Mao and “Obamao”:
Aesthetics and Politics in the
Cultural Revolution and its Aftermath

by

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ i
Preface................................................................................................................................. ii
Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1
Chapter One: An Aesthetic Way of Life................................................................. 17
Chapter Two: Constructing the Sublime................................................................. 40
Chapter Three: Discursive Spaces for New Meanings
   I. Globalization and Commodification................. 63
   II. The Shanghai Propaganda Art Center............ 73
   III. Obamao.............................................................. 91
Conclusion....................................................................................................................... 106
List of Illustrations...................................................................................................... 112
Works Cited.................................................................................................................... 114
Figure 1: My “Obamao” wallet, purchased in 2013.
Figure 2: My t-shirt from The Shanghai Propaganda Art Center, purchased in 2013.
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Preface

As a Chinese American who splits time between the two countries, fluidly navigating the stark differences in both cultural contexts is a must. It gives way to issues that beg for an anthropological lens. In China, my mind is always in investigative mode, fascinated with the things I encounter in everyday life. From issues of authenticity and commodification in malls of fake products, to analyzing littering through Mary Douglas’ ideas of hygiene and order, to using gift giving and reciprocity to understand the Chinese New Year tradition of hongbao (red money packets) exchange, I find myself always pairing the theories I learn in anthropology class with experiences in China that in turn, elucidate and complicate them.

The contents of this thesis project emerged from a lifetime of summers and Chinese New Years spent in China with family and friends, but arose after I took a modern Chinese history class with Professor Schwarz in the spring of my sophomore year at Wesleyan. I began to understand the enormity of what I had not known about China, which was embarrassingly too much. The lectures that especially affected me were about the Cultural Revolution: All I had known previously was that it was a very tragic and terrible time, and that no one in China liked to talk about it much. As we learned about the chaotic revolutionary fervor that took over all facets of Chinese society, led by Mao Zedong to achieve his dream of a Communist society, I began to comprehend the extent of its psychological harm. In those “ten years of madness” between 1966 and 1976 (Mittler 2012), neighbors beat each other to death on the
street, students publicly put their teachers on trial, entire parts of Chinese culture that were labelled as “anti-revolutionary” and “bourgeois” were destroyed. I still remember the knot in my stomach after reading an assigned article on a now elderly Red Guard (the militant university and high school students who attacked people thought to be counter-revolutionaries, that is, to hold beliefs contrary to Mao’s ideals) lamenting how he readily testified against his mother, contributing to her death. The feeling of shame and sadness was almost too much to bear, and it only added more pressure to the question: How could all of this have happened?

The newly gained historical knowledge began to saturate and color my understanding of modern day China. It made sense why the Cultural Revolution was such a taboo to talk about; according to my cousin Lingzhi, the whole period was glossed over as a “mistake” in her Chinese high school history class. But frustratingly at the same time, it didn’t make sense at all, given that the violence and fanaticism only happened forty years ago. The anthropologist in me stirred: In subsequent visits, I began to notice some features of Chinese society in louder ways, even with the changes Westernization has brought about at the surface. Traces of Mao’s time revealed themselves. Billboard advertisements with happy smiling families proclaiming harmonious living and prosperity used familiar propaganda aesthetics and slogans to sell units in new apartment complexes. In contrast, communistic living promoted under Mao still informed the way my grandparents’ neighborhood is set up today. Recounted memories, some happy, some sad, of living in poverty from my grandparents and mother began to mean more than just recollections of “bad times.”
They had been the effects of Mao’s policies. With a keen eye, I began to fit the details of my family’s experience within a historical logic.

Suddenly, Mao Zedong, founder of the People’s Republic of China, totalitarian ruler, charismatic “man of the people,” poet, philosopher, and the person who led China into one of its most chaotic periods, began to pop up everywhere. The presence that had been so ordinary suddenly stood out, strange and slightly eerie. In an oil painting, he looms over Tiananmen Square; he dangles on the red lanyards that hang from taxi drivers’ mirrors, he even stares down at me from the walls of the security office of my apartment complex. Since the Communist Party is still in power in China, people feel inclined to legitimate and uphold their founder, but, given the radical turn toward a market economy, it seemed perplexing how visible he remained in everyday life.

I also began to realize how much he had been present in past summers in China. It became apparent that the Chinese have a complex relationship with Mao today and that, while ubiquitous, much of the narrative about Mao is controlled by the state. A movie that Lingzhi and I reluctantly went to see one day because our preferred movie was sold out, turned out to be “The Founding of a Party,” a state production to celebrate the 90th anniversary of the Communist Party, with a youthful Mao in the leading role. We were two of only a handful of viewers in the audience despite the heavily star-studded cast of Chinese celebrities in the film. With Lingzhi, I also visited Mao Zedong’s high school (coincidentally, his hometown is where my mother is from) that now serves as a museum memorializing his early life. In the beautiful, well-preserved school, I was able to sit at his former desk, peer into the well
where he got the water for his morning showers, and even see the sketches of the stretches and exercises he would do between classes. I was startled by how intimately close to him this experience made me feel.

That same summer, Lingzhi and I visited the National Museum of China in Beijing. In the permanent exhibition room, two large oil paintings hung, both entitled *The Founding of the Nation*. At first glance, they are the exact same painting: Mao is shown giving a speech behind a podium overlooking a crowded Tiananmen Square, a group of state leaders clustered around him. But as my cousin pointed out, there is a man in a dark blue suit absent in one of the paintings. In his place is a potted chrysanthemum plant. Intrigued, I did some research, only to find out that there are eight versions of the painting altogether, each one ordered after a political purge. In each version a leader was taken out—one of them was even erased because of his opposition to Mao’s new marriage. The eighth version of the painting is now the official one, copies of which are available for purchase from tourist vendors in front of Tiananmen Square. I left the museum thinking about the reasons why a painting might have been made to be commensurate with power and representation during Mao’s regime, ordered to be repainted over and over again in order to rewrite official history and reflect the party line.

What also became impossible for me to ignore was how present Mao was even outside the state-controlled narrative. As I shopped, went to tourist markets, and visited modern art districts like Beijing’s 798 zone, I saw Mao’s face in images that messed with it. Artists and producers appropriated propaganda aesthetics to create new artworks and commodities. I became a consumer of these commodities.
Somehow Mao’s image fit in the rapid, consumer-driven transformation in China. While not many people were talking openly about the Cultural Revolution, a sort of dialogue had begun with the visuals about the past, prominently the official Mao portrait.

Images carry a particularly strong power in China due to their elusive meanings, which can slip from government censors that otherwise track and delete certain words in blog posts and social media. To protest the detention of Liu Xiaobo in 2008 and his inability to attend his own Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Norway, a picture of an empty chair started trending on the microblogging site Weibo. Similarly, I started thinking about the proliferation of reinvented Cultural Revolution and Maoist images as creating a sort of dialogue with the past, without words. What did it mean for these images, some silly, some ironic, to exist alongside the legitimated, state-sponsored representation of Mao? What do these images illuminate about the complex relationship people have with traumatic history, through the surprising ways the propaganda visuals are engaged with and manipulated? This thesis is my attempt to theorize and understand the aesthetic and political entanglements around me.
Introduction

There is a shirt in my closet that I treat differently from the rest. To some, the brightly colored image of military-clad women in arabesque position doesn’t elicit any specific reaction other than the statement that it is a “cool shirt.” For those who experienced the Cultural Revolution or know its legacy, however, the famous still from the *Red Detachment of Women*, one of the period’s eight propagandistic plays, requires them to face a piece of complex cultural memory.

I also have a coin purse, bought in the tourist markets of Beijing, that makes me chuckle: It’s Obama’s face in Mao Zedong’s Communist garb, with the words “More money no problem” written underneath. The result—known in the markets as “Obamao”—is a visual mash up of twentieth-century Chinese propaganda aesthetics and Obama’s well-known face.

While I purchased these two items myself, I have been hesitant to use them in China, especially the shirt. When I am there, I am deeply self-conscious of the potentially loaded meanings of the *Red Detachment of Women* image. I would be a Chinese American who, having spent most of her life abroad, is wearing a piece of clothing that modernizes and commoditizes what for many is a painful lived experience that I will never truly understand. I only wear it in the United States, in contexts where I don’t think anyone will understand it, like my dance class. Why would I force anyone to confront an image from one of the most tragic periods in
Chinese history, in which civil war and famine caused the death of 30 million people and the suffering of countless others?

My concern with the possible impact of these images, however, is in the tension of the proliferation of commodities that reuse Maoist propaganda art, such as those abound in the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center and Beijing tourist markets. According to Barbara Mittler in *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*, there exists in contemporary China an entire sphere of Maoist propaganda art that has been actively reconceived for decades:

It appears in the form of jubilee editions and Karaoke versions of the infamous model works [the only eight plays of the period, commissioned by Mao Zedong’s wife Jiang Qing], the eighteen ballets, operas, and symphonic works canonized during the Cultural Revolution; it appears in rock and pop versions of revolutionary songs in praise of Mao; it can take the form of trendy t-shirts, watches, Ping-Pong paddles, mousepads, and even porcelain... Both inside and outside the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Maoist propaganda from the Cultural Revolution sells well across generational and class lines. (Mittler 2012: 8)

I have lived and worked in Beijing and Shanghai for months at a time and have spent many school breaks with family in Wuxi and Changsha. In China, I am both tourist and native. I am often treated like a Westerner by family and friends and taken to famous tourist sites, but my proficient Chinese also allows me to hang out with my cousins and their friends, overhear conversations between my uncles and aunts, and go to the wet market in the early mornings with my grandmother. The time I have spent walking, observing, sensing, and listening in China has made me recognize that attitudes and feelings about Mao and the Cultural Revolution are not clear-cut in the slightest. My assumptions about historical trauma and its effects on
people were proven false by the reality of Beijing’s modern art scene, tourist vendors, and taxi drivers who chose to hang Mao trinkets from their taxicab mirrors. For a country whose government represses discourse on the Cultural Revolution and censors many related articles online, the amount of Maoist propaganda art that exists and circulates in the public sphere, as commodities and as works of art, reveals that despite the party line, a set of attitudes different from those promoted by the state has developed among the Chinese public. A large oil painting of Mao Zedong hangs above Tiananmen Square, the heavily guarded political center of Beijing, but just a few miles away his official image is cut, reassembled, and fogged up in artworks that break from the sacred keep of his portrait. This thesis is motivated by these contradictions.

In this thesis, then, I explore the meanings these objects reveal in people’s negotiations with the past. The visuals of the Cultural Revolution, from Mao portraits to images of propagandist plays, are not only in today’s public sphere, but they are alive in that they are played with and manipulated creatively by artists and merchants alike. Are the intentions behind these manipulations subversive? Does the art show attachment to the past or an individualized break from it and the party line?

The Sublime

Wang Ban, who lived through the Cultural Revolution, writes the following in his conclusion to his book *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth Century China*: “Like many people of my generation, I have become tired of the sublime and the grandiose…Any mention of something sublime or chonggao
more often than not produces skepticism, ridicule, and even disgust” (1997: 263). So ends his thorough and interdisciplinary investigation into the aesthetic discourse of the sublime. His aim is to “illuminate the relations between individual and society, between submission and domination, between governing imperatives and unconscious desire” (1997:8) in the process of identity formation of the person in modern Chinese history. Drawing upon his personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution, notably how he was moved by a propagandistic film Spring Sprouts, Ban takes a critical look at poetry, literature, and cinema to examine how twentieth century Chinese politics was “couched in an aesthetic vocabulary and rendered into an aesthetic experience” (1997:7). By “aesthetic experience,” however, he also refers to life outside of created art: aesthetic formations and symbolic expressions in which regular people experienced everyday life, from the routine contemplation of Mao’s portrait hanging in their living room walls to the spectacle of rallies and parades. The consequence of the Cultural Revolution was that while “millions of souls indeed were shocked, criticized, deluded, tormented, and traumatized; many others were elated, thrilled, enthused, and aggrandized” (1997: 195) by the experience of aesthetic forms intertwined with politics.

What is useful about Ban’s work is how closely it examines the interplay between the aesthetic and the political while drawing upon ideas from both Western and Chinese aestheticians and cultural theorists to fashion a concept of “the sublime” that is particular to the Chinese context. While notable Chinese theorists such as Wang Guowei and Li Zehou certainly converse with Immanuel Kant, Edmund Burke, and the Frankfurt School in their work, Ban distances himself from Western theory as
“aesthetic theory, even in its most pure form and ethereal moment, is often tempered by historical context and invested with ideological motives” (1997: 20). In the historical context of the Cultural Revolution, the sublime was experienced through a subjectivity that emerged from the trajectory of Mao’s historical materialism, of which he controlled. The state employed the otherwise politically ambivalent category of “the aesthetic” to fasten itself onto power and to secure the loyalties of their subjects, which in Ban’s view, exhorted that “the supreme directives of the great leader Mao Zedong should be printed in our brains, dissolved in our blood and materialized in our actions” (1997: 12). In this thesis, I take inspiration from Ban’s approach to construct a definition of the sublime that is specifically attuned to the Chinese context, exploring the historical relationship between man and nature. I will look at specific paintings and the ways they were employed by the government, and examine how bureaucratic institutions, such as the Black Painting Exhibitions, attempted to control aesthetic taste for political motives.

This thesis is also motivated by Ban’s assertion that “the pendulum has swung, in the post-Mao era, toward a cultural tendency to demolish the ideals of the sublime” (1997:14). Ban analyzes the counter-discourse that emerged in the post-1980s New Wave Fiction movement, in which writers like Yu Hua and Can Xue “wreak havoc with the grand narrative…employing the aesthetic strategies of the grotesque, the fantastic, and the schizophrenic” (1997:15). Ban argues that this counter-discourse was at the heart of these writers’ “desublimation project.” I wish to apply his notion of “desublimation” to try to explain what is happening in images like “Obamao” and other commodities that appropriate Cultural Revolution aesthetics. How
desublimation works in these humorous and kitschy visuals is quite different from literary texts, and I use a number of other theories on parody and the absurd, such as Minka Valjakka’s and Francesca Dal Lago’s, to help understand the visual use of parody and its relation to desublimation. While he does address the sublime in certain paintings and works of art during the Cultural Revolution that left a particularly strong aesthetic impression, he does not discuss their fate after the post-Mao years. As I show in this thesis, they are still very much in circulation in the public sphere and a source of artistic inspiration and manipulation. Along the lines of Ban’s argument, I ask: Are these creative manipulations part of a counter-discourse to the sublime?

**A Time of Learning and Discovery**

Where I lack in information from Ban’s book about the Cultural Revolution’s effect on contemporary art and commodification in China, I find in abundance in Barbara Mittler’s book. Her work on present-time Cultural Revolution culture in China explores the contradictory phenomenon of the longevity of that period’s propaganda art as one “that was (and is) in practice and experience liked and enjoyed by many” (Mittler 2012:7). The book is organized into three sections: MaoMusic (revolutionary songs), MaoSpeak (literary aspects), and MaoArt. To look at the function and the impact of propaganda art, each section has two chapters, one dealing with the past and one with the present. She traces the origin of some of the most popular official Mao portraits, such as “Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan,” but also reveals how unofficial propaganda and art was part of everyday life even during the Cultural Revolution. People would collaborate on art murals together and, in addition
to the mass reproduction of posters, would repaint oils and create other visuals by hand to put up in their homes and use in public events such as marches and processions (2012: 295). State-driven commoditization of these visuals also produced items like teacups and cushions (2012: 261) that made their way into the private homes of ordinary people.

Based on oral history interviews conducted with musicians, artists, and other individuals who participated in artistic activities at the time, Mittler sheds light on the reasons propaganda art of that difficult and even violent historical period is not rejected outright. For many artists and composers, the state’s support of their work, even if within strict limits, was experienced as a chance to really delve into their craft, with the government encouraging people to revive old traditions such as Chinese folk music and calligraphy, albeit to serve the propaganda machine. An artist born in 1954 (all Mittler’s interviewees are anonymous) stated: “Sure, I would have painted and drawn as long as I live, but without the propaganda troupes, many of us would not have turned into artists. The propaganda troupes brought art and artists into people’s consciousness” (2012: 9). Most of the music composers that Mittler interviewed described the Cultural Revolution “not as a time of censorship and restrictions but of learning and discovery” (2012: 9). Mittler’s analysis of Cultural Revolution visuals in Part Three of her book shows that people’s reaction to propaganda art during this period was also complex: Neither were they completely brainwashed and manipulated nor were the government’s directives always resisted or negated.

The impact of re-appropriated propaganda art today is definitely powerful, but the extent to which people feel attracted or repulsed by it, or both, is hard to say.
A photographer, born in 1960, comments on the appropriation of songs and Mao portraits:

I don’t think those remakes of revolutionary songs, using the old words but new music and melodies, even rock and all that, are meant to be critical. Their meanings are multiple. They open up new levels of understanding. For the people who lived through this time, these songs and melodies are part of their youth, but even for them, it can also be a little bit critical, or poking fun to listen to them now. It is not really that serious. You could compare it to the Mao portraits: there are so many funny ones, Mao without hair, for example. It is really impossible to know exactly what they mean, though. (Mittler, 2012:1)

While it may indeed be impossible to know exactly what the new Mao portraits mean, my objective in this thesis project is to build on the work of Ban and Mittler to understand them a little better. The photographer quoted above expounds on the messy and slippery “multiple meanings” of the appropriated aesthetics: funny, critical, poking fun, not serious. In this thesis, I ask specifically about the Obamao phenomenon and about the commodities at the Shanghai Propaganda Center: What new meanings about the legacy of Mao and the Cultural Revolution can we illuminate by relying on what Ban has termed the “desublimation project”? The Shanghai Propaganda Art Center, including its gift shop, and Obamao emerged only recently, in 2010 and 2008 respectively, and are emblematic of today’s dominant attitudes toward Cultural Revolution iconography. As commodities, they interact with a larger demographic of people in the public sphere than the contemporary art that Mittler focuses on, which would have only been viewable in galleries and museums. I want to tell the strange and complex creation stories of these objects and places where unofficial narratives on the Cultural Revolution are being expressed, with a humor whose meaning I can’t quite put my finger on.
A Note on the Yan’an Talks on Literature and Art

The ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) saw an entire restructuring and reconfiguring of what was counter-revolutionary. In other words, alongside prescriptions for the Revolution took form that which was to be targeted and criticized. In the early stages of the revolution, it wasn’t even clear to the student activists or the work teams dispatched by the Standing Committee of the Politburo, what exactly they were fighting against. Chaos reigned as Mao Zedong pitted factions against each other, reinstated old persecuted artists while blacklisting formerly celebrated ones, in order to consolidate his own power. The chaotic nature of the Cultural Revolution comes from the arbitrariness of in which peoples’ security was taken away, in forms of both physical violence (torture, prison, and death) and the psychological (public criticisms in the town square and vilification by the family and the community). Despite a systemized bureaucracy, a person’s job title did not guarantee a higher degree of authority during that time period. As people were encouraged to criticize their leaders for any hint of counter-revolutionary ideology, power was often exercised in informal ways.

