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*The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's
Cultural Revolution* by Laikwan Pang (review)

Hang Tu

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The Art of Cloning: Creative Production during China's Cultural Revolution, by Laikwan Pang. New York: Verso, 2017. 308 pp. US\$19.99 (Paperback). ISBN: 9781784785192.

There was an old scholarly prejudice that everything about the Cultural Revolution is worth studying except its *culture*. The cynical understanding of Maoist culture as ideological indoctrination found its empirical supports from the memory politics of the post-Mao generation who uncritically dismissed this tumultuous period as a “cultural desert.” Nevertheless, Mao’s skewed cultural practice has raised crucial questions not only to the contested meaning of Maoist aesthetics in particular but also to the function of art in socialist revolution in general. How did a soul-transforming project to empower human agency, democratize cultural production, and formulate a brand new proletarian worldview result in an aesthetical and political failure? With the revival of interest in political culture, recent years have witnessed a succession of monographs on the culture of the Cultural Revolution—Barbara Mittler’s comprehensive survey of major art forms, Daniel Leese’s historical study of the metamorphosis of Mao Cult, and Yiching Wu’s sharp interpretation into the grassroots Maoism at the margins, to just name a few. Laikwan Pang’s timely intervention into the art of revolutionary models renews the field by *theorizing* the dialectics of artistic creativity and political command in Maoist cultural production. Informed but not exhausted by post-Marxist/poststructuralist theories of agency, Pang is dedicated to dispelling the simplified understanding of Maoist culture as lifeless uniformity.

Pang is particularly interested in the process of subject formation—understood as the ways in which “individuals interact with the dominant ideology to acquire a sense of self.” Pang’s theorization of agency is caught between two paradigms: the Althusserian view of a passive individual interpellated by ideological apparatus on the one hand, and the Gramscian understanding of hegemony as a synthesis of coercion and consent on the other. For Pang, Mao’s shifting stance between bottom-up liberation and top-down control provided individuals with chances to tweak power hierarchy. Thus, the main goal of Maoist cultural politics—unification (一元化 *yiyuan hua*)—was never fully realized. Rather, cultural governance under Mao involved a constant interplay between “the integrity of the whole” and “the autonomy of the parts.”

Pang further (re)conceptualizes the term “mimesis” to theorize this ambivalent situation. She defines mimesis as a “process of social

formation or social healing” that helps the people “develop bonding and submit to the dominant ideology.” Here, the Durkheimian concern for collective solidarity is complicated, if not compromised, by the voluntarist impulse to seek genuine identifications from the individual. On the one hand, one loses independent judgment under Maoist totalistic governance; on the other hand, by emulating, rather than obeying, Maoist commands, one regains cognitive and active agency and disrupts unified conformity. The power of mimesis, as Pang argues, is of crucial importance in understanding the politics of copying in Maoist society. Maoist propaganda actively promoted a wide range of models—model plays (樣板戲 *yangbanxi*), model idols (模範 *mofan*), and leader cults (領袖崇拜 *lingxiu chongbai*). Ironically, the proliferation of these models, which supposedly required stringent emulation, caused their diversification and distortion by the masses.

Chapter 1 starts by outlining the aesthetic principles of Maoist art. The instrumentalization of art led to its predictability, revealed in the regime’s doctrinal call for “Three Prominences” (三突出 *santuchu*), “Tall, Big, Complete” (高, 大, 全 *gao da quan*), and “Red, Bright, Shinning” (紅, 光, 亮 *hong guang liang*). Meanwhile, this socialism realism was infused with a “Maoist romanticism”—a conglomerate of Mao’s voluntarism, avant-gardism, and revolutionary romanticism of the thirties. This aesthetic structure encouraged people to transgress and rebel while sought to contain political subversion within the party’s political scheme. Pang furthers her analysis by investigating the undergirding cultural economy behind aesthetics in chapter 2. Contrary to the capitalist cultural industry that accumulates private capital, socialist cultural production is meant to advance the Maoist collective. This fundamentally transformed authorship from talented individuals into a sublime but anonymous collective—the revolutionary masses. Moreover, authorship and readership became intertwined with each other in the participation of the masses. Under this circumstance, the inflation of Mao’s works in the book market could not be understood as simple regression into cultural homogenization. Mao could not be regarded as a single author writing the nation. Rather, the masses participated in the collective authority of Mao’s works by feverishly reading, interpreting, and debating Mao’s teachings.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 take a comprehensive survey of various state patronized models, from barefoot doctors to Cantonese operas and revolutionary ballets. The ambiguity of mimesis reveals itself in the state’s

