

MAO AND HIS PEOPLE IN POST-MAO ART

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The drama of Chinese history is always reflected in the arts. During the social, ideological, political and cultural conflicts of the twentieth century, Chinese art changed more rapidly than in any other period. The death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976, and the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, opened an entirely new chapter for modern Chinese history, and indeed, for Chinese art too.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, Chinese art attracted the world's attention by frequent participation in important international events such as the Venice Biennale. There are various definitions of Chinese new art in the post-Mao era. From a political point of view, on the one hand, the art has been categorised as 'official' and 'unofficial art', 'non-official art'¹ or 'underground art' in a totalitarian society; on the other hand, in terms of artistic radicalism, the idea of the avant-garde became popular as a means of labelling those artistic experiments outside the domains of institutional and academic art from the 1980s on. Moreover, 'to "decentralise" ideologic-centricism', the term 'un-unofficial art' is coined to 'encourage real freedom of creation in an open, multi-orientational space...'²; or even far away from political classifications, 'experimental art (*shi-yan yishu*)', has been increasingly employed as a looser and broader definition.³

¹ A. Yang, *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art*, London: New York University Press 1998, p. 107.

² Hou Hanru, *Towards an 'Un-Unofficial Art': De-ideologicalisation of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s*, "Third Text" No. 34, Spring 1996, p. 41.

³ Wu Hung, *Exhibiting Experimental Art in China*, Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art and The University of Chicago 2000, pp. 10-11.

This paper aims to explore the significance of the Cultural Revolution to the prosperity of Chinese contemporary art, with a particular perspective of focusing on the relationship between Mao, his people and post-Mao art. Without Mao and the Cultural Revolution, contemporary art would, of course, still exist in China, but look very different. I argue that the complex influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution has provided a foundation for the development of art practice in China, and constructed a crucial source of identity for Chinese art in the global art today.

In this paper, I will firstly outline the historical background of the Cultural Revolution, echoes of which will be heard throughout the text. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the image of Mao Zedong as a dominant visual trope in the Cultural Revolution has been appropriated and reshaped in contemporary art practice – the deification and de-deification of Mao in modern China. In the third section, I am going to revisit people's attitudes and performances during their collective lives in the Cultural Revolution. Reflected in art, there is a conflict between the revolutionary conformity and a hysterical carnival.

Revolution or Ruination

The Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is almost a mysterious happening to many of us, sometimes referred to as 'one of the most bizarre events in history'⁴. It is generally accepted that the Chinese Cultural Revolution began with the so-called *Wuyiliu Tongzhi* (*May the Sixteenth Circular*) from the Central Session of Chinese Communist Party on 16 May 1966, which provided the guiding principles, and lasted until the death of Mao Zedong and the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976.⁵ *The Resolution of the Party's Several Historical Issues*

⁴ J. K. Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800-1985*, London: Harper Perennial 1987, p. 316.

⁵ The duration of the Cultural Revolution has been defined variously. For example, in Mao's view, the Cultural Revolution was launched by Yao Wenyuan's *Ping Xinbian Lishiju 'Hai Rui Baguan'* (*The Criticism on the New Version of the Historical Play 'Hai Rui Dismissed from Office'*), which was published in the *Wenhui Daily* on 10 November 1965. Most early scholars, such as Fairbank (op. cit., p. 317), claimed that the Cultural Revolution proper lasted three and a half years, from late 1965 to April 1969, when the Ninth Session of the Chinese Communist Party announced its successful completion. Again, in the Party's Eleventh Session in 1977, Mao's successor,

since the Establishment of the State in 1981 officially described the Cultural Revolution as a 'ten-year turbulence (*shinian dongluan*)'.

The editorial of the *People's Daily* clarified the anti-revolutionary 'Four Olds' as targets of the Cultural Revolution:

The Proletarian Cultural Revolution is going to thoroughly eliminate all the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits of the exploiting classes, which have corrupted the people for thousands of years, and to create and construct the proletarian new idea, new culture, new customs and new habits among the masses.⁶

The Red Guard, as the executor of the instruction, pioneered this mass movement. The organisation of the Red Guard was established spontaneously by a group of teenager students from the Middle School Attached to Qinghua University on 29 May 1966, followed by the other school students nationwide. The Red Guards at the Second Middle School of Beijing firstly put up their big character poster, *Xiang Jiu Shijie Xuanzhan (To Declare A War against the Old World)*. It read:

We are the critics of the old world. We want to criticise, to smash all old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. All the barbershops, tailors, photo studios, and old bookshops, etc., that served to the bourgeoisie... None of them can be excluded. What we do is to overthrow this whole old world!⁷

Mao's full support for the Red Guards became obvious and 'visible' during the inspection on 18 August 1966 in the Tiananmen Square. The next morning, the Red Guards in Beijing went onto the streets, starting the movement of '*Po Sijiu (Smashing the Four Olds)*'. They distributed their fliers, slogans and big character posters, delivered speeches and began to devastate all the 'Olds'

the new Chairman Hua Guofeng declared, that the first Cultural Revolution that has lasted for eleven years and was successfully finished by smashing the Gang of Four (*Siren Bang*).

⁶ '*Hengsao Yiqie Niugui Sheshen (Sweep Away All the Ox-demon and Snake-spirit)*', "Renmin Ribao" ("People's Daily"), 1 June 1966, p. 1.

⁷ Cited in Yan Jiaqi, Gao Gao, *Wenhua Da Geming Shinian Shi (The Ten-Year History of the Cultural Revolution)*, Hong Kong: Chaoliu Publisher 1989, Vol. 1, p. 90. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author.

across the city. During the summer, the Red Guards searched over ten million homes across the country to confiscate or destroy 'old' property, including dynastic calligraphy and paintings, ancient books and archives, gold, silver or jade ware and jewellery. In the city of Ningbo alone, more than eighty tons of books from the Ming and Qing Dynasties were pulped.⁸ All the idols, including the statues of Buddha, folk gods, even Confucius, and religious architectures, frescos, and books failed to escape from this cultural disaster. Records indicate that there were 6,843 cultural relics registered in Beijing in 1958, but only 1,921 remained in the 1980s. Most of them were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.⁹ These radical actions of the Red Guards soon turned into the 'red terror' across the country, and Mao was worshipped as the unique commander of the revolution within people's collective life.

Undoubtedly, the Chinese Cultural Revolution was a tragedy for the whole nation: millions of people suffered and died during the political campaigns, normal school education ceased and innumerable cultural legacies were ruined for the purpose of a revolutionary reconstruction. If we can imagine what the Cultural Revolution did to the dead, what does it mean to the living? The Chinese Cultural Revolution was identified as 'a great revolution that touches people to their very souls'¹⁰. People who experienced the Cultural Revolution in their adulthood, youth or childhood, living in various places in China, would have different understandings of the Cultural Revolution and their lives were influenced in different ways. Artists are amongst those who have been reflecting upon the phenomenon through different perspectives and at different depths of perception.

⁸ Ding Shu, *Jiduo Wenwu Fuzhi Yiju – Yijiu Liuliu Nian 'Po Sijiu' Jianji (How Many Cultural Treasures Were Burned Off – A Brief Record of 'Smashing the Four Olds' in 1966)*, 2000. Available from: <http://www.cnd.org/BIG5/HXWZ/ZK00/zk237.b5.html> [Accessed on 11 May 2005].

⁹ Wang Mingxian, Yan Shanchun, *Xin Zhongguo Meishu Shi, 1966-1976 (The Art History of the People's Republic of China, 1966-1976)*. Beijing: China Youth Press 2000, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Shiliu Tiao* (Sixteen Points, the initial name for *Zhonggong Zhongyang Guanyu Wuchan Jieji Wenhua Da Geming de Jueding [The Resolution of Proletarian Cultural Revolution by the Central Authority of Chinese Communist Party]*), "Renmin Ribao" ("People's Daily"), 9 August 1966, p. 1.

The period of the Cultural Revolution is often referred to by many as the 'ten lost years' or metaphorically a 'cultural desert'; most of the cultural outcomes of the Cultural Revolution are seen as valueless. However, if the Cultural Revolution offers nothing of cultural value, why has its visual legacy been appropriated and reflected continually by Chinese artists, and in a sense, somehow contributed to the prosperity of Chinese contemporary art? From a contemporary perspective, rather than a 'desert', I argue, the Cultural Revolution can be seen as the most significant cultural complex fostering new Chinese art.

