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# Popular Propaganda? Art and Culture in Revolutionary China<sup>1</sup>

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A POPULAR JOKE from the 1940s runs like this: “Goebbels is sent back at the gate of heaven: he should go to hell. In order to incite him to go, Saint Peter allows him a gaze at hell through binoculars. What Goebbels sees is a beautiful, elegantly decked-out bar with expensive drinks and smashing girls. When he finally arrives in hell, however, he finds something completely different: a place of horror, suffering, and pain. Quite annoyed, he complains and asks whatever that was he had seen. The devil answers: ‘Propaganda.’”<sup>2</sup>

What this joke shows very clearly is that, at least to German ears, propaganda is evil. It amounts to nothing but blatant lies and false pretense. Propaganda is manipulated and manipulative. Whenever propaganda has an effect, this is bound to be negative; an enthusiastic recipient of propaganda cannot but be deluded. A system creating propaganda is to be despised; everybody hopes for it to end. The times in which propaganda flourishes are considered unhappy times, times that everybody hopes will pass very quickly.

Considering all this, it is unsettling that the propaganda from one of the most tragic periods in Chinese history, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, which is linked very closely to one important figure in Chinese history, Mao Zedong (1893–1976), is so very popular today. The radical politics of the Cultural Revolution brought suffering and death to many, especially intellectuals. But still, the propaganda products from this time continue to thrive. For the Chinese public, Maoist propaganda art has been rehatched and modernized for almost two decades

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<sup>1</sup> Read 27 April 2007. This paper summarizes some of the ideas contained in a forthcoming study: Barbara Mittler, *A Continuous Revolution? Rethinking Cultural Revolution Culture*.

<sup>2</sup> Thymian Bussemer, *Propaganda und Populärkultur. Konstruierte Erlebniswelten im Nationalsozialismus* (Wiesbaden, 2000), 133.

now: this propaganda art appears in the form of jubilee editions and karaoke versions of the eighteen infamous model works, ballets, operas, and symphonic works canonized during the Cultural Revolution; it appears in rock and pop versions of revolutionary songs in praise of Mao; it can take the form of trendy T-shirts, watches, ping-pong racquets, mousepads, and even porcelain. Cultural Revolution propaganda objects decorate restaurants (not just in Beijing, but in London, too). Even Taiwan has begun to read the Little Red Book recently, and Sotheby's intermittently offers to sell a wide selection of Cultural Revolution relics, too, describing Maoist propaganda as "some of the most potent and fascinating propaganda art of the 20th century."<sup>3</sup> But especially in China, Maoist propaganda from the Cultural Revolution sells extremely well, to different generations and different classes. Even the successful manager, so recent media reports tell us, may now be turning back to read Mao's writings for strategies of (capitalist) success.

How does one explain that a people will not reject the propaganda of a time that for many of them means painful memories, memories of torture and violence, of slander and treason, of psychological strain and terror that drove many of them to madness, even death? Even for research purposes, it is difficult to get hold of the propaganda films from Germany's Nazi regime, but the propagandist model works from the Cultural Revolution are not only not restricted, but have been selling extremely well in the last few years, published in ever-new formats and luxurious editions in VCD and DVD formats. There are television series and memorial publications narrating the stories of their actors, and even internationally renowned stage directors such as Zhang Yimou will venture revival performances of these propaganda pieces.

Why this is so is an extremely difficult question to answer. I came across it for the first time more than a dozen years ago, when, researching for my Ph.D. dissertation,<sup>4</sup> I interviewed some fifty Chinese composers from various generations and backgrounds. Many of them told stories that were extremely different from the textbook versions of Chinese history known to me. The Cultural Revolution, the time of "grand

<sup>3</sup>This advertising phrase was used for a Sotheby auction in April 2001. It gave two online auction Web sites: <https://news.sothebys.com/cgi-bin2/flo?y=eDIO0BLrhK0OX0BAQ30BX> and <https://news.sothebys.com/cgi-bin2/flo?y=eDIO0BLrhK0OX0BAQ30BX> (both last accessed 23 April 2001) and described them as follows: "This online auction features a collection of remarkable artifacts, carefully selected to reflect the range of objects used to disseminate the gospel of Chairman Mao. Highlights include Nixon/Mao ping-pong paddles in their original packaging, portrait busts and banners of the Communist leader, as well as two rare portrait medallions of Mao ostensibly fashioned from the wreckage of US fighter planes shot down over Vietnam" (Marsha Malinowski, director of online auctions, books and manuscripts).

<sup>4</sup>The dissertation was later published as *Dangerous Tunes. The Politics of Chinese Music in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China since 1949* (Wiesbaden, 1997).

propaganda,” was described not as a time of censorship and restrictions—to the contrary. Many of these composers had found their love for music during and through the Cultural Revolution. They had learned how to compose and to conduct as members of the propaganda troupes marching from village to village. Many of them had gotten to know the rich and varied traditions of Chinese folk music during this time, when intellectuals, urban youth, and students would be sent to the countryside. They had seen what these folk traditions contained, quite beyond all propaganda: pornography, poetry, and much of the everyday. Many of them had learned to read during the Cultural Revolution, and not just propaganda works, but so-called “black literature” as well—for example, Balzac, as the Chinese seamstress Dai Sijie says in a recent book and movie, or philosophy, during the anti-Confucius campaign of the early 1970s. Others had learned to write during the Cultural Revolution. Even a *Dazibao*, they would argue, a big-character poster, which was used for political propaganda and denunciation only, was a calligraphic exercise, after all. Said one female writer (born 1958), in a recent interview, “During the Cultural Revolution a lot of people had very good calligraphy because we were all writing *Dazibao*. Now students no longer know anything about calligraphy.”<sup>5</sup> None of the composers interviewed in 1992 and not one from the group of interviewees I met in 2004, ranging from taxi driver to university professor, from journalist to musician, and from many different generations, would condemn Cultural Revolution propaganda outright. Many of them sang and performed for me extracts from the model works, revolutionary songs or so-called loyalty dances, with a smile, and hardly ever with irony, much less contempt. They would proudly show me old black and white photographs of themselves and their friends, posing in dramatic gestures. Many even argued that their most important experiences during the Cultural Revolution were these many different intellectual and cultural activities, most of which amounted to propaganda in the end.<sup>6</sup> One interviewee, an artist (born 1954), remembers: “Sure, I would have painted and drawn as long as I live, but without the propaganda troupes, many of us would not have turned into artists. The propaganda troupes brought art and the artists into people’s consciousness.” He continues: “My older brother was a great influence on me; he plays the violin. Of

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<sup>5</sup> Interview Shanghai, 10 March 2004, female writer, capitalist GMD (Guomindang) background.

