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Faces of Mao

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The Political Portrait

Leadership, Image and Power

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Alessandro Giaccone**

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9 Faces of Mao

Stefan Landsberger

The likeness of Mao Zedong, the founder of the People's Republic of China, has evolved over time from an image that was used and able to mobilize millions to an icon that signifies and personifies the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. Ever since February 1949, when the city of Beijing – then called Beiping – was liberated from Nationalist rule, several versions of the Mao portrait have looked out over the nation, dominating the symbolic heartland of China – Beijing's Tian'anmen Square. Aside from this official portrait, Mao's face graced millions if not billions of propa-ganda posters and other media, produced for different audiences, venues, policies, occasions, campaigns and events.

The Tian'anmen Mao

The official Mao portrait, measuring 6.4 by 5 meters and weighing 1.5 tons, was not the first in that particular spot. The first portrait that was installed was a painting that represented Sun Yatsen, a physician, writer and revolutionary, the first president of the Republic of China, who is referred to as “father of the nation”. It was hung above the central gate in 1929 and showed Sun's face frontally, flanked by slogans. After recapturing Beiping at the end of the Sino-Japanese War in 1945, the painted portrait of Chiang Kai-shek appeared, the President of the Republic of China. It stood on the balcony rather than hanging on the wall, almost reaching the roof of the gate-building. Mao's first portrait, talking Chiang's portrait's position on the balcony, made its debut on February 12, 1949; it was designed under the leadership of Dong Xiwen (1914–1973).¹ A second portrait appeared in July 1949, again designed by Dong. Eight months later, with the proclamation of the founding of the People's Republic, the third portrait was put up; based on a photograph taken by Zheng Jinggang in Yan'an, it was turned into a 6-by-4.6-meter portrait hanging in the center of the gate-building's front wall by Zhou Lingzhao.² By May 1950, it was replaced by a portrait by Xin Mang, who also painted a newer version that would hang from October 1, 1950 until May 1, 1952. Zhang Zhenshi painted the next version, making its first appearance on October 1, 1952 and continuing until 1963. In the period 1964–1967, it was Wang

1 Zhongguo meishuguan, ed., *Zhongguo meishu nianjian 1949–1989* [Chinese Yearbook of Fine Arts 1949–1989] (Guilin: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 1993); Michael Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists – A Biographical Dictionary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 31.

2 Ibid., 236.

Guodong's portrait that looked out over the Square. Wang Guodong and his student, Ge Xiaoguang, would continue to paint the version that has been used from 1967 until the present. All of the artists who had and have been involved in painting the iconic Mao image were recognized for their talents and political trustworthiness, as they had demonstrated in earlier commissions.³

That Mao's portrait was a painting rather than a photographic representation had technical and symbolic reasons. Photographs of the size needed to dominate Tian'anmen Square were difficult to produce. Moreover, the leaders whose portraits had preceded Mao's all had been paintings, thus setting a precedent.

Aside from different artists applying their talents to rendering the leader, the different versions also show different Maos: the first portrait is frontal (showing "two-ears"); the second shows Mao from the left ("one-ear"); the third also from the left (Figure 9.1); the fourth from the right ("one-ear"); the fifth from the left; the sixth full-frontal ("two-ears"); the seventh from the left; and the final portrait is full-frontal again (Figure 9.2). These different versions and postures, all imbued with different meanings for the intended audience, indicate that there initially was some uncertainty about how to best present the Leader to the people and the world.⁴

After Mao's death in 1976, attempts were made to eradicate the excessive use of his image and influence. Yet this proved to be very difficult. Once Deng Xiaoping took over in 1977, all forms of leadership worship ceased. Deng abhorred the personality cult in all its manifestations and was convinced that leaders should remain in the back-ground.⁵ Under Deng a process of de-Maofication was started in the early 1980s, leading to an official reassessment of Mao's contributions. As a result of this reevaluation, Mao's official portrait gradually disappeared from public places, including Chinese embassies abroad. Despite this, Mao continued to be worshipped, reaching a new high with the centenary of his birth in 1993, when a phenomenon also known as the Mao Craze, or Mao Fever, erupted (Figure 9.3). By then it had become clear that the Mao image had become a unifying factor for the nation and a major visual element supporting the party-state. The CCP's involvement in this conscious manipulation of icons can be seen from the ultimate commodification of Mao and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976),⁶ a deft negotiation between socialist and consumerist systems of mass

3 Details about these painters can be found in Zhongguo meishuguan, *Chinese Yearbook of Fine Arts*; Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists*.

4 Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing – Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space* (Chicago, ILL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 68–84; Chen Lu, "Baci geng xuan, Tian'anmen shang Mao Zedong huaxiangde 'mimi'" [Replaced Eight Times: The 'Secret' of Mao Zedong's Portrait on Tian'anmen], *Xin Jing Bao* September 28, 2016. <http://www.bjnews.com.cn/graphic/2016/09/28/418458.html>, accessed on September 25, 2019.

5 Liu Jianming, *Deng Xiaoping xuanchuan sixiang yanjiu* [On Deng Xiaoping's Ideas of Propaganda] (Shenyang: Liaoning renmin chubanshe, 1990), 60–5.

6 This was a mass movement engineered by Mao and his followers that set out to return China to the straight path of revolutionary commitment. It is known for its violence and destruction, in particular at the hands of school pupils and university students that had been mobilized to support Mao and his political line. See Guo Jian et al., *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2006); Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao's Last Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

communications.⁷ The trinkets that were available during the short period of the Mao Craze in 1993 included reissues of the *Little Red Book*, watches, alarm clocks with Red Guards waving copies of the *Little Red Book*, medallions, commemorative plates and plaques, etc. Even at present, many karaoke bars still offer popular Maoist songs that are greatly favored and sung with gusto by patrons, old and young; one of the perennial favorites devoted to Mao is “Dong Fang Hong” (“The East is Red”) that became the nation’s unofficial anthem from the mid-1960s onwards.

