

Maoism and Postmodernism

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In this essay I discuss the emergence of the Mao cult during the Cultural Revolution in China and its appropriation in cultural revolutions in Europe and the United States to show how this image resonated with similar cults of popular icons in the West and lent itself to the formulation of theories and practices of postmodernism. The image quality of these cults facilitated the rise of the Mao-craze in the late 1980s and 1990s when political pop productions of Mao by Chinese artists emerged in New York and were then transplanted to China where they met with transfigurations of Mao's legacy in the People's Republic. The final stage of postmodern variations of Mao is reached with the presidency of Barack Obama in 2009 and the merging of the two leaders into Chairman Obamao or Comrade Maobama, which can be read as the end of ideological contrast between the two countries for the sake of creating a system of political interdependence for the 21st century, a postmodern prefiguration of a coming ChinAmerica.

The 120th anniversary of Mao Zedong's birth on 26 December 2013 occasioned a number of activities that reflect the divisive reactions to events connected with the foundation of the People's Republic of China and the repercussions of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. The obvious signs of a resurgence of Maoism are counteracted by critical assessments of the Chairman's deeds in China and abroad. Thus, the play *Mao Zedong and His Eldest Son* written and directed by Liu Yiran, which premiered in November 2013 at the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, shows the love of Mao for his eldest son Anying, who died in the Korean War in 1950 as a soldier of the People's Liberation Army. Reminding the audience of this sacrifice and of the father's patriotic reaction: 'Sons of the people can shed their blood on the battlefield. Why cannot mine?', evokes Mao's nationalistic fervour and absolute dedication to the Chinese Revolution. It is part of a nostalgia for Mao, prominently connected with Bo Xilai in Chongqing until his trial for misuse of power, which developed into a form of neo-Maoism advocated by new political leaders. At the same time new historical and biographical studies document the violent and destructive effects of the Maoist regime. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday reveal Mao's 'unknown story' and Frank Dikötter focuses on the millions of Chinese who died from starvation in the 'great famine' between 1958 and 1962.¹ In this battle of leftists

and rightists over Mao's role for contemporary Chinese politics President Xi Jinping seems to take a mediating position when he advised in a speech in Mao's home province Hunan to prepare 'grand, frugal and pragmatic' celebrations.² In the light of this current engagement with Mao's legacy, I would like to re-vision the Mao-craze during the Cultural Revolution and the impact of Maoism on Western cultures in the 1960s and 1970s as well as its connection to postmodernism both in China and the West. The obvious focus on visual media in Maoism and postmodernism, visible in the pictographic display of grandiose wallpapers to advertise the Cultural Revolution as well as in the intermedial design of postmodern artefacts allows for the viable transfer of images between China and the West. Thus, the creation of a Mao cult in China in the Cultural Revolution links up with similar cults for cultural idols in the West in the 1960s and prepares for a re-importation of Mao images from the West to China in the late 1980s and 1990s as the basis of Chinese postmodernism. In this essay I will first describe the multimedia basis of postmodern designs and then analyse examples of Maoist images created by American postmodern artists, followed by the analysis of transfigured Maoist images created by Chinese postmodern artists in the New Era of the 1980s. Last but not least, this will lead to the emergence of a fusion of both postmodern images in the interrelation of Chairman Mao and President Obama as Obamao or Maobama in the political pop culture of our time bespeaking a new form of interdependence between the two countries for the 21st century.

The emergence of postmodernism and its display of visual signs can be connected to the cultural and political relations between China and the United States, which begin in the second half of the nineteenth century when Chinese workers sought employment in America to improve their financial situation at home and participated in the construction of American railroads.³ It was the American poet Ezra Pound who discovered the pictographic nature of the Chinese language in 1908 when he received the manuscript of the late Harvard professor Ernest Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. While working on this book, which he published in 1918, he also started translating Chinese poems into English, a poetic task that can be related to his creation of the modernist form of imagist poetry. Although Eastern and Western scholars have pointed to Pound's misreading of the Chinese writing system and argue against Chinese writing as pictographic or ideographic 'because the characters are linguistic signs of concepts and represent sound and meaning of words rather than pictographic representations of things themselves', his efforts nevertheless document his serious engagement with the ancient Chinese tradition and its impact on Anglo-American modernism.⁴ His studies also revealed to him the importance of Confucius and his teachings at a time when Chinese intellectuals, along with the founders of the Chinese Republic, moved away from the imperial tradition and connected with European enlightenment ideas in the May Fourth Movement of 1919. His ten Chinese cantos (Cantos 52–71), in which he evokes important phases in the succession of Chinese dynasties, are followed by ten American cantos on John Adams and the Early Republic, which show the influence of Chinese empires on the formation of a Western democracy. In the American cantos, Pound refers to the correspondence of the second and third president of the