ceaseless attempt to impose rigid models to formulate political conformity on the one hand, and the local masses' creative appropriation of these political formalities on the other. The circulation of the image of barefoot doctor, as Pang analyzes, stemmed from heterogeneous factors mingling artistic aspirations with realistic concerns: Mao's voluntarist impulse to proletarianize medical professions, the dire need to provide affordable medical services to the rural masses, and the political tactic to "responsibilize" local communities on fiscal ends. The result was the collapse of vertical power in the face of the power's horizontal dispersion, as local communes constantly produced their own versions of barefoot doctors.

Meanwhile, the flexible production was boosted by regional variations. Pang sharply teases out the difficulty of transplanting Yangbanxi into Cantonese Opera. The Northern-centered Yangbanxi aesthetics was drastically different from Cantonese cultural forms. More specifically, although the visual arrangements of Cantonese opera could be reformed to comply to the meticulous demands of Yangbanxi, the acoustic aspect proved to be irreconcilable. As a result, the adaptation of Cantonese opera was caught between a cyclical struggle between local adaptation and central control. The promotion of revolutionary ballet encountered a similar problem, as its foreign form recalcitrantly resisted co-optation. The sexually provocative dance forms and bourgeois femininity constantly overshadowed the desexualization of Maoist aesthetics.

The last two chapters place together two almost diametrically opposed models: Mao the sublime and intellectual the abject. Mao, as the most carefully calibrated, censored, and deified representation of the Cultural Revolution, ironically became the most willfully distorted and compromised figure for the masses. Calling the image of Mao as a "doxa," Pang argues that it was precisely the ubiquitous presence of Mao that emptied the meaning of his image. The ritualized deification of Mao evacuated the unifying political message of the symbol, and so opened the space for creative interpretations. Meanwhile, if the Mao cult was meant to unify the mass by imposing positive idols, the denunciation of the intellectual as ghosts served the same function by provoking negative symbols. Educated intellectuals were structurally placed into a Kojevian "negating negativity" who sacrificed themselves to preserve social cohesion. This negative mimesis functions through sacrifice—to punish intellectuals through mass indictment, and ghost-turning—to banish them into a spectral status as abject figures. By creating the object of hate, Mao's proletarian subject became more firmly anchored.

Pang concludes the book by pointing out the limit of Maoist mimesis. The schizophrenic call for ideological conformity and creative appropriation tore individuals asunder. The result was neither the actualization of Maoist collective nor the triumph of individual will. Rather, constant politicizations generated a nonchalance toward the political in general: the post-Mao transformation witnessed the fanatic embrace of bourgeois interiority, accompanied by a cynical understanding of the public as merely playground for power struggles. Maoist mimesis may have elevated human agency temporarily, but proves to be unable to tackle the question of alterity for a pluralistic democracy.

One finds this conclusion perplexing: Pang opens the book by a theoretical and historical attempt to retrieve people's agency from the conventional interpretation of Maoist subject as passive and suppressed. She successfully demonstrates that Maoist art forms—its production, circulation, and reception—were far from monolithic. Aside from its function as tools of politicization, these art forms were imbricated with individuals' authentic desire for liberation. By the end, she nevertheless concludes that the creative potentialities endowed by Maoist mimesis didn't cultivate plurality and democracy: it failed to construct a positive intersubjective bond.

It is possible to conceive of this as a historiographic inquiry without hermeneutical ambitions: Pang is primarily interested in bringing the autonomy of art back to the scholarships on Mao. Yet the incongruity between refurbishing Maoist agency in theory and denouncing Maoist practice in reality, betrays a Benjaminian desire to seize hold of history at a standstill, projecting Mao's revolution not "as it happened" but "as it could have been." In other words, the democratizing impulse of Maoist art, despite its catastrophic results, still speaks to us with unrealized potentialities. Theorizing Maoist subject formation might provide us with a chance to excavate that radical potentiality.

