INTRODUCTION

Discerning Red Legacies in China

Jie Li

We are the heirs of communism
Inheriting the glorious tradition of the forebearers of the Revolution.

—“Song of the Young Pioneers”

In this absurd time, they encourage you to sing revolutionary songs, but they do not encourage you to wage a revolution.

—He Bing 何兵, China University of Political Science and Law, 2011

As Chinese schoolchildren continue to sing the revolutionary anthem “Song of the Young Pioneers,” what are the legacies of the Communist Revolution in today’s China? The celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 2009 and the ninetieth anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 2011 seemed to be culminations of a recent official and popular revival of so-called red culture, wherein cultural artifacts associated with the Communist Revolution received makeovers as “red classics,” “red songs,” “red art,” “red collections,” “red restaurants,” and “red tourism.” Yet after nearly four decades of market reform and social transformation, to what extent are the ideas, realities, and memories of the Mao era still relevant? How have the notions and practices of “revolution,” “communism,” and “socialism” changed over time? Which
aspects and layers of the revolutionary past have been glorified, contested, or disavowed since the end of the Cultural Revolution—and by whom, how, when, and why?

The contributors to this volume examine “red legacies” in China—reminders and reminders of the Communist Revolution in the post-Mao era. Evoking at once utopian ideals and traumatic catastrophes, red legacies may be found in the remnants of public culture from the 1950s to the 1970s and contemporary representations and reinventions of the revolutionary past, as well as in inherited aesthetic forms, practices, and mindsets. Mediated by monuments and artifacts, texts and images, bodies and places, red legacies pose critical questions for the continuity and transformation of Chinese identity from the socialist to the postsocialist eras. At stake is not only how the present remembers the past but also how the past might shape the present—how the ideas, symbols, and sacrifices on the revolutionary path might serve as resources or liabilities for Chinese society, in both material and spiritual terms. The chapters in this volume revisit, analyze, and critique red legacies in their various cultural forms.

How are we to periodize red legacies? China’s red culture can be traced back to the 1921 founding of the CCP and the establishment of Communist base areas from Jinggangshan to Yan’an, but it was only after the CCP’s political victory in 1949 that those early decades of revolutionary mobilization entered mainstream culture as myths, legends, and monuments; these in turn played a great role in “continuing” the revolution until Mao’s death in 1976. In other words, the revolutionary struggles that took place prior to 1949 were already important legacies for the first three decades of the PRC. Although our definition of the revolutionary past includes the pre-1949 period, this volume treats such early Communist history mostly in terms of its post-1949 representation and mediation in museums, art, theater, literature, and film. The post-Mao reverberations of the public culture of the Mao era remain the primary focus of this collection.

Unlike post-Communist countries in the former Soviet bloc, China never underwent an explicit regime transition—neither after Mao’s death in 1976 nor later, after the nationwide protests in 1989. The CCP has continued its authoritarian rule, but since Deng Xiaoping’s market reforms, “socialism with Chinese characteristics” can barely mask China’s abandonment of Communist ideals and its entrance into the global
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capitalist economy. The ideologies, cultures, and institutions from the Mao era have either faded away entirely or persisted in residual forms, meeting with erasure or revival at various times and places. In recent years, red culture made a localized official comeback under former Chongqing party secretary Bo Xilai, who promoted the dissemination of Maoist slogans and the singing of red songs to tap into popular sentiment, before he fell spectacularly from power in the spring of 2012. Meanwhile, the central government has juggled selective memories of pre-1949 revolutionary struggles with a willing amnesia about the Mao era. Although the party officially repudiated the Cultural Revolution as catastrophic turmoil in a 1981 resolution, textbooks, museums, and official mass media circumvent any mention of this traumatic decade and of other sensitive histories like the post–Great Leap Famine and the Anti-Rightist Movement. The Maoist past thus remains a volatile site of contestations that can both bolster and threaten the current government’s legitimacy. China’s contradictory, even schizophrenic, relationship to its red legacies is best expressed in the epigraph by He Bing of China University of Political Science and Law: “they encourage you to sing revolutionary songs, but they do not encourage you to wage a revolution.”

