

Burden or Legacy:
From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to
Contemporary Art

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Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art

Jiang Jiehong

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 has 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-Cultural Revolution era. From a political point of view, on the one hand, the art has been categorized into '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 'decentralize' ideologic-centricism", the term 'un-unofficial art' is fabricated to "encourage real freedom of creation in an open, multi-orientational

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

space...²; or even far away from political classifications, 'experimental art (*shiyān yìshù*)', increasingly has been employed as a looser and broader definition.³

This research offers neither a chronological review of Chinese contemporary art, nor does it invent new terminology; instead, it focuses on the relationship between the Chinese Cultural Revolution and contemporary art, aiming to explore the significance of the former to the prosperity of the latter. Without the Cultural Revolution, contemporary art would continue to exist in China, but very differently. The influence of the Chinese Cultural Revolution is complex and exists at various levels. I argue that it is the foundation of the development of contemporary art in China and a crucial source of identity for Chinese art in the global art world today.

This chapter is divided into six sections. First, I will outline the historical background of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, echoes of which will be heard throughout the text. Second, my analysis of artists' works will show how the Cultural Revolution has been read and reflected upon by artists with their different attitudes, sitting somewhat contradictorily between critique and nostalgia. Third, I will demonstrate how the image of Mao Zedong has been appropriated and reshaped in contemporary art practice — the deification and de-deification of Mao in modern China. Fourth, following Mao's appearance as a dominant motif of the visual environment of the Cultural Revolution, I will turn the lens on Mao's people themselves in the Cultural Revolution to explore and analyse their collective identities. Reflected in art, there is a pair of contrasting approaches of visual representation, between revolutionary conformity and hysterical carnival. Fifth, I will demonstrate that Chinese characters are another significant visual source drawn upon by contemporary artists. Finally, I will discuss the ways of artistic reflections on the Cultural Revolution in visual experimentation. Should the Cultural Revolution be seen as a burden for Chinese artists or its opposite — a legacy to re-identify Chinese art on an international platform?

Ruin or Revolution

The Chinese Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*Zhongguo Wuchan Jieji Wenhua Dageming*) 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 Cultural

2 Hou Hanru, 'Towards an "Un-Unofficial Art": De-ideologicalization of China's Contemporary Art in the 1990s', *Third Text*, 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.

4 Fairbank, John King, *The Great Chinese Revolution 1800–1985*. London: Harper Perennial, 1987, p. 316.

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 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 organization of the Red Guard was established spontaneously by a group of teenage students from the Middle School attached to Tsinghua University on 29 May 1966, followed by other school students nationwide. The Red Guards at the Second Middle School of Beijing put up their big-character poster, *Xiang Jiu Shijie Xuanzhan* (*To Declare A War against the Old World*). It read: "We are critics of the old world. We want to criticize, 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 and encouragement to the Red Guards became noticeable during the inspection on 18 August 1966 in Tiananmen Square (Fig. 1). 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' across the city. During the summer, the

5 The duration of the Cultural Revolution has been defined in various ways. 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 (1987, 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, the new Chairman Hua Guofeng, declared that the first Cultural Revolution that had lasted for eleven years was successfully finished by smashing the Gang of Four (*Siren Bang*).

6 '*Hengsao Yiqie Niuguai 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 and Gao Gao, *Wenhua Da Geming Shinian Shi* (*The Ten-Year History of the Cultural Revolution*). Hong Kong: Chaoliu Publisher, Vol. 1, 1989, p. 90.

Red Guards searched over ten million homes across the country and confiscated or destroyed '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 statues of Buddha, folk gods, even Confucius — religious architecture, 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 Red Guards soon turned into the 'red terror' across the country. In forty days, from the middle of August to the end of September 1966, more than 1,700 people were killed, and 33,600 houses of residences were searched and confiscated. In one of the most tragic examples, in Daxing, a small county located to the south of Beijing, 325 people were killed within a week (from 27 August to 1 September) — the oldest was eighty and the youngest was only thirty-eight days old — and twenty-two families were entirely exterminated.¹⁰ However, it is impossible to know the full extent of the terror.

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".¹¹ It proposed metaphorically the depth and significance of its influence. People who experienced the Cultural Revolution in their adulthood, youth or childhood, and living in various places in China, would have different understandings of the Cultural Revolution and their lives influenced in different ways. Artists are among those who have been reflecting upon the phenomenon through different perspectives and at different depths of perception.

The period of the Cultural Revolution is often referred to by many as the 'ten lost years' or, metaphorically, as a 'cultural desert'; most of the cultural outcomes of the Cultural

8 Ding Shu, *Jiduo Wenwu Fuzhi Yijiu — 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 at <http://ww1.cnd.org/BIG5/HXWZ/ZK00/zk237.b5.html> [Accessed on 11 May 2005].

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

10 Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, *Wenhua Da Geming Shinian Shi* (The Ten-Year History of the Cultural Revolution), Hong Kong: Chaoliu Publisher, Vol. 1, 1989, p. 110.

11 '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.

Revolution are seen as valueless. However, if the Cultural Revolution offers nothing of cultural value, why has its visual legacy continually been appropriated by Chinese artists and, in a sense, somehow contributed to the prosperity of Chinese contemporary art?

Critique or Nostalgia

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution, a new generation of Chinese leaders made a dramatic turn to develop a capitalist market economy under the name of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics'. Although the party has never given up its control over artistic affairs, its cultural policies have oscillated between extremely strict and relatively relaxed, depending on the political situation. Although stylistic changes did not appear immediately in post-Mao China,¹² Chinese artists began to breathe and have more space to resume their self-consciousness in art practice.

Artists started to think more independently and keep away from the Maoist ideology after the Cultural Revolution. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a movement that has been labelled 'critical realism (*pipan xianshi zhuyi*)' or 'new realism'¹³ emerged to rethink and narrate realistically the decade of the Cultural Revolution. In literature, Lu Xinhua's novel *Shangheng* (*Scar*) was published in the *Wenhui Bao* (*Daily*) on 11 August 1978. The novel per se told something unfamiliar but truthful about people's life, while *Shanghen* (*Scar*) became a more accessible and direct depiction for the immediate response of the Red Guard generation after the Cultural Revolution. With a similar approach, a thirty-two-piece set of illustration and an adaptation of the story *Maple* (*Feng*) that appeared in *Lianhuan Huabao* (*Serial Pictures Gazette*) a year later, describing the tragic death of the young lovers as a result of battles between contending Red Guard factions, marked the beginning of '*Shanghen Yishu* (*Scar Art*)'.¹⁴ As the authors recall, "We sincerely believed that we were destroying the 'old world'. With our selflessness and faithfulness, the Red Guard Movement destroyed the original orders, from schools to the whole society... and we were unavoidably driven by the great spiritual power... Until years later, we realized that our future and own nation had also been badly destroyed too, by ourselves."¹⁵

12 In the first National Fine Art Exhibition after the Cultural Revolution in February 1977, one-sixth of 695 works were images of Mao, Mao's successor Hua Guofeng or the other communist leaders.

13 Andrews, Julia, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China: 1949-1979*. London: University of California Press, 1994, p. 393.

14 Li Xianting, *Zhongyao de Bushi Yishu* (*What Is Important Is Not Art*). Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Press, 2000, p. 196.

15 Cheng Yiming, et al., '*Guanyu chuanguo Lianhuanhua "Feng" de Yixie Xiangfa* (Some Thoughts on the Illustration "Maple")', *Meishu* (Fine Art), 1980, Vol. 1, pp. 34-35.

