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Long Live Chairman Mao (badges): buttons as revolutionary objects

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Image 1: Mao Badge, British Museum 2007,4005.15.

[Our purpose is] to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part, that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.
-Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art" (May 1942), Selected Works, Vol. III, p. 70

China's Cultural Revolution, which ran from 1966 until Chairman Mao Zedong's death in 1976, was an extended series of political and social campaigns, launched, among other reasons, to counter what Mao perceived as revisionist tendencies in the country's top leadership. Most histories of the period focus on these political aspects, and despite its name, the Cultural Revolution is often portrayed as a 'cultural wasteland', a time when all art was propagandistic and subsumed to political demands. In reality, however, it was a period of extensive artistic activity; indeed the art historian Jiang Jiehong has called the Cultural Revolution "an unparalleled visual experience."i Artist Shen Jiawei, who first came to national prominence during the Cultural Revolution, notes the opportunities available to young artists at a time when every work unit, school and factory had to have its own display of political acquiescence. Indeed, rather that seeing the period as one in which no art was produced, the vast scope of the Cultural Revolution "art project" should be recognized. Paintings and calligraphy covered surfaces inside and out; portraits and posters were displayed around the home, and revolutionary art came to dominate the visual landscape of everyday life.

There was one element of visual cultural that gained a unique standpoint: the Mao badge. These little buttons, adorned with likenesses of Chairman Mao, were pinned to shirts, jackets, and for the die-hard even the bare chest, and thus became roving emissaries of Cultural Revolution political ideals. It is thought that up to five billion of them might have been produced, the majority of which were made between 1966 and 1969.ii They came to be considered items of everyday necessity, worth fighting over, worth giving up food and shelter for, in some cases, worth dying over. What was it that led these little buttons to have such power? Buttons were popular then, and have been popular around the world at various times, because they are the concise expression of some true or desired identity. If you see a badge, you know what a person stands for. In the tumultuous times of the Cultural Revolution badges

were simple ways of expressing a whole range of associations and embodied positions, combining revolutionary militancy, rebellion, but also conversely, personal alignment with the political movements of the day.

Mao badges started to be produced before the Communists came to power in 1949, and throughout the 1950s and early 1960s were awarded to model workers, soldiers and peasants. People's Liberation Army soldiers returning from Korea, for example, would receive star-shaped military achievement badges, with Mao's portrait on the front and a peace dove on the back.iii They were, then, objects associated with revolutionary prestige, and with a concept of success primarily oriented towards martial strength.

Badges became widespread during the Cultural Revolution, and especially in the years 1966-1969. Drawing on the buttons' historical prestige, young students who called themselves 'Red Guards' and took up Mao's call to 'bombard the headquarters' started wearing the badges in the summer of 1966 and even presented a number of badges to Mao at a rally in Tiananmen Square. Badges became a youth phenomenon and were worn as a sign of revolutionary intent. They became objects that youths wanted to have, but especially at the start of the Cultural Revolution, ownership was often restricted to those with good class backgrounds.iv In this way, they represented powerful 'weapons of exclusion',v and became a way of demarcating a person's worth, through their family background. In Gao Yuan's autobiography, he recollects that his friend Yuling was prevented from wearing a badge, as her father was suspected of being a CIA spy, as he had spent time in America. Zhou Jihou, a prominent Chinese collector, has written about how his family's political troubles – his father was accused of being a 'capitalist roader' – prevented him from acquiring a badge until 1968.

In my heart, I thought of these badges as sacred and beautiful objects. I really had a strong desire to own my own. But at that time it was impossible ... In the spring of 1968, a relative from our old home in Jiangjin, Sichuan province, came to visit. On his chest he wore a beautiful glowing badge. It was red, glass covered and it had the figure of Chairman Mao covered with phosphorus so that it would glow in the dark. This particularly beautiful and rare badge fascinated me and I could not take my eyes off it. When my relative left, I followed along the way until he finally decided to give me this most treasured thing. I would wear this rare Shaoshan manufactured badge wherever I went, and was very proud of it.vi

