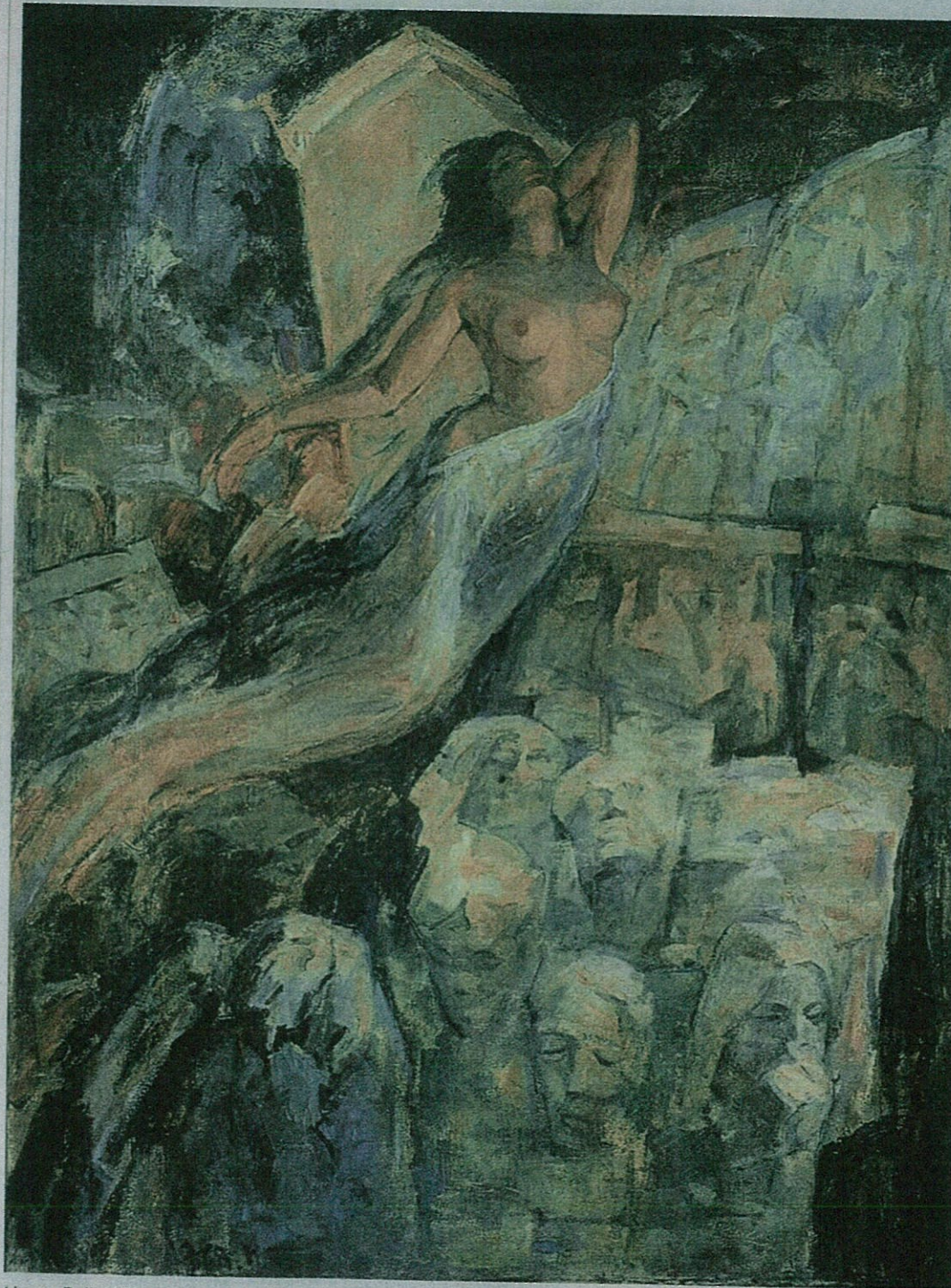


THE ARTIST WHO TOOK ON MAO

China Over a decade before the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Beijingers were already stirring. One brave young man – and an equally courageous young woman – capitalised on that mood, collaborating on a daring painting, writes Madeleine O'Dea.



Huang Rui's 1978 work based on Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*. In Delacroix's work, Liberty urges the French people to fight on. Huang aimed to infuse memories of the 1976 Tiananmen defeat with the same spirit.

