
Chairman Mao Badges: Symbols and Slogans of the Cultural Revolution

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*Chairman Mao Badges: Symbols and Slogans of the
Cultural Revolution*

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Acknowledgements

A few years ago I was asked to send some information introducing the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum, for publication in a Chinese journal. In that short article, I mentioned that the Department housed the national collection of badges, including, at the time, 128 Mao badges.

An old friend, Mr Sheng Guanxi 盛观熙 of the Zhoushan Numismatic Society, spotted the article, reprinted it in the *Bulletin of the Zhoushan Numismatic Society*, and sent me a copy. He included a letter, remarking on the small size of the collection, and kindly offered 200 duplicates from his personal collection. His donation was the impetus for this publication. My colleague, Kirstin Leighton-Boyce, had just started learning Chinese, and was keen to do the routine preparatory work that is standard for all new museum acquisitions. Armed with a very basic knowledge of Chinese language, a Chinese-English dictionary, Wang Anting's *Catalogue of Chairman Mao Badges* and Melissa Schrifft's *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, she set to work. However, it soon became clear that this task was far harder than it had appeared to be at first. Her experience has shaped the way the book has developed. In particular, it reflected the need for an object-based reference guide, modelled on the traditional British Museum coin catalogues, and the need for both English and Chinese text, including *pinyin*. I am especially grateful to Mr Sheng and to Kirstin, and also to Joe Cribb, Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals, who has supported the book from its inception and watched it grow. My colleagues Elizabeth Errington, Mary

Hinton and Vesta Curtis have, as usual, witnessed the highs and lows of the process, and have been wonderfully human foils for my temporary monomania.

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This book has taken far longer than I had hoped and has tested the patience of my husband Wang Tao and our children Simon and Nina. At times the children have sought refuge with their friends, and I am grateful to Ava, Fran, Brett, Joy and Linda; Julian, Sade and Maxine; Adam and Christie; Tommy, Ciara, Chi and Julian; Lucy, Leesa and Fiona; Daisy, Charmaine and Sandra, for all the fun, food and sleepovers that they have enjoyed (and I have missed). This book is for Tao, who witnessed the Cultural Revolution first-hand, and for Simon and Nina, with love.

Preface

The starting point for this book is the very modest collection of almost 350 Chairman Mao badges at the British Museum. It is a small but manageable number from which to begin to explore the repertoire of symbolic imagery and inscriptions of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Serious collections of Mao badges in China start at 10,000 different specimens, and as a result, Chinese catalogues present hundreds, sometimes thousands, of badges. Yet they seldom explain the images or the texts in a consistent way. For Chinese collectors, editors and publishers, there is simply no need to include such basic information, unless there is something exceptional to say. But for outsiders, general knowledge that is specific to a particular culture of a particular period can be incredibly difficult to grasp.

In this respect, I am an outsider. Despite my surname (acquired through marriage), I was born in capitalist, and almost post-imperialist, Britain in 1965. My childhood knowledge of China was abysmal, mostly gleaned from television (in particular the film *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* based on the life of the missionary Gladys Aylward), my geography teacher Mrs Yeomans (who had also been a missionary in China, and from whom I learnt of terraced farming and the one-child family policy) and miscellaneous oddities, such as Lady Precious Stream, willow pattern plates and chopsticks. My understanding of politics was no better: I knew more about James Bond than I did about Mao Zedong.

When I started to learn Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in 1983, the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) had been over for seven years. The Chinese government had acknowledged it as a dreadful period in Chinese history, yet the heroic acts of the model soldier Lei Feng still featured in our Chinese textbooks. Our vocabulary lists were clearly not of the revolutionary period but nonetheless included items of limited use: for example, ‘meteorological station’ (first year Chinese, useful to me once in 25 years), ‘welding equipment’ (second year Chinese, useful to me once in 25 years), and ‘the gentle meeting of eyes through the open-stack library shelving system’ (second year Chinese, not useful yet), and left us entirely to our own devices on such mundane things as toothbrushes. Dictionaries were a minefield for the beginner learning Chinese: full-form or simplified characters; *pinyin* or another system of romanisation; People’s Republic of China or Taiwan. Even *A Chinese-English Dictionary* (‘the big green one’, PRC, *pinyin* romanisation, 1978), which proved to be the most useful, was full of stilted and extreme expressions which we could never imagine using. This was a shock to those of us accustomed to the *Petit Robert* and easy-to-use Collins dictionaries for modern European languages. In 1984–85 we spent a year at the Languages Institute in Beijing, where we slogged through the big, green dictionary in order to be able to read about Albanian children waving bright red

ribbons in an exuberant welcoming display for a visiting head of state, in a long out-of-date newspaper report for our Modern Readings class. No wonder we checked which cities were open to foreigners and went travelling instead. Phrases such as ‘Long live Chairman Mao’ and ‘Serve the People’ were still visible on outside walls and on glass panels above office doors, but these were faded and peeling. Statues of Chairman Mao served as useful landmarks when asking for directions. The Cultural Revolution was in the past, and it seemed no one talked about it much. In any case, I did not have the capacity or vocabulary to ask. Until recently, I had no idea how to say ‘helmsman’ in Chinese.

