

MAO AS THE KITCHEN GOD: Religious Aspects of the Mao Cult During the Cultural Revolution

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During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Mao Zedong, his writings and even his quotations, became the embodiment of the Chinese Communist Party and its power; following his call to bombard all headquarters¹, and the subsequent devastation of most structures of political and administrative power, Mao had ceased to be merely the unifying symbol of the revolutionary leader, but simply *had become* the CCP and all that it stood for.² This article will consider the religious aspects of the Mao Cult from the viewpoint of the propaganda art which was produced in abundant quantities during the period.

As the ultimate father-mother of the people, Mao was the omnipresent expression of state power. His countenance beamed down from the huge billboards located along the streets and avenues in China's urban areas; his likening decorated steam engines and harbor cranes; photographs showing his face, placed in the fields, oversaw most phases of rural production; he figured larger than life in the huge visual representations of a future Communist Utopia; and quotations from his writings, containing political and ideological exhortations to behave and think in a specific way and compared to a magic or supernatural weapon, a "spiritual atom bomb" or even a "beacon light", graced every imaginable surface.³

Cultural Revolution propaganda art was the logical result of the experiences gained in the past as well as the climax of the visualization and propagation of models of behavior. Although designated Mao-successor Hua Guofeng tried to mold his image in the example set by his predecessor after the latter's death in 1976, the propagation of the divine presence and the accomplishments of the supreme leader

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¹ "Bombard the Headquarters", big character poster (*dazibao*) written and posted by Mao on 5 August 1966. Dennis Bloodworth, *The Messiah and the Mandarins — Mao Tsetung and the Ironies of Power*. New York: Atheneum 1982, p. 207; Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China 1949-1979*. Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press 1994, p. 318.

² James T. Myers, "Whatever Happened to Chairman Mao? Myth and Charisma in the Chinese Revolution", in Victor C. Falkenheim and Ilpyong Kim (Eds.), *Chinese Politics from Mao to Deng*. New York: Paragon House 1989, p. 23.

³ James T. Myers, "Religious Aspects of the Cult of Mao Tse-tung", *Current Scene*, Vol. X, No. 3 (10 March 1972), pp. 6, 8. See also Göran Aijmer's contribution elsewhere in this issue.

would never again be repeated with the same intensity, sophistication, and mind-numbing density in the China of economic reforms and Open Door policy.⁴

Creating a Style to Portray the Revolution

Already before the personality cult of Mao got fully on steam in the 1960s, a long search had been undertaken for an esthetic style to portray the accomplishments of the revolution. After the Long March (1936-1937), the CCP finally had the opportunity to turn to an important aspect of its work among the people: the politicization of the Chinese. In Yan'an, the use of art as a catalyst to change the peasantry was first put in practice. Propaganda art was created specifically to reinforce political campaigns that were waged primarily through other mass media, such as the press. But no amount of communal study or newspaper reading ever could have the same effect as the direct experience of being confronted with striking visual propaganda. In order to accommodate and reach the largely illiterate peasants, the Party started to address them in terms of their own psychology and experience by using reworked iconographic forms of art that were current among the people, in particular the medium of the New Year prints (*nianhua*).⁵ The theoretical dimensions of, and limitations on, art in the socialist society under CCP rule had already been formulated during the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art in 1942, a meeting of artists and intellectuals in the revolutionary base area of Yan'an.⁶ There it was decided that the arts were to serve the "broad masses of the people" by satisfying both their cultural demands (*puji*, popularization) while at the same time raising their cultural standards (*tigao*).⁷

⁴ However, North Korea has shown to be a worthy successor of the example set by China during the Cultural Revolution. See, for example, *The Leader of People — Collection of Works at the National Art Exhibition in Celebration of the 70th Birthday of Great Leader President Kim Il Sung*. Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House 1984, which naturally is dominated by many illustrations featuring Kim. A number of the North Korean images are almost carbon copies of earlier Chinese works devoted to Mao, which have been published, i.a., in Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu (Eds.), *Jinian Mao zhuxi "Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhuishangde jianghua" fabiao sanshi zhounian meishu zuopin xuan* (Selection of Fine Arts' Works to commemorate the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Publication of Chairman Mao's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art"). Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe 1973.

⁵ David L. Holm, *Art and Ideology in Revolutionary China*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1991, p. 78. Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

⁶ For a translation and extensive discussion of the contents and the various versions of Mao's opening and closing remarks at the Forum, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1953 Text with Commentary*. Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies No. 39. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan 1980.

⁷ Arnold Chang, *Painting in the People's Republic of China: The Politics of Style*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1980, pp. 7, 73-77; McDougall, *ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

The New Year prints produced under CCP guidance could take the form of "hortatory propaganda pictures" (*xuanchuanhua*), for which soldiers, workers and militiamen posed and which were painted on city walls and village houses, or on huge pieces of white cloth. One form of propaganda pictures that was probably derived from Soviet practice and that was used from 1943 on, was the "leader's portrait"; they featured local, national and international figures, military and political leaders, i.a. Mao, and labor and hygiene models. These pictures sometimes were sold, but they could also be awarded as prizes. In this way, they were incorporated into rituals which enhanced their value and conferred status on their recipients.⁸ The peasantry responded positively to the old visual idiom and symbolism used in these colorful images that had been appropriated by the CCP to propagandize socialist principles; they liked their *nianhua* realistic, as long as their portrayal was a little more beautiful than reality itself.⁹ Moreover, they replaced traditional New Year prints because the CCP succeeded in establishing hegemony over culture; they shut the latter out by means of the monopoly over the media, by simply prohibiting their production and distribution. It is in the combination of these elements that the roots of the invasion by Mao of the home and the individual's personal and private space can be traced.

