

In recent years the production of what is generically defined as “avant-garde” art in mainland China has been the site of a widespread reemergence of the icon of Mao Zedong, paired in the larger social context with a mass cultural trend focused on the renewed popularity of the figure of the Chairman.<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon has attracted the attention of scholars, cultural critics, and jour-

nalists, and, in terms of artistic production, has achieved substantial market success overseas; yet, these works are still banned from public exhibition and have only been shown abroad. Notwithstanding the prominent visual character of the larger sociocultural phenomenon, little or no notice has been paid to the specific domain

of the visual and to the close connection between the popular success of the so-called Maocraze and the propagandistic process of visual dissemination employed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).<sup>2</sup>

This idiosyncratic form of cultural production and consumption at play in contemporary China encompasses both high and low culture in a fluctuating process largely facilitated by the long-lasting effects of the earlier ideological framework. The cultural critic Liu Kang has discussed this phenomenon by stating that “contemporary Chinese culture of the everyday has increasingly become the site of dialogical contention of a variety of forces, among which the culture industry, or the commercial popular culture, and China’s local and national forms and styles, including the revolutionary legacy of the culture of the masses, intersect and interpenetrate.”<sup>3</sup> More specifically, the case can be made for a mode of cultural dissemination originally produced to meet the requirements of the ideological apparatus, but still active today within the collective imagination of a consumerist Chinese society. The transition of propagandistic models from ideological dissemination to mass consumption creates an unexpected correspondence between socialist and consumerist systems of mass communication. The Chinese case offers a direct example of the versatility of the propagandistic medium to fulfill opposite ideological orientations within the same society and within the time frame of one generation.

While the starting point of my research has been the investigation of the tight relationship created during this century between artistic production and nationalist ideology, my investigation has eventually turned toward a larger dimension of cultural production. This shift has taken place in order to provide valid tools of interpretation for the complex phenomenon of the renewed popular currency of the figure of Mao within a social framework that would seem to have abandoned the ideological assumptions symbolized by the icon at the time of its original emergence. It will eventually become apparent how the very significance of the icon of Mao can instead be considered as a discursive space where different, sometimes antithetical, ideological strategies are negotiated, often simultaneously. In this sense the renewed viability of this sign can be proposed as a paradigm of some of the complex, often contradictory forces at work in the contemporary cultural production of the People’s Republic. This cyclical shift from popular taste to official marketing strategy can moreover be considered as an idiosyncratic instance of what has been

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## Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art

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1. The term *avant-garde*, used here to define contemporary independent Chinese art (as opposed to government-sponsored and -circulated art), is problematic and would deserve a complex discussion of its own. Nonetheless, I am adopting it because of its accepted customary use and because it literally translates the term *qianwei*, used in art circles in mainland China to distinguish this production—often the object of censorship—from another, more “official” and uncritical type of work; see also Gao Minglu, “From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transnational Avant-Garde in Mainland China,” in *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, exh. cat. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 149–66.

2. The most definitive text on the Maocraze, from which I have drawn throughout this article, is Geremie Barmé’s *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1996). Other English texts that have discussed this phenomenon are Edward Friedman, “Democracy and ‘Mao Fever,’” *The Journal of Contemporary China* 6 (Summer 1994): 84–95; Dai Jinhua, “Redemption and Consumption: Depicting Culture in the 1990’s,” *Positions* 4, no. 1 (1996): 127–43; Orville Schell, “Chairman Mao as Pop Art,” in *The Mandate of Heaven* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 279–92. The only English-language discussions of the visual aspects of the phenomenon to my knowledge are David



1. Peasants reading and studying Mao's teaching in the Model Commune of Dazhai. Reproduced in *Hong taiyang zhaoliangle Dazhai qianjin de daolu* (The Red Sun Shines over the Progressive Road of Dazhai) (Beijing: Waiwen Chubanshi, 1969), 129.

defined as “the Mercantile fervor of the Reform age,”<sup>4</sup> an example of the ideological demise of Communist China that has turned the country into the most promising sociocapitalist market of this century.

## The Portrait

If a 1979 statistic estimating the production of Mao’s portraits during the Cultural Revolution at 2.2 billion—three copies for every citizen—is accurate, then the standardized image of Mao, best known in the West because of its prominent position as the frontispiece of the Little Red Book and through Andy Warhol’s remake of the 1970s, may be the single most reproduced portrait in human history (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> This image has recently undergone a disconcerting revival prompted by a set of practices comparable to the Western phenomenon of star adoration and celebrity worship. In order to grasp the aura of immanent sacrality it once generated, it is worth considering its specific and multilayered significance. This aura is central to assessing the huge propagandistic system activated in China during the Cultural Revolution via visual language.

The most important component of this ideological superstructure is related to the portrait’s location in the most sacred ritual space of Communist China, Tian Anmen Square, on the gate of the Forbidden City also called Tian Anmen (The Gate of Heavenly Peace). The portrait had hung there since the early days of the People’s Republic in 1949 and was produced in several versions through the years. Of these the most reproduced was the version that hung on the gate during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

In its latest version the portrait still faces the expanse of the largest public square in the world, at the symbolic center of the state, where all major modernizing movements of this century began physically or metaphorically. In this position it does not perform a merely decorative role on the side of this central area, but—as noted by the art historian Wu Hung—it occupies one of the conceptual poles that creates a symbolic space with other elements of the square, endowing it with the manifold sacrality derived from the conflation of traditional cosmological arrangements and socialist ideological superstructures.<sup>7</sup>