Yet, within ten years, the Mao craze would sweep through China; taxi drivers would hang portraits of Mao from rear-view mirrors for good luck; cassettes and CDs of revolutionary songs would fly off the shelves. The most striking visual imagery of the Cultural Revolution would be appropriated by artists and advertising agencies, both in China and elsewhere. Particularly in the case of European artists and designers, it seems that the attraction lies in the youthful energy, dynamism and directness of the visuals.

The symbols and slogans of the Cultural Revolution are certainly striking and memorable – they were designed to be so! In the pre-digital age, they appeared throughout China in brightly coloured propaganda posters, revolutionary songs, radio broadcasts, loudspeakers, newspapers, journals, comic books, handwritten big-character posters and more. In short, the same messages were to be found everywhere. They were instantly recognisable and immediately readable, even in the most abbreviated form: for example, a small red rectangle represents the Little Red Book (*Quotations from Chairman Mao*), and the tall triangle with a red dot at the top represents the revolutionary base in the Jinggangshan mountains. But these messages are compact codes, and the impact is only immediate if you can read them.

That is precisely my aim here: to present the British Museum collection of Mao badges, and to offer a reference guide for navigating through the symbols and slogans of the Cultural Revolution in different media. For this object-based catalogue I have broadly followed the model of the traditional British Museum coin catalogues, which focus on a particular group of coins, issued in a specific location within a specific time period. They aim to explain all that can be seen on those coins by means of introductory narratives, a descriptive and illustrated catalogue, and lists and appendices of useful information. While they may seem empirical and old-fashioned in style, they are the most comprehensive guides to the objects that one can find. The data is collected together and presented in a systematic way, thereby creating an easy reference guide for anyone wishing to identify coins of that particular series or to consult that series as part of a broader study.

I hope that this book will encourage continued exploration of the subject, and lead to conversations and understanding that venture deeper than the somewhat superficial appropriation of the imagery today. It can also be used as a source book for further reading and reference. When consulting Chinese and English books on the same subject, I found it was not always easy to match up inconsistently translated terminology; and for this reason, I have tried to give the English, Chinese and *pinyin* terms as far as possible. This should also make subsequent dictionary and internet searching easier. However, as the book is aimed at the English reader, I have tried to keep to a mostly English bibliography.

The Cultural Revolution is part of China's history, and an extraordinary period in the history of mankind. But it is not a ten-year period that can be neatly slotted in or out of history. Just as many aspects of it can be traced to earlier periods of Chinese history, so there are legacies of the Cultural Revolution. There are millions of people in China today who lived through the Cultural Revolution; there are also millions of young people, born after 1976, who have grown up in a completely different world.

We should not forget that the Cultural Revolution affected every family in China. While this book highlights some of the

reddest, brightest and shiniest objects of that time, we should remember that they were created as part of the Mao cult, that they are explicit expressions of loyalty to the 'Great Teacher, Great Leader, Great Commander, Great Helmsman', and that they convey a relentlessly positive energy for revolution. The message was serious, in many cases deadly serious. The consequences of some of the policies and directives were devastating. Many people were killed or died as an effect of the Cultural Revolution, and there was substantial physical, mental and emotional damage. It is not without reason that the once heralded 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' became known as 'The Ten Years of Chaos', and that an entire generation, who had once proudly proclaimed Mao as 'the reddest sun in our hearts', became known as 'the Lost Generation'. While such glosses may be helpful in summing up a general feeling, they mask the achievements of that time (for example, improved healthcare and education in rural areas) along with the catastrophes, and run the risk of a selective approach to remembering and forgetting.

The youngest generation of the Cultural Revolution, once hailed as 'the successors of the revolution', are now raising their own children in a very different environment.