But being able to visualize abstract policy and behavioral indications through traditional New Year prints, adapted both in style and contents to the revolutionary situation prevailing in China, was not enough in the eyes of the leadership, or at least not modern enough. Although successful in transforming the thoughts and sympathies of large sections of a predominantly rural audience, the arts were also to be directed toward an audience of urbanites who were still largely unfamiliar with, and possibly hostile to, Communism. From a very early stage, the CCP leadership sought inspiration in the Soviet Union for the development of its visual propaganda for this target group. As a result, Mao and other Chinese leaders were convinced that Socialist Realism was the best tool to develop new, national forms of art; because of the bright colors and the happy and prosperous atmosphere so characteristic of Socialist Realism, it was seen as a continuation of the essential features of the visual tradition of the popular New Year prints.¹⁰ What had to be discarded in the prints, although undoubtedly contributing to their popularity among large sections of the population, was the symbolism that traditionally, and conventionally, was seen as auspicious: symbols indicating long life, a government career, and wealth; or religious and mythological figures such as the Kitchen God, the Door God and the God of Longevity, thus conferring on them the quality of magical charms to ward off bad luck.¹¹

⁸ Holm, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67; David L. Holm, "Art and Ideology in the Yenan Period, 1937-1945" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1979), pp. 102-103, 185, 186, 309-310.

⁹ Holm, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

¹⁰ Holm, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

¹¹ Maria Rudova and Lev Menshikov (Eds.), *Chinese Popular Prints*. Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers 1988, p. 10.

Chinese Socialist Realism

Socialist Realism, then, became the accepted manner of representing the future after the People's Republic had been founded in 1949. In Socialist Realism, an image tends to be structured as a narrative, something which is not merely to be seen to be understood, but which can also be "read" as a story containing numerous meanings. Therefore, it is subjected to a number of codes. First of all, the main subject of the painting is located in or near the center, and usually illuminated by a natural or artificial light source; this causes the secondary subject(s) to be shrouded in shadows. The representation of the subject is highly colored and detailed. These are not the only reasons why all attention is drawn to the main subject. Its placement at the top of an imaginary, triangular ground plan, with the secondary subject along the diagonal sides, is even more instrumental in drawing the viewers' attention. This spatial device, moreover, serves as a wedge from the foreground into the middle, adding depth to the painting.¹²

Secondly, Socialist Realism portrays the future in the present, by not only showing "life as it really is", but also "life as it ought to be", thereby instructing the viewers in the revolutionary development which takes place "in the spirit of Socialism".¹³ The extreme vulgarization that is characteristic of Socialist Realist art is precisely the reason for its existence: the assumption being that realism is something that can be readily understood by "the masses of the people", and therefore will be appreciated by a (mass) audience for esthetic reasons as well. Indeed, in China, Socialist Realism would make it possible for "... Chinese artists to grasp the world of reality and to cure the indifference to nature which caused the decay of Chinese traditional art", while at the same time "it was the most popular form of art, which was also easiest to grasp".¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu has stated most forcefully the reason why Socialist Realism reflects the level of sophistication and esthetic appreciation of a leadership.

"What is expressed in this formalist and petit-bourgeois art — which, far from expressing the people, involves rather a *negation of the people*, in the form of that naked-torsoed, muscular, sun-tanned, optimistic people turned towards the future, etc. — is the social philosophy and the unconscious ideal

¹² Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1988, pp. 20-21.

¹³ Howard L. Boorman, "The Literary World of Mao Tse-tung", *The China Quarterly*, No. 13 (January-March 1963), p. 18.

¹⁴ Ma Ke, "Jianguo shiniandai zhengzhi xuanchuanhua" (Political Propaganda Prints in the Ten Years Since the Founding of Our Country), *Meishu yanjiu*, No. 1 (1959), p. 1.

of a petite bourgeoisie of party men who betray their real fear of the real people by identifying themselves with an idealized people (...)"¹⁵

Socialist Realism, blended with traditional elements and specific Chinese artistic techniques, was not only thought appropriate because of its appeal to the masses, its combination of the reality of today with the ideals of a better future. It also portrayed idealized social and political behavioral models, or learning objects, namely, ordinary men and women engaged in the creation of this better future, thus showing the "bright side" of life of the "real heroes", or representatives of the "new people", striving for a "new world".¹⁶

During the Great Leap Forward-campaign in the late 1950s, with its calls for "more, faster, better, [and] cheaper" production, Mao called for the replacement of Soviet Socialist Realism with the "fusion of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" in the arts. Or, as Guo Moruo put it, "revolutionary realism takes realism as its keynote, and blends it with romanticism", whereas "revolutionary romanticism takes romanticism as its keynote, but blends it with realism".¹⁷ On this basis, the visual arts were intended "to convey the most romantic and glamorous views of the motherland; social, economic and political triumphs; the strength, courage, and resourcefulness of the people; and the wisdom of their leaders".¹⁸

Clearly, the non-Soviet element of romanticism was introduced to make the arts more visionary¹⁹, in order to imbue the population even more with the necessary spirit of self-sacrifice, hope and enthusiasm to overcome concrete obstacles by pure will power. At the same time, this eliminated the gloominess often found in "pure" Soviet Socialist Realism, which was considered inappropriate.²⁰ All this, of course,

¹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1991, pp. 213-214. For an equally scathing remark concerning the leadership's intellectual level and esthetic appreciation, see Elizabeth K. Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society — The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition*. New York, NY/Guildford, Surrey: Columbia University Press 1989 [1977], p. 152.

¹⁶ Laing, *op. cit.*, p. 20; Scott Minick and Jiao Ping, *Chinese Graphic Design in the Twentieth Century*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd. 1990, p. 102; Boorman, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ Kuo Mo-Jo (Guo Moruo), "Romanticism and Realism", *Peking Review*, 15 July 1958, p. 11; Ng Mau-sang, *The Russian Hero in Modern Chinese Fiction*. Albany, NY/Hong Kong: State University of New York Press/Chinese University Press 1988, pp. 278-279; Minick and Jiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

¹⁸ Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. 1987, p. 51. Although this prescription was originally given for the medium of photography, it fits the visual arts remarkably well.