Hanging above the gate’s central opening, the portrait is situated on the city plan’s central axis. This axis, with its associations of central imperial power, has formed the ideological and cosmological spine of most Chinese capitals since the Zhou dynasty in the fifth century B.C.E. At the same time the portrait hangs just below the historic rostrum from which Mao personally announced the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. In that position it is a constant reminder of the conceptual unity that links the founder of the modern state and the Chinese tradition of power.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to this semiotic network external to the space of the picture, the portrait displays another range of ideological signifiers in the formal arrangement of its elements. Through a set of compositional characters indebted both to Soviet models and to local traditions of imperial and ancestral portraiture, it operates in a way similar to that of early Byzantine icons by “making visible that which could not be perceived by the senses.”<sup>9</sup> The icon “contemplates us, it becomes in its turn the gaze of God on the beholder who finds himself caught within the circuit of informative and transformative relations.”<sup>10</sup> “The icon acts. . . . Who sees it sees himself. Who sees it is seen.”<sup>11</sup>

Clarke, “Reframing Mao: Aspects of Recent Chinese Art, Popular Culture and Politics,” in *Art and Place: Essays on Art from a Hong Kong Perspective* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1996), 236–49; Monica Dematté, “Personal Icons: The Quest for a New Individuality in Chinese Painting of the Nineties,” in *Quotation Marks*, exh. cat. (Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 1997), 36–37; Wu Hung, “Mao Revisited,” in *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, 1999), 49–53.

3. Liu Kang, “Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses,” in *Postmodernism and China*, ed. Arif Dirlik and Zhang Xudong, *Boundary 2*, 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 121 (my emphasis).

4. Barmé, 13.

5. *Ibid.*, 8.

6. For practical and satirical reasons this version is commonly defined as “one-ear” (*yige erduo*) Mao, to distinguish it from the “two-ear” (*liangge erduo*) frontal representation, more directly associated with traditional ancestral portraits, which since Mao’s death has been hanging on Tian Anmen Gate. The artist Zhang Hongtu pointed out this terminology to me.

→ “Tian’anmen Square: A Political History of Monuments,” *Representations*, no. 35 (Summer 1991): 85–117. Wu Hung affirms that the construction of Tian Anmen Square—undertaken during a twenty-five-year period—was meant to create a symbolic structure that would “externalize Mao’s vision of revolution, history and people on a geographic plane” (102). In this context Mao came to represent both the past and the present of the Chinese state.

8. The mourning of ex-Party Secretary Hu Yaobang, which initiated the two-month period of protest in Tian Anmen Square in 1989, was marked by placing an iconic portrait of the deceased man on the Stele of the People’s Heroes directly opposite the site occupied by Mao’s portrait on the gate. On May 23, Mao’s portrait was defaced in one of the most iconoclastic acts performed during the demonstrations (see n. 36). Finally, the statue of the Goddess of Democracy, the last attempt made by the students to establish their ideological position on the square, was placed immediately in front of the portrait, in an openly confrontational gesture of defiance. On these strategic acts of public representation, see Wu Hung, 104–14; Tsao Tsing-yuan, “The Birth of the Goddess of Democracy,” in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in China*, eds.



Like the iconic representations of Soviet leaders, it is constructed by merging a semiphotographic effect with the surface of the painting. This process bestows the image with a hybrid quality that shifts between the objectivity of the everyday and the transcendence of the myth.<sup>12</sup>

Thanks to this symbolic layering of significance, the portrait was turned into a highly effective tool of ideological indoctrination during the Cultural Revolution and became an intrinsic element of this period's visual and political culture. Mao was a ubiquitous figure then. His images were executed in a wide range of forms and materials and disseminated in every public and private space, thus performing a function of ideological surveillance on every individual in all contexts of daily life. The visual ubiquity of the portrait, combined with the power attached to the political and personal prestige of the man, contributed to the creation of a feeling of religious adoration not just toward the Chairman, but toward the image itself, which began to share in the godlike nature of its referent.

### **The Posthumous Cult: The Maocraze in the 1990s**

This set of ideological features is both central to the dissemination of Mao's portrait during the 1960s and 1970s and a major cause of its renewed currency as a popular culture icon in the early 1990s. In that period a popular fad based on the visual and cultural reappropriation of the image of the leader engulfed the whole country in a posthumous cult of personality that has been dubbed the Maocraze (the Chinese term *maore* is literally translated as MaoHeat). During this time the portrait acquired a talismanic status whose best-known manifestation was its use as a rearview mirror ornament by taxi or bus drivers to protect both vehicle and passengers from road accidents.

Mao was progressively accepted as a trademark of low-brow consumerism. Books on his life, reeditions of his collected writings, and essays on his person and his role in Chinese history and society started to appear. Karaoke and pop remakes of revolutionary songs associated with his figure became top-selling hits all over the country. Mao-style restaurants became fashionable, with decor employing standard paraphernalia from the Cultural Revolution and menus based on the poor, countryside diet. "It was," as Dai Jinhua, a prominent cultural critic, has stated, "more the revelation of a political unconscious than some kind of conscious political behavior: the displacement and identification of political power with consumerism."<sup>13</sup>

Many have read in the Maocraze a phenomenon of nostalgia for a totalitarian past of relative economic stability and unblemished ideological zeal, lacking the anxieties and insecurities initiated by the looser atmosphere of recent economic liberalization. In the eyes of the people, especially in extra-urban areas, Mao remains the eternal revolutionary subversively used—from within the accepted political discourse—to contest the legitimacy of today's rulers.<sup>14</sup> The image of the despotic and tyrannical Mao (the Bad Mao) is therefore contrasted by popular, superstitious beliefs with that of a Good Mao, "worshiped as one of the people, incorruptible and non-nepotistic in contrast to the post-Mao rulers who are dismissed as greedily and narrowly concerned only with their own."<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence of its popular success, the revived Mao cult was appropriated by the Communist Party to serve active nationalist goals. The renewed

Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elisabeth J. Perry (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 140–47; Clarke, 242–43.