Man or Mao

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong declared the foundation of the People's Republic of China to the thousands of commoners and soldiers gathered under Tiananmen Tower: 'Chinese people have finally stood up!' The appearance of Mao, as the Chinese communist leader, must have added a new political dimension to the Gate of Heavenly Peace, and reinterpreted the hidden ruling power to finally symbolise the beginning of a new era. At the same time, the dignity of the Tiananmen Tower offered the man a dual status of both a communist leader and a feudalistic emperor.

During the Cultural Revolution, the traditional customs, festivals, and folk religions were considered as superstitious and anti-communist and forcibly removed from people's life. To fill the 'religious void', Mao volunteered the role of the new 'god' – the Red Sun. The popular song extended the metaphors of the Chairman:

Sailing on the sea relies on the helmsman,
The universe growing relies on the sun;
Seedlings raising by the moistness of dew,
Revolution needs the thought of Mao Zedong.

Fishes cannot live without water,
Melons cannot live without vines;
The revolutionary masses cannot live without the Communist Party,
Mao Zedong's thought is the endless sun.

Wang Yi suggests that Mao's identity with the Red Sun was closely related to the healer and the rescuer who would be able to save the people from the agony and illness, and save mankind from a world full of

evils.¹¹ Because of the personality cult, the image of Mao permeated the visual environment of the Cultural Revolution, whilst the significance of Mao's image far outweighed the representation of a man, but rather provided a new god fabricated by the Chinese revolution. It is estimated that during the Cultural Revolution 2.2 billion of the so-called 'standard portraits (*biaozhun xiang*)' of the Chairman were produced¹², and 900 million posters of Liu Chunhua's oil painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* were printed. Those images appeared as Mao's substitute in both private and public spaces in people's lives to provide instant and direct access to the great leader. In another medium, more than 2.8 billion Mao badges, or four for every man, woman and child in the nation, were manufactured during the Cultural Revolution, and the total variety of Mao badges has been estimated at over some 50,000¹³. These images were produced, exchanged and displayed, as tools for communicating Chinese nationalist ideology to the masses, and offering them the opportunity to learn about, conform to and define themselves in Mao.¹⁴

Reflecting on Mao has been a continuous motif in Chinese contemporary art, I argue, with three different perspectives. Firstly, the critical approach of representing Mao's image became an extreme challenge of rebellion for the artists, who had lived under his rule for many years. In the 1979 Star exhibition¹⁵, the *Ouxiang (Idol)* (ill. 1), a wood sculpture by the self-taught artist Wang Keping, was the most striking work in the show – a daring pioneer work which 'violated'

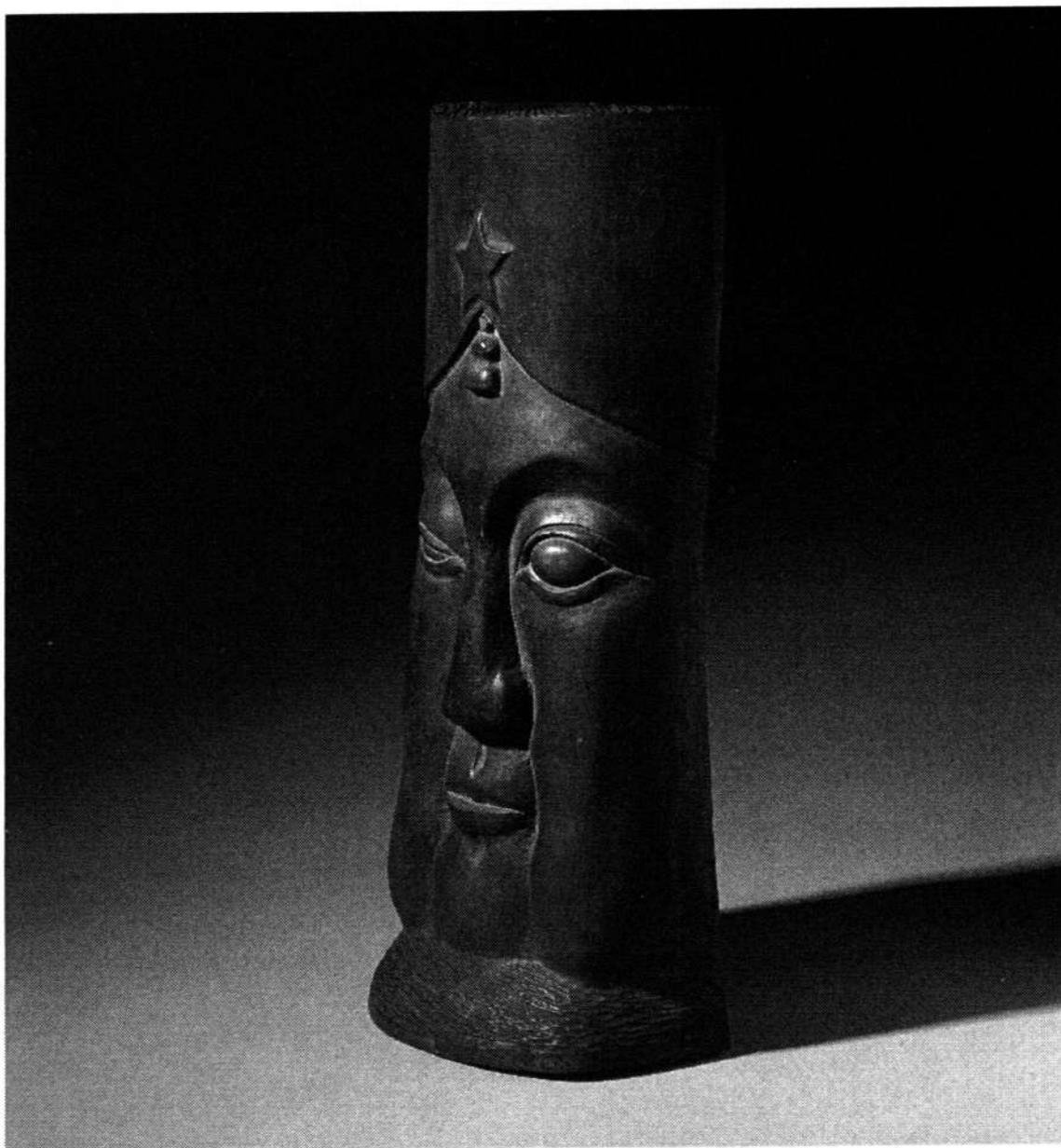
¹¹ Wang Yi, 'Wanwu Shengzhang Kao Taiyang' yu Yuanshi Chongbai ('The Universe Growing Relies on the Sun' and the Primary Worships), in: *Wenhua Da Geming: Shishi yu Yanjiu (The Cultural Revolution: Facts and Analysis)*, ed. Liu Qingfeng, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press 1995, p. 128.

¹² G. R. Barmé, *Shades of Mao*, London: An East Gate Book 1996, p. 8.

¹³ Lu Na, *Mao Zedong Xiangzhang Shoucang yu Jianshang (The Collection and Appreciation of Mao Zedong Badges)*, Beijing: International Culture Press 1993, p. 14.

¹⁴ For a detailed discussion on Mao Badges, see M. Schrift and K. Pilkey, *Revolution Remembered: Chairman Mao Badges and Chinese Nationalist Ideology*, "Journal of Popular Culture", Vol. 30, fall 1996, pp. 169-197.

¹⁵ The first Star exhibition (*Xingxing Meizhan*) opened on 27 September 1979, was staged in the street outside the National Art Gallery in Beijing. It defined a more unofficial position in the Chinese art world since 1949. See Yi Dan, *Xingxing Lishi (A History of the Stars)*, Changsha: Hunan Art Press 2002.



iii. 1 Wang Keping, *Ouxiang (Idol)*, 1978,
birch, stained, height ca. 40 cm, collection of the artist.
Photograph courtesy Hanart T Z Gallery, Hong Kong.