Cheng Conglin's *Snow on X Month X Day, 1968* (*Yijiu Liuba Nian Mouyue Mouri Xue*) (Fig. 2) and Gao Xiaohua's *Why* (*Weishenme*) marked the peak of Scar Art, picturing the artists' personal experiences in political battles. Both Cheng and Gao were trained in realistic techniques at Sichuan Academy of Art. Like all artists of their generation, they had seen their childhood revolutionary ideals smashed by the political turbulence of their adolescence. As Gao Xiaohua states, "I am also the witness, the participant, and the sufferer of the tragedy, and we have got the scars engraved on our hearts as the evidence. We have the right and responsibility to record and tell true history."¹⁶ The exhaustion and doubt can be clearly read through those 'truth' defenders and Mao's loyal soldiers, while the realistic work offered a space for viewers to reflect on the past and ask 'why'. Pursuing the truth, political dogma was rejected, while Scar artists envisaged the human cost rather than the glories of the Cultural Revolution. However, because of their young age and the close proximity of their response to the Cultural Revolution, their perception of it could not be comprehensive. The paintings could be read as the "expression of a sentimental humanism"¹⁷ rather than rational critiques. In comparison with the Red Guard generation, Zhao Yannian, the 'direct target' of the Revolution, was unable to reflect on his sufferings for many years. As the head of the Printmaking Department in Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou,¹⁸ Zhao was accused of being one of those '*niugui sheshen* (ox-demons and snake-spirits)' and 'counterrevolutionary academic experts'. During the public criticisms, a heavy banner was hung around his neck as a sign of humiliation — astonishingly by his own students. If he were not so aware of his responsibility for the family, he would have given up, and the beautiful West Lake would have been his doom.¹⁹ Because of the ways in which they were implicated in the political campaign, these older artists cannot confidently re-envisage the Cultural Revolution. Even the date of Yan Han's *Book Collecting Stamp* (*Cangshu Piao*) (Fig. 3), in which the artist portrays himself suffering criticism, still remains unknown.²⁰ Zhao Yannian did not start his woodcut series *Nightmare* (*Emeng*) (Figs. 4 and 5) until 1989. This work was included in the jubilee exhibition of his professional life, the first time it was shown to the public. To depict the trauma of the experience, *Nightmare* focuses on the detailed expressions of individuals. As a victim himself, Zhao Yannian believes that "only real experience with real feeling will produce real art."²¹

16 Gao Xiaohua, 'Weishenme Hua Weishenme (Why Painted Why)', *Meishu* (Fine Art), 1979, Vol. 7, p. 7.

17 Gao Minglu, *Zhongguo qianwei yishu* (China Avant-garde). Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Press, 1997, p. 57.

18 Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art (*Zhejiang Meishu Xueyuan*) is the former name of China Academy of Arts (*Zhongguo Meishu Xueyuan*).

19 Interview with Zhao Yannian, 10 November 2003, Hangzhou. All interviews in this paper were conducted by the author.

20 Interview with Yan Han, 29 October 2003, Beijing. The artist was reluctant to provide further details of this woodcut or show any other relevant works, which were expected to be published only after the artist's death.

21 Interview with Zhao Yannian, 10 November 2003, Hangzhou.

However, to some, the Cultural Revolution was not just a disaster, but something to which they had dedicated their youth and, hence, so complex that it simply could not be negated or criticized. In the summer of 1967, the Red Guard factionalism reached its peak. After one year, Mao dispatched the People's Liberation Army and worker's organization to control the schools and dispersed more than fourteen million students to the countryside and border areas.²² Rather than attempting to learn from the masses, the true aim of this so-called movement of *shangshan xiaxiang* (going to mountains and countryside) was to mitigate the turbulence across the cities. To many artists, their experience in the rural area is unforgettable. As his final work at Sichuan Academy of Fine Art, Zhou Chunyu's more than thirty-piece woodcut series *Half of the Life* (*Rensheng de Yiban*) 1980 (Fig. 6), influenced by the style of Belgian artist Frans Masereel (1889–1972), is a narrative illustration about the story of this generation. The artist claims it to be an artistic statement of the ideal of his youth.²³ Graduating from Sichuan academy in the same year, He Duoling produced his final work, *Spring Wind Revivified* (*Chunfeng Yijing Suxing*) (Fig. 7), which was clearly inspired by Andrew Wyeth and which has been labelled '*xiangtu xieshi* (rustic realism)'.²⁴ In this work, cruelty and indignation are replaced by a kind of loneliness and sentimental expression that one may also see in Wyeth. The title of the work literarily metaphorizes the end of the Maoist era, while the visual itself implicates a nostalgic representation. More explicitly, in the work *A Song We Used to Sing* (*Woman Ceng Changguo Zheshou Ge*) (Fig. 8), the artist poetically presents the youths singing after their hard work on the farm. However, instead of sorrow and tears there is expectation and optimism, highlighting their rustic life. The 1984 work *Youth* (*Qingchun*) (Fig. 9) is a conclusion of the artist's personal retrospection and reflection on the Cultural Revolution. In *Youth*, a girl student, dressed in Red Guard uniform, is monumentalized in a wasteland, with a fragment of a farm implement at her side. "To me", says the artist, "the Cultural Revolution was an idealistic era, no matter whether it was real or illusory. The eagle in my paintings symbolizes the ideal of our generation, while the pale sunshine attempts to lacerate and destroy the beautiful youth. However, the strength of life still enables the youth to envisage all the tribulation taking place."²⁵

If the youths had a sense of nostalgia for the Maoist utopia, the children, could imagine the Cultural Revolution as romantic and heroic. Liu Ye was one of these children. "I

22 Liu Xiaomeng, 'Xiaxiang Nu Zhishi Qingnian Hunyin Poxi (An Analysis on the Marriages of Young Female Intellectuals in the Going-to-Countryside Movement)', in Liu Qingfeng (ed.), *Wenhua Da Geming: Shishi yu Yanjiu* (The Cultural Revolution: Facts and Analysis). Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1996, p. 149.

23 Interview with Zhou Chunyu, 2 November 2003, Chengdu.

24 Gao Minglu, et al., *Zhongguo Dangdai Meishushi* (A History of Chinese Contemporary Art): 1985–1986. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1991, p. 47.

25 Interview with He Duoling, 3 November 2003, Chengdu.

remember the first lesson of drawing in my kindergarten", Liu recalls; "I was taught how to draw a red sun and a ship on big waves, an illustration of Lin Biao's famous slogan, 'sailing on the sea relies on the Helmsman'. I did not have any other choice, and the red sun [a symbol of Mao] was the only motif. All these memories are rooted deeply in my unconscious mind. Although now I am not attempting to focus on the Cultural Revolution, my understanding of contemporary issues, such as love and sex, were addressed on the canvas somehow as revolutionarily red"²⁶ (Fig. 10). In Liu Ye's work, those children dressed in navy represent the next generation of the revolution with their loyalty towards Mao, the Great Helmsman, confident in their success (Fig. 11). A ship carrying the revolutionary ideal could sometimes appear dramatically either behind theatre curtains or even as a mirage (Fig. 12). The romantic and fairy tale-like imagination of the utopian redness has been interwoven between childhood memory and the intellectual inheritance from his father, a writer of children's stories; the artist continues the story in a surrealistic space. Similar to Liu Ye, born two years later in 1966, Yu Hong's understanding of the Cultural Revolution is also received from the interpretation of her parents' generation. The artist's recent work *Witness to Growth* (*Muji Chengzhang*) is an ongoing series started in 1999. It has been a private space for Yu Hong to reflect on her own experiences since 1966 — the year of her birth, and the year of the start of the Cultural Revolution (Fig. 13) — compared with the life of her daughter, Liu Wa, born in 1994. As Przerwa suggests, in *Witness to Growth*, Yu Hong studies "the balance between collective meaning and individual irrelevance and depicts its various nuances, and this idea lends itself exceedingly well to an investigation of China's tumultuous recent history and the effects it has had on the individual".²⁷ Each painting imitated from a photograph of the time is paired with another photograph collected from a wide variety of official publications, such as *China Pictorial* (*Renmin Huabao*). For Yu Hong, who trained as a painter at the Central Academy of Fine Art for more than ten years, photography itself is a meaningless medium and only given significance when photographs are chosen and reinterpreted within her native language, painting. "It seemed that painting the old photographs enables me to physically touch the past", explains the artist: "during the practice, I could experience every single detail of my past. My favourite dress and even a button become tangible in the strokes and I could almost recall their original smell."²⁸ For example, the photograph of the celebration of the poster *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* (*Mao Zhuxi Qu Anyuan*) in 1968 is juxtaposed with two-year-old Yu Hong with a *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* badge proudly on her chest (Fig. 14). In another combination, one could almost hear the soldiers' voices in support

26 Interview with Liu Ye, 29 October 2003, Beijing.

27 Przerwa, Xenia Tetmajer Von, 'Yu Hong's *Witness to Growth*: Historic Determination and Individual Contingency', *YiShu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 2, No. 3, September 2003, pp. 34–42.