United States, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, in which he discovers traces of Confucian philosophy and Confucian ethics. The trajectory from ancient Chinese traditions via the foundation of the United States and the constitution of the Early Republic to the publication of these cantos in 1940 also links Pound's poetic avant-garde project with the rise of postmodernism in the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. The group of writers, artists, architects and intellectuals at the Black Mountain College jointly created and practiced experimental forms of postmodern culture carried on by the Beat Generation in the 1950s. The turbulent decade of the 1960s sees the popularization of postmodern ideas as a protest movement of young people against all forms of authoritarian structures and political conventions. It is at this moment that Mao and Maoism enter the scene of Western protest movements.

Against presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon, whom the young people in America and Europe held responsible for the human loss and the devastations of the Vietnam War, the North Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh and Chairman Mao appeared to be the revolutionary heroes in achieving their own revolutionary goals of transforming democratic societies into Marxist states. Ignoring the reality of Mao's radical transformation of Chinese society by installing the dictatorship of the proletariat, Western students emulated the practice of the re-education of urban intellectuals in the countryside or among factory workers. As an exemplary figure for radical change, Mao lends himself to a twofold interpretation in the West serving similar purposes. On the one hand, intellectuals use Mao to advance Marxist theories to transform bourgeois societies into socialist ones. Prominent examples are French philosophers and structuralist critics such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, or the Frankfurt School critic Jürgen Habermas. While their engagement is now seen as part of the general revolutionary mood, especially after the May 1968 demonstrations in Paris and elsewhere, and were rather short-lived, such as Sartre's editorship of the journal *La Cause du peuple* – the publication organ of the proletarian left from 1968–1972, which prominently figures Mao's portrait in the title page – it is the French thinker Louis Althusser who shared Mao's belief about the loss of the continuous revolutionary potential of Communism after the demise of Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev.⁵ The disappointment with the Soviet Union and its turn away from Communist politics led to the rise of Maoist groups in Europe and North America.

To relate the political impetus of these Maoist groups to the performance of postmodernism as visible in the enthusiasm of young idealist revolutionaries who romanticized the Mao image and contributed to the Mao cult seems to be justified when connecting the visible signs of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966 in China with the cultural revolutions of 1968 in the West. Against the familiar assumption of the emergence of a Chinese form of postmodernism in the 1980s, Guo Jian recognizes postmodern features in the activities of 'Red Guards organizations, school boycotts, the writing of big-character posters, and ... the waving of the little red book' which surfaces in Euro-American cultural revolutions.⁶ More forcefully, Francesca Dal Lago links these displays of the Mao cult to the avant-garde of the late 1980s in China:

It is important to remember that the language of the Cultural Revolution was visual to begin with and that its visual currency very much facilitated its propagation and the depth of its ideological penetration. Since 'visual' is in turn the space of production of the avant-garde, there exists an immediate level of response between the two artistic languages – Cultural Revolution propaganda and avant-garde art – sustained but not mediated by the recent popular fad. In other words, visibility is the first and most direct space of reception of that original message and therefore becomes central to the consumption and re-elaboration of the original propaganda.⁷

The impression of superficial images and the casting of real lives and people into stereotypes devoid of meaning and of any link to concrete reality eventually became features of postmodern theories conceived in conjunction with these cultural revolutions. The common denominator of Chinese and Western postmodernism is the deconstruction or displacement of the ideas of the Enlightenment and modernity. Mao's turn against the efforts of May Fourth Intellectuals in 1957⁸ and the later instigation of the Cultural Revolution find their corollaries in postmodern theoreticians who – like Jean-François Lyotard – promote the deconstruction of master narratives such as that of the Enlightenment for the sake of privileging small anecdotes.⁹

