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## Parodying Mao's Image: Caricaturing in Contemporary Chinese Art

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### Abstract

Although Chinese contemporary artists are often criticized for creating superficial works that parody Chairman Mao without any deeper meaning, the employment of parody is a far more complex phenomenon. Instead of being representatives of Jamesonian pastiche, many artists employ varying methods of trans-contextual parody to express their mixed and even controversial intentions and notions. With a detailed structural analysis of the art works, and taking into account the socio-cultural context and the artists' own intentions, I will show that the common assumptions—that parodying Mao is equivalent to political pop or that political pop represents pastiche—are oversimplifications of this complex phenomenon, especially when caricaturing is used as a method to violate the visual norms.

**Keywords:** Chairman Mao, contemporary art, trans-contextual parody, image, caricature

### Izveček:

Čeprav kitajske sodobne umetnike velikokrat kritizirajo, da ustvarjajo površinska dela parodij predsednika Maota brez kakršnegakoli globljega pomena, pa je uporaba parodije veliko kompleksnejši fenomen. Namesto, da bi bili predstavniki Jamesonove pastile, številni umetniki uporabljajo različne metode transkontekstualne parodije, da bi izrazili mešane in kontroverzne namene in ideje. Z natančno strukturalno analizo umetniških del in z upoštevanjem družbeno-kulturnega konteksta in avtorjevih namenov, bom prikazala, da so splošne domneve—da je parodija Maota ekvivalentna političnemu popu ali da politični pop predstavlja pastile—preveč poenostavljene ideje tega kompleksnega fenomena, predvsem, če se karikature uporabljajo kot metoda kršenja vizualnih norm.

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**Ključne besede:** predsednik Mao, sodobna umetnost, transkonktextualna parodija, podoba, karikatura

## 1 Caricaturing Mao as Trans-contextual Parody

In this article, my intention is to investigate contemporary Chinese art works, which have employed forms of caricaturing in the re-creation of Chairman Mao's images.<sup>1</sup> In order to explain the complexity of the motivations, intentions, and targets emerging in these works, I have found Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody most clarifying. As she aptly delineates, parody is a "value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations" (Hutcheon 2002, 90).

Although this definition was initially given for parody in postmodern art, it can be applied to modern art too. Indeed, in her new introduction written in 2000 for the re-publication of *A Theory on Parody*, Linda Hutcheon further emphasized her argument that parody in twentieth-century art connects the modern to the postmodern. One of her major aims has been "to study this historical and formal linkage" in order to develop a theory for contemporary parody (Hutcheon 2000, xii).

Consequently, Hutcheon's theory is not confined to any specific form or type of art, and is therefore extremely beneficial for exploring the complex scene of contemporary Chinese art. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge, as John N. Duvall (1999, 385) has suggested in relation to Euro-American art, that some of the works are so complex that they deny the possibility of "reading postmodernism exclusively through the lens of parody or pastiche".

However, in China, the situation is even more complicated. Even the mere presence of postmodernism can be questioned in contemporary Chinese art, as, for example, art historian Gao Minglu (2005, 239) has pointed out. As a result, it is essential to explore more carefully the relation of parody and contemporary Chinese art before analyzing the art works themselves. In addition, besides the complexity of the contemporary scene, it is equally important to be aware of the socio-political context and norms applied to the production of the original images

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the chapter "Parodying Mao" in my doctoral dissertation, *Many Faces of Mao Zedong*. See Valjakka 2011. The chapter provides a far more in-depth discussion of the methods of parody in contemporary Chinese art.

during Mao's lifetime in order to understand the re-creation of Mao's image.<sup>2</sup> Drawing from Dominic Lopes's (1996, 217–225) notion that pictorial variation of a picture is based on variation-recognition, and is not reducible to mere subject-recognition, I argue that it is necessary to analyze these contemporary works in relation to the original ones.

A more detailed understanding of these works will also require adequate information on the status and role of caricaturing in China. After briefly explaining the history of caricature, I will approach the interesting question of creating caricatures of Mao during his lifetime, or shortly after his death in 1976. Finally, I will provide an in-depth analysis of deformations of Mao's visual image in order to illuminate the variety of the artistic creation. Through these examples I aim to demonstrate how contemporary Chinese artists are creating far more meaningful interpretations of the prominent leader than is usually acknowledged. Indeed, the act of caricaturing Mao in contemporary Chinese art is an illustrative example of trans-contextual parody. While violating the visual norms of the original images, it requires the viewer to question and negotiate their previous mental images of Mao.

### 1.1 Trans-contextual Parody

In the context of contemporary art, parody has often been regarded as a degenerated form, which merely imitates previous works without creative and original sentiments. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the forms and intentions of parody have been in constant flux. It is only since the 1980s that parody has become commonly regarded as an essential feature of postmodernism.<sup>3</sup>

The negative judgements on the postmodern parody derive from the previous writings of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, who all regarded modern parody as lacking content, intention, or both.<sup>4</sup> The most pessimistic approach to parody is represented by Fredric Jameson (1983, 112–114, 124–125; 1991, 16–21), a well-known critic of postmodernism. He has asserted that the

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<sup>2</sup> I use the concept of image to denote both material and immaterial representations. When I wish to emphasize that the topic of discussion is only material representations, I employ the concept *visual image*. Likewise the concept *mental image* only refers to immaterial representations. For a more detailed discussion, see "Introduction" in my doctoral dissertation, Valjakka 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For short but illustrative introduction to postmodern theories on parody, see Rose 1995, 242–274.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief introduction of these negative views on "modern" parody and its influence on postmodern thinking, see, e.g., Rose 1995, 186–195, 205–206. For Baudrillard's view on parody as blind and non-intentional see Baudrillard 1994, especially pp. 1–42.

emergence of postmodernism as a historical period represents a time when no stylistic innovations are possible and consequently, parody as ridiculing imitation has become impossible. Instead, pastiche, as the humourless, neutral and blank form of parody, has become a significant feature of postmodernism.