The versions of Mao images on posters come in a variety of designs and poses. Chinese poster collectors prize Mao posters the highest; even younger generations of collectors who were not born yet when Mao ruled can criticize or wax poetically over the way in which the Chairman is rendered. According to one (of many) classifications of propaganda posters in circulation, Mao posters are the first category of thirteen, preceding those featuring mass campaigns, the Army, New China, revolutionary models and others.⁸

The Revolutionary Mao

Portraits of Mao had been used prominently for propaganda purposes at least since the Zunyi Conference which took place during the Long March in 1935, where Mao accepted the leadership of the CCP.⁹ Presenting Mao as the leader of the revolution echoed the cult that developed around Chiang Kai-shek, which in turn was modelled on the cult that had been formed around Sun Yatsen.¹⁰ For the manifestations of the Mao images in the years following his installation until the founding of the People’s Republic of China, we have to depend on photographic evidence. These old photographs, taken during Party meetings and elsewhere, or showing interiors of dwellings, see Mao images appearing regularly in the background. His portrait also is often accompanied by that of Zhu De, Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army, and portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. The photographs of the victorious Red Army entering large cities on the Eastern seaboard in the late 1940s show Army trucks bearing portraits of Mao and Zhu.

After 1949, during the first three decades of the PRC, the Mao portrait increasingly and actively began to form and guide the revolution as an embodiment of CCP rule (Figure 9.4). As a leader cult developed in the 1950s and 1960s, Mao’s image came to dominate all aspects of daily life more and more. By the time the Cultural Revolution started (1966–1976) and the cult reached its climax, Mao’s image simply was everywhere. He featured in comic strips chronicling the victory in the war against Japan and the founding of the PRC; his face appeared on bookmarks, biscuit tins and mirrors; a few of the images featuring Mao even were made into postage stamps. However,

7 Francesca Dal Lago, “Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art,” *Art Journal* 58, 2 (1999): 47.

8 Shenzhenshi hongdu wenhua chuanbo youxian gongsi, “Xuanchuan hua zhuyao fenwei shisan lei” [Thirteen Important Categories of Propaganda Posters]. <http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/DPJJU15N-PmjW-D5r3Y7gg>, accessed on September 25, 2019.

9 Barbara Mittler, “Popular Propaganda? Art and Culture in Revolutionary China,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 152, 4 (2008): 13.

10 Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult – Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

using stamps with Mao's likeness could be complicated, in particular during the period when he was venerated like a god.

Prior to the mid-1960s, Mao was showing the Chinese where the Revolution would lead to: he appeared on posters devoted to socialist (re)construction, Five Year Plans, agricultural reform, etc. He was also shown fraternizing with the people, ranging from school children to workers, peasants, soldiers and intellectuals; receiving delegations from ethnic groups, including the Tibetan leader the Dalai Lama; taking stock of the nation. During the Cultural Revolution, politics took precedence. Chairman Mao Zedong, as the Great Teacher, the Great Leader, the Great Helmsman and the Supreme Commander, became the only permissible subject of the era's arts (Figure 9.5). He was "the embodiment and exemplification of the value system supported by the government-maintained ideology".¹¹ Despite Mao's ambiguous warnings against a personality cult, the intensity of his portrayal in the second half of the 1960s was unparalleled (see cover image). His image was considered more important than the occasion for which a particular work of propaganda art was designed: in a number of cases, identical posters dedicated to Mao were published in different years bearing different slogans, thus serving different propaganda aims.¹² In the few posters where Mao did not feature as prominently, his symbolic presence or blessing was hinted at by the use of symbols like the *Little Red Book*, or his selected works.

Mao was sometimes depicted as a benevolent father surrounded by children, bringing the Confucian mechanisms of popular obedience into play. Or he was portrayed as a wise statesman, an astute military leader or a great teacher. To this end, artists represented him in the vein of the images of Lenin, which had started to appear in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s: towering over the masses, with an outstretched arm suggesting a benediction.¹³ Another group of posters visually recounted the more illustrious of his historical deeds. But in each case, he had to be painted *hong, guang, liang* (red, bright and shining); no grey was allowed for shading, and the use of black was interpreted as an indication of an artist's counter-revolutionary intentions.¹⁴ This penchant for using specific colors found its origin in traditional ideas about the symbolic effects they had; it still plays a role of paramount importance in the painted faces in Chinese opera.¹⁵ His face was painted in such a way that it appeared smooth and seemed to radiate as the primary source of light in a composition. In many instances, Mao's head seemed to be surrounded by a halo which emanated a divine light that

11 James T. Myers, "Whatever Happened to Chairman Mao? Myth and Charisma in the Chinese Revolution," in *Chinese Politics from Mao to Deng*, eds. Victor C. Falkenheim and Ilpyong Kim (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 23.

12 Interview with art consultant Yang Peiming, Shanghai, January 17, 1998.

13 Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl – Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 65–6; Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power—Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 142–7.

14 Jerome Silbergeld, *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993), 43; Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949–1986* (New York: Abrams, 1987), 22; Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 360.

