**INTRODUCTION**

**POPULAR CULTURE AND CULTURAL REVOLUTION CULTURE: THEORY, PRACTICE, AND EXPERIENCE**

In the fall of 1978, the comic magazine *Lianhuanhuabao* (连环画报) printed a short comic strip of eight images entitled *Record of Painting an Elephant* (画象记 Huaxiangji) (ill. 0.0). The strip features two persons—an unnamed painter and Jiang Qing 江青 (1914–91), Mao Zedong’s (毛泽东, 1893–1976) wife who took charge of cultural production during the Cultural Revolution and whose name is added to the first image to ensure that every reader will recognize her (panel 1). The painter has outlined an elephant that, as the strip continues, goes through a number of revisions, each following Jiang Qing’s angry orders (panels 2–5). At the end, the elephant looks nothing like an elephant any more. At this point, Jiang Qing is seen jumping around excitedly, just like a little child, crying out “Good! Good! Good!” while the painter looks quite baffled (panel 6). The next image under the slogan “Smashing the Gang of Four” (粉碎四人帮) shows a large fist banging down on and suffocating Jiang Qing, while the painter appears quite happy and content—the characters above his head read 大快人心, which translates as “making the people happy and content.” He rejoices, as we can see in the next picture (panel 8): “Spring has come for the arts” (文艺的春天来了), and quickly retouches his image of the elephant, which is now, as in his first attempt once viciously criticized by Jiang Qing (panel 2), quite readily recognizable as an elephant again.

The comic strip plays with homonyms for “elephant” (象 xiang) such as “portrait” (像 xiang) or “auspicious” (祥 xiang). It also plays with the several meanings of the character for “elephant” (象), which can also be read as “to imitate” as in “imitating sound” or “onomatopoeia” (象声), “to be similar/like” as in “serving the people like Lei Feng” (象雷锋一样为人民服务), or “to seem/appear” as in “it seems that it is about to rain” (好象要下雨了).1 With this in mind, the comic

1. All of these are examples of how 象 is translated in the *Xin Han-De Cidian* 1988, 836.
can be read as a record of painting not elephants but portraits (画像记), or rather, of painting the portrait, that is, the portrait of Chairman Mao, the most important hero of the Cultural Revolution. Painting the portrait—an act discussed in detail in Chapter 5—meant observing numerous strict rules. Failing to observe them, even if one was convinced that the end product was not only not an elephant (不象 bu xiang) but indeed not similar (不象 bu xiang) to its original, Mao himself, was indeed inauspicious (不祥 bu xiang) to any painter who dared do so. The comic strip is thus an illuminating commentary on (cultural) policies during the Cultural Revolution, policies that made some things appear to be what they were really not, and vice versa.

It may not be surprising, then, that the trope of “not being an elephant” (不象 bu xiang) or “not being similar” to what really was, or simply being not “like that,” occurs in many descriptions of the Cultural Revolution as a cultural or artistic experience. The phrase, “really, it was not like that,” is common in oral history. It also constantly recurs to the attentive observer who looks at the (anti-)facts of Cultural Revolution Culture and compares them with the regulations and tenets that allegedly controlled and governed them. The three interview quotes preceding this Introduction give some hints as to this aspect of the Cultural Revolution as a cultural experience: it was not such (不象 bu xiang) that cultural life during the Cultural Revolution was totally restrictive, although it was that, too—but indeed, it opened up opportunities for some, even saved their lives. It was not such (不象 bu xiang) that the Cultural Revolution absolutely destroyed the tenets of Chinese culture and civilization—it did to some extent, but then it can also be seen as a significant “enlightenment movement.” And it was not such (不象 bu xiang) that the propaganda culture of the Cultural Revolution was entirely boring and thus repugnant to everyone: if its constantly repeated message was less than exciting, some of its products nevertheless bear unmistakable artistic qualities and are appreciated, even enjoyed, today.

What was the art and culture of the ten-year-period now called the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) like, then, in theory, practice, and experience? This introduction will provide a few first glimpses of the kinds of material and sensual worlds that this book will uncover in order to answer this question. It will place some unobtrusive scents for the reader who will begin to smell the aromas of what will be discussed more elaborately later. By describing the Cultural Revolution as a lived experience, this book presents first of all its contradictory qualities. For this purpose, it juxtaposes, in the attempt of applying a kind of historical hermeneutics, close readings and analyses of the cultural products from this period with the impressions given in a series of more than three dozen in-depth interviews conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in the early 2000s (most of them in Spring 2004) with representatives from many different class and generational backgrounds—from young taxi driver to elderly musician, from middle-aged journalist to housekeeper to museum curator. The interviewees were randomly chosen from a group mostly involved in education, art, or media today. About half of them experienced being sent down to the countryside or working in the factories. While half of them came from working class, rural, or what would be considered “capitalist” backgrounds, the other half came from intellectual families, members of which had been criticized severely and declared Rightists before and during the Cultural Revolution. All were asked the same set of questions about their personal memories of cultural life during the Cultural Revolution, about painting Mao and reading comics, about criticizing Confucius (孔子 551–479 BCE) and watching or performing the model works, about being sent to the countryside, and about understanding the Cultural Revolution along the new Party line.

2. A complete list of the interviewees, their occupations, ages, and family backgrounds is given in Appendix 1. Interviewees preferred to remain anonymous, a fact I respect even if it prevents me from thanking them by name.
3. A complete list of interview questions is included in Appendix 2.
The Introduction and the Conclusion to this book are composed primarily of evidence from the interviews (i.e., oral history), in order to shed light on what was happening on the ground, while the book’s six chapters juxtapose experience (from oral history) with practice (as artifact). While neither the selection of interviewees nor the particular cultural products chosen for analysis throughout this book can in themselves be considered “statistically relevant,” I am convinced by the many resonances as well as the dissonances to be found among the various different source materials studied in this book that only such a combination of readings—from cultural practice as well as from cultural experience—will enable us to understand why people reacted to Cultural Revolution artistic production the way they did (and continue to do). In juxtaposing memories with close readings of the structure, motifs, aesthetics, and compositional elements of Cultural Revolution works of art or performance, and with the help of an intertextual reading of all of these different “texts,” Cultural Revolution Culture begins to make sense.

The book as a whole includes, deliberately, much patch-working from the original interviews: each section and each chapter starts with a long series of quotations from them. This is done in an attempt to trace and make visible the extremely multifaceted and complicated nature of the Cultural Revolution (cultural) experience. These memories are indeed “visions of the collectively experienced past,” reconstructions by those who have lived through that past. Naturally, they cannot be taken as “an objective chronology of the past” (Lee and Yang 2007, 3), but they are valuable hints as to its importance to the present. Although they are often quite distinct from official history, the official line significantly determines collective memory structures and ways of speaking about them. Whenever confronted with evidence that would suggest a reading different from the official line (but not only then), interviewees tended to get into (even more) contradictory argumentations. The phrase, “Really, it was not like that” (i.e., the elephant that does not look like one is one, after all), mentioned in so many of the interviews as well as evident from the cultural products from this period, therefore, is a staple of this book. And here, the fissures and discrepancies within and between different memories are important in their own right: it was not at all difficult to juxtapose the quotes preceding each chapter so that they represented opposite views on exactly the same matter almost all the time. Indeed, these quotes illustrate the many inconsistencies in the Cultural Revolution experience to which we may not have paid enough attention so far. This is why they are so prominently exposed: not in order to deny or beautify its horrors but in order to make visible the multifaceted experience of the Cultural Revolution. For, indeed, in taking materials such as these seriously, the student of the Cultural Revolution is navigating between Scylla and Charybdis: s/he is neither able to condemn the Cultural Revolution entirely nor to take a Maoist stance exclusively emphasizing its idealist intentions. It is the aim of this book to neither accept nor deny any of these positions—each has its merit and its justification as well as its blind spots. By scrutinizing both the material evidence and the lived experience of Cultural Revolution Culture, this book intends to complicate our view of this intensely complex and immensely important period in Chinese history. It argues for a more comprehensive view of the Cultural Revolution that acknowledges both its horrors and its pleasures, both its dictatorial and its democratic natures.

What the many sources scrutinized in this book illustrate, time and again, is that the Cultural Revolution defies categorization. The Collection of Cultural Revolution Jokes (文革笑料集 Wenge

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4. See Hörning 1997, 32: “Um zu verstehen, warum Menschen das tun, was sie tun, reicht es nicht aus, die vorherrschenden kulturellen Konstrukte einer Gesellschaft zu erkennen, sondern genauso wichtig ist es, die Wege und Weisen zu analysieren, wie diese Konstrukte in die sozialen Praktiken der Menschen Eingang gefunden, vor allem wegen des polyphonen Charakters kultureller Realitäten.” (In order to understand why people do something, it is not enough to recognize cultural constructions in a society. It is equally important to analyze the ways and methods through which these constructions enter social practices. This is so especially due to the polyphonic character of cultural realities.) All translations are, unless otherwise noted, by the author.
*xiaoliao ji* published in 1988 makes this explicit: on its cover page it claims that the Cultural Revolution was a tragic, comic, hateful, and pitiful historical moment all at the same time (一段可悲可笑可恨可怜的历史). The joke collection is advertised as an important document for those growing up after the Cultural Revolution, so that they may understand the period even as they find some of it strange and hard to believe (70年代后长大出生的后人们, 你读到这段难以置信的历史, 也许会拍案惊奇吧). Most importantly, it hopes to illustrate—and this is the aim of my book as well—that the Cultural Revolution cannot be adequately discussed in simple terms and categories (不要简单地说) (*Wenge xiaoliao ji* 1988). The Cultural Revolution was *This* (read "an elephant") and *Not This* (read "not an elephant") at the same time, and accordingly, there are those who will say (and believe) *This* and *Not This* at the same time as well, and each one of them will have an important point to make. It is imperative to pay attention to all of these voices.