28 Interview with Yu Hong, 30 October 2003, Beijing.

of “*Mao zhuxi wansui* (long live Chairman Mao)” immediately from the photograph, but the girl’s purpose in the picture is more ambiguous (Fig. 15). Comparatively, child Yu Hong would not have the same agenda as today’s children, like Liu Wa’s generation, but indeed, heroic ambitions for the communist success (Fig. 16).

Critique or nostalgia, the distinction between them gets more ambiguous in the artist couple Shao Yinong and Mu Chen’s photograph series *Da Litang* (*Assembly Hall*). From the dynasties to the People’s Republic, China’s tradition of change is always revolutionary—to demolish and to re-establish—while the speed of change increases dramatically towards the post-industrial twenty-first century. As has been introduced previously, many dynastic relics disappeared during the Red Guard movement of ‘Smashing the Four Olds’. Tragically, even today, to recuperate the legacy of the Cultural Revolution can also be difficult because of the government’s efforts to remove the Cultural Revolution from people’s memory and reshape history. For example, one of the few remaining representative buildings from the Cultural Revolution—the Exhibition Hall of Sichuan Province at Tianfu Square in Chengdu—is to be pulled down to build a new one in the Qing dynasty style.²⁹ In other words, ironically, an original tradition is to be replaced by an artificial reproduction. Britta Erickson describes, “There is a sense of loss, resulting in nostalgia for what is gone”, and continues, “Shao Yinong and Mu Chen bring the urgency of nostalgia into sharp focus... the images are a poignant reminder of the Cultural Revolution political fanaticism that necessitated regular meetings in these halls. Empty of people, the photographs invite the projection of personal memories.”³⁰

With a background as a photojournalist, Mu Chen questions the ‘realness’ of photojournalism. She discussed, “the camera could be considered as a relatively honest and reliable tool, but the moment when the shutter clicks would bring a subjective choice or decision.”³¹ The boundary between photo-documentation and art, therefore, is meant to be vague in the *Assembly Hall* series, where we could only see the simplest execution of photography and the least artistic intervention involved. More like anthropological research, the artists’ itinerary is based on their substantial literature review of the historical background. Departing from Yan’an, the artists travelled for over two years to locate hundreds of revolutionary shrines and assembly halls built since China’s revolution. These first-hand materials then were documented as specimens to be considered suitable for inclusion in the series.

29 Interview with Liu Jiakun, 3 November 2003, Chengdu.

30 Erickson, Britta, *Memory Devolved and Evolved: Photographic Works by Shao Yinong and Muchen*, 2003, unpublished manuscript provided by Shao Yinong and Mu Chen.

31 Interview with Mu Chen, 28 October 2003, Beijing.

Assembly halls, the most communal space where masses gathered for events of either celebration or criticism, played an important role in the Cultural Revolution. "It was a stage where one could have played the role of hero with dignity and then suddenly become a guilty counter-revolutionary", said Shao Yinong; "it was once filled with glory and humiliation, happiness and agony, passion and violence, resounding with enthusiastic and hysteric voices, but all passed today."³² Some assembly halls have fallen into ruin (Fig. 17); some have survived, even with Mao's portrait on display; others have been converted to warehouses (Fig. 18), factories (Fig. 19) restaurants (Fig. 20) and, even more ironically, Buddhist temples.

Similarly, in the photographic series *Wenge Yijing* (*Vestiges of the Cultural Revolution*), that began in 1994, Wang Tong uses his camera to search and rescue the disappearing vestiges, including Mao's images and big-character slogans (Figs. 21 and 22) on the wall, and points out the decay of the era. Interestingly, some local residents did not even notice the existence of the legacy— even a big image of Mao (Fig. 23) right in their view — which the artist had travelled extensively to find.³³ The image of the Chairman — once the central focus of every man, woman and child— now is an indifferent mark on the wall.

Envisaging these factual documents that mirror the experiences of people, artists' are less explicit about the Cultural Revolution and mainly serve to provide a reminder for those who have had the experience.

Words or Images

From a visual perspective, the beginning of the Cultural Revolution can be linked to the appearance of the first big-character poster (*dazhi bao*) at Peking University on 25 May 1966. This poster was written by Nie Yuanzi and the other six members of staff from the Department of Philosophy. It criticized Song Shuo, the vice minister of Higher Education Beijing Municipal Committee, Lu Ping and Peng Peiyun, the secretaries of Communist Party Committee of Peking University. On the same day, suddenly more than a thousand big-character posters covered the whole campus to join the criticisms and discussions.³⁴ Soon afterwards, this bottom-up 'mass voice' was supported by Mao, and the content of the poster was broadcast to the whole nation through the Central People's Broadcast

32 Interview with Shao Yinong, 28 October 2003, Beijing.

33 Interview with Wang Tong, 17 June 2004, Beijing.

34 Yin Hongbiao, 'Wenge de Diyizhang Malie Zhuyi Dazhibao (The First Marx-Leninism Big Character Poster in the Cultural Revolution)', in Liu, *Op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 3–16.

Station on 1 June 1966 and published on the first page of the *People's Daily* the next day.³⁵ Then, as the main visual medium, big-character slogans were written in red on all available surfaces. Stores, government offices, tea shops, noodle restaurants and various eateries were so completely covered that it was impossible to tell which was which.³⁶

Although a piece of handwriting consists of words — a letter, a poem or a slogan — carrying literary meanings, its textual identity could be debased by illegible calligraphy or, indeed, the violent visual impact of the big-character posters of Chinese political movements. When the artistic value of writing overpowers its literary content, the identity of Chinese characters become ambiguous. The word 'anti-writing' has a positive meaning in Chinese visual culture, changing literary words to images. "By subtly suppressing the content of a handwritten text a writer can emphasize the aesthetic value of his brushwork," however, Wu Hung argues; "all traditional calligraphers conducted this transformation in one way or another, but none of them tried to completely divorce form from content. A radical departure from this ancient tradition only occurred in contemporary Chinese art."³⁷

From the late 1980s, the most influential Chinese artists, such as Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan and Xu Bing, coincidentally got into 'anti-writing' by producing a large body of pseudo-calligraphy and fake texts, in which they consciously distinguished form from content, and tried to construct a purely calligraphic art. Wu Shanzhuan states, "Chinese character is the most significant one, in terms of either its function that is able to construct people's ways of thinking, or its influence on the national psychology. And its monosyllabic pronunciation and unusual image make it distinguishable among all characters in the global context. If character is the key to the national soul, losing Chinese character is to lock the most powerful soul ever in a safe."³⁸

The exhibition *70% Red, 25% Black, 5% White*, which included 76 pieces of work led by Wu Shanzhuan, took place in Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in Hangzhou in 1986.³⁹ The title of the exhibition reflects the artists' visual memories during the Cultural Revolution. Based on the proportion of these three colours, the installation

35 'Beijing Daxue Qi Tongzhi Jiechuan le Yige Dayimou (An Evil Plot Was Exposed by the Seven Comrades from Peking University)', *Renmin Ribao* (People's Daily), 2 June 1966, p. 1.

36 Yan Jiaqi and Gao Gao, translated and edited by D. W. Y. Kwok, *Turbulent Decade: A History of the Cultural Revolution*, Hawaii: School of Hawaiian, Asian & Pacific Studies, University of Hawaii, 1996, pp. 89–90.

37 Wu Hung, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art and The University of Chicago, 1999, p. 38.

38 Wu Shanzhuan, 'Guanyu Zhongwen (About Chinese Characters)', *Meishu (Fine Art)*, 1986, Vol. 8, p. 61.

39 The artist group of the exhibition includes Wu Shanzhuan, Zhang Haizhou, Lü Haizhou, Luo Xianyue, Song Chenghua, Ni Haifeng and Huang Jian, who started their studies in Zhejiang Academy of Fine Art in 1983.

is constructed by Chinese characters in *heiti* (bold typeface), which was popular in Cultural Revolution propaganda. This industrial style demolishes the poetic aesthetics of traditional calligraphy but revisits the visual identity of Chinese revolutionary slogans.