15 Charles A.S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives* (New York: Dover Publications, 1976 [1941]).

illuminated the faces of the people standing in his presence, a practice that followed the Buddhist tradition (Figure 9.6).¹⁶

As a supermodel, every detail of his representation had to be preconceived along ideological lines and invested with symbolic meaning. The artist Liu Chunhua, a Red Guard who studied at the Central Academy of Industrial Arts and who in 1967 had painted the famous painting-turned-poster *Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan* (Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan) on the basis of a collective design by a group of students of universities and institutes in Beijing, explained the creative process involved in this work as follows:¹⁷

To put him in a focal position, we placed Chairman Mao in the forefront of the painting, advancing towards us like a rising sun bringing hope to the people. Every line of the Chairman's figure embodies the great thought of Mao Zedong and in portraying his journey we strove to give significance to every small detail. His head held high in the act of surveying the scene before him conveys his revolutionary spirit, dauntless before danger and violence and courageous in struggle and in "dar-ing to win"; his clenched fist depicts his revolutionary will, scorning all sacrifice, his determination to surmount every difficulty to emancipate China and mankind and it shows his confidence in victory. The old umbrella under his right arm dem-onstrates his hard-working style of travelling, in all weather over great distances, across the mountains and rivers, for the revolutionary cause [...] The hair grown long in a very busy life is blown by the autumn wind. His long plain gown, flutter-ing in the wind, is a harbinger of the approaching revolutionary storm [...] With the arrival of our great leader, blue skies appear over Anyuan. The hills, sky, trees and clouds are the means used artistically to evoke a grand image of the red sun in our hearts. Riotous clouds are drifting swiftly past. They indicate that Chairman Mao is arriving in Anyuan at a critical point of sharp class struggle and show, in contrast how tranquil, confident and firm Chairman Mao is at that moment.¹⁸

Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan (Figure 9.7) became a *cause célèbre*, "perhaps the most important painting of the Cultural Revolution period",¹⁹ if only because Mao never visited Anyuan. The painting was meant to discredit Liu Shaoqi, Mao's main political opponent at the time, who had played a much more important role in organizing the labor movement in Anyuan in the 1920s than Mao did and did visit. It is believed that more than 900 million copies of the Mao painting were eventually printed; it was displayed at meetings and carried around during demonstrations, mass meetings and processions, and many found their way onto walls, next to the official portrait of the Chairman.²⁰ It seems as if this poster illustrated the formative and tempering processes

16 Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 360.

17 Ibid., 338; Liu Chunhua, "Painting Pictures of Chairman Mao Is Our Greatest Happiness," *China Reconstructs*, October 1968, 2–6.

18 Liu Chunhua, "Singing the Praises of Our Great Leader Is Our Greatest Happiness," *Chinese Literature*, September 1968: 32–40.

19 Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 67–70.

20 Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 339; Robert Benewick, "Facing Left – Power, Terror and Profit in Chinese Iconography," Professorial lecture, University of Sussex, November 26, 1996, published in brochure form, 19.

Mao had gone through, from the young firebrand to the founder of the State to the ultimate Leader of the Cultural Revolution. Seen from this perspective, the poster may also have been disseminated on such a large scale in order to demonstrate that Mao himself had been something of a Red Guard *avant la lettre*. The importance of this painting and its message is proven further by fact that it was meticulously reproduced on a number of posters, thus spreading its message even further.

Nonetheless, when compared with most of the other Mao posters produced during the Cultural Revolution, Liu's painting-turned-poster is remarkably different. The popularity of the Anyuan poster may stem from the fact that its romantic presentation of Mao as a young firebrand appealed to many.

The Domesticated Mao

Even before the Cultural Revolution, Mao had become a regular presence in every home, either in the form of his official portrait, or as a bust or statue (Figure 9.8–9.11).²¹ Once the Cultural Revolution started, one could not do without. The official portrait showed the Leader all by himself, in his splendor of *hong, guang, liang*, as

an idealized benign face done in a near photographic manner, taking advantage of the play of light and shadow over the Chairman's features. It is not a lively portrait; rather, a kind of serenity seems to dwell on the face of the man, gazing into nowhere, almost disinterested in human affairs. On his lips is the shadow of a smile. He is dressed in a bluish grey uniform-like tunic originally introduced as official wear by Sun Yatsen in the early days of the Republic. The background is a celestial blue.²²

Not having the Mao portrait on display indicated a lack of commitment to the revolutionary flow of the moment, or a counter-revolutionary outlook, and refuted the central role Mao played in politics and the day-to-day affairs of the people. For this reason, those households that were identified as belonging to the landlord class or as bad elements often were not permitted to display Mao's portrait. The formal portrait usually occupied the central place on the family altar. This added to the already god-like stature of Mao as it was created in propaganda posters. The intention was to replace the worship of the "old" gods and superstitious symbols with the worship of Mao by presenting his image and words as sacred symbols.²³

21 It is estimated that during the Cultural Revolution, some 2.2 billion official Mao portraits were printed, in other words, "three for every person in the nation". Geremie Barmé, *Shades of Mao – The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 1996), 8. The official poster, *Weidade lingxiu he daoshi Mao Zedong zhuxi* [The Great Leader and Teacher Chairman Mao Zedong], published by Renmin meishu chubanshe, print no. 8027.4696, saw its 157th edition in October 1977.

22 Göran Aijmer, "Political Ritual: Aspects of the Mao Cult During the Cultural 'Revolution,'" *China Information* XI: 2/3 (1996): 221. On the origins of the "Sun Yatsen Suit" (*Zhongshan zhuang*), see John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China – Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 23–5.