In intellectual discourse and popular culture, red legacies are also riddled with paradoxical and ambiguous meanings. In the decade after Mao’s death in 1976, the Cultural Revolution became a major subject in literature, art, and cinema, giving rise to such literary and cultural movements as the “Scar” and “Searching for Roots” movements. However, the plethora of unofficial historiographies giving a cathartic outlet to past sufferings remained in the shadows of censorship and never dealt with crucial issues of collective guilt and responsibility. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a posthumous cult of Mao flourished throughout the country. Historical ignorance, folk beliefs, and disillusionment with market reforms all contributed to a mass commodification of Maoist memorabilia, the rerelease of Cultural Revolution songs set to rock beats, a recycling of red art into the Political Pop of commercial advertisements, and various red-themed restaurants and tourist destinations. The 1990s also saw the emergence of “New Leftist” public intellectuals who criticized the government’s market-oriented policies for creating inequality and sought to resuscitate Maoist ideals. Their arguments and those of their liberal opponents have garnered passionate supporters and strident critics in cyberspace since the turn of the twenty-first century.
Cultural Sites of Memory

As generations born after the Cultural Revolution come of age, memories based on personal, lived experiences of the Chinese Communist Revolution and the Mao era are giving way to mediated cultural forms. In highlighting the term “red legacies,” this volume focuses less on the reminiscences of the middle-aged and elderly generations than on what theorists of collective memory have labeled “sites of memory” and “cultural memory.” The French historian Pierre Nora coined the term “sites of memory” (lieux de mémoire) to designate a collection of geographical places, historical figures, literary or artistic objects, emblems, and symbols that constitute French national identity. He argues that these sites of memory exist because there are no longer “milieus of memory” (milieux de mémoire), or settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience. In a similar juxtaposition, the German scholar Jan Assmann distinguishes between “communicative memory,” constituted through informal everyday interactions, and “cultural memory,” which is written into sacred texts and crystallized in symbols, rituals, and narratives. Applying Assmann’s distinction to contemporary China, Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik points out that official historiography in the People’s Republic of China has been based on those “sacred texts” edited and published as Mao Zedong’s Selected Works, and thus not only remote history but also recent history has been treated as part of the nation’s cultural memory. Also applying Nora and Assmann to a Chinese context, the recent collection Places of Memory in Modern China examines a few significant sites of memory in modern and contemporary China, ranging from the First Emperor’s Terracotta Warriors to the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall.

While the concepts of cultural memory and sites of memory are indispensable grids from which to consider what the past means in the present, these terms also connote a convergence toward a single cultural tradition, national identity, and historical master narrative, putting less weight on controversy and multiplicity. Thus we propose red legacies to provide a new critical framework and interpretive strategy within which to examine the profusion of official and unofficial cultural artifacts associated with the Chinese Communist Revolution. We submit that red legacies are outcomes of agency and practice, not “a vague wave
of associations which supposedly come over an entire population when a set of past events is mentioned.”\textsuperscript{10} Hence this volume investigates the commerce between past and present, and reconstructs the palimpsests of red legacies as they have accrued over time.

In the field of contemporary Chinese studies, this volume builds on—but is to be distinguished from—related scholarship that aims at three goals: to uncover or set straight historical facts; to show how different social groups remember the Chinese Revolution and the Mao era; and to examine contemporary representations of that past in film, fiction, or art.\textsuperscript{11} Rather than excavating “what really happened” in China’s “revolutionary decades,” we examine the meanings of the past in the present, or what the past does for and to the present.\textsuperscript{12} Instead of remembrances of firsthand experiences, we ask what is transmittable across generations, as well as what has been repressed but continues to exert influence.\textsuperscript{13} We seek to go beyond analyses of cultural artifacts as disembodied texts to trace the processes of their production and reception as well as their status as symbolic capital and cultural assets.\textsuperscript{14} Finally, discussions of Chinese “post-socialism” have to this point been more concerned with the expansion of global capitalism and its discontents than with examining both the inheritances and the debts, and the vitalities and the sequelae that “revolutionary history” might have left behind.\textsuperscript{15}

The chapters in this volume emphasize the indebtedness of the present to the past as well as the resurrections of the past in the present. Instead of capturing the zeitgeist of a given period or accounting for how historical epochs succeed one another in a monumental, teleological fashion, we share a layered approach that borrows from Michel Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical methods.\textsuperscript{16} This approach elucidates the relations between what Raymond Williams calls “dominant,” “residual,” and “emergent” forms.\textsuperscript{17} Rather than treating red legacies as transhistorical constants, the authors of this book excavate the layered strata of cultural memory sites to trace how given revolutionary symbols and myths were created in the first place, how their forms and meanings changed in specific historical contexts, and how they have been mobilized by different agents during the past few decades. As residual forms that remain alive—as opposed to dead, “archaic” ones—red legacies can serve to bolster the dominant culture or provide resources for an alternative or opposition to it.

Besides more obvious red legacies, like the “red classics” and Cultural
Revolution posters, we also seek to detect “invisible” red legacies, such as totalitarian aesthetics and habits of thinking, as well as the revolution’s human costs—both voluntary and involuntary sacrifices that beg the questions of whether, what, and how we can learn from disjunctions between theory and practice, between ideology and experience. Sometimes the very censorship of certain memories constitutes a legacy in its own right, showing that the past is not quite passé. It is also worth keeping in mind that, while the Chinese government and dominant political and economic interest groups play key roles to shape the meanings of the past in the present, red legacies also reside in alternative realms that resist or lie beyond official repressions and representations.

