Possible titles:

(“The True End of Mao”)

(“The Cultural Death of Mao and the Rise of Capitalism in China”)

(“The Cultural Death of the Great Helmsman”)

(“Mao’s Shrinking Image”)

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Sometime in the mid-1990s, Mao became kitsch. I first realized this when I visited Mao's Mausoleum in the spring of 1995. The Mausoleum sits in the middle of Tiananmen Square. In the time of the dynastic emperors, you could stand in the middle of the Forbidden City, looking South, and have a clear vision through all of the great gates of the City and straight across the Square to the "Front Gate" on the opposite side of Tiananmen Square. Today, the building that is Mao's resting place sits right in the middle of that view. The story is that this building was placed there in order to remind the world that this society belongs to Mao and his legacy.

The process of entering the Mausoleum projects the tone of reverence that one might expect for the resting place of the "Great Helmsman". Long before the opening hour, the line to enter the Mausoleum winds back and forth, with hundreds of tourists—mostly Chinese people—waiting to pay their respects. As you near the viewing hall, people remove their hats, become very quiet, and look expectantly towards the door; once in the viewing hall, people file past the embalmed body in the glass case with a mixture of reverence and awe. The scene is somewhat dreamlike. As you file out the backdoor of the Mausoleum, the scene transforms from dreamlike to surreal. As soon as you exit this memorial to communist ideology, you are immediately assailed by entrepreneurs selling the kitschiest Mao memorabilia imaginable; you move from the somber mood of respect and reverence for the leader of China's Communist Revolution to trying to decide which Mao cigarette lighter you should buy.

As jarring as the scene was in 1995, it actually is reflective of key aspects of the economic reforms in that period of time. At that time, China was in the middle of dismantling the command economy that had been established under Mao's leadership. As part of that transition, in the 1980s, the government allowed for the emergence of small-scale entrepreneurs so that displaced workers would have some avenues for economic viability in the face of closing options in the state sector. But the fostering of entrepreneurship in the 1980s and early 1990s involved a delicate push and pull, with the government allowing the private sector to grow without allowing it to grow too rapidly or become too powerful of an independent force. In this context, one can see why the state would want to allow (or even promote) the practice of small-scale entrepreneurs cozying up to the back door of Mao's Mausoleum to sell images of the old icon: much better to have them hawking cigarette lighters with images of Mao on the front that hum "The East is Red" when lighting up than being rogue entrepreneurs. It was around this time that you also began to see taxi drivers hanging little plastic portraits of Mao from their mirrors—some of them surely purchased from the entrepreneurs selling his image outside the Mausoleum. Suddenly it seemed like kitschy representations of Mao were everywhere.

A decade later and two thousand miles across the country, I was struck by the further transformation of Mao's image. Across the street from Lijiang's Office of Cultural Exchange stands a 50-foot tall Mao statue. It is one of the classic Mao statues that was built during the communist-era, an image of Mao standing erect, right hand raised, proclaiming the founding of a new nation, the People's Republic of China. The image is familiar to all Chinese and to anyone who has followed Chinese history over the last fifty years—the statue can be found in many cities and the actual scene it represents can be found in virtually any documentary that depicts the history of the PRC. I had seen this statue before on a trip to Lijiang in the summer of 2000 and found it interesting if only because the architects of this particular scene had gone to the trouble to construct a backdrop for the statue that looks like the stage at the mouth of the Forbidden City, overlooking Tiananmen Square, where Mao stood in that famous pose on that victorious date of October 1, 1949.

When I passed by the statue on a recent trip to Lijiang, I couldn't help but notice that you hardly detect Mao at all anymore; his presence here is the backdrop for a different scene. The scene is overwhelmed by the presence of a balloon arch advertising the launch of the Jili (Geely) Auto Company's new line of cars. Underneath the arch sit 5 new models, all just off the assembly line of Jili's main plant in Zhejiang Province. As I chatted with the on-site Jili representative, he was very quick to point out that Jili is a Chinese-only brand. "We are not a joint venture," he proclaims proudly. "We are a Chinese company, and our cars are at international standards." Behind the line of cars, there is another layer, a different kind of advertisement, a sign that is not a part of the Jili expo, but had been placed in this public space recently, presumably by the Lijiang City government. This sign is an advertisement of the recently passed Public Safety Law; the billboard contains the entire text of the law, and it is meant to make available to and educate the population on the concepts and rights associated with this new law. To the right of this informational legal billboard are several cartoonish billboards depicting different aspects of the legal and moral aspects of responsible driving. Finally, when you study the scene long enough, you are forced to return to Mao, whose outstretched hand, ironically, appears to be blessing the entire scene—a scene filled with capitalist production and new laws.