¹⁹ According to Guo, "Chinese romanticism never lost its revolutionary character, but early accepted a distinct ideal." See Kuo Mo-Jo, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁰ Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

took place against the background of famines which followed the failures of the Great Leap.

In 1962, Mao advocated the Socialist Education Movement (SEM), in an attempt to "inoculate" the peasantry against the temptations of feudalism and the sprouts of capitalism which he saw re-emerging in the countryside. The whole movement was clearly a bid to regain his former political prominence and power, which he saw being overshadowed by other leaders such as Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping.²¹ Large doses of didactic politicized art, whether figurative or literary, were produced as serum for this inoculation process. The Party organization, in the meantime, tried everything in its power to block Mao's initiatives; because of the Party's obstructions, Mao increasingly found fault with (the power-holders in) the CCP.²² Accusing the Party of the same inclination towards "revisionism" and a preference for technocratic over ideological solutions as he witnessed in the Soviet Union, he turned towards the only organization he considered trustworthy: the PLA.

The PLA had been active in the field of propaganda art during the anti-Japanese and the Civil Wars; in peacetime, the army largely followed the trends in the civilian arts world as dictated by the Party.²³ Under the leadership of Marshal Lin Biao, who replaced Peng Dehuai to become Minister of Defense in 1959, the PLA increasingly was employed to bolster the personality cult around Mao, and thus to produce art that would contribute to the construction of Mao's god-like image.²⁴

Already before the compilation of the *Quotations from Chairman Mao (Mao zhuxi yulu*, the "Little Red Book", published in May 1964) for use by the armed forces, Lin Biao, or Mao's staunch supporters in the Army, had turned the PLA into

²¹ For the situation in the countryside, see C.S. Chen (Ed.), *Rural People's Communes in Lien-chiang; Documents Concerning Communes in Lien-chiang County, Fukien Province, 1962-1963*. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press 1969. For the Socialist Education Movement, see Richard Baum and Frederick C. Teiwes, *Ssu-Ch'ing: The Socialist Education Movement of 1962-1966*. China Research Monographs No. 2. Berkeley, CA: University of California 1968; and Bill Brugger, *Contemporary China*. London: Croom Helm 1977, pp. 241-280.

²² For Party obstruction in literature, see among others Stefan R. Landsberger, "After the Bumper Harvest": *China's Socialist Education Movement as Seen Through Short Stories from the Sixties*. ZZO Working Paper No. 46. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam 1984, pp. 63-64.

²³ Already at the Gutian Conference in 1929, guidelines were set which basically shifted the organization of propaganda work from the army to the CCP. Holm, *Art and Ideology*, pp. 18-23; *Zhonggong dangshi zhuyao shijian jianjie* (Short Introduction to Important Events in the History of the CCP). Chengdu: Sichuan renmin chubanshe 1982, pp. 187-191. An artistic impression of this meeting can be found in the set edited by Renmin meishu chubanshe, *Qingzhu Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun jianjun wushi zhounian meishu zuopin xuan* (Selection of Fine Arts' Works to Celebrate the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Founding of the Chinese People's Liberation Army). Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe 1978.

²⁴ Evidence that has recently been brought to light, however, "... indicates that Lin Biao was fundamentally uninterested in political power [and] adopted a passive strategy of doing whatever Mao wanted ...". See Frederick C. Teiwes, "Unearthing the Historical Mao", *The China Quarterly*, No. 145 (March 1996), p. 182.

"a great school of Mao Tse-tung Thought": an organization that functioned along the ideological and political lines as Mao desired them.²⁵ The army was the driving force behind the campaign to study Mao's *Quotations*. The PLA also supplied the behavioral models that corresponded most closely to Mao's ideas about ideological correctness; the most well known of these were such exemplary soldiers as Lei Feng, Wang Jie, and Ouyang Hai, who attributed their miraculous deeds to, or found their deaths in sacrifice for the Revolution, the Party, or Mao.²⁶ As a hagiography of Lei Feng informs us, this hero, and the others as well, was noteworthy because of

"... his revolutionary spirit of being always mindful of his origins and loyal to the Party and Chairman Mao ... his noble communist virtues of endurance to hardship, simplicity, diligence, absolute selflessness and readiness for others ... his endeavor in studying Chairman Mao's works, his selflessness in accepting Party education..."²⁷

Models as Teaching Aids

The use of models is an important aspect of Mao Zedong Thought.²⁸ Mao Thought, which has been termed "Confucian Leninism" by Lucian Pye, combines the controlling elements of both Confucianism and Leninism, making everybody constantly aware of what constitutes correct behavior in accordance with the correct definition of one's role, and what conduct is deemed unacceptable; correct ideas (orthodoxy) are believed to follow automatically from this proper behavior (orthopraxy).²⁹

²⁵ Maurice Meisner, *Mao's China — A History of the People's Republic*. New York, London: The Free Press, Collier Macmillan Publishers 1977, p. 297.

²⁶ Laing, *op. cit.*, pp. 53, 55; Meisner, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

²⁷ "Notification on the Propaganda and Study of Comrade Lei Feng's Exemplary Deeds in the Whole Army", issued by the General Political Department of the PLA, February 9, 1963, in *Union Research Services*, Hong Kong, Vol. 31, No. 24, p. 864, quoted in Myers, "Religious Aspects", p. 3.

²⁸ During the "Cultural Revolution", Mao Zedong Thought was solely ascribed to Mao's genius. When his contributions were assessed in the 1980s, it was interpreted as the collective wisdom of China's veteran revolutionary leaders. The latter assessment is laid down in the *Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China*, adopted by the Sixth Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in 1981. See *Resolution on CPC History (1949-81)*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press 1981, pp. 11, 56-57.

