



SOUVENIR MAO
ON COUNTLESS PORCELAIN FIGURINES,
THE CHINESE DICTATOR'S BENIGN FACE,
WITH ITS HOMELY MOLE, BECAME
THE REVOLUTION'S TRADEMARK.

By Steven Heller



Facing page: "Exceed U.S. and U.K." exhorts the sign carried by a factory worker as he and a peasant woman triumphantly ride a missile. This porcelain statuette symbolizes Mao's economic plan known as the Great Leap Forward, an ambitious 10-year effort (1966–1976) to achieve parity with the West no matter the human cost. **Left:** Mao wears the coat of the People's Liberation Army as he waves to the masses.

When hordes of Chinese youths wearing red armbands and waving the Little Red Book of quotations from Chairman Mao converged on Beijing's Tiananmen Square in August 1966, they did not decry the decrepitude of the aging dictator's 17-year-old Communist regime. Rather, the students and peasants who comprised the newly formed Red Guard cadres were a vanguard of revolutionary renewal—called into action by the crafty Mao Zedong himself. His leadership had been challenged by opposing factions within the Chinese Communist Party, and by commanding these impressionable minions, dubbed the Red Guard, to “Bombard the Headquarters,” tear down existing power structures, and purge corrupt high-ranking officials, Mao reasserted his Party domination. The event triggered the so-called Cultural Revolution, which destabilized and wreaked havoc on Chinese society until Mao's death in 1976.

Public criticism and recantation sessions were daily fare during this period. Inflammatory slogans attributed to Mao were promulgated to demonize rivals. Numerous propagandistic vehicles were introduced by Mao's handlers to insure his absolute control, including “enlightenment” campaigns coupled with decrees requiring that posters with Mao's visage be hung in all homes, and that Mao badges, Mao hats, and Mao jackets be worn at all times. Besides bolstering Mao's cult of personality, this resulted in an unexpected worldwide fashion trend. Mao's orchestrated acceptance of a Red Guard armband with the motto “Serve the people” during

that initial Tiananmen demonstration was not only an affirmation of power, but also signified that the next Chinese generation was totally his to do with as he pleased.

Official photos and paintings showing Mao wearing the armband and Red Guard neckerchief subsequently became as familiar as the mole on his Buddha-calm face. Mao was the principal and inviolable trademark of the Cultural Revolution, and the Maoist “brand” seeped into every corner of China, and eventually, into revolutionary movements throughout the Third World.

As if to compensate for the brutality of the Cultural Revolution, many Mao souvenirs issued to commemorate the Great Leap Forward in the political and economic realm projected a curiously benign sensibility. Indeed, some are almost childlike in their execution. Soviet Socialist Realism, introduced by Josef Stalin in 1933, was the model for most CCP graphic images, but unlike the turgidly solemn Stalinist model, Mao was portrayed as, to use advertising argot, a “friendly trade character,” more like a Cheeto Bandito than an iron-fisted Big Brother—replete with smiles and even a hearty open-mouthed laugh from time to time.

For the duration of the Cultural Revolution, Mao and his key allies were painted, drawn, stenciled, paper-cut, silk-woven, or engraved in official poses and casual vignettes on everything from posters to wristwatches. But of all the propagandistic memorabilia for exclusive use within China, the most ubiquitous were the armies of



BY DECREE, POSTERS WITH MAO'S IMAGE HAD TO BE HUNG IN EVERY HOME, AND MAO BADGES, MAO HATS, AND MAO JACKETS HAD TO BE WORN AT ALL TIMES.

colorful porcelain figurines that canonized him and other Communist heroes. Looking like revolutionary Hummels (those sappy collectible statuettes of children and animals), the figurines were made by “re-educated” artisans working in ceramic workshops who had once been denounced for bourgeois tendencies. The items they produced, often in quantities of hundreds of thousands, were usually presented as souvenirs to Party functionaries. Recipients so honored, however, were ordered to give the figurines prominent display—and heaven help anybody who broke one.

Possessing various iterations of these mini-Maos (with cigarette or without, with children or without, with party leaders or alone, or, famously, swimming in the Yangtze River) was a must. There were also huge assortments of elaborately molded porcelain friezes depicting peasants, workers, Red Guards, and soldiers in all manner of social and political interaction. Among the most prized, if eerie, of these featured self-satisfied Red Guard men and women or factory workers perpetrating cruel, though officially sanctioned, acts of humiliation on so-called counter-revolutionaries, who, kneeling dog-style (since they were considered criminal dogs), wore dunce caps and signs hanging from their necks scrawled with derogatory terms like “traitor” or “spy.”

The much-feared Madame Mao (Jiang Qing) managed many aspects of the propaganda effort from her ministry of public enlightenment in Beijing; from here, she oversaw film production

as well as the state-sanctioned opera and ballet companies, with their heavy-handed political messages. While propaganda teams in the capital determined media and content, the main components of the CCP effort were largely decentralized. Revolutionary committees throughout China had considerable autonomy with the materials they produced. Some artists and designers were employed by government-sponsored Ceramic and Porcelain Research Centers, but many collaborated with Red Guard units to continually create new designs that would compete with the outputs of other committees.

There was no limit to the types of approved depictions: from CCP leaders, to model factory workers and farmers, to children in school uniforms worshipping at the feet of Mao. Some ceramics were based on larger sculptural compositions, such as the enormous Rent Collector monument in northern China, which, in the spirit of class struggle, shows the brutality of wealthy landowners toward their long-suffering peasants.

Ceramics are an ancient Chinese craft, and porcelain was considered a more politically correct material than metal, which was scarce in China at the time. The figurines could be inexpensively manufactured, some in private kilns so as not to waste time or manpower in overworked factories. In this all-out campaign to brand the nation, ideology, and leader—at a time when access to television and radio was limited—these quaint though politically charged souvenirs brought revolution from the street into the home. 📍



From left across spread: Public humiliation session of a dunce cap-wearing “counter-revolutionary”; a peasant militia woman wears a Red Guard armband; an innkeeper stalls Nationalist soldiers while her Red comrade escapes; a character in a ballet wears a blue militia uniform; Mao reviews a Red Guard detachment from his Red Flag Jeep.