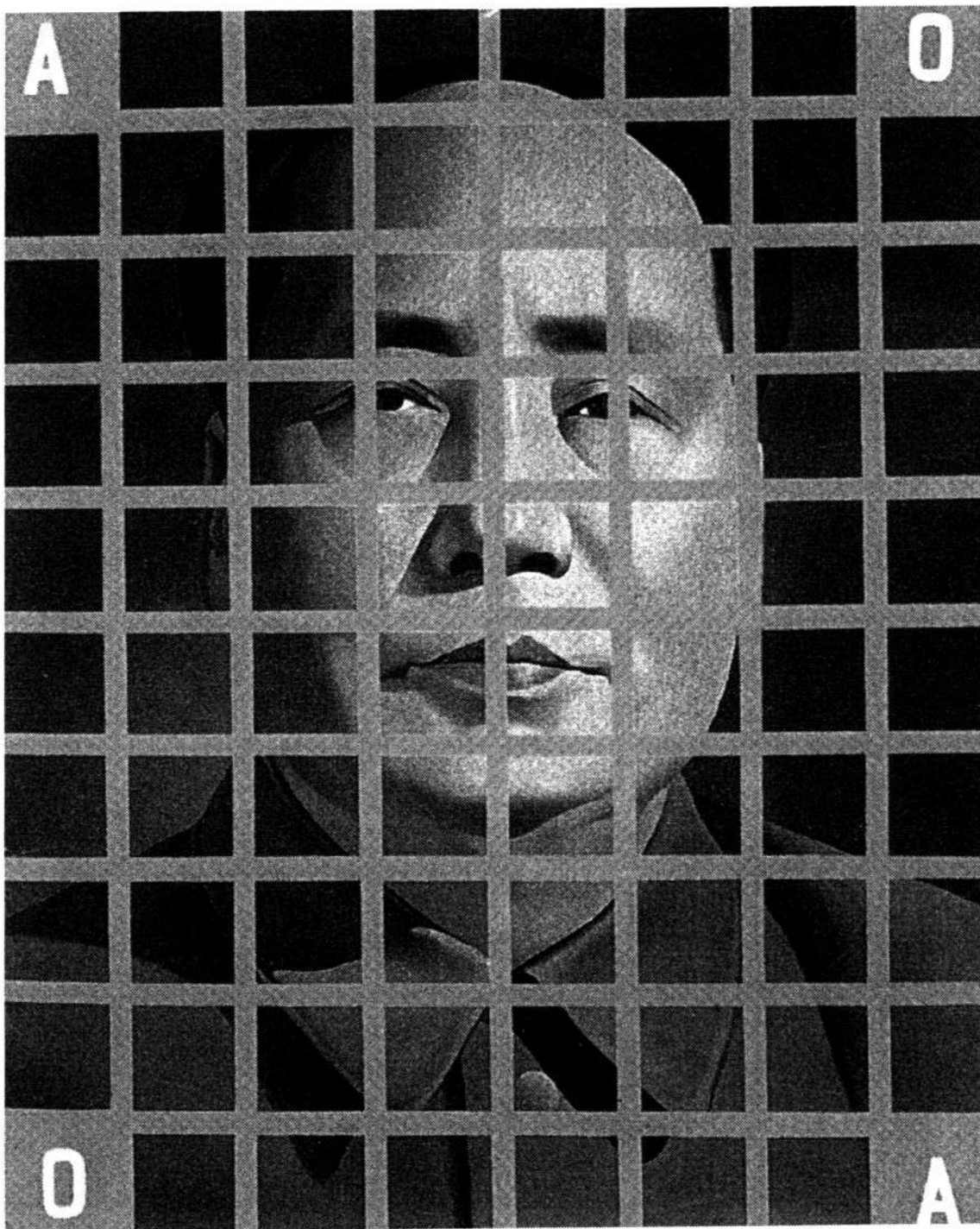
the sacred image of the Communist Chairman. The sculpture was obviously re-shaped from the image of Buddha, which originally came from India but was generally understood as a sign of Chinese traditional religion, whilst Chinese viewers would immediately recognise the significance of the pentagram engraved above his forehead. The ironic interaction between 'feudal superstition' and the communist ideal boldly revealed the fact that Mao had been worshipped as a new religious idol. In fact, *Idol*, finished in 1978, only two years after Mao's death, was the first to utter what most people did not even dare think. The artist is rather a militant hero challenging the autocracy of the state.

The next work on Mao with this critical approach did not appear until ten years later in 1988. It is Wang Guangyi's series of paintings *Mao Zedong*. The artist re-pictured the Chairman's 'standard portrait', ubiquitous during Mao's political reign, on five large canvases. Two of them in red grids – *Mao Zedong – Hongge (Mao Zedong – Red Grid)* (ill. 2) – and another three in black grids – *Mao Zedong – Black Grid* – were shown in the 1989 China Avant-Garde exhibition at the National Art Gallery in Beijing. The original intention of this series was to conclude the artist's 'liquidation of humanist enthusiasm'¹⁶, however, after it had been exhibited, Wang Guangyi suspected that 'the onlookers, with hundredfold humanist enthusiasm, endowed Mao Zedong with even more humanist connotations'¹⁷. During the Cultural Revolution, the grid was a useful tool for duplicating Mao's portrait to scale avoiding any mistake in proportion. Here, Wang Guangyi brought this hidden grid to the surface, overlaying Mao's sombre grey image. In his painting, the warning barrier required people to pause to think before approaching this deity, and forced an objective reconsideration.¹⁸ The grid of thick red lines, on the one hand, could be a superficial symbolisation of imprisoning Mao or his autocratic era. On the other hand, the grid, still as a role of measure, rather reveals the fact of how a man could be

¹⁶ For the analysis on the Wang Guangyi's notion of 'humanist enthusiasm', see M. Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: A Semiotic Analysis: the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 2003, p. 154.

¹⁷ Cited in Lü Peng, Yi Dan, *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishu Shi 1979-1989 (A History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1979-1989)*, Changsha: Hunan Art Press 1992, pp. 166-168.

¹⁸ K. Smith, *From Mao to Now: Wang Guangyi*, in: *Wang Guangyi*, Hong Kong: Timezone 8 2002, p. 10.



iii. 2 Wang Guangyi, *Mao Zedong – Hongge (Mao Zedong – Red Grid)*, 1988, oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm, private collection. Reproduced with permission of Wang Guangyi.

possibly 'magnified', and simultaneously, brings this divine image drawn from the altarpieces to a frame rationally analysable and dissectible.

Starting at about the same time as Wang Guangyi, Yu Youhan concentrated on Mao's imagery for eight years. However, instead of defiantly criticising the former leader, Yu's response seems somehow more relaxed. It can be analysed as the second approach – cynicism. Born in the early 1940s, Yu experienced the Cultural Revolution while he was studying at Central Academy of Art and Craft¹⁹ in Beijing. To him, Mao represented many things: a great leader of the nation, a symbolisation of China, the east, a depth of culture, or a period of history; sometimes Mao is avant-garde, sometimes conservative.²⁰ In Yu's series of paintings *Mao and His People*, the Chairman was positioned in the centre with the gesture appropriated from Mao's famous official photograph of his Yan'an presentation, *Lun Chijiuzhan (On Protracted War)*. Instead of the original patched trousers, Mao's suit was patterned with colourful flowers, which were also spread in the painting and turned into a fabric-like composition, or in the artist's own words, an 'unreal and hollow environment'²¹. Similarly, floating flowers are applied to the work *Talking with Hunan Peasants (Yu Hunan Nongmin Tanhua)* (ill. 3) derived from a photograph of Mao taken in the 1950s with a family of cheerful smiling peasants in his hometown village Shaoshan, in Hunan province. Isolated within the red faces, peasants' white teeth somehow lay bare the fallacy of the joyful bliss, as Dal Lago argues, 'the exaggeration exposes the farcical quality of political propaganda and the surreal, over-idealised relationship between the leader and the people'²².