To understand how Mao envisioned art and literature to function in the revolution, it is critical to read his speech at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art. The speech was given on May 1942, after thirty years of war between the Nationalists, the Communists, and later the Japanese. With so many ideological factions in China, Mao Zedong called for a forum to set forth a purely Communist literature and art for the masses. Since “propaganda” can be used to describe any type of art that carries a
persuasive message for a particular purpose, from McDonalds’ advertisements to
Counter Reformation reliefs, it is useful to look deconstruct the speech to understand
what it meant under Mao.

Mao saw literature and art as powerful weapons that must fit well into the
revolutionary machine and serve to unite and educate the people so that “they help
the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind” (Mao 1942: 2). The enemy
at this time was the Japanese, whose “traitor” literature and art went against the
present stage of China’s culture; the “anti-imperialist, anti-feudal culture of the
masses…under the leadership of the proletariat” (Mao 1942: 9). Art should not cater
to the tastes of the bourgeoisie but to the ninety percent of the masses: the proletariat.
Mao encourages the artist to get to know the masses (peasants, farmers, workers). In
order to create a “genuinely revolutionary literature and art” (12), Mao says, art must
aim to be popular, which means simpler and plainer so as to cater to mass taste. The
unity of the movement has the propagandist-artists at the front, in a sort of vanguard
leadership with the goal of molding people by, as Mao put it, “learning the language of
the masses” (5). He even notes the difficulties that the propagandists may have: “The
more you put on the airs…and play the ‘hero’ the less likely they are to accept it” (7).
To understand how to get art to reflect life, Mao sent many artists, composers, and
acting troupes from the urban centers to the countryside, where they taught and
performed alongside peasants and farmers.

While, for Mao, politics and art were intertwined, as what is demanded of art
is the “unity…of content and form…of revolutionary political content and the highest
possible perfection of artistic form” (24), the political for him took importance over
the art, in that “literature and art are subordinate to politics, but in their turn exert a great influence in politics” (20). With this, Mao asserts the necessity of harnessing the power of the arts in his revolutionary movement. Mao affirms the intersection of politics and art clearly as the unity of motive and influence, and judges the artist not based on their subjective intention or motivation but on the resulting art’s “social practice and its effect” (16).

As Liu Kang writes in "Reinventing the “Red Classics in the Age of Globalization”, the speech served as the foundation for the institutionalization of cultural production during the Cultural Revolution (2009: 333). Novels, films, dramas, and visual arts produced by government-legitimated Writers Associations and Associations for Cultural Workers and Artists were “adopted in the curriculum of the middle schools, colleges, and required in the political study sessions in all factories, hospitals, stores, government offices, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), police stations and prisons, and people’s communes in rural areas” (Ibid). Later we will see that how the art was judged and received, things the speech left out, were both arbitrarily and tightly controlled by the government.

**On Method and Structure**

Every encounter I had with visual Cultural Revolution pieces was by chance, except for the trip to the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center (and even then, I had no idea what kind of objects I was about to see and what kind of experience I was about to have). The haphazard nature of my gradual encounter with images of this censored historical period shapes how I write about it: through bits and pieces, and by starting
with the objects themselves. While textbooks often refer to history as a sequence of facts and events, the Cultural Revolution was a period of such contradictions that a linear narration stands risk of losing the richness of the circumstances that led up to each moment. Wang Ban captures the importance of this struggle with the contradictory and contingent: “To confront history is to run into an inescapable paradox between our desire to tell a story about the past and the inevitably arbitrary nature of such narrating acts in ordering those irrevocable, chaotic events and experiences” (1997:4).

Taking inspiration from this, I start Chapter One in Tiananmen Square, using Lauren Berlant’s framework of “crisis ordinariness” to examine how trauma is experienced in a place where the sublime is still upheld by the Communist Party through the spatial design of the square and the large portrait of Mao. I also extend this notion of “ordinariness” to contextualize how art was controlled and judged by the government, in ways both standardized and arbitrary, during the Cultural Revolution. In Chapter Two, I construct a definition of the sublime in the Cultural Revolution context, by looking at how Mao harnessed the Chinese historical relationship between man and nature for his political objectives, such as the mobilization of countryside villagers for his large infrastructural and agricultural projects. By examining the Cultural Revolution’s most famous propaganda poster, Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*, I look at how the sublime was manifested aesthetically, and with its two contemporary responses (Wang Xingwei’s *The Eastern/Oriental Way* and *X-ray*), I begin to conceptually tease out Ban’s desublimation. The final chapter is split into three sections, to look at how
commodification, in its variety of forms and range of image manipulations, fit under the desublimation. I look at how the economic exchange of Maoist commodities has changed from the Cultural Revolution context to the post Deng Xiaoping globalized market. The Shanghai Propaganda Art Center sits at an interesting intersection as both a preserver of propaganda posters as “relics” and a place where those images are commoditized and decontextualized. Inspired by Arjun Appadurai’s The Social Life of Things, I look at how a shirt from a famous image from the Red Detachment of Women turns the otherwise normal white cotton t-shirt into a fetishized commodity. Finally, I contextualize the emergence and the popularity of the “Obamao” design within a long history of manipulations to the Mao portrait, and use Alexi Yurchak’s definition of stiob to delve into the new meanings of the fusion image. What is the exact power of humor, parody, and the absurd within desublimation? I reveal how power is contained in elusive ways, deciphering the “meaninglessness” and “harmless fun” of these playful images as a privilege of making art that has no clear-cut meanings; a contrast to how even paintings of plants during the Cultural Revolution was forced to have counter-revolutionary meanings.

An internal contradiction with this project lies in the usage of some of the anonymous sources. The bulk of testimonies and recollections on the Cultural Revolution come from Mittler’s interviews and The Claremont Chinese Political Recollection Project, which were done anonymously to protect the identities of the interviewees. Since I am looking at the sublime, which made masses take over the rationalities of the individual to be part of the Mao’s grand historical narrative, it feels uncomfortable to be using these sources as a “general voice” without any
individualizing details on gender, age, class, or occupation to interpret alongside their words. However, the work of the Claremont Project provides a valuable glimpse into how the propaganda posters were experienced during the Cultural Revolution, and how people reflect on those impacts today. The Claremont Project sent two groups of researchers into central and southwestern China between 1998 and 1999 to conduct face-to-face interviews with two groups of people (workers, peasants, and farmers of age groups 25-40 and 40 over) on their thoughts when presented with a series of propagandistic posters. Given the political sensitivities, the interviewees were granted strict anonymity. I use their recollections in Chapter Two, as interviewees reflect on posters depicting Chairman Mao among the working peasants in agricultural scenes.

Closing

In the article “Anthropology of Power and Maoism,” Andrew Kipnis examines how five U.S.-educated anthropologists approached the theorization of power in China in their works: “Whatever their differences, they theorize power without giving in to tendencies to reify it into a singular, omnipotent concept, to denounce it as an evil to oppose, or to ignore the complexity of the dynamics it indexes” (Kipnis 2003: 279). In this thesis, I hope to fully embrace the complexities and contradictions that propaganda art presents to us while staying aware of the larger role that art, whether it produced pleasure for the artist or the viewer, had in Mao’s framework of cultural production. The Cultural Revolution is an intensely important period in Chinese history, and from the personal moments narrated by Mittler and The Claremont Project, it is possible to assert that interactions with its artistic productions conjure
memories of joy and happiness as well as sadness and regret. My mother, after
hearing me talk about how much I loved my West African dance class, happily
reminisced about dancing with her school down the street in parades alongside work
regiments after big government meetings in Changsha, singing songs like “I Love
Tiananmen.”

The Foucauldian analysis of power, which decentralizes power from
institutional holders, resonates with how power manifests within the sublime.
Foucault emphasizes a frequently overlooked side of power: the forms it takes beyond
the centralized, repressive functions of authority, that is, the mundane ways in which
it shapes everyday existence. He writes, “What makes power hold good…is that it
traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces
discourse…It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the
whole social body, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression”
(Foucault 1980:119). In exploring the function, impact, and consequences of
propaganda art in China during and after the Cultural Revolution, it is important to
be aware of what Foucault calls “the social body,” the people and their institutions,
both great and small; these are also agents and producers of power, not merely the
passive, receiving end of it. The multiple ways in which Cultural Revolution
propaganda art is viewed and used in modern day China calls for a complex
investigation into how political power is expressed through propaganda, both by
authoritative figures in the government and by modern artists and designers,
including ones who say they make designs like “Obamao” just to sell souvenirs to
tourists. The discourses of the sublime and what Ban refers to as “desublimation”
broaden the definition of power in the post-Mao China context to specifically locate aesthetics and the artists’ agency within relationships of power and autonomy.
Chapter One
An Artistic Way of Life

Looking up, I can only see Mao Zedong’s face gazing down us, the people.

As I walk on the open, flat ground of Tiananmen Square, I fumble in my bag for my iPhone. I feel the fabric of my new coin purse. “Obamao” is on it—a print of Obama’s face wearing Mao’s Communist cap. The words “More money no problem” and its Chinese translation are underneath.

I back up on the square and snap a picture. One of the painting alone, focused in. Another one zoomed out, of the painting framed by the many tourists posing in front of Tiananmen Gate. A group of American university students are huddled in for a group picture, their excitement obvious as they smile. Chinese families arrange themselves in multiple positions, admonishing children to stand still as they pose for the camera. Smiles, peace signs, “yi, er, san” (1, 2, 3). People are expected to act like tourists in this place where surveillance cameras are hooked onto rows and rows of decorative lampposts, and they do so accordingly.

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When I stand on Tiananmen Square, I am extremely conscious of my body and of those around me. A palpable tension hangs in the air. While there is laughter, flashing cameras, hawkers selling light-up toys, and a bright blue sky, I am keenly aware, as I think others are, that we are being surveilled; we are conscious that any wrong movement, anything outside of what is officially acceptable in this political space, will erupt into an explosion. An elderly man walks outside of and opposite to
the fenced off lanes, and a member of the People’s Armed Police\(^1\) immediately follows him, yelling harshly and without hesitation. Tiananmen Square is an intimate public space, with peoples’ eyes constantly on each other. The gaze of the police is the most unflinching and disconcerting—unwaveringly still, their green uniforms dot the landscape, their presence acutely felt. I consciously control my movements, very aware of those around me—but at the same time, I feel distanced from myself, as the movements of the crowd seem to control my own, dictating what is appropriate behavior.

On any given day, in addition to the military police, a mix of foreign and Chinese tourists, Beijing locals, and plain-clothes policemen fill the 109-acre square. State power is exercised and legitimized here in unabashedly obvious ways: modeled on Moscow’s Red Square, Tiananmen Square’s T-shape layout arranges large military structures and government buildings to face one another resolutely. The amount of open space between the buildings is jarring, and is filled with a mix of smog and sky. As with the Silk Street Mall of Fakes and the Summer Palace, Tiananmen Square is an essential destination for any visitor to Beijing, and it’s easy to see why: Tiananmen Gate, the National Museum of Art, The Great Hall of the People, the Mao Zedong Mausoleum and other architectural behemoths elevate this public site to the most politically legitimated aesthetic space in China.

Orderly, respectful tourists act out the well-enforced regulated behavior in the square. Tall iron fences separate the sidewalk from the boulevard, and since there is

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\(^1\) A paramilitary unit closely affiliated with the People's Liberation Army (Lee 2011: 413).

\(^2\) Mao’s slogan book.

\(^3\) Mittler borrows the term ‘propagemes’ from Rainer Gries (whose work is all in German) but she translates his definition as follows: "Contents of propaganda, rhetorical markers, markers with political
four-lane traffic, people must use underground tunnels to cross the road. The tunnels have an intensely organized and efficient way about them: thick metal dividers split the walkways into two opposite streams, and guards stand at each tunnel’s mouth to ensure people are walking in their assigned lanes. I found myself impatient on a sticky summer day as the people walking ahead of me suddenly halted; a line, the length of half the tunnel, had formed. I peered to the side and saw a security scanner, with an x-ray conveyer machine, at the opening of the exit, manned by two guards. People were visibly annoyed, especially young women who had only small purses with them. Sighs and noises of agitation filled the air. Nonetheless, everyone stood in line to wait their turn to put their bags on the conveyer and walk through the scanner.

These state security scanners, a ubiquitous presence in Beijing, are manned by two or three officers at every subway entrance and exit. Mass compliance with such a security system creates a disciplined and orderly social body. When someone doesn’t obey, like the grouchy old man who trespassed earlier, the police approach and everyone looks back and stares at the confrontation, but people are quick to walk away, not wanting to be part of the scene, or be part of a break in square’s stability and order. I myself was one of those observers—when a confused looking elderly man walked back into a subway lane he had just come out of, perhaps to find someone he was walking with or to fetch something he lost, an officer yelled at him so maliciously that a young man stopped to defend him (“Why must you yell at him like that?”), raising the tone of the confrontation even further. I walked away while looking back, with a twisted knot in my stomach.
Much of the determination for order and stability comes from a history of political dissent and violence on the square. The tension is an unspoken, tacitly understood recognition of this history. Only twenty-six years ago, the Tiananmen Square massacre ended a seven-week people’s protest in enormous bloodshed, with an estimated toll of two thousand pro-reform civilian protestors killed by officers with guns and tanks, on orders of their own government (Lee 2011: 1). Many foreigners are familiar with the iconic Tank Man picture: an unarmed and unidentified man in a white shirt faces a line of machine-gun fitted tanks, standing alone in the middle of the street, shouting and waving his arm furiously, refusing to let them pass. The tragedy of the repression of these protests by an autocratic state is, today, only magnified by the absence of any sort of public memorialization to the violence and the lives lost, on the square and elsewhere in the city. Denounced by the state as “counter-revolutionary” turmoil, the massacre and the events leading up to it have been wiped clean from the square. The state of normalcy and the ordinariness of the tourist atmosphere of Tiananmen Square only make the missing more jarring. There is not a single trace of memory of such a tragic event.

As a person who has visited many capital cities, such as Washington D.C. and Berlin, the absence of urban space dedicated to monuments and memorials provokes a disconcerting feeling. In and around the square, people laugh and walk around. Street vendors sell one kuai popsicles and water bottles, some fly small lit-up toys in the air. But below the surface lies a sort of disjointedness. Are we all isolated but silently thinking the same thing? Or are we deeply divided in our thoughts, as we walk on ground made to embody the nationalism and authority of the Chinese Communist
Party? What is an American college student thinking as he stares up at Mao, flashing the “peace” sign as he poses for a picture, and, just a few feet away from him, what is the older Chinese man thinking as he takes a picture of his family? As a Chinese American who is familiar with the massacre, I always wonder what is going on in the minds of the older Chinese adults around me, those who don’t only know Tiananmen as a place of imposing beauty and history but also as a place of personal experience and memory.

Mao

Presiding over the entire square is Mao Zedong. Between the two slogans, “Long Live the Chinese People’s Republic” and “Long Live the Great Unity of the World’s Peoples,” is his portrait, hanging above the entrance of Tiananmen Gate.

Figure 3: Tiananmen Gate, also known as the Gate of Heavenly Peace.

The large oil painting depicts him in his older years, although his face is smooth, rosy-hued, and without wrinkles. Mao holds the only illustrative cue among
the solid-color buildings and Chinese flags in the square. He wears his blue, proletarian collared suit, which is seen in many other propagandistic posters and photographs. Repainted every year, the altar-like tower elevates his face above the square, his posture perfectly frontal and his eyes gazing into the mass collective assembled below him (Lee 2011:400). He is ultra visible at all times from every angle of the square; his portrait was even reworked three times until the current 1952 version became the norm, as according to Wu Hung: “Compositionally, in this new version Mao’s posture is perfectly frontal, and he stares straight into the viewer’s eyes” (2005:77). His expression is content but serious, with no hint of a smile.

A stirring of history provoked by this image gives way to memories of him presiding over the square in person for the birth of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Mao’s image remains highly visible in Tiananmen Square, indicating his staying power as the stronghold of the Communist Party even after his death. Still viewed as the catalyst for much of China’s modern history, his painting serves as both a reminder and legitimizer of his complex attachments to people today. As Haiyan Lee writes, “as the personification of the Chinese revolution, Mao must be ultra visible at all times and in constant, unobstructed symbolic communication with his moral-political source—the people” (2011:400).

Mao Zedong is the most mythologized individual in China, known as the man who brought China into the twentieth century with disastrous effects, but also as a “patriotic leader, martial hero, philosopher-king, poet, calligrapher” (Barme 1996: 20). After uniting the nation after a long civil war with the Nationalists, Mao announced the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, thereby becoming the
leader of China. In the next twenty years, Mao’s political reforms and idealistic goals caused an estimated 40 million people to die of hunger between 1959 and 1961. These were the years of The Great Leap Forward, with overambitious attempts to radically increase agricultural and industrial production resulting in widespread famine. In 1966, after a brief break from his centralized power, Mao regained control of the country through the Cultural Revolution, in which he declared capitalism and intellectualism to be elements of a bourgeois society that had to be eliminated. This revolution, which involved power struggles in almost every aspect of society, sent the country into economic and social chaos. But with the Communist Party still in power today, Mao’s portrait lingers, looming over Beijing’s most public and visited political center far after his death in 1976. His real, physical remains are in Tiananmen too—his corpse is preserved in the Memorial Hall nearby.