<sup>6</sup> Interview Beijing, 22 March 2004, artist couple, she (born 1959) working-class background, he (born 1954) intellectual background: She: “I had a good throat, so in the school I would sing the role of Aqingsao (from the model opera *The Village Shajiabang*). Both this and the model opera *The Red Lantern* were performed in our school.” He: “The most important experiences we had during this Cultural Revolution were all these cultural activities.”

course we did not play well; we just played. But indeed, many of the now famous musicians and artists used to be in those propaganda troupes. It was a real opportunity. Of course the contents were all politics, but you could also learn how to play the violin or to paint; it was all ‘to serve politics’ (*wei zhengzhi fuwu*) but still, it was painting, so I painted a lot in the anti-Confucius Campaign, caricatures and all.”<sup>7</sup>

The way they dealt with this difficult past was so different from what I had known as a German about the German practice of dealing with the Nazi past, that I started to doubt the basic axiom that propaganda is evil. In a forthcoming study, *A Continuous Revolution. Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture*, I am trying to understand the effects of Chinese revolutionary propaganda art, which is an art, completely political, completely manipulative, and completely teleological, but nevertheless extremely popular. I am trying to make sense of this fact. In this book, I consider Chinese revolutionary propaganda from the Cultural Revolution from the point of view of *longue durée*. Cultural Revolution propaganda did not appear out of the blue, but has a long pre- and posthistory that can be traced from the late nineteenth century into the twenty-first century. Taking this long view of history makes it easier to understand the enormous effects that this propaganda had. Looking at the Cultural Revolution not as a period of “cultural stagnation”<sup>8</sup> that lasted ten years, between 1966 and 1976 (this now official chronology is in itself debatable),<sup>9</sup> but examining instead the *longue durée* of propaganda art, even disregarding the political and institutional divide of 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party began to rule all of China, I attempt a new way of conceptualizing modern Chinese cultural history.

The propaganda art from the Cultural Revolution can thus be seen as one development in the attempt to create a new but Chinese modern art and culture. It is in fact not the exception but the norm in cultural production in modern and revolutionary China, that is, throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Many of its contents have been communicated for a long time and for generations, even surviving social and political changes and revolutions. They appear in a variety of media, they can be physically experienced in propaganda

<sup>7</sup>Interview Beijing, 22 March 2004, male artist, intellectual background. Cf. also interview Shanghai, 10 March 2004, male historian of China, born 1957: “The interesting thing was that so many people actually learned how to play an instrument during that time.”

<sup>8</sup>Douwe Fokkema, “Creativity and Politics,” in *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 15/1, ed. Roderick MacFarquhar and John K. Fairbank, 2:594–615 (Cambridge, 1991), at 594.

<sup>9</sup>Michael Schönhals, review of *The Cultural Revolution: A Bibliography, 1966–1996*, in *China Quarterly* 59 (1999): 744–45, 744.

events, and, thus, they become time-resistant semantic units that form important and structuring elements in a collective cultural memory.<sup>10</sup> The “propagemes”<sup>11</sup> that have thereby come into being—the Mao image being one of them—could be considered a perfectly innocent communication technique, a social fact and factor that structures and determines all modern societies. Put differently, propaganda, and the propaganda of the Cultural Revolution as well, could be conceived of as simply a political version of advertising that is accordingly just as popular as advertising is.

And this, I would argue, it is (and was) indeed. The propagemes significant in Cultural Revolution propaganda have been interpreted and reinterpreted many times. There are multiple possibilities of reading even the extremely reduced messages of Cultural Revolution propaganda, and these interpretations, and reinterpretations by a long series of communicators, form long-lived narratives. Thus, these propagemes become part of Chinese everyday life and they may be resistant even against newly hatched propaganda. One example of this phenomenon at work may be the attempts in the early 1980s to tear down some of the Mao statues in Chinese cities and public arenas. These attempts were met with extremely strong resistance by the Chinese public. The longevity of the propagemes and their obvious impact up to the present day make it necessary to study them in detail. Thus, a study of Cultural Revolution propaganda can contribute to a history of modern Chinese society at large.<sup>12</sup>

What I will do in this paper is to introduce, by surveying some of the interviews I conducted recently, (1) how and why Chinese propaganda art is effective, that is to say, how propagemes are engendered. I will also ask (2) whether and why Chinese propaganda art is more or less effective than other popular art that does not pursue a political goal.<sup>13</sup> I will argue, *first* (A), that the Chinese audience has dealt with propaganda from the Cultural Revolution in a way that hovers between deluded and passive reception on the one hand and parasitic and sub-

<sup>10</sup>Rainer Gries, “Zur Ästhetik und Architektur von Propagemen. Überlegungen zu einer Propagandageschichte als Kulturgeschichte,” in *Kultur der Propaganda*, ed. Rainer Gries and Wolfgang Schmale, 9–35 (Bochum, 2005), here 22 and 24.

<sup>11</sup>Gries 2005, 13 and 34, defines propagemes with the following characteristics: “Contents of propaganda, rhetorical markers, markers with political content, and more or less complex narratives that have been repeatedly and successfully communicated to a target group for a longer period of time, probably across generational borders and across political and social systems, through the mass media” (translation and paraphrase by the author).