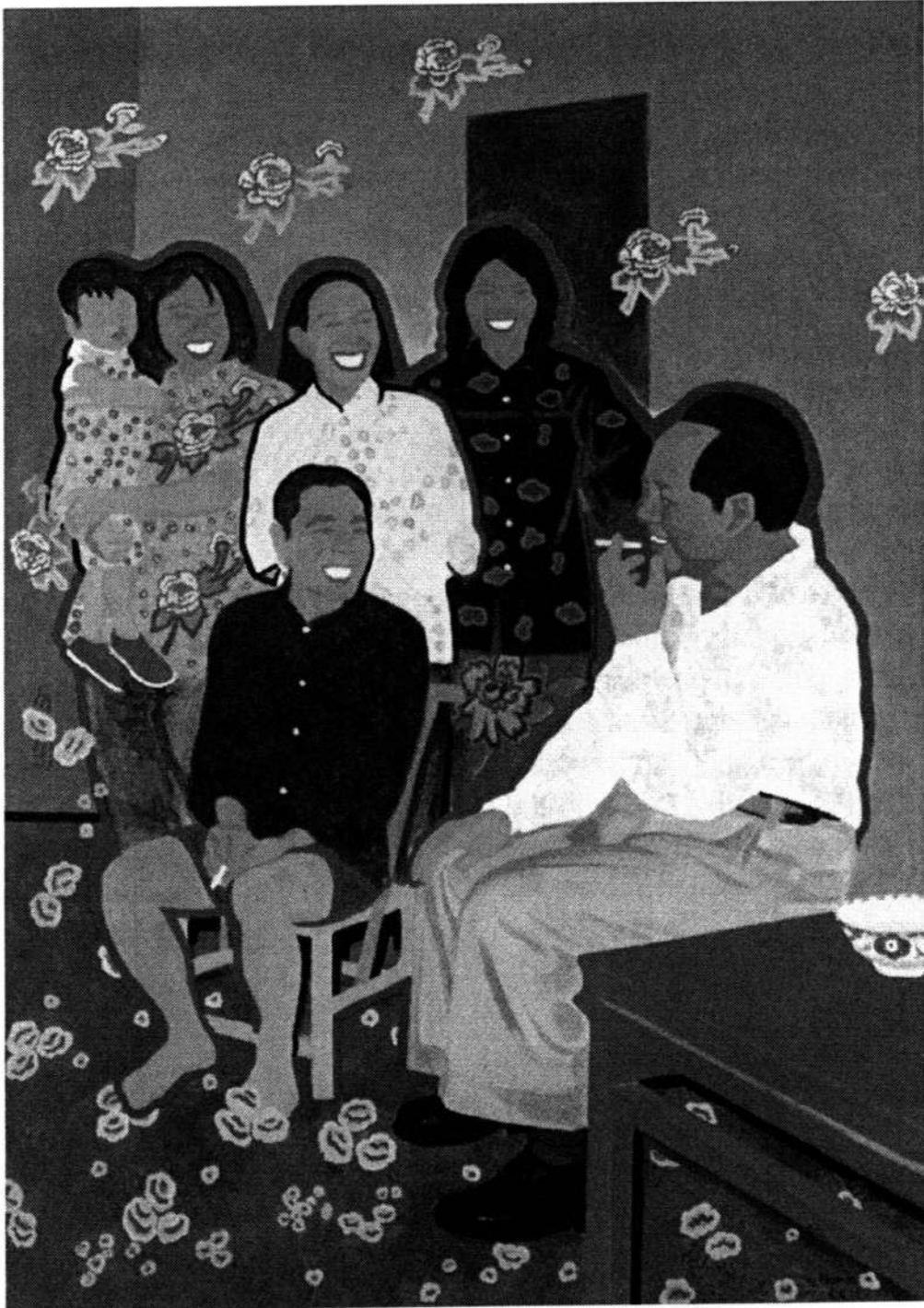
Another strategy employed by Yu is to juxtapose Mao's official images with the icons of western pop culture, for example, the American singer Whitney Houston, or more generally, a fashionably dressed woman. The design clearly presents the artist's personal perception of the leader, in terms of his representability of 'Chineseness' as well as the revolutionary era, placing him in the context

¹⁹ Central Academy of Art and Craft (*Zhongyang Gongyi Meishu Xueyuan*) is the old name of Academy of Art and Design, Qinghua University (*Qinghua Daxue Meishu Xueyuan*).

²⁰ Interview with Yu Youhan, 9 October 2000, Shanghai.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² F. Dal Lago, *Personal Mao: Reshaping An Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art*, "Art Journal", Vol. 58, No. 2, Summer 1999, p. 50.



iii. 3 Yu Youhan, *Yu Hunan Nongmin Tanhua*
(*Talking with Hunan Peasants*), 1991,
oil on canvas, 167 × 118 cm, collection of the artist.
Photograph courtesy Yu Youhan.

of contemporary life. A similar juxtaposition is created in Qi Zhilong's work *Xiaofei Xingxiang (Consumer Icons)* series in the early nineties (ill. 4). Like bright flowers or charming beauties with seductive smiles, Mao is portrayed as another consumable image in today's urban life. This appropriation of Mao's image is understood as 'one of the most generalised and at the same time personalised way to deconstruct ideological pressures'²³.

Li Shan's earliest painting of Mao's portrait could be traced back to the Great Leap Forward Movement in 1957, when he was a young propagandist in middle school. In October 1989, the artist restarted to work on the image of the Chairman in his painting series *Rouge*, but in a quite different way. *Yanzhi* (rouge) is a hue of pink verging on fuchsia, originally, a particular colour associated with Chinese folk art, such as Beijing Opera and New Year painting. Li Shan's painting series *Rouge* is based on two of the Chairman's most famous portraits, one done during the period of Mao's guerrilla activity in the 1930s and the other of a benevolent-looking 'standard portrait'. The image of Mao is understood by the artist more as a cultural imagery, dominated in his personal experience, rather than a political sign. The title *Rouge* is chosen for its symbolism of something superficial, but at the same time, useful for whitewashing the revolutionary ideology and the prospect of people's life.²⁴ In the series *Rouge*, a mysterious lotus-like flower in the colour rouge is always carried by the lips of the communist leader, who is wearing a red star cap as well as lipstick (ill. 5). This '*Yanzhi hua* (rouge-isation)' of Mao, on the one hand, demonstrates the popularisation of the Chairman's portrait and its transformation into a mass icon; on the other hand, this folk, and even vulgar, taste of the colour rouge eliminates and insults the sacred meaning of the image of Mao.

Does not Li Shan's portrayal of Mao have sexual implications? Dal Lago explores,

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 (in Beijing Opera). This association – implied both by the use of the colour and

²³ Li Xianting, *Qi Zhilong de Zuopin He Yishi Xingtai de Jishixing (The Work of Qi Zhilong and the Instant Ideology)*, in: *Xiaofei Xingxiang (Consumer Icons)*, exhibition catalogue by Schoeni Art Gallery Ltd. Hong Kong 1994, p. 5.

²⁴ Interview with Li Shan on 4 October 2000, Shanghai.



iii. 4 Qi Zhilong, *Xiaofei Xingxiang (Consumer Icons) No. 6*, 1992, oil on canvas, 100 × 80 cm, private collection. Reproduced with permission of Qi Zhilong.



iii. 5 Li Shan, *Yanzhi (Rouge) No. 7*, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 122 × 151 cm, private collection. Photograph courtesy Hanart T Z Gallery, Hong Kong.

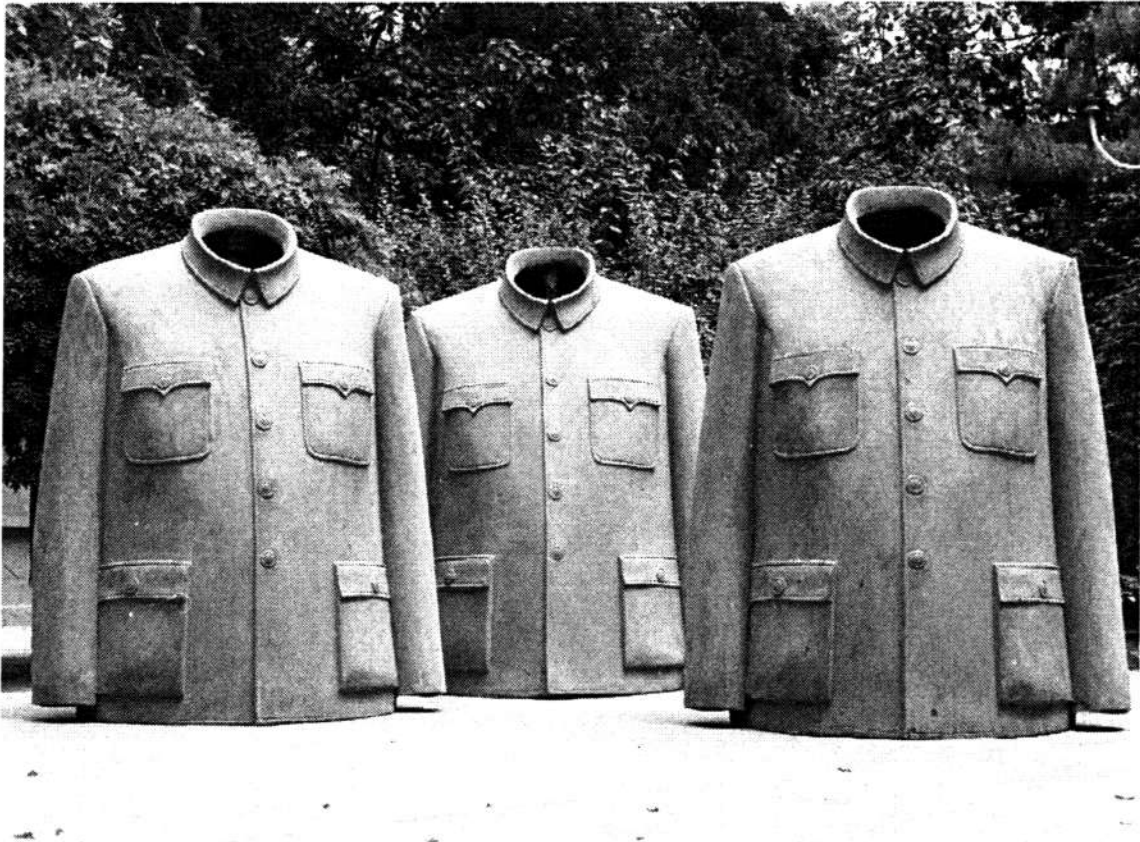
by the androgynous, feminised features assumed by the portrait in Li's series – introduces another recurrent trope of the literary recollections of the Cultural Revolution – that of sexual freedom and liberation experienced during this period. 'Gendering' Mao becomes Li's personal way to vulgarise the 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 feminised Mao.²⁵