9. John Baggley, *Doors of Perception* (London: Mowbray, 1987), 77. For a discussion of the portrait in terms of traditional ancestral portraiture and mourning, see Clarke, 238.

10. Marie-José Mondzain, *Icone, image, économie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), 119. According to Mondzain, the Byzantine icon is constructed so that an ideal set of perspectival lines departs from the gaze of the figure and converges "in the eyes of the beholder, who is left feeling that he [or she] is essential to the completion of the icon," 81 (my trans.).

11. *Ibid.*, 119.

12. This is very similar to the way in which official Soviet portraiture was manipulated in Russia; see Brandon Taylor, "Photo-Power," in *Art and Power*, ed. Dawn Ades, Tim Benton, et al., exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1995), 251–52.

13. Dai Jinhua, 129.

14. Friedman, 90–91. The critical undertones that the portrait could assume vis-à-vis the government were underlined during the Tian Anmen demonstrations, when people started to openly carry it as a form of protest; see Barmé, 16.

focus on Mao's patriotism strengthened the party's image for ideological cohesiveness and provided a surrogate for the worn-out socialist ideology undermined by the economic reforms of the Deng era. By 1993, the one hundredth anniversary of Mao's birth, the Mao cult became a grandly orchestrated movement that officially promoted and marketed a new brand of reform-style nationalism. Nonetheless, the popular enthusiasm for the Chairman quickly subsided as a direct consequence of the government's official appropriations and manipulations.<sup>16</sup> It should be remembered that unlike Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mao was never officially repudiated by the Chinese Communist Party, despite the devastation the country suffered under his rule. Thus, his icon has never ceased to be considered—both at home and abroad—the quintessential representation of modern China.

## The Maocraze and Contemporary Chinese Art

While the nationalist agenda attached to the official appropriation of the Maocraze should not be dismissed in the discussion of Mao-related artworks, the popular aspect of the fad and its mass cultural character appear more relevant to contemporary artistic production. It is important to remember that the language of the Cultural Revolution was visual to begin with and that its visual currency very much facilitated its propagation and the depth of its ideological penetration. Since "visual" is in turn the space of production of the avant-garde, there exists an immediate level of response between the two artistic languages—Cultural Revolution propaganda and avant-garde art—sustained but not mediated by the recent popular fad. In other words, visibility is the first and most direct space of reception of that original message and therefore becomes central to the consumption and reelaboration of the original propaganda.<sup>17</sup> The reuse of popular symbols of the socialist realist and propagandistic visual production has been discussed by the critic Li Xianting, the first to provide a critical frame for this new production and the one who gave this genre its name, Political Pop:

An existence saturated with politics has become the accustomed state of being for most contemporary Chinese. . . . Efforts to avoid this political reality . . . are only further evidence of the power of the system. Political Pop uses the acknowledgment of this political reality as its starting point, but then proceeds to satirize politics, providing an effective (but by no means heroic) means of neutralizing the hold of a politically saturated mentality on the inner mind. . . . In a sense, "Mao Fever" and Political Pop art are linked in that there is inherent in both the use of past icons or "gods" to criticize, or in the case of the latter, to satirize, current reality.<sup>18</sup>

A constant aspect of this production is the ironic dimension attached to the re-presentation of the Chairman, a liberating experience vis-à-vis the dark psychological mood of coercion and regulation of the previous totalitarian period. The attitude of cheeky irreverence often expressed in these works could actually be compared to the vernacular humor focusing on Mao that began in the early 1980s, where jokes provided an occasion of transgression and release that would facilitate the secularization of the figure of the Chairman.<sup>19</sup>

A general distinction to be made about these works relates to the age of the artists and whether they personally lived through the period of Mao's rule. For those who lived through the Cultural Revolution as young adults, it is

15. Friedman, 93.

16. Barmé, 5.

17. Geremie Barmé defines this production as *pop trivia*, relegating it to the role of a mere by-product "rarely reflecting any of the true cultural complexity of the popular Mao Cult, or the residual social and cultural aftershocks of the original Cult" (45). Such an interpretation apparently consigns the visual production to the status of a footnote of a larger and "higher" social narrative, unfit to convey the full layers of meanings embodied by the social phenomenon.

18. Li Xianting, "Major Trends in the Development of Contemporary Chinese Art," in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, ed. Valerie C. Doran (Hong Kong: Hanart T. Z. Gallery, 1993), xxi.

19. Barmé, 20.

20. Quoted in Geremie Barmé and Linda Javin, eds., *New Ghosts, Old Dreams* (New York: Times Books, Random House, 1992), xxvi.

21. Barmé is the first to recognize the many similarities between the Mao and Elvis cults; see Barmé, 47.

22. Clarke, 239, remarks how in most unofficial art, it is not Mao but "the pre-existing, mass-reproduced, rhetorically loaded images of him" that become the focus of artists' manipulations.

23. Wendy McDaris, "Elvis + Marilyn = 2 x Immortals," in *Elvis + Marilyn = 2 x Immortals*, exh. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 43.

24. The Stars, the first avant-garde art group to emerge in post-Mao China, created a sensation with their 1979 exhibition in Beijing, held outside the China Art Gallery, the main official institution for modern art; see Hui Ching-shuen, ed., *The Stars: Ten Years* (Hong Kong: Hanart 2, 1989). For a reproduction of this sculpture, see Gao Minglu, ed., *Inside Out*, 151, fig. 17.