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Lawrence Grossberg, “Der Cross Road Blues der Cultural Studies,” in *Kultur Medien Macht. Cultural Studies und Medienanalyse*, ed. Andreas Hepp and Rainer Winter (Opladen, 1997).

versive reception on the other. In most cases, so it seems, the political contents of propaganda art have no influence on its reception. The political message is, therefore, not relevant to an audience's like or dislike of a piece of propaganda art. I will argue, *second* (B) that the particular form propaganda art takes is crucial to its success: in Cultural Revolution propaganda, popular genres as well as select genres from the canon of high art have been chosen for particular effect. Finally, *third* (C), I would like to show that not just the longevity of propaganda art but also—what is even more important—the context within which it appeared, were crucial to its success: quite a bit else, apart from propaganda art, continued to exist, was performed and experienced, although officially it was not allowed, during the Cultural Revolution years. This is extremely important for the reception of Cultural Revolution propaganda: the idea that it was the only artistic food that China received for ten years is grossly mistaken. (This point is very obvious in the interviews, which all stress restriction and variety at the same time.) In conjunction with its many unofficial alternatives, official propaganda art could be rather effective. Whether this was part of the official design, or a sign of the anarchism that can be said to have characterized Cultural Revolution politics, is difficult to tell.

## 1. HOW DOES PROPAGANDA BECOME EFFECTIVE?

### SUBJECTIVE RECEPTION

In Jacques Ellul's classic 1965 definition, propaganda is "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, . . . unified through psychological manipulation and incorporated in an organization."<sup>14</sup> This definition has been developed and questioned many times. One of the elements common to nearly all of the more commonsensical conceptions of propaganda is the idea that propaganda is evil, that propaganda reduces the recipient to reflex reactions: he is manipulated, even forced to do what the propagandist tells him; his reactions are foreordained and planned in every minute detail.<sup>15</sup> As we have seen, the reception of Cultural Revolution propaganda, on the other hand, appears to be completely different. This propaganda is being discussed, played with, and parodied. It is itself manipulated in people's reactions to it. There are jokes on citations from the Little Red Book; talk shows and quiz shows in which memorized quotations from Mao's works and the

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York, 1965), 61.

<sup>15</sup> Bussemer 2000, v.



FIGURE 1. Detail, anti-SARS comic with figures from the Cultural Revolution Model Works (among them, in the middle right, Yang Zirong from *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*) 2003. Source: DACHS (Digital Archive of Chinese Studies, <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/dachs/>), Heidelberg 2003.

model works play a crucial role; advertising and art that reproduce and remodel Cultural Revolution propaganda; and new versions of the images and texts published during the Cultural Revolution (figs. 1 and 2).

The question, then, appears to be less “What does propaganda do to the people?” than “What do people do to propaganda? Who takes what from the offerings in a buffet less bewitching than neutrally attractive,



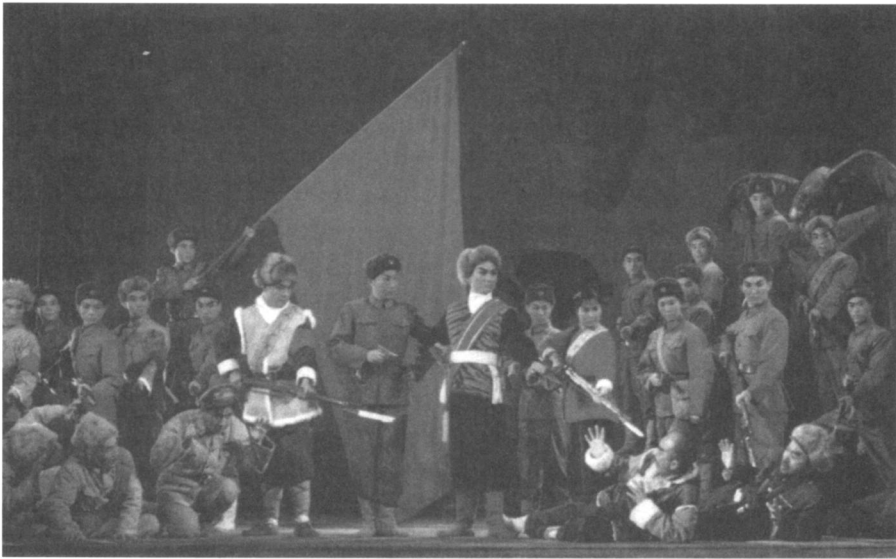


FIGURE 2. Model opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, 1972. Source: set of postcards ([Peking]: Foreign Languages Press, 1974). *Top*: This postcard shows the final scene, in which a group of bandits (on the ground) has been defeated. *Bottom*: This postcard shows the main hero of the opera, Yang Zirong, riding on his horse (which is not seen as this is symbolism from the Beijing Opera) to the lair of the bandits on Tiger Mountain.

and why is this so?” How do people react to propaganda, and how is the message of propaganda interpreted? There is not just one possible reading of propaganda, certainly; otherwise, the anti-Nazi film *Why We Fight*, produced in 1942 by the U.S. government and directed by Frank Capra, would not have worked: Capra did not introduce one new scene. His film reproduces material from Nazi propaganda films, most prominently among them Riefenstahl’s *Triumph des Willens*. According to Capra every propaganda image can serve as anti-propaganda as well. Every propaganda image, then, can be read affirmatively or subversively.<sup>16</sup>

And that is certainly true for Cultural Revolution propaganda. During the anti-Confucius campaign in the first half of the 1970s,<sup>17</sup> Confucius and with him the “feudal age,” as it was called at the time, were to be criticized. The campaign also aimed at Lin Biao, who was accused of having had couplets from the Confucian Analects hanging above his bed. Lin, the former minister of defense and designated successor to Mao, had fallen out with the Chairman due to the coup he had allegedly planned against him, which ended eventually in Lin’s deadly flight to Mongolia in 1971. The “Campaign to Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” had quite a few unintended effects, however: millions of people suddenly read, by official orders, the Confucian classics. That included factory workers and peasants. And they would be thinking whatever they wanted to think, no matter what the critical propaganda said. One Chinese journalist (born 1946) simply took the criticism for black humor.<sup>18</sup> A historian of China (born 1957) remembers: “I participated in the movement; it was quite interesting. We got to talk about history. Mao wanted us to all study history and I actually became interested in history because of that. . . . The discussions were very exciting, even more exciting than now, in a way, because everybody had to participate! We criticized and studied the stuff at the same time. But even while we criticized we would realize that there is something valuable in all that, too. . . . Indeed, I did not believe in any of the criticisms. Of course, it was not all that clear. I just thought some of their logic was really not logical at all, 他们的道理没有道理.”<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> For two thorough studies of this and other anti-Confucian campaigns throughout the twentieth century, see Kam Louie, *Critiques of Confucius in Contemporary China* (New York, 1980), and idem, *Inheriting Tradition: Interpretations of the Classical Philosophers in Communist China, 1949–1966* (Hong Kong, 1986).