I support Linda Hutcheon's position against Fredric Jameson's idea that parody degenerates into pastiche. Indeed, parody in art is not necessarily uninventive imitation like pastiche.<sup>5</sup> In the context of art works relating to Mao, parody is, however, usually used by scholars as a negative notion, deriving from Jameson. It is closely related to postmodernism, and similar to meaningless pastiche based on mere imitation (see, e.g., Lin 1997). However, my aim is to show that parodying Mao is not representing Jamesonian pastiche—a suggestion initially made by Wu Hung (Wu 2008, 8).

Consequently, I have found Hutcheon's concept of parody, which broadens the focus from mere imitation to trans-contextualized discourse, to be a far more beneficial approach. Her theory provides many insights for in-depth analysis. The first insight is that parody is not merely a mocking imitation of previous art work, but is also essentially a *critical dialogue* with the past, using ironic inversion and focusing on *difference* rather than similarity. As a result, parody has a broad range of intentions and is not necessarily comic, but can also be neutral or even reverential. (Hutcheon 2000, xii, 2–16).<sup>6</sup> This broad range of intent is clearly visible in the art works relating to Mao.

The second insight is that parody is double-coded. Parody not only challenges its target but also confirms the target by re-contextualizing it. In practice, the parodied works are not forgotten. Related to double-coding is Hutcheon's third insight, that parody is trans-contextual. In other words, parody can interact with previous specific works of art or with general iconic conventions in the visual arts, such as the iconographic traditions of image creation. Principally, any form of coded discourse can be the object of parody, even as a cross-genre play (Hutcheon 2000, xii–xiv, 12–18).

For Hutcheon, trans-contextuality clearly implies that a painting can parody a piece of music or literature, or vice versa. Furthermore, trans-contextuality can be

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<sup>5</sup> I am aware that pastiche is a highly controversial concept, widely used but seldom truly examined, as Richard Dyer (2007) has pointed out. However, Dyer also emphasizes that essential to pastiche is *imitation*.

<sup>6</sup> Hutcheon's approach that parody is not necessarily comic is criticized, for example, by Margaret Rose, for whom parody is essentially comic and/or humorous (Rose 1995, 238–241, 266, 278).

understood as a dialogue between historical, cultural, or national art discourses, and it is “what distinguished parody from pastiche or imitation” (ibid., 12). I find this insight highly important for my research, where the clear majority of the contemporary art works do not rely on inter-art discourse itself, and even those that could be interpreted as an inter-art parody repeatedly utilize trans-contextual aspects. By this I mean that if a Chinese contemporary artist creates a painting that parodies Euro-American masterpieces, Chinese traditional paintings, photographs or statues, all these can also be considered as forms of trans-contextuality. In addition, it is important to remember that although a contemporary work of art might trans-contextualize a previous work depicting Chairman Mao, the target of parody is not necessarily the work itself, but, for example, the official iconography of Mao. Caricatures in particular are a strong form of violation of the visual norms set for the accepted iconography.

The fourth insight is that the socio-cultural context of production and viewing is relevant to interpretation of the work. Parody is clearly a process of communication that depends on appropriate encoding and decoding based on shared codes. As a result, with ironic inversion, parody reveals the politics of representations (Hutcheon 2000, xiv, 16–24, 84–99; Hutcheon 2002, 90–91, 97–102). Parody represents deconstructive criticism and constructive creativity, and this makes us aware of both the limits and the powers of representation in any medium. This multifaceted understanding of parody enables us to research the various methods used in parodying Mao.

The four major methods I have found utilized in parody by Chinese contemporary artists are: i) trans-contextualizing previous paintings, such as Euro-American masterpieces or Chinese paintings of Mao; ii) re-employing other visual images of Mao, such as documental photographs, or statues of Mao; iii) re-modifying the general iconic visual conventions of Mao through caricaturing; iv) re-modifying the general iconic visual conventions of Mao with other methods, such as erasure of the image. As can be seen, only the first category of these could be truly considered as inter-art discourse. However, because art works of this kind are also created in relation to other canonical art discourses, such as Euro-American, or socialist art in China, they are also inevitably based on trans-contextuality.

## 1.2 The Question of Parody in China

Although parody has been used in various forms in relation to arts and literature for centuries, it has become essentially intertwined with the heated debate on postmodernism and its implications in cultural forms in Euro-American research (see, e.g., Rose 1995; Hutcheon 2002, 89–113). In China, however, the interrelation of parody with postmodernism is not at all so evident. Even the presence and definition of postmodernism in China is highly disputed and forms a complex issue, continuously addressed by scholars. Art historian John Clark (2010, 169–185) has suggested in his detailed discussion on postmodernism in relation to Chinese art that “post-modernity concerns neither a specific set of styles nor a way of integrating them, but an *attitude to style*” (ibid., 183). As previously mentioned, even the question of whether contemporary Chinese art can be regarded as representative of modernism or postmodernism can be challenged (Andrews 1998, 9; Gao 2005, 45). Art historian Gao Minglu (2005, 239) has even suggested that “in Chinese contemporary art modernism and postmodernism represent a false distinction because China did not produce the same modernism that was produced in a different cultural context at another time”.