23 James T. Myers, "Religious Aspects of the Cult of Mao Tse-tung," *Current Scene* 10, 3 (1972): 2; Anita Chan, Richard Madsen, Jonathan Unger, *Chen Village under Mao and Deng* (Expanded and Updated Edition) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 89; Richard Madsen, *Morality and Power*

Mao's importance as an object of worship was strengthened further by small porcelain tablets—"tablets of loyalty"—bearing his image, often with a golden halo, which replaced the ancestral tablets that earlier had been demolished by "Destroy the Four Olds" teams or by roving Red Guards as the principal objects of family-based worship. These tablets were placed on a "Precious Book Table", which each household had to have. Here, the copies of Mao's works, such as the four volumes of the *Collected Works*, were stacked. In some cases multiple sets were displayed, as free copies were handed out as rewards for diligent labor and other contributions to the revolutionary cause. The presence of the books did not necessarily mean that they were read; they had become sacred, ritual paraphernalia, "the Word made tangible".²⁴

The Great Teacher not merely invaded the living quarters, but also the private space of the people. His portrait was carried close to everyone's heart, either in the form of the photograph included in the *Little Red Book*, or in the form of the Mao badges that many wore and collected.²⁵ Mao even took his rightful place among more traditionally accepted objects of worship. A white bust of Mao was placed in a Protestant church in Beijing (1966), and a sculpted figure of Mao was prominently displayed in a Buddhist temple in Shanghai (1967), before these and other places of religious worship were closed. It is unclear whether these Mao statues were intended for worship or whether they were brought in on account of their protective qualities. Exhibition halls or 'sacred shrines' were built on sites where important events had taken place in Mao's life; organized pilgrimages to these sites—whether under the guise of "revolutionary link-ups" or not—enabled people to pay obeisance.²⁶ Aside from Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, these places included Mao's native village Shaoshan, the revolutionary base area of Jinggangshan, Yan'an, Zunyi and Ruijin. Presently, these spots play a role in the so-called revolutionary or red tourism, strongly supported by the party-state.²⁷ Moreover, in many of these destinations, medium- to large-sized (private) museums have been set up by avid collectors, exhibiting paintings, posters and artefacts.

The bestowing of honors on Mao was accompanied by a number of rituals enacted in front of his symbolic presence, which served to further strengthen the belief in the mythical-religious efficacy of his persona. The days were structured around the ritual of "asking for instructions in the morning, thanking Mao for his kindness at noon, and reporting back at night".²⁸ This involved bowing three times in front of Mao's

in a Chinese Village (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 186; Jonathan Unger, "Cultural Revolution Conflict in the Villages," *The China Quarterly* 153 (1998): 87–8, 93.

24 Dennis Bloodworth, *The Messiah and the Mandarins—Mao Tsetung and the Ironies of Power* (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 258. Chan et al., *Chen Village*, 170.

25 Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 242–61; Melissa Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge – The Creation and Mass Consumption of a Personality Cult* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Helen Wang, *Chairman Mao Badges – Symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution* (London: British Museum, 2008).

26 Laing, *The Winking Owl*, 67. Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China—A History of the People's Republic* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 336.

27 Yiping Li, Zhi Yi Hu and Chao Zhi Zhang, "Red tourism: sustaining communist identity in a rapidly changing China," *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 8, 1–2 (2010): 101–19.

28 Pictures of such rituals taking place in a peasant village in Yunnan can be found in *Wenhua dageming bowuguan* [Museum of the Cultural Revolution], ed. Yang Kelin (Hong Kong: Dongfang chubanshe youxian gongsi, Tiandi tushu youxian gongsi, 1995), 116–17.

picture or bust, or in front of the ‘tablets of loyalty,’ singing the national anthem, reading passages from the *Little Red Book* and ended with wishing him “ten thousand years”. In the mornings, everybody would announce what efforts they would make that day for the revolution. In the evenings, people would report on their accomplishments or failures and announce their resolutions for the next day.²⁹ Peasants would start and end every workday by reciting a Mao quote, “like an opening and closing prayer”, and would spend half an hour on Mao study during their lunch breaks.³⁰ Moreover, “even the simplest transaction in a shop had to include a recitation from Mao’s words”.³¹ Before every meal, words of thanksgiving had to be intoned, also quite “similar to the pre-dinner grace of the Christian tradition”. According to Anita Chan, a standard form of such a recitation went like this:

We respectfully wish a long life to the reddest, reddest red sun in our hearts, the great leader Chairman Mao. And to Vice-Chairman Lin’s health: may he forever be healthy. Having been liberated by the land reform, we will never forget the Communist Party, and in revolution we will forever follow Chairman Mao.³²

The Mao cult replicated aspects of the traditional cult of the “God of the Stove” or Kitchen God (*Zao wang*, *Zao jun*), the observance of which can be traced back to the first century BCE.³³ The most important similarities can be found, first, in the power that Mao exerted over daily life by keeping an eye on what went on in the household, noting the virtues and vices of its members in terms of political purity (where the Stove God had monitored moral rectitude). Secondly, certain rituals were enacted in front of Mao’s formal portrait, as used to be the case with the portrait of the Stove God. But unlike the Kitchen God, whose effigy was burnt and thus “sent up” to report to the heavenly magistrates on a yearly basis, Mao’s image itself was sacrosanct. Furthermore, how could he report to a more high-ranking god, since he himself was the highest authority?

The Divine Mao

In Leiyang County, Hunan Province, local peasants brought together more than 21 million *yuan* of private funds in the 1980s to build the *San Yuan Si* (Three Sources Temple). The construction of the edifice started in 1991 and took a number of years,

29 Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Chinese Graphic Design in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 119; Silbergeld, *Contradictions*, 41; Myers, “Religious Aspects,” 7; Meisner, *Mao’s China*, 336; Bloodworth, *The Messiah and the Mandarins*, 258; Mayfair Yang, *Gifts, Favors & Banquets – The Art of Social Relationships in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 250.