But it is Mao’s image, given its strategic positioning, that makes its way into every tourist’s camera and that overlooks the activities of the square. His presence is a constant reminder of the country’s recent history, which radically reshaped China. This history is one of national unity but also of war, famine, and immense social upheaval during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. The state’s purpose of maintaining Mao’s portrait in the square is clear—the old Chairman is still sacred to the power of the Communist Party, and his place in China’s present is as fixed as the portrait is to the gate. How do ordinary people engage with Mao’s portrait and the scene of the Tiananmen Square massacre? Alongside thousands of tourists, Chinese locals visit the square, many of them just taking a casual walk in this space that was the stage of such chaotic and traumatic events. How do people deal with the
feelings presumably lying just under the surface of their mundane, daily routines, without being overwhelmed?

**Crisis Ordinariness**

Lauren Berlant’s conceptual framework based on the idea of “crisis ordinariness” helps me untangle the seemingly contradictory relationship Chinese people have with the square. In *Cruel Optimism*, she argues in favor of moving away from the conventional assumptions of trauma theory, which “focuses on exceptional shock and data loss in the memory and experience of catastrophe” (2011: 10). Her approach seeks to look at the effects of trauma as negotiations, small to big, that people constantly navigate in the present. In trauma theory as espoused by Cathy Caruth and Giorgio Agamben, the subject is cut off from the present, with trauma categorized as an event that stands out ahistorically from the ordinary (Berlant 2011:80). Berlant proposes something different, as a division between the traumatic and the ordinary makes the reality of life less deservedly complex. As in Tiananmen Square, the traumatic is completely diffused *within* the ordinary, people don’t just compartmentalize intensities and traumatic memories to have access to them at will.

The usefulness of “crisis ordinariness” is that it allows us to examine trauma not as the exception from ordinary life, but as ordinary life itself. “Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness,” Berlant (2011: 10) writes, but is something that is actively being worked out in the present and even in the future. The ordinary becomes a zone in which histories intersect, bringing a sense of precariousness that spreads into modes and habits of being. As Berlant describes it, crisis ordinariness can
bear many contradictions at once: it can be “a sense of belatedness from having to catch up to the event; a sense of the double-take in relation to what happened in the event…a sense of the present that makes no sense with the rest of it” (2011: 80-81).

Emotionally, the effect of trauma can manifest in many different ways, from numbness to anger to sadness. I imagine the thoughts going on in my mind as I walk in Tiananmen Square are vastly different from the thoughts of a mother who lost her child to the massacre, or from those my father, who had just graduated from Beijing University and was working as a journalist during that time. However, we all mediate and adjust to our own experience of walking through Tiananmen Square: instead of detachment or blockage from the past, the historical present is deeply engaged with. In a place with such regulated behavior and conspicuous absence of memorialization, the term “crisis ordinariness” takes on an even deeper meaning than Berlant intended. Not only do we have to walk under Mao’s portrait and experience the over-militarized square, but we also have to deal with the crafted order of the ordinary: political performance that is carefully choreographed by the state and by all of us who play along.

The Military Sublime

What the Square is crafted to be, in Haiyan Lee’s words, is the “paradigmatic site for the rites of power and the acclamations of sovereignty” (2011:1), a place that aestheticizes power not only through the architectural spatial order and Mao’s portrait, but also through the social behaviors regulated and allowed. This includes the orderly behavior of visitors, and the ceremonies organized by the government,
and the social and political rituals that place the orderly crowd as its legitimizing agent.

Figure 4: The National Day parade on the 60th anniversary of the PRC, October 1 2009.

These ceremonial activities necessitate the crowd—watchers, revelers, a mass of people to mystify and unite into a collective. The annual National Day parade is a perfect example of this overwhelming display of a mix of aesthetic and political power. While I have never witnessed the parade, it’s hard not to be impressed by the pictures, which show processions of soldiers in large and perfectly rectangular formations. The effect of these People’s Liberation Army parades, against the sheer spatial scale of the square and the massive audience as a collective, create what Lee calls a “military sublime.” The military sublime is a disciplinary power, “an aesthetic preoccupied with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain” (Lee 2011: 410). In the square, the military sublime creates a sense of national pride and unity that makes the individual disappear into the larger
frame of “the people” and of official history—it’s an overpowering, debilitating sensation, as people surrender their agency to a higher being: Mao. With Mao’s portrait constantly visible, overlooking the ceremonial activities, he is “in constant, unobstructed symbolic communication with his moral-political source—the people” (Lee 2011: 400).

The military sublime of Tiananmen Square is rooted in the eight rallies that took place between August 18 and November 26, 1996, in which a total of 13 million young devotees from all over China travelled to the square to be reviewed under Chairman Mao (Ban 1997: 197) during the Cultural Revolution. In *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics In Twentieth-Century China*, Ban captures the emotional and overwhelming feeling generated by the masses of loyal young people, called Red Guards, as they marched towards the square. With deafening cheers of “Long Live Chairman Mao,” slogans blaring from loudspeakers, and the sheer the magnitude of the gathering, there was a sense of “sublime limitlessness and boundlessness, a sense of invincible power” (1997: 199) in the square. Ban includes the narration of a former Red Guard and now writer, Liang Xiaosheng, to remark upon the both equally uplifting and empowering feeling for the individual: “Liang is speaking for many Red Guards when he writes that each felt his ego suddenly strengthened by the magnitude and dynamics of the raging crowd, like a proud soldier in a huge, magnificent army” (1997: 198).

**The Politics of Painting Mao**
Wang Ban applies the framework of the sublime beyond the ritualized and politically orchestrated rallies in Tiananmen Square, extending it beyond the military. According to him, the sublime manifested during the Cultural Revolution as at once “an aesthetic, a social practice, a cultural institution, and a prevalent state of mind” (Ban 1997: 226), with the uniting goal being the revolutionary transformation in the soul to adhere strictly to the party line. During the Cultural Revolution, the tensions between the aesthetic and the political were intrinsic in how Mao deemed what was culturally reactionary under the Four Olds: old ideas, old customs, old traditions, and old habits (1997: 195). Art and literature, as well as “street names, fashions, hairstyles, public discourses, daily formalities and rituals, traditional architecture, etc” (1997: 195) were deemed aesthetically repulsive or decadent. People’s speech, behavior, and ritualistic performances were judged politically—“one had to enter a prescribed “theatrical” realm in which the individual acted out well-demarcated roles” (1997: 208). In other words, everyday life was scrutinized and criticized, as people could be thrown in jail for the way things looked. By maintaining an aesthetic that was in line with Mao’s Communist ideal, and disciplining and chastising those who did not fall under it, the state also legitimated its political rule and ideological hegemony (1997: 191).

The subject of critiquing and judging art was emphasized in Mao’s Yan’an talks. Demanded was a need for literary and art criticism to “subject these [art] works to correct criticism…so that art of a lower level can be gradually raised to a higher level and art which does not meet the demands of the struggle of the broad masses can be transformed into art that does” (Mao 1942: 23-24). Mao does not elaborate,
however, on what the criteria exactly is, how the criteria could change over time, and who would be able to judge the criticism.

The portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square is a central part of the military sublime, but it emerged out of a long legacy of standardized Mao portraiture that was heavily critiqued and judged during the Cultural Revolution. These portraits were supposed to legitimize his authority, by depicting him as a heroic and great leader of the Chinese revolution whom people could look up to and trust. Visual representation of Mao was tightly controlled and critiqued, shown by how the Red Guard art movement, art academies, and model books instructed both professional artists and ordinary people how to paint Mao (Mittler 2012: 272). He appeared in a variety of contexts, alone or among the masses, old or young, but the way his face and body were painted remained standardized. There was one way to paint mature, aged and timeless Mao, which is what the Tiananmen Square portrait utilizes, and there was another way of depicting young Mao (Mittler: 2012: 275). People adhered to the convention that he had to be “red, bright, and shining”, turning the popular propaganda slogan “Mao is the sun in our hearts” to visible, tangible form (Mittler 2012: 273).

In *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China*, Julie Andrews describes the widely accepted norms among Cultural Revolution artists of Mao depictions. His face was to be smooth, without conspicuous displays of brushwork, and while the entire composition was to be bright, Mao was to be illuminated as the primary source of light (1994: 360). The color palette was also very specific. Tang
Muli, an artist during that time, learned the correct requirements of painting Mao from old classmates who had taken Cultural Revolution art classes:

Pure red should be used to paint the face, burnt sienna for shading, and yellow ochre for highlights. He was warned that blue and green must never be used on the face and that the paint squeezed on one’s palette should be organized in a specific order, with cool colors in the least accessible spot. Mao’s face was to be divisible into three equal sections, and his pigmentation to follow the chromatic sequence on a color chart issued for that purpose. (Andrews 1994: 355)

The requirements for painting Mao were so concrete that Tang considered painting during the politically volatile time as a sensible career, reasoning that “in visual art, unlike literature, it was possible to avoid expression of potentially dangerous personal opinions” (Andrews 1994: 354). Tang did indeed became a successful propaganda artist, after the Municipal Art Creation office recognized his artistic talent in a local art exhibition. He was eventually commissioned to work in the Shanghai Agricultural Exhibition Hall, where he made political posters, illustrations, leaflets, and portraits of Chairman Man until the end of the Cultural Revolution (Andrews 1994: 359). By utilizing the standardized Mao code in his paintings, Tang was able to align himself with the political authorities of the time, winning the Communist Party’s approval and thereby securing a stable future for himself.

**Enforcing Aesthetics as the “Conduct of Conducts”**

At the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the former government organizations overseeing cultural production (the Ministry of Culture, the Central Propaganda Department, and the Chinese Artists Association) were abolished to make way for a new cultural council overseen by Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife. With her
newly hired administrative team, she began organizing National Art Exhibitions, which set the uniform themes and styles of art in 1972, 1973, and 1974 (Andrews 1994: 366). It is here that the official sponsorship for art generated enthusiasm for artists to work on their crafts. Following Mao’s emphasis on the involvement of the proletariat in the Yan’an talks, most of the successful submissions were by amateurs (workers, peasants, and soldiers). However, Mao’s criteria for revolutionary art to reflect the lives of the proletariat yet also be at a high standard of aesthetics led to a problem: many of the workers, farmers, and soldiers weren’t technically skilled enough to paint at such a high standard. The formation of ‘painting correction groups’ was the government’s answer to the problem of “technically weak but politically correct entries of workers, peasants, and soldiers” (1994: 359). This meant that each major geographic region was assigned a number of painting professionals, usually graduates from art academies, to correct and repaint certain sections of their region’s submissions if needed.

While the painting correction groups and the National Art Exhibitions upheld the emphasis on proletariat art and a uniform, social realist style of painting, the Black Painting Exhibitions, also organized by Jiang Qing, attacked and condemned paintings as having counter-revolutionary intentions. However, there was no common aesthetic standardized critique to these paintings as with Mao portraiture. The Black Painting Exhibitions attacked artists who were supported by the Premier Zhou Enlai, viewed as a political threat to Jiang’s control of China’s cultural sphere. He advocated for a dual artistic standard, in which China would produce art for both domestic and foreign consumption (Andrews 1994: 376), which was against Mao’s
assertion that all art was to be for the revolutionary masses (1942: 6). Without consulting Jiang’s council, Zhou independently enlisted artists to produce paintings for hotels and railway stations that had been defaced by Red Guard slogans and pictures (Andrews 1994: 368), intending to redecorate them for foreign visitors. The Black Painting Exhibitions directly attacked a selection of this paintings, with seemingly apolitical subjects prescribed counter-revolutionary meaning: a painting of lotus leaves by Li Kuchan was read as a criticism of Jiang Qing’s eight revolutionary model operas, a print of a spider plant by Yan Han “allegedly accused the Cultural Revolution of ‘hanging the gentlemen’” (Andrews 1994: 373). Local authorities in cities such as Shanghai, Xi’an, Nanjing, and Ji’nan began to organize their own Black Painting Exhibitions, with newspapers publishing the charges against the now so-called “black painters” (Andrews 1997: 345).

Michel Foucault’s theorizations of power and governance in his essay “The Subject and Power” can help examine how political institutions were so intertwined with the artistic sphere during the Cultural Revolution. He proposes to define the exercise of power as the “conduct of conducts,” in that to govern is to “structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault 2002: 341). Through the regulations for Mao portraits, upheld by the painting correction groups and the painting exhibitions organized under Jiang Qing, artists’ actions were controlled and critiqued. Taste became a political signifier, and as with Tang Muli, artists complied with the instructions on how Mao was to be depicted. Otherwise, artists were labeled as counter-revolutionaries ran risk of being persecuted by the state and being forced to perform daily “self criticism” meetings (Andrews 1994: 376). The National Painting
Exhibitions and the Black Painting Exhibitions exemplify the institutionalized control of possible actions, as Foucault asserts that the state’s function is “the taking of everything under its wing, to be the global overseer, the principle of regulation” (2002: 344). Not only did the state regulate what art had to look like to be politically acceptable, but also in the case of the “black paintings”, meanings were arbitrarily attributed to paintings to deem them unacceptable. Here is where the state exerts its power through rationalization: as the exercise of power is “something that is elaborated, transformed, organized” (Foucault 2002: 345) to current situations, Jiang and her political extremists were able to rationalize the contents of paintings to be actively dangerous in order to assert their governmental control over Zhou Enlai.

Foucault also stresses that it is not just institutions or political structures that uphold power, but that power and rule are consolidated within the social body (2002). Collaborative efforts in producing Mao portraits, including the painting correction groups, underscores how ordinary people during the Cultural Revolution also kept each other’s aesthetic representations in check and in line with requirements. A businesswoman born in the 1940s remembers: “Everybody was happy to take part in some kind of activity, so we would paint Mao’s image all over the place, on any kind of wall, etc... There would be a few students together, and they would paint such a picture” (Mittler 2012: 270). The collaborative nature of these Mao depictions allowed skilled technical artists and amateur artists to work together to produce politically acceptable works in teams, and leave their work as anonymous. This protected them to a certain degree; or at least proved advantageous to how
“black paintings” were gathered in the Xi’an exhibition, as the administrators found their job very easy as the artists had signed all their paintings (Andrews 1994: 375).

Art did not have to be submitted to local exhibitions in order to be critiqued and judged. In addition to Communist Party officials, ordinary people were critics of art, contributing to the principle of regulation that Foucault espouses taking part, as a social body, in the disciplinary techniques started by institutions. The following recollection from an art historian born in the 1940 shows how the label “black painter” was not just utilized in a top-down institutionalized manner, but among other settings as well:

I painted Mao in school. When there would be a criticism session, I would paint. But there was a lot one had to be careful about…But we all knew the rules. One of my father’s students, however…was painting a bit absentmindedly one day. He painted a huge Mao. The color was like that of the propaganda posters, but for some reason when the image was printed, the body was somehow blackened. He was doomed—became a “black painter” who painted “black paintings”. It was not his fault. The black came out when it was printed, so it was really not his intention. But he recalls this story even today. And since my daughter keeps asking about how people died during the Cultural Revolution…I told her this story. There are many stories from that time which one just cannot believe today. (Mittler 2012: 274)

It is within this context of highly controlled and disciplined artistic production, where standardized depictions of Mao became the legitimizer of the power of the Communist Party, that the Mao portrait became a highly reproduced motif during the Cultural Revolution.

Breaking the Code

Mao is a great person, and his image will still be there on Tian’anmen even in 50 or 100 years…I have a lot of pictures of Mao and statues in
porcelain and other such things. He is very important to me. --Beijing Taxi Driver, 1958-. (Mittler 2012, 260)

The Mao portrait hanging in Tiananmen Square today is a direct legacy and reminder of the stringent, standardized techniques of the Cultural Revolution, and as seen by the taxi driver, his official depictions are still treasured by some. Yet, just a few miles away from Tiananmen Square, his image is also scrapped, fogged, and printed Warhol style by artists in Beijing’s modern art district, the 798 Zone. In Wang Fu Jing, a shopping district popular with locals and tourists alike, street market tables are full of shirts and caps with Communist propaganda motifs, Little Red Book key chains, and “Obamao,” the Mao-Obama illustration printed in shirts and army-green canvas wallets, like the one I own. Legitimized and non-legitimized depictions of Mao now exist with one another in close proximity.

On my wallet, “More money no problem” with its Chinese translation “世界无难事只要肯花钱” is printed below Obamao. The Mao evoked in this illustration is a far cry from one on the Cultural Revolution posters donning his Communist garb and accompanied by printed slogans like “For the people” and “Working people unite.” But the aesthetic is still present enough that the original source is understood. With Mao taken completely out of the frame, and replaced with Obama, what intent and function does this “Obamao” object hold now? Today, Mao’s portrait is treated with reverence in places like Tiananmen Square and even hung up on the wall in my

\[2\] Mao’s slogan book.
Beijing apartment complex’s security office, but his image is also played with, reproduced out of context, and even distorted in manifold forms and ways.

To take Berlant’s crisis ordinariness a step further: here we see that after the Cultural Revolution, people are not only facing visuals from historically traumatic times, but actively engaging with them in creative, irreverent ways. It’s a far cry from the standardized techniques of Mao portraiture that Jiang and her cultural council espoused. The creative interventions range from the seemingly pointless and random to the historical and more straightforwardly political: Wang Xingwei’s painting *The Way to the East*, for instance, is a direct response to one of the most popular and heavily reproduced Cultural Revolution paintings, Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*. Some of the slogans that are printed with his face, such as “More money no problem,” are so removed from his official persona and imbued with a knowledge of Western pop culture and taste that they more readily evoke a commodity logic than the military sublime. Online, I found a Vivienne Tam dress that was collaged fully with iterations of Mao’s portrait: in one, he has little girl pigtails, and in another, a badly bee-stung face. What is common in all of these re-appropriations, however, is that it shows a re-negotiation of Mao as a political symbol; seen as acts of agency by Chinese artists and vendors, the manipulated images show engagement and attachment instead of censorship and suppression.