The complex co-existence of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern in the 1990s, is also noted by the researcher of film and literature, Sheldon H. Lu (2001, 13). However, despite the simultaneous existence of the various forms and styles on the contemporary art scene, Lu concludes that contemporary Chinese artists have deliberately associated themselves with an international post-modernism and utilized collage, pastiche, and parody, the postmodernist techniques of representation, as primary methods. As a result, through fabricating the images of Chineseness, artists are negotiating and disengaging “from conventional notions of the self, the other, China, and the West” (ibid., 192). For Lu, parody and pastiche are intertwined in postmodernism, and although he does not clarify whether parody and pastiche have the same meaning, his approach primarily derives from Jamesonian postmodernism. However, whether these art works represent modernism, postmodernism, postpostmodernism, or some combination of these forms, or even a completely new, undefined artistic form, is a secondary question to their closer structural analysis. Consequently, I have found it far more interesting and meaningful to focus on exploring these art works through forms of parody, irony, and satire, which have been utilized in visual arts long before any idea of postmodernism.

It has been repeatedly claimed that the works relating to Mao are representatives of political pop and therefore merely empty parody, in other words, pastiche. Although it is commonly known that Mao's visual image has been a significant feature in the paintings of political pop, or even the most prominent feature, as art critic Karen Smith (2005, 223–224) has suggested, not all the political pop works represent Mao. In addition, previous notions that regard political pop as meaningless pastiche lacking any kind of depth and providing merely flat images (see, e.g., Lu 2001, 157) are oversimplifications. In the following I will provide examples showing that works that do not represent political pop also employ parody, and even if an art work could be categorized as political pop, it does not necessarily follow that this work is mere pastiche. Many of these art works re-explore the original art works and images of Chairman Mao created during his lifetime, with various intentions, methods, and targets. Furthermore, although it is often argued that the main intention of these works is to merely mock Chairman Mao, closer analysis will reveal that this approach is too one-sided.

Nonetheless, I do not suggest that all contemporary Chinese art works fulfil the same level of parody. To clarify this further, I think John N. Duvall's suggestion, that both Jameson's and Hutcheon's perspectives are valuable, is highly beneficial for understanding the different perceptions of parody and pastiche visible in these Chinese art works. As Duvall (1999, 385) indicates in respect to Euro-American art, some of the works are so complex that they illustrate "the difficulty of reading postmodernism exclusively through the lens of parody or pastiche." Duvall's point is highly valid for the further discussion about the characteristics of postmodernism, especially in the fields of the visual arts. In contemporary Chinese art relating to Mao, there are certainly art works that represent either Hutcheon's definition of parody, or, in some cases, the notion of pastiche as Jameson defines it, or even both of these. I agree that some art works represent simple imitations of the original visual images and therefore the concept of pastiche can be applied to them. Here, however, I find it more important to focus on the works that do represent trans-contextual parody, in order to show that not all these works are mere pastiche.

Although the artistic reproduction of Mao's image is often mentioned in academic discussion as parody, in-depth research about the forms and intentions of parody used among artists is still missing. As a result, Chinese artists are often criticized for creating superficial works that lack any deeper meaning. It has been

repeatedly claimed that works that parody Mao are examples of political pop and, consequently, are merely pastiche, or uninventive kitsch. These perceptions generally do not take into account the historical and socio-cultural context or the artists' own intentions, and therefore often fail to provide meaningful analysis.

I consider Dominic Lopes's (1996, 217–225) notion that the pictorial variation of a picture is based on variation-recognition, and is not reducible to mere subject-recognition, indispensable for the in-depth analysis of the works that derive from previous images. Variation draws the viewer's attention to the aspects that the original picture presents, but, inevitably, creates a new meaning of its own, which is not secondary to the original one. The content depends on the interrelations of the original and the re-contextualized work.

Without taking into account the creation process of the original visual images of Mao, it would not be possible to interpret the new or re-circulated images emerging in the contemporary art scene, especially when artists employ parody as the main method. To truly understand the levels of irony and the target of parody, one needs to acknowledge the conventions and norms related to the original reproduction. In the case of Mao's visual images, any kind of misuse or even a slightly deviant way of depicting him was considered highly inappropriate behaviour, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

## 2 Caricaturing Mao

Caricature,<sup>7</sup> originally developed in Western Europe and in the United States, has been considered both a sub-genre of portraiture and a popular method used in political graphic art. Caricaturing is inevitably based on both the recognition and deformation of the person portrayed. What sets caricature apart from other genres is the use of a satirical and humorous approach to the subject (Brilliant 1997, 69–70). By means of simplification, distortion, and exaggeration, caricature usually concentrates on the weaknesses and faults of the person depicted. As a result it is claimed that the caricature reveals the “essential” being, the true man behind the mask, even being “more like the person than he is himself” (Kris and Gombrich 1979, 189–190).

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<sup>7</sup> The original Italian word *caricatura* means literally “loaded pictures” (Kris and Gombrich 1979, 189). It has also been translated as “a likeness which has been deliberately exaggerated” (Lucie-Smith 1981, 9).