In 1978, on a late spring day in the heart of Beijing, a nervous young man called Huang Rui closed the door of his bedroom and asked a young woman to strip to the waist. He was 25, but having grown up in the puritanical world of Mao's China, he had never seen a woman naked in his life. He was standing in his family home, a rundown house at one corner of a dusty courtyard wrapped within the grey maze of hutongs that encircled the historic centre of the capital. She stood barely an arm's length from him, in the room where he had first closed his door against his parents and the outside world.

Between them stood a canvas, patched together out of four pieces of cloth, primed and ready to be painted. They looked at each other. She saw a bookish young man with thick-rimmed glasses and pale features apparently untouched by the five years he had spent in the far reaches of Inner Mongolia toiling in the cause of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution.

He saw a woman from another age. Stripped to the waist and triumphant, she was a vision of freedom guiding a victorious people out of a time of tragedy. She was Eugene Delacroix's 1830 painting *Liberty Leading the People* come to life.

He worked in a leather factory, she on a construction gang building roads. Together they were going to cross a line.

Two years before, in April 1976, Huang Rui had witnessed the beginning of a revolution on a rainy spring day in Tiananmen Square, when the unthinkable happened: after 10 years of chaos wrought by the Cultural Revolution, anger over decades of wasted hope and blighted dreams boiled over in a huge and violent demonstration. At the time, the demonstration was condemned as a counter-revolutionary revolt, and those involved were branded as either dupes or criminals. But Huang Rui knew it had not been like that.

He had been there. On the evening of April 3, 1976, Huang Rui had left his job at the Beijing No. 3 Leather Products Factory and had headed with a workmate for Tiananmen Square. It was two days before the festival known as Qing Ming, when the Chinese traditionally honour their dead.

Premier Zhou Enlai had died that January after a four-year battle with cancer. He had long been revered as someone who had mitigated the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution, which had raged across the country for the previous 10 years. A grand state funeral had been held for the elite in the Great Hall of the People in January, but Qing Ming gave ordinary Beijingers their chance to mourn.

In the days before the festival on April 5 they came in their thousands to Tiananmen Square. They carried tributes of mourning not just for Zhou but for the ideals of the revolution itself, the dream of a Republic truly dedicated to the people's welfare, a dream which less than three decades after its birth lay in ruins.

At the centre of the square, the Monument to the People's Heroes floated in a sea of flowers and placards, posters and poems. There were expressions of grief, but also of anger. Some, in a clear reference to Mao, proclaimed that the "Emperor's rule" was over. The crowd ebbed and flowed across the square, stopping to listen as people stepped up to speak. Through the rainy streets to the square, Huang Rui carried a poem he had written, called *The People's Grief*. When he arrived at the monument he decided to read it out loud.

As Huang Rui began he was scared, but he was excited too. Something wonderful was happening in the square that day. People were expressing how they felt, something they had not dared to do for years. When he finished reading, he heard a voice calling from the back of the crowd: "Read it again!" He knew this might be an agent of the secret police, offering him more rope to hang himself with. He read it again anyway, then let his workmate drag him away, but not before he had posted his poem among the others on the base of the monument.

When the Qing Ming festival dawned, Huang Rui's poem was gone, along with every other expression of the people's sorrow and anger. Not a scrap of paper was left, or a flower. China's hard-line leadership, meeting in anxious session on the night of April 4, saw these tributes as a direct challenge to their rule. By the time a new wave of mourners came to the square on April 5 the police had scrubbed the place clean.

The leadership of the People's Republic had rewritten history many times before, but this time the Beijingers who came upon the sanitised scene would not accept it. Thousands rallied in anger, and soon more than 100,000 people were milling in the



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Square. Police cars were set on fire and government buildings bordering the square were breached.

At 10pm, the security forces moved in and used batons and clubs to beat the crowd into submission. It was later announced that hundreds had been arrested, but others estimated that more than a thousand people were taken into custody that day. They were later convicted in mass trials or sent to camps devoted to "reform through labour".

The crackdown on the Qing Ming demonstrators in April 1976 was the last bloody act of Mao's reign. On September 9, 1976, at the end of a boiling hot summer, Mao Zedong died. The man who had led China's Communists to power and who had proclaimed the People's Republic some 27 years before, the person who had transformed the country and then led it into the serial disasters of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, was dead. Less than a month later, Mao's wife Jiang Qing and the other members of the so-called Gang of Four were under arrest.