This book intends to listen to what they have to say about the art and culture of the Cultural Revolution while it avoids politics, which has been discussed many times and recently most masterly by Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schönhals (2006). Cultural life, the artistic *practice* of the Cultural Revolution, was equally (if not more significantly) a part of the Cultural Revolution as a quotidian (and aesthetic) *experience*—and thus of cultural memory today. As Wang Ban puts it:

Much emphasis has been put on the Cultural Revolution as a political struggle among rival political groups and factions, but the most enduring memory of it is not related to committees, groups, cliques, decrees, or policies. It is, rather, an endless stream of images and patterns from daily life: ... model plays, ..., Mao badges, the green army uniforms, the red armbands of Red Guard organizations, the waving of red flags, the singing of songs and shouting of slogans, the never-ending study and criticism sessions, the solemn morning prayers and evening reports at the altar of the Great Leader, the loyalty dance ... and loyalty halls ..., and the ocean of red ... the list goes on. ... The Cultural Revolution had created a life that was aesthetically driven, ritualistic, and theatrical. (1997, 208–9)

This peculiar quotidian aesthetics of Cultural Revolution China continues to haunt (or invigorate) everyday life in the twenty-first century in China. Cultural Revolution art and culture, almost always made and watched collectively, thus continues to reflect the nation’s collective mentality (Chi 2007, 238). And still, this artistic and cultural practice of the Cultural Revolution has not been studied in detail:

Few have bothered to look closely at the arts and literature of the Cultural Revolution, perhaps because of the dismissive but unquestioned assumption that the period was a cultural desert. Don't we all know that the Revolution produced nothing except the eight model plays? (Wang 1997, 196)³

Cultural Revolution art and culture had been dismissed for many years as “restrictive,” “extremist,” or “mere propaganda” before it was recently resurrected as a subject worthy of study both in China and abroad. Even within the last decade, when the situation began to change, the art and culture of the Cultural Revolution continued to be reduced to a few pages even in specialized works: in an extremely well-informed history of Chinese dance (Feng 2002), for example, the 25 years before the Cultural Revolution receive 65 pages, the 25 years since the Cultural Revolution receive 110 pages, while the ten years of the Cultural Revolution are given only fifteen pages. In a history of Chinese drama, on the other hand (Fu 2002), the 23 years before the Cultural Revolution receive 103 pages, the years since 1977 receive 50 pages, while 50 pages are devoted to a discussion of an

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5. For a similar characterization of the state of the field, see Brown 2003.
6. The question of the restrictive nature of Cultural Revolution Culture, which is, indeed, often summarized in the slogan "nothing except the eight model plays,” in Wang’s words (1997, 196), is discussed in detail in Chapter 1.
extended Cultural Revolution period (1963–76). Perspectives are changing, then, and with the passage of time it has become ever more evident that the Cultural Revolution is an event of cultural import.7 Recent studies have focused exclusively on the years of the Cultural Revolution, showing that politics is not all there is in explaining the Cultural Revolution. Indeed, politics often works very differently from the logic of cultural production during the Cultural Revolution, which may sometimes be inert, lethargic, and thus resistant against, or simply oblivious to, policy changes that occur too quickly. Accordingly, Cultural Revolution Culture may not be read exclusively as derivative or even correlative of Party politics. This significant disjunction has been emphasized recently by Paul Clark (2008, 1–9), who comes to clear conclusions about the possibilities and impossibilities of artistic production in China during the Cultural Revolution. What remains to be probed, however, is the relationship between artistic production on the one hand and aesthetic experience on the other, for these, too, do not necessarily work on parallel planes. That is what this book attempts to do.

In theory, if one believes that cultural production during the Cultural Revolution was all in the hands of the Party, closely watched and regulated by adherence to Mao’s doctrine from the Yan’an Talks (Mao 1942), artistic production and artistic experience can be matched easily. If it were all “propaganda” in the commonsensical and negative understanding of the word, or nothing but “propaganda,” there would be one reading and one understanding: restrictive, repetitive, exclusive. Yet, this theoretical construction matches neither the material nor the experiential evidence. Says Wang Ban:

The simplest retort to this view is that literature and art created on the Yan’an principle nourished and fashioned a whole generation, or several generations of readers, who may think very differently from the detached critic. These readers did not see this brand of literature as propaganda when they first read it, and many of them were inspired by this literature to become enthusiastic participants in revolutionary movements. Even if we concede that Communist literature is propaganda, we still have to consider seriously why it worked—often effectively. (1997, 209–10)

Cultural Revolution Culture, which has repeatedly been declared an exceptional artistic culture that could but be denigrated and abhorred as “propaganda,” was (and is) in practice and experience liked and enjoyed by many. This book intends to dissolve this only seemingly paradoxical phenomenon—the central contradiction of the longevity of Cultural Revolution propaganda art.

Art as Propaganda

Goebbles is sent back at the gate of Heaven: he should go to hell. In order to incite him to go, Saint Peter allows him a gaze through a binocular. What Goebbles sees is a beautiful, elegantly decked-out bar with expensive drinks and smashing girls. When he finally arrives in hell, however, he finds something completely different. A place of horror, suffering, pain. Quite annoyed, he complains and asks whatever what he had seen was. The devil answers: “Propaganda.”

What this joke, popular in 1940s Germany, shows very clearly is that, at least to German ears, propaganda must be evil. It amounts to nothing but blatant lies and false pretense; it is manipulated

8. The joke is retold in Bussemer 2000, 133. Throughout this book, I have tried to provide links to studies on the propaganda cultures of other states and nations, but I cannot, for reasons of space, engage in a full-fl edged comparison with these other propaganda cultures. That is, however, part of a new research project.
and manipulative. The devil’s techniques are precisely those of withholding vital information, of invoking heuristic devices, and of using meaningless associations to prove a point (Jowett and O’Donnell 2006, 4). Whenever propaganda has an effect, it is bound to be negative, for an enthusiastic recipient of propaganda cannot but be deluded. A system creating propaganda is to be despised, and the times in which propaganda flourish are considered unhappy times, times that everybody hopes will quickly pass.

Taking all this at face value, it is unsettling that the propaganda from what can be considered one of the most tragic periods in Chinese history, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—linked closely to one important if not unambiguous figure in Chinese history, Mao Zedong—remains popular even today. The radical politics of the Cultural Revolution brought suffering and death to many, especially intellectuals. Nevertheless, the propaganda products from this time have not disappeared. For the Chinese public, Maoist propaganda art has been reconceived and modernized for decades now: it appears in the form of jubilee editions and Karaoke versions of the infamous model works, the eighteen ballets, operas, and symphonic works canonized during the Cultural Revolution (see Chapter 1); it appears in rock and pop versions of revolutionary songs in praise of Mao (see Chapter 2); it can take the form of trendy t-shirts, watches, Ping-Pong paddles, mousepads, and even porcelain (see Chapters 4–5). Indeed, Cultural Revolution propaganda objects decorate restaurants (not just in Beijing, but in London, too) and form the props for China’s growing wedding party industry. Taiwan, too, has recently begun to read the Little Red Book, and Sotheby’s intermittently offers to sell a “wide selection of Cultural Revolution relics,” describing Maoist propaganda art as “some of the most potent and fascinating propaganda art of the twentieth century.” Both inside and outside the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Maoist propaganda from the Cultural Revolution sells well across generational and class lines: even the successful business manager may now be turning back to read Mao’s writings for strategies of success.

How does one explain why a people will not reject outright the propaganda art of a time that for many of them conjures up painful memories, memories of torture and violence, of slander and treason, of psychological strain and terror, of madness and even death? Even for research purposes, it is not so easy to get hold of the propaganda films from Germany’s Nazi regime, but the propagandist model works from the Cultural Revolution are not only no longer restricted, but since the mid-1980s have been selling extremely well. In the last few years, ever-new formats and luxurious editions on VCD and DVD have emerged as their popularity continues to increase (Barmé 1996, 14). Television series and memorial publications narrate the stories of their actors, and internationally renowned stage directors such as Zhang Yimou 张艺谋 (1951–) venture revival performances of these pieces.

Why this is so is an extremely difficult question to answer. I came across it for the first time almost 20 years ago, when, while conducting research for my PhD dissertation (Mittler 1997), I interviewed some 60 Chinese composers from different generations and backgrounds. Many of

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11. This advertising phrase was used for a Sotheby auction in April 2001 (DACHS 2009 Sotheby I & II). It described its auction as follows: “This online auction features a collection of remarkable artifacts, carefully selected to reflect the range of objects used to disseminate the gospel of Chairman Mao. Highlights include Nixon/Mao Ping-Pong paddles in their original packaging, portrait busts and banners of the Communist leader, as well as two rare portrait medallions of Mao ostensibly fashioned from the wreckage of US fighter planes shot down over Vietnam” (Marsha Malinowski, Director of Online Auctions, Books, and Manuscripts).
12. DACHS 2009 Mao Cult.
them told stories that were vastly different from the textbook versions of Chinese history known to me then. They described the Cultural Revolution, in my mind a time of “grand propaganda,” not as a time of censorship and restrictions but of learning and discovery. Many of these composers had found their love for music during and through the Cultural Revolution. They had learned how to compose and to conduct as members of the propaganda troupes marching from village to village. Many of them had gotten to know the rich and varied traditions of Chinese folk music during this time, when intellectuals, urban youth, and students were sent to the countryside. They had seen what these folk traditions contained, quite beyond all “propaganda”: pornography, poetry, and much of the everyday. Many of them had learned to read during the Cultural Revolution, and they were reading not “just propaganda” works but so-called “black literature” by writers such as Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850) as well, not unlike the Chinese seamstress that Dai Sijie 戴思杰 (1954–) talks of in a recent book (Dai 2000). Some had (been) turned to philosophy during the Anti-Confucius Campaign in the early 1970s. Others had learned to write during the Cultural Revolution: even a “big-character poster” (大字报 dazibao), which was used for political propaganda and denunciation, was an exercise in calligraphy, they would argue. Said one writer: “During the Cultural Revolution a lot of people had very good calligraphy, because we were all writing big-character posters. Now students no longer know anything about calligraphy” (Female Writer, 1958–). Another supports her view: “My father actually was very good at writing big-character posters, with very big letters. He was a good calligrapher. Often, he would actually copy big-character posters, just because of the calligraphy, and then he would ask me what they were all about” (Museum Curator, 1950s–).

None of the composers interviewed in 1992, and not one from the group of interviewees I met in the early 2000s, would condemn Cultural Revolution propaganda art outright. Many of them sang and performed for me extracts from the model works, revolutionary songs, or “loyalty dances” (忠字舞 zhongziwu), often with a smile, seldom with irony, even less contempt. They would proudly show me old black-and-white photographs of themselves and their friends posing with dramatic gestures. Many even argued that their most important experiences during the Cultural Revolution were these many different intellectual and cultural activities, most of which amounted to propaganda. One interviewee, an artist born in 1954, remembers: “Sure, I would have painted and drawn as long as I live, but without the propaganda troupes, many of us would not have turned into artists. The propaganda troupes brought art and artists into people’s consciousness.” He continues: “My older brother was a great influence on me; he plays the violin. Of course, we did not play that well; we just played. But indeed, many of the now-famous musicians and artists used to be in those propaganda troupes. It was a real opportunity. Of course, the contents were all politics, but you could also learn how to play the violin or to paint, it was all “to serve politics” (为政治服务 wei zhengzhi fuwu), but still, it was painting, so I painted a lot in the Anti-Confucius Campaign, for example, caricatures and all” (Artist, 1954–).

13. Loyalty dances were dances in which one formed the character 忠 for loyalty (see Chapter 4). For short explanatory descriptions of each of these genres, see Wenge shiqi guaishi guaiyu 1988, 259–60.
14. An artist couple, she (born 1959) with working class background, he (born 1954) with intellectual background, would remember this as follows: She: "I had a good throat, so in the school I would sing the role of Aqingsao [from the revolutionary opera The Village [沙家浜 Shajiabang]. Both this and the model opera The Red Lantern [红灯记 Hongdengji] were performed in our school." He recalled: “The most important experiences we had during this Cultural Revolution were all these cultural activities.”
15. See also the interview with a male China historian, born 1957, who said, “The interesting thing was that so many people actually learned how to play an instrument during that time.” Andrews 1994, 315, supports this point when she argues that the Cultural Revolution's "rejection of professionalism in science and economics pushed many ambitious young people into the arts. Finally, its populist emphasis expanded the practice of official painting to regions of China that had previously produced little art. Government cultural and personnel policies thus produced an artistic pool of unprecedented breadth and talent."
The way they dealt with this difficult past was so different from what I had known as a German dealing with the Nazi past that I began to doubt the “basic axiom” that propaganda must always be evil. In this book, I attempt to understand the effects of Chinese revolutionary propaganda art, which is an art that is completely political, completely manipulative, and completely teleological, but, nevertheless, extremely popular in all of its meanings. As I try to make sense of this fact, I consider Chinese revolutionary propaganda art originating in the Cultural Revolution from the point of view of its longue durée: Cultural Revolution propaganda art did not appear out of the blue, but has a long pre- and post-history that can be traced from the late nineteenth and into the early twenty-first centuries. Taking the long view makes it easier to understand the enormous effects of this propaganda. Looking at the Cultural Revolution not as a period of “cultural stagnation” that lasted from 1966 to 1976 (this now-official chronology in itself is debatable), but examining instead the longue durée of propaganda art, even disregarding the political and institutional divide of 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) began to rule all of mainland China, I attempt an alternative way of conceptualizing modern Chinese cultural history that will be, in addition, a cultural history of production and reception.