Guide to Chinese Characters, Romanisation and Special Terminology

This book uses the simplified form of Chinese characters and the *pinyin* system of romanisation. This introduction aims to explain as simply as possible how Chinese characters and *pinyin* work.¹

Chinese characters

Chinese characters come in two forms: full-form and simplified form. Each character is composed of individual strokes, written in a particular order. Full-form characters are the older, ‘traditional’ forms, and have a greater number of strokes. These were the standard forms which had official status before the 1950s. Simplified characters are 20th-century versions of those characters with fewer strokes. Many of these simplified forms had been in existence for a long time, but only began to have official status under PRC government sanction.

When you learn Chinese, you learn the structure and stroke order of the characters. There are set patterns; these ensure that the characters have a consistent appearance and also facilitate learning. As with an English word, when you know a character you can read it immediately. When you come across an unfamiliar character, you look to see how it has been constructed. People who can read Chinese can see a clear structure and system of strokes in each character.

Each character is composed of several elements. These are usually the radical (or semantic root) of the character, or the phoneme (an indicator of pronunciation). For example, anyone seeing the character 忠 (*zhong*), meaning ‘loyalty’, will immediately see the two separate elements 中 (*zhong*, ‘middle’ as in the Middle Kingdom, ie China, but used here as a phoneme) and 心 (*xin*, ‘heart’, used here as the semantic classifier, indicating that the character has something to do with the heart or mind).

Pinyin

Pinyin is the commonly abbreviated form of *Hanyu pinyin* (literally 汉语 *Hanyu* ‘Chinese’, 拼 *pin* ‘to spell’, 音 *yin* ‘sound’). *Hanyu pinyin* was devised in the People’s Republic of China, approved by the Chinese government in 1958 and adopted in 1979 by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) as the standard romanisation for modern Chinese. *Pinyin* is now the most widely used romanisation system for Chinese, and a standard method of typing in Chinese on computers, mobile phone text messages, and so on. Chinese schoolchildren learn *pinyin* before they learn characters.

In *pinyin*, most vowels and consonants are pronounced as they are in English. The exceptions are *x* (close to English ‘s’ or ‘sh’), *q* (close to English ‘ch’), *c* (close to English ‘ts’) *zh* (close to English ‘j’), *z* (close to English ‘dz’) and *i* (sometimes pronounced ‘ee’ and sometimes close to English ‘er’).

There are, of course, other romanisation systems, such as the Wade-Giles system (developed from Sir Thomas Francis

Wade’s (1818–95) system, and modified by Herbert Allen Giles (1845–1935)); the Chinese postal service romanisation (邮政式拼音 *youzheng shi pinyin*), and the *zhuyin* system (also known as *bo-po-mo-fo*). *Zhuyin* is an abbreviated form of *zhuyin fuhao* (literally, 注 *zhu* ‘annotate’, 音 *yin* ‘sound’, 符号 *fuhao* ‘symbols’).

Using a Chinese dictionary

Most modern Chinese dictionaries are arranged in *pinyin* order and will have a radical index at the front of the dictionary. In this way, if you know the pronunciation, you can go straight to the dictionary entry (like using an English dictionary). Each character is equivalent to one syllable. If you do not know the pronunciation, you can search for the character by its radical. The radical index is usually arranged in stroke-number order. To look up a character this way means deciding which radical you need, counting the strokes of the radical, finding the radical and its list of associated characters (also in stroke-number order), and locating the character. When you find the character, the list will give you the page number in the *pinyin* dictionary. The character will be on that page. Searching by radical is a little bit slower, because it involves several stages of looking up. Fluent readers of Chinese can often guess the pronunciation by the phoneme: for example, in the following list of characters 包 is the phoneme, and any character with this phoneme will probably be pronounced *bao* or *pao*:

- 包 *bao* = bundle
[*bao* has 5 strokes]
- 抱 *bao* (with ‘hand’ radical) = hold, embrace
[radical has 3 strokes; *bao* has 5 strokes]
- 饱 *bao* (with ‘food’ radical) = full after eating
[radical has 3 strokes; *bao* has 5 strokes]
- 苞 *bao* (with ‘grass/plant’ radical) = bud
[radical has 3 strokes; *bao* has 5 strokes]
- 雹 *bao* (with ‘rain’ radical) = hail
[radical has 8 strokes; *bao* has 5 strokes]
- 泡 *pao* (with ‘water’ radical) = bubble
[radical has 3 strokes; *bao* has 5 strokes]
- 炮 *pao* (with ‘fire’ radical) = cannon
[radical has 4 strokes; *pao* has 5 strokes]

Symbols of the Cultural Revolution

I have used the term ‘symbol’ loosely to refer to visual and verbal symbols, and have listed these in the Glossary. There are, of course, specific Chinese terms:

- 象征 *xiangzheng* – a symbol representing a quality or situation (eg red for communism)
- 符号 *fuhao* – a symbol representing a fixed meaning (eg the hammer and sickle of communism)
- 隐喻 *yinyu*; 暗语 *anyu* – metaphor

转喻 *zhuanyu* – metonym (eg the sun as metonym for Mao)

图标 *tubiao*; 图符 *tufu* – icon (as on a computer screen)

崇拜对象 *chongbai duixiang*; 偶像 *ouxiang* – icon (as describing a famous person or idea)

Slogans of the Cultural Revolution

I have used the term ‘slogan’ loosely to refer to the most common expressions which were repeatedly shouted out loud or written down. There are several different terms for specific types of slogans in Chinese:²

号召 *haozhao* – a shouted out slogan

标语 *biaoyu* – a written slogan pasted or written on walls

语录 *yulu* – a slogan citing *Quotations from Mao Zedong* (毛泽东语录 *Mao Zedong yulu*).

最高指示 *zuigao zhishi* – a slogan citing a Supreme Directive, as issued by Mao or the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCPCC).

However, not all inscriptions on Mao badges are slogans. There are also adulatory expressions, commemorative names, quotations from Mao’s essays, speeches and poems, and directives. The various categories are discussed in Chapter 5.

Notes

1 For a more detailed discussion on *pinyin*, see Chappell 1980.

2 For a history of slogans in China, see Lu Xing 2004. See also ‘Chinese Pamphlets: Political communication and mass education in the early period of the People’s Republic of China’ (approximately 200 cartoon books, pamphlets, postcards and magazines published in Hong Kong and China, 1947–54, collected by Edward Hunter [1902–78]), accessible on http://ecollections.cri.edu/cdm4/about_hunters.php?CISOROOT=/hunters

Introduction

Chairman Mao badges are the most iconic objects of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). They are named after Mao Zedong (1893–76), Chairman of the Communist Party of China from 1943 to 1976, and Chairman of the People’s Republic of China from 1949 to 1959. They were not the earliest badges to feature an image or quotation of Mao, but they were certainly much broader in content and more numerous than all the Mao badges that had preceded them. The Mao badge phenomenon really burst into life in the late 1960s, when an enormous variety of badges were created and worn as an expression of loyalty to Mao, as well as part of the dress code of that time. These badges, distributed in urban areas, and dispersed into rural areas by those sent to live and work there, achieved a special status throughout China between 1966 and 1971. The Red Guard wearing a Mao badge and holding up the ‘Little Red Book’ (*Quotations from Mao Zedong*) has since become recognised worldwide as a typical image of China’s Cultural Revolution. The aim of this book is to place Mao badges in their historical context, and to explore the images and inscriptions on the badges themselves. For this reason, the book is arranged in three parts.

Part 1 looks at the background to Mao badges, giving a short summary of Chinese badges before the Cultural Revolution, and of the media and context of the Cultural Revolution. The earliest badges featuring Mao were created in the 1930s and 1940s. They played a significant role in the promotion of the Mao Cult of the 1940s. These were generally made of a copper alloy, and often portrayed Mao alongside other leaders, in particular the military leader Zhu De (1886–1976), but also with Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), Lu Xun (1881–1936), Gao Gang (1902–54) and Kim Il Sung (1912–94). The pre-Cultural Revolution badges were issued in a very different context from those of the Cultural Revolution, yet the use of Mao portraits and quotations, together with icons of the international Communist movement and of Chinese revolutionary history, set a precedent for the later badges. They show that a wide range of revolutionary iconography was already commonly known on Chinese badges long before the onset of the Cultural Revolution. These early badges are discussed in Chapter 1.

The striking design and powerful language of the symbols and slogans of the Cultural Revolution permeated every aspect of life in China in the 1960s and 1970s. The inscriptions and images found on the badges were seen and heard all around: in slogans painted on walls, in propaganda posters, newspapers, revolutionary songs, revolutionary model operas, radio broadcasts, postage stamps, ration tickets and so on. The same images and inscriptions were conveyed in different media forms. For example, Mao’s quotations were published in the newspapers, at the front of books and written on walls. They were printed, recited and read. They were also reproduced on

everything from teapots and ration tickets to badges, and were broadcast on the radio, adapted into revolutionary songs and recorded as LPs. In short, everyday life was saturated with symbolic imagery and inscriptions. In this respect, it is important to consider Mao badges in the context in which they were created, worn and collected. Chapter 2 surveys the milieu of the Cultural Revolution, and shows how the badges were part of the bigger picture.