<sup>18</sup> Interview Shanghai, 11 March 2004, female intellectual, rich family background: “A very strong influence on me was in the 1970s, the anti-Confucius movement. Then, nobody believed it, we took it for black humor!”

<sup>19</sup> Interview Shanghai, 10 March 2004, male historian of China, family land-owning, parents intellectuals, cadres.

There were quite a few who would criticize the critical voices in the propaganda even during the Cultural Revolution. One female writer (born 1958) remembers: “Since 1949 there had not been much teaching in the Classics. If we read old-style poems it was those by Mao. As for the Three-Character-Classic, *Sanzijing*, I read it when it was criticized; the same with Confucius, Mencius, I read all of these when they were criticized. I thought the criticism was stupid, but I also did not like the books themselves.”<sup>20</sup>

Although there were no real bases to build on, no prior knowledge of the Confucian heritage, interest in and understanding of ancient Chinese literature and philosophy were kindled in some. One artist (born 1954) remembers: “This movement was critical of Confucius, true, but since before that movement we had not actually read any Confucian stuff, it was through this movement that we learned how important Confucius actually was. . . . we were blind, then, of course, but somehow I did not think he was really all that bad.”<sup>21</sup>

The most prominent example of the educational effect this movement had, an “own goal” for the propagandists, is the director of one of the most important research academies in China: he is the son of peasant parents, both of whom were illiterate. They would never have been able to send him to school, and had it not been for the anti-Confucius campaign, when, as a member of one of the criticism groups, he received his training in the Classics, he would never have studied Chinese history and philology. But that is how a peasant boy became a renowned scholar, by means of a propaganda movement, and he is not a singular case, although his experience is by no means everyone’s experience either.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the most important characteristic of Cultural Revolution (and perhaps all?) propaganda is that it was received and experienced in many different, even contradictory ways.

Let me give another example. The phrase “Be resolute, fear no sacrifice and surmount every difficulty to win victory” 下定決心, 不怕犧牲, 排除萬難, 去爭取勝利, from chapter 19 in the Little Red Book, “Revolutionary Heroism,” is taken from the end of the story of a so-called “foolish old man” who wants to move three mountains in front of his house and finally manages to do so, in spite of everyone’s skepticism. This quotation was used during the Cultural Revolution in numerous ways, to overcome sandstorms, deep waters, and difficult mathematics exercises, as well as nasty imperialists. All possible obstacles are successfully

<sup>20</sup> Interview Shanghai, 10 March 2004, female writer, GMD intellectual background.

<sup>21</sup> Interview Beijing, male artist, intellectual background.

<sup>22</sup> Interview Shanghai, 12 March 2004, historian of China, born 1949.

undone with the help of this phrase. In the model works, it appears time and again. One of its most spectacular uses is in *Longjiangsong* (“Ode to the Dragon River”): a dike has broken and the peasants now form a human wall to make repair works possible (fig. 3). Beating the waters, they are helped by citing, singing, and performing this quotation from the works of Mao. There is a loyalty dance, too, to embody this citation. And the two artists I visited in 2004 even showed me how they had danced it. Yet whether the citation was effective or not, they could not agree.

HE: We would sing the quotation songs (*yüluge*, songs based on quotations by Mao), “Be resolute,” for example. Everybody can sing this, and everybody of course knows that it is taken from one of the “Three Old Stories” by Mao.

SHE: But we did not quite believe what these stories told us, they did not really give us support.

HE: Yes, of course, they did, for example when I was performing ballet (one of the model works, the *Red Detachment of Women*), this quotation would keep me going when I was tired.<sup>23</sup>

What we have here is very obviously subjective interpretations of propaganda. Thus, we must question the idea that propaganda is univalent and forces the recipient to interpret it in one way only. Propaganda during the Cultural Revolution was neither simply received in a reflex reaction, nor only used parasitically. The audience responded as it did with all other art: reading and enjoying it in a critical as well as creative way.

## 2. WHY IS PROPAGANDA EFFECTIVE? OBJECTIVE REFLECTION

Why was this so? Why does Cultural Revolution propaganda not evoke more resistance? I would suggest three possible answers to this question and will give more detailed examples for each of these below.

First, propaganda art was the most prevalent, but by no means the exclusive fare one could hear, see, or watch during the Cultural Revolution. It was effective because it appeared as a dominant and constantly repeated element in a spectrum that would have been officially restricted but would, unofficially, have allowed for quite a lot of variation. On the part of the population, the people in the countryside, for example, would have had more regular opportunities to take part in cultural performances than ever before (or after), even if they were offered mostly

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<sup>23</sup>Interview Beijing, 22 March 2004, artist couple, he born 1954, she born 1959, intellectual and worker background respectively.



(83) 紧接着，一个个争先恐后跃进江中，筑成一道“人墙”，向巨浪进行搏斗。江水英勇顽强，屹立江中。



(84) 军民们顶狂风，战巨浪，高声背诵着“**下定决心，不怕牺牲，排除万难，去争取胜利**”，谱下了“人定胜天”的战斗乐章。

FIGURE 3. Comic based on the model opera *Ode to the Dragon River*. In the second image, the Mao quote “Be resolute, fear no sacrifice” is printed in bold. Source: Longjiangsong; Shanghai Renmin Meishu 1974, 83–84.

propaganda art (cf. the picture of cinema performances in the countryside; [www.morningsun.com](http://www.morningsun.com)). The sent-down youth, too, would serve as (propagandistic) educators. One historian of China remembers: “In our village there were very few people who could read and write, and the sent-down youth actually taught us. They also danced and sang, so the cultural aspect was also positive. So for the youngsters in the village, myself included, this was really good. These youth, they brought some comics, also some translations, so you could get these things from them. And they really understood something about music, so we would sing together.”<sup>24</sup> Propaganda art, then, was successful because, in conjunction with non-official sources in circulation, it in fact made the everyday cultural experience of the average “comrade” more interesting, more exciting, even more cosmopolitan than ever before.