In this study, then, the propaganda art from the Cultural Revolution is to be seen as one development in the broader attempt to create a new but Chinese modern art and culture. It is in fact not the exception but the norm in cultural production in modern and revolutionary China, that is, throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. Many of its contents have been communicated for generations, surviving even social and political changes and revolutions. They appear in a variety of media, can be physically experienced in propaganda events, and thus form time-resistant semantic units that become important and structuring elements in a collective cultural memory: they are, in a term coined by Rainer Gries, “propagemes.”

The Cultural Revolution was a pivotal moment, congealing particular revolutionary propagemes in Chinese cultural memory. During the Cultural Revolution, these propagemes—such as revolutionary songs in praise of Mao (what I have termed “MaoMusic”), Mao’s portrait (which I will refer to as “MaoArt”), or his writings (for which I have adapted Apter & Saich’s [1994] term “MaoSpeak”)—would be considered first and foremost as persuasive communication techniques and thus as political versions of advertising, just as “popular” as advertising must be. Recalls one businesswoman about painting Mao’s portrait: “We would paint his image all over the place on any wall, anywhere. Those paintings were just like advertisements today; this was their function” (Businesswoman, 1940s–). Both advertising and propaganda focus on the formation of a community, prescribe a particular lifestyle, and model particular rituals, all in order to make the product part and parcel of the consumers’ everyday experience (Marschik 1997, 219). This is precisely what happens with propaganda art in China: the propagemes significant in Cultural Revolution propaganda have been interpreted and reinterpreted so many times that these interpretations and reinterpretations by a long series of communicators begin to form long-lived narratives. This book analyzes a number of these narratives in order to show how the propagemes became part of Chinese everyday life and how they may even have become resistant against newly

16. In Hung 2011, the idea that revolutionary culture as produced after 1949 was new but could build on existing models is well taken: “Liberation” in 1949 certainly puts a new quality (and a further manipulation and expansion as well as a stiffening of rules) to revolutionary culture and lifts it onto a new level. Yet, it also does not break entirely with many developments that began long before 1949.
18. Schönhals 1999, 744. I return to this question of periodization in the Conclusion.
20. Gries 2005, 22–24. Gries defines “propageme” as follows: “Contents of propaganda, rhetorical markers, markers with political content, and more or less complex narratives which have been repeatedly and successfully communicated to a target group for a longer period of time, probably across generational borders and across political and social systems, through the mass media” (2005, 13, 34).
hatched propaganda: one example of this phenomenon at work may be the attempts in the early 1980s to tear down some of the Mao statues in Chinese cities and public arenas. These attempts were met with extremely strong resistance by the Chinese public. The long-lived nature of the propagandes and their concentration during the Cultural Revolution explain their obvious impact to the present day and make it necessary to research them in detail. Thus, a study of Cultural Revolution propaganda and its diverse functions, both positive and negative, can contribute to a history of modern Chinese society at large (Gries 2005, 28).

In this Introduction, I will make a few more general statements about propaganda art (here understood simply as art that propagates a particular political line), and I provide scents which will be fleshed out in different senses in the chapters to follow. I argue that the Chinese audience has dealt with propaganda from the Cultural Revolution in a way that vacillates between a “deluded” and “passive” reception on the one hand and a “parasitic” and “subversive” one on the other (see [Subjective] Receptions of Propaganda). In many cases, it seems, the political content of propaganda art has had little or no influence on its reception. In other words, the political message is not immediately relevant to an audience's liking or disliking a piece of propaganda art. I argue, on the other hand, that it is the particular form propaganda art takes that has been crucial to its success; in Cultural Revolution propaganda, popular genres as well as select genres from the canon of high art have been chosen for particular effect (see [Objective] Forms of Propaganda). In this section of the Introduction, I also hint at a factor illustrated throughout this book: it is not just the longevity of propaganda art but, even more importantly, the context within which it appeared that is crucial to its success. Quite a bit else, apart from propaganda art, was performed and experienced during the Cultural Revolution years, even though this was not officially acknowledged. This is extremely important for the reception of Cultural Revolution propaganda art, because the idea that it was the only artistic food that China received for ten years is mistaken. This point is obvious when researching the material evidence, and it is prominent in the interviews, all of which stress restriction and variety at the same time. It is only in combination with its many unofficial alternatives that official propaganda art became effective. Whether this was part of an official strategy or a sign of the (politically determined) anarchism prevalent during the Cultural Revolution is difficult to tell, but in the end the Party's ability (and willingness) to control cultural production during the Cultural Revolution was far less pervasive and absolute than is widely assumed. In spite of all its efforts, the Party never reached the level of a mega-machine eliminating all that was unwanted and disagreeable.

(Subjective) Receptions of Propaganda

Wang Ban, who was a youth during the Cultural Revolution, remembers, somewhat bashfully, his experiences with Cultural Revolution propaganda art:

The embarrassment comes from an experience with a Chinese film entitled Spring Sprouts. Made during the Cultural Revolution, the film is propaganda. It depicts the power struggle of the political lines at its most bombastic and distasteful, but I was moved to tears by its high-flown drama. I believe millions of Chinese had a similar experience with other forms of propaganda if not with this particular film. Looking back, one is at a loss whether to laugh or cry. This may seem sheer folly now, but it was not folly [then]. (1997, viii)

In Jacques Ellul's classic 1965 definition, propaganda is "a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of

21. A comic version of the film, Chunmiao, is discussed below in Chapter 6.
individuals . . . unified through psychological manipulation” (1965, 61). Although this definition has since been developed further, one of the common elements in nearly all of the more commonsensical conceptions of propaganda can be derived from it: the idea that propaganda is manipulative make-belief, the “catch-all for suspicious rhetoric” (Jowett and O’Donnell 2006, 3) as it brings about participation—active or passive—implicitly, against one’s will. Propaganda reduces the recipient to reflex reactions: s/he is manipulated, even forced to do what the propagandist says, and every (re)action is foreordained and planned in minute detail (Bussemer 2000, v). Wang Ban’s unease or even shame at his emotional, if not enthusiastic, reception of a propaganda film during the Cultural Revolution illustrates precisely this assumption that to be touched by propaganda is to have succumbed to manipulation.

And yet, the reception of Cultural Revolution propaganda does not accord with a “reflex model.” This propaganda is being enjoyed and hated, debated and destroyed, but it is also being played with and parodied. It is itself manipulated in people’s reactions to it and their reenactments of it. There are jokes on citations from the Little Red Book (see Chapter 4) and the model works, there are talk and quiz shows featuring memorized quotes from Mao’s works and the model works, there is advertising and art reproducing and remodeling Cultural Revolution propaganda (see Chapters 1, 4, and 5), and there are new versions of Cultural Revolution images and texts in which model heroes are recontextualized to serve, for example, the fight against SARS (ill. 0.1). Today, model heroes may be presented in personalized (sexual) fantasies, as in Wang Yigang’s 王易罡 (1961–) oil painting entitled Yang Zirong (杨子荣) (2002), for example (ill. 0.2).

The image juxtaposes one of the main heroes from the model works (in fact not Yang Zirong from the revolutionary opera Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy (智取威虎山 Zhiqu weihushan), as the title suggests, but Hong Changqing 洪常青 from the model ballet Red Detachment of Women) with the face of a beautiful woman and symbols of marriage (the sign for double happiness) and female sexual maturity: when the peony, the sign of female maidenhood seen in this image, begins to bloom, so traditional lore has it, it is picked by the young man (Eberhard 1986, 232). The fact that the hero is, consciously or not, mislabeled becomes part of the images’ irreverence. The enigmatic writing connects it with other paintings in the same series, all of which juxtapose commodities (Chinese cloth patterns and symbols) with elements from Chinese propaganda art and sexually provocative images of women’s bodies. The words read 微露主义永放光芒, roughly translated as “A dogma of small revelations will always send out its rays,” suggesting a mocking reading of Cultural Revolution propaganda art, which features, time and again, the rays of Mao the sun and his “revelations” (see Chapters 2, 4, and 5). With this in mind, it appears even more ironic that the painter of this image, Wang Yigang, should teach at the Lu Xun Academy of Arts 鲁迅艺术学院, the cradle of Chinese propaganda art.

The question, then, appears to be less “What does propaganda do to the people?” than “What do people do to propaganda?” Certainly, there is not just one possible reading of propaganda, otherwise the anti-Nazi film Why We Fight, released in 1942 by the U.S. government and directed by Frank Capra (1897–1991), would not have worked. Capra’s film reproduces authentic material from Nazi propaganda films, most prominently among them Leni Riefenstahl’s (1902–2003) Triumph des Willens, without introducing a single new scene. According to Capra, every propaganda image can serve as its own anti-propaganda piece as well: every propaganda image can be read affirmatively or subversively (Bussemer 2000, 135).

And this is certainly true for Cultural Revolution propaganda. Although it was taken for granted that most members of a select audience would recognize familiar symbols and would react

23. On some of the artist’s own websites, “small revelations” is translated into the very unidiomatic “little appearances.” See DACHS 2009 Wang Yigang Contemporary Art.
to them in a predictable way, no experienced propagandist could in fact expect to be able to control all of his audience all the time (Qualter 1985, 123). Accordingly, in spite of all the propagandists’ efforts to deliver the one and only meaning through performances of their model works, for example, they would be “misread” constantly—whether consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or by mistake. A sent-down youth relates one such incident, which followed the performance of a model ballet in his village:

Once we had this really funny situation. We took everybody to see the ballet White-Haired Girl [白毛女 Baimaonü]. When we came back we had a meeting and talked to everyone about what they felt about the model work. This old peasant said: “But Xi'er, really, is not a good person, how come she can be the heroine?” Everybody was quite shocked at his remark and asked why he thought so. He said: “Someone who hits an old man like she does [in a scene where her former landlord comes to the temple where she has hidden, see ill. 6.16] simply cannot be a good person.” It was too scary. He really thought she was no good. This shows very clearly that the peasants were somehow faced with this new art, and it bewildered them: they did not understand things at all. (Intellectual, 1955–)

The old man’s subjective interpretation of the propaganda piece was derived from traditional moral values, which would demand that age be respected. Even though the elderly man in the model ballet, Huang Shiren 黄世仁, is marked by all kinds of devices (his name, dress, gesture, face color, accompanying music, all of which will be discussed in Chapters 1 and 6) as an evil landlord and a negative character, these markers have escaped the old man’s attention.

Propaganda’s message, then, no matter how hard it tries, is never univalent. Take the phrase “Be resolute, fear no sacrifice, and surmount every difficulty to win victory” (下定决心, 不怕牺牲, 排除万难, 去争取胜利) from Chapter 19 in Mao’s Little Red Book, from the story of the “Foolish Old Man”愚公 who manages, in spite of everyone’s skepticism, to move two mountains blocking the front entrance to his house. As will be seen in Chapter 4, every imaginable obstacle is successfully undone in Cultural Revolution propaganda art using this phrase. The phrase is helpful in overcoming sandstorms, deep waters, and difficult mathematics exercises, as well as nasty imperialists. One of its most spectacular uses is in the revolutionary opera Song of the Dragon River (龙江颂 Longjiangsong) (scene 5): a dike has broken and the peasants now form a human wall to make repair works possible (ill. 0.3).