Although early expressions of postmodernism in the decorative style of architecture, which abandons Louis Sullivan's modernist principle of 'form follows function' for the sake of playful allusions to earlier forms, and avant-garde productions of the Beat Generation and Abstract Expressionists practised and prefigured later theories, major theoretical postmodern works arose in connection with the cultural revolutions of the sixties. Familiar assumptions of postmodernism, which often originate in the visual signs of the time, are the disappearance of the boundary between fact and fiction, the negation of an extralinguistic reference of language, which privileges floating signifiers over the signified part of signs, and the playful mode of all art. Conventional structures of reality and the arts are parodied and deconstructed in private and public life. The creation of anti-authoritarian communes, the formation of alternative communities and the battle against outmoded traditions underlies the postmodern spirit and the embracing of Maoism. A veritable Mao cult, as instituted in China, is imitated in the West along with the popularization of Mao's Little Red Book for a celebration of Marxist activism, which gradually turns into the popular fashion of radical chic. In postmodernist fashion, the new journalist Tom Wolfe both celebrates and critiques the flirtatious attitude of the white upper middle class with revolutionary forces when they invite Black Panthers to their parties in New York.¹⁰ The Canadian student of Chinese descent, Jan Wong, captures this postmodern Maoist spirit, which motivates her to become one of the first two North Americans accepted as exchange students at Peking University in 1972, in her autobiography *Red China Blues: My Long March from Mao to Now*. Jan Wong's rebellious 1960s' spirit leads her to criticize her family's difficult acculturation in Canada and to adopt Maoism as a result of Anti-Vietnam activities in North America and Europe. Dedicated to her political conviction as 'a Montreal Maoist' the McGill student plans to realize her political intentions during her stay in Beijing 'to do

manual labor and to reform [her] thinking.’¹¹ The actual experience of Maoism in China eventually triggers her dissatisfaction with the political system.

In the West, the image of Chairman Mao and his Little Red Book, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, become powerful symbols of resistance against the capitalist system and military interventions such as the war in Vietnam. In the United States prominent postmodernists such as Andy Warhol or the dramatist Edward Albee stand for the playful engagement with the Mao cult. Edward Albee directly takes up Mao’s book and uses it for the title of his play *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (1968) in which Mao is placed with three other characters, a Long-Winded Lady, an Old Woman and a Minister, on a steamboat in the middle of the ocean. While Albee wants the Mao figure to possess the Asian features of a Mao look-alike on stage, he gives him the role of a teacher whose lessons – directly taken from *The Little Red Book* – are not heard. Except for the Minister, who does not have a speaking part, all other characters recite their texts without communicating with each other. Albee’s playful deconstruction of their speeches as empty rhetoric resembles the postmodern denial of extralinguistic references and simultaneously serves his critical purpose to reject escapist romances, such as Maoism. While the representative of this system appears on the theatrical stage in a postmodern manner concordant with the clichéd popular perception, it allows the playwright simultaneously to deconstruct Mao’s political rhetoric as empty phraseology and to question his claim to be the ‘servant of the people’.

In a similar way to postmodern practice, pop artist Andy Warhol takes up the Mao cult, which originated in China, and links it up with cults existing in the United States in the 1960s. Geremie Barmé was the first to recognize a similarity between the Mao cult image and the ones of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe.¹² She also quotes statistics according to which 2.2 billion portraits of Mao were produced during the Cultural Revolution, which were based on the official state portrait on Tiananmen Square and reproduced on the cover of *The Little Red Book*.¹³ It is not surprising that the Chinese and American cults merged in Warhol’s art. In analogy to his Marilyn Monroe silkscreens of the 1960s, Andy Warhol creates a series of Mao posters starting in 1972, probably in response to the new diplomatic ties between China and the United States. Similar to the glamour of the American sex symbol of the 1950s, the political glamor of Chairman Mao is being multiplied and thereby deconstructed by Warhol. Compared with Mao’s official state portrait overlooking Tiananmen Square, which holds the Great Hall of the People and his own mausoleum, and which Warhol visited in the fall of 1982, Warhol’s postmodern representation disfigures the eminent leader and reduces him to a series of small figures. He was so fascinated by this picture and apparently absorbed by the Mao cult that he painted Mao about 400 times, each reproduction technically different (Figure 1).