Second, it is important that propaganda art made use of some of the most popular forms, such as Beijing opera and peasant painting, in addition to selecting genres from high art such as ballet dancing or oil painting, artistic forms that were thus popularized. This variety and the particular choice of genres favored by many different groups in the population helped to make this art widely popular, while indeed it also contained quite a few elements typical of popular culture.

Third, and this is connected to the second point made just now, the propaganda art of the Cultural Revolution was not an invention of the Cultural Revolution, but could make use of long-established predecessors prominent since at least the 1930s, if not earlier. Almost all of the model works go back to earlier versions. Mao portraits have been used prominently at least since the Zunyi Conference in the mid-1930s. Comics and anti-Confucius campaigns, too, can be traced back to the early Republican era, as far as the 1910s. Cultural Revolution propaganda can thus refer back to a long history of “pre-propaganda”<sup>25</sup> that caused its success during and after the Cultural Revolution. The propogemes that mark the Cultural Revolution had rooted themselves so deeply in cultural memory long before 1966 that it is not easy, even and especially after the Cultural Revolution, to eradicate them, and this, too, is one reason for their continuing popularity.

### A. Variety and Availability

It is a common assumption that the Cultural Revolution was a period of unprecedented cultural stagnation. Eight so-called “model works” (*yangbanxi*), which had been introduced in the beginning of the Cul-

<sup>24</sup> Interview Shanghai, 12 March 2004, historian of China.

<sup>25</sup> Ellul 1965, 15.

tural Revolution, are taken as paradigmatic of all there was of Cultural Revolution culture. They are condemned as an aberration in terms of aesthetic and cultural development. And yet, the idea that the Cultural Revolution was simply an atypical phase of political extremism, distinct from the years before and after this “unfortunate period,” is misleading, most certainly as concerns artistic production. The notion that there was nothing but “eight model operas” in Cultural Revolution culture is mistaken.<sup>26</sup> While during the Cultural Revolution all artistic production was subject to extreme political regimentation, and only certain correct colors, forms, and sounds, too, would be officially acceptable, it turns out that there was a large gap between what was officially acceptable and what was freely available.

One artist (born 1954), mentioned that he regularly played the *Butterfly Violin Concerto*, a romantic piece (composed 1959, based on local operatic tunes, by Chen Gang and He Zhanhao). The piece was officially condemned during the Cultural Revolution because it was based on a romantic love story, individual love, not love for the Party and the Communist cause. The artist remembers: “I even played the *Butterfly Violin Concerto*. Everybody who played the violin would play this piece; it simply sounded so good. Actually, what we played, nobody really cared. Music was never restricted all that badly (or at least we did not feel it).”<sup>27</sup>

Apparently, what was true for music was true for literature as well. One journalist (born 1946) remembers that she would read traditional stories in the form of comics, which were no longer officially published during the early years of the Cultural Revolution: “During the Cultural Revolution, I read all these traditional comics, although they were no longer published then. As for the revolutionary comics, I did not read them; they were not that nice, a bit boring, really.”<sup>28</sup>

A younger historian (born 1958) would remember veritable “reading orgies” with stolen books: “They [the Red Guards] also stole so many books in the library and then we would exchange these books. We would read these books in secret, but we felt so great when we did it. I was a very fast reader when I was small, because there was always this atmosphere of secrecy.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Even an authoritative 1998 Harvard bibliography of the Cultural Revolution includes the polemical slogan-phrase “eight model operas” as a section title (Eugene Wu, ed., and Song Yongyi and Sun Dajin, comp., *The Cultural Revolution. A Bibliography, 1966–1996* [Cambridge, Mass., 1998], 263). The Cultural Revolution produced eighteen model works as a whole; see Mittler *forthcoming*, chap. 1.

<sup>27</sup> Interview Beijing, 22 March 2004, male artist, intellectual background.

<sup>28</sup> Interview Shanghai, 11 March 2004, female intellectual, rich family background.

<sup>29</sup> Interview Shanghai, 10 March 2004, female writer, capitalist GMD background.

A musician (born 1942) had even included an old Tang poem in his black and white photo album, which he showed me. He remembered: "Of course, there is a Tang poem in this photo album. Of course we would memorize these poems during the Cultural Revolution."<sup>30</sup>

And a historian (born 1949) would even mention the regular visit of a storyteller to their village: "In the countryside, there were quite a few storytellers. They would come around and stay for five to eight days or something. They did this and there were no restrictions, nobody interfered. So it is not really true to say that all of China's tradition was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Because China is so big, it was not possible to actually guide everything and know exactly what was going on. And they really could not manage it! You could perform all kinds of things, and nobody would know it. Often there were blind men as storytellers. The whole activity was organized just by the village; they gave him a place to stay and eat etc.; nobody cared about that. Tradition has not been broken off; they could not manage to do that."<sup>31</sup>

It is easy to add to this list of examples. What they illustrate is that the Cultural Revolution was a time during which there was an attempt, officially, to manipulate and guide precisely the choice of cultural resources available (a fact constantly mentioned in the interviews). This is especially true for the years between 1965 and 1971, when local operas and traditional themes and techniques in opera, literature, comics, and painting, as well as foreign so-called "capitalist" or "revisionist" art, were no longer readily available (that is, for sale). This changed drastically with the beginning of ping-pong diplomacy in the early 1970s, however. Foreign orchestras were allowed to travel to China again, and many an artist who specialized in traditional painting styles and was condemned in the early years of the Cultural Revolution was asked to come back from his re-educational sojourns in the countryside to create so-called "hotel art": works for the foreign guests who were to be impressed with traditional Chinese culture. Throughout the Cultural Revolution there may have been harsh restrictions on the propagated official culture, but the importance of the manifold and varied local and private cultures both in urban settings and in the countryside has not earned enough attention. These cultures form, however, an extremely important backdrop for the particular effect that Cultural Revolution propaganda art had. Says one artist (born 1954), "We had lots of opportunities in these propaganda troupes. When we went to the countryside, the connection with the peasants was very good. The leaders wanted us to learn from the peasants, and we did learn some things.

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<sup>30</sup> Interview Shanghai, 9 March 2004, male musician, family factory workers/ owners.

<sup>31</sup> Interview Shanghai, 12 March 2004, historian of China.