The work *Hongse Youmo* (*Red Humour*) (Fig. 24) was created as an installation at Wu Shanzhuan's studio in Zhoushan in 1986, but was not shown to the public until 1998 in the United States. The artist used the format of the Cultural Revolution's big-character poster, but the messages were drawn from the surrounding environment and conveyed the multiple dimensions of contemporary political, social and economic information. The texts written all over the room's walls, floor and ceiling included political slogans, such as "exercise for strength in the class struggle", price notices and popular advertisements such as "newly arrived supplies", newspaper headlines, traffic signs, Buddhist texts, weather forecasts and even some lines of ancient poetry. The big-characters in *Red Humour* were written not only by the artist himself, but also by visitors to the installation. Viewers might sense a playful and happy attitude when seeing Wu's windowless room filled with the absurd combination of nonsense and terror. Nevertheless, the personal experiences of the Cultural Revolution inevitably could be recalled by such a familiar visual environment in which revolutionary and holy ideals or the highest instructions ironically were de-constructed and de-signified.

Gu Wenda's *Pseudo Characters Series* (Fig. 25) investigated the intrinsic aesthetics of Chinese character by displaying a conflict between linguistic meaning and aesthetic pleasure. Calligraphy is usually used for captions and visually served as decoration in Chinese traditional painting. In Gu's work, traditional calligraphic techniques are used to write restructured characters with components upside-down, reversed or wrongly written. The proportion of painting and calligraphy was changed; the huge reversed Chinese characters dominated the picture instead of the landscape itself. As Gao Minglu states, the production of these works demonstrates a paradox: whenever a calligrapher is writing, an aesthetic affectation may override any concern with the text, whilst Gu Wenda became a radical destroyer of the power of traditional writing,⁴⁰ and arguably was influenced by the 'big-character aesthetics' of the Cultural Revolution. More directly in Gu's 1987 installation *Guanzhong Zuowei Qizi de Xuangua Qipan de Youxi* (*A Game in which the Audience Serve as Chessmen on a Suspended Chessboard*) (Fig. 26), large black characters *ge* and *ming* (revolution) were reversed and crossed out by red lines, with political and religious meanings. Jason Kuo observes, "this treatment of Chinese characters seems to be the artist's reaction toward the abuses of language by the writers of big character poster during the Cultural Revolution."⁴¹

40 Gao Minglu, 'From Elite to Small Man: The Many Faces of a Transitional Avant-Garde in Mainland China', in Gao Minglu (ed.), *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*. London: University of California Press, 1998, p. 159.

41 Cited in Sullivan, Michael, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China*. London: University of California Press, 1996, p. 264.

In another example, Qiu Zhijie's *Wenshen (Tattoo 1)* (Fig. 27), a large character *bu*, meaning 'no', is written in bright red across the artist's body and the wall behind him. It creates the illusion that his body has strangely disappeared, and the character has become independent, detached from the body and the wall. In other words, this character rejects the ground and makes the person invisible. "The character *bu* was chosen because its structure would be interesting in this piece of work, and it does work very well with my body," said the artist; "as soon as I decided on this big character, I could not think about using any other colour rather than red."⁴²

Xu Bing used to call himself a member of the first artist generation of '*wenzi gongzuozhe*' (literally 'character worker' and generally known as writers or editors; here it means artists focusing on Chinese characters as a visual form). His interest, or rather habit, of making Chinese characters was formed during the Cultural Revolution.

One of the government-enforced curriculum changes was a push to simplify many traditional Chinese characters. The simplified form could be seen as an initial 'cultural' revolution, in which Mao attempted to formalize and popularize the traditional format of writing and, more ambitiously, to prepare a cultural foundation for cultivating the new ideology. In Chinese education, everyone needs to spend several years memorizing thousands of individual characters. Xu Bing recalls his experience of learning Chinese characters at school: "every few months, a new set of simplified characters would be devised by the government; and the previous one, some of which had been considered inappropriate, would be replaced." Therefore, many of Xu's days were spent learning, then unlearning different characters for the same word, a process that made him realize that to change the language, even a little bit, really changes people's thinking. This could also have confused the understanding of Chinese culture in which, traditionally, "characters would be respected as a sanctified creature, and the movement of simplifying Chinese characters actually challenged the root of Chinese culture."⁴³

Growing up in the centre of the Cultural Revolution at Peking University, Xu Bing witnessed the movement, including the display of the first big-character poster. When his father, the chair of the History Department in the university, like many other intellectuals, was sent to prison to be 'reformed' through labour, Xu Bing was labelled as 'the bastard son of a reactionary father'. The big-character posters were shrill and angry, denouncing people by name and accusing the targets of being 'capitalist roaders'. Many irregularly simplified or even deliberately wrongly written characters (Fig. 28)⁴⁴ in political propaganda became

42 Interview with Qiu Zhijie, 26 February 2000, Beijing.

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

44 For example, the character *qi* in the name Liu Shao Qi, former chairman of China and a political opponent of Mao, could be turned on its side to become *gou*, or 'dog', as a way to insult.

a way to insult opponents, but, later, these inspired the artist's conscious invention of his 'heavenly words'. "At that time", says the artist, "you really felt the power of characters. If you wanted to kill somebody, you did it not by gun but by brush."⁴⁵ As a result, Xu enthusiastically dedicated himself to political propaganda in order to rid himself of this blemished family history. "I sat in the Propaganda Office hour upon hour", Xu Bing recalls, "writing and painting big-character posters and leaflets made of tightly written small characters, they all were as carefully and neatly done as professionally printed words. Even the largest slogan posters were perfect on first try. Each character was standard and forceful. I could write them quickly and extremely well."⁴⁶

Since the late 1980s, Xu Bing has learned to enjoy the skills that he acquired, not necessarily from his seven-year study at the Department of Printmaking in Central Academy, but from his 'training' during the Cultural Revolution. He spent many years of intensive work hand-carving more than two thousand wooden type elements (Fig. 29) and printing them on paper. However, none of those characters in the *Book from the Heaven* can be pronounced or understood because the artist invented each one by rearranging elements from original Chinese characters. The installation was composed of three elements: handscrolls, wall panels (Fig. 30) and books (Fig. 31) in the traditional woodblock-printed form. The orderliness of thousands of characters printed in black on white enshrouds the room, masking the wall. Erickson notes that the *Book from the Heaven* has been likened to the big-character posters that appeared throughout the Cultural Revolution for people's daily reading.⁴⁷ To the viewers — foreigners as well as Chinese — all semantic significance of the Chinese characters was completely removed from the 'heavenly book', the writing itself. Thus, the artist seems to mock the sacred texts of antiquity.

Wang Jinsong's photographic work *Bai Chai Tu (A Hundred Chai)* (Fig. 32), completed in 1999, witnesses the reconstruction of the city of Beijing. Since the 1990s, the Chinese character *Chai* (to demolish) began to appear — in bold white or spiny red — all over the capital, either on the outer walls of traditional residential buildings or on doors and windows. It was marked for the bulldozer's target, as low-rise buildings made way for those of greater height. The handwritings of *Chai* seem "despotic, truculent and even tyrannical in many cases", discussed the artist; "the impact is not from the literary meaning of the character itself, but the visual format and execution of the writing."⁴⁸ Only

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

46 Xu Bing, "The Living Word", in Britta Erickson (ed.), *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*. London: University of Washington Press, 2001, p. 16.

47 Erickson, *Ibid.*, p. 44.

48 Interview with Wang Jinsong, 25 March 2006, Beijing.

because of the writing, the character as a sacred image would then be able to demonstrate authority and power, to demolish an architectural space or, as in the turbulent era, to vandalize humanity and bereave one's life.

