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Long Live Chairman Mao! Death, Resurrection, and the (Un)Making of a Revolutionary Relic

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Abstract

Why does Mao's embalmed corpse continue to arouse powerful religious feelings among contemporary Chinese writers after the end of his rule, from fantasies of resurrection to yearnings for redemption? While extant scholarship focuses on the sociopolitical aspects of Mao's posthumous cult, this essay reveals the crucial role that literary narrative plays in the (un)making of Mao's quasi-religious appeal. Drawing on literary genres such as diary, memoir, science fantasy, and satirical fiction, I argue that the political theology of Mao can be read as a grand "political fiction" that linked the doubling of Mao's immortal body with the perpetual sovereignty of the Chinese Communist Party. However, even as literary narrative authorizes the political mythology of Mao, contemporary Chinese literature also demonstrates its capacity for ideological critique. My narrative begins with the party's controversial effort to sacralize Mao's biological remains, from the ritualized display of political sovereignty to the ambiguous allusion to religious miracle. Then I look at the bizarre resurrection of Mao's flesh in Liu Cixin's 劉慈欣 1989 science fiction novel *China 2185*. The story features a cybernetic uprising in the distant future, when a computer engineer breaks into the Mao mausoleum and "uploads" Mao's mind into cyberspace. Lastly, I draw on the satirical fictions of Yan Lianke 閻連科 and Chan Koonchung 陳冠中 to reveal the desacralizing impacts of neoliberal capitalism on the Maoist political religiosity.

Keywords: Chan Koonchung; Liu Cixin; Mao Cult; political theology; Yan Lianke

In the spring of 1989, Liu Cixin (1963–), a young engineer working at a power plant in Shanxi, drafted his first political cyberpunk novel, *China 2185* (中國 2185), a piece that remains available only in online forums (Liu 2012). The story portrays how Mao's reanimation triggers a cybernetic uprising that brings China's future government to the brink of collapse. The Great Helmsman's embalmed corpse was placed into a crystal coffin and put on permanent display in 1977 at the south end of Tiananmen Square. Although the body is missing vital organs, the relic of the founding father continues to attract a steady stream of curious visitors in Liu's futuristic utopia. At this moment, a mysterious hacker sneaks into Mao Memorial Hall and uses holographic simulation software to scan Mao's and five other dead seniors' brains to create their "digital avatars" in cyberspace, effectively bringing the dead back to cyber life. Yet the resurrection of Mao soon leads to an unprecedented political crisis. Just when people are thrilled by the realization of "digital immortality," one of the avatars begins to replicate his consciousness on the internet, producing millions of "electric pulse beings" (脈衝人). Dismayed by future China's revisionist turn away from revolution, the Maoist clone army destroys the Central Firework System and establishes a cyber-based regime called "The Republic of Huaxia" (華夏共和國). China's political leader eventually chooses to shut down the national power system to eliminate the revolutionary regime in cyberspace. The story ends with Mao's final admonishment before his disappearance: any attempt at immortality is futile, because "immortality is mortality" (永生就是永死).

China 2185 reveals some of the most intriguing mystic-political fantasies aroused by Mao's embalmed corpse, from the allegory of religious relic to the posthumanist theme of technologically enabled human immortality. While Liu's distance from the cult of Mao is obvious, he does not forecast

a future Chinese polity that replaces charismatic leadership with legalistic and bureaucratic routine. Rather, Mao's spectral aura constantly haunts Liu's technological utopia, devoid of sacred meaning. This ambiguity signifies contrasting public opinions toward Mao's biological remains in contemporary China. On the one hand, neo-Maoists feverishly imagined how his resurrection would revitalize Mao's revolutionary politics and strike fear into the hearts of China's domestic and foreign enemies. Yet this overheated millennialism was frequently repudiated by liberal intellectuals, who condemned the quasi-religious worship of a "revolutionary relic" as a regression to the "uncivilized and inhuman" tradition of the imperial cult. The open display of Mao's biological remains, as the Chinese historian Zhang Lifan 章立凡 (1950–) and human rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang 浦志强 (1965–) (2014) argued, was not only a flagrant moral and legal violation of Mao's expressed wish for a frugal socialist funeral, but also detrimental to Deng Xiaoping's effort to displace the "disguised monarchism" of the Mao era with a collective leadership. In contrast with the leftist fascination with Mao's enshrined corpse, the liberals launched petitions to cremate Mao's body in accordance with the traditional funeral of "interment," a Confucian ritual to bury the dead underneath to achieve "final serenity" (*ritu weian* 入土為安). Both sides signaled the unsettling effects of Mao's body magic on the Chinese present.

Do Mao's biological remains continue to inspire devotion to the postrevolutionary regime? Or does the party's scandalous reliance on Mao's holy relic weaken its secular political authority? Most importantly, how should we understand the intersection of secular politics and religious metaphors embedded in the ritualized display of Mao's corporeal remains? Here, the question of "political religiosity" goes beyond doctrinal disputes of revealed religions to connote the profound spiritual allure of Mao's charismatic leadership. Therefore, a brief overview of the complex role that Mao's body played in the Chinese revolution can helpfully problematize this fusion of politics and religion.

To begin with, the sheer weight of Mao's "flesh" in the symbolic universe of Chinese socialism is fraught with tension. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—its Leninist party organization and Marxist ideology notwithstanding—inherited the cultural iconoclasm of the May Fourth Movement to overthrow all "divine authorities" and "feudal superstitions." Yet the impulse to enshrine the revolutionary leader proves as tempting as it is ironic. The need to concentrate power against internal and external enemies gave birth to the cult of Mao's leadership during the Chinese Civil War (1927–49). In particular, the sacralization of Mao's flesh bears out Ernst Kantorowicz's (2016, 1) thesis that the king's body natural is indispensable to the legitimacy of the body politic. For nearly half a century, the propagation of Mao's image generated feverish popular support for the party establishment, salvaging the revolutionary regime from a succession of legitimization crises, from the Yan'an days to the era of high socialism. Just as Elaine Scarry (1985, 14) contends that the "sheer material factualness" of the human body outperforms high-flown ideologies and faceless bureaucrats in the midst of crises, Mao's physical body stirred up mass emotions to overcome the enormous human costs of wars, class struggles, and massive economic failures. The quasi-religious halo of Mao culminated in the initial days of the Cultural Revolution: his thought inspired spiritual salvation, his touch produced miracles, his portrait cured disease, he appeared as an immortal god-like figure in propaganda arts, and his "traveling mangoes" became a sacred object of deep veneration nationwide (Chau 2010, 256–75; Cook 2014, 1–22; Landsberger 1996, 196–214; Leese 2011; Palmer and Goossaert 2011).

With the demise of Mao, however, the legacy of the personality cult was placed on trial. Deng Xiaoping's 1981 "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party" tackled Mao's controversial legacy by separating Mao's contributions—as the founder of the Chinese revolution—from his "erroneous" ultra-leftist undertaking that caused "ten years of turmoil." Realizing the alarming fact that Mao had "cannibalized the party from within," the reformist leadership sought to contain and sanitize the excessive cult of Mao, with his iconic slogans and posters removed from the public space, his idiosyncratic vision of revolution reinterpreted as "the crystallization of collective wisdom" (Lee 2016, 251), and his lifelong obsession with revolutionary violence rearticulated in the depoliticized rhetoric of "national salvation" (Dirlik 2015). In conjunction with this, Chinese intellectuals inaugurated a series of "cultural reflections" to address the human abuses, mass violence, and other forms of severe social injustice conducted in the frenzy of the Mao cult. The multivalent liberal assaults on Mao's legacy—cult of personality, ultra-leftist violence, and ideological fanaticism—sought to dethrone the

omnipresent master from the post-Mao political and cultural renewal. Advocates of secular humanism fulminated against the religious aura of Mao as a remnant of emperor worship. In sum, both intellectuals and the party establishment were drawn increasingly away from personalistic rule and toward the institutionalization of collective leadership.

