

CULTURAL REVOLUTION, KITSCH, AND THE ORIGINS OF THIS ODD LITTLE BOOK

Many years ago, while living as a hippie in New York City, I happened upon a nondescript storefront and wandered inside.

China Books & Periodicals turned out to be a store unlike any I had ever seen. On the walls hung brightly colored Red Chinese propaganda posters, screaming *Revolution!* Chairman Mao Zedong—wart and all—was everywhere, hovering like a bloated float in the Macy's parade. He beamed down on bright-eyed Socialist workers and bushy-tailed Red Guards, who saluted him by waving copies of his best-selling book of quotations, informally known as *The Little Red Book*.

I was transfixed by the art and the aura, bright colors, erotic swirls of calligraphy—the bizarre marriage of political diatribe and beatific imagery. Confronted by an army of subversive books and broadsides, I ogled the budget pamphlets and zines from Communist China. Uniquely bound and sized, many had been printed on odoriferous handmade papers. The queer texts were badly translated for foreign consumption, with type that fairly



The Chairman displays LiveMotion prototype.



Original edition of The Little Red Book.

shrieked from the shelves. Titles flew out at me like outlandishly surreal insults aimed at enemies within and without. The glory of Maoism was trumpeted with blasts of discordant hyperbole. *Oppose Book Worship! . . . Follow the Liberation of Women in Albania! . . . Defeat Running Dog Imperialists and Their Lackeys! . . . The Secrets of Treating Deaf & Dumb Mutes . . . ?*

The latter volume had a particularly weird cover: an illustration of a soldier armed with an acupuncture needle, poised and resolute, about to pierce his own ear with the needle!

Yes, I bought it, and asked the clerk to wrap it in a plain brown paper bag. I knew I was on dangerous ground. Of course, my interests were entirely aesthetic, not political. Surely *my* government would understand...

After discovering this literary goldmine, I began haunting New York's Chinatown, the herb shops, pharmacies, and haberdasheries, where I bought funny-smelling toothpaste, plastic toys, and cans of who-knew-what. I then returned to my apartment to gawk at the packaging designs, study the labels, and drool over the sheer *coolness* of the stuff.

I grew dizzy with dreams of satirical art.

In that charged, fetishistic atmosphere, my artistic sensibility began to take form.

I went on to publish books, illustrated with my own handmade collages. Under the name Norman Conquest, I founded the international anticensorship art collective Beuyscouts of Amerika and created nearly 100 mixed-media book objects (see *Little Red Book with Hook* in the People's Gallery color section) and artworks in "multiple" editions. However, it wasn't until the late 1980s that I discovered computers and—most importantly—Adobe Photoshop. It was then that I packed away for good my razors, scissors, and spray adhesive.

When I discovered the Web, I was immediately struck with the desire to animate—GIFs, of course, for there was no such thing as Flash back then. Today, however, you can export GIF and Flash animations with Adobe LiveMotion. While I use and admire Macromedia Flash,¹ the authoring program remains difficult to master and far from intuitive. Since I'm not a programmer and have neither the patience nor aptitude for writing code, I spend most of my time in Adobe LiveMotion. It lets me design interactive pages, layouts, navigation buttons, and JavaScript rollovers with ease.

It is truly a Web graphics package for the Masses.

Please Don't Squeeze the Chairman

What, I wonder, would Mao say about this rip-off of his book and image? Undoubtedly I'd be labeled a *zalan goutou xiao pachong da pashou wangba gaozi*!²—or worse. I'd be put on trial as one of the Gang of Five.



¹ All jokes aimed at Macromedia are intended as good clean fun. Like Adobe, Macromedia's products are awesome achievements. I'd certainly hate to have to build a Web site without Dreamweaver.

² Rotten dog's head, little reptile big pickpocket, cuckold kid!

But it hardly matters now that the Chairman has become an omnipotent pop icon, a grand Pooh-bah, a capitalist tool appropriated to sell everything from cornflakes to personal hygiene (see the People's Gallery color insert section). Yes, the Chairman is probably spinning in his grave, and wouldn't that make a great Flash animation!



Infamous PAA propaganda poster (Anonymous, 2000).

But, you may ask, is it proper, that is, *correct* Marxist–Leninist–Mao Zedong Thought to publish a computer book filled with satire, puns, and visual mischief?

Of course it is—especially when the goal is to revolutionize the computer book industry by defeating all big fat feudalist manuals and replacing them with svelte, absurdist guides bent on Web domination.

And as the Web continues to evolve and revolutionize our lives, I think it's fitting that I resurrect the obese ghost of Mao Zedong to spur us on to bolder experiments, so that we may create great and glorious images and engaging, immersive, interactive animations for the Web.

Web Workers of the World, Unite!