30 Chan et al, *Chen Village*, 123; Madsen, *Morality and Power*, 137–8.

31 Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao: The Memoirs of Mao’s Personal Physician* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), 507; Yang Xiao-ming, *The Rhetoric of Propaganda – A Tagmemic Analysis of Selected Documents of the Cultural Revolution in China* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 1994), 30–1.

32 Anita Chan, *Children of Mao – Personality Development & Political Activism in the Red Guard Generation* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 186 and 236–7. Leese, *Mao Cult*, 195–210.

33 Robert L. Chard, “Rituals and Scriptures of the Stove Cult,” in *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion: Five Studies*, ed. David Johnson (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies Publications, 1995), 5–6.

with as many as 2,000 people working on the job. The temple, a huge edifice in traditional Buddhist style, was dedicated to the revolutionary Trinity of the CCP: Mao Zedong, Premier Zhou Enlai and Commander-in-Chief Zhu De. The largest of the three idol halls of the complex contained a six-meter-tall statue of Mao; the other two housed the seated images of Zhou and Zhu, each measuring approximately 4.5 meters. At the height of its popularity, in late 1994, the temple attracted 40,000–50,000 mostly elderly worshippers daily. Many came from other parts of the country, and used the traditional methods of burning incense to offer their worship. After having been forced off the site by outraged pilgrims during an earlier attempt to bring these religious activities to an end, the authorities closed the temple down in May 1995, on the grounds that it encouraged superstition.³⁴

The inclusion of Mao in a pantheon of religious-political figures also took place elsewhere. In northern Shaanxi, in temples dedicated to the Three Sage gods (*San Sheng*), Mao, Zhou and Zhu are venerated in a similar manner as in Leiyang. And the China specialist John Gittings tells how visitors to Shaoshan, Mao's birthplace in Jiangxi Province, "burn incense and paper money and set off firecrackers before the statue [a bronze statue of Mao, six meters high, erected in Shaoshan's village square]. Some kowtow to Mao as if he were a god who could grant good fortune".³⁵

For those not willing or unable to travel, pictures and talismans were available, which were widely believed to protect against harm and evil.³⁶ The talismans first appeared in Southern China and spread throughout the country from 1991. These charms, which could often be seen hanging from rear-view mirrors in cars and trucks, showed laminated pictures of Mao as a young man or in his later years, in civilian dress or army uniform, or in the guise of a guardian spirit or a temple god. Many of the pictures came in temple-like frames of gold-colored plastic with red tassels, auspicious characters (such as *fu*, happiness), firecrackers or "gold" ingots dangling from them. Such amulets combined aspects of the Mao persona with elements of folk culture and religion, devoid of any of the political adulation of the past.³⁷ Some of these amulets from the 1990s had Mao's portrait on one side, and Zhou Enlai's image on the reverse. They were manifestations of a popular longing for a more orderly society and nostalgia for an imaginary golden past, as presented in the propaganda posters of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. At the same time, they served as protective symbols against the social upheavals and dislocation that became daily occurrences in the reform period.

34 China Study Journal, "Maoist Temple Closed Down," *China Study Journal* 10, no. 2 (August 1995): 26–7; Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, 23; Dachang Cong, *When Heroes Pass Away – The Invention of a Chinese Communist Pantheon* (Lanham MD.: University Press of America, 1997), 46.

35 John Gittings, *Real China — From Cannibalism to Karaoke* (London: Pocket Books [Simon & Schuster] 1997), 166, 167.

36 Numerous stories testifying to the protective qualities of Mao images and amulets, many of them undoubtedly apocryphal, circulate(d) in China. See also Gittings, *Real China*, 159; Cong, *When Heroes Pass Away*, 64–7.

37 Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, 22.

The Artsy Mao

The Mao image also had traction abroad. Revolutionary students in France, Italy, Germany and elsewhere saw him as the leader of a revolutionary movement that gave agency to the younger generation and opposed global imperialism. They carried his portrait around during anti-establishment demonstrations in the late 1960s, mistakenly interpreting the Cultural Revolution as a mere youth uprising against the establishment.³⁸ Andy Warhol took much of the political context out of his image and turned him into an icon of the times.³⁹ In doing so, the Mao portrait, whether in the form of satirical commentary by Warhol or not, became domesticized, a piece of respectable and collectable art. Yet when the *Andy Warhol: 15 Minutes Eternal* exhibitions took place in Beijing and Shanghai in 2013, Mao's Pop Art portraits could not be shown.⁴⁰

In the 1990s and 2000s, young Chinese artists in turn used Mao as an inspiration for satirical works.⁴¹ The painter Wang Guangyi (b. 1957) in particular paved the way for making Mao respectable in Western art collections. Wang is a representative of the artists who paint "political pop", paintings that provide satirical commentary, "trying to use a playful attitude and the forms of capitalism to break open the existing system and ideology".⁴² Wang has become best known for his works that combine revolutionary imagery with logos of Western consumer brands.⁴³ But in one of his first major works, *Mao Zedong – Black Grid* series paintings (1988), first shown at the Beijing *China Avant-Garde* exhibition of 1989 (a few months before the student demonstrations were staged on Tian'anmen Square), Wang applied elements that excited Western art consumers: he combined the official portrait of Mao with the overlay of a grid, suggesting the imprisonment of Mao. In the Western interpretation this could only mean one thing: Wang criticized the authoritarian rule of Mao; he testified that life in China was like living in a prison. In the eyes of Chinese art consumers, however, Wang had faithfully and even expertly rendered the Great Leader, and the grid he used reminded many of the technique needed to enlarge small images for the giant propaganda murals

38 Richard Wolin, *The Wind from the East – French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Sebastian Gehrig, "(Re-)Configuring Mao: Trajectories of a Culturo-Political Trend in West Germany," *Transcultural Studies* 2 (2011): 189–231; Kerry Brown, "The Maoists and Modern China," *China Studies Centre Policy paper Series* 9 (March 2015); Julia Lovell, "The Cultural Revolution and Its Legacies in International Perspective," *The China Quarterly* 227 (2016): 632–52.