Andy Warhol’s silk screen project seems to conform to the postmodern theory in Jean-François Lyotard’s classic study *The Postmodern Condition* by depositing the eminent leader, an artistic strategy later confirmed by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei who in his contribution to Christopher Makos’ photographs of *Andy Warhol China 1982* sees the Mao portrait as the most famous of Warhol’s portrait figures:

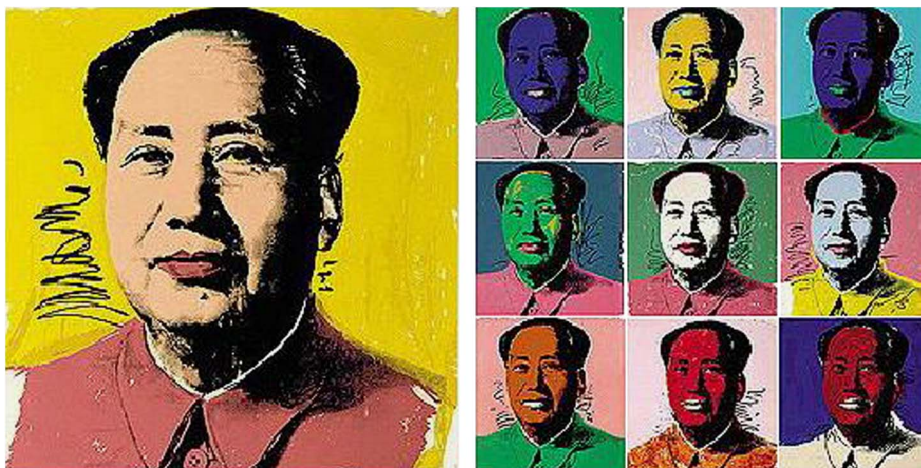


Figure 1. Mao portrait by Andy Warhol. © 2012. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

‘The ubiquitous portrait caused Mao Zedong to be looked upon as a god in China. However, in Andy’s rendering, the allegorical force of Mao’s portrait was made conventional, its enormity neutral, objectified, emptied of its moral value as well as its aesthetic intent’.¹⁴ Warhol’s deposition of the god-like chairman in his postmodern portrait from its eminent status to a technical serialization, recognized in Ai Weiwei’s statement, has proliferated transnationally and has become the basis of more audacious variations of the former state portrait and its persona in the late 1980s and 1990s.

The American writer of Italian descent, Don DeLillo, sees Warhol’s reproductions of Chairman Mao in the Museum of Modern Art in 1989 as part of the Andy Warhol retrospective. They inspire him to write his novel *Mao II* (1991), whose title page quotes Warhol’s silk screens but also moves on from Mao to Mao II (Figure 2). The novel addresses the relationship of leaders and masses in times of global terrorism and takes up mediated images of mass events such as the celebration of mass weddings and political demonstrations. DeLillo takes Mao and his political inheritance to task. Hence, the Mao references, including his quotation ‘Our god is none other than the masses of the Chinese people’ from *The Little Red Book* and the Cultural Revolution, are set against depictions of the television coverage of student demonstrations on Tiananmen Square on June 4, 1989.¹⁵ Even though it was Deng Xiaoping’s ‘Reform and Opening up’ politics of 1978, i.e. his idea of a Marxism with Chinese characteristics, which had fostered democratic yearnings among the young generation squashed in the military repression,¹⁶ it is Mao’s image that casts a long shadow over the square. The actual defacement of his state portrait hanging on Tiananmen Gate by three students from Mao’s province Hunan, who on 23 May ‘threw several eggshells full of ink on the portrait,’ shows that they held him responsible for the political development of the People’s Republic of China.¹⁷ Although the demonstrators