Barbara Mittler asks poignant questions in *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* regarding the message of these Mao re-appropriations: “All are pointed reflections of the fact that the Cultural Revolution Mao Cult was perceived and experienced as a religion by some…By making it public
in such a satiric and caricatured manner, are they [the artists] able to destroy it? Does the political symbol become a mere joke?” (Mittler 2012: 320). What makes the meanings of these visuals hard to untangle is the paradox in which they both subvert propaganda art to varying levels, but somehow, at the same time, still reveal the importance and effect of its original function. These visuals are also being made in a very different China, and in a very different world overall. Since Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door Policy in the 1970s, China has gone through a rapid increase of Westernization, meaning that the art created does not only represent history to the domestic audience, but to a tourist market as well. The historical relationship between Mao and the Chinese people is certainly the basis for the attachment that produced these new artworks; however, it is important to see these commodities also within the new context of growing tourist consumption. Some of the Mao visuals, such as Obamao, play on types of humor that merge American pop culture with Chinese, revealing an interesting intermingling of political mindsets.

**Ban’s Desublimation**

What I am most intrigued by in Wang Ban’s work on Chinese literary aesthetics in *The Sublime Figure Of History* is how he not only uses the sublime as the nodal interplay between the aesthetic and the political (1997: 8), but how he also looks at *desublimation*, in which the ideals of the political sublime are demolished. He points to two authors of the 1980s movement in New Wave Fiction, Yu Hua and Can Xue, as producing works that break up the “generic features of social realism…demystify the ‘iron laws’ of the real and history…breaks up the image of the
unified, sublime subject of the State” (Ban 1997:15). He uses the categories of the fantastic, the schizophrenic, and the grotesque to analyze how the Yu Hua and Can Xue, working in a time of widespread disenchantment with Communist ideology, tried to demolish sacred irons of the established systems of representation in text (Ban 1997: 230-231).

What Ban does not explain is how feelings of Mao changed after the full extent of his atrocities became clear after the Cultural Revolution, or how the desublimation works for visuals as opposed to literary texts. I will take inspiration from Ban’s usage of the sublime framework for modern Chinese literature and apply it to visual art—specifically, “propagemes” that have made it into a new market of tourist commodities and Chinese contemporary art. While I will give the big picture as to show the variety of commodities that have been produced since the 1970s, I will focus on the pieces that help me most clearly elucidate the sublime. This includes the aforementioned Chairman Mao Goes To Anyuan, the most reproduced poster of the Cultural Revolution, and its post-modern response from Wang Xingwei, A Journey to the East and X-ray.

My aim in exploring these specific objects is both personal and theoretical—these images emerged in my everyday life in China, when walking around and shopping in Beijing, Shanghai, or Wuxi. By putting them both in historical and analytic context and by making them the object of personal reflection, I hope to

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3 Mittler borrows the term ‘propagemes’ from Rainer Gries (whose work is all in German) but she translates his definition as follows: “Contents of propaganda, rhetorical markers, markers with political content, and more or less complex narratives which have been repeatedly successfully communicated to a target group for a longer period of time, probably across generational borders and across political and social systems, through the mass media” (2012:10)
provide a nuanced narrative of their significance by bringing to light their power and contradictions. By bringing in the sublime, perhaps the definition of power in the production and consumption of art can be widened and made more real to reflect the phenomenon of these marketplace images today, as they contest the legitimized and official representations of the Cultural Revolution that exist alongside them.
Chapter Two
Constructing the Sublime

Ban writes that in the official, state-sponsored sublime during the Cultural Revolution all individuals were exhorted to “strive for the sublime subjectivity of history and to model themselves on lofty revolutionary heroes” (1997:20). In this chapter, I will examine the meanings behind this assertion by asking the question: How was the sublime manifested aesthetically in the propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution? Jiang Qing and her cultural council officially controlled aesthetics and standards of taste, such as the formal directives on how to paint Mao, but how were the paintings meant to incite political action from the masses? As Mao states in the Yan’an talks, revolutionary art must have a “unity of motive and effect,” with the criterion for judging art being its social practice and the actions it inspires (1942: 23).

I will look at how the sublime was appropriated for the “environmental aesthetics” in Mao’s nationalistic propaganda. One of the central actions, or “effects,” that the propaganda was intended to do was to mobilize workers and peasants to take part in Mao’s large infrastructural and environmental projects, such as building dams and radically increasing agricultural output. As Judith Shapiro writes in her book *Man’s War Against Nature*, Maoist policy linked the cultural and the environmental as its spheres of action, to devastating results. The Maoist period, she writes, “illustrates the relationship between political repression and environmental degradation, demonstrating the tragedy of this interface under extreme conditions...
[T]he dynamics suggest a congruence between violence among human beings and violence by humans toward the nonhuman world” (1999: 16).

Historically contextualizing the specific environmental problematic of revolutionary China is crucial to building a Chinese theory of the sublime. It is equally important to link it back to its philosophical roots. Ban asserts that while Chinese aesthetic discourse has persistently engaged classical Western philosophers, such as Kant, Hegel, and Schiller, its treatment of the sublime builds on this engagement but exceeds it (1997: 9). Well-known aesthetic theorists, such as Wang Guowei and Li Zehou, have articulated a specifically Chinese discourse on the sublime that grows out of Chinese history and cultural experience. I take inspiration from Ban’s call “not to apply Western theories of the sublime directly to Chinese texts” (1997: 11) as I extend his analysis to official paintings of the Cultural Revolution.

**Delineating the Chinese Theory of the Sublime**

How did Mao’s propaganda campaigns use the sublime to mobilize millions into environmental and political action? It is helpful to first examine the sublime figure himself, and how he was aesthetically elevated to be the god-like hero leading the masses into revolutionary transformation, ruling over nature itself.

One of the most popular propaganda paintings of the Cultural Revolution is Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*. 
With 90 billion posters printed, this is also the most reproduced oil painting in human history. Painted in 1968, it depicts a strong, youthful Mao striding across the white-fogged mountaintops. The historical narrative behind the image is Mao’s journey to support the coal miner’s strike in Anyuan in the 1920s. Declared a model for Cultural Revolution art by Jiang Qing herself, it was reprinted in some of the most important political publications such as *People’s Daily* and the military newspaper *Liberation Army Daily* (Andrews 1994: 339). After its official legitimation by the party in 1969, millions of copies were disseminated in demonstrations and town hall
meetings and hung in the walls of people's homes. It was even reproduced on the surface of kitchenware.

Liu Chunhua was only twenty-four years old when he and his classmates at the Central Academy of Industrial Arts set out to design a revolutionary painting. The subject matter was a strictly political decision that came after a party purging. In the late 1950s, one of the paintings commissioned for the Museum of the Chinese Revolution featured Liu Shaoqi, Mao's predicted successor, as the leader of the Anyuan strikes. The painting was accepted by the government at the time and even made into posters. However, by the start of the Cultural Revolution, Liu Shaoqi had been branded as an enemy of the state, and his face had to be purged from previously accepted artworks. A 1967 conference organized for this purpose was entitled “Cut Off Liu Shaoqi’s Black Hand in the Art World – Thoroughly Eliminate the Poisonous Weeds Glorifying Liu Shaoqi” (Chinese Posters). All posters depicting him were destroyed, creating the need for a new painting representing Mao as the leader of the revolutionary struggle. In order for history to be corrected and adjusted to the current party line, the official painting had to change, too. Liu Chunhua clearly stated the political intention behind his work: “For a long period, China’s Khrushchev [Liu Shaoqi] arrogantly distorted history by claiming that he, and not Chairman Mao, had led the Anyuan workers struggle…the Red Guards of Chairman Mao, vowed to do our part to correct this distortion of history” (Chinese Posters).

The political function for the painting was clear; it was to serve as an instrument for the Communist Party’s purging of Liu Shaoqi from history and the elevation of Mao to take his place. However, the political functionality of the painting
doesn’t derive from the subject alone: Mao’s heroism and glory are aesthetically constructed and meticulously planned. One did not need to know the historical context of the painting to understand the message. Mao could be striding through any part of China, as the location of the mountains and clouds is not identified. The painting does not require an understanding of its political imperative for it to be powerful since Mao’s appeal and claim to greatness are universalized. Writing on the iconographic importance of the painting, Mittler says that the artificially arranged clouds appear more frequently in propaganda after this, as they allow “nature to echo Mao’s movements” or, as the painter says, to express “the winds of revolution.” Nature is not merely the backdrop to Mao’s greatness, but it makes way for him—he stands at the forefront of the painting, on the top of the mountain, and just beneath the clouds. The brightness of the painting suggests optimism; Mao’s tall, upright figure exudes confidence and strength.

A Western educated viewer, like myself, may see *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan* and be reminded of another painting.
The similarity to Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, one of the most recognizable paintings of the European romantic sublime, is striking. Painted in 1817, more than a hundred years prior to the Cultural Revolution, the painting depicts a well-dressed man with a walking stick by his side, standing on a mountain, looking out at the rolling fog and a cloudy sky. The two paintings have a similar subject matter and a comparable general framing: A solitary man is placed in the center of the painting and above a mix of clouds, mountains, and fog that also surround him.

However, upon a closer examination, the paintings are notably different. The most obvious difference is that Mao is in the forefront of the painting, facing the viewer, while the wanderer in Friedrich’s painting has his back to his viewer,
positioned farther into the landscape. His figure is smaller and is almost engulfed by
the fog, which fills up most of the painting. The wanderer is also just that—a
wanderer, pausing to rest at the top of a cliff with his walking stick to contemplate the
view. By contrast, Mao is captured in movement—he faces slightly to the left, his left
hand rolled into a fist as he marches, his robes billowing in the wind. Nature also
looks tamer around the wanderer: The ground on which Mao walks is flat, or at least
much less jagged than the rocky cliff on which the wanderer stands, suggesting
danger. The lush green vegetation around Mao also makes nature look more inviting
and lush, less menacing than the dark, barren cliffs.

Immanuel Kant, who laid the foundation for much of the modern
interpretation of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*, explained the difference
between the beautiful and the sublime: The sublime “brings with it as its characteristic
feature a movement of the mind bound up with the judging of the object” while the
beautiful “maintains the mind in restful contemplation” (1951: 85). The mental
movement provoked by the sublime is caused by the negotiation between the
imagination and the rational faculties as the viewer attempts to comprehend the
seemingly infinite quality of the natural object. When the viewer cannot apprehend
the totality of nature through the imagination, in Ban’s words, “the faculty of reason
arrives promptly on the scene…not to rescue the imagination but to assert itself more
forcefully at the expense of an imagination now on the verge of breakdown”
(1997:163). In this sense, the sublime pits the faculties of imagination and of reason
against each other within the viewer, and Kant seems to suggest that, in the end, the
rational is destined to prevail, to stand as superior: “The feeling of the sublime in
nature is respect for our own destination…[T]his makes intuitively evident the
superiority of the rational determination of our cognitive faculties to the greatest
faculty of our sensibility” (Kant 1951: 96).

Taking Kant’s definition into account, the effect of the sublime in *Wanderer
Above the Sea of Fog* takes place within the wanderer’s mind, within his subjective,
individual consciousness as he struggles to comprehend what is before him. The dark
and menacing view of nature produces a feeling of the sublime that is fraught with
terror, as the physicality of the man, small and frail, is overwhelmed, positioned as he
is on the edge of the cliff amidst the thick fog and jagged mountains. With his back
turned to us, it is left to the painting’s audience to imagine the negotiation between
imagination and rationality underway as he tries to take in the seemingly boundless
landscape before him.

By contrast, Mao is not represented as contemplative but as an active, moving
force, confident and calm, and not at all lost or intimidated by his natural
surroundings. In fact, the focus of the painting is on him, with nature as the
background. In Liu Chunhua’s own commentary on the painting, it is interesting to
note that how he narrates how the weather and the environment conform to Mao’s
movements:

We placed Chairman Mao in the forefront of the painting, tranquil,
far-sighted and advancing towards us like a rising sun bringing hope to
the people…The old umbrella under his arm reveals his style of hard
work and plain living, travelling in all weather over great distances,
across mountains and rivers, for the revolutionary cause. Striding
firmly over rugged terrain, Chairman Mao is seen blazing the trail for
us…The rising autumn wind, blowing his long hair and billowing his
plain long gown, is the harbinger of the approaching revolutionary
storm. A background of swift-moving clouds indicates that Chairman
Mao is arriving in Anyuan at a moment of sharp class struggle... We should bring out his revolutionary heroism and revolutionary optimism so well expressed in his own words: ‘What boundless happiness to struggle against heaven, against earth and against men!’ In short, we should get across to the onlookers the wisdom, preeminence and magnificent spirit of the great leader. (Mittler 2012: 277)

How is the relationship between Mao and nature constructed within the sublime, if he is not overwhelmed or intimidated by nature, but, on the contrary, empowered by it, exuding strength from it? Instead of a contemplative Kantian subject of the sublime, the figure is active and triumphant. Nature is not overwhelming and dangerous to him, as it is in Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, but, instead, he is seemingly conquering, or at the very least, projecting strength.

Ban emphasizes the work of Chinese philosopher Li Zehou to articulate a Chinese discourse of the sublime. Li agrees with how the feeling of the Kantian sublime manifests in the mind, but takes it further by adding another category of the sublime: human activity. In fact, he asserts that human achievements such as heroic actions or great artistic achievements (Ban 1997: 160) generate a larger feeling of the sublime than natural objects. Li also argues that “without human conquest, natural objects cannot be a source of sublime appreciation” (1997: 161) as it is only after humans successfully struggle against the forces of nature that human achievements can shine force in relation to the once life-threatening objects. In Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, Mao is depicted as a powerful agent elevated above nature, off to aid in a worker’s strike and change society, rather than the contemplative wanderer who is unmoving against the forces surrounding him.
“Man Must Conquer Nature”

In 1956, Mao gave an address at the Chinese Communist Party’s 8th National Congress, in which he quoted an ancient Chinese proverb, “Man must conquer nature” to rally support for his socialist construction campaign. Immediately, the proverb made its way into newspapers and propaganda posters as an efficient slogan to disseminate Mao’s ideology to the far reaches of China’s rural population. The pithiness of the four letters “ren ding sheng tian” communicated the complexity and scope of Mao’s program. There is a double meaning of “nature” in it that attributes it a subjective agency, enabling the logic of a war against an otherwise inanimate object. The Chinese “tian” literally means sky, but throughout history, it has carried three other connotations in the Confucian tradition (Li 2010: 131): one, God or Emperor; two, a supernatural power, which usually denotes the existence of fate; and three, a materialist nature that is independent from the spiritual world.

With China’s large population and harsh geographical conditions, the prosperity and well being of its people are extremely vulnerable to natural disasters. There are historical records of China’s first ruler, Yu the Great, drawing up plans for flood control hydro-projects more than four millennia ago (Shapiro 2001: 7). What was probably more frightful in the memory of those living during the Cultural Revolution were the central China floods, which killed somewhere between two and four million people in 1931, and the Yellow River Floods of 1887. Population growth and new technological advances fueled a national drive towards mastery of nature during (years?) by means of large-scale projects such as dam construction. These
projects, combined with the over-farming of land, contributed to a pattern of “exhausting the earth” through habitat loss, deforestation, erosion, and desertification. When Mao came to power, he was able to capitalize on the historical Confucian tradition of regulating and ordering the environment for a rational extraction of resources and merge this Confucian, anthropocentric view with his Marxist-materialist ideology on total class struggle.

Mao’s Marxist, conflict-centered worldview, which advocated for continuous revolution and social restructuring, was initially directed towards the purging of external enemies who challenged China’s security. These external enemies included the Western imperialist powers (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and, eventually, the United States), which tried to break China up into “spheres of influence” for colonization. These enemies also included the Japanese in the Sino-Japanese War and the Kuomintang Party. The war contributed to instilling a military mindset registered in language; under Mao, Chinese people referred to one another as “comrades” and neighborhoods were called “regiments,” as they were always on the defensive toward an enemy attack. With the temporary defeat of the external enemies, the focus then shifted towards internal enemies who dissented from the Maoist vision. The definition of counterrevolutionary action was very loose, which led to the persecution of intellectuals, artists, teachers, writers, and thinkers. Neighborhood self-criticism sessions were mandatory, and, in them, people had to publicly purge their own thoughts if these were at all disloyal or ambivalent toward the Maoist doctrine.

In order to achieve the socialist utopia Mao envisioned, nature also had to be controlled. The urgency of this socialist imperative put China in competition with
Britain and other countries to produce as much as possible, which meant planning for a fantastic industrial output in a very condensed amount of time. A fear of lagging behind and the hope that Mao’s environmental campaigns would lift China out of poverty combined to fuel the promise of a glorious and harmonious future. Instead, the continuation of over-extraction of resources, intensive farming schemes, excessive well digging, and land reclamation projects eventually led to a net loss of 29 million hectares of farmland between 1957 and 1977 (Shapiro 2001: 13). Mao pitted humans against nature in such a way that being a good socialist subject meant enthusiastically participating in development projects that transformed and degraded the environment. Scientists, who cautioned against such projects, anticipating the long-term negative results, were immediately persecuted. Such is the story of Ma Yinchu, a demographer who warned about the dangers of a population explosion following a sharp increase of food production. Persecution of intellectuals and others who tried to dissent from Mao’s environmental policy “thus contributed indirectly to a dramatic decrease in the amount of arable land per person” (Shapiro 2001: 197) as sound scientific knowledge was ignored and environmentally harmful projects were pursued by the state. Refusing to take part in the environmental projects became a political crime. The socialist utopia depended on the control of nature by willing physical laborers, so the mass modernization projects had not only an environmental rationale but a political one as well.

How did Mao move millions of Chinese laborers into action? According to Shapiro, “the militarization of Chinese society in a war against foreign and domestic enemies was matched by a militarization against nature” (2001:12). The “Great
People’s Communes,” organized from collectives and villages, were mobilized to build dams, cut down trees, and terrace rocky hillsides in an almost super-human coordinated effort. To understand how the gargantuan project of refashioning the countryside was motivated, I return to the sublime and to the ways an ancient Chinese environmental story was co-opted in Mao’s propaganda posters.

Moving Mountains

“愚公移山” (yugong yishan or “The Old Man Who Moved the Mountains”) is the name of a well-known rock music club in Beijing, where my dad and I went to see a San Francisco strings trio concert for my birthday in the summer of my junior year. But yugong yishan is also a Chinese saying from an ancient Daoism text, and the four characters tell a story that Mao used for the purpose of political mobilization. Yugong yishan was the title for his 1945 speech at the Chinese Communist Party’s 7th National Congress, and ultimately became one of the most widely circulated propaganda slogans during the Cultural Revolution (Li 2010: 136). The story was included in the Little Red Book, a collection of Mao’s quotations, which were disseminated widely among the population. Many people had the contents of the book memorized by heart.