²⁹ Paul J. Hiniker, *Revolutionary Ideology & Chinese Reality - Dissonance Under Mao*. Beverly Hills, CA/London: Sage Publications 1977, p. 81; Lucian W. Pye, "Communication and Political Culture in China", in Godwin C. Chu and Francis L.K. Hsu (Eds.), *Moving a Mountain; Cultural Change in China*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii 1979, p. 174; Lucian W. Pye, *The Mandarin and the Cadre: China's Political Cultures*. Ann Arbor, MI: Center for Chinese Studies/University of Michigan 1988, pp. 31-32; James L. Watson, "The Renegotiation of Chinese Cultural Identity in the Post-Mao Era", in Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom

Correct behavior can be presented in the printed or broadcast media, in art or in literature.

In Maoist theory, the confrontation with a model that is held up for emulation will cause a desire in a person to recast himself. This results in an internal contradiction between the individual's existing, internalized values and the ones he now compares himself with. The struggle between the two value systems, then, leads to a new equilibrium, in which the new values are internalized. The process does not stop there: When confronted with a new model, the equilibrium in turn gives way to a new internal contradiction. In this way, an eternal cycle of confrontation, internalization and renewed confrontation is created, leading to ever higher levels of human perfection or social development.³⁰ As such, the emulation of models follows the Marxian dialectical process and fits neatly into the "struggle-unity-struggle"-scheme which was developed in Mao's epistemology. Or, to quote Mao's own words,

"... it is only through repeated education by positive and negative examples and through comparisons and contrasts that revolutionary parties and revolutionary people can temper themselves, become mature and make sure of victory."³¹

Along these same lines, he later increasingly valued the use of models in the mass campaigns that were designed to overcome the objective difficulties created by lagging industrialization and mechanization.³² Particularly from the Great Leap Forward on, these models held up by the CCP had to demonstrate that by relying on will power, and by giving supremacy to the human, subjective dimensions of history, the people would be able to bring about a quick transformation of the concrete obstacles they encountered in the physical world.³³ This was the result of an exaggerated belief in the power of ideology on human consciousness, a belief that is at the backbone of a great deal of propaganda art and that reached its climax in the

and Elizabeth J. Perry (Eds.), *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning from 1989*. Boulder: Westview Press 1992, pp. 71, 73, 75.

³⁰ Donald J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Contemporary China*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 1977, pp. 139-140.

³¹ As quoted in Chi P'ing, "Attach Importance to the Role of Teachers by Negative Example", *Peking Review* (31 March 1972), p. 5.

³² Hiniker, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68. According to Pye, the belief that the difficulties related to modernization can be overcome by eliminating some surface defects and allowing the basic virtues of the people to reassert themselves is based on a conviction that the precise qualities required for successful modernization were once a part of the Chinese heritage. Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics*, pp. 58-59.

³³ See Alan P.L. Liu, *Communications and National Integration in Communist China*. Berkeley, CA, etc.: University of California Press 1971, pp. 32, 55; Pye, "Communication and Political Culture in China", p. 165.

Cultural Revolution cult of the "Little Red Book", representing Mao's spiritual presence.³⁴ A study session with the "Quotations",

"... 'supplied the breath of life' to soldiers gasping in the thin air of the Tibetan plateau; enabled workers to raise the sinking city of Shanghai three-quarters of an inch; inspired a million people to subdue a tidal wave in 1969, inaccurate meteorologists to forecast weather correctly, a group of housewives to re-invent shoe polish, surgeons to sew back severed fingers and remove a ninety-nine pound tumor as big as a football."³⁵

Cultural Revolution Art

Lin laid down instructions that art should unite and educate the people, inspire the struggle of revolutionary people and eliminate the bourgeoisie. Art had to be revolutionized and guided by Mao Zedong Thought, its contents had to be militant and to reflect real life. Already in the summer of 1964, during the "Third National Exhibition of PLA Art", most of the Army-produced paintings, echoing Lin's instructions, featured lots of red paint, army heroes (Lei, Ouyang, and others), Mao, and his thoughts. Clearly, proletarian ideology, Communist morale and spirit, revolutionary heroism, all virtues displayed by models in one form or another, were the messages of this new type of hyper-realistic, politicized art that took precedence over style and technique and that differed in all aspects from art creation until then.³⁶

The visual arts during the Cultural Revolution were largely influenced by the dictates of Mao's wife Jiang Qing.³⁷ The conceptual dogmas and theatrical conventions provided by the five model operas and two ballets (*yangbang*)³⁸ supported by her became the standard in the visual arts. On the basis of her "three prominences" (stress positive characters; stress the heroic in them; stress the central character of the main characters), the subjects were portrayed realistically, and, employing the techniques of *mise en scène* of the stage, were always in the center of the action, flooded with light from the sun or from hidden sources. The themes that were addressed after 1969, not including the ones featuring Mao, witnessed a

³⁴ Myers, "Religious Aspects", p. 5.

³⁵ Bloodworth, *The Messiah and the Mandarins*, p. 258.

³⁶ Laing, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-56; Minick and Jiao, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

³⁷ Jiang Qing's policies were largely laid down in *Summary of the Forum on the Work in Literature and Art in the Armed Forces with which Comrade Lin Biao Entrusted Comrade Chiang Ch'ing*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press 1968. The Forum itself took place in February 1966.

³⁸ Operas: Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy; On the Docks; The Red Lantern; Shajiabang; and The Raid on White Tiger Regiment. Ballets: The Red Detachment of Women; and The White-Haired Girl. They were first staged in Beijing in May 1967.

shift in thematic contents: they dealt with the victories of the Cultural Revolution; featured heroic images of workers, peasants and soldiers; highlighted the successes in industry and agriculture, and other themes, all of them basking, directly or indirectly, in Mao's glory.³⁹