Ironically, the charisma of Mao proved to be more resilient and sustaining than the 1980s enlightenment project. From the early 1990s onward, the tripartite forces of commodification, pluralization, and nihilistic hedonism significantly undermined the appeal of secular modernity. Rebooted and transformed, the image of Mao returned to the Chinese public through multiple forms, including the charismatic founding father in the commercialized “mainstream melodies” and the mystical earthly god in folklore and popular religion (Barmé 1996; Chen 2016, 101–64). While Mao’s public image had been carefully orchestrated by the party-state throughout his lifetime, his posthumous cult appeared to be spontaneous and dynamic. For many critics, the ultimate icon of revolution underwent a process of “secularization” and “democratization” in the age of mass culture (Barmé 1996, 19–23). Mao, in other words, was no longer the formidable teacher, philosopher, and founder of the Chinese revolution. Rather, commodification had transformed the Great Helmsman into a fallible human being who had a penchant for oily food, wished to live among peasants, and followed the traditional chivalric spirit to guide his revolution. Yet the extensive production of “EveryMao” (Barmé 1996, 19) did not simply lead to a thoroughly secularized account of his popular image. Above all, Mao’s enshrined corpse—his most tangible and concrete legacy—continues to evoke powerful religious and political resonances, from fantasies of resurrection to yearnings for redemption. This brings profound ambiguity to the narrative about Mao’s “secularization” that prevents us from seeing the mutation of Mao’s image into new modalities.

The spectral persistence of Mao’s holy power raises important questions regarding the quasi-religious dimension of secular political authority in the modern era. In particular, Carl Schmitt’s (2005, 36) bold claim that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts” has deeply shaped scholarly accounts of the abiding affinity between modern authoritarianism and Christological worldviews, from Hannah Arendt’s (1973) analysis of totalitarianism to Emilio Gentile’s (2006) paradigmatic rethinking of “political religion,” from Karl Löwith’s (1957) discussion of the eschatological roots of communism to Eric Voegelin’s (2000) excavation of the “Gnostic revolt” that anticipated modern totalistic governance. Working within the Judo-Christian tradition, these scholars focus on the “permanence of the theological-political” (Lefort 2006): the persistent haunting of the modern state by something outside of secular reason, an exception that compels political authority to invoke the tropes of transcendence (messiah, miracle, redemption) in the register of immanence (leader, party, socialism). Although this collective endeavor furnishes a genealogical investigation into the theological origins of the European fascist and communist dictatorships, it tends to understand the *elective affinity* between premodern theology and secular politics as one-directional *causality* (Gordon 2013, 152–55). From this perspective, the ostensibly secular dimension of modern politics is merely a strategy of persuasion that conceals its theological inheritance.

Meanwhile, political scientists have cautioned against applying Western political theology to the Chinese context. While the resemblance between traditional folk deities and the worship of Mao has been extensively studied, Daniel Leese (2011, 260) and other scholars have shown that religious explanations alone are inadequate to explain the “actual shaping and sustaining of the [Mao] cult phenomenon.” For this reason, extant scholarship highlights the CCP’s strategic and instrumental deployment of quasi-religious symbols, rituals, and values for purposes of political persuasion and mass mobilization (Perry 2012, 5). From this rational-functionalist perspective, the Mao cult is understood as the result of “rational calculation” at the individual level and “non-hierarchical forms of bureaucratic communication” at the structural level (Leese 2011; Wang 1995). Hence, the religious facade of the cult functions not so much as the underlying substance of secular politics, but floating symbols manipulated by a thoroughly rationalized state.

This article offers a different perspective on the intertwined relationship between politics and religion through a hermeneutic reading of the fictional representation of Mao’s body magic. I contend that narrative fiction (小説) will take us to different places than social science. Here, what I mean by

“fiction” is not only literary fabrication but also the narratological construction of political mythologies ranging across historical memory, national allegory, and utopian dreams. From the discursive construction of Yan’an as a “revolutionary simulacrum” to the ritualized practice of “speaking bitterness” (訴苦) in the land reform, the Chinese socialist machinery repeatedly took up storytelling—or the fabrication of reality—to incite utopian passion and solicit religious conviction (Anagnost 1997, 17–44; Apter and Saich 1994, 224–62). Perhaps for this reason, fiction also serves as the primary medium for public discussion of and intellectual engagement with Mao’s dark legacies in the reform era (Wang 2020, 1–29). Echoing Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) observation that “fiction rises when historiography shows signs of decline,” writers and publishers utilized “small talks”—fringe, unofficial, and fictionalized history—to evade censorship and reveal the immemorial and the unspeakable part of the Mao era. Thus, the fabrication of political myth and its disavowal brings to the fore the most troubling yet enticing aspects of Chinese literary modernity.

More specifically, I focus on the inextricable tension between political fiction and literary fiction in the (un)making of Mao’s body magic. In connection with Kantorowicz’s (2016) thesis that the mystique of sacred kingship originated in medieval literary and legal fictions, I read Mao’s enshrined body as a state-orchestrated “political fiction” that linked a doubling of Mao’s corporeal remains with the perpetual sovereignty of the CCP. Yet, the fictional nature of Mao’s political theology inevitably generates its own antithesis: even if the creation of a “revolutionary relic” incites political sacrality, its scandalous reliance on literary narration incurs doubts and suspicions. Following the traditional medical therapy of “fighting poison with poison” (以毒攻毒), contemporary Chinese novelists wield the power of storytelling to expose the artificial myth of Mao’s body magic. In doing so, they remind us that fiction embodies the act of *poesis*: the power of narrative to make and unmake political mythologies (Kahn 2014, 3). Admittedly, my hermeneutic approach might not resolve the scholarly disagreements between the rational-functionalist and the theological understanding of the Maoist political religiosity. Yet the dynamic interplay between political and literary fiction might help us understand the dialectical nature of Mao’s manufactured divinity at the narratological level: how it melded religious charm and political power, how it simultaneously functioned as a sacred object and as kitsch, and how it conjured up both religious awe and sacrilegious impulses among post-Mao intellectuals and writers.

The following pages trace the vicissitudes of Mao’s enshrined body in a series of historical and literary fictions, from the diary of Mao’s personal physician and other “garbage materials” written in the style of “internal source” (內部消息),¹ to a variety of science fantasies, political novels, and satirical literature in contemporary China. My narrative begins with the party’s decision to preserve Mao’s body in a time of intense emotional grief and political uncertainties. I analyze how Mao’s biological remains were endowed with layers of political-theological meaning, from the ritualized display of political sovereignty to the ambiguous allusion to religious miracle. Then I look at the bizarre resurrection of Mao’s flesh in Liu Cixin’s 劉慈欣 1989 science fiction novel *China 2185*. Lastly, I draw on the satirical fictions of Yan Lianke 閻連科 (1958–) and Chan Koonchung 陳冠中 (1952–) to reveal the desacralizing impacts of neoliberal capitalism on the Maoist political religiosity. Yan and Chan describe how Mao’s sacred aura underwent a process of mutation in the disorienting tempos of global capitalism, endorsing and enchanting not revolutionary fanaticism, but the neoliberal dictum to “get rich.” In each of these works, I pay close attention to the intersection of secular politics and religious metaphors in the (un)making of a revolutionary relic.