Yugong (old man) is a stubborn old farmer who is annoyed by the two big mountains that block the entrance to his house. Instead of moving away from the area, he is determined to move the mountains away by himself. Taking his two sons with him, he goes outside and starts chipping away at the rock with a hoe. An old
scholar walks by, and when he realizes what is transpiring, he ridicules the old man, saying that it is an impossibly foolish and hopeless endeavor to dig out the mountains. The old man retorts that after he dies, his sons will keep on digging, and after they die, their children will dig, and one day, the work of successive generations will finally remove the mountains from his house’s path. When god heard of this story, he was so moved by the old man’s determination that he sent down two fairies to carry the mountains away on their backs.

This story teaches the lesson that with the efforts of the collective across generations, tian (nature) can be conquered, whether it is by manual labor or the force of the supernatural. Either way, the loyalty of the old farmer is rewarded by a higher being that exists outside of the individual. Mao used this myth in many propaganda posters, elevating the old farmer to a hero whose voluntarism and hard work showed that nothing was impossible. The myth, in effect, was co-opted by state ideology in order to cultivate and motivate obedient subjects to tackle huge environmental projects, like the Dazhai dam, to fulfill human will and China’s socialist utopia. In the original 1945 speech, Mao meant for the two mountains to be the symbols of “imperialism” and “feudalism,” the two evils that had to be purged from China. But in the 1977 propaganda poster Move Mountains and Make New Land, the slogan yugong yishan is inscribed on the dam, relying on the literal meaning of “mountain” to exalt this environmental project.
The poster was part of a campaign to mobilize workers to build the Dazhai Dam, which Mao hoped would become a successful environmental model for other villages to follow. The project involved environmentally inappropriate terracing on steep slopes and encroaching on lakes and rivers to build new irrigation canals. What is interesting about this painting is that the beauty comes from a natural landscape clearly altered by human labor. The mountain is dramatically cut through to make way for the dam, which takes up the entire forefront of the poster. Rushing water flows in the human-made stream outlets. While brightly colored forests make up much of the poster, the amount of white, barren ground is also striking—the paths cut by tractors are undulated, and the white roads on the hill to the right were cut by workers to be used as paths for more work. The size of the mountain range is huge, appropriately disproportionate to the tiny, almost microscopic laborers who are driving the tractors and walking on top of the dam. Yet, the overwhelming feeling the
viewer gets from the painting is not from nature’s grandiosity, but from the ability of humans to change it, as visually, it is the actions of humans that make up most of the painting.

In an anonymous recollection, a former worker remembers:

During the movement of learning from Dazhai, I was a schoolteacher and led students to the riverbank and carried soil to it and made it into fields. One day about 100 handcarts of soil was carried and 10 mu of land was claimed. So long as Mao Zedong called on us to do this, we would do it without thinking. At that time every word he said was the truth. Students worked very hard…Fuping country where I stayed was one of the models in building reservoirs and water canals, etc. The engineering project was done beautifully. People from other counties came to learn from us. Mao said: “Water is the life of Agriculture.” (Chinese Political Posters 2006: 7).

The power of collective human effort here is similar to that of Mao as he strides over the mountain in *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*—humans are nature’s superiors and its transformers. The workers are literally moving the mountain, piece by piece, to make way for Mao’s project. The propaganda of Mao’s socialist utopia relies on an aesthetic of the sublime that Li Zehou states “is to be located in human beings’ active practice in transforming nature and society” (Ban 1997: 164). In Li’s theory of the sublime, he states that actions within the sublime are not exerted by individuals, but by “humankind’s socio-historical practice to transform the world” (Ban 1997: 164). Followingly, the collective human presence in the dam is instrumental to the large undertaking; the bright colors and inscribed slogans bring hope for a future in which nature is completely under human control. While the Kantian sublime constructs a contemplative human subject to be put in his “small place” in the face of nature’s greatness, Li’s sublime was couched in Maoist language
as moved by the collective’s “productive struggle, class struggle, and scientific experiments” (Ban 1997: 164). The sublime is not located in the individual’s mind but in the collective’s transformative practice; in this case, the building of the Dazhai dam for Mao’s Communist society.

**Adoration of the Sublime Figure**

In many portraits and paintings during the Cultural Revolution, Mao is depicted among farmers and peasants in intimate settings. He is seen conversing with them, eating with them, or even engaging in physical labor alongside them in the fields. These paintings reflect real life, as he would indeed make visits to the countryside, as reflected in the following recollection:

> When news came that Chairman Mao came to make an inspection of the tea hills, the peasants rushed from all sides to see him, cheered and were deeply moved. I remember I read some newspapers about the feelings of peasants when they saw Mao. They would say he was so occupied by state affairs, yet he still had us peasants in mind. He never forgot the peasants and he constantly showed his concern to us. We must work harder and produce more grain to show our gratitude and our love to him. (Chinese Political Posters 2006: 8)

As shown by the quote, the peasants’ relationship to Mao was at once intimate and affectionate as well as distanced: Mao was still a superior figure, remote in his political standing. Yet his greatness was even more so because he came down into the countryside to be with the common people. In many different posters, Mao is positioned as the sun and portrayed as a kind of savior of society, with titles such as “Mao is the sun in our hearts” and “The Growth of All Things Depend on the Sun.” People projected their wishes and hopes onto Mao, drawing motivation and energy
from him to work harder. It is interesting to note that the quoted worker expressed wanting to produce more grain not to have more food, but to show gratitude and love for Mao. With everyone’s energies and motivations focused on one person, the figure of the supreme leader, the collective also becomes united under him.

Figure 8: *The Growth of All Things Depends On the Sun*, 1975-1976.

To Ban, Mao was a sublime figure in that he inspired love and loyalty in a way that emulated religious feeling (1997: 206) for its total submission to authority. Like the figure of the old farmer in *yugong yishan*, Mao was a catalyst for action, leading China to realize its full human potential, “from a semi colonial and semi feudal country to a strong industrialized nation state” (192). Forging the subjects of this
strong state meant motivating its people through the aesthetics of the sublime: Ban
gives Chairman Mao the title of “statesman-poet” and calls the party-state an aesthetic
state (192). While environmental work and physical labor was a part of that state
making, Mao also inspired other acts such as self-criticism, public criticism, parades,
and rallies that made the individual perform in ritualized fashion. Criticism meetings
were often held in town squares, with mostly young people singling out anybody who
showed a hint of counter-revolutionary or intellectual sentiment. Much of it was a
performance that would publicly legitimize people’s devotions to Mao. Young Red
Guards would clamor to see just a sight of Mao at rallies in Tiananmen Square and
would find themselves overwhelmed at the emotional intensity of seeing their leader.
Whoever got to shake hands with Mao “would transfer the sacred touch to other
people, who would in turn pass on the magic power and the sacred aura” (Ban 1997:
206).

Wang Xingwei’s Response
Figure 9: Wang Xingwei, The Eastern/Oriental Way. 1995.

Figure 10: Wang Xingwei, X-ray. 2000.
These two paintings are a clear response to Liu Chunhua’s *Chairman Mao Goes To Anyuan*. The subject matter and contradictory treatment of Mao—both evoking and refashioning the icon and thus reworking the narrative—make it evident that the original propagandistic poster deeply affected Wang Xingwei, such as he made it the basis of these two parodies. Mittler explains the way in which Maoist propaganda have made their way into modern art and culture: “Propagemes like Mao….are attempts to express particular (and changing) emotional, cognitive and mental needs…Daily invocations of Mao provide a ‘moral economy’ for assessing and understanding the present” (2012: 26). In the present, the reflections on Mao are very confusing and mixed, as evidenced by the paintings. Some people have positive views of the time, recalling life under Mao as a period of employment security and relative social equality; but some have equally vivid memories of the period as marked by violence and fear (2012: 26).

As art historian Francesca Dal Lago explains in her article “Personal Mao: Reshaping an Icon in Contemporary Chinese Art”, within the Chinese population there are two age groups of Mao artists: the older generation who lived through the Cultural Revolution as young adults, and a later generation who were children and teenagers at the time of his death (1990: 50-51). For the latter, Mao does not hold the same amount of psychological confusion and entanglement, he is more of an “item of wall decoration or an image without depth that does not retain any personal significance” (Lago 1990: 51). But Wang Xingwei was born at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (Mittler 2012: 285) and evidently, the aesthetics of the *Chairman*
Mao Goes to Anyuan made a deep enough impression on him in that he revived their significance in his art.

*The Eastern/Oriental Way* shows a young Chinese man walking away from Anyuan, wearing a Westernized outfit of bright colors and carrying a pink umbrella. He looks well groomed, and his slacks suggest that he is a businessman. Given that this painting was done in the 1990s, when Deng Xiaoping was expanding Chinese business globally, Wang Xingwei could be suggesting the new horizons emerging for Chinese people beyond its borders. As we see the man walking into the unknown, instead of a directed path towards Anyuan, there is quality of freedom and exploration. By taking Mao out of the picture and replacing him with an anonymous businessman, Wang is also breaking down the narrative that Mao or any other leader will lead China on the road to prosperity—it will be the regular individual who is able to walk above the same mountaintops. Upon seeing the painting, Chinese viewers will simultaneously feel a set of associations with the original image and the hilarity of the reinterpretation (Dal Logo: 1999: 54). The ideological identification is present, and key to understanding the significance of the painting’s changes.

*X-ray* is a multi-layered, grey toned version of *Anyuan*. Instead of conveying Mao as a figure triumph and strength, the painting conveys weakness and even a bit of sorrow. Two older Maos are superimposed on the younger, original Mao, with one of them holding the other one in an awkward, almost grotesque position. It is a shock to see Mao stumbling, exuding not strength or happiness but weakness and instability; a portrayal of an aging Mao as a weakened person would not have been
allowed during the Cultural Revolution. By portraying Mao’s human vulnerability, he is less of a God, and the “x-ray” reveals the original to be fake and unrealistic.

These modern reinterpretations by Wang Xingwei of Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan show a reworking of meaning and intention of the Maoist sublime, by breaking apart the established systems of representation of Mao during the Cultural Revolution. However, this is just one context in which desublimation is carried out. Ban writes: “like many people of my generation, I have become tired of the sublime and the grandiose” (1997: 264). If this is the case, then what are other ways in which artists have potentially challenged and “desublimated” the representation of Mao and the Cultural Revolution? I look to other ways in which visuals can manifest and be seen by a larger audience, as did the countless Mao trinkets and posters as they proliferated both private and public realms during the Cultural Revolution.
Chapter Three
Discursive Spaces for New Meanings

I. The Globalization and the Commodification of China

My favorite childhood memories in China include going to the children’s floor of the neighborhood department store with my cousins in Changsha, a city in Hunan province, gleefully using the Chinese New Year money our grandparents had given us to buy gifts for one another. Throughout the years as I returned to Changsha, Beijing, and Shanghai for family visits, I accumulated a number of wacky goods: a paper clip holder in the form of a magnetic mini-sink, a pig-shaped desk vacuum, and a flattened neon vase. From cute, cartoon-decorated stationery to pirated DVDs, Chinese goods deftly exploit a sense of novelty. While I cannot say anything about the quality of these goods, the ingenuity and imagination of Chinese manufacturers is impressive.

At the same time, American brand stores have poured into China at a seemingly exponential rate in the last decade. I distinctly remember proudly showing off my new iPod to my cousins, who hadn’t heard of Apple before. Then, two summers later, they owned models newer than mine. When I was young, the Starbucks by my grandparents’ apartment was where I got my fix of American food, but now there are a plethora of choices to select from, from Baskin Robbins to Pizza Hut. My favorite stores have also started appearing in China: Forever 21, Sephora, and H&M. No longer were my cousins asking me to bring them back tank tops and makeup—they could buy their own American goods just a short bus ride away. And
indeed, they did. Their knowledge and desire for high-end brands far outpaces mine and that of my American friends. It seems like the desire to have well-known branded makeup isn’t so much a craving for better, high quality makeup, but an urge to take part in a trend of knowing American culture and products. It has become a trendy status marker. As Sun Shijin, director of the Psychology Research Center at Fudan University, said in a China Daily article: “purchasing power of Chinese citizens is rising along with the development of the commodity economy…conspicuous consumption during a period of social transition is an inevitable process of social development” (Woke 2011). Currently, Chinese wallets account for half of the world’s luxury spending (Economist 2014).

China’s assimilation into the global market started with the fundamental changes to economic policy that took place under Deng Xiaoping’s reform program. The program gaige kaifang, which translates to ‘reform and opening, began in 1979. This triggered high-speed economic development and a quick embrace of the global market, both of which signaled a departure from the revolutionary idealism and isolated self-reliance of Mao’s economic policies (Kang 2004: 11). Gaige kaifang meant reorienting China’s economy and society to the rest of the world while a historic transition was underway globally with the end of the Cold War.

Globalization, in the sense of dominance of “global communication and information systems, a global entertainment industry, and popular culture” (Kang 2004: 11), pushed China’s residents into a free market in which a limitless selection of products can be bought—if not in stores, then online. Censorship has not hampered the
enormous impact of the Internet and the emergence of 649 million netizens.⁴ Nowadays, “Get online!” is the most kitsch slogan among teenagers and millions of youth (Kang 2004: 78). My favorite mobile messaging app isn’t iMessage or What’s App, but WeChat, a platform developed in China that has seamlessly integrated voice message, newsfeed, and photo-taking features—like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and iMessage all rolled into one⁵, with the additional features added. My cousins and my parents are now sending me more animated gifs and emoticons than my friends in the United States.

Starting in 1979, Deng Xiao Ping’s slogans “getting rich is glorious” and “let a part of the population get rich first” (Kang 2004: 10) constituted a direct contradiction to the egalitarian and national-interest minded slogans of Mao. Gone were the sentiments that richness and materialism were signs of an anti-revolutionary and bourgeois lifestyle; in the past, these had been reasons for house searches by the Red Guards—jewelry would be snatched, vases smashed, and any other luxury belongings thrown out to the street as a gesture of public scorn. Deng’s reforms, in contrast, spurred a materialist lifestyle that “caters to the wish-fulfillments of material and body desires and promotes...a particular kind of middle class lifestyle of the advanced, postindustrial, and postmodern societies in the West” (Kang 2004: 345). In the years of visiting my extended family in Changsha, the rate at which they accumulated goods was astonishing—by now, each of my cousin’s families has at least one car and my youngest aunt gives me her hand-me-down clothing, which is mostly

⁴ As of December 2014. Carsten, “China’s internet population hits 649 million, 86 percent on phones”.
⁵ Surprisingly, a number of friends in the United States and Europe have added me as a contact on WeChat—suggesting that they are trying to go global.
brand-name European clothing. On a surface level, the dizzying rate of change and spending among people joining the ranks of the middle and upper classes show that the Chinese have earnestly welcomed their place in the global economic capital system.

Liu Kang argues, in his book *Globalization and Cultural Trends in China*, that even though China is now intertwined within the global capitalist system, its transformation and own form of modernization does not easily fit into a Western postmodern framework. He argues in favor of the logical and historical necessity for each country, from India to Russia to Cuba, to construct their own alternative modernity, since the “specificities of each nation-state’s encounter with modernity constitute irrefutable differences and alternatives to Eurocentric, capitalist modernity” (2004: 27). For China, that specificity lies in the remaining significance of its revolutionary legacy, the clearest manifestation of which is the continued power and authority of the Communist Party. The more elusive and seemingly contradictory dimension of this legacy involves the aesthetics of revolutionary propaganda being reproduced in a market economy, shaping a different relationship between producer and consumer as well as producing a symbolic value of how the revolution is remembered. Along with the growth of global brand markets in China, the proliferation of shops and tourist markets selling Maoist and Cultural Revolution inspired commodities suggest its legacy is materially and publicly present in the economic and cultural sphere, as the images are widely produced, sold, and purchased. But how can we know what meanings are prescribed to them? Chen Xiaoming’s definition of the “post-politics” of Chinese contemporary films reveal the
complexities and slippages of this question: “Everything is political and nothing is political at one and the same time; politics is everywhere and yet it subverts itself at any moment” (quoted in Kang 2004: 84).

**Desublimation: Commodification and the Aesthetic**

In his search to understand China’s alternative modernity, Kang writes that “What remains to be seen is whether the dialectics of history can turn these cultural contradictions (the Chinese legacy of the culture of the masses) into creativity or further reification” (2004: 101). The Maoist and Cultural Revolution commodities serve as valuable objects for this investigation, as they attest to the relevancy of the revolutionary iconographic legacy while being materially manifest in today’s new and creative forms. Ban’s desublimation framework suggests that China’s alternative modernity can be seen in the ways “the political is channeled into the aesthetic” (1997: 230), as cultural reflection over the Cultural Revolution leads to the questioning and attempted demolition of the established system of representation.

What are the characteristics of desublimation for objects that function both as commodities and as re-appropriations of the Cultural Revolution’s visual repertoire? Some of the general aspects align with the characteristics Ban identified for the desublimation of literary texts—a restructuring of the revolutionary narrative and a dismantling of the legacy of Mao as hero and God of the people. Ban writes of a general counter-culture emerging after the 1980s, when “traumatized scarred bodies, writers and intellectuals inquired into what had gone wrong with Chinese culture” (Ban 1997: 230) in an act of critical reflection that, he asserts, aimed to demolish the
aesthetic of the sublime. But the forces driving the production and consumption of commodities and their impact on such interactions with Mao’s legacy are outside of his analysis. To make his ideas applicable, there are two new elements to be explored here: the commodification process, in which objects are produced and consumed in retail markets such as the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center gift store, shops, and tourist markets; and the visual interventions, in which propaganda art is reworked in a range of humorous, ironic, absurd ways, such as in Obamao.

