

Red Nostalgia: Commemorating Mao in Our Time¹

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Abstract

This essay departs from the figure of exoticism to theorize *chinoiserie* for the twenty-first century, so we may better address the new realities and forces at work in the context surrounding the (re) creation and redefinition of the “orient.” The paper takes as its focus the cult of posthumous Mao that became fervent in the 1990s and has since the turn of the millennium created a nexus in which global capitalism and “effective authoritarianism” negotiate conflicting interests and, together, create a line of development in their search for a global modernity. I argue that Chinese state capitalism in the twenty-first century took advantage of cultural consumerism made possible by global capital while working upon and with the genealogy of orientalism, of *chinoiserie*, in the so-called West. I seek to show that the commodity industry of posthumous Mao today witnesses *chinoiserie*’s transformation from a western fantasy into a policed imagination – a *chinoiserie* with Chinese characteristics. For the first time, perhaps, in the case of “China,” the orient constructs itself, for its own purposes, as the “Orient,” the product of a new *chinoiserie* that serves the state along the lines of its nationalist and universalizing ambitions.

Madeleine Jarry notes in *Chinoiserie* – a study of Chinese influence on European objects in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – that although the word *exotisme* did not appear in the French language until the nineteenth century, “it embodies a concept that had fascinated Europeans since the High Middle Ages (12th to 13th centuries)” (1981, p. 9). Exoticism is a key term in the historical narratives of *chinoiserie*. At moments in the eighteenth century, “exotic” China was the idealized moral past as Voltaire, in his “translation” of *The Orphan of China* (a Chinese tragedy from Yuan Dynasty), referred to it imaginatively and nostalgically. Most of the time though, exoticism defined the character of “things Chinese” and formed the basis of an imbalanced power relation between China and the West – one between an active, desiring consumerist self and a passive, fetishized object. In spatial terms, it legitimated the constructed relation between the modern Enlightened West and the barbaric Far East. The crux of this relationship remains that China, whether in terms of power, geographical reference, or temporal distance, served as a locus of difference, a manufactured object of European national imaginations, expansive capital, and colonial greed – in the form of what David Porter calls “an aesthetic of the ineluctably foreign, a glamorization of the unknown and unknowable” (2001, p. 134).

In the time since the end of industrial capital and the emerging dominance of finance capital, a new extensive, pervasive, and flexible power monopolizes most forms of cultural communication, understanding, and exchange.² As a result, “[t]here are no longer ... exotic peoples,” observed the great German Jewish exilic critic Erich Auerbach in his book of reflections on the long history of western realist representations (1953, p. 552). As Auerbach came close to finishing his *magnum opus Mimesis* and, perhaps thinking about Lily Briscoe’s Chinese eyes in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, he made a brief remark on China and anticipated a certain inadequacy in the discourse of *chinoiserie*:

[To]day the term [*exotic*] would be quite unsuitable for Pearl Buck's Chinese peasants. Beneath the conflicts, and also through them, an economic and cultural leveling process is taking place. It is still a long way to a common life of mankind on earth, but the goal begins to be visible. And it is most concretely visible now in the ... representation of the random moment in the lives of different people. So the complicated process of dissolution which led to fragmentation of the exterior action, to reflection of consciousness, and to stratification of time seems to be tending toward a very simple solution. (1953, pp. 552–3)

Without meaning to be ironic, Auerbach found “exoticism” unfit – “quite unsuitable” – to describe Pearl S. Buck's Chinese peasants. This is not so much because Auerbach lost himself in the then popular song of praise for Buck's prize-studded novel *The Good Earth*.³ Indeed, Auerbach was not concerned with reading Buck from the perspective of what now comes to be called “postcolonial studies.” Even if given the hindsight of Edward W. Said's work on the modern novel, Auerbach's critical purpose clearly takes issue with the problem of cultural hegemony that emerged in the form of what critical theorists from the Frankfurt School would call “state-centered” democracy at a global level and scale. Writing in the postwar era of the mid-1950s and soon after his narrow escape from the Nazis, Auerbach was trying to work out the consequences of emergent global hegemony. In effect, *Mimesis* betrays the shock of the survivor and the trauma of ethnic cleansing, all of which sensitize him to any approaching sign of totalizing power, no matter the form. From his perspective, globalization prepares the ground for a new set of national identity politics and representations.

Today, globalization's technologies in commodifying political imagination have become so advanced that Auerbach's “forewarnings of the approaching unification and simplification” mark only the beginning point of the ever-saturating globalization process. They have become an indispensable fact of our being today. Importantly, in the case of China, the globalizing force experiences a dynamic mutation as it meets with the driving forces that are foundational to both the Chinese state's national project of transforming China into a global power and some Chinese nationalists' corresponding aspiration for world homage. These collected forces – global, statist, and nationalist combined – meanwhile constitute the moral economy of a political endeavor, which the Beijing government had characterized in the earlier slogan “one world, one dream,” and more recently in President Xi Jinping's “Grand Renaissance of the Chinese nation.”⁴ They present themselves as conscientious agents in the ambition to bring forth a new standard of global modernity that finds its blueprint and resources in the collusion between Chinese post-socialist “new authoritarianism” and neoliberal capitalism. Given these forces and ambitions, as China announced its “rise” with a series of incredible visual allures in the first decade of the new millennium,⁵ nothing truly “exotic” remains. Thus, some questions arise: How do we talk about *chinoiserie* without the “exotic”? Without being “exotic,” how does contemporary China, for example, the “China model” along with its Confucius institutes in the world, serve now as a template of “alternative modernities” in the age of globalization?