Part 2 focuses on the Mao badges of the Cultural Revolution, providing an outline history of the Mao badge phenomenon (Chapter 3), and details of materials, manufacture, design and packaging (Chapter 4). It also explores in detail the images and inscriptions that are found on the badges (Chapter 5). For those people who lived through the Cultural Revolution, these images and inscriptions form part of a general knowledge built up through their own personal experience. During this period, Chinese people were expected to wear a Mao badge as an expression of loyalty to Mao. The exceptions were those people who were forbidden to do so for political reasons. At the time, individuals either belonged to the politically correct ‘five red categories’ or were damned as belonging to the ‘five black categories’. There was no middle ground. In this context, those seeking to show their loyalty might seek out the largest, newest or most detailed badge they could find, either to wear or to add to a personal collection of Mao badges. Not wearing a Mao badge therefore carried negative connotations.

An estimated five billion Mao badges were produced between 1966 and 1971. While the majority were created by specialist badge factories across China, it was the case that any individual or organisation could make Mao badges. Special centres, known as ‘Respectfully Manufacture Mao Zedong Badge Offices’, were set up across China to facilitate badge manufacture, and to advise on the design, production and raw materials for new badges. Most Mao badges consisted of a stamped aluminium base, usually in a gold colour, with a thin layer of transparent red plastic affixed to the surface. These badges were often described as ‘red, bright and shiny’. But many other materials were also used to make badges, including gold, silver, bamboo and porcelain. Indeed, many of China’s famous porcelain centres, such as Jingdezhen, produced porcelain Mao badges at this time. The most prolific creator of Mao badges was the Shaoshan Badge Factory, which was established in Mao’s hometown specifically for the production of Mao badges. The factory used machinery from Shenyang and Shanghai, and had technicians and badge designers from all over China, employing over 400 people at its height. Details of this and other factories are given in Chapters 3 and 4.

The circular red and gold badges with a portrait of Mao in profile are the most familiar of all the Mao badges of the Cultural Revolution. But there were thousands of different

types of badges. The designs on badges include Mao's portrait in several different forms, historical landmarks of the Communist revolution in China (known in Chinese as 'revolutionary sacred sites'), Communist iconography (eg hammer and sickle), commemorative events (including National Day on 1 October, and personal visits by Mao and other leaders), and traditional Chinese symbolism (eg the pine and plum as symbols of longevity and endurance). The inscriptions on badges include adulations of Mao (eg 'Long live Chairman Mao, the red sun in the hearts of the people'), supreme directives (eg 'Increase vigilance, protect the homeland'), and quotations from Mao's speeches and essays (eg 'Serve the People'). They also include designs and inscriptions that quote, or allude to, Mao's poetry.

There is usually a clear association between text and images on the badges. A portrait of Mao above the inscription 'Long live Chairman Mao' is a straightforward example that needs no explanation. However, there are more subtle associations, which require some background knowledge. In many cases it is clear that a traditional form or reference has been employed. For example, a portrait of Mao above a gun and the Chinese character for 'power' is a rebus for Mao's most famous quotation 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun' (cat. no. 84). Another badge presents a portrait of Mao wearing a scarf above a branch of plum blossom (cat. no. 274). Although there is no inscription, the combination of images is clearly a reference to Mao's poem 'Winter Cloud' (1962), in which he describes China's increasing isolation in the world following the breakdown in the Sino-Soviet relationship. The beautiful and fragile plum blossom on the gnarled and seemingly exhausted branch is a traditional symbol of the ability to survive wintry conditions and re-emerge at the first warm breath of spring. It is one of the most popularly used symbols in traditional Chinese painting and classical literature. In 'Winter Cloud', Mao wrote in a classical form of poetry and employed traditional symbolic devices while describing a contemporary political issue.

The inscriptions on Mao badges are sometimes presented in printed forms and sometimes in handwritten cursive forms. When the cursive inscription is adulatory (eg 'Long live Chairman Mao') it is usually in the hand of Lin Biao (1907–71). When the cursive inscription quotes Mao's writings, speeches or poetry, it is usually modelled on Mao's own hand. Mao was a keen and competent calligrapher, who practised calligraphy, promoted handwritten 'big character posters' (done in brush and ink), and provided many calligraphic inscriptions for institutions and organisations. Many of Mao's poems were written to commemorate events in the history of the Communist revolution in China. Linking Mao's calligraphy to a particular poem associated with a particular historical event, served to emphasise and celebrate Mao's central role in that event. The inscriptions and images found on Mao badges are explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

Part 3 is a catalogue of the Mao badges in the British Museum collection, giving full details and illustrating the front and back of each badge. It is the first attempt at a catalogue of Mao badges in English.