39 Warhol made five series of Mao paintings in 1972–73 using the same photographic source. See *The Andy Warhol Catalogue Raisonné. Paintings and Sculpture 1970–1974*, ed. Neil Printz (New York, NY: The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts – Phaidon, 2010), 164–263.

40 Kevin Holden Platt, "The artist and the chairman: How Warhol saw China's changing history," *The Japan Times* January 30, 2014. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/01/30/arts/the-artist-and-the-chairman-how-warhol-saw-chinas-changing-history/>. Last accessed on September 25, 2019.

41 Minna Valjakka, "Many Faces of Mao Zedong," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Helsinki 2011, 163–76.

42 R. Orion Martin, "Revisiting Political Pop and Cynical Realism, Discussion with Luo Fei," *The Terms Put Forward*, July 13, 2012. <http://www.orionnotes.com/2012/07/revisiting-political-pop-and-cynical-realism-discussion-with-luo-fei/>. Originally accessed August 20, 2013, no longer available.

43 Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists*, 154.

that had been produced in many urban and rural areas in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁴ Moreover, for many Chinese observers, Wang's images coincided with the increased official attention devoted to Mao in the run up to the centenary of his birth in 1993.⁴⁵ Yet not all of the political pop paintings that emerged out of China after Wang Guangyi and that came to define modern Chinese art featured Mao, even though he might make an appearance. Works by other artists who work in the genre of "politi-cal pop", such as the sculptor Wang Keping (b. 1949),⁴⁶ Zhang Hongtu (b. 1943)⁴⁷ and the Gao Brothers (Gao Zhen, born in 1956 and Gao Qiang, from 1962),⁴⁸ on the other hand, have explicitly satirized or caricaturized Mao.⁴⁹ Even though the value of these artistic products in the trajectory of the development of modern Chinese art is acknowledged, few Chinese have seen these works or appreciate them. For many, whether they have suffered personally at the hands of Mao or his followers or not, turning Mao into a joke is seen as sacrilegious.

Consuming Mao

Putting Mao's portrait on Chinese money surely has been the most efficient and effective way to ensure that he is carried around by everyone. With Mao's likeness gracing the Chinese currency since 1999, "Grandpa Mao", as he is affectionately called, is a more sought after commodity than ever, particularly the red 100 *yuan* bills. In that sense, the present money worship so lamented by commentators in China and abroad can be equated with Mao worship. But aside from enabling Chinese to consume to their hearts' desire, Mao continues to mobilize them for a variety of reasons. The Mao likeness – as well as the occasional Mao impersonator – plays a prominent role during contemporary mass events, ranging from international football meets; the patriotic anti-Japanese demonstrations that took place in 2012; and many smaller, more local-ized demonstrations where the rights of the people are at stake.⁵⁰ Mao has come to personify a more just nation, where the rights and interests of the 'laobaixing' (the One Hundred Names), the ordinary people, are protected and preserved. This is further underlined by the fact that in rural areas, the Mao image is still very much present in the homes of the people; not only in those of his beneficiaries, the elderly who lived through Land Reform (1950) and collectivization (1958–1978), but precisely in the dwellings of the peasantry that has profited from the policies that Mao's successors have enacted.⁵¹ For them, the slogan that without Mao, Modern China would not

44 Zheng Shengtian, "Art and Revolution: Looking Back at Thirty Years of History," in *Art and China's Revolution*, eds. Melissa Chiu and Zheng Shengtian (New Haven, CT: Asia Society/Yale University Press, 2009), 32–4; Ralph Croizier, "The Avant-garde and the Democracy Movement: Reflections on Late Communism in the USSR and China," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, 3 (1999), 483–513.

45 Michael Dutton, "From Culture Industry to Mao Industry: A Greek Tragedy," *boundary* 32, 2 (2005): 151–67.

46 Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting*; Sullivan, *Modern Chinese Artists*, 158.

47 *Ibid.*, 217.

48 Valjakka, *Many Faces*, 163–76, 298.

49 Minna Valjakka, "Parodying Mao's Image: Caricaturing in Contemporary Chinese Art," *Asian and African Studies* XV, 1 (2011b): 87–114.

50 Timothy Cheek, "The Multiple Maos of Contemporary China," *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 2008, 17: 18–19. See also Ou Ning, *Meishi Street* (New York, NY: dGenerate Films, 2006).

51 Analysis of countless photographs and personal observations, February 1980–May 2017.

exists, rings true. Mao also represents the more assertive attitude China is adopting presently, intent on revenging the national humiliations of the past and reclaiming territories that it sees as rightfully belonging to the nation, and demanding its voice and opinions to be heard and heeded on the international stage (Figure 9.12). In this role, he is used to admonish the CCP that in the eyes of Chinese nationalists, it is not doing enough to defend the nation's interests.