The visual arts mainly functioned to communicate the correct ideological standpoint and corresponding behavior, in line with the experiences previously gained in the PLA. Only a narrow range of subjects was considered ideologically safe, and art was politicized and stereotyped to the extreme. Moreover, it was the first time that propaganda art became the most favored vehicle for the transmission of Party ideology. Works of art (oil paintings, water colors, woodcuts, and others) were reproduced for the ubiquitous large-format posters; printed in smaller formats they were distributed through the network of *Xinhua* (New China) bookshops for mass consumption. As in the Soviet posters of the 1930s, the hyper-realistic representations of ageless, larger-than-life peasants, soldiers, workers and educated youth in dynamic poses, functioned as abstractions and dominated all artistic expression as models, or ideal types.⁴⁰ These heroic figures were usually boldly outlined, while the coloring tended to be varied and gay, a style, which combines Chinese ink outline and Western color shading, also known as *Zhongguo hua*⁴¹; however, in order to portray every subject as a hero, the physical distinction between male and female bodies often disappeared, leading to figures with standard bodies, including absurdly big hands and feet, with different, but stereotyped heads. Given the frequent changes in the interpretation of what was deemed correct, these political posters came to be carefully studied by the people for any subtle change of tone or ideology, redirection of the (sub)movement(s), and (dis)appearance of slogans, accustomed as they had become to the use of codes and symbols in the media. In light of the rigid hold which the CCP had on these media, their version of consensus, after all, generally was accepted as the correct one at any moment.⁴²

³⁹ Laing, *op. cit.*, pp. 71, 73-75; Minick and Jiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129; Jerome Silbergeld, with Gong Jisui, *Contradictions: Artistic Life, the Socialist State and the Chinese Painter Li Huasheng*. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press 1993, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Victoria E. Bonnell, "The Peasant Woman in Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s", *American Historical Review*, February 1993, p. 81.

⁴¹ Ellen Johnston Laing, "Contemporary Painting", The Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China (Ed.), *Traditional and Contemporary Painting in China; A Report of the Visit of the Chinese Painting Delegation to the People's Republic of China*. Washington DC: National Academy of Sciences 1980, p. 67.

⁴² Minick and Jiao, *op. cit.*, p. 120; Laing, *op. cit.*, pp 64-65; Pye, "Communication and Political Culture in China", pp. 157-167, 173-175.

Mao as Super Model

Content-wise, the figure of Mao Zedong, his revolutionary role as well as his thoughts, played a dominating role in the art of the Cultural Revolution, often to the exclusion of other subjects; as the Great Teacher, the Great Leader, the Great Helmsman, the Supreme Commander, he was, after all, "the embodiment and exemplification of the value system supported by the government-maintained ideology".⁴³ Mao, then, was the only permissible subject, the only model displaying behavior that could be emulated. He could be depicted as a benevolent father, bringing the Confucian mechanisms of popular obedience into play.⁴⁴ Or he was portrayed as a wise statesman, an astute military leader or a great teacher⁴⁵; to this end, artists represented him in the vein of the statues of Lenin, which had started to appear in the early 1920s in the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ Another group of posters visually recounted the more illustrious of his historical deeds.⁴⁷

But no matter how he was depicted, he had to be painted *hong, guang, liang* (red, bright, and shining); no grey was allowed for shading, and the use of black was often interpreted as an indication of an artist's counter-revolutionary intentions.⁴⁸ As a super model, every detail of his representations had to be preconceived along ideological lines and invested with symbolic meaning, as the artist Liu Chunhua explained with respect to the painting-turned-poster *Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan* (See Illustration 1)⁴⁹:

⁴³ Myers, "Whatever Happened to Chairman Mao?", p. 23.

⁴⁴ *Xiang Mao zhuxi huibao* (Reporting to Chairman Mao). Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, no date, print no. 86-706, shows Mao, wearing the red scarf of a League member, surrounded by peasant youth. Reproduced in Stefan R. Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters — From Revolution to Modernization*. Amsterdam/Singapore/Armonk, N.Y.: The Pepin Press/M.E. Sharpe 1995, p. 40.

⁴⁵ For example *Qinqiede guanhuai* (Showing Loving Care). Tianjin: Renmin meishu chubanshe August 1975, print no. 8073.20229, depicting Mao teaching children in a bamboo grove.

⁴⁶ Laing, *The Winking Owl*, pp. 65-66.

⁴⁷ For example *Hunan gongchan zhuyi xiaozu* (Hunan's Communist Small Group), showing Mao and some founding fathers of the CCP. A later example is *Yao ba wuchan jieji wenhua dageming jinxing daodi* (The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution Must Be Waged to the End). Renmin meishu chubanshe, August 1973, print no. 8027.5618, showing Red Guards, factory workers and peasants converging on Tiananmen Square to greet and hear Mao, who stands to the left. These posters are included in Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu (Eds.), *Jinian Mao zhuxi*.

⁴⁸ Silbergeld and Gong, *op. cit.*, p. 43; Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 22; Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁴⁹ *Mao zhuxi qu Anyuan* (Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan), depicts Mao in a traditional long tunic while carrying an oiled paper umbrella. The poster is included in Guowuyuan wenhuazu meishu zuopin zhengji xiaozu (Eds.), *Jinian Mao zhuxi*. It was produced for the didactic exhibition "Mao Zedong's Thought Illuminates the Anyuan Workers' Movement", held at the

"To put him in a focal position, we placed Chairman Mao in the forefront of the painting, advancing towards us like a rising sun bringing hope to the people. Every line of the Chairman's figure embodies the great thought of Mao Zedong and in portraying his journey we strove to give significance to every small detail. His head held high in the act of surveying the scene before him conveys his revolutionary spirit, dauntless before danger and violence and courageous in struggle and in "daring to win"; his clenched fist depicts his revolutionary will, scorning all sacrifice, his determination to surmount every difficulty to emancipate China and mankind and it shows his confidence in victory. The old umbrella under his right arm demonstrates his hard-working style of travelling, in all weather over great distances, across the mountains and rivers, for the revolutionary cause [...] The hair grown long in a very busy life is blown by the autumn wind. His long plain gown, fluttering in the wind, is a harbinger of the approaching revolutionary storm [...] With the arrival of our great leader, blue skies appear over Anyuan. The hills, sky, trees and clouds are the means used artistically to evoke a grand image of the red sun in our hearts. Riotous clouds are drifting swiftly past. They indicate that Chairman Mao is arriving in Anyuan at a critical point of sharp class struggle and show, in contrast how tranquil, confident and firm Chairman Mao is at that moment