The Mao badge phenomenon reached its peak in the spring of 1969, at the time of the 9th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Vast quantities of aluminium had

been used to make badges, and Mao's famous words 'Give me back the aeroplanes' were a call to scale down badge production. Mao badges were unpinned, put away or collected in. After 1971 it was no longer appropriate to wear them in public, and they more or less disappeared from view. They did, however, continue to appear in posters, as well as in design copy books, well into the 1970s.

After Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four (the four key powerholders: Jiang Qing, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan and Wang Hongwen) in 1976, the Chinese authorities masterminded a careful removal and disposal of Cultural Revolution remains. Documents issued by the Central Department of Propaganda in the late 1970s stressed such things as the correct management of Mao's image,¹ the appropriate treatment of objects with the character for 'loyalty' on them, and how to deal with slogans, posters and quotation boards in public places.² In 1981 the CCP's 'Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of our Party since the Founding of the People's Republic of China' stated that 'the "cultural revolution" did not in fact constitute a revolution or social progress in any sense, nor could it possibly have done so.'³ The intentionally lower case letters and inverted commas represented the new viewpoint. Careful consideration was given to the appropriate defusion of the formalised language of the Cultural Revolution in the press and elsewhere. Directing the new language was crucial to maintaining order, dealing appropriately with the legacy, and limiting damage to the history of the CCP.⁴

Forty years on, Mao badges are still available in China. The shift from communism to consumerism means that genuine badges, modern fakes and new designs are available in antique markets, as well as in souvenir shops attached to tourist sites, such as Shaoshan, the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall in Beijing, and the site of the 1st Congress of the CCP in Shanghai. But, whereas any disrespect (however accidental) towards these highly charged icons would once have led to the most serious consequences, nowadays the images and texts on these same icons have been defused of their original earnestness. They have been appropriated, adopted and adapted to suit new purposes, both in China and in Europe.

The revival of the visual imagery and language of the Cultural Revolution is most notable in the work of contemporary Chinese artists and in commercial advertising both in China and elsewhere. It can be attributed to several developments. First, the massive wave of nostalgia, known as the Mao Craze (毛热 *Mao re*), that swept across China in the late 1980s and early 1990s is said to have started following a traffic accident in Guangdong, in which the sole survivor was a taxi driver, who attributed his good luck to the image of Mao he kept in his car. This struck a timely chord and kicked off a consumer boom of Mao memorabilia. Cassettes and CDs of Cultural Revolution songs flew off the shelves, in quantities way beyond expectation.⁵ Restaurants with a Cultural Revolution theme sprang up in big cities, providing a necessary and cathartic outlet for shared experiences of the Cultural Revolution and of the subsequent years of unprecedented change.⁶ Looking back, people began to laugh at the stilted language and absurdities of every day life during the Cultural Revolution, and compilations of jokes and stories were published,⁷ as well as collections of photographs by the

educated youths who had been sent to the countryside.⁸ This coincided with a growing criticism of the political situation and provided a referent against which to compare and criticise more recent corruption, injustice and social inequality.

Second, a decade after Deng Xiaoping announced his Reform and Open Door policies (改革开放 *Gaige kaifang*, 1978) those who had thrown themselves at the task of catching up with ideas and developments in the rest of the world began to reflect on China's status on the international scene. Nationalism swelled, and those perceiving inferior treatment began to demand equality, as seen in the demands of Chinese artists for more prominent exhibition space at the Venice Biennale in the 1990s. Artists such as Wang Guangyi (王广义, b. 1956) commanded international recognition and demanded international art market prices for their work. In the background, 'Communism' was shifting towards 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' (中国特色社会主义 *Zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi*), and when Deng repeated Mao's words 'Look to the future' (向前看 *Xiang qian kan*), the pun was widely appreciated as 'Look to the money' (向钱看 *Xiang qian kan*).

Rapid commercialisation brought with it new theories about marketing and audience awareness. These led to some revealing name changes, not least the renaming of the government's Propaganda Department as the Publicity Department.⁹ The links between propaganda, marketing and advertising were crystal clear: highly charged revolutionary iconography and witty visual imagery; political slogans and commercial taglines; and, crucially, the resonance or emotional response. The key was satire, a form of humour that combines criticism and ridicule. The vibrant and powerful symbols and slogans of the Cultural Revolution, once presented and received in earnest as propaganda, could now be appropriated in the commercial advertising of products and services. Simple, but effective, puns often involve the swapping of one or two characters: for example, 'Increase vigilance, protect the homeland' (提高警惕, 保卫祖国 *Tigao jingti, baowei zuguo*) adapted to 'Increase vigilance, protect the stock market' (提高警惕, 保卫股市 *Tigao jingti, baowei gushi*).