Embalming the Great Helmsman

Chairman Mao died at approximately 12:10 a.m. on September 9, 1976. His personal physician, Dr. Li Zhisui 李志綏 (1919–95), faithfully recorded his last days. At the very end, Mao’s physical body was

¹I call these nonspecialist, unofficial sources “historical fiction” not to question their accuracy, but to highlight the fusion between objective narration and subjective evaluation in the popular historiographical account of Mao. To make history lively and entertaining, these authors often utilize tales, rumors, and unverifiable “secret documents,” modify materials, and offer personal judgments. This imaginative configuration of history harks back to the literary tradition of Sima Qian’s *Shi Ji* (史記).

ravaged by multiple diseases. Gluttony, irascible temper, and poor hygiene had gradually eroded his life over the years (Li 1994, 8). With both lungs deteriorated, the eighty-three-year-old autocrat could only breathe with an oxygen mask; the progression of a rare and fatal amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) led to muscular atrophy and cost him the ability to swallow and speak. Eventually, his weakened heart proclaimed the imminence of death (Li 1994, 9). As the diseases progressed, Mao's comrades and relatives abandoned him to the courtyard of Zhongnanhai (中南海)—the central headquarters of the CCP—to avoid being blamed for his impending collapse. His round cheeks swollen and skin ashen, the dying man could only utter slurred speech, to be decoded by his favorite confidential secretary, Zhang Yufeng 張玉鳳 (1945–). At this moment, the deterioration of Mao's flesh threatened to tarnish the popular fantasies associated with his immortal image. Could the revolution be immortal when the revolutionary leader only has a mortal body?

Within two hours of the Great Helmsman's death, Hua Guofeng 華國鋒 (1921–2008), Mao's designated successor, held an emergency meeting with the top leaders to discuss Mao's funeral. The immediate question was whether to preserve Mao's remains or accept cremation. In theory, Mao should have been buried in accordance with the party's universal incineration policy. The funeral reform of the 1950s enforced the work-unit-based "memorial meeting" (追悼會) to replace the onerous Confucian burial rituals. The simplification of mourning rites was in accord with the Marxist materialist conception of the human body: since death is only part of the everlasting metabolic exchanges between nature and the social world, the deceased body is to be regarded as pure matter devoid of theological subtleties, a thing without a soul. Mao himself had expressed an utterly atheist vision of afterlife in 1956: "We should all be cremated after we die, turned into ashes and used for fertilizer" (Mao 1998, 110). By contrast, enshrining Mao's corpse would bring up dangerous allusions to imperial emperorship. In addition, preservation runs the risk of physical defilement in the case of future political reversals. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards smashed open the graves of "counterrevolutionaries" and defiled the corpses to annihilate their last physical traces. Preserving Mao's remains hence invites the perennial fear of posthumous retribution (Wakeman 1985, 150).

There are no reliable records of how the central leadership, including Mao's widow, Jiang Qing 江青, and her "Gang of Four" radical faction, eventually reached the decision to preserve the corpse. While Mao had signed his pledge to be cremated, Politburo members feared that the reduction of Mao's enshrined body to ashes might confuse or even shock the Chinese. In life, Mao's sublime body had been a site for the assertion of sovereign power and the incarnation of the mass will (Lee 2016, 245–70). Although the zenith of the Mao cult had passed by the late 1970s, his sublime image—reproduced in portraits, posters, badges, and other popular art forms—was still omnipresent (Leese 2011, 195–252).

In particular, the celebration of Mao's physical prowess had been a central strategy of the Communist propaganda. One finds a recurrent logic that links the physical vitality of Mao's body to the health of the Chinese nation. In sharp contrast with the "Sick Man of Asia" embodied in the corrupt and moribund Qing dynasty, Mao's supreme strength and vitality represented a new stage in China's centennial struggles for national rejuvenation. Mao's widely publicized Yangtze River swim in 1966, for instance, was hailed as "an act with both political and quasi-religious significance" (Barmé 1996, 25). The god-like figure of Mao was further strengthened by the ritualized enactment of the cult in daily life. At the height of the Cultural Revolution, millions of Chinese practiced the ritual of "asking for instructions in the morning, thanking Mao for his kindness at noon, and reporting back at night" (Li 1994, 18). Hence, it was hard to imagine what might happen if Mao's body were cremated. Wang Dongxing 汪东兴 (1916–2015), Mao's head bodyguard, pleaded with Dr. Li to "have some regards for our feelings" (Li 1994, 18), and it was feared that the sudden collapse of a physiological miracle might be too volatile and dangerous for the party leadership in transition.

Hence, senior leaders initially agreed that Mao's body should be temporarily preserved and displayed inside the Great Hall of the People to allow the Chinese people to pay their last respects to the deceased founding father. The radio announcement of Chairman Mao's death, which came sixteen hours later, was saturated with formulaic eulogies and did not sketch out any plans for the funeral. With the socialist anthem "The Internationale" echoing over Beijing at dusk, eight days of memorial ceremonies were scheduled for the entire nation to mourn and honor the Chairman. Just when foreign

media speculated that cremation or burial would soon be carried out and attended only by top leaders, a hastily formed “preservation team” (遺體保護小組), including medical professionals, biologists, and refrigeration engineers, began to search, under immense political pressure, for viable preservation options. The team was headed by the Soviet-trained biologist Dr. Xu Jing 徐靜, vice director of morphology at the Chinese Academy of Medical Science (Cao 2010, 500–501; Li 1994, 22). On the morning after Mao’s death, Dr. Xu and her team met with Politburo members in Zhongnanhai to discuss their urgent mission. Scientists concurred that a short-term preservation could be easily managed by injecting formaldehyde into Mao’s body cavity (Li 1994, 17). By contrast, long-term preservation for the purpose of public display was considered scientifically unrealistic, especially given the material scarcity and technological backwardness of China in 1976. As victims of Mao’s rustication campaign, several team members had just been “hauled out of a re-education camp” in the rural hinterland, where they had been cut off from scientific exchanges for decades (Kaye 1994, 17).

Shortly afterward, Dr. Xu Jing performed a short-term embalming procedure to prevent Mao’s corpse from decomposing. Autopsy specialists washed and disinfected the body. Yet, according to Dr. Li’s ghoulish account, the panic-stricken Dr. Xu caused significant disfiguration by injecting an excessive dose of formaldehyde into the corpse. Mao’s face became bloated, with “his neck now the width of his head,” and “formaldehyde oozed from his pores like perspiration” (Li 1994, 20). The team then massaged the swollen parts with towels and cotton balls and used makeup to restore Mao’s normal facial form. They also took a detailed record of the body’s dynamic physical characteristics, including its color, weight, skin texture, and flexibility of joints (Cao 2010, 506). The measurement of the body’s physical form became crucial for later reparation and restoration.