By no means do I attempt to impose political judgments upon Pang's rigorous theoretical innovations. On the contrary, I want to explore the extent to which the ambivalent agency in Pang's work is imbricated with a deeper methodological problem of post-Marxism / French theory in general. Pang's enthusiastic attempt to bring autonomy to cultural sphere in analysis is intertwined with cultural Marxism's century-long struggles against the Marxian base/superstructure division. The resistance to economic determinism gave rise to a radical calling for cultural agency independent from socioeconomic structures. Canonized as the founders

of “French Theory,” Althusser, Bourdieu, and many others attempted to retrieve radical lens of Marxism by initiating a linguistic/discursive turn. As Warren Breckman points out, this “re-symbolization” replaced historical materialism with a symbolic understanding of the world structured by discourse. The temporary bracketing of the social reality in turn provides a possibility to affirm radical agency of Marxism.

The analysis of Mao as doxa is the most representative of Pang’s dependence on the discursive turn of post-Marxism. Mao the leader of real politics couldn’t monopolize the power of the cult toward himself, because Mao as a discursive construction is a linguistic arena where antagonistic forces striving to enunciate him. Pang radicalizes her point by suggesting that this linguistic anarchism renders Mao as a passive medium rather than an active initiator of power, as she puts it: “power *passes through* Mao, who submitted to and exercised it” (emphasis mine). Pang regards Mao as a “power-effect” that merely provides “a network in which power circulates.” The Foucauldian antirealism not only decentralizes the hierarchical structure of Mao cult, but also banishes all power relations into the *symbolic* realm. The result is the restoration of the agency of the masses, because now mimetic subjects are free to emulate and transform Mao the symbol in a willful manner. However, did the fact that people could freely discuss Mao *discursively* necessarily testify to the existence of their political agency? If radical agency can be achieved only by prioritizing the symbolic over the real, how *radical* is it? Even if there was a radical agency outside of the discursive, does agency always bear *positive* implications?

This conundrum speaks of a political paradox: post-Marxism’s radical retrieval of agency might have resulted in the *retreat* of radicalism into the symbolic. Admittedly, the symbolic turn reinvented discursive struggles, cultural resistance, and a conception of the political no longer bounded by dialectical materialism. It remains contested, however, whether this turn truly (re)discovered human agency in theory and in practice. Meanwhile, the application of post-Marxist analysis into the Chinese context strikes me as ironic: Pang’s historiographical attempt to fragmentize Maoist power relies on a Western theory of agency that betrays its own desire to decentralize power as a gesture of resistance. Pang’s conceptualization of Maoist aesthetic anarchism is directed toward Mao’s revolution as her *object* of analysis, but her analytical framework is historically inspired by a theoretical anarchism. Thus, (retrieving) radical agency seems to have become the object of her study *and* the subject that

motivates her inquiry at once. This dubious affinity between Mao's aesthetic anarchism and poststructuralism's theoretical anarchism (Deleuzian schizopolitics, Foucauldian micropolitics, etc.) might lead to the idealization of history on the one hand, and the separation of theoretical intention from historical result on the other.

Overall, Professor Pang's project represents a rigorous and passionate inquiry that refreshes our understanding of subject formation under Mao. It poses important questions concerning the relationship between the masses, art works, and socialist revolution in China. Pang's audacious theorization challenges the Western concept of mimesis, and places Mao's aesthetics into a creative dialogue with post-Marxist/poststructuralist theories. Meanwhile, the ambivalent agency theorized by Pang might shed light on the question of why Maoist subjects in history, with all their mimetic power, were never truly emancipated from Mao's control. Walter Benjamin pointed out that Fascist populism did not give back the masses their rights, but merely gave them a chance to *express*, preserving instead of disrupting the monopoly of power. This process was termed by him as "the aestheticization of politics." Fascism empowers human agency discursively while deprives individuals of their subjectivities in the real world. Against this, Benjamin expected a genuine attempt to empower human agency by communism—an act he called "the politicization of arts." As Pang's mimetic subject reveals, it is uncertain whether Mao's revolution has provided an answer and what exactly that answer is.

Hang Tu
Harvard University