

FASHIONABLE MAO AND THE ABSTRACTED CULTURAL REVOLUTION **ZHANG LI**

The image of Mao has accompanied the appearance of contemporary Chinese art on the international horizon from the beginning. Mao has been the most frequently used motif in Chinese artwork since the 1990s. Ten years ago, contemporary artists living alternative and marginal lifestyles juxtaposed the various standard representations of Mao with images from Western popular culture, particularly the central symbols of Pop art and kitsch. Many experimental artists also used Mao as means of representing the concepts they wanted to convey. The large number of artworks featuring Mao as a motif, produced in response to market demand, have already been widely criticized. However, given the ongoing and substantial changes in contemporary Chinese art, the meaning and essence of Mao's image in art requires further consideration and analysis.

In the late 1990s, "Mao fever" was a predominant element of popular culture in China. The image of Mao was made into good luck charms to hang from the rearview mirror of taxicabs; lighters, watches, commemorative stamps and other goods carried humorous images of Mao; songs praising Mao from the days of the Cultural Revolution were popular favorites in karaoke bars. At this time, China "at the time" was undergoing a rapid and profound transformation. Though these changes did not result in a complete upheaval of society, they were substantial and their impact was extensive. They left those living through them little opportunity to reflect or think. As society underwent this transition, the ineffectiveness or absence of a system of social values and clearly-defined political positions led to a certain nostalgia for the Maoist era on a socio-psychological level.

Although there are intrinsic reasons for the persistence of "Mao fever," it is important to note that Mao is still very present as a symbol of political tension in people's lives. The legacy of Mao and all he represented has not yet been determined conclusively; thus his image still evokes nostalgia. Mao is frequently glorified in heroic representations, but conversely, his image is often invested with destructive power. He appears on the gate of Heavenly Peace, in a glass coffin in his Memorial Hall, and in films and programs broadcast by the state media. His official image has invariably been presented in a positive light. Even thirty years after his death, Mao has yet to be relegated to history.



WORSHIP | 2007 | oil on canvas | 140×140 cm

Mao is becoming fashionable in contemporary China. In Shi Xinning's paintings, Mao appears in imaginary scenarios where he is engaged in dramatic, passionate relationships. We can interpret these pictures as purely ironic mockery or as an alternative expression of a critical attitude towards globalization, but the radiant light that emanates from Mao is unquestionably imbued with complex meaning. The quasi-mythical stories about Mao that ran counter to his official image and often served as footnotes to images of him legitimize the abstract logic and possibility contained in the scenarios and imaginations presented by Shi Xinning. Mao's earth-shaking movement was at its height in the 1960s and 70s, the same era that the popular culture of so-called "American Imperialism" achieved dominance all over the world. Revolutionary romanticism and mass struggles for freedom and liberation were played out both in the East and the West. In Shi Xinning's works, Mao welcomes Hollywood actresses, attends the Oscar award ceremony, visits contemporary art exhibitions, and hobnobs with the Beatles and Elvis. In his flirtation with Western art and popular culture, Mao appears remarkably at ease. And yet, the 1960s were also the era of the Cold War. Heroism, confidence and fearlessness, as well as the idea of the "brave new world," the intoxicating prospect of realizing a common dream that Mao held out to the Chinese, were in fact trapped under the antagonism of the two camps – between the internal assaults against counterrevolutionaries and the Cold War within China.

Throughout history there has been a crucial difference between our conceptions of time and space: Time is regarded as irreversible, while spatial distances are seen as conquerable – they not only can but must be overcome. In Shi Xinning's works Mao's revolutionary ideas and the fashionable world of Hollywood meet in a bizarre conjunction. As the artist has pointed out himself, different viewers interpret his art in very different ways, often inserting their own understanding of the historical figures he portrays. The fictional scenarios he sets up for them merely serve to open the gates of their imaginations.

Each person's understanding of history is unique, and histories are written different ways. There is also a disparity between one's experience of a historical event, the memory of the event, and the way it is spoken of, recorded and explained to others. These differences form the historical contexts for the creation and reception of Shi Xinning's works. We can only approach them from a certain angle in an attempt to understand the language of the era and the history the artist has lived through and to discover when and how history becomes a "backdrop."