Caricaturing as a technique has been commonly employed in cartoons but it has also been utilized in other forms of art. Nonetheless, one of the most popular forms is the usage of caricature as a political weapon, which emerged in Europe at least as early as the sixteenth century (for several examples see, e.g., Lucie-Smith 1981). Caricatures, as Lawrence H. Streicher has pointed out, are negative representations, because they aim at ridiculing and mocking the subject visually (Streicher 1967, 431). Political cartoons, in particular, frequently rely on caricaturing in order to guarantee the viewers' recognition of the topic and the people depicted, which is an essential prerequisite for an in-depth interpretation of the cartoon's meaning (Kemnitz 1973, 82–84).

If we accept Linda Hutcheon's (2000, 12–18) suggestion that parody can also be used for targeting general iconic conventions in art, such as creation or reception, then I suggest that it is possible to interpret caricaturing as a form of parody that trans-contextualizes the original conventional visual image of the person portrayed. As is commonly known, caricaturing has often been employed as a very powerful political weapon also in China. It is therefore a highly appropriate method for artists who wish to violate or question the official norms of visual representation of Chairman Mao. Before analyzing the contemporary Chinese art works that illustrate examples of caricaturing Mao's image, I will first elucidate the origins of caricature in China and the intriguing issue of whether it was possible to create caricatures of Mao during his lifetime.

## 2.1 Origins of Chinese Caricature

In Chinese, the concept *manhua* (漫话) denotes a wide variety of graphic arts, including comics, cartoons, caricatures, social and political satire images, graphic novels, and serial pictures (*lianhuanhua* 连环画). *Manhua* is a loan-word based on Japanese *manga* and it was first used by Feng Zikai in May 1925 (Harbsmeier 1984, 19; see also Hung 1994a, 124, note 4). Despite the lack of a specific concept, caricaturing in China has a long history, but it has not always been used for poking fun. As Streicher has pointed out, the distortions of the natural appearance do not necessarily include the notion of ridicule, but instead have been used in fine arts with other intentions. Therefore, deciding when and whether distortions become ridiculous depends on the historical context (Streicher 1967, 435–436). In Chinese visual arts, deforming the facial or bodily features has been employed to express

reverence, especially in depicting Buddhist or Daoist figures. The exaggeration and deformation of the physical features are considered to reflect the celestial characteristics and supernatural abilities of the people depicted (for deformations in Daoist images, see Little 2000, 264–269, 313).

An obvious change in the use of deformations for ridicule emerged in China in the nineteenth century. In addition, Chinese cartoons and caricatures bearing socio-political meanings were emerging. In the 1930s and 1940s, witty caricatures and cartoons commenting on both domestic and international socio-political issues were created abundantly. Cartoons by Communists were used as an effective weapon against both the Japanese occupation and the *Guomindang* (GMD) government.<sup>8</sup> After 1949, the political tide changed and new regulations for cartoons were set: cartoons had to be directed to praise the correct line and attack the enemy (see, e.g., Harbsmeier 1984, 36, 183–198; Hung 1994b). During the Maoist era, cartoons and caricatures were used in political campaigns because they were regarded as the most suitable form of satire for attacking specific individuals (Galikowski 1998, 46). Caricaturing was utilized as an individual form of political art and also as a visual method in political posters. As such, this gradual transformation of the usage of the caricatures in China made them reflect the common Euro-American use of caricature as a political weapon.

Political cartoons and caricatures prior to or after 1949 were not all pro-Communist, although this perception is often promoted. Images satirizing Communism did exist in mainland China and were even made by the pro-Party artists themselves.<sup>9</sup> “Internal satire” as Liu-Lengyel calls it, aiming at negative social issues but not directly at the Party or the socialist cause, did occur in the 1950s (Liu-Lengyel 1993, 135–136, 140–141, 153–155, 199, see also images on pp. 300–302, 317–320). During the Hundred Flowers campaign, when intellectuals, artists, and writers were encouraged to express their critique against socio-political

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<sup>8</sup> For a brief but illuminating history of Chinese caricaturing and cartooning see Sullivan 1996, 119–125. For a history of *manhua* in English, see Wong 2002. The significant changes in political cartoons after Mao's death are discussed in Croizier 1983. For further information in Chinese see, e.g., Bi 2005. Anti-Japanese cartoons are mentioned in Sullivan 1996, 93. Hung (1994a) instead focuses on the anti-*Guomindang* images. For images of Chiang Kai-shek see *ibid.*, 130–131 and plates no. 7–10.

<sup>9</sup> According to Maria Galikowski there were cartoons criticizing the Communists in the satirical art exhibition organized in Yan'an 1942. [Galikowski 1998, 142.] Liu-Lengyel (1993, 135) also mentions the exhibition. She has suggested that in the Liberated Areas there were also cartoons referred to as “interior caricature”, which targeted the misbehavior of the revolutionary groups. However, in 1942 Mao addressed the issue of appropriate cartoons and insisted that they should be aimed at enemies, not at their own people (*ibid.*, 117–118, 121).

circumstances and the Communist Party, many cartoons and caricatures criticizing the Party for its bureaucracy or extravagance were exhibited at the National Exhibition of Cartoons in January 1957 (Galikowski 1998, 63). However, the Anti-Rightist campaign was formed as a counter-measure to this short period of liberal criticism. Consequently, several cartoonists were excluded from artistic work and sent to the countryside while others focused on drawing favourable and supporting cartoons instead of internal satire in order to survive amidst the political turmoil (Liu-Lengyel 1993, 141–150). It is understandable that examples of anti-Communist caricatures are usually nonexistent in the publications of mainland China. However, some interesting reproductions can be found in Western and Hong Kong publications (Holm 1991, 329; Wong 2002, 40–43).