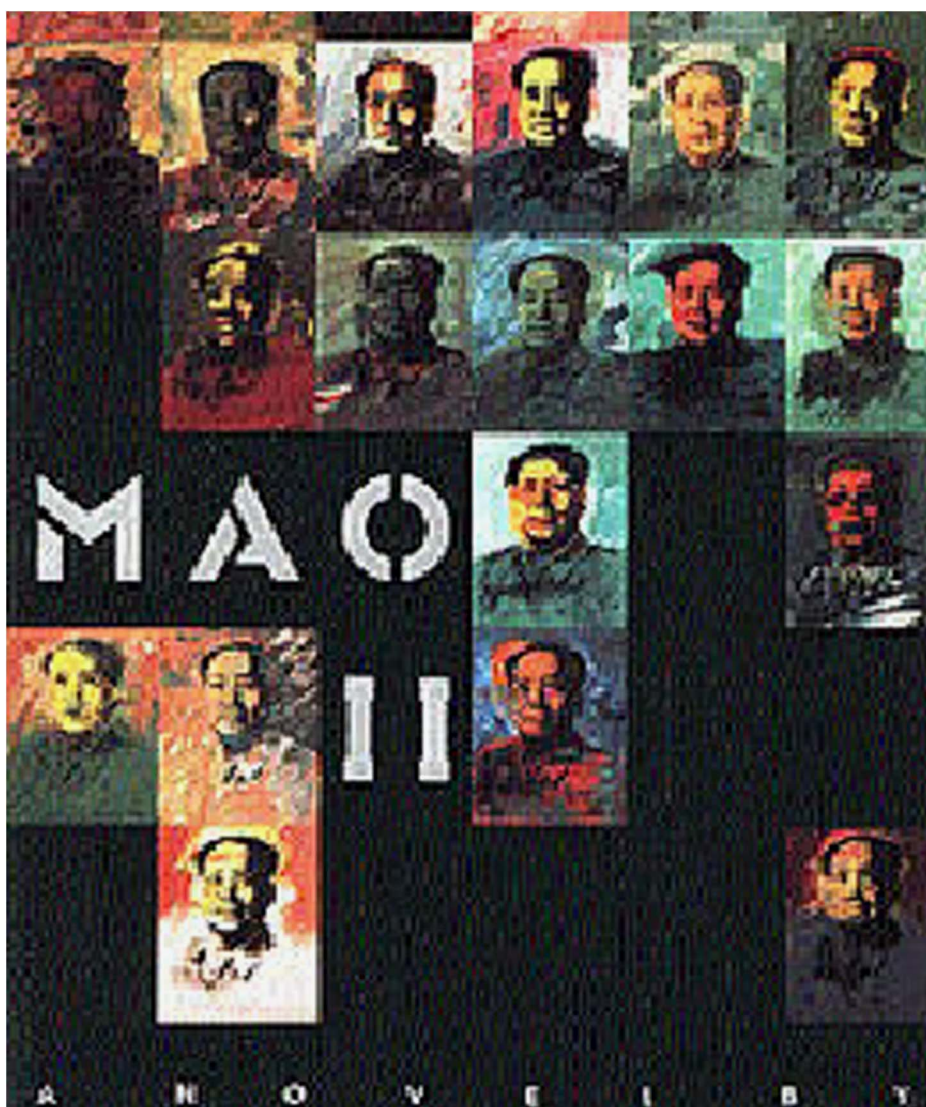


Figure 2. Book cover of Don DeLillo's *Mao II*.

turned the perpetrators over to the police, this visual challenge to the authority of the Chinese leader coincides with increasing signs of a Chinese postmodernism in which postmodern transfigurations of Mao figure prominently.

Critics unanimously credit the New Era of the 1980s with the emergence of a general postmodern mood in China.¹⁸ The first postmodern representations of Mao date from the late 1980s and are usually created by Chinese artists in New York City such as Yu Youhan and Zhang Hongtu. Eventually their works link up with productions by artists in China such as Li Shan to culminate in a posthumous Mao cult in the 1990s in conjunction with the 100-year anniversary of Mao's birth in 1993.



Figure 3. Yu Youhan, 'Mao and Statue of Liberty'. © Courtesy of Yu Youhan and Shanghart Gallery, Shanghai (1996).

Art critic Li Xianting sees these postmodern representations of Chinese politics as part of a new wave of 'Mao Fever' and labels them 'Political Pop.'