The success of the temporary preservation gave Chinese scientists a chance to navigate a long-term plan. A few days later, the party center decided to permanently preserve Mao’s remains for posterity. Although political calculation might have been the primary reason, the religious myth of incorruptible remains also played a significant role in the decision. In the next meeting between the scientists and the Politburo members, senior leaders were eager to learn the secrets behind those well-known embalmed bodies worldwide, from Vladimir Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, and Sun Yat-sen to the ancient Egyptian and Chinese mummies (Cao 2010, 503; Palmer 2012, 182–83). Soviet experts have developed an impressive technology to maintain Lenin’s body, but all scientific exchanges between the two nations were cut off following the Sino-Soviet split in 1966 (Yurchak 2015). A special delegation was dispatched to Hanoi in the hope of studying Ho Chi Minh’s body, but the Chinese request was turned down by the Vietnamese government (Li 1994, 22–23; Zabarksy and Hutchinson 1997, 172–90). Medical experts also learned that Sun Yat-sen’s body had already decayed before any decisions about his funeral could be made (Cao 2010, 503; Wakeman 1985).

Besides the modern cases, the discovery of a Western Han (202 BCE–9 CE) female mummy in Mawangdui (馬王堆) was also brought up (Cao 2010, 503). When the tomb was excavated in 1971, archaeologists found that an unknown liquid that filled the coffin had kept the skin soft and moist, with all the organs and blood vessels intact. A special chemical compound known as kaolin clay was also used to seal the coffin, preventing water and air from seeping inside. At the time of discovery, the corpse did not show any signs of decomposition. The miracle of an ancient body well-preserved for more than two thousand years apparently made a deep impression on the party leaders. However, preserving Mao’s corpse in a manner similar to ancient mummy was unthinkable primarily because of the public nature of Mao’s image. Whereas royal bodies in imperial China were buried deep inside the labyrinth of secret tombs, the main purpose of modern preservation was to showcase the leader’s remains as the symbol of sovereign power (Wu 2005, 57–58). As an anatomist explained to the Politburo members, preserving the corpse—immersing the shrunken body cavity in the balsamic liquid—would not meet the basic standard of public display (Cao 2010, 504).

The fear of physical decay loomed over the meticulous dialogue about the techniques of embalming. As it decomposes, a body dries up, shrinks, changes color, and grows moles. Even though modern technology might forestall actual decomposition, the corpse would inevitably lose its originally shape. Katherine Verdery (2000, 5) argues that the religious charm of a socialist statue is manifested in its ability to “arrest the process of that person’s bodily decay” to bring him into the timeless realm of

the sacred. But the preservation of Mao's corpse was even more ambitious, for by defying and reversing the natural process of decay, it attempted to manufacture a miracle.

In this regard, the task was not just preserving Mao's flesh, but creating a supernatural sense of being alive. Indeed, the term "lifelikeness" (栩栩如生) was repeatedly invoked by scientists and political leaders to describe the preferred state of the corpse (Cao 2010, 504; Yu 2013). Dr. Xu Jing explained that Chairman Mao's body must maintain its lively physical characteristics: skin color, posture, and facial features—a "lifelike state"—for public veneration. Such preservation is entirely different from making cadaver specimens, in which changes in the external appearance are considered natural. As the study of Lenin's embalmed body reveals, "conservation" does not capture the scientific artistic effort to resist biological decay (Yurchak 2015, 116). Creating sensuous, visual, and affective "illusions of life after death" (Linke 2005, 15) conjured up a phantasmagoric mirage of a living, breathing, and immortal being rather than a lifeless, static, and corruptible corpse.

To achieve this effect, a massive undertaking known as the Project Number One (一號工程) was secretly created to gather top medical experts, engineers, and architects to work on Mao's preservation (Yu 2013, 45). The personnel were divided into three separate divisions: the medical team was in charge of embalming the body; the engineering team, including mechanics, lighting experts, and glaziers, was responsible for the design of Mao's crystal coffin; and the construction team was assigned to work on Mao's mausoleum. After a brief public memorial ceremony, Mao's body was transferred to an underground military complex for a second embalming. Scientists left Mao's brain intact, but removed the viscera and replenished the main cavities of the body with embalming fluids (Li 1994, 23). With the assistance of refrigeration experts and mechanics, the body was then put into a transparent plexiglass jar filled with liquid nitrogen to control temperature and prevent decomposition (Xie 2016, 25–30). While these measures could slow down decay, they still could not prevent gradual changes in the physical appearance. The problem was finally resolved with the invention of a unique lighting system that illuminated Mao's body with dynamic colors. The xenon lamps inside Mao's crystal coffin produced a harmonization of colors, angles, and intensity that gave the appearance of normal skin tone. Optical engineers suggested that lighting functioned like plastic surgery (彩色配光整容): it lightened Mao's face, brightened the skin color, and reduced visible wrinkles and moles, restoring an authentic-seeming, living, and glowing body (Cao 2010, 519; Xie 2016, 28; Yu 2013, 47).

The entire project culminated in the completion of Mao Memorial Hall in Tiananmen Square in 1977 on the anniversary of Mao's death. The design of the building features Mao's body as the embodiment of Chinese history and nation. Architects were instructed by Vice Premier Gu Mu 谷牧 (1914–2009) to incorporate traditional Chinese architectural aesthetics while avoiding imitating imperial tombs whose grandeur only revealed the prowess of the "exploiting class." Instead of enshrining Mao's as an imperial ruler, the mausoleum was meant to "glorify the achievement of a modern revolutionary leader" (一座紀念無產階級革命家光輝一生的紀念堂) (Cao 2010, 529). It contained a biographical narrative of Mao's lifelong odyssey, especially how his personal endeavor was intertwined with nation building and revolution in twentieth-century China. To achieve this effect, building materials were shipped from important historical sites all over China: red granite from Dadu River in Sichuan, water and sand from the Taiwan Strait, and white marble stones from Fujian, Shandong, Liaoning, and many other places. Mao's effigy—a 3-meter-high white marble statue—sits at the northern entrance of the Hall, facing the gate of the Forbidden City. Behind the statue hung a huge landscape painting that depicted magnificent mountains and rivers, symbolizing the merging of Mao Zedong Thought with the Chinese landscape. Inside the Hall, Mao's crystal coffin was placed on a black catafalque of granite from Mount Tai, surrounded by mountain flowers. Mao's physical remains basked in dim and yellow light, as if the Chairman were "in the middle of a deep sleep." Finally, a line was inscribed on the southern wall: "Our great leader and teacher Chairman Mao Zedong is eternal without corrupting" (偉大領袖和導師毛主席永垂不朽).

Yet despite the elaborately crafted scheme to enshrine Mao's physical remains, the party leadership under Deng Xiaoping began to systematically erase the Mao cult from the Chinese political iconography. Besides the edict to remove Mao's images from public spaces, the CCP's 1981 "Resolution" proposed to evaluate Mao's deeds dialectically, which consisted of "thirty percent of wrongdoings and

seventy percent of righteousness.” In particular, Mao’s idiosyncratic vision of revolution—a practice punctuated by class violence, utopian ideology, and the cult of personality—was denounced as a dangerous deviation from the Chinese path to socialism. Hence, the recalibration of Mao’s legacy involved the refashioning of Mao Zedong Thought as the “crystallization of the collective wisdom of the Party” (Dirlik 2015, 19). In other words, the doctrine of Maoism was perceived as a cosmic worldview above the words and deeds of any single leader, and therefore could constantly evolve and adapt to the changing political reality beyond the horizon of revolution. While Deng Xiaoping sought to monopolize the interpretation of Mao’s ideas for his own reformist agenda, the devaluing of revolution was at odds with the sanctification of Mao’s physical remains. The tension between Maoism as a malleable teaching and Mao as the immoral relic produced ambivalent, if not schizophrenic, feelings and attitudes toward the revolutionary relic in the years to come.