This essay departs from the figure of exoticism to theorize *chinoiserie* for the twenty-first century, so we may better address the new realities and forces at work in the context surrounding the (re)creation and redefinition of the “orient.” The paper takes as its focus the cult of posthumous Mao that became fervent in the 1990s and has since the turn of the millennium created a nexus in which global capitalism and “effective authoritarianism” negotiate conflicting interests and, together, create a line of development in their search for a global modernity. When this Mao cult brought the 1960s socialist discourse about “alternative modernities” back into the market of the late 1980s, this was a signal to conclude the era of the so-called “Chinese revolution,” to stop investing hope in authoritarian China's prescribed course of modernization. For the first time, perhaps, in the case of “China,” the orient constructs itself, for its own purposes,

as the “Orient,” the product of a new *chinoiserie* that serves the state along the lines of its nationalist and universalizing ambitions. In other words, post-Mao Chinese society took advantage of cultural consumerism made possible by global capital while working upon and with the genealogy of orientalism, of *chinoiserie*, in the so-called West.

I argue that, on the one hand, twenty-first century *chinoiserie* accepts revolutionary China as a figure of unlimited possibilities. The neo-socialist China that unfolded in the course of the second half of the twenty-first century brought Mao Zedong to life again, puffing him with so much money and market creativity that gave the Chairman an afterlife hardly any other historical leader could share. On the other hand, the new *chinoiserie* continues to instruct and inform China from within the hegemonic framework of transnational capitalism precisely in its attempt at liberating and depoliticizing Red China. Yet, this is not to say that *chinoiserie* is a marginal effect of the global. As the Beijing Olympics made explicit to the world in 2008, China is not a weak state in relation to capital institutions.⁶ The era in which finance-capital led predominantly by the US expands and acts as a new form of colonization has ended in the new millennium. Globalization, when it comes into play with post-socialist Chinese national ambition and state interests, dissipates in the face of another hegemony and in the order of power that turns in on itself. Despite globalization’s narrow focus on the market, posthumous Mao of the twenty-first century allies with a new authoritarianism that ceaselessly invents, reconstructs, and stages China’s revolutionary past as a spectacle in which the party-state allows and contains voices of social discontents.

In short, this paper is less interested in the extent to which twenty-first century *chinoiserie* actually exists outside of the Chinese community. It seeks to show that the commodity industry of posthumous Mao nowadays witnesses *chinoiserie*’s transformation from a western fantasy into a policed imagination – a *chinoiserie* with Chinese characteristics. The cult of posthumous Mao provides details for a rich historical narrative about the ideological export and commodity industry of Red China, a narrative showing that important changes in the trend of post-Mao *chinoiserie* have been taking place, first at the end of the cold war, and then again at the turn of the millennium. This change, in turn, dramatizes the uneasy collaboration between Chinese statecraft in the era after Deng Xiaoping, global modernity, and hegemonic capital.

Mao Mao

(Figure 1)

“The chairman is like Giorgio Armani” (Rauhala, 2009). “He is more popular than ever,” said John Li, who sells Mao memorabilia from a small shop in Hong Kong. Thanks to Deng Xiaoping’s era of market reform and “opening up,” the world sees the great helmsman thrive as a contradictory being in the world, reinvented from the sublime revolutionary hero in war-torn China to the obscure object of desire. Since the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the open market spliced Mao’s use value as a political figurehead and his potential as a cultural and consumerist icon. From pop-art portraits to the omnipresent face on the *renminbi* notes, from Cultural Revolution kitsch to the ObaMao souvenirs more recently found in tourist stalls, the manufacture of new Mao is a process in which the revolutionary relics in their different dimensions, renditions, and manifestations adapt to often incompatible social spaces and go through contradictory forms of fetishism.⁷ The image of Mao – whether ideologically charged or discharged, politically castrated or simply exterminated, held up nostalgically, ironically, or as an object of ridicule – enjoys a posthumous existence in and through an astonishing range of merchandise.⁸ See figure 1 below for example. Indeed, when it comes to legacies of the future, few leaders in the world history of state authoritarianism have had the luck of enjoying as much vitality and creativity as Mao Zedong. Mao, once evoked by such popular memoirists as Nien



Figure 1. A “Red Guard” Cultural Revolution kitsch standing outside of “The Monogamous Chinese,” an upscale Sichuan and Peking restaurant located in Hong Kong’s Soho district. Photo by author, 26 November 2013. See also the restaurant’s website <http://themonogamouschinese.com> for an “art gallery” showing the restaurant’s interior décor, which features a gigantic portrait of Chairman Mao made completely from business cards of patrons.