However, the artist denied that he had attempted to feminise Mao or that the painting was based on any association with the Beijing Opera. Instead, the 'treasonous' representation was explained as transferring Mao to a purely unisex human being, a visual cultural identity for the artist himself. In fact, the artist might have to accept that he depicted a unisex face by way of inevitably feminising Mao, who actually is more than a male trait, a saviour of the whole nation. Because of Mao's political and apotheosised status, the feminised version of Mao had objectively constructed a subversive impact. In the meantime, the artist's private expression had been unconsciously revealed by depicting the sign of his own cultural background.

Thirdly, artistic response is not necessarily by playing Mao's image, but Mao's suit and Mao's book (*The Quotations of Chairman Mao*), which have become the metonymies of Mao, and which could invite more reflections on the era itself rather than upon Mao as a person. Since 1949, the Mao suit that was invented by Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yatsen), the leader of the republican revolution, quickly became the most popular form of dress, conveying both nationalistic and revolutionary significance. Without Mao's image, in Sui Jianguo's *Yibo (Legacy Mantle)* (ill. 6), the Mao suit is 'sculpturalised' and monumentalised more explicitly as a political symbol, but hollow inside; and at the same time, reaffirmed as a 'historical subjectivity that manifested both the modernity of Chinese culture and its ability to be self-critical.'²⁶ The artist's 2003 work *Youshou (the Right Hand)* is a right arm, enlarged to more than seven metres in length. The sleeve of its Mao suit an immediate link with Mao's standard statue in public spaces during the Cultural Revolution, whilst the deathlike gesture of

²⁵ F. Dal Lago, op. cit., pp. 54-55.

²⁶ Zhu Qi, *Putting on and Taking off: How the Mao Suit Became Art*, in: *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung, Hong Kong: New Art Media 2001, p. 50.



iii. 6 Sui Jianguo, *Yibo (Legacy Mantle)*, 1997,
coloured glass fibre, 240 cm high, collection of the artist.
Photograph courtesy Sui Jianguo.

the bodiless hand demystifies the 'super instruction' of the Chairman. Sui Jianguo's works distanced itself from art forms that parodied, ridiculed, criticised or satirised Mao as a political symbol. The artist tells us,

it seems that I was following the guideline of socialist art by discarding all the personalities that might be involved in the practice. In *Legacy Mantle*, I reproduced Mao's suit, just like a carpenter or a blacksmith, with no personal or artistic rendering²⁷.

In contrast with a more expressionistic mood, Mao Xuhui started his painting series *Jiazhang (The Parent)* (ill. 7) in 1989. Without any realistic hint, one might ask who is the parent? But perhaps there is no need to have a definite answer: sometimes it could be a head in a work unit, or a principal in a school; and sometimes of course, it could be the leader of the country. *The Parent* provides a visual record of the artist's reflection on the complex of politics, the autocratic power, and the structure of the social system in China. Rather than referencing any original image directly from the Cultural Revolution, Mao Xuhui reflects ideologically the centralised political power as the core of the culture, and responds with his expressionistic style. As he states paradoxically, 'the more abstract the painting that I produce, the more explicit the image of 'the parent' can be, as a symbol in my mind'²⁸.

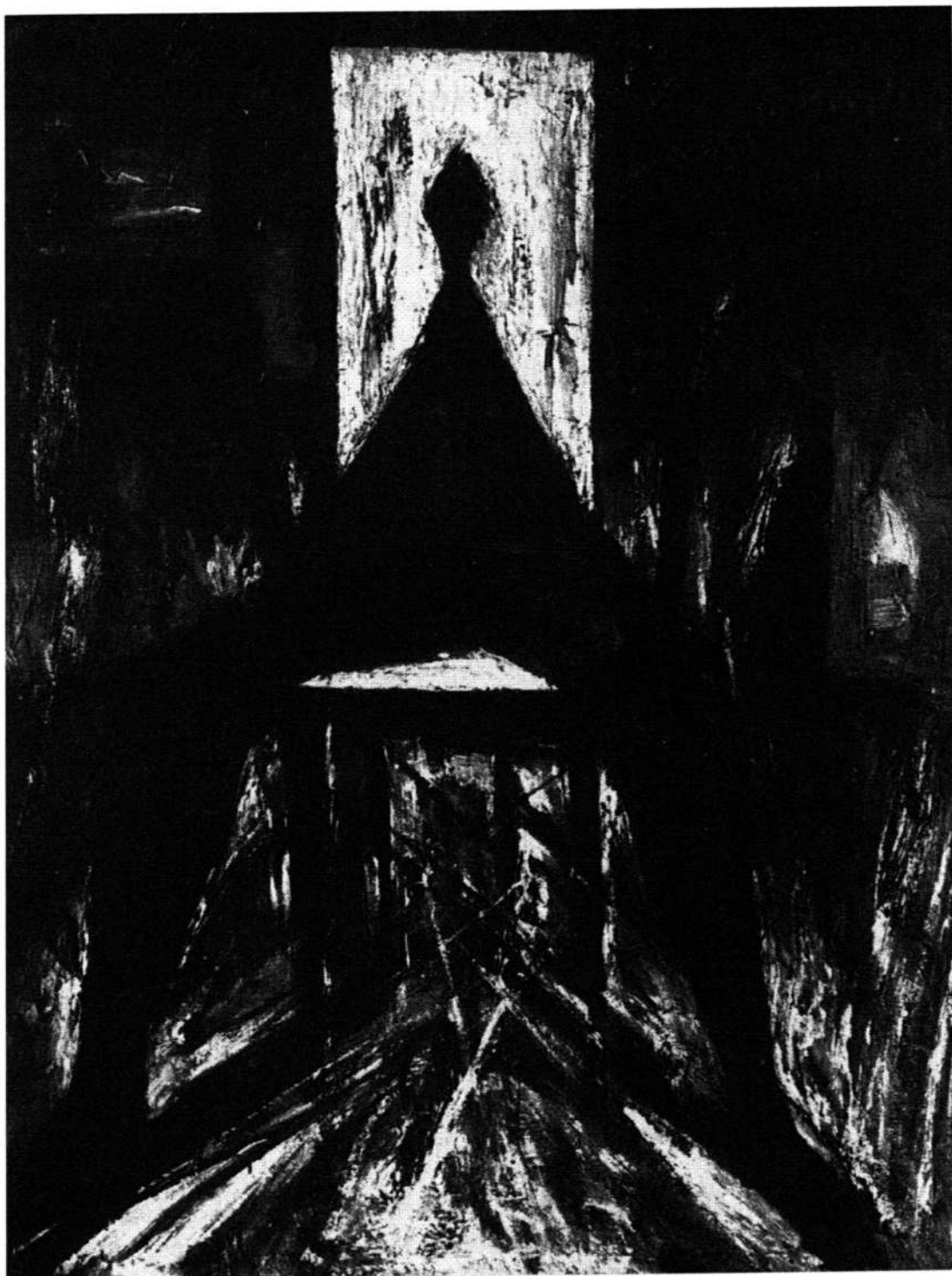
The cult of Mao was fostered from the moment Mao took charge of the Chinese Communist Party, and reached its climax during the period of the Cultural Revolution. During the personality cult movement, Mao was known as the Four Greats, namely, the Great Teacher, the Great Leader, the Great Commander and the Great Helmsman. He transcended a human image and became a god of the Red Sun to receive people's worship. In the post-Mao era, when the revolutionary fervour evaporated, Mao has not simply been taken down from his throne. Rather, in art, there are even more reflections on the complex – between a man and Mao.