Zhou recalls that the badge was later taken off him by a group of children Red Guards for being a black class element. When badge wearing opened up to everyone after Mao rejected the 'bloodline theory', they lost their original class-specific nature, but interestingly gained another. Badges, like any other commodity, were available only to those who could afford them. While cheap, the larger or more colourful models were beyond the reach of many of the less well-off families, especially in the early years of the Cultural Revolution. These families – those with 'poor peasant' class designation – were meant to be the most prized members of the community. As badges developed in complexity and size, their prices rose, and they gained an exclusionary status not originally intended. The ability to invest in an especially decorative badge could bring with it significant political capital and status. Feng Jicai, for example, talks about the prestige he felt when wearing one particularly special badge:

It was the nicest badge I had. The kind of badges we were wearing at the time were called, in the jargon of those in the know, "The eighty-round steamships."...These were the largest available. The size of these badges mattered in that the larger they were, the more loyal the wearer supposedly was – and certainly the more startlingly visible they were...All in all, these badges were the newest, largest, and most fashionable of their kind at the time. There was not the slightest doubt that they were works of great craftsmanship. Stealing glances at the "eight-round" badge pinned to my clothes, how my classmates envied me! Especially pleased with myself, believing myself to be the most loyal to the cause, I would walk proudly with my head held high with more than a touch of exhibitionism.vii

Gao Yuan too recollects finding a particularly special badge in a badge market in Nanjing. It was a new design, consisting of a small red badge inlaid on a five-pointed gold star. But its value put it beyond Gao's reach: "The owner wanted ten small badges for it, an impossibility for me."viii The irony that a movement launched to counter revisionist tendencies in the population and the leadership ended up performing loyalty through the bourgeois process of exclusive acquisition seems to have been lost on its participants. In this seemingly fashion- and money-averse society, the ability to decorate the body with something new and exclusive maintained a most un-communist fascination.

While badges were fashionable and a way to fit in with peers, their importance went beyond that and they should not be written off as just another youth trend. In his description, Zhou calls the badges 'sacred' and 'this most treasured thing'. A similar feeling is evoked by Gao Yuan when he describes how he felt when he acquired his first two badges, on a trip to Beijing: "I pinned one on my chest and the other inside my pocket. I was sure I could feel Chairman Mao's radiance burning into me."ix Mao badges came, through their association with the Chairman, to symbolically represent power, and they therefore came to be respected in the same way as an authority figure would.

Image 2: All of the figures in this 1967 poster are wearing Mao badges "Blood debt must be repaid with blood", University of Westminster Poster Collection: D3. http://chinaposters.westminster.ac.uk/zenphoto/

Different people would have had different reasons for wearing Mao badges, and totalising explanations of public behaviour during the Cultural Revolution should be avoided. Indeed, considering the different ways badges were consumed can help break what Michael Dutton calls the myth of the 'the people-as-one' during the Maoist period.[x] Some people desperately believed in the sacredness and the power of the badges; others may have worn them to avoid trouble; others still may have been attracted to them as fashionable items to be worn in a time when individual expression was frowned upon. For Red Guards, badges contributed to the cultivation of the personality of revolutionary successor, and badge choice could help to identify the wearer's political allegiance. Badges represented a mixture of authority – through Mao – and rebellion – through their association with revolutionary history – that Red Guards were looking for. It allowed them to believe they were 'making revolution' as the saying went, while maintaining an allegiance to Mao as a symbol of stability.

While posters and portraits of Mao helped to build the cult of personality that surrounded him, the badges provided something quite different: an individual connection between the wearer and Mao. As Robert Benewick says, "Portrait and poster art expressed totalising power, while badge art...expressed individualizing power."[xi] The badges allowed a narrowing of the distance between Mao and his followers, and the development of a relationship between the individual and that which they perceived, or wanted, Mao to be. They were a symbol of the universal, sacred Mao: the Mao who rose above politics, the Mao who did not make mistakes, or change course. The prevalence of traditional symbols of power, strength and stability on the badges attests to this, as do the numerous historical references. In a time of upheaval, Mao represented that which did not change, and by pinning this small button onto their clothes, the wearer could feel that they had come under the protection of this omnipotent Mao. Gao Yuan says that wearing the badge, he could feel Mao's radiance burning within him; as worship of Mao increased throughout the early years of the Cultural Revolution, Mao badges reinforced the increasingly sacred persona the leader assumed by forming a direct connection with the body of the wearer and that of Mao.

Image 3. This 1969 badge depicts Mao in front of a number of important sites from revolutionary history. The plum blossom in the foreground is a traditional symbol of perseverance and the ability to survive hardship. Mao Badge, British Museum 1987,0326.1.