Instead of China’s political, economic, and institutional heritage, this book focuses on red legacies in the cultural realm, with chapters on the visual and performing arts, literature, and cinema, as well as architecture, museums, and memorials. Apart from engaging with critical theory and writing new cultural historiographies, the authors use diverse methods, including archival research, art-historical interviews, and close readings of images and texts, as well as ethnographic thick description. By focusing on the cultural afterlives of the Communist Revolution, this book distinguishes itself from the recent volume edited by Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry that examines the influences of Chinese revolutionary experiences and legacies on contemporary political institutions and policy styles, explaining the Communist Party’s regime resilience through “adaptive authoritarianism” and drawing attention to “Mao’s invisible hand.” Whereas social scientists have approached revolutionary memories by defining models that can explain (and possibly predict) larger political and social patterns, the authors of this volume offer critical interpretations of the nuances and complexities of cultural phenomena and intellectual currents. And whereas social scientists privilege taxonomies, statistics, and scientific periodizations, we attend more to the media and genres, the poetics and aesthetics of red legacies that not only “channel and constrain the articulation of memory” but also participate in shaping present and future social practices. The chapters in this volume are organized in five parts—“Red Foundations,” “Red Art,” Red Classics,” “Red Bodies,” and “Red Shadows.” Following are introductions to each part, along with synopses of the individual chapters.
Red Foundations

Before this collection turns to discussing the cultural afterlives of the Chinese Revolution or state socialism, Part 1 attends to how red legacies came to be created in the first place. Time and again summoned into being through mass political campaigns and commemorative occasions, the texts, images, artifacts, and monuments that would later become red legacies were often meticulous and grandiose constructions in the socialist era that projected the future as much as they mythologized the past. The first two chapters of this volume take us behind the scenes to trace the construction of some of socialist China’s most iconic self-representations. They show that political leaders oversaw major projects, such as the excavation and “museumification” of the First Party Congress site in the early 1950s (Chapter 1) and the construction of the Ten Great Buildings in the late 1950s (Chapter 2). In turn, “cultural officials” and “cultural workers”—ranging from museum staff to architects—implemented their visions, often working as collaborating collectives rather than individually. Following careful negotiations and multiple revisions, the makers of red legacies manipulated texts, artifacts, and visual images from the past to accord with contemporary political agendas and to fashion history into myth.

As Denise Y. Ho shows in Chapter 1, the task of preserving and memorializing sites of China’s pre-1949 revolutionary history was an important part of the Communist Party’s propaganda effort from the founding of the People’s Republic, drawing inspiration from Republican-era and Soviet precedents. One of the key locations was the site of the First Party Congress, the first place in the party’s foundation narrative and one that would be identified and restored as a revolutionary relic and a symbolic place for pilgrimage. This chapter chronicles the search for and authentication of the site after the founding of the People’s Republic, as well as the subsequent construction and presentation of its exhibitions. Drawing on records in the Shanghai Municipal Archives, periodicals, and more recent official history and memoir, Ho traces the revisions to the First Party Congress exhibition—both what was on display and the oral scripts followed by the docents—from the 1950s to the present. She argues that there was a persistent tension between authenticity and interpretation,
between reproducing the site (as artifact) as it was, originally, and revising history (as narrative) to cope with the changing politics of the Maoist and post-Mao eras. In the early 1960s, museum officials created an authoritative “mask” of official history, a construct “carefully designed to cover uncertainties, contradictions, and uncomfortable truths.” During the Cultural Revolution, the museum changed from a political textbook to a political broadside, promoting the cult of Mao and providing a critique of the latest Cultural Revolution enemies. This chapter concludes by examining how the First Party Congress site has been renovated and its exhibits created anew in the reform period, and how—despite new trends in museology and the presentation of objects—it remains a center for “red tourism” and a memorial to revolution within Shanghai’s rapidly changing cityscape.