As per Ban’s assertion that desublimation does not directly contradict the power of the sublime, Kang writes: “Mao’s revolutionary ideological hegemony has been deradicalized, and its meaning and content have been made hollow, but its discursive formations and rhetoric still provide the legitimation for the post-Deng regime” (2004: 4-5). The hollowness is key here: while the framework of the propaganda aesthetics remains, new meanings and sentiments toward Mao and the Cultural Revolution emerge after the visual goes through commodification and aesthetic interventions. While there is a renewed visual occurrence of Mao, the god-like icon of the Cultural Revolution, there are complex, contradictory forces at work that show detachment as well as a warmth and closeness that is associated with humor. To help me analyze this important additional dimension to Ban’s concept of desublimation, I will use the work of Kang, Minna Valjakka, and Francesca Dal Logo to analyze the way commodities create “discursive space(s) where different, sometimes antithetical, ideological strategies are negotiated, often simultaneously” (Dal Logo 1999: 47). These discursive spaces exist in the same public spaces wherein state-sponsored narratives are visualized in places like Tiananmen Square and the
National Museum, illuminating the ways in which “legitimation” of the current regime is unwittingly challenged and contested through the manipulated visuals of the commodities. Artists and manufacturers outside of the state produce these manipulations and re-appropriations.

**MaoCult Commodities – Past and Present**

While tourist markets in China illustrate the commercial dimension of the contemporary nostalgia for the Cultural Revolution, the scope of commodification of propagandistic art was massive even within that period (Mittler 2012: 325). Geremie Barme in *Shades of Mao* argues that these two periods—the years of the Cultural Revolution and the present opening to global markets—are marked by “cults”: the personality cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution and the posthumous cult, initiated in the late 1980s. The latter was characterized by an awareness of the international reception of Mao and a drive for commercial profit (Barme 1996), and initiated by regular people—vendors and consumers—instead of the authorities. The commodities come in even more varied forms than during the Cultural Revolution, as “it is not just posters, silk screens, badges, paper cuts, postal stamps, Red Books or nail clippers—but bank notes, T-shirts, cuff links, glow-in-the-dark busts, lighters, pendants, talismans, watches, and most ingeniously, perhaps, the ‘Mao’s pad’ mousepads” (Mittler 2012: 326). The image of Mao, once so carefully cultivated and under strict governmental control, including what hues were to be used, is now deployed as a sort of “visual currency” (Dal Logo 1999: 50) in which new
manipulations and interpretations are freely overlaid by artists and commodity producers.

When thinking about commodities, it is useful to use Arjun Appadurai’s definition of the commodity as a thing with a non-static value, which changes according to context. In *The Social Life of Things*, such a context refers to the “variety of social arenas, within or between cultural units, that help link the commodity candidacy of a thing to the commodity phrase of its career” (Appadurai 1986: 15). Therefore, in the trajectory of an object’s existence, their value can change within the context they are consumed—in this instance, it is the difference between an object existing during the Cultural Revolution, when Mao’s image was treated with a god-like reverence, and the capitalist market today, in which an object turns into a relic valued with an exorbitantly high price. For example, a Mao badge that was mass produced by the state and worn by the Chinese as a crucial symbol of loyalty (and, if not, one ran a risk of being labeled a counter-revolutionary) is now auctioned as a piece of Mao memorabilia for record prices at Sotheby’s (Mittler 2012: 325).

The sublime narrative of Mao’s elevated God-like status infused commodities with an aura that affected the ways they were acquired and exchanged. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao commodities were often sold below manufacturing costs or even given as gifts (Leese 2009: 244). A portrait or one of his many quotes would be printed on these commodities, ranging from house goods like towels, pillows, and carpets to novelty items such as toys and large metal shields to attach to motorcycles and cars (Leese 2009: 244). It speaks to the religious reverence many felt towards Mao that it was deemed sacrilegious to sell the commodities to earn a profit. When
acquiring a Mao portrait from a shop, one even used the word *qing* “请,” a polite expression used to acquire sacrificial objects (Mittler 2012: 325), instead of the word *mai* “买,” which means to buy or purchase. Copies of his Little Red Books were even contained in traditional silk bags previously used for Buddhist sutras (Leese 2009: 244). In this sense, their exchange value became social and religious instead of monetary, and they functioned to spread the official narrative of Mao.

In stark contrast, Mao commodities still surviving today are considered elite art commodities and are sold for extremely high prices. As mentioned before, Western auction houses such as Sotheby’s often sell Cultural Revolution relics, describing them as some of the most potent and fascinating propaganda art of the twentieth century. For instance, one advertisement describing an April 2001 auction reads as follows: “This online auction features a collection of remarkable artifacts, carefully selected to reflect the range of objects used to disseminate the gospel of Chairman Mao” (Mittler 2012: 8). Sotheby’s frames the artifacts with religious sentiment, intentionally using their functionality under Mao’s god-like reverence to add monetary value. Reconceived reproductions of Mao commodities, such as Little Red Book key chains, Mao hats, and even old military style water jugs, are sold for lower prices in tourist markets, street side vendors, and even in subway stations near large malls. Where these reconceived reproductions of Mao goods are sold shapes the flexibility of their prices; some tourists and locals are able to haggle intensely in outdoor markets, where every vendor sells a similar selection of goods. The crux of the matter, however, is that these commodities and visuals underwent
metamorphosis, as things intended for other uses are now placed into the commodity state (Appadurai 1986: 16) in a market system where they acquire exchange value and turn a hefty profit.
II. The Shanghai Propaganda Art Center

A strange co-existence of propaganda posters as relics and their re-appropriated counterparts as commodities exists in the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center. It is where I purchased a shirt with an image from the *Red Detachment of Women*, one of the eight state-produced propagandistic plays of the Cultural Revolution. The museum, existing as what Ban would call a market-oriented cultural institution (2012: 230), straddles two intersecting functionalities, acting as both an art preservation center and as a place where history is commoditized for the museum visitor’s consumption in the gift store.

The “About Us” page on the museum’s official website speaks of a remarkable origin story, as well as the inclusion of several interesting details that illuminates its tensions:

Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center is a remarkable private museum and only one of this kind in China, dedicated to documented the changes of modern China as depicted on thousands of striking posters from 1910 to 1990. A labor of love, the museum was founded by Yang Peiming, who grew concerned about both the poster art and the unusual history. Yang Peiming started to collect posters ever since 1995 when all the government organizations deleted the propaganda materials due to the political reasons.

The museum was set up at 2002 by one room and gradually developed into three rooms of 400 square meters by 2010. In March 2012, the museum obtained the official license from the government. The official name in Chinese is Shanghai Yang Peiming Propaganda Poster Art Museum, but we still maintain the original English name as this name has been used for quite a few years in media and publication.

Now the museum has a collection of 6000 Chinese propaganda posters from 1940 to 1990, with an addition collection of hundreds of Shanghai Lady Calendar posters from 1910 to 1940. The museum is proud of this best and most collection in the world.
The museum is interested in travel exhibitions as well as doing lectures and cultural exchange with different institutions and schools around the world. (Shanghai Propaganda Art Center)

For a country that does not publicly remember, much less memorialize the tragedies that took place under Mao’s Communist Party rule, the museum’s very existence seems to contradict the widespread reputation of the Chinese government as an iron-fisted and censorship-driven regime. The television show *The Big Bang Theory* and the daily *New York Times* are censored, yet the thousands of propaganda posters issued from 1949 to 1979, during China’s most tumultuous times, remain openly displayed on the museum’s walls. The Cultural Revolution is glossed over in school curricula in a quick sentence that depicts the period as a “mistake,” and there is no public recognition of the millions of lives lost during that time period. Despite the lack of explicit, official recognition of these events today, however, there were once some failed attempts to build a remembrance museum.

In 1988, the UNESCO-sponsored International Museum Association and the Chinese Museum Association planned to jointly fund the creation of a nonprofit Cultural Revolution research center and museum, inspired by writer Ba Jin’s call to action in his essay “A CultRev Museum.” In this essay, he wrote: “None of us want to see another Cultural Revolution in China. Another disaster like that would signal the end of our nation…It is extremely important that we build this Museum, for only in remembering the ‘past’ can we be masters of the ‘future’” (Barme 1996: 204). The planning committee, which consisted of the board of directors of the Shanghai Museum Society, issued a call to the public for ideas. The response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic, prompting 29,872 letters, 367 visitors, and 574 calls in
only twenty three days, with many people contributing new ideas to the proposal, such as the establishment of a “CultRev Research Institute,” a “CultRev Archive, etc.” (Barme 1996: 205). The detailed proposal that resulted from this public process covered everything from the content of the three exhibition halls to the design of the main entrance. Ultimately, however, the project failed. According to Zhou Jihou, it “was buried under red tape and little further progress was made…” (Barme 1996: 206). He does not go into specifics, but it is not hard to understand why the government would not want such a museum to be built—the proposal called for one hall to be dedicated to the memories of various artists and writers that had died during the Cultural Revolution after persecution.

The Shanghai Propaganda Art Center is not focused on remembrance of specific individuals, nor did a committee plan its inception—it was privately conceived and started by an art collector called Yang Peiming, who is now the director of the only museum in China that displays a thorough history of the revolution through its original propaganda posters.

My Visit

I visited the museum in the summer of 2013 when I was in Shanghai interning for an environmental consulting non-profit. That summer, I came to appreciate why the city is considered China’s art capital. The architecture of the city is a fascinating mix of Art Deco buildings, classic Parisian style houses against the backdrop of modern skyscrapers, and Chinese residential courtyard complexes. The Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center is located in the French Concession, a foreign enclave
once administered by the French between 1849 and 1943, and now still a popular neighborhood for expats as well as local Chinese to live, shop, and enjoy nightlife. On the way to the Center, I passed by several small Chinese noodle and dumpling restaurants, as well as an Italian gelato café, a pho restaurant, and a jazz café.

There are no signs that direct the curious tourist towards the museum, so the first time I visited, it took my friends Ben and Hans and me half an hour of circling around a block before finally realizing that the museum had been right in front of us. The directions that I had found on Trip Advisor and Time Out Shanghai led us to a seemingly ordinary Chinese apartment complex, complete with cars and Chinese aiyi’s coming in and out with wheeled grocery bags. We stood puzzled outside the entrance to the complex until I saw a young white couple emerge from one of the apartment buildings. Acting on instinct, I approached them and asked if they knew where the propaganda museum was. They nodded, pointed to where they had come from, and said, “It’s down there.”

Excitement and trepidation hung in the air as we stepped into the elevator. A small round sticker reading “Shanghai Propaganda Art Center” was next to the LG (lower ground) button—the only bit of explicit direction in the entire search. As we descended into the basement, I was brimming with curiosity to see what awaited us.

The doors opened to white bathroom with tiled walls and a dimly lit, awkwardly shaped hallway. A mop leaned against a door and an umbrella stood in a green washing bucket. Without the signage that was now plastered everywhere—red arrows pointing to the “Gift Shop” and “Exhibition Room” and a cheerful Mao poster
that said “Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Center”—the basement would have looked like the storage and cleaning supplies area of any ordinary building.

The arrow reading “Exhibition Room” pointed to a door to our left. Heavy plastic strips covered the entryway. We walked through it and were immediately bombarded with color. Large framed posters filled the walls of the irregularly shaped room, in all different proportions and sizes, but fitting together so closely that there was hardly any brown wall space between them. I couldn’t believe the sheer number of them, and how striking they were: bright yellows and reds dominated the color spectrum, depicting heroic and tragic scenes in great detail. Right in front of us was a large board of English text with “ART TELLS HISTORY” emblazoned in red at the top. I was jolted by how eloquent, authoritative, and self-aware the writing was:

This collection is a remarkable look into the twentieth century history of China. The posters serve as a valuable historical document and provide an idealized account of a key period in global history. As Winston S. Churchill famously said, “The Empire of the future will be the empire of the mind.” In the days before CNN and Fox News, a still image truly was worth a thousand words, and these posters were how Mao and his group informed and restored the collective mind of the Chinese people...

The Chinese propaganda posters are the most rich in contents and styles. The early posters had a surreal cartoonist style reminiscent of European early forays into the new medium of large-scale industrial print propaganda...Great Leap Forward and Cold War posters of the later 1950s and early 1960s saw quite a few interesting creations of folk art painting. The shift to the red-art style of the Cultural Revolution—which largely featured violent and militaristic themes—is sudden, and gives the readers some impression of the chaotic zeitgeist of that era. (Shanghai Propaganda Art Center)
As this was the first time I had been taught about the Cultural Revolution from a source inside of China, I was completely awed by how much information was in front of me. The fact that the writing opened with a quote by Winston Churchill and referenced American news outlets Fox News and CNN not only made the historical contents of the museum seem more contemporary and global, but it also made me realize they were catering to a Western audience. In fact, all the other explanation boards, dense with history and context that explained the period of the chronologically displayed posters, were in English and French. Looking around at the eight to ten people who were already there, I noticed that Hans and I were the only Chinese visitors. On every wall there was a “No Photography Allowed” sign.

After we started making our way through the chronologically displayed posters, a short Chinese man in his sixties came over to us and handed Ben, Hans, and I three strips of paper. He waited there, with a fanny pack on his waist. I realized that “10 Yuan” were printed on bottom of the strips and that these were tickets we were expected to pay for. We quickly took notes out of our wallet and gave them to him.
Ben, Hans and I made our way through the museum silently, only speaking to excitedly point out specific posters to each other. The same imagery and aesthetics that I had seen on wallets, notebooks, and key chains in tourist markets were now here in their full, original glory. Posters with Mao in his heroic and godly stance were to be expected, but I was surprised to see Americans and the British depicted in so many of the posters. They were drawn with green heads and grotesque features, marked as bad influences to be kicked out of the country. Several posters cheered Chinese workers on to pass the industrial production levels of Britain and the Soviet Union.

In a separate corner of the room, an old picture of a street in China showed low apartment buildings covered in white paper bursting with black ink calligraphy. The explanation board stated that these were *dazibao*, public criticisms that neighbors, friends, workers, students, and teachers wrote to accuse each other of being reactionaries. I had never tangibly felt or seen the paranoia and fear that the Cultural Revolution was known to have seeded in people—but as I stared at the picture from only forty years ago—a man riding his bike through the street below the loud and black-inked accusations, a scene of ordinariness—I felt frightened. It also felt wrong that such beautiful calligraphy was being used for such ugly purposes. A few pieces of original *dazibao* were also framed and displayed, taking up an entire wall. The lines of black characters sometimes had another layer of writing on top, in a different color. These were the accused trying to defend themselves.

As with all museums, a sign directed us towards the gift store upon exiting the exhibition space. We entered a sizable room, much smaller than the exhibition space,
but still holding an immense number of products that reproduced the visuals we had just seen. Covering the walls of the room were posters of small, medium, and large lengths, some with framed versions as well. A wooden shelf stood in the corner, with rows and rows of postcards, each a mini print of the propaganda original. Certain images were also available on more functional goods such as tote bags, t-shirts, notebooks, and playing cards. One image stood out to me in particular: a group of young women with short haircuts holding rifles on a stage, their figures in a rigid *arabesque* and their pointed shoes a strange contrast to their blue military uniforms. The red color of their Communist armbands and the cherry blossoms in the background contrasted stunningly with the blue sky and their uniforms. It was evidently a popular image, as I found it on a variety of goods. Ultimately, I chose to purchase its reproduction on a white t-shirt.

**Exposing the Sublime**

We left the museum and emerged into bright Shanghai sunlight in disbelief. So much of China’s controversial modern history had been revealed to us in a small basement in an apartment complex. Going underground to uncover information about China’s normally suppressed history felt like an act of transgression, a direct contrast to walking in the open but closely watched Tiananmen Square and the guarded National Museum, where only government-authorized historical narratives are offered. The intensely unstructured and informal practices of the museum—tickets are sold by an approaching man, and basement signs are papers tacked to the walls—are a respite from the rigidly controlled museums in Tiananmen Square.
After further online research, however, I discovered that the museum, privately owned by self-proclaimed art collector Yang Peiming, obtained a legal license from the government in 2012 (Enright 2012). It seemed strange that the museum was government approved, and yet, as the fullest collection of Chinese propaganda posters in the world, it occupied a dingy basement in an unadvertised apartment building. In an interview with British travel writer Becki Enright, Yang explains that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, “all the propaganda materials including the posters were thrown out from governmental organizations, museums, libraries, and other cultural centers” (Enright 2012), making his endeavor to save so many posters seemingly subversive to the Communist Party agenda. While the relationship between the government and Yang is mysterious as the museum’s existence is perplexing, I will not attempt to determine how exactly the museum is allowed to exist, as many unknown factors (such as his guanxi, or connections) could be the cause. Instead, I want to ask a more tenable question: What happens to the meanings of the sublime in these posters when they are re-contextualized in this way? Does the exhibition room, with original posters and an unofficial historical narrative, effect a form of desublimation?

Ban states that the literary desublimation movement started with “a series of cultural self-reflections and critiques” (1997: 230) once the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976. This included a questioning of the rationale for seemingly ordinary bombardment of propaganda, and a newly gained understanding of what it was produced for: to uphold Mao and to make individuals “strive for the sublime subjectivity of history and to model themselves on lofty revolutionary heroes” (1997: 230).
I would argue that the exhibition room of the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center is one of the few places in which this kind of critical self-reflection is guided and materially narrated. While the museum is called an “art center”, it is evident in its official website description (Shanghai Propaganda Art Center) that it doesn’t merely strive to preserve a certain kind of object or aesthetic:

Today China’s economic path to prosperity is well defined. But with the shift toward a more modern and forward-thinking China, it would be a mistake to forget our recent history. In the memory of that important historical era, our art center is very proud to be the only place in China to offer all of these posters together as most of the posters were destroyed due to different political changes in the past years.

As with the introductory board “Art Tells History,” the role of the propaganda posters exhibition is to make relevant a time period that is hardly talked about or publicly remembered. The museum asserts a role in contributing to (re)write China’s history and shaping its future as it moves forward in its ‘economic path to prosperity’, or as Kang would say, its alternative modernity. By showing the original posters alongside historical narrative, the function of the cheery optimism and the grand, heroic slogans are exposed. The narrative of Mao’s Communist ideology is made clear in its construction, rooting the human and social destruction of the Cultural Revolution on an aesthetic of the sublime that is still used in China today, such as in Tiananmen Square. When I saw the posters, the overwhelming feelings I experienced did not reify Mao’s power, but rather demystified his aura as I saw how emotions and aesthetics were harnessed in everyday life to elevate his status. The “repressive tyranny of the sublime subjectivity imposed by the party-state” (Ban 1997: 230) is revealed, thereby acting like a warning of the power of propaganda.
Yang refers to himself as an art collector and the museum is officially known as an art center, but the posters are undeniably both political and aesthetic objects. For at least the *dazibao*, we get a personal glimpse into his rationale behind displaying them, from their description on the museum’s official website (Shanghai Propaganda Art Center):

I was a university student during the Cultural Revolution. The school campus was full of Dazibao, posted on walls. Even today, when I close my eyes, I can still see them vividly in my mind. I never expected that, years later, I would be showing Dazibao as art. I smile with satisfaction when visitors walk into the exhibition room and express great surprise upon seeing the collection. I am very proud to be the first person to *discover the art value of Dazibao*? These posters are unsurpassed as people’s art, not only as a historical witness of the Cultural Revolution, but also as priceless treasures of Chinese contemporary art.