Cheng and Jung Chang for his role as the leading antagonist in trauma literatures, has gone through several waves of commercial and cultural renewal.⁹

The process of objectifying Mao has displayed a consistent engagement with the circumstances of the time that varies enormously depending on global politics and China’s place and function in such politics. If the socialist art and literature of Mao’s era were deeply anchored in the socialist idyll, then post-socialist art, committed to a wide range of popular sentiments and tastes, emerges from the market’s profit-making motive served by a superstore of aestheticized commodities.¹⁰ MM or Mao Mao, once the spirit in the theme song of Jean-Luc Godard’s 1967 film *La Chinoise*,¹¹ is now the name of the online shop, Sync, and gives to one posthumous Mao.¹² Assuming the persona of a gender-neutral cuddly panda with a pair of starry eyes, Mao Mao is the most up-to-date reference of “the most respected/inspiring Chinese leader.”¹³ Born “to sync with the progressive world” and with a “heart and mind” that “signify [sic] the true progressive spirit,” Pandie-MM is “playful,” “adventurous,” and has “a sense of humor” (Figure 2).

In brief, it is especially as a consumer pop-icon that Mao Mao becomes one commodity for the profiteers of late capitalist globalization. In his afterlife, Mao’s portrait went from being the subject of the commercial artist Andy Warhol’s “business art” to being iron-on stickers that beef up tank tops, tote bags, luggage tags, alarm clocks, coffee mugs, and local wine.¹⁴ These “hip accessories” incorporate everyday activities, evidencing the way the market of the 1990s



Figure 2. A collage of screen captures of Mao Mao merchandise taken from Sync's webpage.

successfully liberated, if not also rectified, Mao's socialist experiment. The multifarious "shades of Mao" (Barné, *Shades of Mao: The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*, 1996) are evidence of the fact that it is cultural capitalism, rather than the struggling revolutionary left, that has succeeded in developing policing states and institutions in time to correspond to the conditions of the times. They show that the Chinese revolutionary days and experiments have arrived at an impasse – sometimes referred to as the socialist "end of history." In their form as legacies of the communist days resurrected from the dustbin of history, they also steer a direct course for post-war capitalism.¹⁵ Andy Warhol's 1972 portrait of Mao Zedong is a classic example of transnational capital's reification of Mao.

At the turning point of the Cold War, Warhol, the self-identified "Business Artist,"¹⁶ appropriated Chinese political iconography and used the portrait of Mao printed on the Little Red Book to fill yet another space in his collection of celebrities in politics and entertainment. Noticeably, Warhol did not seek to invalidate the resonant ideological and global-political implications of his subjects, for example, Mao's iconic function in the cold war era. The repeated attempts to facelift and deface celebrities – of decontextualizing and imaging fame – reveal nothing more than Warhol's achievement in becoming an early practitioner of the "society of the spectacle." As Warhol himself made clear, the technological touch-up pictures manifest not only a resolute lack of interest in the original photograph's contextual significance but also little authorial intention to provide aesthetic pleasure, especially the pleasure of the moral and/or the spiritual. Ironically, Warhol by virtue of his authorial nullity, which is essential to any success in discoloring Red China, has earned himself a seat in the China wave of the era of alleged globalization.

Certainly, the pronounced range and variety of Mao objects suggest that any use and consumption of the commodities is a liberation from the past – an experience of "seeing the unseen" (Sync, 2013); it is more a subjective taste or personal style than a belief system in

practice. Differently put, in the context of mapping *chinoiserie's* historical developments, Warhol's *Mao Zedong* is a prophetic announcement of the arrival of a new site of identity production and commodity fetishism. A site that tacitly reifies and represents any forms of what Arif Dirlik calls "alternative modernity" wherever they appear on the global scene as nothing more than a sensational and marketable screen in the museum-cum-auction house (Dirlik 2012: 283).¹⁷ In face of hegemonic capital, any "revolutionary potential" that critics imagine might contain in products of market play – such as the hollow plastic bust of Mao available at a hundred US bucks and comes in multiple colors – falls short of expectations.¹⁸ Meanwhile, ever more market products and opportunities join a corpus of life writings by some Chinese exiles (mostly women), who quickly captured the English-language publication market with their memoirs and biographies about "the unknown story" of "revolutionary Mao" and Red China. The memoirs – which recollect, question, allege, imagine, and explain the life and power of a revolutionary autocrat – in being an important popular source of conflicting accounts of Mao create a moral vacuum, even nihilism.¹⁹ On other occasions, I have discussed extensively the politics of writing involved in the popular memoirs.²⁰ Simply put, I examine the Chinese memoirs as a specific ensemble and corpus of writing unto themselves and argue that they are in many ways a product of the post-cold war liberal capitalist market. The geo-political conditions situating the memoir writers were so powerful that they were the "authors" of these texts.

As the process of commodifying Red China rampant in the 1990s engages in the task of historical rewrites, it also produces a "counter-revolutionary" environment that would generate legitimating sentiments for the increasingly authoritarian and conservative political climate of corporate-state capitalism – a naturalized condition of our time. The persisting play – I appropriate this term from the Android "Google Play" app²¹ – could also become more of a serious game.