“Immortality Is Mortality”

While the CCP sought to reshape itself through a reformist and covertly capitalist makeover in the 1980s, the myth of Mao’s vengeful return was still very tenacious in the popular imagination, especially among those who harbored a deep dissatisfaction with Deng’s “revisionist” reform policy. Although cultural critics lambasted the “imperial fantasies” embedded in the nationwide “Search for Mao Zedong,” the public looked fondly on the charisma of the long-dead Chairman, for whom it “offered simple answers to complex questions: direct collective action over painful individual decisions, reliance on the state rather than a grinding struggle for the self, national pride as opposed to self-doubt” (Barmé 1996, 321). For many, Mao’s moral leadership was intertwined with the lived experience of socialism: personal memories, youthful ideals, and romantic pursuits. By contrast, the chaotic market transition brought corruption, dispossession, and social dislocation. Therefore, the image of Mao’s enshrined body, detached from his destructive ultra-leftist adventure, rekindled nostalgic feelings and invited novelistic imaginations.

In this regard, Liu Cixin impels his readers to gaze at China’s murky postrevolutionary transition, in which neither the myth of Mao’s immortality nor the liberal’s iconoclastic call to “bid farewell to revolution” won the day. Although *China 2185* was only circulated among Liu’s fans, it was part of a larger “new wave” in the Chinese science fictional imagination that alternated between the utopian yearning for a technologized future and the dystopian reflection on Mao’s crumbling revolutionary legacy (Song 2015). Since the late Qing era, the foreign genre known as *kexuexiaoshuo* 科學小說 (science fiction) had been appropriated by reformist intellectuals to project a teleological vision of national rejuvenation and technological progress (Wang 1997, 252–312). Yet *China 2185*, which was composed only a few months before the 1989 Tiananmen democratic movement, presents a more ambiguous vision of China’s futuristic history. Liu projects an idealized political democracy in 2185, with female leadership, universal suffrage, and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, the vision of an enlightened China is complicated by the spectral existence of the Mao cult. Mao’s resurrection quickly gives sanction to a political uprising that paralyzes the democratic regime and even brings the whole world to the brink of war.

Liu’s ambivalence toward the Maoist leadership is manifested in his bizarre imagination of Mao’s “digital immortality.” The transfiguration of the corporeal Mao into an eternal digital existence fulfills the transhumanist vision of “ultra-Enlightenment,” in which the perfection of humanity is achieved through the radical extension of life through technological enhancement (Bernstein 2019, 165–210). If the embalming technique manufactures physical immortality in anticipation of the soul’s return, digital immortality rejects such mind-body dualism to prioritize the immaterial nature of Mao’s consciousness. Hence, Mao’s spiritual regeneration as an “electric pulse being” combines the fantasy of resurrection with a futuristic vision of “mind-uploading.” Mao’s digital avatar appears simultaneously archaic and modern, oppressive and emancipatory, dangerous and full of promise. Indeed, Mao’s digital avatar is hailed as the true Second Coming who stirs the emotions and thought of Chinese citizens. That Mao’s call to revolution is irresistible even in a futuristic utopia demonstrates the longevity of his dangerous appeal. Meanwhile, the reincarnated Mao promises not only the return of the revolutionary

sublime but also the arrival of universal digital immortality, which is hailed by transhumanists as the ultimate salvation of the human race. In Liu's perspective, transferring life from physical being into digital format ensures that a person's consciousness continues to exist after the decay of his body. In 2185, Chinese citizens are thrilled by Mao's regeneration primarily because it delivers the hope of eternal life. As the Russian Christian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov (1829–1903) declared, the struggle against death is a "common task" that dwarfs all secular revolution and enlightenment. Thus, the desire to realize humanity's most primordial cause—to be immortal—has rendered Mao's revolutionary legacy a rather frivolous, if not irrelevant cause to the future citizens of China.

Yet to conclude that Liu is a naive transhumanist simplifies his sustained reflections on the inner dynamics of Mao's posthumous cult. The novel gradually reveals that the Maoist-cum-posthuman revolution is not masterminded by Mao's avatar, but by the other five revived party seniors. Whereas Mao's loyal disciples rekindle revolutionary passion in cyberspace, Mao appears as a hermetic old man totally withdrawn from politics. After the Maoist clone army is defeated, China's leader in the real world engages in a lengthy conversation with Mao to seek his guidance, and soon finds the founding father to be earthly, earnest, and visionary. Mao adopts a contemplative posture and offers a fair assessment of the achievements and the catastrophes brought by his revolution. When China's future leader criticizes Mao's enshrined corpse in Tiananmen Square for being excessively "superstitious," Mao concedes that forging of a cult has always been a means to govern China in tumultuous times. His power is neither absolute nor sacred, and his superhuman image is the result of a political fiction. As Mingwei Song (2015, 8) suggests, the resurrected Mao "appears to be at ease with his own eventual farewell to revolution."

The tension between Mao's avatar and Maoist ideology further illustrates the schizophrenic nature of the cyber-based revolution. The other five revived brains have inherited the ideological fanaticism of the Mao era. The founding of the Huaxia Republic curiously echoes Mao's idiosyncratic claim during the Cultural Revolution that "he would go back into the mountains and wage a guerrilla war all over again if China is dominated by 'revisionists' and 'capitalist-roaders'" (Barmé 1996, 3). However, the resurrected Maoists' concern is not so much about the waning of revolutionary passion as it is about the disintegration of traditional morality in 2185. These reactionary minds see great ugliness in the future world: crass materialism, erosion of the nuclear family, sensuous gratification, nihilism, feminism, and above all, an utter disregard for ancestors, tradition, and orthodoxy. Thus, their anachronistic revolution crystallizes as a hateful response to the perpetual technological progress that threatens to undermine patriarchal principles. Once in power, the Maoists hijacks the country's internet-based security system to censor deviant behaviors: they destroy neon lights and take down bikini advertisements; shut down night clubs, assault dandies and dancing girls; and broadcast puritanical instructions on sexual morality, work ethics, and the time-honored "traditional" ways of living. As Li Hua (2015) suggests, this conservative revolt is Liu's caricatured account of the "Anti-Spiritual-Pollution Campaign" (清除精神污染運動) spearheaded by the party's ruling gerontocracy in the 1980s. In the end, the farcical revolution displays an ossified and archaic political mentality rooted in arrogance and intransigence.