Yang’s attachments to these original *dazibao* are rooted in his first hand experiences being surrounded by them, while a student at the university. He witnessed how they were used in their most explicit political function: to intimidate and accuse people of counter-revolutionary ideas. In Yang’s decontextualization of their political motivations, the aesthetics are separated from their function, as he considers himself the first person to “discover” the art value of the *dazibao*. What is striking is how he brings them up at all: Being such reminders of the perpetration of cruelty and chaos, how is he able to bring them back so apparently dispassionately form his personal memories?

Lauren Berlant builds upon the notion of crisis ordinariness by writing about “cruel attachments,” a condition in which people maintain attachments to

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7 Emphasis is my own.
significantly problematic objects (2011: 24). They are drawn to its potentialities for optimism, she writes, as “what matters is the presence of a relation that invests an object/scene with the prospect of the world’s continuity” (Berlant 2011: 52). One could argue, then, that Yang is attached to the dazibao not only because they were personally formative, his memories of them so vivid that he can see them when he closes his eyes, but also because they represent a painful history that is very much a part of him yet is not acknowledged in the current regime. As noted in the first website excerpt, he wants these propaganda posters to be relevant in shaping China’s future. His eagerness to show the dazibao can be read as an act of affective attachment, as a “knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so much overwhelming yet sustaining negation” (2011: 52). By displaying them materially, he is making sure the world he knew still exists and maintains relevance, asserting its historical significance as the witness to the Cultural Revolution that he was.

The Gift Store

A hallway separates the exhibition room in which the propaganda posters, narrating China’s chaotic and traumatic past, are displayed, and the room in which these very visuals are sold as commodities. Once the museumgoer walks through this hallway, the charged meanings of the posters change, as they are now printed onto t-shirts, posters, postcards, and playing cards, resized and retouched for the museumgoer to take home. Therefore, the museum embodies an interesting contradiction: While the function of the exhibition room is to present relics of the
historical past, the gift store commoditizes the experience, desublimating the overwhelming experience into small objects for fixed prices.

Appadurai calls this phenomenon “diversion,” in which formerly protected things are drawn into the zone of commoditization: “the calculated and ‘interested’ removal of things from an enclaved zone to one where exchange is less confined and more profitable” (1994: 2). In this case, the gift store contains commodities that are rendered profitable by visitors’ initial experiences in the exhibition hall: the value of a normally simple white cotton t-shirt or deck of playing cards is enhanced by the visuals that are now understood to be of important significance. According to Appadurai, the combination of “the aesthetic impulse, the entrepreneurial link, and the touch of the morally shocking” (1994: 89) is what makes up the aesthetic of decontextualization in its diversion. With the image being reprinted in a new context, the producer is aware of and interested in the new meaning that it produces: an object of novelty attractive to the consumer, which can then generate profit. In the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center, the producer is relying on the historical power of these propagandistic images and the quality of their aesthetic languages to sell the commodities. This “entrepreneurial link” is certainly not limited to this museum alone since most historical spaces and museums in the world today commodify the contents of their exhibition rooms as well. However, given the fact that these propaganda posters are extremely valuable both in the rarity of their display and the normally silenced historical narrative they exhibit, their diversion into commodities strikes as a more extreme leap of detachment for the viewer to go through.
The intended audience for the museum is mostly international tourists, or people who don’t know much about the Cultural Revolution: the explanation boards are only in French and English, the museum is heavily advertised on English travel websites as a must-see, and the museum’s website itself is mostly in English. In this sense, the museum’s commodities can tentatively fall under the realm of tourist art, a special commodity traffic, in which, according to Appadurai, “the group identities of producers are tokens for the status politics of consumers” (1986: 47). However, in the museum, the group identities of the producers are changed as well as a result of their production and distribution of these commodities. By commoditizing these visuals, the producer negotiates with the traumatic past suggested by the posters in the exhibition hall, exercising power and authority to desublimate its historical meaning into works of art and novelty. There is an undeniable tension in that “not all parties share the same interests in any specific regime of value” (Appadurai 1994: 2), in that only people who did not experience the Cultural Revolution would be detached enough to buy shirts or hang posters in their homes. However, the transformative power of the producer in this context cannot be understated, because the last time these visuals were made into objects, they were treated as if they had a religious-like sacred aura, and the very idea of selling them for profit was taboo.
The shirt I purchased contained a still from the *Red Detachment of Women*, one of the most famous operas of the Cultural Revolution. It is an immediately recognizable and striking image; the play is one of eight “Model Operas” that Mao and his wife Jiang Qing developed to replace the consumption of traditional Chinese opera or Western films, condemned as bourgeois art (Jiang 2013). The vivid colors and sharp, rigid poses are the result of Jiang Qing’s direction. According to the photographer Zhang Yaxin, she “produced detailed manifestos that defined every detail of the performance, right down to the exact placement of badges on the performers’ sleeves” (quoted in Jiang 2013). The operas can be interpreted as the state’s artistic achievements most in line with Mao’s approach of the aesthetics in service to the political, as espoused in the Yan’an Talks. Military heroes and peasants acted out the carefully scripted performances, which were produced in “every town
and village across the country to inform the masses about revolutionary history” (Jiang 2013).

Not only were the performances reenacted in propaganda troupes, but they were also filmed and the songs recorded, bombarding the public with an endless stream of images and music. The Eight Model Operas were the only form of entertainment politically acceptable to be consumed by the public (Ban 1997: 213). These plays disseminated an ideology that encouraged the communist subjugation of the individual will to the greater good, and as a result, they “oriented the viewer’s taste, penetrated into their feelings, and shaped their aesthetic judgments” (Ban 1997: 213). The sublime and the heroic became the standards of beauty, dramatizing its consumption with characters for people to relate to and narratives for people to strive for. This particular image of gun-toting female revolutionaries is known to have exemplified beauty in China for a generation (Jiang 2013), imprinting its aesthetic influence to other theater productions, even though the beauty was employed for propagandistic purposes.

The shirt is far from the first post-revolutionary deployment of the Eight Model Works. Representations of these works are prominent in the public sphere. In “Reinventing the ‘Red Classics’ in the Age of Globalization,” Liu Kang argues that the state uses visual representations (film, TV drama, music) to capture nostalgia for that time, to “mummify” history in creating commodities in popular culture sectors (2009: 345). While he writes about the political endeavor to keep representations of the Eight Model Works under official control and the government’s wish to maximize profit (Kang 346), however, Kang does not specify how individual agents outside of the
government partake in this ideological reconstruction as well, which is crucial to understanding reformed meanings of these works of art today. Moreover, in his analysis of “reinventions”, he only looks at electronic and multimedia reproductions inspired by the revolutionary operas.

Objects carry a different functionality that do not fit neatly under Kang’s “mummification” of history. I argue that the shirt, along with the store’s other commodities, decontextualizes the image to a point that it escapes the state’s post-socialist project, but in its allusion to it becomes an object of irony and kitsch. It is reminiscent of the irony that dramatist Yan Tang Yuen, explores in relation to the audience reception, among the young and the old, to opera revivals in her documentary “Yang Ban Xi: The Eight Model Works”. She describes teenagers flocking to see them: “[T]hey regard them as] funny and campy—they look at the operas with so much irony. They liked them but they laugh about them” (Macnab 2005: 1). The placement of the image on a shirt even further decontextualizes its function as a theatrical propaganda aesthetic, especially as it punctuates its new framing with the URL “www.shanghaipropagandaart.com” printed underneath. The shirt, and the rest of the store’s commodities, do not fit neatly under Kang’s “mummification” of history, as the forms of agency that people have to produce, consume, and use the s commodities lie outside of the government’s control.

In the museum’s gift store, the social contexts and meanings of the goods transcend their use values. Appadurai expounds on this further, writing about the political nature of the exchange process, which is such that seemingly “ordinary dealings would not be possible were it not for a broad set of agreements concerning
what is desirable…and who is permitted to exercise what kind of effective demand in what circumstances” (1994: 2). Selling these visuals in a capitalist, for-profit framework desublimates them by not only stripping them of their function and context, but also giving the producer—the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center—agency in deciding how the visuals are to be consumed and by making possible new desires. In this case, “what is desirable” is the desublimated irony that recasts the power of propaganda visuals now in commodity form, drawing from its former religiosity and replacing it with discursive spaces for new meanings.
III. Obamao

In a short two minute video clip produced by Reuters, Liu Mingjie’s shop on No. 20 Yandai Xiejie, one of the well known tourist shopping streets by the Bell and Drum towers, is put on a spotlight (2009). The small, narrow store overflows with merchandise: items hanging on the walls, shirts stacked high on a table in the middle, more shirts filling several built-in shelves. All of them have Obama donning the revolutionary cap and jacket of Mao, a new figure that Liu Mingjie has coined “Obamao.” There are Obamao shirts available in both black and white and with various slogans, small coin purses with Obamao or a Communist red star, and Obamao bags of many sizes and shapes. There’s even a shirt with Obamao superimposed on the Statue of Liberty.

![Figure 13: Liu Mingjie in his Obamao shop, wearing one of his own creations. 2009.](image)

My Obamao coin wallet was not purchased here. It’s hard to say where exactly because tourist stalls are a ubiquitous presence in Beijing, with many of them selling the same merchandise. Liu Mingjie, a forty five year old Beijing native, started selling
his original fusion design in 2009, with more than 300 t-shirts and 1,000 coin purses sold within two months from his shop (China Daily 2009, 25). Six years later, the Obamao image can be found in every souvenir market and tourist destination in Beijing, from the Great Wall to the streets of Wangfujing. Souvenir vendors have evidently caught on to the popularity of the image and its profit-making potential.

Now a common trinket, the image has undergone even more manipulations and other creative options exist outside of Liu’s offerings; my wallet, for instance, doesn’t have the words “Serve the people” written in traditional red calligraphy as his goods do. Instead, printed under Obamao’s image is “More Money No Problems,” a reference to the song “Mo Money Mo Problems” by famous American hip-hop star and cultural icon The Notorious B.I.G. However, the details of Liu’s Obamao visual have not changed.

In the Reuters video, a young Chinese woman gestures up to a hanging shirt and remarks: “It has a lot of creativity…putting Obama in the clothes of that period with “Serve the people” underneath. It has the similar form, and it’s also funny, and it will make people think” (2009, my translation). A group of Chinese teenagers, wearing school uniforms and backpacks, marvel at the coin wallets by the window. The video also shows Chinese pedestrians stopping on the street to look at the store; one older man, balding and wearing spectacles, takes a picture of the shop window with his camera. Most of the customers featured in the video are local Chinese, with the exception of one Chinese-American tourist who buys a shirt for a friend back home. “Chinese people see Obama’s face where Mao’s should be, and they laugh,” says Liu (China Daily, 2009).
President Obama is hugely popular and well liked in China. But, according to Shi Yinhong, professor of international relations at People’s University, the United States is paradoxically not, as the superpower is still viewed by many Chinese as “the world’s policeman, ensuring global peace but capable of hurting innocent countries” (Bourgon 2009). What seems to make Obama different from the United States is the fact that he is not white and that his personal narrative is that of a hard-working minority, which Chinese people find relatable. In a Telegraph article entitled “Obama-mania alive and well, and living in China,” twenty five year-old finance student Lu Dongkai viewed Obama as a shining example of the American dream: “He’s black, and he worked hard to get to where he is. This is an accomplishment that the Chinese people can appreciate. After taking power, he initiated policies that benefit the average citizen” (Bougan 2009). Liu agreed, saying “he viewed Obama as someone who was ‘close to the working classes,’ which is why ‘normal people like him so much’” (Bougan 2009). In a separate article in China Daily, Liu makes two other observations: “He [Obama] talks about his family, which is important to Chinese people. And he’s very friendly with African and Asian people” (2009). The Obamao image is so popular that it garnered five million results on Google China in 2009, compared to the four million results for Hu Jintao, China’s premier at the time (Bougan 2009).

More Than Just Tourist Art

However well embraced the visual is by the Chinese, it is evident that Liu created Obamao with the Western consumer in mind. In the Reuters video, he
chuckles as he explains the motivation behind a small design change from the original Mao image: “If you look carefully, the cap [on Obama] is on sideways. Mao would wear it straight on. But I purposely put the cap on Obama sideways, because if you look at Americans in China, most of them put their caps on sideways, not straight on. So like this, he looks more like an American” (2009). And, what spurred him to create the visual in the first place? “On the streets in Beijing, they like the Mao hats and green T-shirts. The foreigner wants to show he loves Chinese culture” (China Daily 2009). Liu shows an awareness of how to appeal to Westerners through his manipulation to the Chinese revolutionary icon, exemplifying a complex relationship between authenticity, taste, and consumer-producer relations. However, Obamao is not merely tourist art, similarly to how the commodities of the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center gift store did not completely fall under Appadurai’s definition. While Liu’s commodities profit greatly from a Western consumer base, it is evident that both Obama and Mao symbolize deeper meanings for the Chinese audience. Obamao materialized after a long legacy of Mao parodies, which makes the commodity’s value not merely one of “tourist art” but that of materializing ongoing Chinese negotiations with the representation of Mao.

Wang Keping’s sculpture Idol (1978/1979) is considered the earliest Mao parody, in which Mao’s face and hat are stretched and deformed into a nearly unrecognizable brown object (Valjakka 2011: 100). Since then, the official Mao portraits have been reinterpreted and reworked in many different ways, both in
modern contemporary art and in popular commodities. In China, Mao remains extremely visible in both public and private realms despite attempts in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping to recall and destroy all Mao badges (Barme 1996: 201). This is also despite the fact that during and after the Cultural Revolution, the Party issued mandates to control Mao’s visual presence. Point two of a Party document dated July 29, 1981 reads: “Portraits of Chairman Mao can be hung in public places but with due regard for moderation and dignity, and so as not to offend international sensibilities. Note that excessive numbers of portraits should not be hung, yet it is inappropriate to ban the display of portraits altogether” (Mittler 2012: 308). While the legal code took jurisdiction over the display of official portraits, nothing was stated about possible manipulations to them. The ambiguous and flexible laws seemed to tacitly allow individuals to decide for themselves how to depict Mao, and from walking around the streets of any major city, it is evident that Mao has remained an important presence in the Chinese “visual diet” (Mittler 2012: 310) in manifold forms. Artists and entrepreneurs like Li Mingjie have thus taken it upon themselves to create new images and new meanings.
For Ban, desublimation in literary text refers to the “political and aesthetic dimensions as well as their mutual implication in a literary work, and particularly to the work’s subversion of the dominant cultural presumptions” (1997: 232). His definition does not make desublimation a simple destructive force, but one that also creates new subjectivities and “shatter[s] the reified objectivity of established social relations” (1997: 232). Again, the logic of the political sublime in propaganda was to serve the masses in presenting models on a higher plane, as summarized in the Yan’an Talks. Following Ban, I argue that Obamao is a visual that desublimates the Mao legacy and heroic narrative because it creates new, alternative meanings to his image, the elements of which will be discussed in the upcoming sections. In previous chapters, I’ve discussed the sublime as an overwhelming emotional feeling that spurs
people into action to take part in Mao’s grand vision for China. In this chapter, I will examine the feelings the Obamao commodities elicit in comparison. If parody is “a process of communication that depends on appropriate encoding and decoding based on shared codes” (Valjakka 2011: 91), what codes does the Obamao visual communicate and what meanings are implicated? What does re-facing Mao with Obama’s features say about attitudes towards both political icons? For this particular commodity, its process of production, the visual it contains, and its materiality are all points of analysis that will help me illuminate its political significance brought forth through a desublimating effect.

Previously, I discussed the paintings of Wang Xingwei as a desublimating response to the most widely distributed propagandistic Mao portrait during the Cultural Revolution, Liu Chunhua’s Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan. Obamao’s implications are different from those of a painting in a museum or an art gallery—Liu Mingjie has produced a visual that can be shared without a specific class or spatial context in mind. By manifesting Obamao on shirts and wallets, the commodity moves around different spaces. It is shared, exchanged, used and seen in public. Obamao can even travel to Tiananmen Square, held under the official Mao portrait hung on Tiananmen Gate. The visual certainly fits under the phenomenon of “diversion” that the gift store commodities exemplify, as per my previous analysis of Appadurai’s definition. However, the decontextualization of the gift store commodities, such as the shirt with the Red Detachment of Women still, was mostly due to its commoditized form, with the image itself remaining untouched from the original. What is needed is an examination of the visual manipulations in Obamao and its effect.
“It’s Not Political”: Creating a New Discursive Space

The creator Liu Mingjie says that his Obamao image is not a political statement but just a bit of harmless fun (Reuters 2009). It seems like an ironic statement to make for a visual that combines the god-like founder of the People’s Republic of China, harkening back to an era when the Mao military aesthetic was used in revolution and war, and the current President of the United States. Even though it would be unusual for someone to blatantly state they are making a big political statement with their art in China, I believe that the intention behind Liu’s words are genuine.

The “harmless fun” Liu alludes to refers to the mashing up of two icons, using Mao’s communist garb and military aesthetic as a framework into which, unexpectedly, Obama is inserted. To Ban, any aesthetic intervention in China is a political act since, in his words, “politics does not borrow the garb of aesthetics to dress itself up but is itself fleshed out as a form of art and symbolic activity” (1997: 15). In other words, politics and “harmless fun” do not exist, in Ban’s analysis, in two separate fields. In fact, making light of such a visual, where norms are violated in the drastic mutual re-contextualization of both icons, is a subversive act, given how seriously coded and standardized depictions of Mao were during the Cultural Revolution. In those times, it was fruitless for or an artist to proclaim their work had no political meaning, as from the Black Painting Exhibitions and public criticism meetings, every art piece was not without motive or correlation with the revolution. Even seemingly “apolitical” paintings of plants were infused with political meaning by
those in leadership, leading to many artists’ persecution. For an artist to claim he or she is having “harmless fun” with a Mao visual is a creative freedom that could not have been possible during the Cultural Revolution.