While Chiang Kai-shek was the main target in the caricatures of the Communists artists, it is possible that caricatures of Communist leaders, such as Chairman Mao, existed too. Unfortunately, I have not yet found any visual examples, which is understandable due to the sensitivity of the topic. However, according to Wu Hung some caricatures of Mao have existed. In a Black Painting Exhibition organized by the Red Guards of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, several cartoon images of Mao were included, covered with curtains, and shown only to the Red Guards. They were created in the early 1950s by Zhou Lingzhao (周令钊, b. 1919), a painter of the official Mao portrait in 1949, and Ye Qianyu, (叶钱予, 1907–1996) a cartoonist and professor of traditional painting in the Central Academy of Fine Arts (Wu 2005b, 180–181). At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, caricatures were unquestionably seen as the worst crime of an artist, representing malicious distortions of Mao. Due to the fact that creating any deviating image of Mao was a serious crime, the possibility for any artist in mainland China to produce caricatures of Mao during the 1960s and 1970s is indeed limited, although perhaps, not completely impossible.

## 2.2 Earliest Existing Caricatures of Mao

Interesting examples of political caricatures are Liao Bingxiong's (廖冰兄, 1915–2006) works, which were exhibited in 1979 at the exhibition of political cartoon art in Guangzhou. Liao's cartoons and caricatures reveal traumatic and even hostile feelings towards the Gang of Four, but the one depicting a satisfied, fat cat wearing emperor's clothes and ignoring three rats stealing fish is intriguing (see

Fig. 1). The text in the image can be translated: “This dignified cat sees the rats but doesn't catch them. Ideally he should be struck from the register of cats so as to avoid passing on this disgrace to the race of cats.”<sup>10</sup>

Ralph Croizier (1981, 320) has suggested that the cartoon could be addressing the sensitive issue of Mao's role in the events of the Cultural Revolution. Croizier's claim is based on the fact that the word for “cat” is a homophone for Mao. However, he also reminds us that there are other possible interpretations for this image. If we recall Deng Xiaoping's famous slogan that a cat's color is irrelevant to its ability to catch mice, it is possible that the cat in the image is a representation of any selfish bureaucratic element in the Party. However, it is possible to deny the interpretation of the image as a depiction of Mao and the Gang of Four by pointing out that there are only *three*—not four—rats. I believe that it is also conceivable that depicting only three rats may have been a strategic visual choice by the artist himself: if accused of mocking Chairman Mao, he could rely on this fact for denying such accusations.



Figs. 1 and 2: Liao Bingxiong, 1979. Photo courtesy by Ralph Croizier.

Similarly, Croizier suggests that another caricature by Liao, entitled *Many Tricks of the Ghosts* (*Gui ji duo duan* 鬼计多端, see Fig. 2),<sup>11</sup> could be referring to the Party, or the leader of it, the Chairman himself (ibid., 320–321). The caricature depicts a legendary demon queller, Zhong Kui (鍾馗), a mythic figure, who could

<sup>10</sup> My translation differs slightly from Croizier's original. See Croizier 1981, 320.

<sup>11</sup> The title is a wordplay with homophonous words and refers to an idiom “诡计多端,” which means “to be very tricky/crafty.”

defeat ghosts and evil spirits. While drunk, as implied in this visual image, he is not paying attention to what is happening around him. Three caricature figures are cavorting around Zhong and making him powerless to act. A male figure is offering Zhong Kui more wine and a female figure is showing him an inscription with the flattering words, “treat evil and slay ghosts so merits and virtues will be boundless” (*zhi xie zhan gui gong de wu liang* 治邪斩鬼功德无量). While concentrating on his cup, Zhong does not notice that the other male figure is stealing Zhong’s sword. As a result, he will be incapable of fulfilling his duties in the future. Although it is possible to interpret this image to imply the relation between Mao and the Gang of Four, the references to Mao are more obvious through the representation of a cat in the previous image.

Using a cat as a replacement for Mao’s visual image has also been employed by contemporary artists, which strengthens the reading of Liao’s work to imply Chairman Mao. For example, in 2007, Qiu Jie (邱节, b. 1961) created a painting entitled *Portrait of Mao* that depicts a cat in a so-called Mao suit, still known in China as *Zhongshan suit* (*Zhongshanzhuang* 中山装).<sup>12</sup> Because of the outfit, the reference to Chairman Mao is obvious, but the title of the painting leaves no chance for misreading.

The text in the painting is a part of a poem written by Mao in the early 1960s to praise plum blossoms in winter (for the poem see, e.g. Barnstone 2008, 104–105). It reads “While the mountain flowers are brightly coloured, she is smiling among them” (*Dai dai shan hua lanman shi, ta zai cong zhong xiao* 待到山花烂漫时，她在丛中笑). During the early 1960s China was encountering difficulties in international relations, and the main idea of the poem was to imply that China would survive the pressure without declining.<sup>13</sup>

If Liao’s caricatures represent Mao, then they would be the earliest exhibited visual images with satirizing and even ridiculing sentiments for the Chairman after his death. They would precede Wang Keping’s *Idol* (*Ouxiang*, 偶像, see Fig. 3), which has repeatedly been referred to as the first critical reproduction of Mao’s image in contemporary Chinese art. Although created in 1978/79,<sup>14</sup> *Idol* was not exhibited until 1980, in the exhibition of *Stars* (*Xingxing* 星星) (Dal Lago 1999,

<sup>12</sup> Reproduced, e.g., in Jiang 2008, 64–65; on Saatchi Gallery’s webpage (*Saatchi Gallery*).

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Jiang Junxin for pointing out the origin and meaning of the text.

