

Ian Johnson

Poisonous Weeds

Straddling the mighty Yellow River as it begins its wandering path through northern China, the metropolis of Lanzhou marks the border between the country's Han Chinese east and its western borderlands of ethnic minorities. The city is a center of China's military-industrial complex, and a hub for ambitious plans to use infrastructure and investment to bind China with far-flung points around the globe. An arid city of poplars and willows, Lanzhou is a marker of Chinese power: from this base we will pacify our troubled western regions and push outward across the continent.

This is the setting for Lisa Ross's examination of China's febrile ambitions. The artist takes us to one of Lanzhou's military compounds--a *danwei*, or "work unit" around which early Communist society was organized. Built in the 1950s and '60s, these were low-rise brick buildings that housed the staff of offices, factories, or ministries, and often included schools, clinics, playgrounds, and theaters, all surrounded by fences and gates. They were small universes of Communist Party control, whose only decoration were propaganda panels on the sides of buildings that exhorted or warned residents to follow the latest government directives. In the Mao era, many carried the Great Helmsman's sayings, his violent visions imprinted even on the communities where people lived. Lanzhou became dotted with *danwei* communities as the city became a key military hub and a center for heavy industry.

Mao died in 1976 and in the late 1970s China embarked on what became known as the "reform era," a time of capitalist-style economic policies that created today's economic superpower. Places like Lanzhou initially withered, its aging heavy industry no match for the nimble cities of China's prosperous coastal regions. But its role as a military hub remained and by the new millennium a resurgent China began to shift its attention to Central Asia, reinvigorating Lanzhou with new dreams.

Throughout these changes, many of the city's old *danwei* buildings remained. Their slogans faded in the harsh sun, but they were still visible—traces of the past that refused to disappear.

Ross visited the *danwei* and was drawn to walls with painted words, during an artist residency in Lanzhou, 2018. On many, the paint had been scrubbed or faded with time, but the signs were still legible because they were on plaster and raised off the surface. At first glance hard to read, the characters slowly reveal their messages, like a forgotten memory that

slowly reappears. One of them reads:

Whatever the enemy opposes, We should support.
Whatever the enemy supports, We should oppose.

This quotation from Mao, which we can see on Ross's *Poisonous Weeds (Whatever the Enemy Supports)*, is typical Communist Party's rhetoric over its more than one hundred years of existence. It echoes the first line of the first essay of the first volume of Mao's collected works: "Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? That is a question of first importance for the revolution." Society was divided into friends and enemies, a Manichean world that was drilled into people in textbooks, movies, books, newspapers, and these propaganda notice boards.

It is a heritage that the party has never repudiated. Indeed, since coming to power in 2012, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has reemphasized this world view, forbidding that any aspect of the Mao era be rejected. The Mao era and today, he argues, are two sides of the same coin. That continuity is especially true for how the Chinese state sees the world to the west of Lanzhou—the borderlands populated by ethnic minorities.

This is an area that Ross knows particularly well. The artist's previous work focused on the deserts and oases of Xinjiang, a western region that is home to several ethnic minorities. Historically, these peoples have rarely been under Chinese political and economic control, leading to two centuries of tension, revolts, rebellions, and repression. Ross's work in Xinjiang documented the inner lives of one key group from there, the Uyghurs, a group whose culture the state is seeking to erase through forced cultural assimilation. Ross documented and visually reinterpreted the Uyghurs' most sacred sites—small shrines in the desert that were vessels of Uyghur identity. Many of them have now been demolished in an active effort of state-sponsored disremembering.

This violence underlies Ross's new work. As the artist was making these new pieces, the state was rounding up people such as Ross's friend Rahile Dawut, a renowned ethnographer whose arrest garnered international attention. These events reinforced the continuity to the inherent violence found on these early propaganda panels, making it impossible to simply show them as faded relics.

Instead, Ross needed to draw out the deeper message of power and dominance. The panels were originally a quietly faded vermillion, something akin to an old Persian rug. So

Ross began to reinterpret them, changing the images' hue, contrast, and saturation, and evoking a bloodier feeling. Once pleasant and almost decorative, they regained their original anger and intensity, reflecting the sense of perpetual struggle—a country and a political party at war with itself and its imaginary enemies.

The images form a postmemory of this now-distant era. When Ross visited the *danwei*, it was about to be demolished and replaced with something more modern—a shopping mall, probably, or maybe a housing tower. Instead of dowdy brick structures that are clearly markers of the past, they will be replaced with something more acceptable to modern aesthetics, making China's ambitions seem newer and less persistent. By documenting these messages and making them

speaking again, Ross creates an arc of energy that links the past to the present—the ambitions of a new superpower firmly rooted in the past.