2. Yu Youhan. *Chairman Mao Talking with the Peasants of Shaoshan*, 1991. Oil on canvas. 66 x 47 (167 x 119). Collection of the artist.



25. In a November 1998 telephone conversation Yu Youhan told me that his first painting with Mao dates from late 1988. This painting, *Mao and Whitney*, is an earlier and smaller version of the one later published in *La Biennale di Venezia: XVI Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte*, exh. cat. (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 1993), 549. Ai Weiwei (b. 1957), a Star member who moved to New York in 1981, employed Mao's icon for a series of paintings begun in 1984. Because these paintings were produced outside of China proper and thus were presumably unknown within the People's Republic, I consider Wang Guangyi's and Yu Youhan's paintings of 1988 the first symptoms of the phenomenon within mainland culture. Two examples of Ai Weiwei's paintings are reproduced in Hui Ching-shuen ed., 56.

hard to disentangle the figure from the confused sense of exhilaration and disillusionment associated with those years. In the works of these artists Mao is generally treated with a critical depth and a sense of psychological involvement mostly lacking in the works of younger artists. Zhang Hongtu—an artist in his fifties now based in New York—has summarized this older generation's feeling toward Mao's icon with the following words: "When I first cut up a photo of Mao's face to make a collage, I felt as if I were sinning. Such feelings

have made me realize how my work is really an effort to break the psychological authority that Mao as an image continues to hold over all Chinese. For me, working on Mao became a form of exorcism."<sup>20</sup> For a later generation who were children or teenagers at the time of his death, Mao is largely an icon in the popular sense of the term, an idol with a visual relevance similar to that reached in the West by Marilyn or Elvis.<sup>21</sup> For these artists Mao is very much an item of wall decoration or an image without depth that does not retain any personal significance.<sup>22</sup> Finally, for individuals of both generations, Mao's image has often become a transparent semineutral sign where, as is often the case in the system of Western celebrity cults, the viewer may "overlay his or her own interpretation . . . with his or her own sexual, personal and cultural identity."<sup>23</sup>

The first known critical reappropriation of the image of Mao that foretells later, ironical uses of the image is a sculpture by Wang Keping (b. 1949) titled *Idol* (1978). Exhibited as a part of the *Stars II* outdoor exhibition in 1980, it visualizes the leader's godlike status, overlapping Mao's flaccid features with those of an ironically winking Buddha.<sup>24</sup> *Mao Zedong—Red Grid No. 1* by Wang Guangyi (b. 1956) and *Mao and Whitney* by Yu Youhan (b. 1943), both dated 1988, are the earliest examples of the more recent Mao-related phenomenon in painting.<sup>25</sup> Wang's work belongs to a series in which major paintings—largely drawn from

the Western tradition—are reduced to their essential volumetric forms and/or analyzed through a cold abstract grid, reminiscent of iron bars, in a process meant to divest them of any trace of emotional impact.<sup>26</sup>

To a slightly later period belongs *Mao on the Rostrum in Tiananmen Square* (1989) and *Chairman Mao Talking with the Peasants of Shaoshan* (1991) (fig. 2), both by Yu Youhan. Yu appropriates a famous 1950s official photograph of Mao taken with a family of cheerfully smiling peasants in his hometown village, Shaoshan, and manipulates it with patterned color motifs that recall the decorative style of folk art. This simulated naïve language parodies official socialist realist policies, whose basic tenet was to promote an art created from the standpoint of the masses. The folk language Mao hailed as the necessary choice for revolutionary art is grotesquely exaggerated, as the figures turn into flat

patterns arranged in a fabriclike composition.<sup>27</sup> The blurred faces are nearly absorbed into the decorative background, and only their overemphatic smiles distinguish the people from the overall wallpaper effect. Yu paradoxically equates the relentless annihilation of the self that marked a whole decade of recent Chinese history to a process of home decoration, in which all the elements are selected for their formal matching qualities.

The process thus becomes a metaphor suggesting the ways in which visual propaganda assimilated most individuals into a semi-irrelevant background propped against the representation of the only protagonist left on the political scene. Just like *Alice in Wonderland*'s Cheshire cat, the shining smiles remain after the disappearance of the subjects, representing their original presence. Isolated within the red faces, the white blots lay bare the fallacy of the joyful bliss artificially imposed on the subjects of the Cultural Revolution's art and society. Exaggeration exposes the farcical quality of political propaganda and the surreal, overidealized relationship between the leader and the people.

While for older artists the Chairman's image and the symbolic value attached to his official representation still maintain a deep emotional significance, artists of a generation too young to have experienced the political brainwashing of the Cultural Revolution directly reveal a sneering detachment in the use of Mao's icon. In a particularly significant example—the painting *New Generation* (1990) by the Beijing-based Liu Wei (b. 1965)—the artist exposes the ongoing play of references created between Mao the icon and Mao the historical character by relegating the Chairman

to the position he physically occupied for two decades in the daily life of the people: a portrait on the wall.<sup>28</sup> Mao has literally become a backdrop for a photo-taking session of two children, portraits of the artist and his brother. While the Chairman's figure towers over the composition, it is not the leader but his representation that is reproduced. Mao is a portrait on the wall, secularized through the addition of a semi-abstract and naïvely drawn landscape, his image employed as a framework to Liu's self-representation. His face is shown with the usual blank expression that looks but does not see, while the boys in front of him are looking out. The tension produced by juxtaposing the iconic, expressionless portrait of Mao and the restlessness of the children in the forefront illustrates the shift that has occurred. The Chairman is no longer a physical and religious entity whose presence can affect the course of millions of individual lives; he is a reminiscence of the past, a flat poster on the wall, a mere backdrop for a new generation striving in the foreground to gain the center of the picture.