...⁵⁰

As a consequence of this, the more the personality cult around Mao intensified, the more god-like and divorced from the masses he came to be portrayed.⁵¹ His face painted usually in red and other warm tones, and in such a way that it appeared smooth and seemed to radiate as the primary source of light in a composition, illuminating the faces of the people that faced him.⁵² This is taken to extreme heights in such pictures as "The growth of all things depends on the sun", in which Mao, standing in a cottonfield surrounded by peasants, indeed functions as the life-giving force of the sun (see Illustration 2).⁵³ Not only the man himself was made into a divine being; his portrait had to be treated with special care as well, as if it

Museum of the History of the Revolution in October 1967. Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

⁵⁰ Liu Chunhua, "Singing the Praises", *Chinese Literature*, September 1968, quoted in Silbergeld and Gong, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45. For more on this *cause célèbre*, "... perhaps the most important painting of the Cultural Revolution period", see Laing, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-70. It is believed that more than nine hundred million copies of the painting were eventually printed. Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

⁵¹ Laing, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67; Minick and Jiao, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125.

⁵² Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 360.

⁵³ *Wanwu shengzhang kao taiyang*. Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, no date, print no. 86-704. Reproduced in Landsberger, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

contained divinity itself: nothing could be placed above it, and its frame should not have a single blemish.⁵⁴

And yet, despite the apparent distance between Leader and Led, there was something in the images featuring Mao that struck a chord with the people, something recognizable that turned him into an EveryMao.⁵⁵ The "imaged" Mao somehow remained united with the people, whether he inspected fields, shook hands with the peasants, sat down with them, and shared a cigarette with them; whether he was dressed in military uniform, discussing strategy with military leaders, inspected the rank-and-file, or mingled with contingents of Red Guards; whether he headed a column of representatives of the national minorities, or received a delegation of foreign visitors.

Ritualizing Mao

The presence of his official portrait in every home⁵⁶, often occupying the central place on the family altar and replacing the ancestor tablets as the principal object of worship, added to the already god-like stature of Mao.⁵⁷ The Great Teacher not merely invaded the private space of the people, but also took his rightful place among accepted targets of worship: a white bust of Mao was placed in a Protestant church in Beijing (1966), and a sculpted figure of Mao was prominently displayed in a Buddhist temple in Shanghai (1967). Exhibition halls, or "sacred shrines" were built where important moments and decisive deeds had taken place in Mao's life; organized pilgrimages brought people to pay obeisance.⁵⁸

The bestowing of honors on Mao was accompanied by a number of rituals enacted in front of His presence, which only served to strengthen the belief in the mythical aspects of his persona. The days were structured around the ritual of "asking for instructions in the morning, thanking Mao for his kindness at noon, and reporting back at night", involving the reading of passages from the Little Red Book in front of Mao's picture, or in front of tablets of loyalty to His thought; the benediction "Long live (*wanwansui*) Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist Party" had to

⁵⁴ Silbergeld and Gong, *op. cit.*, p. 41; Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

⁵⁵ The coiner of this great phrase is Geremie Barmé, in his excellent *Shades of Mao — The Posthumous Cult of the Great Leader*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 1996, p. 19.

⁵⁶ It is estimated that during the Cultural Revolution, some 2.2 billion official Mao portraits were printed, in other words, "... three for every person in the nation". Barmé, *ibid.*, p. 8. *Weidade lingxiu he daoshi Mao Zedong zhuxi* (The Great Leader and Teacher Chairman Mao Zedong), published by Renmin meishu chubanshe, print no. 8027.4696, saw its 157th edition in October 1977.

⁵⁷ Myers, "Religious Aspects", p. 2.

⁵⁸ Laing, *op. cit.*, p. 67; Meisner, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

be recited before every meal.⁵⁹ These daily demonstrations of faith and obeisance strengthened the many similarities with the traditional cult of the Kitchen God: like that deity, Mao kept an eye on what went on in the house, noting the virtues and vices of the household, but unlike him, he did not need to report to a supreme god, already embodying that superior being himself. Other differences can be found in the fact that the Kitchen God had a blackened face (an unthinkable sacrilege in the case of Mao!), and that the rituals surrounding the Kitchen God (smearing his mouth with honey to make him say sweet things, burning his image) took place only once a year, during the celebrations for the New Year. Taking his formal portrait from the wall, or throwing away newspapers bearing his image, were acts considered to be tarnishing Mao's image, and therefore counter-revolutionary and sacrilegious, which could be severely punished.⁶⁰

An unintended negative result of the ritualization of Mao was the depersonalization of the Great Teacher himself, as a living, breathing leader. After all, although the various rituals described above took place in front of Mao's portrait, while the leader himself was *in absentia*; Mao himself was no longer needed to produce the major policy statements bearing his name, as they could be "pieced together from fragments of his earlier work".⁶¹

Unseating a God ...

Already in the early 1970s, the extreme, and more religious aspects of Mao's personality cult were being dismantled. This did not diminish the adulation of Mao or his thoughts, which continued to lead the CCP as it was being rebuilt. The excesses committed by the people during the heyday of the Cultural Revolution in the late 1960s, including the embarrassing habit of "3,000 years of emperor-worshipping tradition" in which Mao himself had basked, could be safely attributed to Lin Biao, who had fallen from grace in 1971. Similarly, the army, the former "great school of Mao Zedong Thought", no longer functioned as a model for the people. Instead, the "fine work style" of the CCP and the masses was what the army needed to learn.⁶²

The styles and themes that had been instrumental in deifying Mao continued to dominate Chinese propaganda art well beyond the official end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. The most notable exception was that Hua Guofeng took over the posi-

⁵⁹ Minick and Jiao, *op. cit.*, p. 119; Silbergeld and Gong, *op. cit.*, p. 41; Myers, "Religious Aspects", p. 7; Meisner, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

⁶⁰ C.A.S. Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism & Art Motives*. New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1976 [1941], pp. 210-211; Wolfram Eberhard, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols — Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought*. London/New York: Routledge 1988 [1986/1983], pp. 140-141; Myers, "Religious Aspects", pp. 2, 7; Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

⁶¹ Myers, "Whatever Happened to Chairman Mao?", p. 27.