Conformity or Carnival

Apart from concentrating on Mao, who was the central focus of the nation, artists also turn their lens upon the masses themselves, in other words, the visual

²⁷ Interview with Sui Jianguo, 31 October 2003, Beijing.

²⁸ Interview with Mao Xuhui, 9 November 2003, Kunming.



iii. 7 Mao Xuhui, *Jiazhang (The Parent): Parent in the Chair*, 1989, oil on canvas, 101 × 81 cm, collection of the artist.
Photograph courtesy Mao Xuhui.

identity of the 'collective'. The word 'collective', in Chinese *jiti*, can be literally understood as 'grouped (*ji*) individuals (*ti*)'. Since 1949, mass assemblies have become a familiar and prominent phenomenon during numerous political movements, which has made the 'collectiveness' far outweigh its literal meaning. Instead, based on the sociological and political backgrounds, the notion of 'collective' has been interpreted productively and variously in China. Sometimes it could be embellished as a 'family'; sometimes it could be designed as 'criteria' of daily life, or indeed, constructed as an idealistic identity for 'the people'. The ideology of collective life does not necessarily require any independence of individuals, but a kind of conformity, within which one then could be recognised and valued with a legitimate status.

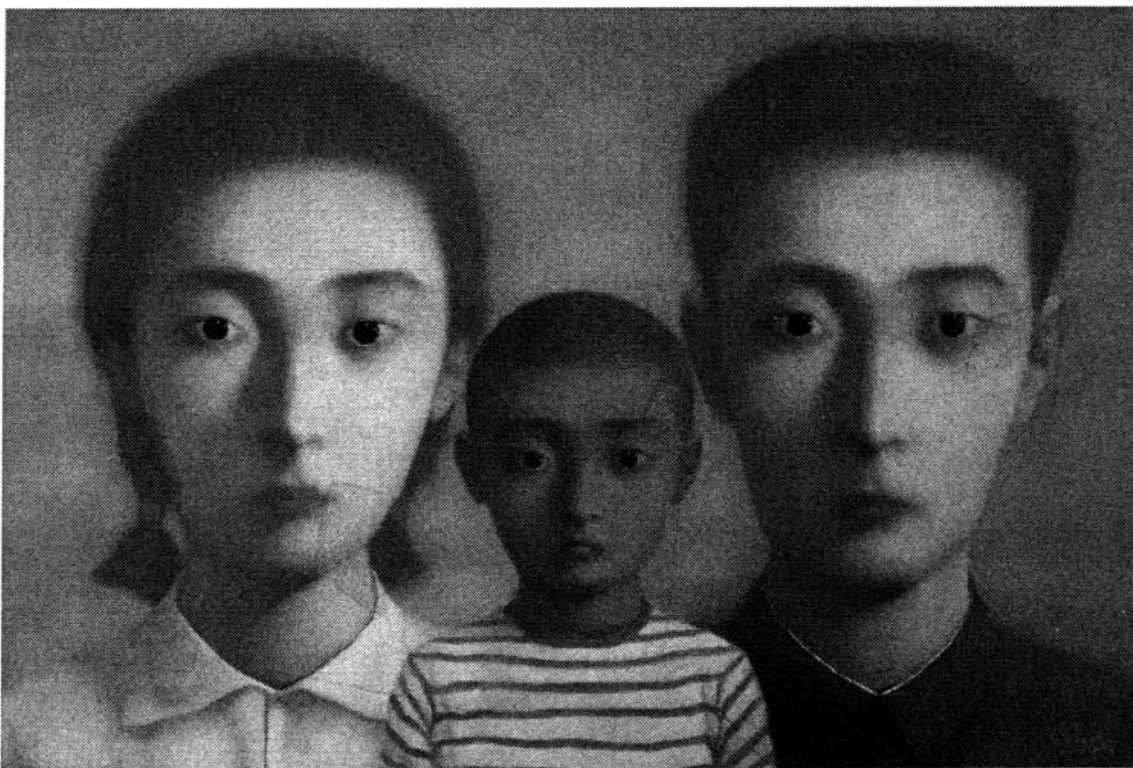
How do people conform themselves to the collective life? The baptism of the Cultural Revolution reshaped the collective identity of 'Chineseness', I argue, with a pair of entirely different, or almost diametrically opposed, approaches. In the Post-Cultural Revolution era, many Chinese artists had been envisaging, either consciously or unconsciously, the conflicts between individual and collective, private and public, family and society, and representing the hybrid collective identity through various media.

Zhang Xiaogang's interest in old family photographs during the Cultural Revolution was the starting point of his internationally acclaimed painting series *Da Jiating (Big Family)*, which firstly appeared in 1993. There are some common rules for the family photograph in Mao's era. For example, the father is always positioned on the right, mother on the left, and child in the middle. The photographer would offer them some criteria for positioning their body, gesturing and even expressions, offering an idealistic model of society. More interestingly, the old family photograph could have been rendered by hand after the studio shot to suit the 'standard' aesthetics. During this revision, many aesthetical and sociological perceptions of the reviser would be added onto the photographic image, with or without the subjects' agreement.

I am always interested in exploring the relationship between individual and the society, or in other words, the conflict between *simi hua* (privatisation) and *gonggong hua* (publicisation); [as the artist notes] family photography is obviously a private medium, but in China, it has conformed to a 'public standard' within the society²⁹.

²⁹ Interview with Zhang Xiaogang, 30 October 2003, Beijing.

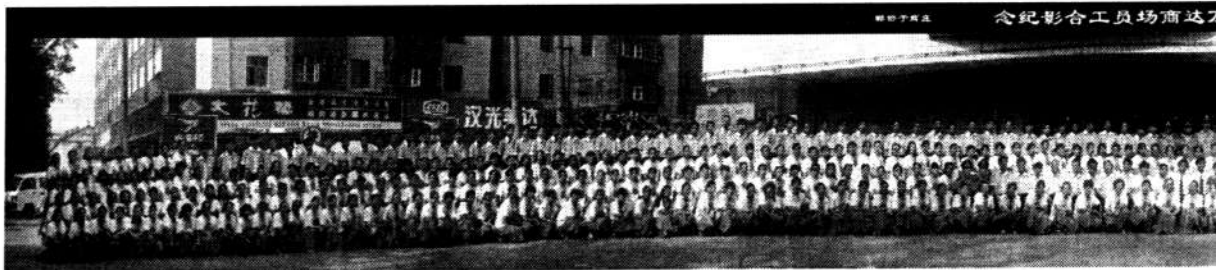
In the *Big Family* series (ill. 8), typical costumes, such as the Mao suit, Red Guard uniform, navy striped top and red scarf are appropriated in the works to indicate the historical background and to represent people's communist ideology. However, the artist does not aim to represent any particular individual or family by depicting any personal characteristics, but the collective similarity, images with a monotonous appearance, and the reactions or the situations of individuals who were confronting the public social environment.



ill. 8 Zhang Xiaogang, *Da Jiating (Big Family): No. 10*, 2001, oil on canvas, 200 × 300 cm, private collection.
Photograph courtesy Zhang Xiaogang.

As portraits, eyes in the *Big Family* are considered more vital than anything else and they have been rendered in detail. However, the artist states that ‘the most important expression of the eyes in these portraits is non-expressive, or in Chinese, *zoushen* (literally losing expression, staring blankly)³⁰. The light falling on the faces like birthmarks emphasises the absurdity of the impersonal expressionlessness behind the generation’s revolutionary fervour and captures the disappearance of individuality, whilst the inevitable colour red that appears reasonably or unreasonably, links comrades’ spirits and defines them in the context of national collectivisation.