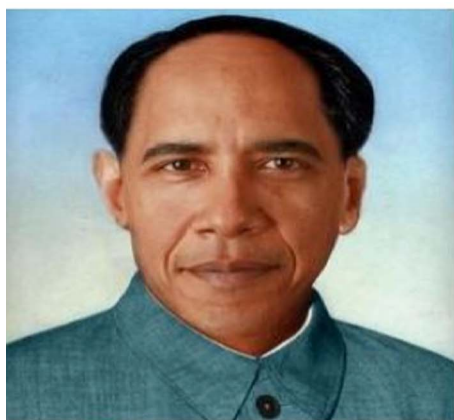
Political Pop uses the acknowledgment of this political reality as its starting point, but then proceeds to satirize politics, providing an effective (but by no means heroic) means of neutralizing the hold of a politically saturated mentality on the inner mind. ... In a sense, 'Mao Fever' and Political Pop art are linked in that there is inherent in both the use of past icons or 'gods' to criticize, or in the case of the latter, to satirize, current reality.¹⁹

All of these Political Pop designs also have a global dimension and travel transnationally.²⁰ Thus, works by Chinese artists in American exile are now exhibited in China, such as Yu Youhan's 'Mao and the Statue of Liberty' (1996) in the Shanghart gallery in Shanghai (Figure 3).

The transnational travel of political pop works between the United States and China has gained a new dimension with the presidency of Barack Obama in 2009. The worldwide fascination with the first non-white American president has generated a new set of political images that artistically graft the icon of Obama onto the post-modern Mao cult.²¹ The transposition of Barack Obama's face onto Mao's favourite uniform and political offices document a form of artistic liberalization that seems to be acceptable in popular culture in contemporary China. Obama's face looking out of a Red Army suit over Mao's well-known calligraphy of 'Serve the people' can be interpreted as a merger between Chinese and American art and politics which could stand for a new form of convergence after years of contrast. In the same way in which



Figure 4. Mao, 'Serve the people: Wearing the Red Army Suit Obama Turned Obamao'. Sing Tao Daily Online 25 September 2009.



美国国家主席
美国民主党主席
美国国家军事委员会主席
美国全国人大常务委员会主席
M.A.O.奥巴马同志



Chairman of the United States
Chairman of the Democratic Party
Chairman of the State Central Military Commission
Chairmen of Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Commission
Comrade Maobama



Chairman Mao

Figure 5. 'Chairman Obamao,' Web. <<http://www.xsjk.net/userfiles/2009111316342.jpg>>.

the names of the two leaders merge into ‘Obamao’, so the two countries could establish a political system of interdependence for the 21st century in a global alliance potentially called ‘ChinAmerica.’²² The public manifestation and commercial availability of such items for all people constitute new standards for political awareness (Figure 4).

This kind of new alliance of the two countries as ChinAmerica seems to be prefigured in a number of political pop works. Barack Obama’s transnational background and his numerous genealogical filiations provide for a change of leadership and political power. The postmodern mergers of the two cult images and of the two names into Maobama or Obamao contain, however, also a political message. Chairman Obamao combines the offices of the two countries as expressed in both the Chinese and American language. The sinicized cult image of the American president succeeds and supplants the cult image of the Chinese Chairman. To what extent these images, which energized the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and took on new momentum in post-1989, have not only registered but also contributed to political changes is still subject to analysis. Whether the political pop projection of an interdependent ChinAmerica under the leadership of Comrade Maobama or Chairman Obamao is a viable option for the 21st century, only the future will tell. While China is celebrating the 120th anniversary of Mao’s birth, the world will look for signs of such an alliance of the two global players (Figure 5).

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2. Cf. Xi Jinping, *South China Morning Post*, 19 November 2013.
3. Shelley Fisher Fishkin has collaborated with Gordon Chang at Stanford University in the ‘Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project’ to collect documents of the many thousands of Chinese labourers in the US and China.
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20. Dirlik and Zhang Xudong attribute the transnational reach of Chinese postmodernism to the proliferation of these products among Chinese in- and outside of the People's Republic of China, A. Dirlik and Zhang Xudong (1997) Introduction: postmodernism and China. *boundary 2*, Special issue on 'Postmodernism and China', **24**(3), pp. 1–18; 3.
21. During my seven-month guest-professorship at Peking University in 2009, I could closely follow in many lectures on Barack Obama's autobiography to capacity crowds of students at different Chinese universities, the reception of the new American president among the young generation of Chinese. At the beginning of Obama's second term the uninhibited fascination has worn off.
22. See my article A. Hornung (2012) ChinAmerica: intercultural relations for a transnational world. In: U. Hebel (ed.), *Transnational American Studies* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag), pp. 13–30. Some of the arguments in this essay are based on this earlier publication.

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