Whereas the First Party Congress site was excavated, reinvented, and commemorated as a revolutionary symbol from the Republican era, the “founding fathers” of the PRC were also eager to create brand new monuments to represent the new socialist state to the world and for posterity. In Chapter 2, “Building Big, with No Regret,” Zhu Tao traces the construction of Beijing’s Ten Great Buildings project during the Great Leap Forward as a new architectural milestone that triggered a nationwide building boom in the Mao era. Politicians, city planners, and architects struggled to devise a style suitable for a Chinese and socialist regime. Consuming enormous resources and labor, the Ten Great Buildings were constructed within twelve months, between 1958 and 1959, to meet the government’s deadline to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the “New China” at the same time that the country was experiencing one of its most dire socioeconomic crises. Through comparisons with Republican-era precedents and today’s megaprojects in what Zhu calls a state-capitalist style, this chapter identifies a long-standing tradition in China wherein an obsession with the projection of power through architectural style takes precedence over civic structures, like schools and homes. Zhu further argues that the tradition of “building big,” regardless of exorbitant costs and devastating social consequences, still exerts a powerful influence over China’s architectural, urban, and social development today. Especially in the 2000s, central and local governments have employed brand-name international architects for grand architectural projects and staged spectacular events to gloss over social contradictions and boost national pride. Finally,
Zhu suggests that China’s very capacity to “embrace change, unburdened with regret” is indebted to the revolutionary tradition of creating a tabula rasa at breakneck speed without qualms over the “brutal erasure of past conditions.”

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Apart from architectural monuments and symbols, the medium of propaganda posters played an important role in the construction of red iconography in the Mao era. In quantitative and spatial terms, as Harriet Evans points out in Chapter 3, posters were the most important visual means through which the Cultural Revolution was created and played out. While artists had little choice but to follow the prescribed messages and aesthetic standards from central and local propaganda departments, their oral histories reveal ideas and aspirations that transgressed the posters’ explicit themes. Likewise, readers and audiences could also “poach” texts to overturn official interpretations, thereby endowing the images with nuances, polysemy, and ambiguity. Evans argues that these “ambiguities of address”—present in the structure, composition, and sometimes even the color of the posters—go a long way toward explaining how they simultaneously evoke complex, contradictory memories of horror and pleasure among their contemporary audiences. After the Cultural Revolution, the once-omnipresent posters gradually disappeared from the spaces of everyday life in the 1980s, only to return, starting in the 1990s, as popular collectibles. The images have been widely revisited in popular commercial advertising, red tourism, and contemporary art, suggesting a complex subjectivity that defies both condemnation of and nostalgia for the Maoist past.

While various contemporary Chinese artists have appropriated the striking imagery of Cultural Revolution posters, none has created works as successful, provocative, or complex as Wang Guangyi. In Chapter 4, Xiaobing Tang focuses on the notion of “socialist visual experience” first articulated by the artist around the year 2000 in order to reconstruct the conceptual evolution in his art, observing three successive stages in Wang’s mature work to date. A first stage of “visual critique,” in which Wang Guangyi juxtaposed Cultural Revolution–style political images with prevalent logos of global consumerism, was followed, Tang
observes, by a stage of “cultural critique.” In this second stage, the artist turned the socialist legacy into an intellectual resource as well as a cultural identity and voiced critical opposition to the contemporary state of affairs. His effort to “restore” or “return to” a socialist visual experience therefore amounts not so much to a political statement as to a cultural rediscovery. The more challenging move, however, is Wang Guangyi’s critique of contemporary art as an institution. This “institutional critique,” Tang argues, is a logical extension of the artist’s work. In claiming that his art is but a result of what the people have created and that his objective is to make art dissimilar from commercialized art objects, the artist poses challenges to the very system of contemporary art that he helped legitimize in the 1980s and 1990s. Tang suggests that this most recent stage in Wang Guangyi’s development hearkens back to some of the anti-institutional, antiestablishment politics of earlier avant-garde movements, such as the Red Guard art movement of the mid-1960s.

Red Classics

In a 1963 speech, Mao Zedong warned against a “counterrevolutionary restoration” on a national scale that would “change the color” of “the whole of China.” Fear of a possible Chinese evolution toward capitalism was spread through the socialist education campaign known as “Never forget class struggle,” which helped pave the way for the Cultural Revolution. After Mao’s death, however, his successors reversed China’s revolutionary path and enacted a “capitalist restoration.” Comparing texts that span the Maoist and the post-Mao eras, the three chapters in this part of the book provide genealogies of red legacies in theatrical, literary, and cinematic productions. Their authors read such post-Mao cultural artifacts as new historiographies that challenge and critique the authoritative narratives of canonical red classics, making claims to greater authenticity in their historical content and greater realism in their formal expressions. The first decade after Mao’s death in 1976 brought the official repudiation of the Cultural Revolution, the rehabilitation of previously purged or maligned figures, and more humanized versions of revolutionary historiography. As the party relinquished its monopoly over all cultural spheres, writers and filmmakers engaged in a sustained
reflection on and critique of the revolutionary narratives while subverting the genre conventions of socialist realism. With temporal distance and the deepening of market reforms in the 1990s, however, traumatic memories of the revolutionary past have also given way to discontent with China’s growing inequality, corruption, and social insecurity. Not only the Communist teleology but also the capitalist teleology of economic development came into question in their invocation of red legacies, which became a resource for critiquing the status quo. Yet the market itself quickly absorbed the red nostalgia that arose out of disillusionment with economic reforms, making commodities out of all red cultural artifacts. The government has similarly exploited the complex alchemy of red legacies for the new ideological purposes of nationalism and state capitalism, even when the color “red” has been emptied of its revolutionary connotations.