In the meantime, Liu does not merely hold the conservatives' petite revolt as an object of ridicule. The realization of a nearly perfect democracy has made the Chinese polity vulnerable to unforeseen emergency. In 2185, China is led by a twenty-nine-year-old woman president elected directly by two billion people. Information technology enables every citizen to participate equally in the decision-making process through an online national assembly, without being mediated by any closed committees or representatives. The president, who is merely the mechanical reproduction of the mass will, must respond instantly to citizens' calls twenty-four hours a day. Admittedly, this scenario reveals Liu's layman's conception of democracy as "what the majority wants becomes government policy" (Achen and Bartels 2017, 1–20). Yet Liu intends to cast doubt on the effectiveness of democratic governance in making rational decisions. For instance, the six revived avatars are initially held inside a digital prison for security concerns. But angry citizens lambaste the government for its unlawful practice of detaining those electric pulse beings, who are now considered to be citizens of China. However, the demand to release the prisoners to the open network unleashes a Pandora's box, creating an

opportunity for the Maoist ideologues to replicate themselves and paralyze the national security system. The liberal fantasy with universal rights paradoxically triggers a violent uprising that almost topples the foundation of the liberal political regime.

Liu's narrative resonates with Carl Schmitt's scathing critique of the formulaic political representation in liberal democracy. Schmitt endorses the mystical-auratic practice of Roman Catholic representation as genuine and essential. In medieval Catholic theology, the lord openly displays his charismatic personality to embody a higher power beyond secular political norms. The practice of representation enshrines a political authority "not for but before the people" (Pitkin 1967, 8). By contrast, liberal parliamentarism abandons the personalist ideal of Roman Catholicism to embrace to a quantitative and technical electoral politics. As party leaders come to personify material interest and the quantified electorate, the theological underpinning of representation is lost (Schmitt 1996). Similarly, Liu Cixin portrays a transparent political system that reduces the national leader to a vending machine that passively translates the people's will into governmental policy without any substantive power. Worse, the mediated enactment of politics has turned China's leader into a Hollywood film star whose stardom derives from theatrical performance. The inexperienced female president is elected simply for "being cute." Politics becomes an episode in reality television, as paparazzi and reporters constantly harass the president, digging up juicy stories to satisfy the public's voyeuristic desire. Because of this, the president projects a nostalgic gaze toward the Maoist sublime. She admires Mao's sober and elegant "demeanor" (風度), an amicable and inviolable character that elevates him into a true sovereign leader. By contrast, the decline of the auratic leadership leads to the complete dissolution of the political in 2185.

Liu's deep attachment to a vitalist-spiritual political authority is influenced by his social Darwinist vision of global order. Since Yan Fu 嚴復 (1854–1921) introduced the Spencerian phrase "survival of the fittest" to the late-Qing intelligentsia, the brutal truth of "natural selection" convinced many Chinese citizens that international order functions in compliance with the amoral law of the jungle, and the "yellow race" would face extinction unless it instituted "self-strengthening" reform. Even though Liu might not share the racial, eugenic, and evolutionary underpinning of social Darwinism, his deeply held belief that survival requires Machiavellian realpolitik has profoundly shaped his dismissive attitude toward liberal humanism. The cyberwarfare between the Huaxia Republic and China soon triggers an international nuclear standoff. After the clone army takes control of China's national defense network, the Soviet Union is prepared to launch nuclear strikes to exterminate the Chinese nation for fear of further contamination. Here, Liu's vision of international politics is clearly influenced by deterrence theory, a political realism that prioritizes the art of coercion and intimidation in the age of nuclear war. Echoing Schmitt's claim to restore fear as the primal source of political order, the advocates of nuclear deterrence argue that the fear of nuclear retaliation forces great powers to avoid direct military confrontation and vow to sustain international peace. With China's nuclear weaponry compromised by the Maoist rebels, however, both the Soviet Union and the United States seize this opportunity to advance their interests to eliminate China once and for all. Liu does not believe in a Kantian "perpetual peace" that will bring an end to all bloody revolutions and warfare. Rather, humanity will always be at the mercy of radical evil.

The allegorical implication of the nuclear strike is clear: China's "perfect" liberal state cannot guarantee its own existence without instrumentalizing coercion and implementing authoritarian leadership. In his later science fiction, Liu envisions a bleak universe dominated by "zero morality," the permanent state of war between amoral alien species. In this dangerous universe, the human race always falls victim to its own moral consciousness. Such apocalyptic vision of human extinction is rooted in the political motif of *China 2185*: animosity cannot be expunged from any world order, and the moralization of politics would only drag the human community into the abyss. Indeed, Liu has inherited, if not endorsed, Mao's darkest vision of the agonistic political life: Mao's imagination of a chaotic universe characterized by incessant motions and infinite struggles, his adamant belief in unmasking the hidden enemy through violent class struggles, and his paranoid vision of an impending third world war—all these have cast ambivalent shadows on Liu's futuristic China. Transhumanist advancement and political democracy do not dissolve enmity and political conflicts for good. In 2185,

the predominance of the moral-humanitarian consideration has not only undermined the state's capacity to distinguish friends and enemies, but has also reduced political leadership to an empty form, resulting in the near destruction of the Chinese nation.

Liu's story does not end with the reinstallation of a charismatic sovereign leader. After the Huaxi Republic is eliminated, Mao's avatar—the only remaining electric pulse being—offers an intriguing comment on this political crisis. He turns the notion of immortality on its head, defining it not as a preferable form of eternal life but as a state of “forever-dead” (永生就是永死). “True immortality,” for Mao, is to constantly initiate radical beginnings and to create something utterly new without the constraints of the past. In Mao's judgment, the conservatives' atavistic revolt is bound up with a futile attempt to seize hold of a bygone era. The resurrection of the dead does not produce spiritual regeneration but stumbles on its anachronistic existence. Hence, the drama of the short-lived cybernetic uprising neither vindicates the return of the Maoist dictatorship nor endorses the liberal vision of a democratic China. By the end of the story, China's future leader's admiration for Mao is tinged with a vexing web of ambivalent feelings, veneration mixed with fear, conviction tainted by doubt, and a profound uncertainty about the right and wrongs of Mao's revolutionary undertaking. Liu Cixin's reluctance to either repudiate or glorify the Mao cult reflects the lingering aura of the Maoist sublime in the 1980s. However, the rapid marketization process in the 1990s soon transformed the fantasy of the Great Helmsman's resurrection.

The Commodification of the Sacred

In his 2004 novel *Lenin's Kisses*, Yan Lianke reveals a bizarre popular fascination with the corporeal remains of socialism in the age of neoliberal capitalism (Yan 2013). The story is set in Liven (受活村), an isolated mountain village founded by peasant migrants from a forced relocation in the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644). The villagers' secluded pastoral life was disrupted by the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when Mao Zhi, a revolutionary village matriarch, was determined to transform the poverty-stricken community into a socialist rural utopia. From the 1950s onward, the villagers were forced to participate in a succession of mass campaigns, yet the radical effort to collectivize the rural economy brought disastrous results. Unfortunately, Deng Xiaoping's 1978 initiative to embrace capitalism also failed to benefit the village, whose lack of natural recourses and peripheral location prevented further economic development. At this moment, Liu Yinque, a greedy local cadre, is inspired by the rise of red tourism and comes up with a magic scenario to purchase Lenin's embalmed corpse from Russia and install a Lenin Memorial Hall to foster business opportunities and transform Liven into a tourist resort.