Man or Mao

On 1 October 1949, Mao Zedong with his comrades ascended Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, which once stood as a gate of the palace of the Qing dynasty. He declared the foundation of the People's Republic of China to the thousands of commoners and soldiers gathered under Tiananmen: "Chinese people have finally stood up!" The appearance of Mao, as the Chinese communist leader, must have added a new political dimension to the former imperial building, reinterpreting the hidden ruling power to finally symbolize the beginning of a new era. At the same time, the gate instantly offered Mao the dual status of both communist leader and feudalistic emperor.

During the Cultural Revolution, the traditional customs, festivals and folk religions were considered superstitious and anti-communist and forcibly removed from people's life. To fill the 'religious void', Mao played the role of the new 'god' and symbolized by a red sun. This 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 as the red sun was closely related to the healer and the rescuer who would be able to save the people from agony and illness, as well as a world full of evils.⁴⁹ Because of the personal cult, the image of Mao permeated the visual environment of the Cultural Revolution. Mao's image far outweighed a representation of a man; rather it presented 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

49 Wang Yi, "'Wanwu Shengzhang Kao Taiyang" yu Yuanshi Chongbai ("The Universe Growing Relies on the Sun" and the Primary Worships)", in Liu, Op. cit., 1996, p. 128.

(*biaozhunxiang*) of the chairman (Fig. 33) were produced,⁵⁰ and 900 million posters of Liu Chunhua's oil painting *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* were printed (Fig. 34). 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 (Fig. 35), or four for every man, woman and child in the nation were manufactured during the Cultural Revolution; the total variety of Mao badges has been estimated at over some 50,000.⁵¹ 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.⁵²

I argue that reflecting on Mao has been a continuous motif in Chinese contemporary art, with three different perspectives. First, the critical approach of representing Mao's image became an extreme challenge of rebellion for the artists, who had been under his power for many years. In the 1979 Star exhibition,⁵³ the *Ouxiang (Idol)* (Fig. 36), a wood sculpture by the self-taught artist Wang Keping, was the most striking work in the show — a daring pioneer work that 'violated' the sacred image of the communist chairman. The sculpture obviously was re-shaped from the image of Buddha, which originally came from India but generally was understood as a sign of Chinese traditional religion; Chinese viewers would immediately recognize 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)* (Fig. 37) — 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

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

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

52 For a detailed discussion on Mao badges, see Melissa Schrift and Keith Pilkey, 'Revolution Remembered: Chairman Mao Badges and Chinese Nationalist Ideology', *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 30, Fall 1996, pp. 169–97.

53 The first Star exhibition opened on 27 September 1979 and 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.

original intention of this series was to conclude the artist's "liquidation of humanist enthusiasm",⁵⁴ however, after it had been exhibited, Wang Guangyi suspected that "the onlookers, with hundredfold humanist enthusiasm, endowed Mao Zedong with even more humanist connotations" however, after it had been exhibited, Wang Guangyi suspected that "the onlookers, with hundredfold humanist enthusiasm, endowed Mao Zedong with even more humanist connotations".⁵⁵ 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, overlying Mao's sombre grey image. In his painting, the warning barrier required people to pause and to think before approaching this deity and forced an objective reconsideration.⁵⁶ The grid of thick red lines, on the one hand, could be a superficial symbol of imprisoning Mao or his autocratic era. On the other hand, the grid, as a measuring tool, could show how a man might possibly be 'magnified' and, simultaneously, bring this divine image to a frame rationally analysable and dissectible.

Starting at about the same time as Wang Guangyi, Yu Youhan concentrated on reshaping Mao's imagery for more than eight years. However, instead of defiantly criticizing the former leader, Yu's response can be analysed as the second approach — cynicism — and seems more relaxed. Born in the early 1940s, Yu Youhan experienced the Cultural Revolution while studying at Central Academy of Art and Craft in Beijing.⁵⁷ To him, Mao represented many things: a great leader of the nation, a symbol of China, the East, a depth of culture or a particular period of history. Sometimes Mao is avant-garde, sometimes conservative.⁵⁸ In Yu's series of paintings *Mao and His People* (Fig. 38), 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".⁵⁹ Similarly, floating flowers are applied to the work *Talking with Hunan Peasants* (*Yu Hunan Nongmin Tanhua*) (Fig. 39) derived from a photograph of Mao taken in the 1950s with a family of cheerful

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

55 Cited in Lü Peng and Yi Dan, *Zhongguo Xiandai Yishu Shi* (*A History of Contemporary Chinese Art*) 1979–1989. Changsha: Hunan Art Press, 1992, pp.166–8.

56 Smith, Karen, 'From Mao to Now: Wang Guangyi', in Wang Guangyi. Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2002, p. 10.

57 Central Academy of Art and Craft (*Zhongguo Gongyi Meishu Xueyuan*) is the former name of Institute of Art and Design, Qinghua University (*Qinghua Daxue Meishu Xueyuan*).

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

59 Ibid.

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-idealized relationship between the leader and the people".⁶⁰

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 (Figs. 40 and 41). 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 of contemporary life. A similar juxtaposition is created in Qi Zhilong's work *Xiaofei Xingxiang* (*Consumer Icons*) series in the early nineties (Figs. 42 and 43). 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 generalized and at the same time personalized way[s] to deconstruct ideological pressures".⁶¹

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 quite a different way. *Yanzhi* (rouge) is a hue of pink verging on fuchsia, originally, a particular colour associated with Chinese folk art, such as that seen in the Beijing Opera and the New Year painting. Li Shan's painting series *Rouge* is based on two of the chairman's most famous portraits, one taken 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 as 'cultural imagery' in his works rather than as 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.⁶² 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 (Fig. 44). This '*Yanzhi hua* (rouge-ization)' of Mao demonstrates the popularization of the Chairman's portrait and its transformation into a mass icon; the almost vulgar colour rouge eliminates and insults the sacred meaning of the image of Mao (Figs. 45 and 46).

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

61 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*). Hong Kong: Schoeni Art Gallery, 1994, p. 5.

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

Does Li Shan's portrayal of Mao have any sexual implication? 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 by the androgynous, feminized features assumed by the portrait in Li's series — introduces another recurrent trope of the literary recollections of the Cultural Revolution — that of sexual freedom and liberation experienced during this period. 'Gendering' Mao becomes Li's personal way to vulgarize the figure of the leader and bring this sublime object of desire to a more accessible level. The result of this practice is the projection of the artist's sexuality onto the icon, the screen of a feminized Mao.⁶³

However, the artist denied that he had attempted to feminize 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.⁶⁴ In fact, the artist might have to accept that he depicted a unisex face by the way of inevitably feminizing Mao, who actually is a saviour of the whole nation, more than simply a male. Because of Mao's political and apotheosized status, the feminized version of Mao had objectively constructed a subversive impact. In the meantime, the artist's private expression unconsciously had been revealed by depicting the sign of his own cultural background.

The third artistic approach on Mao is not necessarily by borrowing Mao's image, but by Mao's suit and Mao's book *Mao Zhuxi Yulu* (*The Quotations of Chairman Mao*), which have become the metonymies of Mao and which could invite more reflections on the era itself rather than Mao as a person. Actually the so-called Mao suit was first designed for Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen), the leader of the republican revolution. After 1949, the Mao suit quickly became the most popular dress, conveying both nationalistic and revolutionary significance. Without Mao's image, in Sui Jianguo's *Yibo* (*Legacy Mantle*) (Fig. 47), the Mao suit is sculptured and monumentalized more explicitly as a political symbol, but the inside is empty; 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".⁶⁵ The artist's 2003 work *Youshou* (*the Right Hand*) (Fig. 48) is an enlarged right arm up to some seven metres in length. The sleeve of the Mao suit has an

63 Dal Lago, *Op. cit.*, 1999, pp. 54–5.

64 *Ibid.*

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

immediate link with Mao's standard statue shown in public places during the Cultural Revolution, while the deathlike gesture of the bodiless hand demystifies the 'super instruction' of the Chairman.