Beating the waters in breathtaking acrobatic moves, they chant Mao’s phrase at the same time.

The quote has also been turned into a quotation dance (语录舞 yuluwu). Two artists showed me how to dance it. Yet, they could not decide among themselves whether the citation was, after all, effective or not:
He: “We would sing ‘Be resolute,’ the quotation song 语录歌 yuluge [songs based on quotations by Mao], for example. Everybody can sing this, and everybody of course knows that it is taken from one of Mao’s Three Constantly Read Articles [老三篇 Lao sanpian].” She: “But we did not quite believe what these stories told us. They did not really give us support.” He: “Yes, of course, they did. For example, when I was performing ballet [one of the model works, the Red Detachment of Women], this quotation would keep me going when I was tired.” (Artist Couple; He, 1954–, She, 1959–)

Many others echoed their ambiguous response. One remembers that he felt too manipulated to remember for the quote to actually become effective:

We had to read the story of the Foolish Old Man, and the sentence “Be resolute” and learn it by heart. So we had this pressure to learn, which is why we felt quite obstinate and opposed 反感 fan’gan to it. This is why it did not really become part of our own thinking: I was influenced quite strongly, I feel, but since I had to read it, it did not really impress my own thoughts that much. (Intellectual, 1955–)

Another, by contrast, attests to the importance of Mao’s stories, that of the Foolish Old Man especially and “Be resolute” in particular, whenever he felt tired, although he, too, appears to have been somewhat annoyed at the many obligations to use the quote during the Cultural Revolution.

My life has been influenced quite a bit by Mao’s thoughts. The Three Constantly Read Articles are telling you to “Serve the People” [为人民服务 wei renmin fuwu]. And this in itself is just like Christian or Buddhist thought, a kind of old faith, even a religion. You should not pay too much attention to yourself: that is what it says. Those Three Constantly Read Articles, the stories of the “Foolish Old Man Who Moved Mountains” [愚公移山 Yugong yi shan], of Zhang Side [张思德 1915–44] and of Norman Bethune [白求恩 Bai Qiu’ en 1890–1939], these are really good stories. We remember them even now. Back then, we all knew them by heart. I had read these stories in middle school, long before the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s writings are really important. Quotations like “Be resolute!” [下定决心 xiading juexin], yes, I would often use them. I remember situations in which I was very tired and really felt bad, and then, I said to myself, “Be resolute!” As for the loyalty dances and all that, I did not feel opposed to these things [反感 fan’gan], no, none of that! It was just a bit too repetitive, perhaps, because we had to sing the quotation songs all the time. We simply did not have the choice; that was the problem. It was too restricted. Mao wanted to restrict everyone’s heart to loving the Communist Party! That was a bit too much.... (Musician, 1942–)

Again, these are very obviously subjective interpretations of propaganda art. Thus, the idea that propaganda art is totalistic in its univalence and forces its audience to interpret it in one and one way only must be questioned. Propaganda during the Cultural Revolution was not simply received in a reflex reaction, neither was it only used parasitically or subversively, but the reality was more a mixture of both (Bussemer 2000, 135). The audience responded as it did with all artistic products: everybody in his/her own way, critically as well as creatively, and most importantly, in a participatory manner. It is crucial to the experience of Cultural Revolution Culture that its propaganda art was not just received and reacted to, but it was formed and enacted by its audience. China’s revolutionary propaganda culture was meant to mobilize average people, to give them a chance to participate in discussions and to create their own works of art: quotations songs, loyalty dances, portraits of revolutionary heroes, and the like. This populist streak released the energy and creativity of portions of the population against the atrophy of the Party bureaucracy and elitism.

24. His view was refuted by others who said that if one did not like to participate it was always possible to escape. See the interview quotes in Chapter 4.
25. This is the title of another of the Three Constantly Read Articles, discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.
Many propaganda campaigns thus ended up not depriving but enriching people’s lived experiences by offering access to new forms of art and knowledge.

One such example is the Anti-Confucius Campaign (or the Campaign to “Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” 批林批孔 Pi Lin pi Kong) of the early 1970s (discussed in Chapter 3). This campaign criticized Confucius and the so-called feudal age, and it found a contemporary target in Party leader Lin Biao 林彪 (1907–71), who was accused of having had couplets from the Confucian Analects 毛氏 ABC 挂在床头. Lin had been Minister of Defense and designated successor to Mao but had had a falling out with the Chairman after a coup he had allegedly planned against him was discovered. Lin’s life ended in a deadly flight to Mongolia in 1971. The Campaign to “Criticize Lin Biao and Confucius” issued official orders for millions of people, including factory workers and peasants, to read the Confucian Classics. Yet, they would be thinking whatever they wanted to think, no matter what the propaganda messages were saying. One would take the criticisms for black humor (Journalist, 1946–). Another would say: “I did not believe in any of the criticisms. Of course, it was not all that clear to me, then. But I just thought their logic was really not logical at all 他们的道理没有道理” (Historian, 1957–). A third would be so fed up with criticisms in general that he would refuse to listen:

During the Anti-Confucius Campaign, we no longer believed in the propaganda media. Although the idea was to criticize Confucius, it is well possible that during this movement some people read Confucius and learned some of the Confucian morals by doing so. But we, a group of friends and myself, we were not like that. We just did not believe in these stupid criticisms anymore. (Playwright, 1956–)

Indeed, quite a few of my interviewees were critical of bashing Confucius. This did not mean they began to like the Classics, however. One remembers:

Since 1949 there had not been much teaching in the Classics. If we read old-style poems, they were those by Mao. As for the Three Character Classic [三字经 Sanzijing], I read it when it was criticized. The same with Confucius, Mencius [孟子 372–289 BCE]…. I thought the criticism was stupid, but I also did not like the books themselves. (Writer, 1958–)

While quite a few were doubtful about the effects of the movement on the general public, others recalled that they learned a great deal:

During the Anti-Confucius Campaign we would study a lot of original material, reading all these political criticisms along with it. The official take was, of course, very biased. We did not know much about these Confucian texts. Now, we knew what kind of a person Confucius had been, what his life had been like. I am not someone who does philosophy… but because of this movement, one would have to study these things. I wonder whether the children at the time were interested in this, however, and influenced by the campaign. They had never even read the Three Character Classic, nor less the Four Books [四书 Sishu]. They might have come across some things from the Three Character Classic, like its famous beginning lines about the goodness of human nature [人之初性本善],26 they might even have known some Confucian thoughts in their everyday lives, but really, I think, this movement did not change [people’s minds] very much. In spite of the criticism, people continued to teach their children Confucian thoughts and the Sanzijing. The campaign did not really matter. (Guqin Player, 1940s–)

Many of these views are ambiguous, then: in spite of the strong official criticism of Confucian texts, some read them defiantly. At the same time, some expressed uncertainty whether younger

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26. For this passage and its significance in Cultural Revolution discourse, see Chapter 3.
introduction: nose—smells

generations would have had a similar experience. Another interviewee, some fifteen years younger and thus a child at the time of the campaign, shares this pessimism about the “educational effect” of the movement:

The classical Confucian canon, the Four Books and the Five Classics [四书五经 Sishu wujing], had become some kind of a forbidden fruit at the time. I never would have even dreamed of actually reading from it. And during the Anti-Confucius Campaign, too, it was presented just in bits and pieces; never did we read the whole. We did not know enough about these texts. As for this movement serving to popularize the Classics . . . I really think this should not be exaggerated. Although some people studied the Classics in detail, the majority were just confronted with one quote and then asked to criticize it. In these big struggle sessions, people generally got to know no more of the Three Character Classic, say, than the beginning, the passage about human nature being good. So there was not a great influence on people generally. Of course, there were quite a lot of specialists and professionals involved in writing these criticisms. They had to really study the texts, but for the others, there was no need to do this . . . . The influence on society generally was negligible, however. (Intellectual, 1955–)

However much local and individual experience may have differed, it is clear that despite the superficial presentation of the Confucian heritage to the general public during the campaign, as well as scant prior knowledge of this heritage in the younger generation, interest in and understanding of ancient Chinese literature and philosophy was nevertheless kindled in some. For them, the propaganda campaign had a reverse effect from what its creators/initiators intended. One interviewee remembers:

This movement was critical of Confucius, true, but since before that movement we had not actually read any Confucian stuff, it was through this movement that we learned how important Confucius actually was . . . we were blind, then, of course, but somehow I did not think he was really all that bad. (Artist, 1954–)

This view is echoed by a university professor (mid-1950s–): “The Anti-Confucius Campaign actually made us study these pieces. At that time I did believe the criticism. But on the other hand, I would also read the Confucian writings and sometimes thought, hey, that is actually quite true, and to have this kind of thought could not be forbidden.” Another remembers, also quite positively:

I participated in the movement; it was quite interesting. We got to talk about history. Mao wanted us to all study history and I actually became interested in history because of that. . . . The discussions were very exciting, even more exciting than now, in a way, because everybody had to participate! We criticized and studied the stuff at the same time. But even while we criticized, we would realize that there is something valuable in all that, too. (Historian, 1957–)

The most telling example of the “educational effect” this movement had on some is a man who later became the director of one of the most important research institutions in China. The son of peasant parents, both of whom were illiterate, he would never have been able to attend school, much less study Chinese history and philology, had it not been for the Anti-Confucius Campaign when, as a member of one of the criticism groups made up of laymen and specialists, he received his training in the Classics, (Historian, 1949–). An illiterate peasant boy thus became a renowned scholar by means of an iconoclastic propaganda movement, and his is not a singular case. This may or may not have been the unintended effect of propaganda in modern China. It points to the ever-renewable reserve of agency and creativity in Cultural Revolution Culture itself. Cultural Revolution (and perhaps all) propaganda was received and experienced in many different, and often contradictory, ways by individuals from different generations and backgrounds. There was incessant activity among artists involved in the production of works of art for propaganda, to be
sure, but agency falls on the receiving end as well, where people were not always just frightened and restrained but also vibrant, pluralistic, and creative.

(Objective) Forms of Propaganda

Why was Cultural Revolution propaganda as it was enacted enjoyed as well as endured, liked as well as disliked? Why did Cultural Revolution propaganda not evoke more resistance? I suggest three possible answers to this question and give more detailed examples for each of these below. First, propaganda art was the most prevalent, but by no means the exclusive fare, of what one could hear, see, or watch during the Cultural Revolution. It was effective because it appeared as a dominant and constantly repeated element in a spectrum that was officially restricted but that, unofficially, allowed for quite a lot of variation. In terms of the population, propaganda art gave the people in the countryside, for example, more regular opportunities to experience cultural performances than ever before (or after) makeshift stagings of films, theatricals, and music; the sent-down youth, and artistic troupes formed by them and others, too, served as (propagandistic) educators. Propaganda art, then, was successful because, in conjunction with non-official sources of art that would (continue to) circulate, it could enrich the everyday cultural experience of the average Chinese person. Despite the repressive lid of ideological constraints, the Cultural Revolution allowed for a vibrant, creative, and interpretative energy to be brought to life through a vast range of enactments and activities.

Second, it is significant that propaganda art made use of some of the most popular art forms such as Beijing Opera and peasant painting, in addition to selecting genres from high art such as ballet dancing or oil painting, artistic forms which were then popularized. It was this variety and the particular choice of genres favored by different groups in the population that helped make this art acceptable, while structurally, as I will show, it also contained quite a few of the elements characteristic of popular culture.