⁶² Meisner, *op. cit.*, pp. 370-371.

tion in works of art that had until then been reserved for Mao.⁶³ In "The revolution still has a helmsman", for example, Hua literally fills Mao's shoes.⁶⁴ The people who are grouped together in the center of the poster hold the official portrait of Hua aloft. Beneath this portrait, however, a greyish patch is visible. In the original design, this space undoubtedly had been reserved for Mao's body.

Hua's term of office did witness the beginnings of a massive rehabilitation of artists and intellectuals who had been prosecuted during the "ten years of chaos". Many of the artists who had continued painting, however, found it difficult to shake off the style they had been using during the Cultural Revolution. Several of them "... complained that their eyes were ruined by the red-hued palette they used throughout the decade".⁶⁵

... And Reinstating Him

With the demise of ideology, and as part of the search for a new binding element in society, there is a trend visible in large parts of the Chinese countryside toward a re-articulation of the past. One visible manifestation of a return to more traditional modes of behavior has been the revival of religious practices and celebrations, which as before are closely interlinked with festivities of a more secular nature. Temples dedicated to important deities in Buddhism or popular religion, which double as tourist attractions, have been reopened or rebuilt in the rural areas with the same speed and enthusiasm with which they were closed or destroyed in the 1950s and 1960s.⁶⁶ There, people engage in worship, ritual and sacrifice as if religion has never been proscribed and prosecuted.

Not only are the deities of the past revered once more. In Hunan Province, local peasants used private funds to build the San Yuan Si (Three Sources) Temple, a huge temple in traditional Buddhist style dedicated to the revolutionary Trinity of the CCP: Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Zhu De. It attracted a daily number of forty to fifty thousand worshippers, most of whom were elderly. Many of them came from other parts of the country, and used the traditional methods of burning incense to offer

⁶³ The large-size poster *Zhandoude haozhao, guangyaode bangyang* (A Call to Struggle, Glorious Example). Shanghai: Renmin meishu chubanshe, March 1978, print no. 8081.11113, done in Socialist Realist style, features Hua dressed as a miner and wearing a hard hat; *Hua zhuxi, gezu renmin re'ai nin!* (Chairman Hua, the People of All Minorities Warmly Love You!). Jiangsu: Renmin chubanshe, September 1978, print no. 8100.2.305, shows minority representatives launching balloons with streamers in the Summer Palace. Reproduced in Landsberger, *op. cit.*, frontispiece and p. 4, respectively.

⁶⁴ *Geming you youle zhangduoren*. Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe 1977, print no. 8171.1941. Reproduced in Landsberger, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁶⁵ Andrews, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

⁶⁶ Barmé, quoting Xin Yuan, "'Mao Zedong re' yu Zhongguo minjian zongjiao", *Jingbao yuekan*, No. 12 (1992), in *op. cit.*, p. 199.

their worship. After having been forced off the site by pilgrims during an earlier attempt, the authorities closed the temple down in May 1995, on the grounds that it encouraged superstition.⁶⁷

For those not willing to travel to enjoy the protection of these politicians-turned-gods, talismans are available throughout the country which are widely believed to protect against harm and evil. These charms show laminated pictures of Mao as a young man, or in his later years, in civilian dress or army uniform, or in the guise of a guardian spirit or a temple god. Many of the pictures are placed in gold-colored plastic temple-like frames, or have red tassels, fire crackers or gold ingots dangling from them. Such amulets combine aspects of the Mao persona with elements of folk culture and religion.⁶⁸

Concluding Remarks

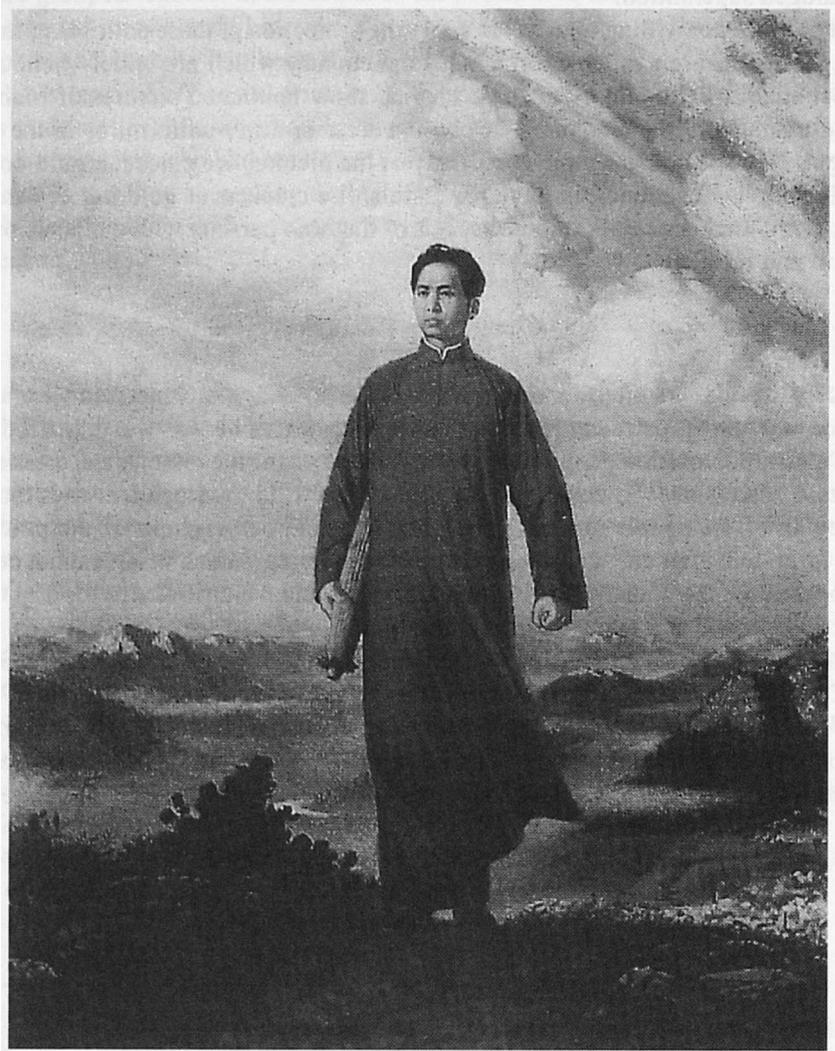
Scarcely thirty years after his death, Mao, or his memory, is venerated with a vengeance that almost pales the religious fervor with which he was worshipped during the Cultural Revolution. Inspired by some form of cognitive dissonance, or selective amnesia, Mao is once more seen as the leader who, as in the slogan, always took the wellbeing of the people to heart. The privations and persecutions of the past have been forgotten: after all, according to the current feeling, Mao himself cannot be held responsible for these aberrations, which instead should be attributed to the evil forces and bad officials and leaders surrounding him.