In Chapter 5, “Performing the ‘Red Classics,’” Xiaomei Chen examines three revolutionary music and dance epics produced in the PRC between 1964 and 2009. Instrumental in promoting the cult of Mao, the 1964 performance of The East Is Red showcased some of the best talents in voice, music, dance, poetry recitation, and drama, meanwhile distorting actual historical events, effacing the roles of other revolutionary leaders, and eliminating post-1949 acts. In the post-Mao era, signature songs from The East Is Red continued to be featured in annual concerts celebrating the birth of the party, the army, and the nation, as well as in amateur performances put on by retirees and ordinary citizens. Taking The East Is Red as a model and “sister performance,” The Song of the Chinese Revolution, which premiered in 1984, revised the historical narrative of the Communist Revolution by restoring the roles of formerly erased revolutionary leaders and restaging old revolutionary legends from a personal angle, presenting pathos-ridden sacrifices of mothers and children rather than heroic male martyrs. Its only act on the Mao era skipped from the 1949 founding of the PRC to the 1976 fall of the Gang of Four as a triumphant new beginning. Finally, the 2009 production The Road to Revival, performed in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the PRC, departed from its two precursor texts by highlighting post-Mao political regimes and the capitalist approach to rescuing China from national disasters and moving toward prosperity. In serving the new ideology of state capitalism, Chen suggests that the aestheticization of politics persisted, demonstrating once again the
“enduring power of revolutionary epic performances” to manipulate “historical narrative, political orientation, star and popular culture, and nationalistic sentiments.”

As much as the state has continued to exercise control over cultural production in the post-Mao era, there has nevertheless been ample room for polyphony among new generations of writers. As David Wang argues in Chapter 6, “Red Legacies in Fiction,” a cornucopia of literary works in the new millennium have been more daring in critiquing the status quo and more polemical in presenting historical plotting and political platforms than the discursive fervor surrounding “China’s Rise.” First, Wang sketches a modern genealogy of literature and revolution, showing that the “red legacy” of using fiction as a vehicle to reform politics, to enlighten the nation’s youth, and to “speak for the insulted and wounded” can be traced back to the early twentieth century, the May Fourth cultural movement, and the Yan’an period, when Mao called on all literature and arts to serve revolutionary politics. Wang further classifies literary fiction of the Mao era into two main genres: the revolutionary history-romance on the period leading up to the People’s Republic of China and the peasant novel. Both forms sought to engage the dialectic of revolution and history, to fashion progressive subjectivity, and to project a utopian vision. In the New Era after the Cultural Revolution, when history had collapsed and the revolution had lost its mandate, root-seeking and avant-garde writers of the 1980s rewrote revolutionary narratives, going “from the sublime to the ironic, from a surplus of meaning to a hollowing out of meaning.” By the turn of the century, seasoned writers, such as Mo Yan and Yu Hua, as well as newer voices, like Yan Lianke and Hu Fayun, produced a new literary canon by teasing out the fictitious traces in historical accounts and political propaganda, and demonstrating the wide spectrum of lived experiences in the People’s Republic over the past six decades.

Following this survey of red legacies in fiction, Jason McGrath discusses the formal and thematic links between the cinema of the Mao era and post-Mao films, in Chapter 7, “Post-Socialist Realism in Chinese Cinema.” Like its literary counterpart, Mao-era cinema combined revolutionary romanticism and revolutionary realism in depicting socialist heroes who “propel history forward” while “modeling the ideal Communist citizen of the future.” In showing that “Communists have more
fun,” McGrath points out the variety of Mao-era genres—war epics, spy thrillers, musicals, and comedies—that served the single master narrative of Communist liberation and called for “ongoing vigilance against reactionary forces.” Cinema in the post-Mao era, however, manifested a “loss of historical certainty” and actively invoked Mao-era genre conventions only to empty them of heroism and to subvert their narratives of progress, thus revealing the conventionality of socialist realism while implicitly claiming a realism of its own. McGrath uses the term “post-socialist realism” both to define these new films against the influence of socialist realism and to draw attention to their realist portrayals of the postsocialist economic and social condition. This new realism makes use of techniques such as on-location shooting, natural lighting and sound, naturalistic performances, long shots, and long takes, as well as giving attention to seemingly irrelevant or contingent details. McGrath explores transgenerational interactions with Mao-era cinema through comparative close readings of films by China’s so-called Fourth-, Fifth-, and Sixth-Generation filmmakers, concluding with a discussion of how digital cinema might both complicate and extend these tendencies.