Another recurring form within this tendency are the works in which Mao is not directly portrayed but metonymically suggested through the quotation of attributes and/or formal compositions associated with his former official



**3. Geng Jianyi. *Eternally Radiant*, 1992. Oil on canvas. 47 x 39 (120 x 100). Courtesy Hanart T. Z. Gallery, Hong Kong.**

26. Reproduced in Gao Minglu, ed., pl. 34.

27. For a similar argument, see Li Xianting, xxi.

28. The painting has been produced in two different versions. The 1990 version (41 x 33 [104 x 85]) is in my collection; the 1992 version (59 x 39 [150 x 100]) is slightly different in subject matter and dimensions but bears the same title. The latter version was commissioned by Johnson Chang of Hanart T. Z. Gallery in Hong Kong and is reproduced in *China's New Art, Post-1989*, 76. The 1990 version is reproduced in Gao Minglu, ed., pl. 39 (where it is erroneously dated 1992).

29. Reproduced in *La Biennale di Venezia*, 544.

30. For another association established between pandas and political authority, or simply as a foremost nonsensical symbol of Chineseness, see *Missing Bamboo*, Wu Shanzhuan's 1993 installation



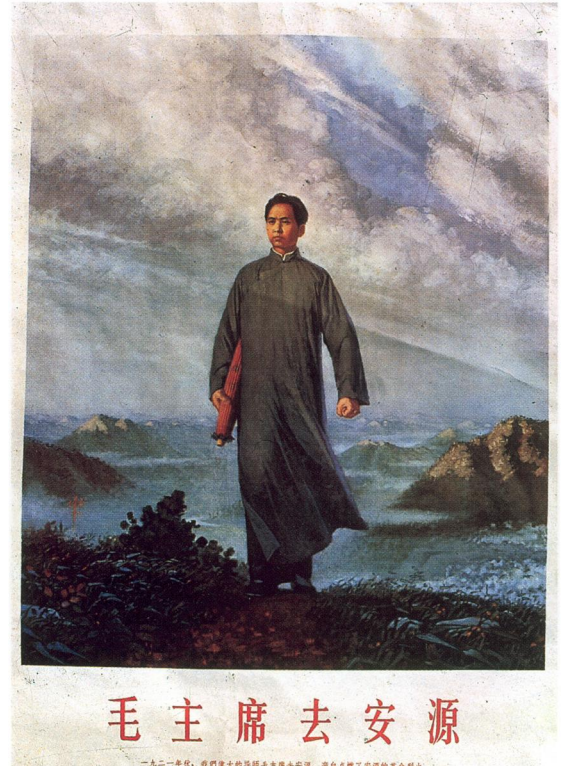


**4. Wang Xingwei. *The Way to the East*, 1995. Oil on canvas. 57 x 73 (146 x 186). Courtesy Hanart T. Z. Gallery, Hong Kong.**

**5. Liu Chunhua. *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, 1967. Oil on canvas. 87 x 71 (220 x 180). Private collection.**

at the Wexner Center for the Arts; reproduced in Julia F. Andrews and Gao Minglu, *Fragmented Memory: The Chinese Avant-Garde in Exile*, exh. cat. (Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 1993), 35.

31. For a comprehensive introduction to the ideological implications that made this painting such an icon of popular cult, see Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 67–70.