And Mao, the Great Teacher, the Great Leader, the Great Helmsman, the Supreme Commander, has come full circle, as can be seen from the production in 1994 of *nianhua* on plastic sheeting, bearing his image, accompanied by those traditional symbols of good fortune (money (*renminbi* or US dollar bills), fish, lotus flowers, fat babies, etc.) that the CCP had attempted to stamp out.⁶⁹ He surely seems to have been blessed with eternal life.

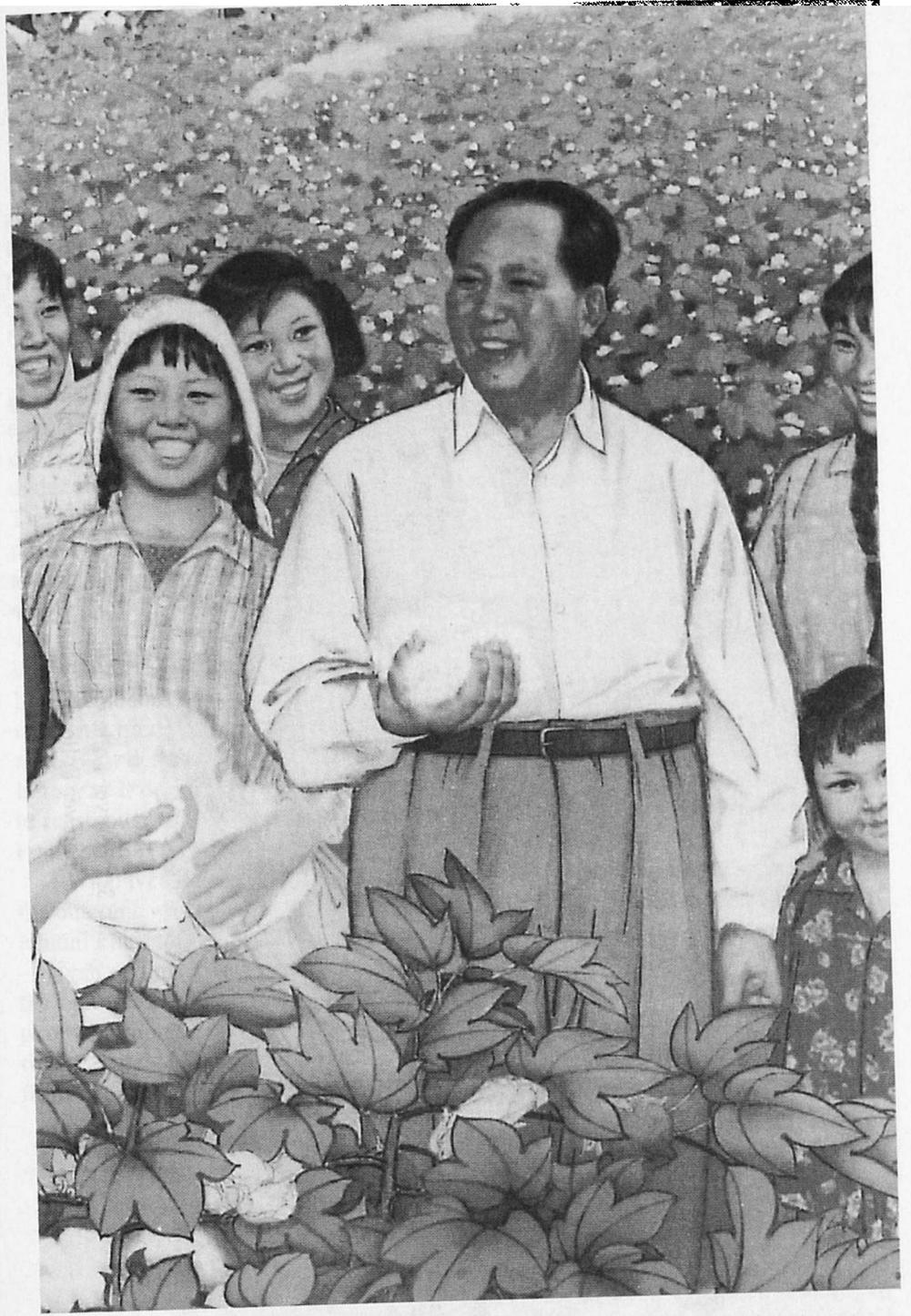
⁶⁷ China Study Journal (1995), "Maoist Temple Closed Down", *China Study Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (August), pp. 26-27; Barmé, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁶⁸ Barmé, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Barmé, *op. cit.*, pp. 41, 93.



Ill. 1: "Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan"



III. 2: "The Growth of All Things Depends on the Sun"



III. 3: "Forever Following the Communist Party,
Forever Following Chairman Mao"