Red Bodies

Having examined the red legacies found in China’s monuments, visual art, theater, literature, and film, Part 4 of this volume examines the mediation of red legacies through the bodies of the leaders and the masses—both in a corporeal sense and as representations. In discussions of Mao’s “two bodies” through his posthumous impersonators, the body of the crowd used in national spectacles, and the commodified bodies of Lenin and the subaltern in Yan Lianke’s fiction, the three chapters in this section show that human bodies are not just the subjects and objects of representation but also serve as a significant medium through which the revolution could be carried out and transmitted. At the height of the Mao cult in the 1960s, the “live encounters” between the Great Helmsman and the millions of young Red Guards at Tiananmen Square were instrumental for launching the Cultural Revolution. Equally significant were the many mass rallies and parades that accompanied every anniversary and political campaign throughout the Mao era.
ad infinitum through photography, painting, and sculpture, Mao’s ubiquitous face and body, on display in public and private spaces, retained a sacred aura that inspired worship by the masses.

In the three and half decades since his death, Mao’s body and image have continued to dominate the center of political power. In Chapter 8, Haiyan Lee investigates how the political-theological idea of Mao’s “two bodies” lives on in the performative art of Mao impersonation in contemporary China. She argues that the party’s greatest ideological achievement after the Cultural Revolution has been its bifurcation of Mao into the mortal “body natural” and the immortal “body politic”—Mao the fallible human being and Mao the anchor of regime legitimacy—as he embodies both popular sovereignty and one-party autocracy. Despite what Lee calls the “overtly nationalist and covertly capitalist makeover,” the party retooled Mao’s immortal body “to sanction developmental goals rather than class struggles.” Lee goes on to examine both the institutionalized practice of using “special actors” to portray Mao (and other political leaders) in PRC “main-melody” film and television and the emerging phenomenon of freelance impersonators reenacting Mao’s speeches and calligraphy at tourist sites and entertainment venues. Framing this discussion is a close reading of Chinese American author Yiyun Li’s short story “Immortality,” about the fate of a man born with Mao’s face and groomed to be Mao’s official impersonator. By situating Mao impersonation on the spectrum of performative practices from spirit mediumship, at one end, to satirical art, at the other, Lee aims to make sense of the fraught relationship between the aura of Mao’s image and its aesthetic and commercial appropriations. This chapter also addresses the question commonly raised by Western journalists: why are the Mao impersonators determinedly unfunny?

Not only has Mao’s body been redeployed for contemporary political and commercial purposes, but also the bodies of the people—the masses—have remained at the beck and call of contemporary nationalist spectacles. In Chapter 9, “Human Wave Tactics,” Andy Rodekohr examines the use of the crowd image in more than three decades of Zhang Yimou’s work as both a director and cinematographer, which he argues engages the legacies of Chinese revolutionary visual culture. Considering Zhang’s use of crowds in terms of ritual and technological visuality, this chapter shows how his direction of the Opening Ceremony for the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing resorted to “human wave tactics” and
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the mass-reproducible forms of propaganda. A legacy from China’s civil war and the Korean War, the “human wave” describes a massive head-long attack from the front line of a battle force, favoring overwhelming scale over strategic maneuvering. China continued to deploy the tactic in peacetime to create a “state of emergency” (or ecstasy) when individual interests had to be sacrificed to the collective good—such was the case during the Great Leap Forward and the construction of the so-called Ten Great Buildings, which Zhu Tao writes about in Chapter 2. The bodies of the masses were collectively mobilized in a similar fashion for the 2008 Olympics, even while the Opening Ceremony carefully expunged all explicit references to the Mao era. At once complicit in and critical of such human wave tactics, Zhang’s historical costume films, such as Hero (2002) and Curse of the Golden Flower (2006), subordinate maximalist images of crowds to the more qualified drama between the main actors, thus interrogating the problematic relationship between leaders and masses and exposing how political-aesthetic spectacles mask the violence and sacrifice that contribute to their formation. Finally, Rodekohr analyzes Zhang Yimou’s cinematography of crowds in early Fifth-Generation films from the 1980s as a “hollow gesture” toward the utopia they once promised, pointing out that his crowds on screen generated consumerist and nationalist crowds off-screen, instead of revolutionary masses.