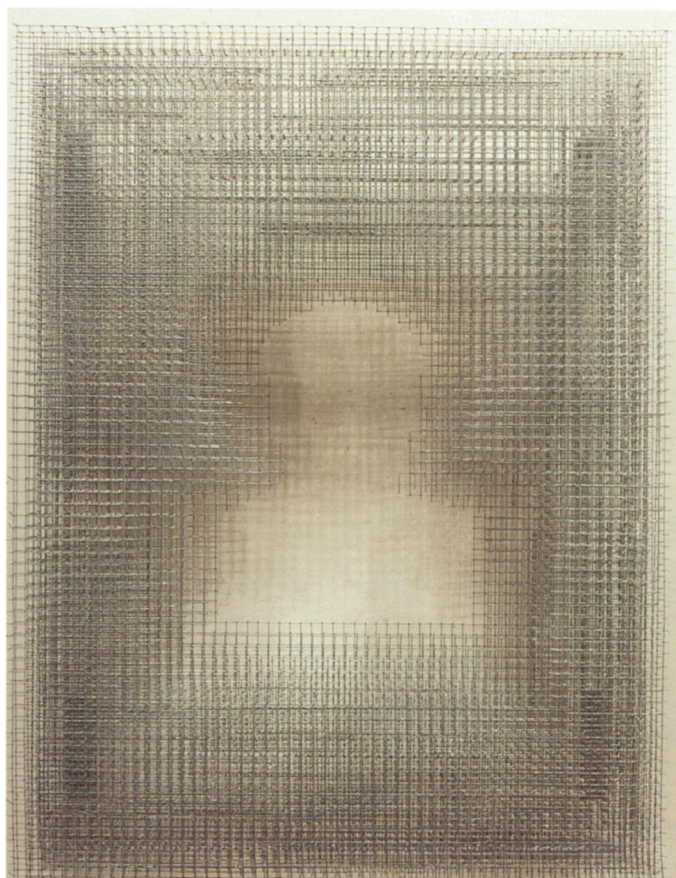


representations. For example, in a series of works by Geng Jianyi (b. 1962), titled *Eternally Radiant* (1992), Mao is unmistakably indicated by the shining rays that would often surround his icon in the official portraits from the Cultural Revolution. Geng substitutes the central icon of the radiant halo with figures like pandas (fig. 3) or everyday images of workers, peasants, and national minorities, such as those printed on Chinese bank notes.<sup>29</sup> In the case of the panda, a nationalist cord is ironically stroked by equating the most formidable advocate of a unique Chinese national character to a universal symbol of Chinese cuteness, the fluffy and friendly panda bear.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly, in a 1995 work by Wang Xingwei (b. 1969), *The Way to the East* (fig. 4), Mao is suggested by the reenactment of the composition of the most famous work of the Cultural Revolution, the 1967 painting by Liu Chunhua titles *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (fig. 5).<sup>31</sup> The contemporary work retains the signifiers that any Chinese viewer would immediately associate with this ultrafamous image: the pink umbrella, the trademark cloudy blue sky, and the distant mountainscape that opens up under the Chairman's feet. Wang thus establishes an immediate visual parallel with this popular icon and creates a



**6. Zhang Hongtu. *Mesh Mao*, 1992. From *Material Mao* series. Iron mesh. 36 x 27½ x 8½ (91.4 x 69.9 x 21.6). Courtesy of the artist.**



complicitous set of associations among the original image, viewers who can still remember its visual impact, and the re-interpreted version, in which the central figure is turned backward and the artist casts himself in the role of the Chairman, wearing a tacky Western suit and a yellow shirt instead of the gray robe of the classic scholar. The hilarity created by this unusual case of mistaken identity is irresistible.

Reproducing Mao as an absent, cut-out presence has been the focus of a large series of works by the New York-based artist Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943), whose series *Material Mao* quotes the Chairman through his standardized, cut-out silhouette (fig. 6). Contrary to the outlook that sees this empty frame as inspired by the Taoist philosophical concepts of yin and yang (negative and positive),<sup>32</sup> the idea for the series, according to the artist, “comes directly from a bagel.”<sup>33</sup> For Zhang, yet another member of the older generation who personally experienced the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, obsessively reproducing the negative silhouette of the Chairman and surrounding it with ordinary materials that create both a visual or verbal pun is a daring defacement of a figure who marked the psyche of an entire generation through his constant visual and psychological presence.

Representations of Mao are included in the semidiarist series executed in ink and brush by the Beijing-based Zhu Wei (b. 1966) under the general title of *China Diary*. In *China Diary* No. 16 (1995) (fig. 7) Mao is once again translated into contemporary clothes by an immediate association to the system of pop cultural stardom, the nearest form to personality cult known in 1990s China. Impersonating the role of Cui Jian—China’s most famous rock-and-roll star and one of the artist’s idols—Mao is represented as the singer, wearing a red bandanna on his eyes while singing on stage. This particular act, Cui Jian’s performing trademark in the early

1990s, is a visual reference to the lyrics of the song “A Piece of Red Cloth.”<sup>34</sup> The cloth is a metaphor for the red flag by which the singer criticizes the numbing effects of socialism on the minds of the people. It is therefore paradoxical that on stage the Chairman should wear a symbol critical of the social system he helped create. In spite of this equation of two different star systems, a certain skepticism over Mao’s popularity is suggested by his downgraded position as an impersonator of the rock-and-roll icon on the stage of a street singer. While in Wang Xingwei’s painting *The Way to the East* the leader’s exceptional popularity was underlined by his very absence (Mao is so well-known he does not need to be portrayed), Zhu’s representation suggests a reversal of roles, in which the leader is forced to wear the clothes of the star to revamp his antiquated political look.<sup>35</sup>

32. Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 271.

33. As stated by the artist in a talk presented at the symposium *Art, Culture, and Memory: The Cultural Revolution and China Today*, China Institute in America, New York, October 5, 1996; also quoted in Danny Yung and Lee Hui-Shu, eds., *Works by Zhang Hongtu* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Center for the Arts, 1998), 10.

34. Thanks to Anne Light for explaining the red cloth’s significance in Cui Jian’s performance.

35. The equation of political and rock-and-roll star systems is also the subject of Yu Youhan’s painting *Mao and Whitney*.

**7. Zhu Wei. *China Diary* No. 16, 1995. Ink and color on paper. 52 x 52 (132 x 132). Private collection. Photo courtesy Plum Blossoms, Hong Kong.**



**8. Liu Anping. *Counterrevolutionary Slogan*, 1992. Video, 2 mins. Courtesy of the artist.**



More subversive is a 1992 video titled *Counterrevolutionary Slogan* (fig. 8) by Liu Anping (b. 1964), in which the author impersonates Mao in the form of his official portrait and reenacts one of the most defiant acts performed during the 1989 demonstrations—the defacement of Mao’s portrait hanging on Tian Anmen Gate.<sup>36</sup> The episode, immediately condemned by the student demonstrators, appeared particularly reprehensible to the authorities because

of its symbolism. By reenacting this episode, Liu exposes how the harsh punishment imposed on the vandals revealed Mao’s still sacrosanct status in the eyes of Chinese rulers.

While the number of artists who have employed Mao or references to his figure in their work is too large to be discussed in this article,<sup>37</sup> the large variations found in the treatment of Mao’s image support the idea that through the intense visual drumming to which Chinese individuals were exposed for decades, his icon was eventually emptied of its strictly ideological connotations, acquiring an aura of daily familiarity central to the manipulations of unofficial art. This phenomenon is strikingly similar to what David Morgan has discussed in regard to popular religious images in the United States: “The theory of popular religious visual culture advanced here posits that by becoming constant and virtually transparent features of daily experience, embedded in the quotidian rituals . . . that people take for granted, religious images help form the half-forgotten texture of everyday life.”<sup>38</sup> The manipulations of Mao’s image become a powerful tool of self-definition and representation exactly because their ubiquity in the realm of public representation was such a visual staple in the daily life of millions.