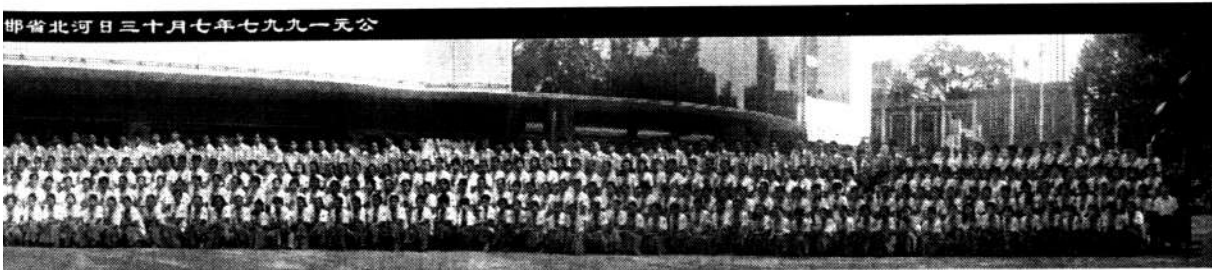
The conformity of collective is presented more explicitly in Zhuang Hui’s 1997 performance photograph series *Jiti Zhao (Group Photo)* (ill. 9). Growing up in Henan province at the commencement of the Cultural Revolution, the artist often travelled around with his photographer father, who was



³⁰ Ibidem.

utilising a technique popularised during the early 1900s, involving a 180 degrees rotational lens camera, to take group photos. It was an amazing experience for the child to understand the camera that caught such a large number of people with a single click, and more importantly, to identify the image of assembly, the heroic pattern, as a significant visual presentation of the era.³¹

The horizontally elongated picture reminds one of the Chinese traditional handscroll, encouraging spectators to 'read' every single character in the photograph. The artist himself is always present, standing at either the far left or right of the assembled group, as the director of the scenery, or indeed, a signature seal in the end of a handscroll, a calculated position of importance. On the other hand, the question of subject in Zhuang Hui's portraits is even further complicated by his own presence. The answer seems neither to lie



iii. 9 Zhuang Hui, *Jiti Zhao* (Group Photo): Hebei Sheng Handan Shi Yangguang Jituan Wanda Shangchang Yuangong Heying (Group Photo of Full Staff of Wangda Department Store of Yangguang Group), Handan, Hebei Province, 13 July 1997, photograph, private collection. Photograph courtesy Zhuang Hui.

³¹ Interview with Zhuang Hui, 28 October 2003, Beijing.

in the individuals that comprise the group, nor in the group. As Borysevicz discussed,

Zhuang Hui's presence mystifies the configuration by leaving the subject a tedious sum of the mass, its component parts, and the artist himself. The disciplines of portraiture, self portraiture, and group portraiture merge³².

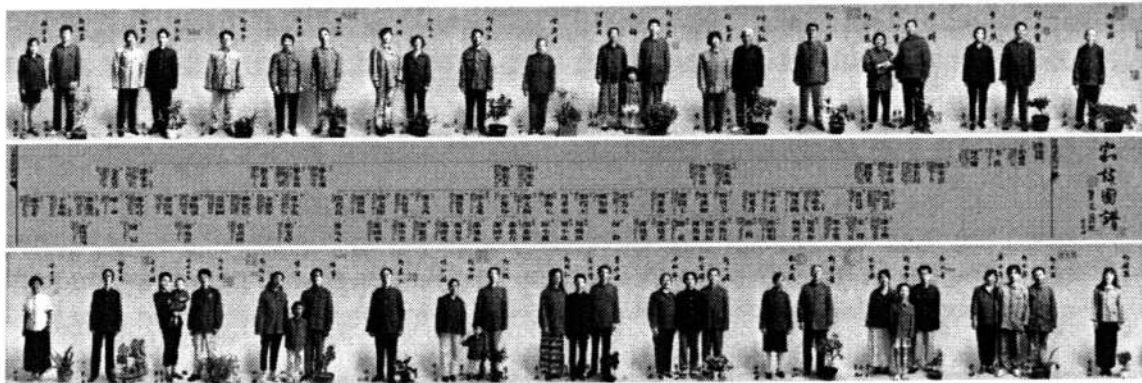
The groups photographed can be as large as 600 persons or more. Zhuang Hui cleverly chooses typical examples of any civil society's institutional framework: organizations of school, work, public security, and village residence, to preserve this disappearing legacy of conformity against the double backdrops of Mao's ideology and China's current economic reformation, and at the same time, to 'manifest not only the obsolescence of socialist spirituality, but also the inability to comprehend its undefined and precarious replacement'³³.

This approach could also include Shao Yinong and Mu Chen's photographic work *Family Register (Jiapu)* (ill. 10). The birth of the artist couple's son motivated them to learn Shao Yinong's family history as a case study and start the project of re-building a family register. In *Family Register*, the ten sepia-toned photographic scrolls, totalling thirty-eight meters in length, show family members all dressed in Mao's suit paired with their choice of lower garment, to present the conflicting embarrassment created between the past conformity, particularly the collectivist experience during the Cultural Revolution, and contemporary individualities driven by today's market economy. The artists intentionally adapt the traditional techniques of studio photograph to minimise their aesthetic input and resume a certain degree of authenticity and reliability for the *Family Register*. At the same time, it has somehow reconstructed a less realistic, or dramatic presentation for both memory and imagination.

Paradoxically, people's conformity could suddenly become hysteria. To many young artists who experienced the era in their childhood, the Cultural Revolution is not necessarily viewed as tragic, but rather carnivalesque, an entirely different world or even a dream world. Yang Fudong's black and white film, *Houfang – Hei, Tianliangle (Backyard – Hey, Sun is rising!)* (ill. 11),

³² M. Borysevicz, *Zhuang Hui*, in: *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*, ed. J. Clarke, Hong Kong: New Art Media 2000, p. 252.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 253.



iii. 10 Shao Yinong and Mu Chen, *Jiapu (Family Register)* (detail), 2000, photograph, collection of the artist.
 Photograph courtesy Shao Yinong and Mu Chen.



iii. 11 Yang Fudong, *Houfang – Hei, Tianliangle (Backyard – Hey, Sun is rising!)*, 2001, still images of 13 minutes 35 mm black & white film, collection of the artist.

interprets his revolutionary impression through a dream-like journey. It tells the story of a young man, or perhaps four, who attempt to capture those passing feelings just before waking in the morning. They all dress in the uniform, move as a team, but in a somewhat hysterical way. The artist writes poetically,

when the puppet-like indolence has been punctured by the dancing swords, they communicate within the loving indignation, hurt but never with pain... all the fragments present an discontinuous dream, which might be true, but would only happen within a fleeting moment just before the sun rises.³⁴

The new Tiananmen Square completed in 1959 could hold 400 000 people, who were performing with dream-like excitement. At the moment when Mao inspected his Red Guards during the first summer of the Cultural Revolution, the fanatical energy behind conformity was exhaustively expressed.

At five o'clock in the morning, 18 August 1966, [the *People's Daily* recorded] Chairman Mao dressed in a green Army Uniform with a red star shining on his cap. Chairman Mao came through the Golden Water Bridge in front of the Tower into the masses, shaking hands with the masses... at that moment, the whole square was suffused, people raised Mao's books in their hands on high, jumped and acclaimed... and cried out, 'Chairman Mao is coming to us! Long live Chairman Mao...'³⁵

This reflects Durkheim's idea of a 'collective effervescence', which

leads to outlandish behaviour whilst people's passions unleashed are so torrential that nothing can hold them. People are so far outside the ordinary conditions of life, and so conscious of the fact, that they feel a certain need to set themselves above and beyond ordinary morality... As a result of collective effervescence, they believe they have been swept up into a world entirely different from the one they have before their eyes.³⁶

³⁴ Artist statement, text provided by Yang Fudong.

³⁵ *Mao Zhuxi Tong Baiwan Qunzhong Gongqing Wenhua Da Geming (Chairman Mao Celebrating the Cultural Revolution with Millions of Masses Altogether)*, "Renmin Ribao" ("People's Daily"), 19 August 1966, pp. 1-2.

³⁶ E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. K. Fields, London: The Free Press 1995, pp. 218-228.

Arguably, the visual environment of the cult of Mao did not necessarily build a solemn religious atmosphere. Instead, it could well present a liveliness and boisterousness consistent with Chinese traditional celebrations, or in other words, carnivals with the nationalistic excitement liberated or transformed from conformity, but at the same time within conformity.

During the Cultural Revolution, Liu Dahong was

frequently awakened in the nights by the loudspeakers celebrating a revolutionary success. People would have movements for the revolution every single day, and always kept themselves in a state of hysterical excitement.³⁷

The artist's two-panel painting *Shuangcheng Ji (A Tale of Two Cities)* (ill. 12) is one example of this particular feature of the Cultural Revolution. The visual phenomena including big slogans, Mao's portraits, mass parades, Red Guard performance, and even the metaphor of the Great Helmsman were appropriated, reinterpreted and recomposed in a dramatic and almost surrealistic way. Another monumental work *Jitan (Sacrificial Altar)* is completed in a western triptych-like form, which ironically presents a heavenly prospect. The god-like Mao dominates the centre of the painting installation accompanied by his wife, Jiang Qing, and his pre-nominated successor, the Vice Chairman Lin Biao, whilst on the back of the triptych, the members of the Gang of Four (*Siren Bang*) occupy the holy positions. All these political figures are juxtaposed with the roles of the Model Opera (*Yangban Xi*) and revolutionary representatives within a fairy tale like scene to offer an absurd performance. As for folk festivals, people dressed in a variety of costumes of minority groups fabricate the prosperity of Mao's era, represent the social environment of mass movement, a continuous carnival, or in Durkheim's term – the 'collective effervescence'.