In Chapter 10, “Time Out of Joint: Commemoration and Commodification of Socialism in Yan Lianke’s Lenin’s Kisses,” Carlos Rojas reads contemporary China’s transition from communism to capitalism through the prism of subaltern subjects who appear to fall through the cracks of history. In Yan Lianke’s 2004 novel Lenin’s Kisses, a local leader in Hunan fabricates an elaborate scheme to purchase Lenin’s preserved corpse from Russia and install it in a newly constructed mausoleum to attract tourists from China and around the world, thereby bringing the county so much revenue that its residents would not know how to spend all the money. As Rojas points out, this novel explores a set of structural tensions inherent in contemporary China’s transition from communism to capitalism by deploying a dialectic of bare life and living death, focusing in particular on the way in which the two intersect around the figure of the commodity. If Marxism arose originally in response to the pernicious workings of capital and profit-driven development, here we find a perverse capitalistic drive emerging out of a preserved emblem of the
Marxist legacy. Rojas argues that the dialectic of communism and capitalism embodied by Lenin’s corpse symbolizes the death of Cold War Communist regimes as well as the continuing force of capitalist development and the corrective critiques that it inspires.

Red Shadows

The first four parts of this volume focus on cultural appropriations of red legacies for symbolic capital in the present and ironic commentary on the status quo. Part 5 emphasizes darker red legacies that have been disavowed, edited out, or otherwise subjected to state-sponsored amnesia. Although the human costs and failures of the Communist Revolution remain on the margins of what may be represented, the Maoist past continues to exert an influence and cast a shadow on today’s People’s Republic of China in linguistic, cultural, intellectual, and institutional realms. Chapters 11 and 12 argue for the necessity of acknowledging and coming to terms with red legacies as both appealing ideals and tragic realities—both theories and practices. Meanwhile, the last two chapters also call for the renewal of certain red legacies, such as the guerrilla spirit of rebellion against hegemonic power as well as Maoist cultural practices that purport to give voice to subaltern memories.

Despite sustained echoes of Ba Jin’s 1986 call for a Cultural Revolution museum, as Chapter 11 shows, the traumatic catastrophes of the Great Leap Famine and the Cultural Revolution have been practically eliminated from official public culture. Nevertheless, there have emerged fragmentary local initiatives to construct peripheral, small-scale “memory places” to commemorate the excesses of the Mao era. Apart from such prominent structures as the Red Era museum series in Sichuan and the Cultural Revolution Museum in Guangdong, “Museums and Memorials of the Mao Era” also discusses derelict cemeteries and mass graves, former sites of commune headquarters or labor reform camps, and contemporary art galleries. Some of these places were constructed during the Mao era, such as the local museum hosting the famous Rent Collection Courtyard that promoted class struggle in the mid-1960s, and the grandiose tombs that Red Guards built for their dead comrades during the Cultural Revolution’s factional violence. After showing how the
meanings of such sites have changed over time, the chapter proceeds to make a number of curatorial proposals for memorials and museums seeking to pass on memories of the Mao era to future generations. Drawing inspiration from institutions and memorials around the world that commemorate totalitarian pasts, victims of manmade catastrophes, and failed utopian projects, this chapter argues for a plurality of local memorial projects that would bring together trauma and nostalgia, subjective remembrances and objective documents, major historical events and everyday artifacts, scholars and artists, sympathetic identification and critical reflection. It highlights four related paradigms: “stumbling stones,” or small memorials of specific victims erected where they once lived; documentation centers that feature oral history collections; monumental ruins that have been preserved and transformed; and community museums that invite contributions from the local population.

In the volume’s final chapter, Geremie Barmé considers a few areas in which we can detect traces of what he calls the “abiding, and beguiling, heritage of the Maoist era and state socialism.” Taking as his starting point the precipitous fall of Bo Xilai in March 2012, Barmé shows that red bloodlines and family connections have continued to play a significant role in turning red symbolic capital into economic and political capital. While thinkers labor to salvage Marxism, this chapter argues that red legacies constitute a body of cultural, intellectual, and linguistic practices that are profoundly ingrained in institutional behavior in China. Meanwhile, the fictionalization of revolutionary history has proliferated in popular culture, and it is in these “remakings, spoofs, and recountsings of High Maoist policies, cultural styles and forms,” writes Barmé, that “we can detect ways in which the impotent, powerless, and dispossessed find a way to express opposition” to the “party’s theory-led monopoly on discourse, ideas, and everyday politics.” While resistance from within may be the most trenchant of red legacies, “the spirit of rebellion, the active involvement with a politics of agitation, action and danger, is one legacy that seems safe to contemplate only at a distance.” Finally, Barmé pinpoints the necessity of historical remembrance and warns against the “crimson blindfold” that deletes or discounts the frustrations and failures of the past in order to formulate coherent narratives that serve as scholastic and cultural legitimations of an authoritarian regime.
Legacies: Inheritance or Debt

The contributors to this volume are all concerned with the value of red cultural legacies, but we do not believe in any simplistic and totalistic affirmation or negation of a red legacy as a whole (hence the multiplicity of legacies as opposed to the singular legacy). We attend to a variety of meanings and implications—positive or negative, nostalgic or traumatic, serious or playful—that cultural artifacts associated with the revolutionary past might have in present contexts. We also examine the fraught relationship between red cultural legacies and the current regime’s legitimacy, asking how the revolutionary past has served as both asset and liability for the state. Beyond state appropriation, might individuals also turn the symbolic capital of red legacies into economic capital or tactics of resistance? Finally, we ask whether the revolutionary past might provide alternatives for a better future. Can the revolution’s successors receive past blessings while dispelling its curses, or must debts be settled before inheritances can be paid out?