The images that appear in advertising campaigns and promotions are customised versions of the original compositions, often stripping away any precise context, and reducing them to the key elements that evoke power, energy and the call to action. The idea of using Chinese revolutionary images in this way would once have been inconceivable; indeed, commercial advertising was seen as the apotheosis of capitalist consumption, a totem of advanced capitalist culture, and contradictory to the concept of the planned economy. Contradiction was one of the points of Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* (大批判 *Da pipan*) series of paintings. His combination of Chinese revolutionary poster and Coca Cola (or Nikon, Canon, or whichever international brand the buyer preferred) summed up perfectly the meeting of communism and capitalism, the energy of the revolutionary and the desire of the consumer. The title of this series added another dimension; during the Cultural Revolution the *Great Criticism* campaign demanded criticism of capitalists, ie those who were anti-Party and anti-socialist.

Mao's military strategies put forward in the Little Red Book are now used in the commercial world, particularly in the worlds of management ('The Correct Handling of

Contradictions Among the People' 关于正确处理人民矛盾的问题 *Guanyu zhengque chuli renmin maodun de wenti*), marketing ('Fight From the Villages, Surround the Cities' 在乡村聚集力量, 用乡村包围城市, 然后取得城市 *Zai xiangcun juji lilian, yong xiangcun baowei chengshi, ranhou qude chengshi*) and customer service ('Serve the People' 为人民服务 *Wei renmin fuwu*).¹⁰

Other expressions have been diluted to match new social situations. In 2000, mothers joked about issuing 'Supreme Directives' (最高指示 *zuigao zhishi*) to their children.¹¹ The expression 能吃苦 *neng chi ku* (literally 'able to eat bitterness', conveying an ability to endure all manner of hardship) has been watered down to *chi ku jingshen bu gou* (吃苦精神不够, literally 'lacks that eat-bitterness spirit', implying 'not hungry enough to go the extra mile').¹² Websites have sprung up with bylines such as 'Home of the Old Educated Youth' (老知青之家 *Lao zhiqing zhi jia*), offering a forum for those who were sent 'up to the mountains, down to the countryside' (上山下乡 *Shang shan xia xiang*).¹³ More often than not, an attempt to explore Cultural Revolution vocabulary on Chinese search engines results in a mass of ironic contemporary twists on words, in personal blogs, online fiction, cartoons and advertisements, that can be difficult for the outsider to navigate. Yet there is a genuine demand for knowledge of Chinese communist history: in 2006, one of the top 20 'Frequently Asked Questions' on the Chinese search engine Baidu.com (百读 *Baidu*) was 'Why did the Red Army set out on The Long March?'¹⁴ In 2007, a 23-episode TV series 'When we were students' (恰同学少年 *Qia tongxue shaonian*) illustrating Mao's student days, was broadcast on Chinese television.¹⁵

All of the examples above illustrate how the visual imagery and language of the Cultural Revolution has been appropriated in the contemporary world. The process also shows how the Cultural Revolution is becoming history. For example, the placing of Mao's portrait on the most recent series of Chinese banknotes, together with his name and dates, is consistent with the international convention of honouring historical figures on a national currency.¹⁶ The rejection and redirection experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s was followed by nostalgia in the late 1980s and 1990s, and subsequently by commercialization.

The appropriation, in particular of the visual imagery, has also been happening outside China. In 2003 the front page of an education supplement in a British newspaper had a striking illustration in the style of a Cultural Revolution propaganda poster, featuring a crowd of young people holding up Little Red Books. Above them, within the sun and emanating rays (ie in place of Mao) was a portrait of the then Education Secretary Charles Clarke.¹⁷ The same format was once employed on Mao badges. In September 2006 the stationery retailer Paperchase produced merchandise printed with visual images appropriated from a Cultural Revolution design copybook, which it promoted through its 'Top Marx' window display for the new school term.¹⁸ In spring 2007 Pizza Hut's 'Lunchtime Revolution' advertising campaign in the free London newspaper *Metro* also featured Communist iconography (heavy use of red, worker-farmer-soldier grouping with a five-pointed star).¹⁹ In 2007, green shoulder bags printed with a red star and the slogan 'Serve the People' in Chinese were fashion accessories in Hollywood.²⁰ In December 2007,

the front cover of *The Economist* featured Mao wearing a Father Christmas hat with a five-pointed red star on the white band, linked to the article ‘Mao and the art of management’.²¹ Clearly, times have changed, for in their original contexts the casual or ironic use of such symbols and slogans would have been almost as politically offensive in the west during the Cold War as in China during the Cultural Revolution.