<sup>14</sup> According to the artist, this work was done either late 1978 or early 1979. Wang Keping’s email message to the author, 19 May 2011.

51; Köppel-Yang 2003, 120–130). If we bear in mind that cartoons have been regarded as a form of art in China, then we could even ponder over the question: would Liao's work, if representing Chairman Mao, be considered as the earliest published example in Chinese contemporary art? However, in this case, by focusing on the concept of image instead of art, we are able to compare and approach these images without tackling the debate of whether cartoons are art or non-art. The possibility that the Liao's cartoons might refer to Mao is already interesting, and as a result, these early examples do provide interesting approaches to the representations of Mao as caricatures shortly after his death.



Fig. 3: Wang Keping, *Idol*, 1978/79. Copyright by the artist.

*Idol* has been considered the earliest satirizing caricature of Chairman, although the artist did not intend his work as a caricature. Wang Keping's intention was to satirize the personality cult of Mao during the Cultural Revolution by creating a cult object, a Buddha image (Köppel-Yang 2003, 121–122). Despite the artist's aim, I agree with Martina Köppel-Yang (2003, 121) and Wu Hung (Wu 2005a, 50) that this work can be seen as an example of caricaturing Mao. Stylistically speaking, *Idol* does deform the facial features of Mao. Furthermore, without doubt, it combines the facial features of Mao and Buddha, and therefore satirizes the leader's godlike status. To me, the hat is not recognizable as any specific hat, despite the fact that Cohen (1987, 63, caption) sees it as reflecting

Islamic traditions, Köppel-Yang (2003, 120) as a Buddhist headgear and Wu Hung (2005a, 50) as a Russian-style Bolshevik cap. On the forehead is an emblem that Wang argues is a reproduction of an official stamp (Köppel-Yang 2003, 121). A faintly red five-pointed star on the hat clearly connects the image with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). With a slightly mischievous facial expression and one eye partly closed, the statue seems to make fun of the viewer. This impression is emphasized by chubby cheeks and empty eyes without pupils, which are therefore unable to see anything. It seems like the *Idol* is neither willing nor able to pay attention to the real world, but instead is mentally in a transcendental sphere.

### 2.3 Later Contemporary Artists Caricaturing Mao

Regardless of this first and widely known example by Wang Keping, caricaturing Mao is still a rather rare trend among contemporary Chinese artists. After Wang, the next artist to experiment in this style was Zhang Hongtu (张宏图, b. 1943). His first art works related to Mao were renderings of Quaker Oats cartons in 1985, simply titled *Quaker Oats Mao*, created in New York. In a phone interview, Zhang said that although he created the first works of this series in 1985, the ones usually displayed and published date to 1987 or later (Zhang Hongtu in a phone interview with the author, 15 March 2008, see Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Zhang Hongtu *Quaker Oats* series. Copyright by the artist.

Actually, the image on these containers is not Mao—Zhang has just added a military hat to the original image of a middle-aged man. Zhang said that while living in the United States he usually ate that cereal for breakfast. After a while he just noticed that the man depicted on the cans looked surprisingly similar to Mao. Zhang further explained that after leaving China he thought he could forget Mao's image, which was depicted everywhere in China. On the contrary, he noticed the similarity with the Quaker Oats' man and felt that Mao's image was following him like a shadow (ibid.). Although the original image of the Quaker Oats' man is not deformed, the mere addition of a military hat that Mao rarely wore, except for the earliest publicity image in the 1930s and for greeting the masses at Tian'anmen, converted the original image into a humorous visual implication of Mao.

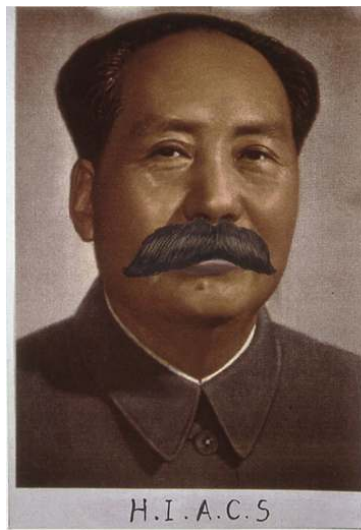


Fig. 5: Zhang Hongtu, *H.I.A.C.S.*, 1989. Copyright by the artist.

In 1989, Zhang created the *Chairman Mao* series, which includes several works using laser prints, collage and acrylic on paper. Although Zhang does not actually deform facial features in all these pictures, he nonetheless modifies official portraits, at least by adding some visual elements. While all the images clearly fulfil the definition of parody, most of them can also be considered as representatives of caricature. One official portrait is modified by painting a bold moustache on Mao and is entitled *H.I.A.C.S.* (*He Is a Chinese Stalin*) (see Fig. 5). Zhang is employing Marcel Duchamp's method from *L.H.O.O.Q.* created in 1919:



by adding a moustache on a portrait of *Mona Lisa* and giving the title with letters, the original portrait is transformed.

Obviously, the title *H.I.A.C.S.* is far more political and critical than Duchamp's original pun, which could be loosely translated as "there is fire down below". The title determines the interpretation of this picture and leaves no possibility for a viewer to misinterpret the message. At the same time, the picture can be seen as slightly amusing and terrifying. Due to the very different historical socio-political context of Mao and Stalin, comparing them with each other is contentious. At least Mao's aim was truly to develop the nation, and although many Chinese ended up in unbearable conditions in numerous labour camps, they were not planned to eliminate people in a similar way as in Stalin's death camps. Nevertheless, the work challenges the viewer to reconsider the motivations and outcomes of Mao's policies. As a group, this series of twelve images effectively provokes the viewer to question how Mao has been seen. By using amusing and sometimes even absurd elements, it shatters the respectful aura of Mao's image.