To a certain extent, history does not progress or change; rather, it consists of the appearance or absence of various historical systems at particular times. There are certain aspects of Mao's revolutionary thinking that originated in the New Culture Movement or "May Fourth Movement." The revolution led by Mao constructed the utopian idea of a new world. In their revolutionary zeal for doing away with the old and founding a new world, people harbored hopes of liberation, of being liberated. They believed the new world and new life they had dreamt of were just over the horizon – and the relentless onslaught of official propaganda did its best to reinforce these expectations. Yet, sadly, the cruel reality of abuse of power gradually gave birth to an even greater hunger for power. Severe control and tyranny have always been central aspects of politics in China.

In the early 20th century, various currents in society initiated by the New Culture Movement, driven by anti-feudalism and an embrace of scientific and democratic ideas, attempted to change the course of traditional Chinese culture and pave a new road for China in a world fraught with danger. Led by intellectuals, the New Culture Movement naturally reflected their concerns, and the policy reforms it triggered were expressions of their criticism of traditional Chinese culture. After proclaiming the need to "destroy the old curiosity shop of Confucius," a longing for utopian ideals and harsh realities steered them down the revolutionary path charted by Soviet communists. Yet "saving" the nation was the paramount rationale of enlightenment, and this goal unquestionably pushed extreme control and tyranny onto the historical stage. Mao shockingly combined liberation, struggle, and tyranny. While breaking with tradition on a superficial level, his political approach to power was deeply rooted in the traditional Chinese political experience of tyranny. The political, economic,



JOKE | 2003–2005 | oil on canvas | 114×185 cm





OSCAR | 2002 | oil on canvas | 140x130 cm



POP CORN | 2007 | oil on canvas | 185×143 cm



A HOLIDAY IN VENICE – AT THE BALCONY OF MS. GUGGENHEIM | 2006 | oil on canvas | 210×272 cm

social and cultural discontinuity or vacuum caused by the Cultural Revolution was, in fact, the basis for the reform and opening of the country. By the same token, the reform's obstacles and the aftershocks are a result of challenging and defending the monopoly on power.

We should not forget that the full title of the Cultural Revolution was "The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution." Today, it is simply regarded as an expression of the utter passivity of the proletariat in China. The transition the country underwent then is at the root of the changes taking place today. The term "proletariat," a theoretical concept of class based on a particular historical period in Europe, has completely lost its meaning in China. Today, the Chinese Communist Party has become a symbol of progress, and can hardly be considered as representing the proletariat. Indeed, the proletariat has become history. Laid-off workers and displaced peasants in urban areas no longer enjoy the benefits of this "class." In the logic of the present, the proletariat has become a class that needs to be eliminated.

For China, the Cultural Revolution was one step in the general direction of integration into the global infrastructure in the modern era. The Cultural Revolution's destruction of traditional culture and the challenge it posed to that culture's moral value system is, on a profound level, a result of the internal make-up of Chinese society. Its pursuit of totalitarianism would ultimately lead to the suppression of obstacles that stood in the way of authoritarian thoughts and culture. On the surface, due to the Cultural Revolution's razing of the foundations of traditional Chinese society, China's transition to modernity has appeared more pressing, rapid and careless. Yet the infatuation with totalitarianism – a psychological legacy that has not yet been resolved – in fact adds an element of the unpredictable to China's transformation into a member of the globalized world. Even though the Cultural Revolution seemed to be a critique and negation of traditional culture, it was essentially rooted in the Chinese model of existence. From the earliest days of its history down to the present, policy reforms in China have always come at the cost of cultural destruction. Problematic aspects of policy – and at times, the lack of policy – are linked to culture, which in itself can not be judged as either "right" or "wrong." Culture became the object of political hostility and was forcibly politicized, resulting in a situation in which the most popular vernaculars are the languages of totalitarianism and profit.

In his works Shi Xinning depicts Mao, an antagonistic figure who took center stage in the Western world, as a representative of the fashionable, thus aptly rendering contemporary Chinese political and cultural ideology. The harsh reality and struggle of everyday Chinese experience temporarily melts away and revolution is transformed into a romanticized, safe object of consumption, appealing and hip. Mao, as both a figure of authority and an individual, rubs shoulders with Western celebrities, who appear rather likable and serene. The West is no longer the alien "other." Today, Richard Serra's works can be displayed in Tiananmen square – but the square is soulless.

History is a richer source of inspiration than the future. During the Cultural Revolution, people hoped to surpass the U.K. and catch up with the U.S.; they hoped for a struggle of the people, for the collapse of Soviet revisionism and American Imperialism. Thirty years later, Shi Xinning has directed our gaze back to history with his unique approach, using the perspective of the present to help us realize that history has merely been running in circles.

TRANSLATION Fiona He (贺潇)



ICE CREAM | 2007 | oil on canvas | 150×185 cm