This yearning for days gone by, when Mao was still in power, is widespread, but can be felt particularly among the urbanites who feel disenfranchised by the speed and scope of reform. They are the middle-aged, the men and women who grew up in the waning days of the Cultural Revolution and the exhilarating early Reform period. They were imbued with hope and expectations that the material fruits of the Revolution would finally be delivered and now have to admit that they have lost out on all accounts. Some of them try to earn an income from the same Revolution that sold them out. They are the dealers of (Cultural) revolutionary posters, artefacts and paraphernalia; they run the museums along the revolutionary tourism trail, where the thirty years of High Maoism are venerated that many others try to forget. They have his portrait or his statue prominently on display in their homes; they often say, tongue-in-cheek, that Mao has made them rich, that they owe everything to the Chairman. But I know for a fact that many of them, or their direct families, actually suffered under his rule.⁵² What characterizes this group of people is their unquestioning faith in authority, expressed in their admiration for the CCP; their loyalty to and friendship with members of the Army, Armed Police, basically anybody wearing a uniform, with whom they love to rub shoulders and be photographed with; and their ardent support for what many see as the new Mao, the present leader Xi Jinping (affectionately called Xi Dada, Daddy Xi). Posters showing Xi, very much in the style of the official Mao portrait, have emerged. Although some see signs that the popularity of Xi, or that of a cult surrounding him, is reaching the same levels as Mao's, posters certainly will not be the medium of choice. Increasingly, digital media are being employed in China, with developments in technology that make printed images look old-fashioned.

Postscript

Sometimes one still encounters hand-painted faded slogans in the countryside urging peasants to learn from Dazhai, or to energetically study Mao Zedong Thought; a few cities continue to preserve Mao statues. Until a few years ago, Mao's image and his utterances had disappeared from most Chinese public spaces, in particular in urban areas. Yet, China cannot do without the many faces of Mao, as the continued presence of his portrait on Tian'anmen Square testifies. It is illustrated further by his reappearance in the streets in urban areas, where posters showing his countenance, accompanied by those of his successors Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping, beam down on passers-by as part of the generations of leaders who have brought the nation to where it stands now. Whether Mao's many personae serve as embodiment of the modernized nation and continued Party rule; as mobilizing inspiration where the Chinese identity seems at stake; or on its currency, they have become deeply ingrained in every person's life.

52 Many personal encounters and conversations, February 1980–May 2017.

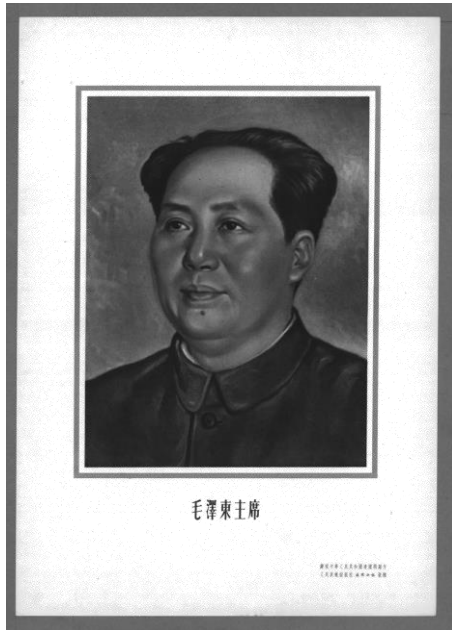


Figure 9.1 “Chairman Mao Zedong – In celebration of the second anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China”. Poster by Xin Mang; Zuo Hui and Zhang Songhe, Beijing, 1951.

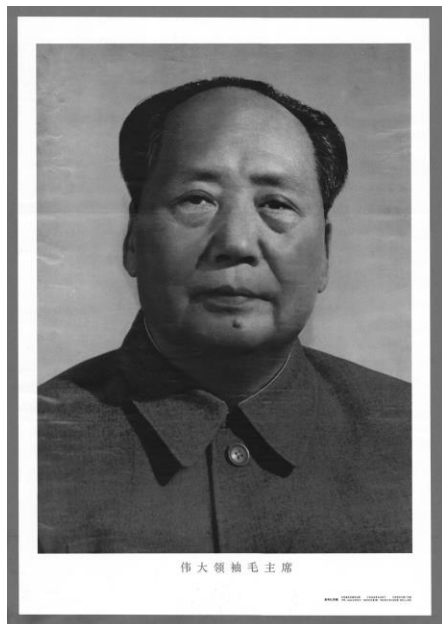


Figure 9.2 “The Great leader Chairman Mao”. Poster, collective work of the New China News Agency, Nanjing, 1992.

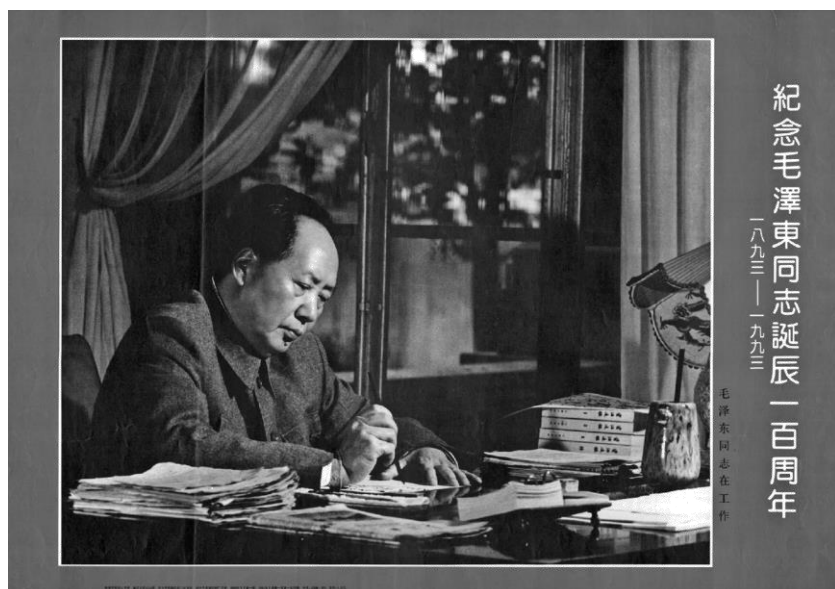


Figure 9.3 “Commemorate the hundredth anniversary of Comrade Mao Zedong’s birthday 1893–1993 – Comrade Mao Zedong at work”. Poster, collective work of the Editorial Office of the People’s Liberation Army Illustrated, Beijing, 1992.