Third, and this is connected to the second point, the propaganda art of the Cultural Revolution was not an invention of the Cultural Revolution but made use of long-established predecessors that had been circulating for many decades. Almost all of the model works can be traced back to earlier versions. Mao portraits came to prominence at the latest during the Zunyi Conference in the mid-1930s; political comics and anti-Confucius campaigns, too, had their roots in the early Republican era, as far back as the 1910s. In terms of techniques, the filmed model works employ methods from 1930s commercial films, especially the so-called Southerners. Propaganda posters were painted by those who once created the famous yuefenpai (月份牌), large-scale advertising posters featuring Chinese beauties that were sold as trademarked calendars. Li Mubai 李慕白 (1913–91), a prominent artist of the successful Shanghai Zhiying Studio 稚英画室, became an extremely productive painter of propaganda posters (continuing to paint, essentially, the same genre of painting) in the 1950s and early 1960s, as did Jin Meisheng 金梅生 (1902–89), another of the more famous calendar painters. In the words of Ellen Laing: “Under the new regime, those who once made their living designing advertisements for commodities or services now drafted posters promoting socialist ideology. Thus, the type of realism perfected for 1920s and 1930s...
advertisement pictures did not disappear after 1949, rather it endured as the dominant style for brightly colored placards selling optimistic socialist and political themes” (2004, 224).

Cultural Revolution propaganda thus referred back to a long history of “pre-propaganda” (Ellul 1965, 15), and this contributed to its enormous success during and after the Cultural Revolution. Although attitudes do not immediately “change with the initial stimulus of some new information” (Qualter 1985, 81), the propagemes that mark the Cultural Revolution had become so deeply rooted in cultural memory long before 1966 that it would not have been easy to eradicate them even then, much less after the Cultural Revolution. This, too, is one reason for their continuing popularity.

**Variety and Availability: Art as Education**

It is a common assumption that the Cultural Revolution was a period of unprecedented cultural stagnation. Eight so-called model works (样板戏 yangbanxi) are taken as paradigmatic for the whole of Cultural Revolution Culture (Chapter 1), and these model works are condemned as an aberration in terms of aesthetic and cultural development. And yet, the idea that the Cultural Revolution was simply an atypical phase of political extremism, distinct from the years before and after this “unfortunate period,” is misleading, especially in terms of artistic production and reception. The notion that Cultural Revolution Culture produced nothing but the “eight model plays” (a phrase for the model works used ironically in Wang 1997, 196, cited above) is historically inaccurate. Although during the Cultural Revolution all artistic production was subject to extreme political regimentation, and only certain correct colors, forms, and sounds were officially acceptable, it turns out that there was a substantive difference between what was officially acceptable and what was freely available.

One artist, born in 1954, mentioned that he regularly played the *Butterfly Lovers Violin Concerto* 梁山伯與祝英台, a romantic piece based on local operatic tunes and composed in 1959 by Chen Gang 陈刚 (1935–) and He Zhanhao 何占豪 (1933–). The piece was officially condemned during the Cultural Revolution because it told a story based on romantic, individual love, not love for the Party and the Communist cause. Quite apparently, what was true for music (see Chapters 1 and 2) in terms of restrictions and their enactment was true for literature as well (see Chapters 4 and 6).

One journalist, born in 1946, remembers that she would read traditional stories in the form of comics during the early years of the Cultural Revolution:

*I read all these traditional comics, although they were no longer published by then. As for the revolutionary comics, I did not read them; they were not that nice [不好看 bu hao kan]. Also, they were the only thing one was officially allowed to read, so this was quite boring [单调 dandiao].* (Journalist, 1946–)

A younger historian (1958–) would remember veritable “reading orgies” with stolen books: “We (especially the Red Guards) stole books in the library and then we would exchange these books, reading them in secret: we felt so great when we did it, but also a bit scared.”

Another model work was available in 1966; during the rest of the Cultural Revolution, another ten works were added to the set. See the discussion of this stubborn misconception in Chapter 1.

31. For further examples, see the quotes at the beginning of the Prologue to Part II.
remembers that he and his friends whiled away their time as sent-down youth in the countryside copying poems:

I would copy all of these poems. A lot of my friends, too, would do that. This was around 1972/73. I would actually copy two or three books full of poems. This would make you forget your difficulties: in your mind, you had these poems. In a book on memoirs by sent-down youths that I have read, there is a very interesting story that deals with Mendelssohn: the sent-down youth in the story really believes in Mendelssohn. He is like me writing these poems; he works in the fields and at the same time, he is thinking of all this romantic music. He talks about how he can forget everything when he thinks of this beautiful music: this is exactly like me. This type of situation is probably quite common. (Language Instructor, mid-1950s–)

There were those who watched foreign films (Librarian, 1950s–), others who listened to the Beatles, and almost every (sent-down) youth would carry his or her collection of 200 Famous Foreign Songs (外国名歌二百首) with them. One such sent-down youth gives a very comprehensive description of various cultural activities in the countryside:

This understanding of China as insular during the Cultural Revolution is total nonsense. There were all these international fashions that we were involved in: the Beatles, or singing the 200 Famous Foreign Songs. My sister would teach me all that, we would sing Malaysian folk songs, too, basically anything sentimental. I read Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer then. I was starting to learn English. Someone had given me a simplified version. Indeed, I remember reading quite well, because there was no electricity.

When we were in the Northeast, you could only work six months of the year; during the other six months, it was so cold that you could not do anything. So we were reading tons of novels, all shipped from Beijing. We would bring them with us, and there was a big exchange going on: we read all these French or Russian novels. Everybody was reading this stuff, even in English, indeed, about half of my mother's library was taken by my brother. He loved Wuthering Heights, for example. So we would come home to visit, and then we would take books back. We could not take back records or music, so there was no music in the countryside, except singing. This is perhaps why we developed such a passion for singing: everybody sang. . . . The peasants loved our singing, and we sang everything for them. I will never forget one brilliant evening, with so many stars, when we were sitting around, playing our guitar and our harmonica and accordion and singing along. The next day, a peasant came and said it was the best singing he had ever heard in his life. (University Professor, mid-1950s–)

Cultural life, then, was quite varied, both in the cities and in the countryside, and contained a mixture of Chinese and foreign elements. One historian (born in 1949) who had grown up in the countryside, the child of illiterate peasants, mentioned the regular visit of a storyteller:

In the countryside, there were quite a few storytellers. They would come around and stay for five to eight days or so. They did this and there were no restrictions, nobody interfered. So it is not really true to say that all of China's tradition was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Because China is so big, it was not possible to actually control everything and know exactly what was going on. You could perform all kinds of things, and nobody would know it. Often there were blind men as storytellers. The whole activity was organized by the village; they gave him a place to stay and eat, etc. Nobody interfered. Tradition had not been broken off then; they simply could not manage to do that.

What these examples illustrate is that official attempts to manipulate (and thus delimit) precisely the choice of cultural resources available during the Cultural Revolution (a fact constantly

32. He refers to Zou 1998, 156–60.
mentioned—with regret—in the interviews), were not entirely successful. Officially, in the years between 1965 and 1971, traditional themes and techniques in opera, literature, comics, and painting as well as foreign “capitalist” or “revisionist” art were no longer readily available (that is, for sale and in officially sanctioned open performance). This situation only changed with the beginning of Ping-Pong diplomacy in the early 1970s. Foreign orchestras were now allowed to travel to China again, and many an artist specializing in traditional painting styles and condemned in the early years of the Cultural Revolution was asked to come back from his re-educational sojourns in the countryside to create “Hotel Art” (旅馆艺术) (see Chapter 5): works for foreign guests who should be impressed with the exquisite qualities of traditional Chinese culture.

Yet, although there were harsh restrictions on the propagated official culture throughout the Cultural Revolution, manifold local and private cultures continued to exist both in urban settings and in the countryside. These have yet to garner enough attention in the scholarly literature, but they are nevertheless testimony to an important form of reciprocal learning and, as such, they stand as a significant backdrop for the experience of Cultural Revolution propaganda art. One sent-down youth remembers the Shanxi countryside as follows:

There was a lot of music performed in the countryside—local operas [地方戏 difangxi] as well as folk songs [民歌 min’ge]. In the early years of the Cultural Revolution, people did not sing the folk songs so openly because of their content: Love and sex and these kinds of things were not supposed to be there. So they would just create new words for a song and make it into a revolutionary song. I really feel that it is too bad that I did not record these songs. The Shanxi folk song is a very old form. And I would never have known anything about these songs had I not been there, so really, not only did we teach the peasants, the peasants also taught us a lot. We ourselves would not be so arrogant to say we really “transmitted culture” to them, but in fact, for example, if we go back tomorrow, they would still remember who said what back then, some 30 years ago now! When I was there, I had bought this harmonica, and I also played the violin. Once I did it, an old peasant woman would come out and say: now this instrument sounds so much better than the other. I was just playing my violin with no teacher, so, of course, it did not sound all that great, but still, she heard a difference! In the countryside, I would play whatever, they did not know what I was playing. (Intellectual, 1955–)

His memories, and his description of mutual learning, tally quite closely with those of two interviewees sent to the Northeast, although their evaluation of what they learned from the peasants differs slightly:

We were a great influence on the peasants. Of course it depends from what point of view you are looking at it. They would sing, for example, they had this special Northeastern type of melody. To the present day, I still remember this atmosphere [气 qi] and all that. On the other hand, they would listen to the model works and all of these songs that we brought with us and that influence on them, in turn, was quite deep, too. (Husband, 1950s–)

It was very seldom that we would watch films, but we were actually faced with the culture that was there, in the countryside. There was a propaganda team [宣传队 xuanchuandui], too. They would perform the model works and revolutionary songs and all that. But most of the cultural activities were really organized by us youths. We sang extracts from revolutionary compositions, like the Long March Suite [长征组歌]. And we made quotation songs. In all this, we were kind of the teachers for the people in the countryside. And we would introduce all these new thoughts and ideas to the children of the peasants. We would teach them the songs and all that. Their education actually improved because they had these students from the cities [as their teachers]. Their world view was broadened because of us. Yes, their consciousness was really broadened. Of course, we did not really have proper teaching materials, but there was all this revolutionary material that we could use. Anyway, they did not have
any of the special knowledge from the cities. It was really useful for them. I actually taught them [the children] music and how to sing. They did not teach us anything; we taught them everything. Of course, the old people sang folk songs, so-called mountain songs [山歌 shan‘ge] for us, for example. I never saw a performance of local opera there, however. Indeed, most of the performances were put on by us for them. (University Professor, mid-1950s–)

These memories by sent-down youths are matched by those of a China historian (1949–), who had grown up with peasant parents in the countryside: “In our village there were very few people who could read and write, and the sent-down youths actually taught us. They also danced and sang, so the cultural aspect was also positive. So, for the youngsters in the village, myself included, this was really good. These youths, they brought some comics, also some translations, so you could get these things from them. And they really understood something about music, too, so we would sing together.” According to this evidence, it appears that cultural life during the Cultural Revolution was not “all of the same kind.” In the words of one interviewee who is an artist today: “You can say a lot of bad things about the Cultural Revolution, but in terms of culture, there was a lot to be offered and learned” (Artist, 1954–).

