The Cult of Mao Today In China

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The Cult of Mao dominated the early years of the People’s Republic of China, particularly during the Cultural Revolution. During my trip to China I was interested in recording modern-day elements of the Cult of Mao, while also recording present historical examples. I was not disappointed in the amount of material present to me. In fact it was surprising for me to see just how many modern portrayals of Mao Zedong are present in China today, even including Tibet, which Mao forcibly annexed in 1950. In my travels I discovered that the Cult of Mao today in China has been adapted as a symbol representing power and good fortune, as a historic figure representing patriotism and love of country, for marketing products to tourists both foreign and Chinese, and as a trendy fashion statement. This essay will cover these elements in that order.

Perhaps most striking about Mao’s presence in modern-day China is the presence of his face on all of the paper currency greater than a Jiao, which is the lowest value paper currency in circulation. What is placed on a nation’s currency is important as it portrays an image to the world and to the country’s citizens alike. Mao’s presence on China’s
paper currency serves as a reminder of his role as the country’s founder and in his influence still today. Maoism and many of his policies are not followed by China’s leaders today; however his power and authority have never been officially questioned after his death. This loyalty to his legacy as a founder is portrayed to Chinese citizens and the world through the use of his face on all substantial paper currency.

Mao statues are also common throughout the country. Without going to much trouble I found this one on the campus of Beijing Jiaotong University. I also saw a Mao statue near the airport outside Lhasa, Tibet. It is very possible that these statues date multiple decades; however they are still important in a narrative discussion of the modern uses of the Great Helmsmen. These statues are a reminder of his might, but similarly to the use of his face on currency these statues remind us of Mao’s legacy.

The location of this statue on a large college campus is somewhat unexpected simply
because Chinese academia has concluded that the excesses Mao caused during the Cultural Revolution, and the Great Leap Forward, make him a fallible character, whereas this statue portrays a benevolent and an all-powerful leader. Regardless Mao’s statue at the University gives the campus a patriotic feel, something likely appreciated by the school’s officials.

Throughout China I encountered more examples of the state’s portrayal of Mao than just money and statues. The obvious example is Mao’s portrait hanging above Tiananmen Square. Similar to the use of Mao on currency and in statues, the portrait serves to remind current and future Chinese generations of the importance of Mao and of his ideals of communism. Making his portrait overlooking Tiananmen special is its historical
significance as Mao stood on the balcony above and proclaimed the founding of the PRC in 1949. The Tiananmen Portrait is also quite significant as it faces Mao’s Mausoleum, which, as it holds Mao’s body, is the ultimate epicenter for the Mao cult. Another example of state produced images of Mao is the portrait above that also consists of Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin, and Hu Jintao. These posters are common throughout China, with this specific one located in a rural Yunnan restaurant. They serve as a propaganda tool glorifying the four leaders of the Chinese state. In this picture you can see how the poster is part of a small shrine. For the business that puts up the portrait it portrays a strong image of nationalism and loyalty to the government that is perhaps beneficial in customer support.

The most interesting example of a display of Mao I witnessed on the trip was in a Tibetan household in Zhongdian. This was the first and only Tibetan house and family we visited and I certainly didn’t expect to find Mao present there. I had assumed that Tibetans were less likely than average Chinese to hold reverence for Mao because of his invasion of Tibet in 1950. Interestingly enough the older Tibetan lady had the poster not out of loyalty or understanding of Mao, but

Figure 5: A government issued poster in a Tibetan household in Zhongdian.
rather because he is a powerful symbol. According to our interpreter the woman doesn’t know much about Mao, but knew that he was a powerful and important figure in Chinese history. This explains perhaps many of the posters of Mao that are up in other places across China, such as the below image of the poster in our guesthouse during our hike along Tiger Leaping Gorge. Powerful figures in Chinese history are respected, not necessarily because of what they stand for ideologically, or in Mao’s case the after effects of their policies, but rather because of the influence they held. This idea is discussed in an article from The Guardian where a taxi driver in Mao’s hometown in Hunan is asked about the Mao talisman dangling from his rear-view mirror. The driver responds that the point is not whether Mao was good or bad, or if his policies were disastrous, but rather that he had “greatness” and projected substantial personal power (Buruma 2001). Many families such as the Tibetans in Zhongdian or the owners of the guesthouse along the Gorge, hang posters of the Chairman up in a similar respect of his power and influence.
Images, clothing, coins, bags, hats, statues, plates, etc. all containing images of Mao are sold throughout China particularly to tourists Chinese and foreign. The hat portrayed in this picture above was sold at nearly every souvenir shop in Yunnan and many Chinese tourists in Dali, Lijiang, and Zhongdian were wearing them. In Tibet I also encountered Mao items being sold in the marketplace to tourists such as this memorial plaque below. Mao has become a staple figure in Chinese souvenirs. This is an obvious result of his visibility. Western and other foreign tourists old and young alike, as well as some Chinese, may not immediately identify the images of Jiang Zemin or even Deng Xiaoping, but Mao will always be recognized and desired in the form of a tourist’s trinket.

Figure 6: Mao tourist items on sale in Tibet.
I started to realize in Beijing how the image of Mao has been coopted into a type of fashion style and image. In a sense it is similar to the use of the image of Che Guevara as a style statement. The hats shown above evidence this; however this is not the only example of Mao being used in fashion. Throughout China Mao’s image is present on shirts as well as in trendy business areas such as this almost counterculture hostel/bar in Beijing. It is mostly the young who use Mao as a fashion statement on their clothing and in their establishments. In fashion Mao still maintains some reverence and is not completely a style statement as many of the individuals wearing Mao hats are also representing a nationalist pride in China. As the country grows and develops it will be quite interesting to see exactly how the trendy Mao fashion style will evolve. My guess is that it will continue to grow or at least maintain a stable popularity simply because of the amount of Mao clothing I saw in China.

In China today Mao’s image is still very common; however the adaptation of his image has changed somewhat from its earlier uses. His image is no longer primarily used simply as a patriotic symbol or as a symbol representing adoration
for Mao. Today his image has been adopted and used in fashion, as a good luck symbol, and in tourist items. There are still examples of Mao's image used in a nationalist and patriotic manner; however the Cult of Mao in today’s China represents much more than it did in the past.
Work Cited