Figure 9.4 “Turn China into a prosperous, rich and powerful industrialized socialist country under the leadership of the Communist Party and Chairman Mao!” Poster by Ding Hao, Zhao Yannian and Cai Zhenhua, Shanghai, 1954.

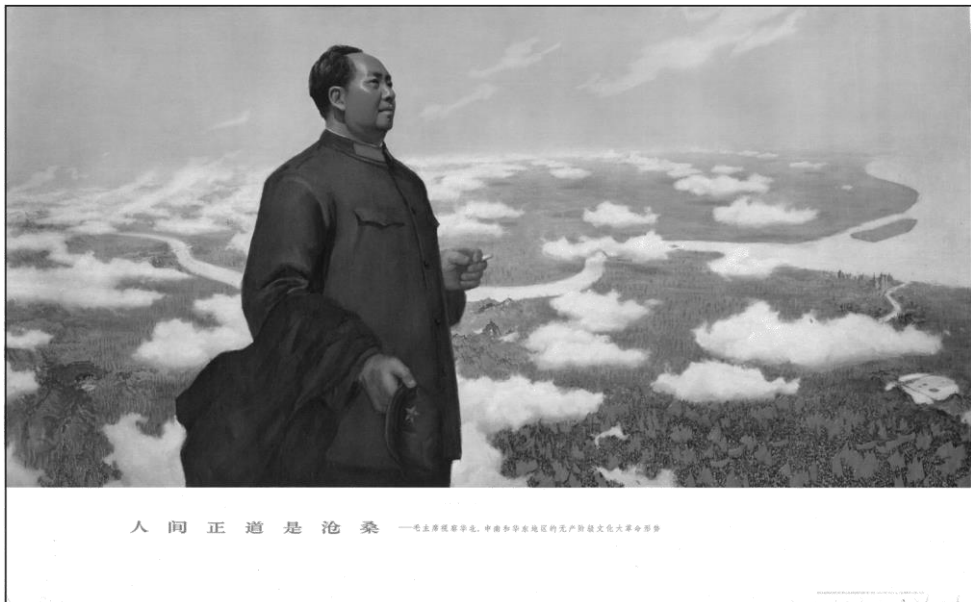


Figure 9.5 “Man’s world is mutable, seas become mulberry fields – Chairman Mao inspects the situation of the Great Proletarian Revolution in Northern, South-Central and Eastern China”. Poster, collective work of Zheng Shengtian, Zhou Ruiwen, Xu Junxuan and the Zhejiang Worker-Peasant-Soldier Art Academy, Hangzhou, 1967.



Figure 9.6 “Advance victoriously while following Chairman Mao’s revolutionary line in literature and the arts”. Poster, collective work of the Central Academy of Industrial Arts, Beijing, ca. 1968.

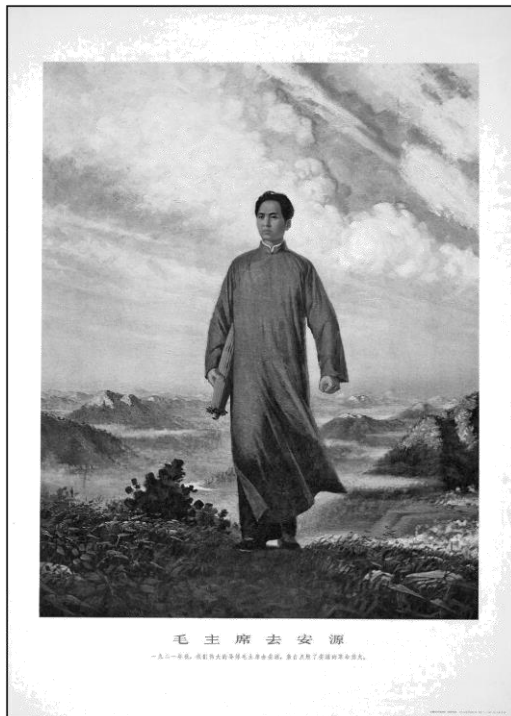


Figure 9.7 “Chairman Mao goes to Anyuan”. Poster by Liu Chunhua, Beijing, 1968.



Figure 9.8 “Moving into a new house”. Poster by Xie Zhiguang, Shao Jingyun and Xie Mulian, Shanghai, 1953.



Figure 9.9 “Chairman Mao gives us a happy life”. Poster by Xin Liliang, Shanghai, 1954.



Figure 9.10 “Remembering the bitter, thinking about the sweet”. Poster by Sheng Shuifu, Shanghai, 1965.



Figure 9.11 “Happy Universe”. Poster, designer unknown, Tianjin, 1997.



Figure 9.12 “Glorious new achievements”. Poster, designer unknown, place of publication unknown, 2012. It represents Mao surrounded by his successors Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping. The bottom row depicts the members of the Politbureau, headed by Xi Jinping.

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