To further tease out the meaning of “political” through which we can understand Obamao’s significance, it is helpful to resort to Alexei Yurchak’s book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*. “Stiob” is a Russian slang term used to describe the ironic aesthetic that emerged in art, film, and music early in the post-Soviet era. The similarity in how post-Soviet Russian and post-Mao Chinese artists appealed to ironic aesthetics in their artistic production makes historical sense, as both socialist countries had a propagandistic machinery that rigidly and persistently ascribed ideological content to art. In fact, many Chinese artists even looked to the Soviet realism style during the Cultural Revolution for inspiration. However, as Dal Logo reminds us, “unlike Stalin in the Soviet Union, Mao was never officially repudiated by the Chinese Communist Party” (1999: 50). This is a critical difference: the fact that the ironic Mao aesthetic thrives in co-existence with the official Mao portrait, notably the one in Tiananmen Square.

Yurchak writes on the art group Mit’ki, which emerged in the 1980s and whose members “turned their daily existence into an aesthetic project” (2006: 238). He also writes on the cinematographic group Necrorealists, who began pulling collective pranks in the mid-1970s involving “absurd nudity…aimless hyperactivity” (244), giving way to their uncanny aesthetic involving “strange and scandalous provocations and images, from aimlessly fighting men to decomposing corpses” (247).
Yurchak described the ironic aesthetic shared by these two groups as one that differed from sarcasm, cynicism, derision, or any of the more familiar genres of absurd humor:

Instead of such activist and dissident dispositions, the aesthetic of stiob was based on a grotesque “overidentification” with the form of an authoritative symbol, to the point that it was impossible to tell whether the person supported the symbol or subverted it in a subtle ridicule. In the best examples of stiob these two positions were merged into one, and the authors themselves did not draw a clear line between them. In addition to the act of overidentification with the symbol, the stiob procedure involved a second act: the decontextualization of that symbol.9 (2006: 252)

Much of this resonates with the form of humor being deployed in Obamao. The recurrent use and proliferation in commodities of Mao’s revolutionary image suggests an overidentification with this authoritative symbol. The extent to which Mao’s image was repeated and thoroughly visible during the Cultural Revolution was due to high volumes of both handmade paintings and mechanically reproduced prints—as already mentioned, Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan alone had a print run of more than 900 million copies. Repeating the already highly reproduced image by hand, by those who wanted to experience the aura of their own Mao creation, was very common, according to one of Mittler’s interviewees, a journalist born in 1949: “In the factory and in the home we had all these images and wooden statues. We thought they were art. Indeed, I even painted Mao myself, because I really liked to paint, and every place had to have an image of Mao anyway” (2012: 295). These Mao images crossed from the private realm into the public realm in marches and

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9 Emphasis is Yurchak’s.
processions, where effectively many different versions of the same Mao representation were shown (2012: 295).

The motif of Mao in a communist green hat and uniform is such a codified icon in China’s collective imaginary that his face can be absent from the Obama visual and yet still there. The code lies in the hat, the uniform, and the red font, which was formerly a red calligraphy statement containing propagandistic slogans. The rough, green material of the wallet also intimates overidentification with the military aesthetic—the green color is specific to the military uniforms of the time period. Even foreigners and people who were not bombarded with Mao visuals during their lives still recognize that this particular code is being violated and transgressed, allowing them to be in on the joke.

The practice of emptying out Mao’s face in a caricature of Mao did not start with Liu Mingjie. Other artists’ work shows how the ultra-visibility of the Mao portrait led them to represent Mao while simultaneously ignoring him in other ways. As analyzed previously, Wang Xing Wei’s *The Way to the East* shows a nondescript Chinese man with his back turned to the viewer in place of Mao walking towards the viewer as he does in *Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan*. The landscape replica, with the blue sky and the foggy mountains, served as the code that connected the original with the new painting. In Zhang Hongtu’s 1985 *Quaker Oats* series, a comic drawing of four shelves lined with Quaker Oats containers has renderings of Mao Zedong instead of the Quaker man, but he is only denoted by the addition of a military hat. Zhang, who created the comic in New York, said he usually ate Quaker Oats for breakfast and noticed that the man depicted on the cans looked like Mao, further explaining that
“after leaving China he thought he could forget Mao’s image, which was depicted everywhere in China. On the contrary, he noticed the similarity with the Quaker Oats man and felt that Mao’s image was following him like a shadow” (Valjakka 2011:108). These are two examples of manipulation of Mao’s image in which his face is removed and yet he is still signified in his absence. Dal Logo writes about how the viability of the codified Mao presence constitutes a discursive space, in which different ideological strategies are negotiated simultaneously (1999: 47). While the absence of the face can be read as an attempt to detract from his historical legacy as ever present since the images do depend on his erasure from the framework, the framework still stands as the foundation for a new visual of Mao thus, arguably, reinforcing rather than detracting from his legacy.

In the case of Obamao, the decontextualization does not leave an empty shell or a non-identifiable person in Mao’s place. Obama, who evokes a very specific personal and historical narrative and who elicits a political significance of his own, is brought in to fill the space, resulting in a visual pairing that is jarring and slightly unsettling. The mind can never quite come to a settled conclusion that feels satisfying. Is the meaning of Obamao completely reliant on absurdity and nonsensicality, as the definition of stiob suggests?

Decontextualization is the act of placing this form in a context that is unintended and unexpected for it…the stiob procedures unanchored the constative meanings associated with them, thus making meaning unclear, indeterminate, or even irrelevant. In other words, stiob served as a model of the “performative shift.” (Yurchak 2006: 252)

From the excerpts of the articles on Obamao in the beginning of this chapter, we see that most Chinese people feel an affinity towards Obama due to their
identification with him as one of the “common people” who worked hard to get to where he is. Here we see a parallel with Mao’s popularity, based as it was on his emphasis on the interests of the peasants and farmers as depicted in propagandistic posters and as shown in events in which he appeared working alongside them in agricultural activities. There are also specific feelings of warmth and admiration for him—Obama is recognized for his being black and his hard work ethic, “an accomplishment that the Chinese people can appreciate” (Telegraph 2015) and a shining example of the American dream. It is interesting that the American dream is invoked here, as it has served as the inspiration for many of the post-Tiananmen Square generation to leave China and immigrate to the United States. My cousins and their friends work hard on their tests not only to get into a good college but to be able to leave China for better educational and work opportunities in the United States and Europe. Obama is not visual filler for parody and amusement; he holds symbolic value for upward mobility, for how the Chinese today are reorienting their lifestyles, goals, and expectations towards the Western world.

So if Obama is regarded in a positive light, then is Mao being complimented and elevated? Or is it the other way around? I argue that this is where the irrelevancy of stiob comes in—the audience gets to make their own narrative. In any case, by allowing Obama to don the cap and jacket, the visual immediately nullifies the historical materialist narrative that Mao is the only one that could lead China into a better future. Mao is emptied, Obama is inserted—questioning and tangling how China is represented, almost making fun of the Western viewer by playing with his or her assumptions. Li Ming Jie’s literal re-facing of Mao is politically powerful because
he uses Mao as cultural capital to allow people to relate and discuss other political
dreams and hopes in 21st century China. Instead of the legitimated Chinese
Communist Party effort to mummify the revolutionary legacy, in which history is
insulated from current reality and doesn’t serve as political commentary (Kang 2003:
345), Obamao creates a discursive space for people to have the agency to decide how
to relate to Mao, a figure from the past, through a representation of the present,
Obama. The popularity of the visual for both Chinese and foreign customers show
how globalized the commodity is—in its creative reconstruction process and reflective
humor, Li Ming Jie materially challenged the face of Mao as the representation of
modern China.

**Techniques of Control**

Li Ming Jie created the visual and commodity himself, an act of decentralized
production that utilized an image produced by a centralized system under the
Cultural Revolution. Subversive and as indicative of a free market as this may seem,
the Chinese Communist Party is still the “global overseer” that has the ability to
regulate and control artistic representation (Foucault 2002: 344). In Foucault’s
theorization of governmentality, several strategies that may be of contradictory
rationality can co-exist, as “the state’s power is both an individualizing and a
totalizing form of power” (2002: 332). While the Obamao visual is in full circulation,
there are still individual instances where the government exerts its power when they
see it as a potential threat or liability.
In March 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama took a trip to Beijing with her daughters Malia and Sasha, and their grandmother. It was the first time they made an official visit to China, and they focused on educational and cultural activities, such as visiting schools and scientific institutes. On the day of their visit to the Great Wall in Beijing, an odd thing happened: the Obamao t-shirts, coin purses, and posters that usually filled the tourist stalls were nowhere to be found (Wall Street Journal 2014). The vendors declined to comment, with one woman who declined to give her name telling a reporter: “We don’t have them anymore. But if you come back next time, you might find them. You could come tomorrow” (WSJ 2014). Somehow the government had made sure that Michelle Obama and her daughters would not see Obamao that day and forced all the vendors by the Great Wall not to sell them.

Is the government’s effort to erase, for a short time, the Obamao visual an act of resistance towards the power it contained? For whatever reason, they supposed it was inappropriate for the Obama family to see it, elevating the humor and “harmless fun” of it above the supposed banality of the tourist market of trinkets and mementos to turn it into an image that could have actual political ramifications. Paradoxically, by censoring the visual, the absence becomes further imbued with political meaning and, therefore, more powerful as a problematic for the state. Even though the state can wield its power and control the circulation of the commodity, there is still an enormous significance of holding an Obamao wallet right under Mao’s portrait in Tiananmen Square. The ability of commodities to circulate and exist alongside legitimated, party-controlled uses of the Mao image gives the individual, the consumer; power to contest the state’s control on its historical narrative and legacy.
Conclusion

This thesis is an investigation into the intersection between aesthetics and politics via detailed attention to the sublime as Mao’s aesthetic tool for producing subjects of the state during the Cultural Revolution. It is also my personal attempt to understand modern day China through a glimpse into its complex past. This required the difficult task of untangling many paradoxes and contradictions: Among these, I had to wrestle with the production of art in post-revolutionary times, in which a process of desublimation seeks to both take Mao down from his elevated, God-like status while still using propagandistic aesthetics as the foundation to form new meanings. Similarly, the Shanghai Propaganda Art Center’s founder sees himself as a simple art collector, yet a sign proclaiming “Art Tells History” greets visitors at the entrance of the museum that becomes the only place in China that provides resources for an alternative narrative of the Cultural Revolution. And finally, even recollections of the Cultural Revolution are full of tensions and contradictions as it is remembered by the older Chinese generation with a mix of pain, embarrassment, and nostalgia. Even though thousands were persecuted under Mao through criticism and purging meetings like the Black Painting Exhibitions, many recalled the time period as also one of revived artistic opportunity, viewing the pleasure of making art under such conditions as separate from the regime’s planned purposes.

By building on Wang Ban’s idea that post-Cultural Revolution writers engaged in a “desublimation project,” I hoped to illuminate those paradoxes to
understand why these propaganda visuals are still so appealing and ubiquitous in China today as artworks and commodities. To understand the meaning of the sublime within the Chinese historical context, I examine the term in relation to how Mao’s aesthetic vocabulary engaged Chinese views on the relationship between humans and nature. I then examine how Mao perversely harnessed such views to his political advantage. The aesthetic framework of the sublime also allowed me to question the ways that power is seemingly disguised within desublimation: While the Obama designer Li Mingjie wrote off his design as “not political” and just a bit of “harmless fun,” in reality it was an exercise of creative freedom that produced an alternative discursive space to represent and interpret Mao’s legacy. The sublime meant that in a time of controlled cultural production, all art was ascribed meaning that either supported or negated the regime’s grand narrative. Now, Obamao commodities can be found in almost every tourist shop, kitschy store, and street market in Beijing, allowing people to create their own interpretations or to simply revel in its absurdity.

In early March, I came across a puzzling headline on the homepage of New York Times: “Move Over Mao, Beloved Papa Xi Awes China.” The article described an intriguing new phenomenon: China’s current president Xi Jinping was showing signs of having a visual personality cult of his own: “His serene smile graces ornamental plates and good luck trinkets, and a book of his thoughts on governing has been translated into eight languages with 17 million copies reportedly sold or given away” (Jacobs 2015: 1). While I hadn’t witnessed the commodification of Xi’s image,

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10 It should be noted that the last time I spent a significant amount of time in China was the summer of 2013, so it would have been too early in Xi Jinping’s presidential rule for his image to be commoditized.
wasn’t totally surprised by the fact that a rendering of his face now adorns the surface of hanging trinkets alongside those still sold of Mao. Since he took over in 2012, Xi has spearheaded several dramatic reforms, such as an anti-corruption campaign and the inception of the “Chinese Dream,” a call for the rejuvenation of Chinese society. Judging by his visibility and the amount of online discussion, he seemed much more popular than his predecessor Hu Jintao.

However, I was a little unsettled by how far, according to the New York Times article, the propaganda machine went. The article said that a musical currently showing in Beijing is inspired by his life and policies and a former Cultural Revolution song has been revitalized with “Papa Xi” taking the place of “Mao” in the song lyrics “China has produced a Mao Zedong” (Jacobs 2015: 3). It is a disturbing set of developments that hark back to Mao’s time, and, as with the Cultural Revolution, the spread of his popularity and aura isn’t just top-down: Beijing’s Qingfeng Steamed Bun shop is now selling out their Presidential Combo Meal of steamed buns and pig
liver stew after Xi made a visit there, paying his own way and carrying his tray to one of the restaurant’s cheap folding tables, which added to his image as one of the common folk, an “indomitable alloy of Superman and Everyman who holds up his own umbrella, kicks soccer balls and knows how to file a rifle” (Jacobs 2015: 2).

The Xi phenomenon was also written about in a recent New Yorker profile on the leader’s rise to power. According to the profile, entitled “Born Red,” Xi’s portrait is being handled with a familiar reverence: the Ministry of Defense released paintings of him in heroic poses, and art students applying to the Beijing University of Technology were judged on their ability to sketch his likeness (Osnos 2015). Even with the Cultural Revolution in the past, Communist Party is utilizing old cultural production techniques, inspired by Mao’s Yan’an talks, to assert power today.

I would like to suggest that the sublime aesthetic, as it applied to Mao and the Cultural Revolution, is relevant to understanding Xi’s current forms of visibility and indicative that the government still relies on the aestheticization of politics today as a means to exert control. It can be argued that the Xi trinkets, images, songs, and slogans are, to an extent, a continuation of the sublime aesthetic: The government is tapping into the legacy of Mao’s propaganda to consolidate Xi’s power. Xi has even visited Mao’s hometown village and Yan’an, the place where he gave his talk on literature and art. The apparent intentionality of these events is not lost on people, with liberals who grew up during the Cultural Revolution unsettled by the party’s “playing with fire”. Political commentator Li Datong is quoted as saying: “The Chinese propaganda apparatus, with its instinct of sucking up to the supreme leader,
is party to blame, but the problem is that he hasn’t moved to stop it. Obviously he is indulging this, which to be honest makes us very uneasy” (Jacobs 2015: 4).

But one can place hopes in the paradoxical power of visual art: If the government wants to bolster Xi’s image with such a propagandistic campaign, so be it. On the Internet alone, Chinese netizens are able to respond to these government-sponsored forms of representation with their own critiques and visual parodies, reaching large audiences in such short spans of time through clicking and sharing. Online ridicule promptly followed one of Xi’s published remarks in which he denounced “strange” contemporary architecture and exhorted artists and writers to serve the masses rather than their own creative impulses (Jacobs 2015:4). Moreover, a number of gifs have surfaced on WeChat that adds animation to absurd visuals: a image of Xi’s face superimposed on a bodybuilder’s six pack body, a deadpan grin as he rips open his tank top, or Xi clapping with a bored expression on his face with “好，好，好” (OK, OK, OK) written on the bottom of the screen, or, finally, Xi clapping manically alongside a group of military leaders.

These gifs, and the many interventions into official propaganda that I am sure will follow, have become a way for Chinese citizens to harness the power of aesthetics to create their own narratives on politics, producing images that manipulate the power of the sublime as deployed by government authority to precisely deflate that power. Desublimation, as first discussed by Ban in 1997, has turned out to be acutely relevant to understanding Chinese society and politics today. From the generation of older Chinese who are tired of the sublime and the grandiose (Ban 1997: 64) to the
young, tech-savvy “netizens” who were born in post-Mao China, ordinary people will continue to challenge the state narrative through the critical aesthetics of irony and absurdity, whether it be a top selling Obamao wallet or a widely shared Xi gif. What remains to be seen, however, is how Xi’s propaganda machine will continue to build on the counter-discourse to Mao’s God-like aura and his Cultural Revolution, potentially harnessing the power of music videos and mobile applications to his own ends. As the discourses of the sublime and the processes of desublimation grow ever more entangled in the post-Mao era, I will be watching attentively, informed with the historical and theoretical knowledge I have garnered through this thesis to analyze how complex the intersections of aesthetics and politics continue to be.
List of Figures

Figure 1: Photograph, Author’s own. 2015.

Figure 2: Photograph, Author’s own. 2015.


Figure 4: “Civilian parade on Tiananmen Square.” Photograph. 2009. Chinadaily.com

Figure 5: Liu, Chunhua. Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, 1967. Color lithograph, 75cm x 55cm. The Chambers Gallery, London/Bridgeman Art Library. Reproduced from Annenberg Learner,

Figure 6: Friedrich, Caspar David. Wanderer Above the Sea, 1818. Oil on canvas, 98cm x 74xm. The Hamburger Kunsthalle. Reproduced from Wikipedia Commons,

Figure 7: Artist unknown. Move Mountains and Make New Land, 1977. Poster. The University of Westminster. Reproduced from China Poster Collection,


Figure 9: Wang, Xingwei. The Eastern/Oriental Way, 1995. Oil on canvas.


Figure 14: Photograph, Author’s own. 2013.

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