Yan's surrealistic plot demonstrates the desecralizing effects of capitalism on the socialist political mythology in contemporary China. While Liu Cixin in the 1980s still believed that even a futuristic democracy could not wrest itself free of Mao's eternal sovereignty, Yan is determined to reveal the “metaphysiological nonsense” (Kantorowicz 2016, 1) of the socialist founding father's sacred body. As a writer from a humble peasant family in Henan, Yan has become famous for his sacrilegious attempt to tweak Mao's “holy revolution,” exposing how the blind religious passion toward Mao's utopia has begotten monstrosity in the era of socialist revolution. In his satirical novel *Serve the People!* (为人民服务), ideological fanaticism triggers an erotic, adulterous affair at the height of the Cultural Revolution between a low-ranking People's Liberation Army soldier and the beautiful wife of his general. In *The Four Books* (四书), the biblical passion to modernize China's agrarian economy during the Great Leap Forward leads to widespread famine, turning intellectuals, artists, and scholars into vicious animals fighting for bare survival. In all these narratives, Mao's call for revolution inadvertently reinforces the most primitive, abject, and obscene desires, transforming sacred feelings into sacrilegious impulses.

Lenin's Kisses underscores how the socialist sublime serves to energize the neoliberal drive to “get rich.” The accelerating pace of market reforms does not simply dispel the sacrality of the revolutionary relic. Rather, the “oceanic feeling” (Freud 1989, 11–13) aroused by the corpse of the socialist founding father solidifies the capitalistic logic that the Maoist revolution seeks to dismantle. The strange alliance

between the sacred iconography of socialism and neoliberal developmentalism is manifested in Liu Yinqué's blueprint of red tourism. In the novel, the post-Soviet Russian state has cut off financial support for the daily operations of the Lenin Mausoleum, causing the rapid decay of Lenin's corpse. Hence, the decision to purchase and preserve Lenin's embalmed corpse helps maintain the sublime, immortal, and extrapersonal halos of the "foundational body" (Yurchak 2015, 131) of international socialism. Yet Liu is drawn to Lenin's body not only for spiritual reasons but out of business calculation. To persuade the villagers, he cites the successful example of Mao's mausoleum, which has become a favorite international tourist destination and an enormous capital investment by Beijing. The construction of Lenin's shrine does not inspire the masses to revolutionary struggles. Instead, Liu seeks to recalibrate political mysticism for his neoliberal utopia. In his grand scenario, the crypto-religious lure of Lenin's embalmed corpse could be utilized to charge expensive admission tickets, build hotels and restaurants, and, by doing so, generate a lucrative tourist industry that will greatly improve the material living of the local residents. Eventually, the somatic basis of sovereign power in the Soviet political cosmology is turned into a riveting show for public amusement.

Liu's outlandish developmental fantasy, as David Wang (2016, 194) argues, invites an allegorical reading about the "monstrous implications of the marriage between liberal marketization and socialist memorabilia" (see also Rojas 2016). That bizarre alliance inspired Yan Lianke to develop a new literary genre called "mythorealism" (神實現實主義). In contrast with the faithful representation of objective reality championed by nineteenth-century European realism, mythorealism deliberately distorts, fabricates, and deconstructs social reality to expose the grotesque, phantasmagoric, and Kafkaesque facades of Chinese postsocialism. The absurdity of the real compels Yan to abandon "the seemingly logical relations of real life, and explore a 'nonexistent' truth, an invisible truth, and a truth concealed by truth" (Yan 2011, 181). The fashioning of an "illogical logic and irrational rationality" is critical for Yan to tease out the radical mixture of ideological fanaticism and entrepreneurial spirit in the commodification of Lenin's corpse (Song 2016, 644–58). The sacred aura of the socialist founding father, in other words, never dissolved. It merely underwent a process of mutation to facilitate the logic of commodification. Whereas Marx declares that the profanation of the sacred allows the bourgeoisie to "face with sober senses his real conditions of life," entrepreneurial thinking capitalizes on the religious fervor toward Lenin to remystify the "real conditions of life" through the lens of commodity fetishism (Marx and Engels [1848] 2002, 5). Therefore, the scandalous scheme of red tourism is a vivid reminder of the eternal presence of theological mystification in both the socialist and postsocialist cult of the revolutionary leader.

Yan's mythorealist account of the degeneration of socialist political theology into capitalist political economy is shared by the Hong Kong writer Chan Koonchung, whose 2020 novella *Zero-Point Beijing* (北京零公里) offers another surrealistic depiction of Mao's rebirth. Chan traces the history of Beijing from the Southern Song dynasty (1127–1279) to the present, recounting numerous deaths, brutalities, and social injustices that haunt Beijing citizens in the form of memories, folktales, and political fantasies. In particular, the last part offers a counterfactual narrative of Mao's technological resurrection. Combining historical records with his own hypothesis and fictional characters, Chan depicts how Mao masterminded his rebirth through the futuristic science of cryopreservation. In Chan's alternate world, Mao's obsession with physical immortality converts him into a believer in Russian cosmism, a religious and philosophical trend that emerged in the late nineteenth century to advocate the radical extension of life by technological means. In his historic 1949 trip to Moscow, Mao was deeply impressed by Lenin's brain, which was preserved in a glass jar filled with formaldehyde at the Lenin Institute. The marvel of the Soviet technoscientific advancement has convinced Mao that his own future resurrection overrides the secular project of building socialism. Hence, Mao instructs Yu Cong, a Chinese brain scientist at Moscow's Brain Institute, to explore the technology of immortality to prepare for his future rebirth.

The fantasy of resurrection has been a recurring theme in the posthumous cult of Lenin in Russia. As Nina Tumarkin (1997, 181) shows, the Soviet leaders' decision to embalm Lenin might have been influenced by the Fedorovian faith in technological resurrection. Even though Lenin's brain was removed before his embalment (Yurchak 2015, 116), the myth and tales of his rebirth proliferated in contemporary Russian cultural and religious imaginations. While these theological fantasies echoed

the ancient millenarian belief in the resurrection of Christ, they cultivated a popular interest in cryonics, a (pseudo)science that practices the cryogenic preservation of the body or the brain in the hope of future awakening (Bernstein 2019, 35–80). Similarly, Chan portrays his fictional Mao as an eager practitioner of cryonics, who entrusts Yu Cong with the task of freezing his brain for the purpose of future reanimation. After Mao's demise, Yu follows the Great Helmsman's will to establish a covert cryonics lab in Beijing to preserve Mao's brain, and recruits a loyal team of special agents to guard Mao's secret from counterrevolutionary forces.

However, just as Yan Lianke's protagonists eventually abandon ideological fanaticism in favor of commodity fetishism, the advent of the market age gradually erodes the millenarian faith of Mao's loyal disciples. The glaring disparity between the rise of China's nouveaux riches and the waning halo of socialist utopianism has produced bitterness and resentment among the special agents, who wasted their whole life waiting for Mao's bodily return. In their last gamble to bring the founding father back to life, the desperate guards make a deal with a Chinese American entrepreneur who boasts about the magical technology developed by his international cryonics company. Yet the petite effort to resurrect Mao is soon detected by the Chinese intelligence agents, who fear that such a miracle will electrify militant neo-Maoists to revolt against the revisionist regime. Eventually, the CCP orders a crackdown on the cryonic lab and burns Mao's brain into the ashes.