The American actor Cameron Diaz, for example, overplayed when she carried a green bag with a red star and the Maoist slogan "Serve the People" on a visit to Peru in 2007. Thinking that China is very much in vogue, the beau monde "did not realize the potentially hurtful nature of ... a purchase [she] made as a tourist in China" (Davis, 2007). Many Peruvians were offended because they have painful and complex memory of the Shining Path of the 1980s – the Maoist-inspired guerrilla insurgent organization. The moral of the incident is clearly the disjunction between global and local. The globalization of *chinoiserie* may well produce local variants of symbol and commodity at odds with state-controlled and/or national notions of the sinocentric. One of the chief contradictions of post-Cold War *chinoiserie* is the way it is ahistorical and situational at once. Ultimately, new Mao is a multitude of patterns, each object of desire for a certain set of existences in place and community. The industry of the new Mao becomes a problematic pressure if the consumers seek to make literal any of the images or objects' confederacies with their historical reality. Here, the Peruvians, as second consumers of the oriental image – of what would have been an innocuous image and everyday object – found it hard to persist in a continuous turning away from politics.

In its effort to bestow their allegedly innocuous "freedom" on consumers everywhere, global *chinoiserie* subjects the new-millennium consumer to the same political crisis that so paralyses the crowd in all the great historical moments of transition and change. If modernist poetry indulges in a murkiness that turns away from the will to live, if postmodernist images pride themselves on their "shock-and-awe" effect that produces "a blasé attitude," if contemporary indulgence in digital virtuality exacerbates alienation, hegemonic power alone readily and unfailingly offers consolation. Such consolation – whether in the form of Enlightenment universalism, fascist fanaticism, communist internationalism, or corporate-state global capitalism – predicates itself on sterilized imagination.²² In Auerbach's words, such a kind of imagination operates in "a sect, which solved all problems with a single formula, whose power of suggestion imposed solidarity,

and which ostracized everything which would not fit in and submit” (Auerbach, 1953, p. 550). Manifestly, since China’s “spectacular economic rise,” an aspiring hegemonic power consisting of late capitalism and new authoritarianism emerges onto the global scene to conduct a grand finale to the finale of the very concept of historical progression. The emerging power puts to shape what globalized capital has been doing to “alternative modernities” in the decades since the end of the Cold War. The new Mao of the twenty-first century has at moments ceased to be as much a pop-consumerist icon as anything else and as it was in the 1990s. Numerous cases, best known among them being the rise and fall of Bo Xilai (薄熙来), the party chief of Chongqing before his fall in March 2012, and along with it the “Chongqing model” – a grand example of Red cultural-state industry, illustrate this.

Chinoiserie in the Twenty-first Century

The posthumous Mao of the 1990s suffered heavy political and ideological losses to the global market, but it led to little wavering of popular imagination of him. The new Mao fetishism, in the long run, removes Mao from the history of revolutionary China through the Cold War to the twenty-first century “war on terror” via the figure of the ultimate mastermind of guerilla warfare – the figure dominating both popular and military imagination at a global scale. Jean Baudrillard wrote, “We are far beyond ideology and causes now” (2003, p. 9), clearly echoing and extending Guy Debord, who focuses on the end of the Cold War and looks at it as a major world event that inaugurates the global triumph of liberal power. Baudrillard describes this last stage of globalization – or the “long war” of global counterinsurgency – as one in which the opposing forces in a conflict are two sides of the same coin, and in which struggles have ceased to be the means or paths to historical transformation. For Debord and Baudrillard, the fall of the Berlin Wall is the historical threshold at and beyond which we reach the end of history and continue into the permanent future.²³ In confronting the very “spirit” of twenty-first century terrorism, Baudrillard explains that terrorist attacks are global capitalism’s own abjection; if you like, they are an immune booster of globalization’s latest system update. In his words, “Every machinery of domination secreted its own counterapparatus, the agent of its own disappearance” (2003, p. 10). To Baudrillard, in the midst of recurrent revolutionary wars, local and global, ideas and political imaginations are lost in the course of fighting, and the so-called counterinsurgents can win even if they offer only amoral promises. In the words of David Galula, author of the treatise *Counterinsurgency: Theory and Practice*, “Force, when it comes into play in a revolutionary war, has the singular virtue of clearing away ... the matter of the issue” (Galula, [1964] 2006, p. 49). Galula continues bluntly, “Which side (of force) gives the best protection, which side threatens the most, which one is likely to win, these are the criteria governing the population’s stand” ([1964] 2006, pp. 8–9). Note well, Galula is as much the mastermind behind the US model of counterinsurgency as he is the muse of Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, whose 2007 *US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* seeks to turn the US military’s attention to Galula’s military career of fighting in “irregular wars” in China. Importantly, both Galula and Nagl consider that any guidelines for combating a local revolutionary war against capital expansionism – the last Iraq War, for example – must begin with an understanding of Red China and Mao’s infamous strategies of guerilla warfare.²⁴

We may resist being as pessimistic as Baudrillard regarding the function of political radicalism, or as unscrupulous as Galula regarding the use of vast-scale force. Yet, their remarks on the final stage of globalization should serve to open up a more general consideration of contemporary talks and practices of “alternative modernity,” whether in the form of local “resistance,” private “struggle,” or terrorist “attack.” Indeed, had we felt the urgency imposed by the resonance of Baudrillard’s critique of hegemonic globalization, or, specifically, were we indignant – as we

should be – about the so-called “Great Chinese Renaissance” and its appropriation of the Chinese revolution’s legacy of modernity in a mode alternative to imperial capitalism,²⁵ we would have an immediate task. Such a task requires that we scrutinize the motive and effect of the Chinese party-state’s recent “struggles” against the new Mao circulating in and for the global.