When I asked Zhang Hongtu about his intentions and reasons for parodying Mao's image, he stated that the Tian'anmen events in 1989 affected him deeply. Even though he lived in the United States, he was Chinese and wished China would develop into a more democratic and opened society. With his art Zhang Hongtu wished to support and to assist the democratic movement crushed in Tian'anmen in 1989 (Zhang in a phone interview with the author 15 March 2008). Whether or not he has succeeded in his aim, is another issue because his works relating to Mao have not yet been exhibited in mainland China.

After Wang Keping, the next artist in mainland China to work with Mao's visual image through the deformation of the features, to some extent, was Zhu Wei (朱伟, b. 1966). The deformation of physical features results from Zhu's personal and slightly surrealistic approach. In the context of Zhu's paintings it is essential to remember that physical deformations were previously employed in Chinese art with respectful intentions. Keeping this historical perspective in mind, it becomes obvious that Zhu's oeuvre is not representative of caricaturing in the limited, mocking sense of the concept, but rather in a broader sense, as physical deformations that derive primarily from his own visual expression.

Since 1994, Zhu has developed his own expressive and even slightly surrealistic style based on traditional Chinese ink painting methods. His art is based on his own personal experiences, but the paintings do not document specific

historical events. Instead, Zhu Wei has reflected the socio-cultural changes around him through his personal perspective. The growing emphasis on this personal approach is visible in the titles of his solo exhibitions, *The Story of Beijing*, (*Beijing gushi*, 北京故事) 1996, *China Diary* (*Zhongguo Rizi* 中国日子) 1996, *Diary of the Sleepwalker* (*Mengyou Shouji* 梦游手记) 1998, and *Zhu Wei Diary* (*Zhu Wei Rizi* 朱伟日子) 2000, all held at Plum Blossoms Gallery in Hong Kong.

Zhu's oeuvre as a whole is an illustrative example of the fact that although these paintings include soldiers, political symbols and leaders, the primary meaning has not been to create political art works but instead to explore human relationships (see Zhu Wei's video interview in 1997 in McGuinness 2001; Li 2005, 7, in English p. 11; Smith 2001, 3). Despite re-creating images of Mao, Zhu has strongly objected to the classification of his paintings into a certain style and movement, namely political pop. This is further clarified when Zhu states that, for him, Mao "is an ordinary person, not a bodhisattva. ... I wanted to use him to address a question, as a representation of a generation and as a symbol of an era. His image reminds me of the things that I did at that time" (Zhu Wei in a video interview in 1997, see also a written excerpt reproduced in the section Catalogue, Sculpture and Lithographs. McGuinness 2001).

In his oeuvre, Zhu has depicted Chairman Mao with somewhat deformed facial and bodily features, as all the figures are in these paintings. Nevertheless, due to the mole on his chin, and the hairline, there is no alternative interpretation for the identity of this figure than Mao. In *The Story of Sister Zhao No. 2* (*Zhao jie zhi gushi liang hao*, 赵姐之故事两号, see Fig. 6), 1994, Zhu has decided to add Mao's portrait in the background, but has also deformed his image to be fatter, with smaller eyes. Occasionally Zhu has given Mao's visual image an even more unusual rendering, such as dressing him in an earring and a red outfit resembling that of Santa Claus in *Goodbye, Hong Kong No. 1*, (*Zaijian Xianggang yi hao* 再见香港一号, see Fig. 7) or blindfolding him and placing him on a stage as part of a rock group in *China Diary No. 16*, (*Zhongguo riji shiliu hao* 中国日记十六号 see Fig. 8), both created in 1995. Consequently, he has trans-contextualized and transformed the image of Mao and provided new, imaginary perceptions.



Figs. 6, 7 and 8: Zhu Wei, *The Story of Sister Zhao No. 2*, 1994 (left); *Goodbye Hong Kong No. 1*, 1995 (above); *China Diary No. 16*, 1995. Copyright by the artist.

The level of the deformation of physical features Zhu has employed does not yet turn these images into obvious representatives of caricatures, but nonetheless these paintings are clearly parodying the iconographic visual conventions of Mao by utilizing a slightly humorous edge that could not have been used during Mao's lifetime. Obviously, his main intention has been to re-employ and re-modify Mao's visual image in order to uncover his personal life, desires and dreams in relation to the changing social context as well as entice viewers to do the same.

#### 2.4 Transforming Age and Gender

Occasionally, it has been argued that Mao's appearance had some feminine features, such as plump lips and soft delicate hands. Some of the artists have utilized these notions and developed them further in their art works. A surprising caricaturing of Mao's image as a woman is created by the Gao Brothers (高氏兄

弟, Gao Zhen 高旻, b. 1956 and Gao Qiang 高强, b. 1962). Their *Miss Mao* series includes several statues made of fiberglass and digitally manipulated photographs of these statues. Two series of sculptures in different sizes and with brilliant colours were created with the titles *Miss Mao No. 1* and *Miss Mao No. 2* in 2006 (see Figs. 9 and 10). The titles of the individual works of art include the colour of the statue, like *Blue Miss Mao No. 1* (see, e.g., Gao Brothers 2006). In these series, Mao's face is modified to look rather childish, with plump cheeks and an elongated snub nose that resembles Pinocchio's. The expression on his face is always mischievous, his eyes are turned to look at something to the upper left, and the well-known mole on his chin is clearly visible. Furthermore, the Gao Brothers have transformed these bust size statues to resemble female bodies with big breasts.