But not that much—I really just painted and read books all the time; it was really fun.”<sup>32</sup>

### B. *Propaganda and Pop*

The cultural experience that the Cultural Revolution was, was indeed “fun” to many. Cultural Revolution culture was popular. The propaganda products introduced popular and high art forms to those who had never been confronted with them: urban youth learned about Beijing opera, peasants about ballet. Says one urban youth of the time (born 1954), “I never used to watch Beijing opera. I did not like it, but the model revolutionary operas were such that they actually made you like Beijing opera, or you got used to it. . . . [Y]es, a lot more people actually were confronted with and at the end knew something about Beijing opera through the Cultural Revolution. . . . [O]f course you can say a lot of bad things about the Cultural Revolution, but in terms of culture, there was a lot to be offered and learned.”<sup>33</sup>

In much of what the interviewees said, it becomes clear that consumers of Cultural Revolution propaganda derived pleasure even from a text whose ideological message they did not share or accept. What people make of propaganda is just as unpredictable as what they would make of any other text, in spite of all the overdetermination worked into them by the creators of this art. The public will appreciate propaganda art’s aesthetic qualities or criticize them; they will notice its political content or ignore it. This ambiguity and openness in reception explain some of the after-effects of Cultural Revolution propaganda, which is appreciated not only by those who have nostalgic memories of performing it, but also by a younger generation that never went through the Cultural Revolution at all (this younger generation, now singing karaoke, rapping and rocking to the model works, figures prominently in a 2005 documentary on the model works).<sup>34</sup> A musician (born 1942) remembers: “My generation likes the model works; they are our youth. Yes, there are people who dislike them, too, but really we do like them. Indeed, when I was young, eighteen or so, I needed art so much, we all did. And then there were just the model works as our food, and we actually thought they were quite great. Jiang Qing [Mao’s wife, who

<sup>32</sup> Interview Beijing, 22 March 2004, artist couple, he born 1954, she born 1959, intellectual and worker background respectively.

<sup>33</sup> Interview Beijing, 22 March 2004, male artist, intellectual background.

<sup>34</sup> Yuen Yan-Ting, dir., *Yang Ban Xi—The Eight Model Works* (Scarabee Films, Rotterdam, 2005). The director again uses the polemical term “eight model works,” which has become customary even in textbook writings about the Cultural Revolution.

was in charge of the production of model works] used really good performers, writers, artists, and musicians. Of course this was propaganda for Mao's thoughts, but it was also simply good art, it is all against these imperialists and their attacks, yes, it is, but it is also good art, really."<sup>35</sup>

The subjective *pleasure* experienced by each of them may be derived from sources that have nothing to do with the original message of the text at all.<sup>36</sup> One artist, documented in the film, remembers how much he liked to watch the model ballet *Red Detachment of Women*, not for its political content, but because the women were wearing very, very short shorts, and he thought this extremely sexy. All of this may also explain why the generation born after the Cultural Revolution, in a kind of Art Retro movement, also finds some of the art and culture of the Cultural Revolution fascinating, why they flock to Cultural Revolution restaurants, buy some of the more expensive collections of the model works and Red Sun CDs, and visit Cultural Revolution flea markets. When it comes to Cultural Revolution propaganda, the concept of *pleasure* has explanatory power at least equal to, if not greater than, ideas about forceful seduction and brainwashing manipulation. What we observe here is semiotic competition for the interpretative power of propaganda. People engage in it, to the present day, because this competition is fun, a game, almost. Messages and contents of propaganda are being negotiated between those who create the propaganda and those who receive it, and this is all the more so, because the recipients in fact do not have to be forced to take part in these negotiations, but willingly and happily do so.<sup>37</sup>

Why? Because many different needs are served by the propaganda: those who like Beijing opera have the revolutionary model operas; those who prefer ballet get that; those who like symphonic music have something for their tastes, too. Whoever likes oil paintings will find a Mao, or even several, to put in his living room. If one prefers ink painting, another is to be had; woodblock prints or a peasant painting style, too, can be found.<sup>38</sup> And for those who would prefer a button to everything else, there is one for every taste. Clearly, the makers of Cultural Revo-

<sup>35</sup> Interview Shanghai, 9 March 2004, male musician, parents factory workers.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Bussemer 2000, 69.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> For a broad vista of all different Mao posters see the relevant sections in Pierre-Loïc Lavigne and Pierre Budestschu, eds., *Chinese Propaganda Posters*, <http://db1.maopost.com/wcat=mao&wlan=en&wreq=backhome>, last accessed 6 December 2007; Katie Hill, ed., *University of Westminster China Posters Online*, <http://home.wmin.ac.uk/china%5Fposters/>, last accessed 6 December 2007; Stefan Landsberger, *Stefan Landsberger's Chinese Propaganda Poster Pages*, <http://www.iisg.nl/~landsberger/>, last accessed 6 December 2007.

lution propaganda art are very familiar with the rules of how to make art popular. They know how to combine different genres and different types to make sure that they capture an audience. As Fiske puts it, “A popular text, to be popular must have points of relevance to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts, and so must be polysemic in itself.”<sup>39</sup> By creating a propaganda art that advocated the same message in a myriad of different cultural registers, genres, and forms, the Chinese state, in the attempt to prevent the creation of popular art from below, produced precisely such art from above, and, now talking from hindsight, did so rather successfully.<sup>40</sup>

The state’s claims for Chinese propaganda art are twofold: it aspires to be popular art and high art at the same time. Its artistic value is dependent on how well it “serves the masses.” By the nature of this ideology (and in complete negation of any Benjaminian or even common-sense theory), the more popular the art work, the higher its artistic achievement. And, indeed, the main hero in the model opera *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy*, Yang Zirong (see fig. 2), is no Hamlet, but more of a Superman. Compared with popular and mass culture rather than high art, i.e., elite art and culture, Cultural Revolutionary propaganda begins to make sense. Popular culture tends to be excessive; its brush strokes are crude, its colors striking. Its excessive nature calls on those who reject and despise popular culture to say that it is “vulgar,” “melodramatic,” “superficial,” “sensational,” and “transparent.”<sup>41</sup> All of these are descriptions that would easily fit the art of the Cultural Revolution as well. According to Fiske, the broad consumption and, at the same time, broad condescension toward a cultural product is usually evidence that the piece of culture is popular.<sup>42</sup> He explains this by taking the example of popular language. We may sigh over simple word games, but we will still be amused. **If Cultural Revolution propaganda is criticized for its lack of aesthetic values, that is done because, evaluated from the vista of so-called “high culture,” it lacks precisely that. The rhetoric of the “deficient character” of cultural products from the Cultural Revolution is identical with the critique high culture usually offers of popular culture. And that is what Cultural Revolution culture is: popular culture. It is effective, as is popular culture, because it is nothing but popular culture, after all.**<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Fiske is cited in Rainer Winter, “Cultural Studies als kritische Medienanalyse: Vom ‘encoding/decoding’ —Modell zur Diskursanalyse,” in Hepp and Winter 1997, 53.