The *Quotations of Chairman Mao Zedong*, the *Hong Baoshu* (*Precious Red Book*), has endured as one of the infamous images of the Cultural Revolution. It was produced in over fifty different languages and the number of copies printed is estimated to be as high as 10 billion.⁶⁶ Benewick and Donald argue that the *Precious Red Book* "was the narrative and visual instrument of the largest experiment in the politicisation of society ever undertaken".⁶⁷

To Xu Yihui, the *Precious Red Book* has been the concrete form of a spiritual resource (Fig. 49). More symbolically, the red books are well situated in the flowered altar (Fig. 50), while glazed ceramic has been a perfect medium to reinterpret the visual principle of '*hong guang liang*' — 'red, smooth, and luminescent' — in the Cultural Revolution. In order to produce canonical writings for the new political and religious authorities, the first Qin emperor reduced to ashes most ancient books that were no longer useful. During the Cultural Revolution, the destruction of millions of books led to the worship of a single book. On the one hand, burning Mao's book became another ritual ceremony, exterminating the era of Mao (Fig. 51); on the other hand, in the artist's words, "it could be seen as a kind of process of sublimation".⁶⁸

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 given the title of the Four Greats (*Sige Weida*), namely, the Great Teacher, the Great Leader, the Great Commander and the Great Helmsman. He transcended an image of a human being and became a god of the red sun to receive people's worship. In the post-Mao era, when the revolutionary fervour evaporated, could Mao easily be simplified and pulled down from his throne? As reflected in art, this man seems to have been even more complex and mystifying as a visual icon of the era.

66 Cited in Barmé, *Op. cit.*, 1996, p. 207.

67 Benewick, R. and S. Donald, "Treasuring the word: Mao, Depoliticization and Material Present", in Robert Benewick, Marc Blecher and Sarah Cook (eds.), *Asian Politics in Development*. London: Frank Cass, 2003, p. 65.

68 Interview with Xu Yihui, 28 October 2003, Beijing.

Conformity or Carnival

In China, “every city, town, or village must have a square for public gatherings”; Wu Hung argues, “big or small, a square is always conjoined with a platform built for the leaders to review the mass assemblies. A square thus becomes a legitimate place for people to meet their leaders, an indispensable joint between the high and the low, the brain and the body.”⁶⁹ Tiananmen Square became the most representative one within this kind of political space. It is hard to imagine Mao’s perception of viewing some 70,000 cheering people from Tiananmen for the first time in the 1949 founding ceremony. Although he ordered a new square to be built shortly afterwards — a square ‘big enough to hold an assembly of one billion’,⁷⁰ — the new square completed after his death could hold only [!] 600,000 people. We have revisited the image of Mao, so what was the identity of the people themselves in the Cultural Revolution, and how do artists approach representations of this collective identity? In particular, how does the Cultural Revolution influence contemporary art in reshaping the people’s collective identity?

Since the foundation of the People’s Republic in 1949, mass assemblies for either Maoism study or political parade and gathering have become familiar and prominent phenomena in people’s daily life and reached the climax during the Cultural Revolution. The word ‘collective’, then, far outweighs its literal meaning; instead, it has been interpreted productively based on various sociological and political backgrounds. Without the experience of the Cultural Revolution, one might have a completely different understanding of individuality and uniformity, dispersion and assembly, private and public, family and society. I argue that artists have been exploring these relationships and conflicts and representing the collective identity of ‘Chineseness’, with a pair of entirely different or almost contrasting approaches.

The concept of ‘family’ is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture as a small version of ‘collective’. 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)* (Fig. 52), which firstly appeared in 1993. There were 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. Those family photographs could have been rendered by hand after the studio shot to match the ‘standard’ aesthetics. During this

69 Wu Hung, *Remaking Beijing: Tiananmen Square and the Creation of a Political Space*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 23.

70 Cited in Wu Liangyong, ‘Tiananmen Guangchang de Guihua he Sheji (The Plan and Design of Tiananmen Square)’, in *Jianzhushi Lunwenji (Essays on Architectural History)*, Vol. 2, 1979, p. 26.

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, i.e. the conflict between *simi hua* (private) and *gonggong hua* (public)"; as the artist discusses, "family photography is obviously a private medium, but in China, it has been conformed to a 'public standard' within the society."⁷¹

In the *Big Family* series, typical costumes, such as Mao's suit, Red Guard uniform, navy striped top and red scarf (Figs. 53 and 54), are appropriated in the works to indicate the historical background and people's spiritual pursuance. However, the artist does not aim to represent any particular individual or family by depicting any personal characteristics; rather, the artist tries to show the collective similarity, images with a mono-appearance, and the reactions or the situations of individuals who were confronting the public social environment. As portraits, eyes in the *Big Family* are considered more vital than anything else, and they have been rendered in detail (Fig. 55). 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, that is, staring blankly)".⁷² The light falling on the faces like birthmarks emphasizes the absurdity of the impersonal expressionlessness behind the generation's revolutionary fervour and captures the disappearance of individuality, while the inevitable colour red, which appears reasonably or unreasonably, links comrades' spirits and defines themselves in the context of national collectivization.

The traditional family model will have been changed inevitably by the one-child policy, which has been referred as a 'no-other-solution solution' because of China's huge population and which generated millions of the so-called standard families. As the first photographic work of Wang Jinsong in 1996, *Biaozhun Jiating* (*Standard Family*) (Fig. 56) comprises two hundred photographs of one-child families. Each of them with its own appearance and personality is seen as the most basic and ordinary element to construct China's whole society. However, the repetition of those families in this monotonic module enlarges the visual impact of the work and at the same time "diminishes the significance of independence of each family and ignores any individual story behind people". The artist comments, "The reality of China is a great system of unification where the appearance of collective dominates in the society in the forms of various movements, either political or economical, and these visual memories and reflections have been offering me vocabularies for my works."⁷³

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

72 Ibid.

73 Interview with Wang Jinsong, 25 March 2006, Beijing.

Artist Bai Yiluo himself worked in a photograph studio for three years, taking identity photos for his clients. People came to the studio with different appearances and social status and, for a normal photograph left a similar impression in the exposure. An identity photo (*zhengjian zhao*, passport photo), however, would have to be presented to the public without all the privacy of a portrait. Therefore, facing the camera or, rather, facing the eventual public, one would conform oneself consciously or unconsciously to 'standard' aesthetics, as an ordinary individual among the social collective.

Three years' work experience in the photograph studio offered Bai Yiluo a large collection of identity photos of various people — including workers, peasants, soldiers, students and intellectuals — to execute his project *People (Renmin)* (Fig. 57). In 2001, 3,600 small-size photographs were sewn together with threads into a 15 square metre sheet, which constructed a surprisingly heroic pattern. The image of each individual perhaps is no longer important but collectively represents "their nationality, social background and their living environment."⁷⁴ The people's relationships are visualized and concretized by the threads woven between the photographs, while the rubbed texture implies a mysterious net, covering, caring and connecting the individuals within the collective community.

Growing up in Henan province at the commencement of the Cultural Revolution, Zhuang Hui often travelled around with his photographer father who utilized a technique made popular during the early 1900s, that involved a 180 degrees rotational lens camera to take group photos. It was an amazing experience for the child to understand a camera that could catch such a large number of people with a single click, or in other words, identify the image of assemblies, a significant visual presentation of the era.⁷⁵

In Zhuang Hui's photograph series *Jiti Zhao (Group Photo)* in 1997, the groups that were organized and photographed were sometimes made up of more than 600 persons. The concept of conformability is reflected explicitly not only by the photographic work itself, but also by the execution of the art practice. Zhuang Hui cleverly chooses typical examples of any civil society's institutional framework— organizations of school, work (Fig. 58), public security (Fig. 59) and village residence (Fig. 60) — to preserve this disappearing visual legacy of conformity and places these against the double backdrops of Mao's ideology and China's current economic reformation. 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.