Figs. 9 and 10: Gao Brothers, *White Miss Mao No. 1*; *Red Miss Mao No. 2*, 2006.  
Copyright by the artists.

Why depict Chairman Mao as a woman? In an interview, the Gao Brothers explained that because Mao was originally considered the father-mother of the nation, they decided to create an image that would reveal this (the Gao Brothers in an interview with the author, 20 June 2008). A similar idea of Mao as a bisexual or omnisexual figure, “the ultimate father-mother official (*fumu guan* 父母官)” praised in literature and music, is expressed by Geremie Barmé (1996, 20–21). The idea of Mao as the only appropriate parent to children is visible in the political posters of Mao's era, in which children are seldom portrayed with their parents, but instead with Chairman Mao.

This amalgam of genders in representations of Mao is related to the notion that the Party represents a mother to all people (Kóvskaya 2007, 9; Karetzky 2007, 12). Without doubt, to claim that Mao was the father-mother of the nation was to justify the ultimate power that he eventually had by invoking the traditional concept of filial piety. Obviously, the father-mother would know what is best for the offspring and the nation, and as a respectful descendant, your duty was to respect and obey your elders. The justification for that status of Mao is nevertheless cleverly questioned in these *Miss Mao* sculptures. By adding the nose of the Pinocchio, the ultimate allegory of lying, the Gao Brothers have visualized their claim that “Mao was a persistent liar” (Gao Bothers in Karetzky 2007, 12).

In addition, the Gao Brothers have created another kind of caricature of Mao: a very childish looking image of a baby boy. One of the earliest works from this series is *Little Mao's Cyber-tribe*, where fifty-six small faces of baby Mao are reproduced in small frames side by side (see Fig. 11). The reference to Andy Warhol's works is obvious and as a result, Mao is turned into a cute commodity with an amusing impression. In some works, the image of this doll-like baby boy is further utilized by placing it in absurd surroundings, such as in the art work *Flying No. 1* from 1999 (see Fig. 12).

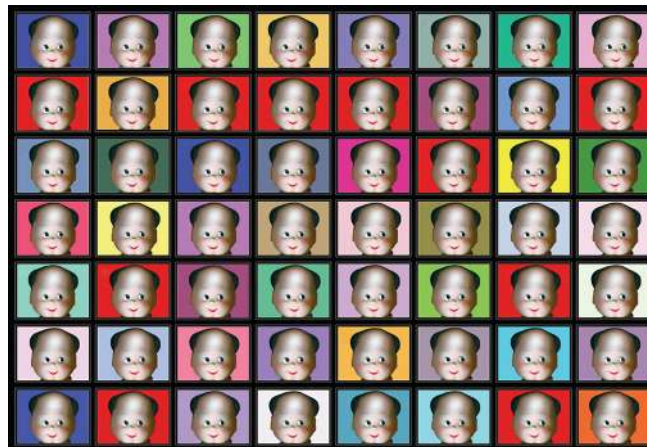


Fig. 11: Gao Brothers *Little Mao's Cyber-tribe*, 1998. Copyright by the artists.



Fig. 12: Gao Brothers *Flying No. 1*, 1999. Copyright by the artists.

Instead of merely parodying the previous visual images of Mao by deformation of physical features, the Gao Brothers are also trans-contextualizing the context in which Mao was usually depicted. Similarly to Zhu Wei, they are not limiting their approach to modifying only the features of Mao, but indeed, they are re-placing him in surreal surroundings such as flying on a saucer in the blue sky or lingering above Tian'anmen Gate.

### 3 Conclusions: Methods of Violating the Visual Norms

Employment of caricature by contemporary Chinese artists in relation to Mao can be regarded as a form of trans-contextual parody because the artists are targeting the visual conventions of Mao. Although caricaturing Mao has been a rather rare trend among artists, they are using varying visual methods in their art, as the examples discussed above clearly show. Besides the quite common conventions of caricature, such as adding a moustache, modifying the facial features, or depicting the person as an animal, artists have re-formed the image further by other means. By utilizing visual signs related to Mao (sunrays, a military hat), Zhang Hongtu has transformed other images to imply Mao, while Zhu Wei has resituated Mao in a completely new context and the Gao Brothers have even modified his age and gender.

Overall, these examples demonstrate how artists are using a value-problematizing form of parody that perceives history through critical distance and,

because of the emphasis on difference and irony, enables the viewers to question the previous politics of representations of Mao. Without doubt, they are not representing Jamesonian pastiche. In addition, because they are violating the visual norms concerning Mao's images, I regard them as representing a trend that Wu Hung has called "counter images" (Wu 2005b, 165–190). Nevertheless, they do not only deface Mao but indeed also *re-face* him providing possibilities for new interpretations and meanings.

As I argue elsewhere, trans-contextual parody is only one of the main four artistic strategies that contemporary Chinese artists have employed in relation to Mao. In addition, as an artistic strategy, trans-contextual parody includes various methods, targets, and intentions, and it is not always mocking the main figure in the image, but can also be used to show reverence towards that person, or to criticize the context in which the image was created (Valjakka 2011). In the case of caricaturing, the approach is somewhat more limited, but still is *not* one-sided, aiming only to ridicule the main figure, Mao himself. Indeed, as shown above, artists are questioning the norms of production and perception of Mao in the changing Chinese society.

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