<sup>40</sup> Bussemer 2000, 78.

<sup>41</sup> Winter 1997, 74.

<sup>42</sup> Fiske is cited *ibid.*, 67.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 76.

### C. *Continuity and Repetition*

According to Ellul, propaganda can be effective only when it is applied over a long time. If we take the Mao-cult as one example, we can see a continuity of more than half a century. At least since the 1935 Zunyi Conference, Mao has been the main leader of the Chinese revolution. The installation of the folk song turned revolutionary song, “The East is Red, China Has Brought Forth a Mao Zedong,” in 1942<sup>44</sup> and the decision to make Mao Zedong Thought part of the constitution in 1945, as well as the erection of Mao statues in public institutions and places since 1949, while the picture, still situated on Tian’anmen, continues to play an ever-changing but ever-propagandistic role, give symbolic affirmation. According to Ellul, “Continuous propaganda exceeds the individual’s capacities for attention or adaptation and thus his capabilities of resistance. This trait of continuity explains why propaganda can indulge in sudden twists and turns. It is always surprising that the content of propaganda can be so inconsistent that it can approve today what it condemned yesterday. . . . Actually it is only an indication of the grip it exerts, of the reality of its effects. We must not think that a man ceases to follow the line when there is a sharp turn. He continues to follow it because he is caught up in the system.”<sup>45</sup>

These observations are directly relevant to the Mao cult. To the present day, even under an exceedingly non-Maoist policy of “socialist capitalism,” Mao plays an (increasingly!) important role. Reverence and love for Mao is, paradoxically, often voiced by those who suffered most during the Cultural Revolution and earlier. They would say that during the Cultural Revolution, a time of mutual distrust and slander, people were more honest than today, that they were much more altruistic than today in this egotistical world, where everyone is for himself and exclusively interested in his own profit. Mao comes to stand for the old and cherished values in a world gone by and, increasingly, he becomes the stuff that makes Chinese society, disintegrating quickly with the effects of socialist capitalism, hold together. Not a particular message, but a particular feeling is associated with Mao, the most prominent symbol of Cultural Revolution propaganda art. What Ellul writes about the effects of a propageme and propaganda is all true for Mao: “It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice,

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<sup>44</sup>The original text of the folk song is to be found on <http://www.morningsun.org/about/index.html>, last accessed 3 August 2006.

<sup>45</sup>Ellul 1965, 18.

but to loosen the reflexes. It is no longer to transform an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief.”<sup>46</sup>

Propagemes like Mao represent and serve very basic timely and culturally dependent needs. They are not usually what they appear to be. They are, *à la longue*, shared formulations, attempts to express emotional, cognitive, and mental needs. They are symbolizations. Thus, they have effects, and those include social and political practice.<sup>47</sup> This theoretical description tallies with what we find in the interviews: Mao the propageme serves to fulfill people’s need for security. The repetitive use of the propageme creates a feeling of trust. Thus, a framework is established that makes it possible for society to stick together.<sup>48</sup> A journalist (born 1946) contends that “[t]here are many reasons for the Mao Fever today. One reason is the fact that we still have a lot of very poor. They always loved Mao; he was for a very egalitarian society. They of course are nostalgic for that time because it was more egalitarian then; now the differences are much, much greater! It is just like the Russians who are nostalgic for Stalin.”<sup>49</sup>

A musicologist, from the same generation, reasons: “Are people nostalgic for the equality during the Cultural Revolution? Yes, I think so! . . . The relationships between people at the time were much different, there was much greater social cohesion, and the workers then, they were really considered very high in the hierarchy, because of Mao. They did not eat better than now (indeed, worse), but their position in society was much better. Now their position is just like before 1949, so it is understandable that people have this kind of nostalgia. But I also think it is very dangerous.”<sup>50</sup>

Finally, a Shanghai musician (born 1942) reckons: “Why is Mao popular again? Well, it may have something to do with the massacre on Tian’anmen. . . . We realized that in spite of Deng Xiaoping’s reform policies, there would still be political trouble. In Mao’s time everybody was the same, everybody wore the same clothes. But now, everybody is different, of course now everybody has a telephone etc., but so many people now have much, much more than others, so those remakes of revolutionary songs in praise of Mao, for example, were in part nostalgic.”<sup>51</sup>

The new Mao (and Cultural Revolution propaganda) cult that has been blooming since the 1990s is supported by the Chinese government

<sup>46</sup> Ellul 1965, 25.

<sup>47</sup> Gries 2005, 32.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–32.

<sup>49</sup> Interview Shanghai, 11 March 2004, journalist.

<sup>50</sup> Interview Beijing, 19 March 2004, musicologist.

<sup>51</sup> Interview Shanghai, 9 March 2004, musician.

more or less openly. What Mao and Cultural Revolution propaganda actually mean to the individual is not discussed. The communicators involved in this process have agreed on a semantic marker, Mao, who, as propageme, can play the mediator for things that may have very little to do with each other.<sup>52</sup>

In a recent article in the *Guardian*, the following story, which sums up very well the different kinds of evidence to be found in China and in China memoirs, is told by Chinese author Xinran Xue (born 1958), who moved to London in the mid-1990s:<sup>53</sup>

“I can make the Queen laugh or frown!” a Chinese student boasted during a party at my flat. Then she used a £10 note to show how she could change the Queen’s expression from a big laugh into a frown simply by making two folds in the note. “Have you tried this on Chinese money with Mao’s face? How would his face look?” asked a Western guest. “Oh, let’s try it! Mao’s face must be very funny.” Some of the students became very excited. I, too, was curious to see what Mao’s face would look like. I had never seen him make any public display of anger or sadness. Even though people have painted him very differently, all have shown him smiling, unceasingly.