At the same time, this type of appropriation conforms to the mode of cultural consumption described by Michel de Certeau as “the silent, transgressive, ironic or



poetic activity of readers,” in which the form of reading provides an alternative, unregulated interpretation of imposed forms of cultural orthodoxy. In his words, “the creativity of the reader grows as the institution that controlled [the text] declines.”<sup>39</sup> Only in the ideologically relaxed arena of post-Mao China, thanks to the social and political restructuring produced by the new open-door policies, did the possibility of such manipulations become feasible.

## Ideological Desire and the Rescue of the Self in the Work of Li Shan

For those who lived through the Cultural Revolution as young adults, this period represented a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Regardless of the social havoc brought about by the “collapse of rationalism,” most often this period stands for a memory in which overwhelming ideological fervor, ecstatic release from years of parental and social surveillance, and hysterical adoration for a single individual are conflated in a disconcerting emotional knot. The work of the painter Li Shan can be read as a conflation of personal and ideological experiences related to Mao’s figure and a compelling case of creative reception and reelaboration of ideological indoctrination. By negotiating his own personal and sexual identity within the most iconic portraits of Mao, Li Shan visualizes his shifting role from passive receptor to active manipulator in the space of the same image and provides a telling instance of the contradictory set of emotions still attached to the icon by millions of people.

Based in Shanghai since the early 1960s, Li was twenty-four in 1966 at the start of the Cultural Revolution. From the late 1980s until the mid-1990s he nearly exclusively painted images based on two of the Chairman’s most famous portraits, one taken during the period of Mao’s guerrilla activity in the 1930s (fig. 9) and the other of the aging and benevolent-looking patriarch reproduced in billions of copies, which was hung on Tian Anmen Gate during the Cultural Revolution.

By appropriating these two specific portraits, Li references those representations of Mao that in his memory are associated with a specific range of emotional experiences and are therefore closely connected to a specific time and place in his life. The portrait is thus quoted within the painting in a specific representational format to evoke a set of personal associations completely dissimilar from the ideological implication lying at the center of the portrait’s construction. In these paintings deliberately mimicking the graphic flatness of propaganda posters, the image’s iconic value is re-created by juxtaposing Mao’s head, executed with black-and-white photorealistic accuracy, against a flat and brightly colored background. Reminiscent of how Warhol “has accepted the photograph directly into the domain of pictorial art not as an external memory prop for the painter’s handmade re-creation of reality, but as the actual base for the image on the canvas,”<sup>40</sup> Li appropriates the photographically originated representations of Mao, preserving part of their basic black-and-white features and thus marking a clear distinction between the found image and his own manipulations.

The portrait Li most frequently employed is that of the young Mao. A helpful comparison could be made in this regard to the literary production of the so-called Educated Youth, a group of writers of Li’s generation defined by their forced experience of country life during the Cultural Revolution. Dai Jinhua has remarked that in order to rescue their idealistic memories of youth

36. This happened on the afternoon of May 23, 1989, when three young men from Hunan, Mao’s birth province, threw several eggshells full of ink on the portrait hanging on the square. The defacement was considered so outrageous that the students immediately apprehended the men and turned them over to the police. As Liu Anping stated in a letter of November 17, 1998, the Beijing court condemned them respectively to life sentence, twenty, and fifteen years under the charge of “counterrevolutionary propaganda and arousal.” This vandalized painting is reproduced on the cover of Barmé and Jaivin.

37. Other Chinese artists who have employed Mao or Mao-related matter in their work include Chen Danqing (b. 1953), Feng Mengbo (b. 1966), Feng Jiali (b. 1963), Huang Yan (b. 1966), Liu Dahong (b. 1962), Qi Zhilong (b. 1962), Wang Qiang (b. 1957), Wang Ziwei (b. 1963), Xing Danwen (b. 1967), Xue Song (b. 1965), Zhang Bo, Zhang Dong, Zhang Gong (b. 1959), Zhang Jianhai, and Zhao Shaoruo (b. 1962). Thanks to Hans Van Dijk and Li Xianting for their suggestions in compiling this list.

38. David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 207.

39. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 172.

40. Robert Rosenblum, *Andy Warhol: Portraits of the 70s*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1979), 12.





**9. Li Shan. Rouge Series:  
no. 59 (Young Mao), 1994.  
Acrylic on canvas. 45 x 79  
(115 x 200). Courtesy  
Hanart T. Z. Gallery, Hong  
Kong.**

from the condition of historical denial that emerged in mainstream culture after the end of the Cultural Revolution, “educated youth literature sought . . . to redeem the self from the calamity, the pillaging, the evil that was history—it was the memory of youth as substitute. Consequently, they tried with near desperation to rip away the memory of their youth from history and the discourse of history. Undoubtedly, it was all in vain.”<sup>41</sup> The evocation of youth and the recollection of a special time of his life achieved via selective memory thus becomes an acceptable reading of Li’s use of the image of the young Mao. The artist’s interpretation is similar to this approach. He declares that his use of Mao is an attempt to provide “a comment on his own personal history, not on the history of China.”<sup>42</sup>

The ecstatic fanaticism marking the experience of the Cultural Revolution and the phenomenon of self-identification with the figure of the political leader is echoed in the celebrity worship system so common in Western popular culture. The interpretation that sees fandom and fanaticism as typical manifestations of youthful idealism is well represented, for example, in the Elvis cult, as Ted Harrison states in his book *Elvis People*:

there are fans who find that in remembering Elvis and keeping his memory alive, they are keeping alive that period of their own lives when they were young, and life was full of hope and promise. . . . In the fifties young people began to feel important. Elvis led the way. And today the same fans, now stuck in middle age, with middle incomes and little hope now of achieving great things in life, can return inside themselves to times past, and Elvis leads the way again.<sup>43</sup>

In this light the young Mao in Li’s work is both the incarnation of that time and the projection of the artist’s memory of self at that time. The figure

41. Dai Jinhua, 136.

42. Li Shan, interview with the author, New York, April 1996.

43. Ted Harrison, *Elvis People: The Cult of the King* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 170.

stands for both the cause and the effect of a process of total devotion and self-annihilation.