We can find the similar celebratory excitement in Hu Jieming's series of photo-manipulated pictures, *Raft of the Medusa*. The original painting *Le Radeau de la Méduse (The Raft of the Medusa)* was created by Theodore Gericault in 1819. It commemorates the loss of the French government frigate, La Méduse, and the tragic fate of its passengers and crew³⁸. On one level,

³⁷ Interview with Liu Dahong, 12 November 2003, Shanghai.

³⁸ It is recorded as a tragic story. When the ship La Méduse sank at sea, its captain and



iii. 12 Liu Dahong, *Shuangcheng Ji (A Tale of Two Cities)*, 1999,
oil on canvas, 300 × 240 cm, collection of the artist.

Photograph courtesy Liu Dahong.

Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* looks like a neo-classical history painting; but it is also highly subversive, depicting not heroes with courageous endurance in any conventional sense, but a moment of profound human iniquity. This story would immediately remind those victims of the Cultural Revolution of Mao's famous metaphor, the Great Helmsman. Hu Jieming draws a parallel to events of the Cultural Revolution, when tens of millions of Chinese intellectuals suffered atrociously in no good or noble cause. However, by understanding the sadness of this background, Hu's skilful digital hands somehow turned the original into a raft of carnival (ill. 13). It carries both revolutionaries and contemporaries, both Maoism and current ideologies from China's market economy, but is steered without direction.



ill. 13 Hu Jieming, *Meiduosha Zhifa (Raft of the Medusa)*, No. 3, 2002, photograph, collection of the artist.
Photograph courtesy Hu Jieming.

senior officers took the lifeboats and consigned the other 150 souls to a makeshift raft, from which only 15 survived.

The sails of Hu Jieming's raft are transformed to the red flag, which represented people's revolutionary enthusiasm during the Cultural Revolution, and which were distributed through the mass parades and the activity of *Geming Dachuanlian* (*Exchange Revolutionary Experience Travel*), and permeated the individual cities, towns, and work units. As an honoured Red Guard inspected by the Chairman at Tiananmen Square, Li Xianting describes his visual memory,

nothing could replace the colour red. It was so red all the time. Red flags suffused everywhere as a slogan reads, '*quanguo shangxia yipian hong* (the whole country awash in red)'. It was the virtually a red sea. I felt it came as a huge red tide. I was extremely excited and could not help following it.³⁹

Zhou Hongxiang's *Red Flag Flies* was finished in 2002 (ill. 14). In this video, the red flag is not only the contextual sign throughout the work, but more importantly, a baton for the performance or a symbol of power authorising the 'correct' direction, as the revolutionary saying, '*yiqie xingdong ting zhihui* (all the actions must follow the command)'. Most of the slogans appearing in the *Red Flag Flies* were selected from Mao's words, whilst each of the more than one hundred actors was meant to appear only once in the video. The work reinforces the centralisation of political power, and at the same time, submerges the individuality within a collective identity. As the artist states, 'there is no main role in the story, and all people are equal in the performance'⁴⁰.

The public loudspeakers, big-character slogans, and people's aroused gestures and shouting demonstrate the forceful inculcation through various media on the one hand; on the other hand, they have stimulated a collective excitement, and fostered a revolutionary carnival atmosphere. Here, people experienced themselves as grander than at ordinary times; they thought they were transformed into a new world and took responsibility to liberate others from the old; they felt, and at that moment really were, assembling for Mao, and living in a collective life that transported individuals beyond themselves.

³⁹ Interview with Li Xianting, 24 February 2001, Beijing.

⁴⁰ Interview with Zhou Hongxiang, 12 November 2003, Shanghai.



iii. 14 Zhou Hongxiang, *Hongqi Piao (The Red Flag Flies)*, 2002, still images of video, collection of the artist. Photograph courtesy Zhou Hongxiang.

From the late 1980s, Mainland China witnessed at first a fitful and then a nationwide revival of interest in Mao Zedong, the so-called 'Maore (Mao-craze)'.⁴¹ Since then, contemporary art has been a special medium, through which artists attempt to re-examine the linkage between Mao and Post-Mao era critically based on their personal experiences. The influence that an artist received from the era can be distributed to every concrete detail of practice, including the style, the technical skills, the media, and the manner of execution. Artist Xu Bing argues, 'if one tries to distinguish contemporary art in Mainland China from that in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or other regions, the introduction of the Cultural Revolution would be the key.'⁴² When the former leader and the people's revolutionary identity were appropriated and reshaped with popular and cynical visual vocabularies in a contemporary context, the original sacred significance was deconstructed on the one hand.⁴³ On the other hand, paradoxically, the communist Utopia that constructed by both the Maoist ideology and people's enthusiasm that represented by the imageries of Mao and the 'collective' respectively, have been even more mystified to new generations, as the aftermath of this most 'bizarre event' in history.

The Chinese Cultural Revolution was one of the most infamous political movements in history, and a disaster for the country. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it needs to be reassessed. The literal meaning of 'Cultural Revolution' is rather positive. It can be read as, and it actually was, an attempt to re-establish the foundation of Chinese culture. Indeed, without this particular reference, one would have seen a completely different platform of contemporary art practice in China. Reflected by these representative artists, or 'cultural revolutionaries', the significance of the unique and unprecedented visual phenomenon of the Mao era is re-examined; at the same time, the identities of Mao and his people have become a neo-tradition in the context of Chinese visual culture, providing the nourishment and the visual capital for contemporary art practice in post-Mao China.

⁴¹ G. R. Barmé, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

⁴² Interview with Xu Bing, 21 November 2003, Manchester.

⁴³ Li Xianting, cited in Lü Peng, *Zhongguo Dangdai Yishu Shi 1990-1999 (A History of Contemporary Chinese Art 1990-1999)*, Changsha: Hunan Art Press 2000, pp. 159-1960.

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I am deeply grateful to all of the artists that I interviewed during the study for their time, enthusiasm and support. My deepest gratitude also goes to Dr Darren Newbury and Professor Nick Stanley for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Mao i jego lud w sztuce postmaoistowskiej

Podczas społecznych, ideologicznych, politycznych i kulturowych konfliktów XX wieku, sztuka chińska zmieniała się szybciej niż kiedykolwiek. Śmierć Przewodniczącego Mao Zedonga w 1976 roku i zakończenie rewolucji kulturalnej, otworzyły całkowicie nowy rozdział nowożytnej historii Chin, w tym również chińskiej sztuki.

Niniejszy artykuł stawia sobie za cel zbadanie znaczenia rewolucji kulturalnej dla „prosperity” chińskiej sztuki współczesnej, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem relacji między Mao, jego ludem i sztuką postmaoistowską. Dowodzi, że złożony wpływ rewolucji kulturalnej stworzył podstawy do rozwoju praktyki artystycznej w Chinach, jak również stworzył główne źródło tożsamości dla chińskiej sztuki we współczesnej sztuce światowej. Z jednej strony artykuł przedstawia, w jaki sposób wizerunek Mao Zedonga, jako dominujący motyw wizualny rewolucji kulturalnej, został zawłaszczony i przekształcony we współczesnej praktyce artystycznej – deifikacji i dedeifikacji Mao we współczesnych Chinach. Z drugiej strony, autor ponownie podejmuje kwestię postaw i dokonań ludzi w czasie kolektywnego życia podczas rewolucji kulturalnej. W sztuce swoje odbicie znajduje konflikt między rewolucyjnym konformizmem a historyczną karnawalizacją.

W niniejszym tekście, opierając się na wywiadach, autor w sposób krytyczny omawia prace piętnastu znaczących chińskich artystów, wśród których znajdują się: Hu Jieming, Li Shan, Liu Dahong, Mao Xuhui, Qi Zhilong, Shao Yinong i Mu Chen, Sui Jianguo, Wang Guangyi, Wang Keping, Yang Fudong, Yu Youhan, Zhang Xiaogang, Zhou Hongxiang i Zhuang Hui.