There was quite a lot out there, then, apart from the official propaganda art, and furthermore, official propaganda art served to introduce both popular and high art forms to those who had never been exposed to them before: however superficial their impressions may have been, through propaganda art, urban youth learned about Beijing and local operas; peasants, on the other hand, learned about ballet and symphonic music.33 There may have been skepticism and misunderstanding, but propaganda art helped to broaden the horizons of both urbanites and peasants. One sent-down youth remembers:

[The symphonic version of] Shajia Village [沙家浜 Shajiabang] had the effect of bringing people in the countryside into contact with symphonic music. When I was in the countryside, I also experienced how a piano was carried to the fields, for a performance of the Red Lantern [红灯记 Hong Dengji]. But from my point of view and from the artistic standpoint, in the end, there was not a lot of exchange. The peasants were not told, “This is a symphonic orchestra,” or “This is a ballet.” But of course, when they would not understand, they would ask. (Intellectual, 1955–)

Propaganda and Pop: Art for Entertainment

The cultural experience of the Cultural Revolution, both through the official propaganda art and through the unofficial clandestine spread of other forms of art to and from the countryside, could thus be educational. To some, it was entertaining, too:

We had lots of opportunities in these propaganda troupes. When we went to the countryside, our connection with the peasants was very good. The leaders wanted us to learn from the peasants, and we did learn some things. But not that much. I for one just painted and read books all the time. It was really fun. (Artist, 1954–)

One of the reasons for these very positive responses was the fact that almost everyone was involved with creating and thus embodying this cultural experience (in reenacting the model operas, singing songs, painting portraits of Mao, or drawing comics, etc.), while not necessarily accepting the propaganda messages outright but reformulating them within his or her own context.34 It is not

33. See some of the testimonies from interviews in Chapter 1.
a given that “action makes propaganda’s effect irreversible” (Ellul 1965, 29). But it has been argued that “he who acts in obedience to propaganda can never go back. He is now obliged to believe in that propaganda because of his past action. He is obliged to receive from it his justification and authority, without which his action will seem to him absurd or unjust, which would be intolerable” (Ellul 1965, 29). Although some of the embarrassment evident in statements on enjoying propaganda art seems to point to the fact that indeed, these actions do now seem absurd and, more importantly, “unjust and intolerable,” one should also acknowledge that some consumers of Cultural Revolution propaganda derived pleasure even from a text whose ideological message they did not share or accept.

The divide between control and freedom was not as clear as it might first appear: the conception of propaganda along two alternatives—manipulative top-down control and individuals’ subversive initiatives to bend it to their own purposes—misses the mobilized, inspirational, and populist character of a long tradition of propaganda in China. A rigid binary that affirms the Chinese saying, “There is policy above, and agency below” (上有政策，下有对策) is too simplistic to explain the workings of Cultural Revolution Culture. A large portion of this art and the cultural experience of the Cultural Revolution generally, I will argue, was in fact based on self-organized, self-initiated grassroots activity, not simply following top-down decrees. People and artists are and were on productive and receiving ends of cultural processes: Cultural Revolution Culture is popular culture.

As shown above, what people make of propaganda is just as unpredictable as what they make of any other artistic “text” in spite of all the overdetermination worked into propaganda by the ideologues. The public will either appreciate propaganda art’s aesthetic qualities or criticize them; they will either notice its political content or ignore it. This ambiguity and openness in reception explains some of the after-effects of Cultural Revolution propaganda art, which has come to be appreciated not just by those who have nostalgic memories of performing (and having fun with) it and (dis-)believing it during their youth, but also by a younger generation who never went through the Cultural Revolution at all. This younger generation, now singing Karaoke, rapping and rocking to the revolutionary songs and model works, figures prominently in a 2005 documentary on the model works (Yang Ban Xi 2005). It is also the generation that invited, in 2007, a group of musicians playing and dancing to Mao quotes including “Be resolute” as entertainment for their wedding celebration (vid. 0.1). A musician born in 1942 deliberates:

My generation likes the model works, they are our youth. Yes, there are people who dislike them, too, but we really do like them. Indeed, when I was young, eighteen or so, I needed art so much, we all did. And then, there were just the model works as our food, and we actually thought they were quite great. Jiang Qing used really good performers, writers, artists, and musicians. Of course, this was propaganda for Mao’s thoughts, but it was also simply good art. It is all against these imperialists and their attacks, yes, but it is also good art, really. (Musician, 1942–)

Another would judge similarly, a third would even say that his son demanded that he sing model works from time to time, while a fourth is more skeptical that the younger generation could be attracted to the model works:

During the Cultural Revolution, we would sing some of these popular songs, the Long March Suite [长征组歌], for example, and some of the model works, too. I liked them a lot. Of course, there was nothing else, and they may even be rather crude artistically, but I liked them, nevertheless, especially Azalea Mountain [杜鹃山] and Red Lantern. In fact, I liked the operas best. And even now, there are still quite a lot of people who like the model works! (China Historian, 1949–)

35. I thank Wang Ban for this idea.
During the Cultural Revolution, I was told: "Why don't you study a little bit of Beijing Opera." And so I did . . . I can still sing some of the arias. My son often calls on me to sing them. (Intellectual, 1958–)

The model works now still have an audience, but it is all people like us. It has nothing to do with their artistic value, it is really only nostalgia. Very few actually consider them art; most who go to see them do so for different reasons. It is a phenomenon similar to the sent-down youths’ restaurants [知青餐厅 zhiqing canting]. The younger generation will find this very strange. They will not like the model works. Even if some may carry Mao buttons, the model works will not appeal to them. (China Historian, 1957–)

The subjective pleasure which some of these contemporaries experienced while watching the model works, then, may be derived from sources that have nothing to do with the original message or artistic quality of the art work at all (Bussemer 2000, 69). One artist, documented in Yang Ban Xi, remembers how much he liked to watch the model ballet Red Detachment of Women, not for its political content but because the women were wearing extremely short shorts and he thought this was very sexy (and this may have been Wang Yigang’s association, too, in surrounding Yang Zirong in his painting with symbols of female sexual maturity, see ill. o.2). Another of the model ballets, Children of the Grasslands (草原儿女 Caoyuan ernü), features a dance in which one can even see under the girls’ skirts. There are those who would deny such readings, or who would argue that “of course they are sexy, but in the type of context in which we were brought up then, we would not actually think of that” (Playwright, 1956–). Yet, examples like these may explain—in opposition to the predictions made by the China historian quoted above—why the generation born after the Cultural Revolution, in a kind of “Art Retro” Movement, also finds some of the art and culture of the Cultural Revolution fascinating, why they flock to Cultural Revolution restaurants, why they buy expensive collections of the model works and Red Sun CDs with remakes of revolutionary songs in praise of Mao, and why they visit Cultural Revolution flea markets. When it comes to Cultural Revolution propaganda, the concept of pleasure as well as ideas about forceful seduction and brainwashing manipulation have important explanatory power. What we observe, then, is semiotic competition for the interpretative power of propaganda. Some people continue to engage in it, even today, for very different reasons—to relieve themselves of its trauma or, quite contrarily, to relive its fun. Messages and contents of propaganda are being negotiated between those who created the propaganda and those who receive it. Clearly, the makers of Cultural Revolution propaganda art were well familiar with the rules of how to make art popular.

Because they understood that the medium was not the message, but that the medium in fact “changes the number and variety of messages and the character of the audiences” (Qualter 1985, 196), and in order to draw in as many audiences as possible for their propaganda art, the message would be packaged in as many media as possible, ranging from revolutionary operas to ballet, from symphonic music to oil paintings—successfully, so it seems. As Fiske puts it: “A popular text, to be popular must have points of relevance to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts, and so must be polysemic in itself” (Fiske 1989, 141). In order best to address itself to the crowd and be effective, reiterates Ellul, popular art (and propaganda) “must touch each individual in that crowd . . . it must give the impression of being personal, for we must never forget that the mass is

36. For a discussion of sexual elements in the model works and other model art during the Cultural Revolution, see Chapters 1 and 6. See also Chen 2002, 37, 116; Kim 2005, 253; and Roberts 2010. A rather mistaken view in this regard is voiced in Yang 1999. She takes prescribed asexuality at face value.

37. One artist couple (He, 1954–; She, 1959–) was quite adamant about this sexual reading being unacceptable. He: “Nobody would be thinking that way.” She: “No, really, nobody would have such thoughts . . . . The people and their thoughts at the time were very healthy [健康 jiankang], nobody would think of sex, they were all thinking of the story.”
composed of individuals, and is in fact nothing but assembled individuals.” Therefore, “all modern propaganda profits from the structure of the mass, but exploits the individual's need for self-affirmation” (1965, 7–8). By creating a propaganda art that advocated the same message in a myriad of different cultural registers, genres, and forms (see Bussemer 2000, 78), the Chinese state, in its attempt to prevent the creation of popular art from below, produced precisely such art from above, and—judging from hindsight—it did so rather successfully.38 One young photographer, then, a schoolboy during the Cultural Revolution, describes the propaganda art of the Cultural Revolution as popular culture:

Things that are popular [流行 liuxing] must really be rather low art, because they are for a lot of people ... and this is what Jiang Qing wanted: she really did not want high art in that elitist sense. And therefore, the model works serve the same function as the pop songs [流行歌曲 liuxing gequ] do today. Before, their being popular was manipulated, the real popularity comes from the people, of course. (Photographer, 1960–)

Chinese propaganda art is successful, even if it is read today as well as in the past, in ways that were not intended. The state's claims for Chinese propaganda art are twofold: it aspires to be popular art and high art at the same time. In his Yan'an Talks, Mao rages against a crude poster and slogan style (Mao 1942), arguing that art’s artistic value is dependent on how well it “serves the people” （为人民服务 wei renmin fuwu）.39 By nature of this ideology (and in complete negation of any Benjaminian or even commonsense theory),40 the more popular the art work, the higher its artistic achievement—regardless of its artistic quality. State engagement in entertainment culture during the Cultural Revolution was an attempt to establish a monopoly on popular culture. State propaganda culture is therefore determined less ideologically than structurally. As in Huxley's Brave New World, in the art of the Cultural Revolution “there are no masterpieces, for masterpieces appeal only to a limited audience” (1965, 43); the propagandist, by contrast, has to reach as many people as possible. And indeed, each of the main heroes in the model works, such as Yang Zirong 杨子荣 in Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy or Fang Haizhen 方海珍 in On the Docks (海港 Haigang) (ill. 0.1) or Hong Changqing 洪常青 in Red Detachment of Women (ill. 0.2), are each one of them more of a Superhero than a Hamlet. Compared with popular and mass culture rather than elite art and culture, Cultural Revolutionary propaganda art begins to make sense. As Fiske tells us, popular culture tends to be “excessive,” its brush strokes “crude,” its colors “striking.” Its overabundance calls on those who reject and despise popular culture to say that it is “vulgar,” “melodramatic,” “superficial,” “sensational,” and “transparent” (1997, 74). All of these are descriptions that would fit easily the art of the Cultural Revolution as well. According to Fiske, the broad consumption and, at the same time, broad condescension toward a cultural product is usually evidence of its popularity (1997, 67). He explains this by taking the example of popular language: we may sigh over simple word games, he says, but we will still be amused. If Cultural Revolution propaganda is criticized for its lack of aesthetic value, this is because, when seen from the vista of “high culture,” it lacks precisely that. The rhetoric of the “deficient character” of cultural products from the Cultural Revolution is identical to the critique high culture habitually offers of popular culture (Fiske 1997, 76). And popular culture is exactly what Cultural Revolution Culture is and aspires to be. It is just as effective as popular culture because it is, after all, nothing but popular culture (Fiske 1997, 76; Edelstein 1997; Snow 2010).