Like many in Beijing during this period of ferment, Huang Rui was restlessly reading the signs. He had been just 16 when he was sent to Inner Mongolia in 1969, just one among millions of teenagers who by Mao's decree would be "re-educated" in the countryside. In that bleak landscape he had

finally lost his faith in the party and in Chairman Mao. It was there too that he resolved that he would make his future as an artist.

Huang Rui had learned the basics of Chinese ink and wash painting as a child, but in the Inner Mongolian capital, Hohhot, he discovered an ethnic Mongolian painter who had been taught to paint by the Russians in the 1950s. He lived under house arrest but welcomed the young man who stole time to visit him and learn about oil paints.

Huang Rui returned to Beijing in 1974 as a factory worker; but whatever the state might decree, he was already an artist, if passion and determination meant anything. He thought that there had to be other people like himself in the capital, kids who were disillusioned with Maoism and determined to make their own destiny.

In the 1976 Qing Ming demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, he saw thousands of them in action. They were driven underground again afterwards, but he knew now they were out there. A few months later, in a library behind Beihai Park in the centre of Beijing, he found an image that could do them justice.

In an old book of Western painting he came on a reproduction of Delacroix's painting *Liberty Leading the People*. Sublimely romantic, the work depicted Liberty as a

Left: Huang Rui in Beijing. Behind him is a work inspired by the 64 hexagrams of the I Ching. Top right: This 2006 work by Huang Rui spells out "Long Live Chairman Mao!" in banknotes. Above: Huang Rui, centre, and his friends in the first and historic demonstration for freedom of expression, on October 1, 1979. The banner reads "March in Defence of the Constitution". ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND ALLEN & UNWIN

beautiful bare-breasted woman, brandishing the flag of the French Revolution as she urged the people to fight on even as the bodies of the fallen were heaped around her.

Suddenly, Huang Rui saw a way of depicting the events of spring 1976 in Tiananmen Square, of reimagining the people's defeat as a victory, with the figure of the woman leading the crowd and standing as a rejection of everything that had gone before.

As soon as he met her, Huang Rui knew she was what he needed. She was tall and strong, beautiful and restless. The daughter of doctors, her education thwarted by the Cultural Revolution, she now worked as a labourer on a road gang. When he told her what he wanted, she didn't hesitate.

It was a warm spring day in 1978 that she came to his house and he took her to his bedroom. He had assembled a canvas out of scraps that he had scrounged and primed with glue. 1 metre by 1.20 metres of rough cloth on which they planned to make their own version of history.

Even 35 years later, Huang Rui blushed when he tried to describe to me how he felt that day, seeing a woman naked for the first time, weighing the danger of painting an event that was condemned as criminal, knowing that even to paint a nude body was

forbidden. They worked through the warm days of spring, in the small room heady with the smell of turpentine. He was working from instinct. Huang Rui had never seen a real Western painting or attended an art class, but he did have the techniques he had gleaned from his Mongolian mentor in Hohhot.

He mixed the paints, cool, sad greys, blues, and greens, and the warm colours of flesh and light. His composition was focused on the Monument to the People's Heroes around which the demonstrators had gathered in 1976. In his painting, the monument would seem to split apart as his vision of Liberty rose through the centre of the frame, while below, a new monument seemed to coalesce, made up of the uplifted, pensive faces of the demonstrators.

Within a year, Huang Rui had banded together with a group of friends to stage an exhibition of the new art they were making - art that flew in the face of official orthodoxy, art that was about the personal, not the party political; the realistic, not the rosy; the experimental, not the traditional.

Denied an official venue, they would choose to exhibit in the open air, hanging their works from the railings outside the National Art Museum of China on September 27, 1979. It was China's first-ever exhibition of contemporary art, and when the authorities forced it to shut down, they triggered another historic event: Huang Rui and his friends took to the streets and staged the first demonstration for freedom of expression ever seen in the People's Republic of China.

By this time, Deng Xiaoping had set China on a new course, a program of economic reform and openness to the West that over the next decades would transform China from a closed and poverty-ridden country to the second-biggest economy in the world.

Running parallel to this was another movement which would prove just as revolutionary: an upwelling of independence and creativity which would reach its climax a decade later at Tiananmen Square in 1989, posing the greatest challenge ever to China's Communist regime, and sending shockwaves through the culture that have never died away. ■

This is an edited extract from The Phoenix Years, Art, Resistance and the Making of Modern China, by Madeleine O'Dea, Allen & Unwin, \$34.99