Badges also had a more utilitarian function during the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. Mao badges, like all buttons worn on the body, were tiny material forms that contained within them an abundance of implied information. This implied information, which suggested adherence to the correct political line, helped the wearer safely navigate the potential dangers of everyday life. As Melissa Schrift says, "Consumption of Mao icons served as a uniquely accessible and highly desirable way for everyday Chinese to gain the political capital needed to survive during the Cultural Revolution."xii Not only did the badge connect the wearer with Mao, more practically, it connected the wearer with all of the people surrounding them, who could unite in shared loyalty to Chairman Mao. Benewick and Donald argue that the wearer's body was 'landscaped' by the badge.xiii Describing a landscape as a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolising surroundings, they seem to suggest the badge brought with it a ready-made identity that gave the body a safe place in the political landscape. The badge lent the wearer its symbolic strength, protecting the body through its visual imagery. The body then was restructured in the political landscape, taking on an appearance that allowed the wearer to blend into the background. Jiang Jiehong describes this power of the badges as providing "a kind of separate realm, a strange aesthetic currency accessible to all."xiv

The danger not wearing a badge could bring can be seen in one of Feng Jicai's stories. Feng's narrator took all of the family's badges to the market to exchange them for one impressive badge. His wife criticises him for the danger he could put his family in through such an act:

You took the kid's and my buttons too! If they'd been stolen, what would we have worn tomorrow? People would say I'd gone without my button because I didn't love Chairman Mao. They'd arrest me as a counter-revolutionary, and there wouldn't be anybody here to cook for you when you got home from work every day.xv

It is interesting that Feng's wife links the loss of the Mao badge with the loss of food. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao badges were considered to be staples more important than food. Perhaps the spiritual sustenance Mao Zedong thought provided was thought to be enough to also fulfil bodily needs! Zhou, for example, recalls a story from the period in which a food-processing plant manager requested emergency assistance during a power shortage. The power supply bureau replied that badge factories received first priority, and the power bureau official reportedly questioned the plant manager: Which is more important, badges or rice? The manager had no reply.xvi

Zhou's story demonstrates the centrality in everyday life that Mao badges took during the Cultural Revolution. These little buttons became central to inter-personal communication, personal appearance, political standpoint, and as a result of these things, bodily health. For believers, they allowed a spiritual connection to Mao, a way to experience daily the joy that seeing the great man could bring. The badges, like ideological buttons for political and social movements or symbols of faith for religious believers, provided a constant source of inspiration and the reminder of the community they were upholding. Its connection to the body, its place on the body, made it a far more powerful token of this inspiration than the other visual imagery of the period. Posters, newspapers and other media could exhort the correct behaviour, they could inform sentiment, they could quote Mao in

great depth, but they could only do so from a distance. Mao badges bridged the distance of mediated space and established a direct connection between the leadership and the wearer's body.

[i] Jiehong Jiang, *Red : China's Cultural Revolution* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2010), 241.
[ii] Melissa Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge : the creation and mass consumption of a personality cult* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 71.
[iii] Ibid., 62–3.
[iv] The 'bloodline' theory was popular in the early months of the Cultural Revolution. It stated that ones political lineage would determine their class nature. In autumn 1966, Mao disputed the bloodline theory, saying anyone could elevate their status through political action. The 'Five Black Categories' were landlords, rich farmers, anti-revolutionists, bad elements, and right wingers. Ibid., 49–50.
[v] Douglas and Isherwood quoted in ibid., 106.
[vi] Zhou quoted in Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 260–261.
[vii] Feng quoted in Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 113–114.
[viii] Gao Yuan, *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1987), 151.
[ix] Ibid., 120.
[x] Dutton, *Streetlife China*, 241.
[xi] Robert Benewick, "Icons of Power: Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution," in *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution*, ed. Stephanie Donald and Harriet Evans (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999), 125.
[xii] Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 105.
[xiii] Robert Benewick and Stephanie Donald, "Badgering the People: Mao Badges, A Retrospective 1949-1995," in *Belief in China : Art and Politics; Deities and Mortality*, ed. Robert Benewick (Green Centre for Non-Western Art and Culture, 1996), 37–38.
[xiv] Jiang, *Red*, 92.
[xv] Feng quoted in Schrift, *Biography of a Chairman Mao Badge*, 130.
[xvi] Zhou quoted in ibid., 68.

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