38. The Nazi State was similarly successful with projects such as Deutsche Arbeitsfront or Kraft durch Freude, which were offerings from above tailored to become popular below (Bussemer 2000, 78).
40. Benjamin 1963.
Continuity and Repetition: Art in History

According to Ellul, propaganda can only be effective when it is applied over a long period of time (Ellul 1965, 18). Taking the Mao Cult as one example, we can see a continuity of more than half a century. At least since the 1935 Zunyi Conference, Mao had become the main leader of the Chinese revolution. Symbolic affirmation of this fact is given repeatedly and on various platforms and media: with the adoption of the folk song turned revolutionary song, “Red is the East, rises the sun, China has brought forth a Mao Zedong” in 1942 (see Chapter 2), with the decision to make “Mao Zedong Thought” part of the constitution in 1945 (see Chapter 4), and with the erection of Mao statues in public institutions and places since 1949. Mao’s portrait, permanently installed on Tian’anmen since 1966, continues to play an evolving but ever-propagandistic role (see Chapter 5). According to Ellul:

Continuous propaganda exceeds the individual’s capacities for attention or adaptation and thus his capabilities of resistance. This trait of continuity explains why propaganda can indulge in sudden twists and turns. It is always surprising that the content of propaganda can be so inconsistent that it can approve today what it condemned yesterday. Actually it is only an indication of the grip it exerts, of the reality of its effects. We must not think that a man ceases to follow the line when there is a sharp turn. He continues to follow it because he is caught up in the system. (1965, 18)

These observations are directly relevant with regard to the Mao Cult (see Chapters 2, 4 and 5). To the present day, even under an exceedingly non-Maoist policy of “socialist capitalism,” Mao plays an increasingly important role. Reverence and love for Mao is, paradoxically, also voiced by those who suffered most during the Cultural Revolution and the years preceding it. Some of them even say that during the Cultural Revolution, a time of mutual distrust and slander, people were more honest and altruistic than they are in today’s egotistical world, where every individual is for himself and exclusively interested in his own profit, and all former communal values have been lost. Others argue the opposite and see the decline of moral values rooted precisely in the Cultural Revolution:

At that time, we were studying the heroic image of Lei Feng 雷锋 1940–62. Our value structure was all about communal cooperation and altruism, about the other and not the self. During this time in the Cultural Revolution, what Mao Zedong really fought against was the self—the Cultural Revolution was a campaign to fight the self 斗私运动 dou si yundong. You cannot just think about yourself, because our country is really dependent on our being unified. From when we were very small we received this kind of education and values; it was Mao who gave us these ideals and values. His Three Constantly Read Articles, we had to learn by heart—and we did so when in the countryside. (University Professor, mid-1950s–)

I had to go there and tell the student leader that it is no good if you beat your teacher. You should not lead the younger students to beat the teachers. So I went there and said: “Mao instructs us that one should not beat and curse others.” He said: “I did not beat him.” I said: “But I saw you beat him.” He said: “He is not a human being, thus I can beat him.” This kind of destruction of human values is something that happened throughout the Cultural Revolution, and its influence is still felt today. Today, there is no reverence for teachers and superiors anymore. Society has lost this value. (Musicologist, 1922–)

41. See DACHS 2009 Dongfang Hong Red Is the East, original words.
42. A more detailed discussion of Lei Feng is found in Chapter 4. For image material on Lei Feng, see DACHS 2009 Landsberger: Lei Feng.
Although each of these speakers comes to a different conclusion as to the significance of the Cultural Revolution on the development of altruistic values in Chinese society, in both cases, Mao comes to stand for the old and cherished values in a world gone by and, increasingly, he becomes the glue that holds Chinese society—disintegrating quickly with the effects of "socialist capitalism”—together, after all.43 Not a particular message but a particular feeling is associated with Mao, the most prominent and long-lived symbol of Cultural Revolution propaganda art. What Ellul writes about the effects of propaganda is absolutely true for Mao: "It is no longer to change adherence to a doctrine, but to make the individual cling irrationally to a process of action. It is no longer to lead to a choice, but to loosen the reflexes. It is no longer to transform an opinion, but to arouse an active and mythical belief” (1965, 25).

Propagemes like Mao, his image, and his words, grown and consolidated over time, represent and serve very basic timely and culturally dependent needs. They are not only what they appear to be, but much more: symbolizations. As shared formulations, they are attempts to express particular (and changing) emotional, cognitive, and mental needs (Gries 2005, 32). Mao, the propageme, serves to fulfill people’s need for security, for example. The repetitive use of the propageme creates a feeling of trust. Through the propageme, a framework is established that makes it possible for Chinese society to stick together (Gries 2005, 31–32). Daily invocations of Mao provide a “moral economy” for assessing and understanding the present. Many recall the days under Mao as “a time of employment security, clean government, and relative social equality,” therefore, and even though they have “equally vivid critical reminiscences of cadre tyranny, grinding poverty, violence, and fear inflicted by political campaigns,” they will stick to their hero (Lee and Yang 2007, 7–8). One journalist explains:

There are many reasons for the Mao Fever today. One is the fact that we still have a lot of very poor. They always loved Mao: he was for a very egalitarian society. They of course are nostalgic for that time because it was more egalitarian then; now the differences are much, much greater! (Journalist, 1946–)

A musicologist who is a few years his junior reasons:

Are people nostalgic for the equality [they experienced] during the Cultural Revolution? Yes, I think so! . . . The relationships between people at the time were much different from today, there was much greater social cohesion, and the workers were really considered very high in the hierarchy, because of Mao. They did not eat better than now (indeed, worse), but their position in society was much better then. Now, their position is just like before 1949, so it is understandable that people have this kind of nostalgia. But I also think it is very dangerous. (Musicologist, 1950s–)

A Shanghai musician, slightly older than the two, reckons:

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

43. Chen (1999, 19) also relates positive attitudes toward Maoist times: “When asked about the impression they had obtained of the Cultural Revolution from their parents, young people described it as an era when people were sincere, passionate, and enthusiastic about their ideals. The parents characterized the period as free, one in which drugs and prostitution were unknown, with low and stable grocery prices, a low crime rate, and more honest officials.”
The new Mao (and Cultural Revolution propaganda) Cult that has been blooming since the late 1980s is not just a popular movement; it is more or less openly supported by the Chinese government. What Mao and Cultural Revolution propaganda art actually mean to the individual is not immediately relevant to this movement, however. Mao is thus recognized for all his worth by different communicators and audiences within Chinese society: as a semantic marker, a mediator for things that may indeed have very little to do with each other (Gries 2005, 22).

Propaganda as Art

In a study on propaganda and opinion control, Terence Qualter writes:

It is always difficult to discuss propaganda objectively because the pejorative connotations of the word in English have largely reduced it to a device for destroying the credibility of opponents. Arguments labeled propaganda can be dismissed as invalid, dishonest, and unworthy of further attention. Charged with being propagandists, we tend to go on the defensive, denying the accusation. (1985, 107)

In this book, I attempt to deal with art and cultural products that have been conceived precisely under this negative label “propaganda,” with all its baggage. I am aware that some of the arguments put forth so far—arguments trying to understand the long-lasting impact as well as the popularity of propaganda art from the Cultural Revolution, or simply trying to reconceive this propaganda as art—can easily be misunderstood, because the “reconstruction of a fascination” undertaken here is easily mistaken for a “fascinated reconstruction” (Felbinger and Scherl 2005, 126). It by no means is, however. In this book, I do not intend to deny or beautify the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. All I try to do is to add to the exclusively negative understanding of “propaganda” an alternative reading which, in combination with the first, might do better justice to the complex experience of Cultural Revolution Culture: during this time all officially produced and accepted art was “propaganda,” but this does not preclude the possibility of propaganda being “art,” too.

In this book, therefore, I am interested in understanding the mechanisms that make the propaganda accompanying this period attractive, because present-day Chinese politics, and more importantly for this study, the everyday experience of life in China are determined by this very propaganda. Jung Chang 張戎 (1952–) in her voluminous biography of Mao entitled Mao: The Unknown Story (Chang and Halliday 2005), which was extremely well-received in the popular media worldwide, nowhere addresses this issue. Few Sinologists would disagree with the fact that the main figure in her book, Mao Zedong, was a political leader who led his Party comrades, and then the entire country, through a series of cataclysms. And still, many specialists would declare the book to be, as Thomas Bernstein aptly put it, a “major disaster for the contemporary China field” (DACHS 2006 Bernstein, Thomas). They would do so not because it introduces a story as “unknown” that has long been known. They would do so because Mao the “monster” is not a figure which, in the minds of contemporary Chinese, is the most privileged and prominent reality. This is so in spite of the fact that the many horrors mentioned in the book have been known in China for quite some time. What Jung Chang forgets in her very angry attack of Mao “the monster” is the fact that this “monster” Mao is not the only relevant Mao to contemporary China; he remains, for many, the symbol of an egalitarian, altruistic past, a past which has only recently been buried with

44. For a number of critical reviews, see the selection in the Heidelberg Digital Archive for Chinese Studies (DACHS 2007 Mao, the Unknown Story).
the victory of "socialist capitalism." This is why Mao appears as a star in many blockbuster movies and pop songs (see Chapter 2 and ill. 0.4), why he can function (with his successors Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin) as a New Year's god, and why he can serve as a talisman for taxi drivers, hanging from their mirrors (see Chapter 5, ills. 5.77 and 5.76 respectively). Not everyone is happy about this:

The fact that the taxi drivers do this is quite annoying. It all depends on how you see the Cultural Revolution. We have been treated badly by Mao, so we are not for this kind of behavior, really. But quite a few, especially the young people, and especially workers and peasants who have not read any books and who don't know how to think, they seem to think that times were better under Mao, and even these intellectuals, the new Left—they, too, are saying that the Cultural Revolution was good 文革好. Really, they are all too romantic. (Editor, 1930s–)

Not only to these “romantics,” as this editor calls them, Mao “the monster” and Mao “the man” have somehow become decoupled, a phenomenon one could observe with Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) in Nazi Germany, as well. The sentence “Wenn der Führer das wüßte . . .” (If our leader were to know of this . . .) is evidence of this (see Bussemer 2000, 121). Similarly, Mao “the man” is not made responsible for many of the things that Mao “the monster” actually did. Why this is so and what this means—these questions and thoughts never occur to Jung Chang. She does not ask why a man, Mao Zedong, and the propaganda of his time, a time of extreme cultural repression, remains so popular even today. It is the riddle this book sets out to unravel.

It approaches this riddle not from the point of view of political science, sociology, or historiography, however. Instead, it takes the aesthetic experience of the Cultural Revolution as its base. In trying to “make sense” of Cultural Revolution propaganda art, it does not question propaganda as art so much as it probes its functions, both for the artist and for the audience, and its impact. This is something that was once suggested in an interview by Liu Chunhua 刘春华 (1944–), painter of one of the most famous portraits of Mao, Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan 毛主席去安源 (see ill. 5.1), seen incessantly during the Cultural Revolution:

How would you evaluate Chinese revolutionary art, or art that expresses revolutionary themes, and its place in the history of Chinese art? Some consider that these are only forms of political propaganda; others believe them to be masterpieces of twentieth-century Chinese art. What is your view on this?