74 Interview with Bai Yiluo, 28 May 2005, Beijing.

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

The question of subject in Zhuang Hui's portraits is even further complicated by his own presence. The answer seems neither to lie 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 merge."⁷⁶

This approach could also include Shao Yinong and Mu Chen's photographic work *Family Register (Jiapu)* (Fig. 61). 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 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 minimize 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, the conformity of people's collective 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!)* (Fig. 62), 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 and move as a team but in a somewhat hysterical way (Fig. 63). 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 a discontinuous dream, which might be true, but would only happen within a fleeting moment just before the sun rises."⁷⁷

The performance with dream-like excitement actually reminds us of the assemblies in Tiananmen Square during the Cultural Revolution. When Mao ascended Tiananmen for eight times to inspect his Red Guards in the summer of 1966, the fanatical energy behind conformity was exhaustively expressed. "At five o'clock in the morning,

76 Borysevicz, Mathieu, 'Zhuang Hui', in John Clark (ed.), *Chinese Art at the End of the Millennium*. Hong Kong: New Art Media, 2000, p. 252.

77 Artist statement. Text provided by Yang Fudong.

18 August 1966", as the *People's Daily* records, "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 Gate 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...'."78 This excitement had been presented throughout all the mass assemblies of celebrations for national anniversaries or Mao's new instructions (Fig. 64). 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."⁷⁹ The visual environment of the cult of Mao did not build a solemn religious atmosphere. Instead, it presented a liveliness and boisterousness consistent with Chinese traditional festivities (Fig. 65), or in other words, carnivals with nationalistic excitement liberated or transformed from conformity but, at the same time, within conformity.

Artist Liu Dahong recalled, "I was frequently awakened during the nights by the loudspeakers celebrating a revolutionary success. People would have movements for the revolution every single day and always keep themselves in a state of hysteric excitement."⁸⁰ The artist's two-panel painting *Shuangcheng Ji* (*A Tale of Two Cities*) (Fig. 66) is one example demonstrating this particular feature of the Cultural Revolution. The visual phenomenon, including big slogans, Mao's portraits, mass parades, Red Guard performances, and even the metaphors of the Great Helmsman were appropriated, reinterpreted and recomposed in a dramatic and almost surrealistic way. Another monumental work *Jitan* (*Sacrificial Altar*) (Figs. 67 and 68) 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, Vice Chairman Lin Biao, while 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 Operas (*Yangban Xi*) and revolutionary representatives within a fairy tale-like scene that offers an absurd performance. As for folk festivals, people dressed in a variety of minority group costumes

78 '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.

79 Durkheim, Emile, translated by Fields, Karen E., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. London: The Free Press, 1995, pp. 218-28.

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

to fabricate the prosperity of Mao's era and represent the social environment of mass movement, a continuous carnival or, in Durkheim's term, the "collective effervescence".⁸¹

The collective in Tiananmen Square was depicted differently in Yue Minjun's 1993 painting *Dakuangxi (Great Joy)* (Fig. 69), in which people are lined up, having the same smirking face and frantic gesture. The lines of collective are to present a kind of "solidified and orderly force", which had been purposely embedded into the artist's childhood memory during the endless collective celebrations and parades.⁸² Later in the same year, the artist began to put his own image into the work and sometimes duplicate it to create a crowd effect. While his self-image is constantly repeated, the power of an individual is then exaggerated by the increase in quantity and the generation of collective. For example, in his later works, such as *Taiyang (the Sun)* (Fig. 70) in 2000 and *Maihuai Haoqing (Lofty Sentiment)* (Fig. 71) in 1999, either the red sun or the red sea of flags in the background were employed as a historical and ideological hint, while the hectic laughter infinitely duplicated became a dominant sign of fanaticism. In Yue Minjun's 2003 work *Langman Zhuyi he Xianshi Zhuyi Yanjiu (Romanticism and Realism Study)* (Fig. 72), the beaming collective dashes out from the two dimensional canvas to replace the socialist group statues. The more carefully the original positions and poses of the statues were imitated by the artist, the more cynically the revolutionary ideology and the power from the heroic collective of worker-peasant-soldier are appropriated, represented and then transformed or, indeed, reverted into a carnival.

Yue Minjun's recent *Renshou Zhijian (Between Men and Beasts)* (Fig. 73) can be seen as a further reflection of this revolutionary fervour carried by the people's collective during the Cultural Revolution. The self-image has been even more plasticized with a pair of horns and raised hands moving with different unknown gestures. Had those arms been lifted high some forty years ago for the excitement? Are those images only referring to the artist himself? As outsiders, we could suddenly reveal the terror hidden behind the manic grin.

The same kind of carnival excitement can be found 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's Gericault in 1819. It commemorates the loss of the French government frigate *La Méduse* and the tragic fate of its passengers and crew.⁸³ On one level, Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* looks like a neo-classical history

81 Durkheim, Op. cit., 1995, pp. 218–28.

82 Interview with Yue Minjun, 24 March 2006, Beijing.

83 It is recorded as a tragic story. When the ship *La Méduse* sank at sea, its captain and senior officers took the suitable lifeboats and consigned the other 150 persons to a makeshift raft, from which only fifteen survived.

painting; but it is also highly subversive, not depicting 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 for no good reason. However, by understanding the sadness of this background, Hu's skilful digital hands somehow turned the original into a raft of carnival (Figs. 74 and 75). It carries both revolutionaries and contemporaries, both Maoism and current ideologies from China's market economy, and is steered without direction.

The sails in Hu Jieming's raft are transformed from the red flags, which played an important role during the Cultural Revolution, 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 says, 'quanguo shangxia yipian hong (the whole country awash in red)'. It was virtually a red sea. I felt it came as a huge red tide. I was extremely excited and could not help following it."⁸⁴ Zhou Hongxiang's *Red Flag Flies* was finished in 2002 (Fig. 76). 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 authorizing the 'correct' direction, which is stated in 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, and each of the more than one hundred actors appears only once in the video. The video reinforces the centralization of political power and, at the same time, submerges 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."⁸⁵ The collective unconsciousness is more subtly revealed by Yang Zhenzhong in his *Spring Story* (Fig. 77), a video piece inspired by Deng Xiaoping's *Southern Campaign Speech* (*Nansun Jianghua*) in 1992. The execution of the work involves 1,500 workers from the newly built Siemens factory in Shanghai. Each individual has a word or a phrase from Deng's speech to enunciate in the original order so that it ostensibly makes sense as it was intended. "The everyday lives of these people are spent concentrated on specific tasks, like many small jigsaw pieces adding up to a bigger picture of manufacturing achievement, as the small utterances amount to the articulation of some overarching vision. Yang's editing has the relentless mechanical quality of factory activity", as Jonathan Watkins discusses; "through his collaboration

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

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

with the Siemens employees, Yang raises intriguing questions about the role of the individual, and the possibility of individualism, now in a country encouraging rampant foreign (capitalist) investment, but still communist at heart".⁸⁶

In Beijing, Miao Xiaochun uses his camera to capture the neo-collectivization that can be seen as a continuance of the past assemblies. "If the collective fanaticism was political during the Cultural Revolution, it then turns to be economical after the Open-door policy". For example, "everyone would have a little red book in hand. But today, it has been replaced by a mobile handset, which now becomes an indispensable link between 'individual' and 'collective'" (Fig. 78). The artist continues that "one might feel extremely lost, either being abandoned by the revolutionary movement in the past, or today, lagging behind the economical development epitomized by those fashionable electronic devices."⁸⁷ In the giant photograph *Qing (Celebration)* (Fig. 79), Miao Xiaochun's digital skill secretly maximized the number of people who are participating in an estate business opening ceremony at Soho Beijing and created an enormous celebratory collective. In the recent work *Chao (Tide)* (Fig. 80), his hard work with computer has been subtly hidden to present an 'untouched' reality of busy Beijing, where individuals are drowned in the moving crowds and traffic or, indeed, in the image of collective with those unknown passing around and those known promoted visually in large scales.

Even in a remote place, such as the Old Silk Road on the north side of the Qilian Mountain, a minority group (Sunan Guyu Nation) can demonstrate a beautiful but fabricated identity of collective. Although the team members in Wang Chuan's *Shaoshu Jiti (Minority Collective)* (Fig. 81) are genuine minorities, the costumes purposefully are borrowed from their past rather than from what is worn today. This instant visual presentation is backed up or, in fact, divulged by the desolate geographical environment to offer an 'authentic' cultural mores of the minority in a collective manner as well as to respond to the curiosity of visitors and the development of the tourist industry.