The compact imagery and inscriptions on Mao badges of the Cultural Revolution were created for an informed audience at a particular and unique time in history. Those who are appropriating and manipulating those images and inscriptions today are doing so for very different reasons, and for very different audiences. Both nostalgia and commercialization are necessarily selective processes, in which only the most iconic, and emotive, images and words can survive.

Notes

- 1 Barmé 1996, 129; Schrift 2001, 156–157.
- 2 Schoenhals 1992, 44, refers to CCP Central Department of Propaganda Circulars no. 3 (1978) and 14 (1979), quoting from Zhongguo Zhongyang Xuanchuanbu 1981.
- 3 Published after the 6th Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP; see *Beijing Review* 27 (6 July 1981), discussed in Goodman 1981, 525.
- 4 Schoenhals 1992. On the struggle to reduce ideological dissonance amid the pulling forces of the burgeoning market economy between 1955 and 2000, see He Zhou 2000.
- 5 Barmé 1996.
- 6 Hubbert 2005.
- 7 Deng 1988 and Jin *et al.* 1989.
- 8 Davies 2005.
- 9 Evans and Donald 1999, 25, fn. 59.
- 10 McGregor 2006; Melvin 2007, also ‘Mao and the Art of Management’, *The Economist*, 22 December 2007–4 January 2008, 123–124. The first quote is the title of a chapter (1957) in Mao’s *Selected Works*, vol. 4. The second quotes from Mao’s Report to the 2nd Plenary Session of the 7th Central Committee of the CCP (1949), also in *Selected Works*, vol. 4. The third is the title of a speech made by Mao in 1944, and the title of Chapter 17 in *Quotations from Mao Zedong*.
- 11 See zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/最高指示.
- 12 An expression uttered by an anxious mother concerned that her intelligent teenage son did not have the drive needed to put in the effort to secure a place at one of China’s top universities, heard by the author in Kunming, September 2007.
- 13 See, for example, <http://www.lzqzj.com>.
- 14 The top five FAQs asked how to lose weight, how to reload computer systems, how to make money, how to have a baby in the year of the metal pig [2007], and how to win on the stock market. See Wang 2006.
- 15 See www.time-blog.com/china_blog/2007/04/a_kinder_gen..., posted by Simon Elegant, ‘A Kinder, Gentler Mao’, 19 April 2007. The title is taken from Mao’s poem *Changsha* (1925). The same title, translated as ‘A Dream of Youth’ was used for a Chinese film (2002) about a group of college students, but not including Mao and his contemporaries; see http://ceas.uchicago.edu/resource/2007FilmCatalog_Chinese%20Films.pdf.
- 16 Mao’s portrait appeared on banknotes before 1949, but did not appear on banknotes of the People’s Republic until the 1980s; see Wang 2003 for details.
- 17 ‘East Meets West. What British and Chinese schools can learn from one another’, *The Independent*, 20 November 2003. The illustration was by Chris Duggle.
- 18 I am grateful to Natalie Siu-lam Wong for bringing this to my attention. She discusses it as part of her PhD thesis ‘Visual Culture of Maoist “cultural revolution” imagery’ (University of Westminster, awaiting completion).
- 19 The slogans for the different adverts included ‘Lunchtime Not Worktime’, ‘Power to the Lunchhour’ and ‘Know your Colleagues’. According to David Stevens of Wieden and Kennedy, London: ‘Our aim was to create a campaign that encouraged workers to unite and reclaim their lunch hour. This led us to look at the art and posters that were produced during the Cultural Revolution in the People’s Republic of China. Our first piece of reference was a T-shirt bought during a trip to our Shanghai office. The message under the design read “Unity is Strength”. We were drawn to the bold spirit of determination the art expressed. Almost every example we researched reflected the energy and togetherness that could help us deliver our simple marketing message: Fight for your rights. You deserve a proper lunch’ (personal communication with the author, 17 October 2007).
- 20 In June 2007 the actress Cameron Diaz publicly apologised for causing offence by toting a green bag with the red star and slogan ‘Serve the People’ (in red Chinese writing) on a visit to Peru.
- 21 *The Economist*, 22 December 2007–4 January 2008.