



20 Maos, 2008
colour lithograph

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Hua Jiming.
Photo: Jia De

In the years following the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), his image, so omnipresent within Chinese society, remained too charged to be engaged with as subject matter in post-Socialist art. By the 1980s, however, this sense of prohibition began to fade as a period of openness and experimentation loosened the strict codes of representation that had comprehensively bound art to politics during the Cultural Revolution.

The first Mao of contemporary Chinese art is generally dated to Wang Keping's *Idol* of 1979, which satirises the Chinese leader's deification through a wooden Buddha idol created in his image. It was Wang Guangyi's *Mao AO* of 1988, however, which heralded a voided Mao as a central icon of contemporary Chinese art as it emerged onto the global stage in the early 1990s. Wang shows Mao's profile sealed behind bars. His treatment of Mao ruptured codified modes of depicting and looking at the Supreme Leader, opening possibilities for engaging differently with this potent icon. Since then, Chinese artists have appropriated Mao's image in various ways.

Hua Jiming's 2008 print *20 Maos* historicises this engagement, presenting Mao in his many different guises as he has surfaced within the canon of contemporary Chinese art. As with the image of Mao himself, the lithograph's garish palette, mass-produced nature and use of repetition and variation are hallmarks of political pop. In this style of painting, artists appropriated, denaturalised and parodied iconography from revolutionary propaganda that had been rapidly emptied of its ideological meaning in China's new commercial environment of the 1990s. In this encyclopedic document of a single feature of contemporary Chinese art history, Hua documents not the fall but the rise of Mao (Barmé 1996), his posthumous second life in art, as in popular culture more broadly.

Genevieve Trail, 2022

Reference:

Barmé, G 1996, *Shades of Mao: the posthumous cult of the Great Leader*, Routledge, New York.