So I raised my hand to tell the students that I had a Chinese note with Mao’s face on it. I was stopped by the middle-aged woman next to me. “Don’t be silly, Xinran,” she said. “Do not let them deface Mao, it is not good for you.” “It’s just a joke,” I said. “And this is London, not China, and we are free to have our own views.” I went to get the note. She stopped me before I could hand it to the students.

“Do you want to be hated by the Chinese?” she asked. “You think the Chinese would hate me for playing a game with Mao’s face? Do you believe they still regard Mao as God?” I was surprised by her attitude; she is, after all, a career woman living in the West, and has family with a Dutch man. “You often go back to China, so tell me why Mao’s picture still hangs on the walls of so many people’s houses, shops and offices,” she said. “You think it is because the Chinese Government orders them to display them, or because those people have never heard Western views? Or do you think they don’t know that Mao did terrible things to his people and how much he damaged his country?”

“Be honest to our history, Xinran. I know your family has lost people under Mao’s cruel policies, I know your parents were sent to prison for years. I am sorry to remind you of your unhappy memories. But don’t look down on what Mao did for Chinese national pride. . . .

<sup>52</sup>Gries 2005, 22.

<sup>53</sup>“Great Helmsman’s Role Still Has Currency,” *Guardian*, 5 September 2005: contained in DACHS Heidelberg <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/archive/documents/history/guardian050919.txt>.

I feel it is unfair to Mao.” I stopped her. “What about the millions of Chinese who died under his rule?” “If Westerners still believe their God is just after he flooded the world for his own purpose, or George Bush could invade Iraq for moral good, why shouldn’t Chinese believe in Mao, who did lots of positive things for the Chinese but also lost lives for his own mission for good?” Her voice grew angry. A student snatched the note from my hand. “I told you, don’t let them use Mao’s face to play with!” She was so angry that she left at once.

I was so shocked by her loyalty to Mao that I couldn’t enjoy the game with Mao’s face and the note. A few weeks ago I heard some news. Peasants near Beijing, who had been campaigning since 2003 to stop a power station being built on their land, were attacked and six were killed by an armed gang. It was said to have been arranged by corrupt local officials. I rang a journalist friend in Beijing to ascertain exactly what had happened. He told me what he had heard: “Many wounded peasants held Mao’s picture and cried, ‘This would never have happened when Mao was alive.’”

All of this made me think that it would be very difficult for a lot of Chinese people to change Mao’s face in their memory or in their hearts—even in a time when their children were happy to play a game with a picture of Mao’s face on a banknote that would have seen them jailed when Mao was alive.

### 3. CONCLUSION: HOW TO DEAL WITH GHOSTS FROM THE PAST— THE AMBIGUOUS LOVE OF MAO

A paper like this can easily be misunderstood, because the “reconstruction of a fascination” that one executes is understood to be a “fascinated reconstruction,” which it by no means is.<sup>54</sup> In this paper and in my forthcoming book I am not out to deny or beautify the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. I am interested in understanding the mechanisms that make the propaganda that accompanied it attractive, because to the present day Chinese politics, and, what is more important, the everyday experience of life in China, are determined by this propaganda. Jung Chang, in her voluminous biography of Mao, *Mao: The Unknown Story*,<sup>55</sup> which was recently so well received in the popular media world-wide<sup>56</sup>—many of you may have heard or read about it—nowhere addresses this issue. Few Sinologists would disagree that the

<sup>54</sup>Rolf Felbinger and Katja Scherl, “Flieger sind Sieger,” in Gries and Schmale 2005, 119–65, here 126.

<sup>55</sup>Jung Chang and John Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story* (New York, 2005).

<sup>56</sup>For a number of critical reviews, see the selection in the Heidelberg Digital Archive for Chinese Studies (DACHS Heidelberg, <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/dachs/>, last accessed 6 December 2007), searching for *Mao: The Unknown Story*.



FIGURE 4. New Year's Poster, 2003, with Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin. The Chinese characters read, "If you would like to attain wealth, rely on the Party. If you want to get rich, don't believe in the gods." Source: DACHS Heidelberg, 2003.



main figure in her book, Mao Zedong, was more monster than man. Indeed, he was a political leader who led his party comrades, and then the entire country, to and through hell. And still, many in my field would declare the book to be, as Thomas Bernstein aptly put it, a “major disaster for the contemporary China field.”<sup>57</sup> We do so not because it introduces as “unknown” a story that has long been known. We do so because **Mao the monster is not a figure that, in the heads of contemporary Chinese, is a reality. This is so although the many horrors mentioned in this book have been known in China for quite a long time. What Jung Chang forgets in her very angry, if in many ways justified, attack on Mao, the monster, is that this monster Mao is not all that relevant to contemporary China.** For many (maybe the majority), he is a symbol of the egalitarian, altruistic past, a past that has been buried only recently with the victory of “socialist capitalism.” That is why Mao appears as **talisman** of the taxi drivers, hanging from their mirrors, why he can function (with his successors Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin) as a New Year’s god (fig. 4), as well as a star in many blockbuster movies and pop songs. Mao the monster and Mao the man have somehow become decoupled in common understanding (that had taken place with Hitler in Nazi Germany, too; the sentence “Wenn der Führer das wüßte . . .” [If our leader were to know of this . . .] is strong evidence for this). And accordingly, Mao the man is not made responsible for many of the things that Mao the monster actually did. Why this is so and what this means—these questions and thoughts never occur to Jung Chang. She does not ask why a man, Mao Zedong, and the propaganda of his time, a time of extreme cultural repression, are so popular. Why is China’s response so different from that of other societies that underwent the pressures of totalitarian regimes? This is a question we need to ask, because it will tell us a lot, not only about the state of Chinese society today, but, given its ever-growing importance, also about our world community tomorrow.

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<sup>57</sup>Thomas Bernstein’s article is to be found in DACHS Heidelberg, <http://www.sino.uni-heidelberg.de/archive2/2006/01/31/bernstein060131.txt>, last accessed 6 December 2007.