After traveling in the world in different image forms and at a range of prices, the new Mao returns home – or almost returns – to post-Mao, post-Deng China. It returns to the end of history in a mode that continues its playfulness and marketability, but that opens itself to not only global capital but also ever more adaptive and assimilative authoritarian power. As an Andy Warhol portrait of Mao Zedong through which actor Dennis Hopper shot two bullets sold for USD302,500,²⁶ the new Mao might have the impression that global capital could buy up all the freedom in the world to travel afar. Beijing shot back, shattering this delusion. In 2012, the Andy Warhol Museum, along with its global investment sponsors such as The Bank of New York Mellon Corporation (BNY Mellon) and Christie’s, wanted to bring the largest ever collection of Warhol’s work to Asia; Beijing would not allow this exhibition to take place in the mainland (The Andy Warhol Museum, 2012). Is the Chinese party-state working here simply as what Baudrillard calls the “viral counterapparatus” of globalization? At first glance, it is. Yet, the sophistication and complexity of Chinese state control that is becoming increasingly manifest suggests that the act is more than an automatic response or counterbalance to totalizing capital.

If global capital audaciously made Mao Mao, Beijing by refusing it the home-return ticket unmakes it, returns Mao Mao to the world, gives purpose to the floating image that global capital makes ahistorical, and complicates and refines the technologies of international corporate power with national state power. All these efforts are not to generate more capital from Mao Mao but rather to reclaim for itself the seeming privilege of global capital and to signal that “Chinese characteristics” are the inevitable component of contemporary globalization. The dramatic rise and fall of Bo Xilai and his Red Empire – a political, cultural, and aesthetic industry launched in Chongqing between 2007 and 2012, so brought the cult of posthumous Mao to such a new height that it is ultimately Chinese state power that acts as the governing authority of the twenty-first century *chinoiserie*.

Bo Xilai, former party secretary of Chongqing, is the master builder of the Chongqing model. From 2007 to 2012, until the Politburo and Central Committee purged him from his position and appropriated his Red empire, Bo launched a series of large-scale anti-corruption task forces and the “singing red and striking black” campaign in Chongqing.²⁷ The purge of Bo has evoked different socio-political sentiments. On the one hand, at a time of rampant corruption and social injustice, many see Bo as the Red Guard incarnate who took on the task of reviving Mao’s revolutionary policies. The leftists, especially, see the party’s ouster of Bo as a blow to their cause. The leftist website Utopia 乌有之乡, along with supporters of leftist policies, have spread documents claiming to prove that the US engineered Bo’s downfall. Specifically, one account suggests that former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brought about the purge to incapacitate Bo’s chances of occupying important positions in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) politburo.

On the other hand, Mo Zhixu, intellectual dissident critical of Bo, holds the view that the “Chongqing model” is isometric with the “China model.” He writes

The political choices unfolding right now are nothing but a brother of the Chongqing model born by the same mother: on the one hand, both stick to the maintenance of overpowering authoritarianism; on the other, both are keen on keeping up economic development. Bo Xilai expressed this Deng Xiaoping doctrine rather nakedly in “singing red and striking black” whereas Xi Jinping affirms it indirectly.... Xi Jinping, and Bo Xilai before him, are seeking to integrate Mao Zedong’s dictatorship and Deng Xiaoping’s reform and opening-up. (Mo, 2013)²⁸

It is becoming clear that Bo's Red industry is a counterpoint of Mao Mao. The Chongqing model is not a restoration of revolutionary authenticity but an aesthetic parallel and analogy to Mao Mao. Bo and Mao Mao seem to embody two possibilities simultaneously active in one Chinese dream, or two forces in a struggle over revolutionary legacies, histories, and alternatives for the future. Given the thin line separating the Chongqing model and the rest of China, we would benefit from knowing how Bo's Red empire could be perceived to function as an example of modernity alternative to "capitalism with Chinese characteristics." *The Atlantic's* reports on the daily operation of Chongqing should suffice to show how the Chongqing Red cultural political industry is in essence a stagy entertainment enterprise

Under the watchful eyes of China's Communist forefathers, teenage waiters donning Red Guard outfits serve up Chongqing's distinctive, spicy hot pot. As customers line up to plunge their chopsticks into a communal rice bowl at the back of the restaurant, waiters periodically break into choruses of Communist Party folk classics such as "The East is Red" or "Ode to the Plum Blossom" [a poem by Mao Zedong]... Waiters constantly restock the beer fridge, which bears the phrase "Weapons Chest," and a steady stream of imbibers line up for the restrooms, which are labeled "Liberated Areas." Daily specials are scrawled by hand on a list called the "Political Commissar's recommendations." The effect is like stepping into a time machine and waking up in rural China in 1968. (Century, 2013)