A recurring element of Li's manipulations of Mao's portrait gives the title to the series and is central to assessing these representations. This is created by adding details or facial features in a hue of pink verging on fuchsia, which Li calls *yanzhi* (rouge). This particular color is associated in Chinese visual culture with popular art, such as New Year prints and popular pageants. In the domain of Chinese opera it is linked with the role of the *dan* or young maiden, which in the past was performed by men. On an immediate visual level the association of this color with the officially sanctioned images of Mao thus establishes a subversive process vis-à-vis the solemnity of the icon, similar to the use of folk patterns in Yu Youhan's paintings. Li speaks of the *yanzhihua* (rouge-ization) of Mao to describe the popularization of the Chairman's portrait and its transformation into a true "popular" icon through the use of a color immediately associated with low and vulgar taste.<sup>44</sup>

But an implicit reference is directed toward male homoerotic desire, traditionally associated in China with the theatrical world because of the convention of men playing female roles. This association—implied both by the use of the color and by the androgynous, feminized features assumed by the portrait in Li's series—introduces another recurrent trope of the literary recollections of the Cultural Revolution—that of sexual freedom and liberation experienced during this period.<sup>45</sup> "Gendering" Mao becomes Li's personal way to vulgarize the figure of the leader and bring this sublime object of desire to a more accessible level. The result of this practice is the projection of the artist's sexuality onto the icon, the screen of a feminized Mao.<sup>46</sup>

This process of self-identification is further revealed in a 1994 painting by Li titled *Mao and the Artist* (fig. 10). Here Mao and Li coquettishly lean on each other, holding in their hands two sensually stylized flowers. Their facial traits demonstrate an effect of mutual assimilation, in which the older Mao is portrayed as a semiclone of the artist. The political icon is progressively absorbed within the artist's persona and rendered as the projection of his psychological journey during a decisive moment of his own history. By feminizing the traits of a desirable hero—and investing the icon that so profoundly marked the horizon of a whole generation with the signs of his own desire, Li attempts to rescue his individual self from "the pillaging that was history." And yet his portrait still maintains a degree of inaccessibility that locates it on a different level from that of the viewer. The iconic properties derived from the original version are preserved in the reworked format, endowing it with a puzzling aloofness. This resistance to a single mode of readings endows the "new" Mao with an undefinable quality that becomes a significant form of expression for a country traversing a period of intense moral and material changes.

In this case, as in many others, Mao has been "undemonized" in a process of "deapotheosis" through absorption into the self.<sup>47</sup> This phenomenon closely recalls the process through which certain popular religious images associated with the daily experience of the viewer can eventually be invested with a specific personal recollection: "the function of the image at the time and thereafter in the ritual of remembering and recounting for others appears

44. Li Shan, interview with the author.

45. The association with sexual freedom facilitated by the anarchistic social environment of the Cultural Revolution is underlined by several works of recollections recently published. In Western languages these are Anchee Min, *Red Azalea* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994) and Mang Ke, *Ye shi* (Wild Things) (Changsha: Hunan Wenyi Chubanshe, 1994), translated into Italian under the title *I giorni della bufera* (Stormy Days), trans. Barbara Alighiero Animali (Pavia: Casa Editrice Liber Internazionale, 1994). Chinese publications on the subject include Zhe Yongping, ed., *Nage shidaide women* (The Way We Were at That Time) (Beijing: Yuanfang Chubanshe, 1998); Zhang Dening and Yue Jianyi, eds., *Zhongguo zhiqing qinlian baogao: Qingchun jitan* (Love Reports of the Educated Youth: The Altar of Spring) (Beijing: Guanming Ribao Chubanshe, 1998).

46. Mao was often described as a most coveted object of love and desire, the first and only love in the life of millions; see Liu Xiaoping, "A Star Reflects on the Sun," in Barmé, 171. In her essay "A Woman's Soul Enclosed in a Man's Body: Femininity in Male Homosexuality," in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992), Kaja Silverman provides a paradigm that could be usefully applied to the reading of this production. In her discussion of Freud's fourth mode of "love for someone who was once part of oneself," she states that "the operative modality here would seem to be the subject's desire for what he once was, perhaps even more for that which he once was to another figure who occupies in relation to him the position which he himself presently occupies in relation to the young man" (365).

47. Dai Jinhua, 130.

48. Morgan, 201.



**10. Li Shan. *Mao and the Artist*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas. 59 x 71 (150 x 180). Courtesy Hanart T. Z. Gallery, Hong Kong.**

to manage change in a way that preserves a sense of self in face of transformation.”<sup>48</sup> During a period when ethical and moral values are being continuously rediscussed under the frantic pace of reform, Mao-the-image has been paradoxically transformed into a stable sign and a most unlikely space of expression for that very entity Mao-the-man had attempted to erase, his subjects’ individual selves.

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