime Guardian China correspondent and poster-collector John Gittings, and literary critic Chen Xiaomei.

5. And there are many other places to turn on the web for those interested in these topics, including this online collection of reproductions of posters held at Berkeley’s East Asian Library. This online source, as well as some of the others mentioned above, includes material that falls outside of the Cultural Revolution’s chronology, which makes it possible to think in new ways about the continuities and ruptures between that period and those that immediately preceded and followed it.