We must nevertheless ask ourselves how weapons made from beer and liberated elements made of organic fertilizers may fuel a Cultural Revolution in substance. Clearly, there was no social turmoil during the "singing red" period. Public performance of red songs steered China back to the road of orthodox Maoism, neither as the leftists had expected, nor as the reformists had fretted. What was at work in Chongqing is in effect a set of political strategies most complexly aestheticized not so much for the sake of ideological indoctrination as for the sake of creating an openness of form that makes political imagination a game and the legacy of the Chinese revolution a cathartic clamor. As the time machine delivers its passengers to the spectacle of a revolutionary China, it also makes a spectacle of the revolutionary past. "It is not the same era anymore," said Beijing-based historian Zhang Lifan. "[Bo Xilai] will not actually do exactly what Mao did. He just makes a gesture as if he will" (Branigan, 2013). In this context, it is also worth mentioning that the website Utopia is equally unthreatening to the liberals

[Utopia's] small, sixth-storey bookshop...has nothing on its shelves to sound any alarms. The titles – *The Secret of American Hegemony*, *The End of the American Century*, *China's Prosperity About to Go Bust?*, *25 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism!* – have the tone of harmless public eccentrics, buttonholing readers with cranky political theories. (Hunwick, 2012)²⁹

Bo Xilai might have staged a pretense of political and ideological fights in his Red cultural and political industry, but the party-state in granting Bo a substantial amount of time for the spectacle is equally hypocritical in feigning a stake in Bo's anti-corruption campaigns and a concern for restoring the virtues of revolutionary politics. The Chinese party-state structures two parallel plots in the way it functions as the governing authority over the extent to which aestheticized politics and the market, stage and ritualize social discontents. In one, it meticulously recreates a plausible fictional Cultural Revolution that tracks the paradox of Bo's contradictory commitments to both the liberal market and the radical left, to the austere doctrine of Maoism and the opulent rhetoric of Universal Studio. In a counter-narrative, the party-state fashions a real clampdown on Red Culture and in the process conjures out of what Deng Xiaoping calls the leftist revisionists, in the figure of a ridiculed and dismissed Red Guard, incarnate. This is the power of new authoritarianism appropriating postmodernist culture and neoliberal capitalism.

In the words of Daniel Leese, author of *Mao Cult*, the party is blowing up a “trial balloon” in which the party’s “internal politics” find a chance to stage dummy runs.³⁰

One tireless quotation from Karl Marx is that history repeats itself, “the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce” (1995, 1999, p. 5). In his 18th *Brumaire*, Marx criticizes Hegel’s mystic belief in the “World Spirit” as a motivating and guiding force of historical developments. Repeating nearly verbatim a letter from Engels, Marx makes an ironic remark about the unexpected ways grand historical events and personages reveal themselves, even and perhaps especially if they do so in succession and from within “the tradition of all dead generations” (1995, 1999, p. 6). Marx’s distinction between history as tragedy and history as farce is an ultimately unimportant one under the new conditions determined by global capitalism and the economic rise of China. Terrorism, the symptom and latest stage of state-corporate capitalism, Said makes clear, is “the vaguest and yet for that reason the most precise of concepts” (1994, p. 36). It is “anti-narrative” – “a web, a network” defined by its “tautological and circular” character (1994, pp. 36–7). Thus, “sequence, the logic of cause and effect as between oppressors and victims, opposing pressures – all these vanish inside an enveloping cloud called ‘terrorism’” (1994, p. 37). This sense that the “war on terror” marks and dramatizes the arrival of the millennial moment, that it depicts the final exhaustion of the self-other conflict detrimental to the political economy of the last decade, removes from “Red China” the very room for farce. In the absence of farce – that staged, public reflection upon, and offence to, proper social behavior – our global world has no exoticism, and stripped of the word has no political imagination for alternatives.

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Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ An essay for Twenty-first Century “Chinoiserie”: China and the Global Imaginary, a Literature Compass Global Circulation Project.

² In many ways, such power is the product of a mentality characteristic of the United States in the postwar era that, for decades since the first round of decolonization, had been seeking to achieve global dominance as a means to end the cold war. This desire for a spectral control over world affairs and resources rests upon and activates newly emergent strategies of power that engage and match the appearance of every upcoming “exotic other” with a new degree of accommodativeness. Since the 1960s, thus, practices of international trade, of cultural exchange, and even of aestheticizing and commodifying the “exotic orient” have been part of some local communities’ own struggle against

their general eclipse and ethnic disappearance. A poignant example of this struggle must come from the experience of the Kenyans under British imperialism. What the British colonizers called the “Mau Mau Revolt” is more than a nationalist movement; it is a logical and natural challenge to British colonial exploitation, brutality, and domination that extends to the postwar era. John Lonsdale correctly sees the meaning of the socio-political movement in its historic role of representing a “moral ethnicity” (Lonsdale, 1992).

³ For the *New York Times*, Buck’s *The Good Earth* provided American readers with an account of China in which “happily, there is no hint of mystery or exoticism.” Introduction to Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*.