I haven't really given this question much thought. People of later generations will have a different evaluation, but the facts of history will remain the same. From the time the Communist Party assumed political power and established the People's Republic of China, under the leadership of Chairman Mao and other party leaders, creative work in literature and the arts was carried out according to the proletarian revolutionary line; over the decades a large number of such works were produced. I don't think these works can be overlooked or disavowed. They are the expressions of the sincere emotions of the artists who worked during those years and under those historical conditions. At the same time, regardless of whether we are talking about them as a reflection of history or of real life, what they express are facts. Of course, those works that are able to stand the test of history must be sincere, regardless of whether their style is traditional or modern, realist or abstract. What value a work of art has in the long flow of history is not something I can judge. But if it has character, if it has unique characteristics, if it has had an impact, then it is certainly exceptional and worthy of praise.45

As a study of the function, impact, and consequences of propaganda art, this book looks at and plays with the "senses" as it deals with the perceptual, sensory, emotional, and physical encounters with the cultural products of the Cultural Revolution (Wang 1997, 7). In three parts comprising

two chapters each, the book covers the ears, or musical aspects (in a discussion of revolutionary “MaoMusic,” or songs in praise of Mao, and the importance of foreign-styled and traditional Chinese music in the model works); the mouth, or literary aspects (in a study of the uses and abuses of Mao Zedong Thought or “MaoSpeak,” and of the childhood primer Three Character Classic during, before, and after the Cultural Revolution); and the eyes, or visual aspects (in a discussion of “MaoArt,” i.e., Mao portraits, and Cultural Revolution comics and their significance).

The Introduction and Conclusion are patterned after the nose and the hands, signifying smell and touch, respectively, introducing at first some “odors” or ideas on art, propaganda, and popular culture, while touching ground at the end with a number of deliberations on the importance of time (periodization), space (locality), and techniques (grammar) in the experience of Cultural Revolution Culture.

A 1968 poster entitled Moving Forward, Following the Victory of Mao’s Revolutionary Line in Art and Literature (沿着毛主席的革命文艺路线胜利前进) (ill. 0.5) shows a huge parade of happy people, holding up the most important cultural products epitomizing “Mao’s Revolutionary Line.” Each one of these is central to my discussion of cultural production under Mao: model music (featuring, on the poster, performers from ballets like the White-Haired Girl on the right, from operas like Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy in the middle, and from instrumental music like Red Lantern with piano accompaniment on the left), model words/works (the poster includes participants holding up several volumes from the Selected Works of Mao Zedong and the Little Red Book), and model images, foremost among them Chairman Mao Goes to Anyuan, a huge sample of which is carried by some participants on the right in the procession depicted in the poster. Accordingly, this book studies, analyzes, reads, and questions the reception of some of the most visible official propaganda art from the Cultural Revolution, tracing its origins and its afterlives. In probing views from oral history, it also deals with the many unofficial cultural experiences that characterized the Cultural Revolution. What it cannot offer is a more elaborate reading of unofficial or underground art, nor does it manage to probe deeply into the thriving art practices beyond the mainstream. These lacunae must be filled in future studies to come.

Throughout, the book argues that one of the most obvious characteristics of Cultural Revolution Culture is that the same message was repeated over and over again, synchronically, on all different
levels of the art work and in all different kinds of artistic media in order to reach as broad a public as possible. On the other hand, one of the most obvious characteristics of Cultural Revolution propaganda art is the fact that the same message was repeated over and over again, diachronically, at different times throughout Chinese revolutionary history. Thus does propaganda become so powerful: it draws the individual into its net, using each of its techniques in its very own specific way, fusing it with many other media, each of them reaching the individual in a specific fashion and making him/her react again and again, over space and time, to the same message, with the same direction of impact, but somewhat differently each time (Ellul 1965, 10).

While focusing on one particular type of cultural product, each of the chapters will investigate it both synchronically and diachronically. The very nature of Cultural Revolution Culture, which can perhaps most adequately be characterized by its redundant interlocking mechanisms, makes it possible for every one of the emblematic works studied here as signposts of Cultural Revolution Culture to be connected more or less visibly by more than one thread to themes, topics, and rhetorical styles or techniques also addressed in other chapters. In three of the six chapters, the book itself practices quite explicitly the propagandistic “art of networked repetition” dealing with different reincarnations of Mao—in music, in language, and in image; MaoMusic, MaoSpeak, MaoArt—for Mao was what Cultural Revolution Culture was all about.

The book will undo the idea that Cultural Revolution Culture was exceptional; it will argue that it was neither particularly xenophobic nor iconoclastic and, most importantly, that it was not without historical precedents. It will show that Cultural Revolution propaganda art merely brought to an extreme cultural practices established many years before. Cultural Revolution propaganda art created an acute impact that ensured its continued importance in the decades after the Cultural Revolution. This is the reason for the book’s title: A Continuous Revolution. Mao’s aim with his continuous revolution (继续革命) was to create—by means of class struggle—a society with selected roots and memories to the past, created in the present to realize a future utopia of Chinese modernity (Bakken 2000, 1). Mao came to regard eternal struggle as the basis of all existence (Michael 1977, vii). In essence, then, his continuous revolution was one that sought to define and bring to life a utopian Chinese modernity. His burden was shared by many others who, during the twentieth century, became obsessed with finding ways to adapt China’s tradition and culture in order to ensure their nation’s survival in the modern age.

Only in creating an art that, at least in theory, allowed for one and only one interpretation, an art of absolute monolithic quality, did Cultural Revolution art and culture differ from art created before and after this period. However, even the idea of monolithic culture in itself was not unique to the Cultural Revolution. Many of the arguments used and abused during the Cultural Revolution to streamline art and cultural production can be traced back to ideas that came into being in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—ideas that flourished during a period that is now often termed the most “liberal” period (and a cultural revolution in its own right) in Chinese cultural history: the May Fourth Movement of the 1910s to 1930s. Accordingly, the Cultural Revolution has been seen as “a distortion of May Fourth values, though its genealogy was clear” (Mitter 2004, 240).

In the same way that the Cultural Revolution has been mythologized, so, too, has the May Fourth Movement. But although the two movements share a similar anti-Confucian stance (one was in fact consciously used by the other) and although, accordingly, in terms of negative effects

47. These arguments are discussed in detail in Mitter 2004, 241.
48. See the definitive work on this topic, Chow 1960, 288–312.
49. One of many examples of such use is the re-publication of Lu Xun’s 批孔反儒文集 during the Anti-Confucius Campaign in the early 1970s. See Louie 1980, 11. In note 38 Louie mentions the publication of Lu Xun’s 批孔反儒文集 in 1975.
on traditional Chinese culture, the two movements might well be considered equals, one is evaluated both in China and in the West in a much more positive light than the other. Science and democracy are considered part of the May Fourth legacy (as is quite obvious in Carma Hinton’s film *Gate of Heavenly Peace*, for example), along with its iconoclasm, which is often taken as a crucial element for China’s opening up to foreign ideas. It is not often realized, however, that this iconoclasm also entailed the destruction of much of the material culture that went along with this heritage. Rana Mitter, who follows these stereotypical categorizations while expanding them in interesting ways, argues that “the mindset that inspired Mao, who had been in the thick of May Fourth and shaped by it in many ways, bears many indelible marks of the earlier era,” and acknowledges that the idea of Mao as the “saviour of the Chinese people” (so prominently featured in that Cultural Revolution song hit “Red is the East” discussed in Chapter 2), too, could be rooted in the May Fourth Movement. Mitter points out that “one of the most powerful cultural threads of May Fourth Romanticism encouraged the belief in a transcendent hero, in a figure who could drag an entire people into the future through the force of sheer will” (2004, 232). He has recently characterized the relationship between the two Chinese Cultural Revolutions as follows:

The Cultural Revolution in China was largely caused by the obsessions of one man concerned both with the purity of his revolution and his own personal position. However, the patterns of thought that defined the path he took were largely ones that had shaped him in May Fourth. Mao’s Cultural Revolution is an explicable end-point of the darkest side of May Fourth—obsession with youth, destruction of the past, arrogance about the superiority of one’s own chosen system of thought—without the enlightenment that tempered the original—cosmopolitanism, critical enquiry, and universalism (2004, 208).

The hysterics of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution have important but often neglected (or deliberately forgotten) precedents during this earlier period, including the belief in youth as a moving factor in history, the destruction of the Confucian heritage (under the slogan of “Beat down the Confucius shop” 打倒孔家店), of temples and ritual objects in a fight against “superstition” (迷信), and of the creation of a new audience: the masses.

This last idea was never successfully implemented during the May Fourth period, however. May Fourth art, in spite of its proletarian leanings, remained elitist. Cultural Revolution propaganda attempted to finally achieve the goal of popularization (大众化 dazhonghua) to which its popularity in recent years bears testimony. This again puts into question its monolithic and univalent qualities:

50. Rana Mitter further explains: “The May Fourth era was associated most with nationalism, ‘science and democracy,’ enlightenment, and openness to the outside world. Surely it is hard to claim that the Cultural Revolution, notable for its xenophobia, intolerance, and scorn for technical knowledge, is the child of that earlier period of possibility? Mao’s use of the term ‘Cultural Revolution’… made the events of the 1960s his self-declared follow-up to the original May Fourth. In this, it is different from, say, the Tian’anmen Square uprising of 1989, which… very consciously took on the mantle of the earlier movement at a grassroots level. However, the Cultural Revolution was not an uncomplicated inheritor of May Fourth’s legacy. Its xenophobia, if nothing else, means that it was a distorted interpretation of the values of the New Culture Movement” (2004, 230).

51. Louie (1980, 144) expresses a similar view in saying that there is one crucial difference between the two movements: “The critics of 1916… desired all that would strengthen and unify the country as well as make possible more individual liberty and initiative. They were in quest of pluralism, even if this quest was soon to transform itself for many of the leading critics into a quest for an alternative ideology.” During the Cultural Revolution, on the other hand, it was “in the name of this alternative ideology that Confucius is being attacked and vilified. This alternative ideology has also received credit for whatever progress the Chinese nation has achieved in politico-military and other areas. Individual liberty and initiative have been set aside for the sake of collective liberty, the freedom from imperialism, and for equality.”

52. For the missing origins of this slogan in May Fourth rhetorics, see May 2008.

53. For the continuities between these movements, see Ho 2009, ch. 4. See also Mitter 2004, 232; Duara 1995, 107–10.
the recent popular reception thrives on ambiguities of interpretation that are obviously possible even in spite of its overdetermined nature. As seen above, it may be worthwhile to question our perception of the restrictive manipulative, predictable quality of Cultural Revolution art and culture, alias propaganda, which has been emphasized in many a study on Chinese cultural production.

In studying the sensual experience that the Cultural Revolution was—its images, its sounds, its smells, and its touch—I will argue that, as an experience, the Cultural Revolution was much less restrictive than is often argued. If looked at more closely, Cultural Revolution propaganda actually allowed for quite a few variations, and, most importantly, the Cultural Revolution cannot be seen as one period of one type of homogenous cultural production. There are significant differences between propaganda art in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and there are important variations within the late 1960s and early 70s. Moreover, the theoretical ideal of Cultural Revolution art as envisaged by the cultural makers around Jiang Qing and the practical experience of what kinds of art and culture were available during the Cultural Revolution (inclusive of the many things that were not being actively produced but still available throughout this ten-year period) were very much at variance. The experience of art and culture during the Cultural Revolution was not singular: it differed substantially depending on the class background of a particular participant, his or her geographical standpoint, educational background, closeness to high revolutionary personnel, and many other factors, but it was determined for all by the mechanisms of continuous revolution: first, it slowly created a climate, and then, it prevented the individual from noticing particular propaganda operations. As this book attempts to show, it was this constant play with incessantly moving targets that eventually made Cultural Revolution propaganda so “incredibly effective” (Ellul 1965, 20).