It is not by coincidence that the Jili representatives have set their expo up here—the Chinese government is too careful with its planning for that. And, to be sure, the notion of Mao blessing emerging domestic multinationals is an important one and one that, once again, illuminates the Chinese government's savvy use of gradual economic change with classic symbols of the past. For one thing, the Chinese government is no longer ambivalent about embracing the capitalist class. While Jiang Zemin's decision to admit "capitalists" into the CCP in 2001 raised opposition from the conservative wing of the Party at the time, that debate is long past. The private sector has come to be viewed as a critical constituency that the CCP leadership must actively court. Second, with China well on its way to achieving the status of global economic superpower, the story is no longer about a successful export-led economy and the gradual emergence of a grassroots private sector. China's power in the global economy today is about companies like Jili, PetroChina, Hier, Lenovo, CNOOC and many more—companies that are ready to compete on the global stage and they do so with the full blessing and backing of the CCP and its leadership.

Linking images of Mao to the economic reforms—using Mao's image to legitimize the gradually emerging capitalist modes of production and livelihood—has certainly been a strategy of the Party. However, there is also something deeper going on, which has to do with gradual political reform. It is widely acknowledged that the economic reforms in China have led to economic growth that has been nothing short of astonishing, but the world is much more skeptical about political reform. China's government has been viewed widely as a group of authoritarian economic elites clinging desperately to power as they buy the population off with steady economic growth. This view, however, is incorrect. China's economic *and* political reform has been gradual, and the lack of a sudden break from the past has led many observers to believe that there is not a commitment to real political change. For the last fifteen years, the Chinese leaders have been quietly pushing forward institutional change. Through the passage of hundreds of new national laws and thousands local laws, the institutionalization of democratic elections at the village level, the gradual emergence of a nonprofit sector, and many other institutional changes that are gradually sweeping across the nation, Chinese society is being transformed.

While China's political leaders do not openly advertise these changes—it has proven to be politically imprudent to do so in the past—a distancing of the Party from its past is clearly in the making. And these political changes are also reflected in the further diminishing of Mao's image—and not only in the kitschified and overshadowed scenes of the Tiananmen Square mausoleum and the Lijang statue. Perhaps the most extreme version of this diminishing came in the Fall of 2006, when Shanghai high schools began teaching from a new standard textbook that was curiously silent on Mao and his communist movement. With little fanfare or press, the central government quietly wrote Mao (and communist history) out of the history books. The ideologically-driven version of Communism, which dominated China from 1949 until the economic reforms began in 1979, and Mao himself receive little attention in the textbook. Topics like technology, economics, and the New York Stock Exchange and figures like J.P. Morgan and Bill Gates are given significantly more attention and space than Mao, his revolution, and Marxist ideology. While China watchers like Joseph Khan of the *New York Times* have wondered about Mao's sudden diminishing status, this particular change is but one of a long line of gradual changes that are quietly redefining China's political system.

It is unlikely that China will ever openly reconsider Mao's legacy in the fashion that the Soviet Union disavowed Stalin's legacy under the leadership of Khrushchev. For 29 years of economic reform, the Chinese model has been to gradually adopt new systems, laws and policies without ever openly overturning the past. In many cases, they have actively employed the images of the past to act as symbolic handmaidens of the new policies. And with his seemingly authoritarian stances on a number of issues, many have worried that President Hu Jintao would leave his once-liberal image behind, showing instead his true colors as the leader of "China's new authoritarianism." But under President Hu we have seen a fundamental transformation of private property rights and the right to form independent unions, two issues which have been central to criticism of China's political reform process. As reform-minded elites emphasized the need for a rational system for economic development, they were also altering the politics of the party system. And, in the end, President Hu, with his quiet authoritarianism, had the political will to close the history books on the Maoist era.