⁴ See Arif Dirlik for the discussion of how Xi’s slogan reflects Beijing’s most dated ambition in “narrativizing the [Chinese] revolution” that would (re)turn China to “a pre-revolutionary past” for the purpose of launching a Chinese modernity “consisting of its own past – revolutionary and pre-revolutionary – to serve as a model of alternative development, possibly once again a model of universal relevance” (Dirlik, Two kinds of time: Thoughts on Renaissance and Revolution, 2013, pp. 2–3). Given the broad spectrum of intellectual and political roots of the Chinese Revolution, this “turn,” as Dirlik makes clear, is “not automatically ... a conservative” one (2013, p. 3). Rather, it has “opened the door to all kinds of backward-looking revivals, to be sure, but Maoists and liberals, too, can read their agendas into it” (2013, p. 3). Most important, while the outcome of this “grand renaissance” will implicate global interest and significance, it worryingly empowers an ambition that is at once away from “the achievement and global pursuit of democracy and social justice” (2013, p. 4) and “distinguishes global from Euromodernity” (2013, p. 3).

⁵ Examples include the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the 2009 PRC sixtieth anniversary military parade, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the docking mission of Tiangong No. 1 in 2011, and the touchdown of Shenzhou No. 9 in 2012.

⁶ See Hung’s essay “Imagination Sterilized: The Workings of the Global Spectacle” for an extended argument on this process.

⁷ See Hubbert for the discussion of the “incompatibility” displayed in different examples of Mao objectification. Specifically, the essay looks at two cases of Mao badge collection and argues that different desires, with contradictory purposes, motivated the collectors to engage in the business of Mao-badge collection in post-Mao China.

⁸ As some past studies have already documented, the sacred Mao badge, the picture portraits of Mao, and other such objects of the Cultural Revolution as the “Little Red Book,” have since the fall of Mao been circulating in the new era of the market. See Schrift and Pilkey’s pictorial essay for the historical account of the way Mao badges went from building “an indigenous communication channel during the Cultural Revolution” to being the object of “foreign voyeurs” (Schrift & Pilkey, 1996, p. 194). See also Dutton.

⁹ Around the mid-1980s a substantial number of Chinese authors started to write, beyond national and linguistic boundaries, about their traumatic experience during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Nien Cheng’s *Life and Death in Shanghai* (1986) and Jung Chang’s *Wild Swans* (1991) are among the first and best-known titles in this emergent literary formation. Whether the memoirs are narrated by a former People’s Liberation Army soldier, or a Red Guard, or an innocent subject drawn into the political vortex, their authors all identify Mao Zedong as a culprit responsible for their suffering and for the collapse of China into an administered “national madness.”

¹⁰ It has become impossible for Zhu Guangming, now 59, who traveled from his hometown in southwest Guizhou Province to Beijing to listen to Mao during the Cultural Revolution, to even think about how Mao’s image could transform into to a modern day pop-icon. In his days, he told the *Global Times*, “Pinning Chairman Mao badges slightly above the heart ... meant to show our loyalty to our leader and some even pinned the badges directly into their skin to show that they put Chairman Mao in their heart” (*Global Times*, 2009).

¹¹ Listen to the song at YouTube user “uddichschmuddich”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4mrkP3xgdc>. Lyrics of the song, with English translation, are available from GugaLyrics.

¹² Sync is an online shop with a registered Beijing address. Its collections pledge to “discover value unseen in things before,” “[b]e it a value to feel good, or a value to unlock the past, or a value to open up the possibilities.” The key lies in the personal; hence, its merchandise must have “a value that is invaluable to you. A value that strikes the cord of your heart” (Sync, 2013, p. What is SYNC).

¹³ See description of MM from Sync’s official webpage (Sync, 2013, p. Modern Mao)

¹⁴ Market imagination is boundless; the list of Mao objects is ever expanding. See blogger Sera Tonin for a personal account of her visit to a stall “full of kitschy Chinese items” at the Valley Markets in Brunswick Street, Australia. According to the blog entry, the Mao objects available for sale in the stall range from “lighters and watches and tins,” and “wall-paper for nurseries” to “wax mangos” (Tonin, 2011).

¹⁵ I substantiate the concept of postmodern capitalism in this context with the example of Mao objectification – a practice that essentially reifies Mao to an obsessive degree no less severe than what the Cultural Revolution did to and with its revolutionary Godhead.

¹⁶ Warhol’s Mao series is typically tailored for a single goal: treating and manufacturing art as a piece of business for generating capital. “I started as a commercial artist,” Warhol once remarked, “and I want to finish as a business artist... I

wanted to be an Art Businessman or a Business Artist. Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art" (Updike, 1997, p. 194). In the context of "business art," Warhol's value lies in the total exposition of the interwoven relation between art and the market, and of making – as inescapable. The praise of Warhol is normally simple: he was able to take a new American direction and reconciled art to the market rather than setting art against the market. The best critical comments on Warhol are by the art critic Robert Hughes.