Apart from Marxist ideology, revolutionary history, and the trauma and nostalgia that constitute collective memories of the Mao era, we show that totalitarian aesthetics, language, habits, and tactics—as well as an absent regard for humans’ sacrifices—continue to exert their influence in hidden and potentially more powerful ways. Instead of reckoning with either the Mao era’s manmade catastrophes or revolutionary ideals, today’s government has continued to construct a spectacular façade of power by tapping into the red legacies in performance art, discursive practice, public architecture, and mobilization strategies. Zhu Tao (Chapter 2), Xiaomei Chen (Chapter 5), and Andy Rodekohr (Chapter 9) discern red legacies in the scale, speed, and cost of grandiose state-sponsored projects that deploy and employ impressive numbers of people. Whether during the Great Leap Forward or in preparation for the 2008 Olympic Games, whether in celebration of the tenth or the sixtieth anniversary of the People’s Republic, the logic of numbers and speed determined everything in the “total mobilization” of people and resources. In other words, red totalitarian aesthetics turned out to be highly resilient and versatile in transcending and absorbing ideological contradictions.

It is important simultaneously to appreciate the revolution’s utopian ideals and to reckon with its enormous human sacrifices—as well as to
see how “positive” and “negative” red legacies may be inextricably intertwined. As much as we tease out distinctions and nuances among different red legacies, we are wary of—as Barmé puts it—“a ‘strategic disaggregation’ of the ideological/theoretical from the historical/lived” in order that abstract ideas may be championed “clear of the bloody and tragic realities of the past.” The continued appeal, relevance, and salience of red legacies lie in the interstices between unfulfilled longings for community and social justice that motivated past revolutionaries and un-mourned traumas that accompanied the revolutionary experience. While serving as a conduit for these desires and memories, red cultural artifacts can be mobilized to both support and criticize the status quo.

Instead of creating a single master narrative that subsumes red legacies under the dominant culture of the present, cultural producers in the new millennium have begun to fashion multiple alternative understandings of the past and visions of the future. As I show in Chapter 11, even without official sanctioning, local civil societies have begun to create memory places that mediate—and mediate between—the collective trauma and the nostalgia associated with the Mao era, thereby opening up horizons for reconciliation and for transgenerational transmissions of the past. David Wang argues that the “small talk” of contemporary Chinese fiction teases out the complex traces underneath historical dynamics, thereby serving as a remedy for a society inundated with “big talk,” from theories to criticisms, doctrines, and manifestos (Chapter 6). And as China’s state socialism gives way to global capitalism, it is worth considering—and critiquing, as Zhu Tao does—the suggestion made by international architects to build for the public good rather than private interests in a country that remains Communist at least in name (Chapter 2). Ultimately, the fate of China’s red legacies is far from sealed. Much as they have been instrumentally appropriated or hijacked by those in power, there is yet the possibility to turn them into a shared heritage and lessons for future generations.

Notes

2. From an informal graduation speech given by Vice Dean He Bing in 2011.
comment circulated widely in China and was also quoted by Western journalists. For a video of this speech, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wu2t1RMsiBU (accessed June 20, 2014).


8. See Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik, “In Search of a Master Narrative for 20th-Century Chinese History,” China Quarterly 188 (2006): 1070–91. In contrast to official historiography as a form of cultural memory, she considers the contested unofﬁcial historiographies—such as memoirs and historical documentaries—as “communicative memory” that is “ﬁnally becoming visible and is claiming its due.”


Introduction


14. Studies of postsocialist cultural representations of the revolutionary past include selected chapters in Ban Wang, Illuminations from the Past: Trauma, Memory, and History in Modern China (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Braester, Witness against History; Jiang Jiehong, ed., Burden or Legacy: From the Chinese Cultural Revolution to Contemporary Art (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007).


19. Quotation is in Lee and Yang, Re-envisioning the Chinese Revolution, p. 11.


22. Jennifer Hubbert’s study of two different museums that display Mao buttons shows that there are also nuances and distinctions among commodified artifacts. See “(Re)collecting Mao: Memory and Fetish in Contemporary China,” American Ethnologist 33, no. 2 (2006): 145–61.

23. This insight is indebted to William Schaefer’s reading of Mao’s saying that the Chinese people are “poor and blank.” See Schaefer, “Poor and Blank: History’s