To be sure, Chan's willful deviation from history is not merely an exercise of "what if" speculation. Rather, his alternate-history narrative further develops Yan Lianke's mythorealist intervention into the entanglement between the drive of revolutionary utopianism and the logic of capitalist accumulation. The creation of the counterfactual genre, as Catherine Gallagher (2018, 48–96) argues, has been inextricably linked with a fervent desire to vindicate, resurrect, and redeem an alternative vision of history in the wake of historical injustices. In reality, the popular fantasy of Mao's resurrection was intermingled with a profound disappointment with China's "erroneous" turn to global capitalism. As Yu Hua 余华 (1960–) (2011, 24) comments, Mao's contemporary admirers imagine that the messianic rebirth of the Great Helmsman would "awe the world, strike fear into the hearts of China's corrupt bureaucrats, and solve at one fell swoop the historical problems, diplomatic issues, and domestic crises that plague China today." Yet in Chan's alternate world, Mao's miraculous comeback cannot rekindle ideological fanaticism to fulfill the unrealized promise of Chinese socialism. To the contrary, Mao's reanimation depends on the quackery of cryonics and on American investment. Chan depicts the Chinese American entrepreneur as a Trump-like salesperson who advertises his cryonic business through hyperbolic rhetoric, spurious tales, and unabashed self-promotion. The almost comic deal between the Maoist acolytes and the entrepreneur reveals that the entire farce might have more to do with marketing scams than with the prophecy of Mao's Second Coming. In this respect, Chan's imaginative history echoes Yan's satirical portrait of red tourism to propose that the resurrection of the long-dead Mao speed up, rather than disrupt, international capital flows.

Conclusion

This essay has so far described how party leaders, sci-fi writers, and novelists actively participated in shaping the political-theological aura surrounding Mao's corporeal remains in the reform period. The first part traced the protracted process in which competing scientific claims, political calculation, and religious fantasies contributed to the party's decision to permanently preserve Mao's body after his death. The second part discussed how Liu Cixin complicates the idea of physical immortality by projecting a transhumanist vision of Mao's digital immortality in his fictional futuristic utopia. Lastly, Yan Lianke and Chan Koonchung impel their readers to consider Mao's miraculous rebirth in the age of neoliberalism. Instead of igniting revolutionary passions, Mao's resurrection has paradoxically reinforced the capitalist ethic of inexhaustible consumption. Together, the three tales shed light on the profusion and mutation of Mao's religious and political appeal and thereby discredit the reductive account of Mao's "secularization" in the reform era.

The intersection of secular political imaginaries and religious fantasies in these narratives provide a new critical framework to examine the dilemma between the rational-functionalist and the theological

understanding of the Mao cult. I have proposed a literary approach that presumes neither the theological basis of secular political authority nor the instrumental mastery of religious symbols. Rather, I elucidated a dynamic, ever-shifting cartography in which mystification and demystification interact to constitute multiple, conflicting dimensions of Mao's enduring halos in postrevolutionary China. In the first case, the creation of a "revolutionary relic" melds religious rituals with secular political power to enchant the sovereign perpetuity of the CCP. Yet the party's scandalous reliance on this manufactured divinity weakens its secular political authority. In the second, the transhumanist notion of "digital immortality" betrays an uneasy alliance between religion and enlightenment: Mao's cybernetic regeneration combines the millenarian belief in the resurrection of the saints with the techno-utopian vision of ultra-enlightenment. In the third, commodification transforms Mao's immortal body into kitsch, symbolizing not the ghostly return of revolution but the eternal life of capital. The Faustian bargain between the cult of the socialist leader and capitalist drive might have maintained the aura of Mao's physical remains, but also costs his revolutionary soul. With the polymorphous mediation of fiction, we find that the sacralization of Mao's image ultimately resulted in a paradoxical process of enchantment and disenchantment. Thus, the dialectical character of Mao's immortal body must be understood as the eternal contestation between "the religious" and "the secular."

The sustaining charisma of the Maoist political religiosity also provides a striking parallel to the revival of political theology in the postsecular West (Habermas 2010, 15–23). In the wake of the global right-wing resurgence, the dark legacy of Schmittian authoritarianism has not only fueled a ferocious defense of vitalist-spiritual leadership, but also prompted scholars to devalue modern rationalism. The critics of secularism dismiss enlightenment rationality as "little more than an instrument of domination" that disavows its own dependence on religious mystification (Gordon 2016a, 467). Yet a unidirectional thesis of "continuity" underestimates the extent to which theological categories have undergone a thorough process of transmutation in the modern era. Hence, the invocation of the divine in modern political discourse does not verify the Schmittian model of quasi-religious leadership. Rather, the theological remainder merely functions indirectly as "metaphor, parallel, analogy" to enchant secular political power with the trope of transcendence (Breckman 1999, 303).

Why is it so difficult to let the Great Helmsman rest in peace? With this question, I return to Mao's final caveat in *China 2185*: "immortality is mortality." If Liu Cixin wrote his cyberpunk novel in 1989 to unsettle the Maoist sublime, his later sci-fi trilogy *The Three Body Problem* (2008) adopted a more permissive stance toward the dark legacy of Schmittian-Maoist political theology. In Liu's epic, humanity is locked in a death struggle with the alien race of the Triosolarans, who have sent a supreme army to colonize Earth. The impending doom forces the United Nations Security Council to select four "Wallfacers" (面壁者): a group of "dictators" who wield unlimited power in their task, acting unrestrained by morality, norm, or law. Although the commissarial design of temporary dictatorship aims to defeat the almighty invader and restore liberal-democratic order, one Wallfacer accidentally discovers that the entire universe is a ruthless "dark forest" ruled by the predator-prey chain and has no place for humanitarianism: "Every civilization is an armed hunter stalking through the trees like a ghost. . . . The hunter has to be careful, because everywhere in the forest are stealthy hunters like him. An eternal threat that any life that exposes its own existence will be swiftly wiped out" (Liu 2016, 484). For many Chinese readers, Liu's gloomy tale is a vivid reminder of China's fragile place in the postpandemic international order—a world full of enmity, struggle, violence, conspiracy, espionage, and of course, human extinction. In the midst of the US-China trade war, Chinese intellectuals spoke with grim authority about the coming "Triosolarans"—the destined confrontation between two superpowers battling for supremacy. Even though Liu hides his politics behind the wondrous imagination of space war, his obsession with the survival of the species makes his novel immensely popular among nationalists. For a new generation of Chinese dreamers, the ultimate lesson of the Maoist leadership is not that any attempts for immortality is futile. Rather, mythmaking is always better than disenchanting liberalism in the existential struggle for world power.

Notwithstanding the disheartening return of authoritarian leadership, the abundant religious analogies in the politics of enshrining Mao's body reveals the paradoxical nature of the Chinese revolution that had to "take flight into the misty realm of religion" to articulate a radical negation of religious

mystification (Marx [1867] 1990, 165). This reliance on theological metaphors and rituals has steered the post-Mao state to preserve the foundational myth of the regime against the atheistic creed of socialism. After all, the Marxist doctrine of revolution, as Peter Gordon (2016b, 189) remarks, is “simultaneously a theory of truth and a theory of illusion.” As the child of Marxism-Leninism, the Chinese regime has played a revolutionary role in expelling religious mystification from the secular political order. Yet the CCP’s reluctance to liquidate its own religious charm—from the cult of the leader to the eschatology of socialism—exposes the dangerous liaison between “feudal superstitions” and political authoritarianism that ultimately tarnishes the legitimacy of the party. In the end, the theological impulse behind the cult of Mao is a reminder that any secularization project cannot dispense entirely with the specters of religion once it begins to instrumentalize the voice of the divine in the realm of the profane.

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