¹⁷ I prefer Arif Dirlik's use of the term to Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar's coinage. Whereas Gaonkar insists to understand "alternative modernities" as branches or "different starting points" of an overarching and universalizing liberal capitalist modernity, Dirlik in his earlier work on "global modernity" points out the important historical moments in which socialism was once treated as an alternative *to* capitalism. In the case of socialist China, it is important to understand that "alternative modernity" has a rich historical trajectory; it is a developing concept and could change from the progressive to the reactionary in the long history of China's "transformation" into a modern nation. In a more recent essay, Dirlik, necessarily and correctly, updates his earlier understanding of the relationship between modern China and global modernity. He is critical of the discursive effort to construct post-socialist China, or the "China Model" as an example of "alternative modernity." He defines the China model thus: "Divorced from the legacies of the revolution, the Chinese model becomes one more version of authoritarian development, seeking ideological and cultural compliance with the demands of development as a participant in the global capitalist economy, without any concerns beyond success in this economy." Hence, "the difference between the present and the past may lie not in the novelty of difference but in a heightened consciousness of and will to difference. ... [I]t [would] make more sense to speak of a 'Chinese paradigm' rather than a Chinese model, which would shift attention from an example to be emulated to an example that provides not only inspiration but also procedural principles, central to which is attentiveness to the possibilities and limitations of concrete local circumstances as well as location in the world[.] This is not only consistent with the legacies of the Chinese Revolution and socialist thinking, but responds more closely to the ideological tendencies of global modernity. It would also avoid the ambiguities of the idea of a Chinese model, with its implications of an established pattern, that hardly does justice to what may be but a work in progress, a subject itself of ongoing experimentation" (Dirlik, *The Idea of a 'Chinese Model': A Critical Discussion*, 2012, pp. 283, 279–280). See also Dirlik's essay "Global Modernity? Modernity in the Age of Global Capitalism" and Gaonkar.

¹⁸ See Sync's new product "Modern Mao," available from (Sync, 2013, p. Modern Mao).

¹⁹ As Geremie R. Barmé notes, "One of the chief problems that the Chinese have had in coming to grips with the problem of Mao is that, unlike in the Soviet Union, there is no Stalin–Lenin dichotomy. Instead, a distinction is made between the early and late Mao. Deng's strategy, moreover, has been to create a collective body of 'Mao Zedong Thought' from which all unwanted theories can be excluded and into which any number of revisionist policies can be incorporated" (Barmé, *History for the Masses*, 1993, p. 260).

²⁰ See Tong and Hung; and Hung, 'Writing the Self 'in the Language of the Other': Chinese Memoirs and the Politics of English.

²¹ Wikipedia defines "Google Play" as follows: "formerly the Android Market, is a digital distribution platform for applications for the Android operating system and an online electronics and digital media store, operated by Google. The service allows users to browse and download applications developed with the Android SDK and published through Google, as well as music, magazines, books, movies, and television programs. Users can also purchase hardware, such as Chromebooks, Google Nexus-branded mobile devices, Chromecast, and accessories, through Google Play" (Wikipedia, 2013).

²² I prefer to concretize the term *sterilized imagination* with its opposite: what Paul A. Bové calls "erotic imagination" in his discussion and reading of William Carlos Williams' "Asphodel." The poem is "a love song" (Bové, 2013). Importantly, written in the spirit to impact minds away from the atomic bomb, Bové maintains that "Williams intends to create a poetics that induces in the mind affects essential to conversion from the stupefaction of unimaginative bedazzlement and the forgetfulness of love" (Bové, 2013).

²³ Jean Baudrillard wrote the remark in response to September 11 (2003, p. 9).

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of Nagl's use of Galula, see (Kelly, 2010).

²⁵ See Dirlik, *The Idea of a 'Chinese Model': A Critical Discussion*.

²⁶ The portrait was sold ten times over its high estimate at international corporate Christie's in 2011. See (Reuters, 2011).

²⁷ Interestingly, the first promoter of the Chongqing model as China's new model for economic development goes to Yazhou Zhoukan (Asia weekly), a Hong Kong-based weekly newsmagazine (Yazhou Zhoukan, 2009).

²⁸ This analysis is compellingly true. After all, predictions that the charges against Bo would deal a deathblow to the revival of Maoist ideology have not happened. If anything, since the party's 18th National Congress, some leaders, alarmed by rising unrest and a slowing economy, have promoted Maoist campaigns similar to Bo's campaign. Addressing the symposium commemorating the 120th anniversary of Mao Zedong's birth (26 December 2013), Xi Jinping reinforced Mao's role as the principal founder of the party, the PLA, and the PRC; and declared that the CCP will hold high the banner of Mao

Zedong thought forever as the country continues to rejuvenate. In the analysis of Bhaskar Roy, author of South Asia Analysis Group (SAAG), “Xi Jinping appears to have been reborn as a new Mao Zedong under the political theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics” (Roy, 2014). See also Xinhua’s report for excerpts of Xi’s symposium address (Xinhua, 2013).

²⁹ See also Teng Biao 滕彪, the well-known human rights lawyer and legal scholar in China (Teng, 2012).

³⁰ Leese coined the term when commenting on the limited edition of the Little Red Book. He writes, “If they hadn’t seen how the general tone towards the Maoist heritage had changed, I don’t think they would have dared. This is party *internal* politics popping up in the public sphere” (Branigan, 2013).

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