If public loudspeakers, big-character slogans, and people's gesturing and shouting demonstrated the forceful inculcation through various media during the Cultural Revolution, what has stimulated a collective and identical excitement and fostered another carnival in today's China? In the revolutionary assemblies, 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 a collective life that transported

86 Watkins, Jonathan, 'Medium and Message', in *Yang Zhenzhong*, exhibition catalogue, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, 2006.

87 Interview with Miao Xiaochun, 22 March 2006, Beijing.

individuals beyond themselves. This carnivalesque atmosphere seems to be inherited from the revolutionary era to China's contemporary society, but at the same time, is transformed by different agendas, objectives and beliefs.

Burden or Legacy

The impact of the Cultural Revolution, either dominantly or implicitly, has been demonstrated in visual work through a variety of artistic approaches. Artists either have been depicting the Cultural Revolution itself with various personal experiences or reinterpreting the era by appropriating some identifiable elements as visual vocabularies. Evaluating the various ways of appropriation in the art practice will offer us further understanding of the artists' inspirations and motivations and, more importantly, the significance of the visual legacy or ponderousness of the burden from the Cultural Revolution.

In the 1994 performance *Jiehuo (Borrow a Light)*, Wu Shanzhuan borrowed a light from a security guard for his cigarette. Wu considers artists, in a sense, to be borrowers: "they borrow things but never return them, or borrow things, such as a light, that never need to be returned."⁸⁸ However, the questions for those borrowers are: what do you 'borrow' and how do you 'borrow'? The wit of the conscious appropriation and the subtlety of utilizing the visual vocabulary are, methodologically, of vital importance in the representation. However, to some, their unawareness of borrowing could be discovered for a different analysis.

In the arena of Chinese contemporary art after the Cultural Revolution, innovation of visual language was sought desperately by the artists to create a shortcut to distinguish themselves as the avant-garde from the 'conservatives'. Wu Shanzhuan discusses, "it is just like *huashan lunjian* (swordplay, or more generally, martial arts competition at Hua Mountain). Everyone at that moment tried to invent a unique skill to take advantage during the competition. I fortunately found the big-character poster as the strongest visual language of Chinese socialist art, and it is my invention of unique skill."⁸⁹ At the same time, Yu Youhan (Fig. 82) and Li Shan appropriated Mao as an iconographical imagery in their works, while Qi Zhilong has been in possession of the Red Guard for many of his large paintings (Fig. 83).

⁸⁸ Interview with Wu Shanzhuan, 12 December 2003, Hong Kong.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Following the famous series *Mao Zedong*, Wang Guangyi also appropriated the great criticism images of the Cultural Revolution in the series *Da Pipan* (*Great Criticism*) (Fig. 84) that began in 1990. In these works, the artist deconstructs the language of symbols: slogans and images from the worker-peasant-soldier movements of the Cultural Revolution are juxtaposed with the logos of Coca-Cola, Marlboro, Cadbury and other famous consumer brands imported from abroad. This seemingly arbitrary combination of political and commercial symbols creates a humorous and absurd effect that carries with it a biting satire of both the ideology of the Mao era and the blind craze for the Western consumer products prevalent in today's China.

Sui Jianguo's *Legacy Mantle* (Fig. 85) distanced itself from art forms that parodied, ridiculed, criticized or satirized 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, by avoiding any personal or artistic rendering."⁹⁰ In contrast with a more expressionistic mood, Mao Xuhui started his painting series *Jiazhang* (*The Parent*) (Fig. 86) in 1989. Without any realistic hint, one might ask who is the parent. But perhaps there is no need to have a certain 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* has been a visual record of the artist's reflection on the complexity of politics, autocratic power and the structure of the social system in China. *Quanli de Cihui* (*The Vocabulary of Power*) (Fig. 87) is a conclusion of the painting series, and the visual vocabularies manifest and reinforce the orthodox authority. Rather than referencing directly any original image from the Cultural Revolution, Mao Xuhui sees the centralized political power as the core of the culture, reflects at an ideological level 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 a symbol in my mind".⁹¹

In Liu Dahong's surreal drama and Hu Jieming's *Raft*, one can easily recognize those familiar images from the Cultural Revolution, while Zhang Xiaogang and Zhuang Hui's intension seems more implicit. They are not interested in visual signs of the Cultural Revolution, rather, they revisit their personal experiences, appropriating conformable poses and revealing the human conditions of the era. Similarly, Qiu Zhijie inherits the revolutionary gestures in his photograph series *Hao* (*Fine*) (Fig. 88). The revolutionary ideals of the Mao era are easily recalled from the affected or, in the artist's words, the "fine standard"⁹² gestures, while the past faith is mocked in a contemporary context.

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

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

92 Interview with Qiu Zhijie, 26 February 2000, Beijing.

From the late 1980s, mainland China witnessed at first a fitful then a nationwide revival of interest in Mao Zedong.⁹³ This phenomenon, which is termed '*Maore* (Mao-craze)', reflects people's nostalgia not only for Mao himself but also his era. Contemporary art obviously is a participant in the phenomenon, where artists tried to appropriate the past 'god' to satirize and criticize the current reality.⁹⁴ When the former leader and the revolutionary ideal were reshaped with popular and cynical vocabularies in a contemporary context, the original sacred significance was deconstructed on the one hand. On the other hand, in a sense, the Maoist ideology, people's enthusiasm and the communist Utopia of the era have been even more mystifying to new generations. Shao Yinong and Mu Chen's *Assembly Hall* and Wang Tong's *Vestiges of the Cultural Revolution* (Fig. 89) quietly present a visual documentation that offers a space for reflections upon the performance at the political events. In architecture design, the revolutionary spirit of the Cultural Revolution and the common memory of the excitement can be seen in today's nightclub, *Hongse Niandai (The Red Era)* (Fig. 90). The designer Liu Jiakun was trying to find some similarities between the revolutionary rebellion and the conceptions of today's new generation, and 'youth', 'passion' and 'violence' became the keywords throughout the design process to bridge the revolutionary legacy to the popular culture of today's youth life.⁹⁵

The Chinese Cultural Revolution, as a political movement, was a disaster for the country. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a different assessment might be possible. 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 the Chinese culture. Chinese contemporary art has developed dramatically since the end of the Cultural Revolution. It can be considered as a visual medium for personal response and, at the same time, as an outcome, including artists and their art, of the revolution. As Li Shan states, "I knew Mao since I was in kindergarten, where I learned my first song, *The East is Red*, and the very first sentence, 'long live Chairman Mao'. Without Mao, who am I? I am meaningless; without Mao in my art, I would feel rather empty."⁹⁶ Indeed, without this particular reference, 'a great revolution that touches people to their very souls', one would have seen a completely different platform of contemporary art practice in China. The influence that an artist received from the experience can be very concrete to every single practice, including the style, the technical skills, the media and the manner of

93 Barmé, *Op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 4–5.

94 Li Xianting, cited in Lü Peng, *Zhongguo Dangdai Yishu Shi (A History of Contemporary Chinese Art): 1990–1999*. Changsha: Hunan Fine Arts Publishing House, 2000, pp. 159–60.

95 Interview with Liu Jiakun, 3 November 2003, Chengdu.

96 Interview with Li Shan, 4 October 2000, Shanghai.

execution. Xu Bing argues, “if one tries to distinguish contemporary art in mainland China from that in Hong Kong, Taiwan or other regions, the baptism of the Cultural Revolution would be the key.”⁹⁷

It is now four entire decades since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. The next generation might only be able to read the movement as a ‘story’ cited in textbooks. If the Cultural Revolution is simply a burden, one day, people eventually would be relieved of it. However, the Cultural Revolution has offered something more, and its influence has been embedded fully in contemporary Chinese culture. In the Post-Mao era, Chinese art has been developed at large in the international platform; through the lens of those sampled representative artists, we see a variety of reflections, reinterpretations and redefinitions of the Cultural Revolution. From a contemporary perspective, rather than a ‘desert’, the Cultural Revolution can be seen as a cultural complex and, indeed, a significant visual legacy giving birth to the new Chinese art in the context of today’s art world.

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