

Sui Jianguo The Sleep of Reason

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Sui Jianguo is one of China's most significant artists. A sculptor, he has become internationally recognized for works that challenge the ideological assumptions and historical origins of Chinese Socialist Realism, the style in which he was trained. His challenge has not been unique: an entire generation of Chinese artists, beginning in the mid-1980s, defined itself in opposition to the idea of an "official" art, an opposition resulting in one of the most urgent and compelling art scenes of the past twenty years – the Chinese avant-garde. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Sui did not adopt an attitude of feigned, ironic detachment (often referred to in the 1990s as "cynical pop") from all things official. Rather, he has chosen to remain inside the academy, as it were, producing sculptures that are like ghosts (and demons) in the abandoned temples of Socialist Realism.

Working in bronze, steel, fiberglass, and plastic, and on a scale that ranges from key chains to monuments, Sui has created a suite of iconic forms – such as free-standing, but hollow (and headless), "Mao jackets," a chorus line of ancient Greco-Roman statues outfitted in Communist Party attire ("Mao suits"), and a swarm of "made-in-China" dinosaurs, some tiny, other mammoth – that bear witness to the once-revolutionary fervor that animated the otherwise rigid academic formulae of official Chinese art. Sui's sculptures also bear witness to China's current revolution: its unparalleled transition from a closed society driven by political ideology to a society newly awakening to a potent combination of nationalism and capital.

This transition is expressed in Sui's sculptures from 1997 to the present as a tension between expression and repression: the Greek statue Discobolus poised to throw a discus while clad in constricting bureaucratic garb; the psychically pregnant "empty" space inside a sterile Mao jacket; a ferocious "dragon" that is merely a scaled-up toy; or, in non-figurative work of the early 1990s, boulders that expand, contract, and crack with the temperature while tightly wrapped in a welded web of steel reinforcing bars. Which is to say, Sui's sculptures embody the ambivalence of his times, and, in a sense, the time of his ambivalence.

Born in 1956 in Tsing Dao, Shan Dong province, Sui grew up in an atmosphere ablaze with visual propaganda celebrating the virtues and accomplishments of revolutionary China. Idealized images of soldiers, peasants, factory workers, scientists, school children, and, of course, the leaders of the Communist Party (Mao Tse-dong in particular) adorned countless wall posters, text books, comic books, kitchen calendars, billboards, public murals, banners, statues, movie screens, and – for those who had them – televisions. Ever-present reminders of proper proletarian conduct and thought, these images depicted themes and subjects that embodied revolutionary ideals: individual sacrifice for the common good, strength in defending the homeland, commitment to industrial progress, purging "bad elements," faith in the Communist Party, and the adoration of Mao as a benevolent, omnipotent, and irrefutably wise Chairman.

Artists of Sui's generation were instructed to serve the people, "heart and soul," and they were raised on pictures of abundant wheat and corn and every imaginable vegetable; of verdant peasant girls carrying their babies on their backs as they run off to confront the invading enemies; of heroic children studying to become the next

generation of Marxist revolutionaries; of factory workers and engineers earnestly collaborating in the construction of Utopia; of happy, red-cheeked farmers laboring selflessly in the service of commune production quotas; and of the omnipresent visage of Mao, the “reddest red sun,” rising and setting above their every day and night.

These themes were visually represented in a variety of styles, including some that drew upon folk art from the countryside, calendar and “new year” art, advertising from the 1920s and 30s, and the occasional ink-brush painting (tailored to its political message). The dominant strain of Chinese propaganda art, though, was Socialist Realism, and it came almost entirely from the Soviet Union, which, under Stalin, had crushed the vital and innovative Futurist and Suprematist movements (in which book arts, painting, street theater, architecture, film, and even the painted sides of “agitprop” trains were the thoroughly modern features of a revolutionary Cubist montage) and replaced them with a stolid, academic form of 19th century European realism whose sole function was to advance Soviet ideology. After the creation of The People’s Republic of China in 1949, many Chinese artists studied in the Soviet Union, and “oil painting” departments (oil painting was new to China) were instituted in Chinese art academies. Socialist Realism soon became the prevailing style and artists were pressed into service of the revolution as cultural workers in an ideological struggle.

In the West, artists since the mid-19th century had helped imagine the utopian visions of modernity as well as react against its values of materialism and its excesses of brute industrialism. Fostering revolutions of style and taste, they criticized status-quo society from the Bohemian fringe. In China, as Norman Bryson has pointed out, the Communist Party institutionalized the idea of revolution. It remained at the center of political power; there was no Bohemian fringe. Perpetual revolution was, at least rhetorically, the status quo. Artists were trapped inside the revolution and its attendant academies; serving the ideological interests of the state, they, and their works, became academic.

In 1939 the American art critic Clement Greenberg wrote that academic art is the “stuffed shirt” front for Kitsch. Kitsch, with its lowbrow commercial forms of “art” and entertainment and its appeal to sentimentality and popular taste, was seen a “rear-guard” reaction to the avant-garde innovations of high Modernism. This is not to say that Socialist Realist paintings, posters, banners, and statues – while earnest forms of Kitsch – were uninteresting, or their makers untalented. Indeed, the panorama of visual images in which peasants, soldiers, workers, and the Party faithful enact the narratives of Chinese political correctness is a bountiful harvest of clichés so sincerely depicted in such an ideologically restricted context that today they seem like over-ripe sociology.

At the time, however, it was neo-Classical Kitsch having migrated to China through Eastern Europe from Western Europe – but it wasn’t Chinese art, either traditional or modern. The Chinese avant-garde came later, in the mid 1980s, a reaction against the academic status quo from – where else? – the Bohemian fringe. When asked why a Chinese avant-garde had emerged in the first place, since China had no tradition of Modernism in the Western sense, Wang Goxing, a noted video artist in Beijing, replied in imperfect but precise English: “To against the official art.”

Sui Jianguo is the head of the sculpture department at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. Long the most prestigious art school in China, the Central Academy was housed in a warren of aging studios, classrooms, dormitories, and administrative buildings not far from the center of Beijing. Torn down in 1996 to make way for commercial redevelopment, its spacious and well-equipped replacement campus is located in the more

fashionable Chaoyang district, near other important arts centers, such as the 798 Building, a former armaments factory built by the East Germans in 1956 that's been rehabilitated as a neighborhood of artists' studios, galleries, film studios, architect's offices, bookstores, and restaurants and cafes – the Chelsea of Beijing. The several years it took to demolish the old campus and erect its spiffy reincarnation offer a convenient interregnum separating the old academy, then a bureau of the state, from the new academy, now a jumping off point for international careers in art. Though still a bureau of the state, it is no longer a factory for Socialist Realism.

Still, new campuses, neighborhoods, and eras notwithstanding, the legacy of Socialist Realism remains embedded in Chinese art academies in the curricular form of a stale of classical realism, sans Socialism. This, in itself, is a measure of how China has changed in the past twenty years. It is also the academic milieu – a curious mixture of conservative curricula (the past) and avant-garde nexus (the future) – from which Sui draws most of his iconography as a sculptor. The Mao jackets, suits, and Greco-Roman sculptures testify to the once dominant presence of Socialist Realism, and yet they are either left naked or hollowed out by its departure from the scene. Meanwhile, the array of bright (flag) red dinosaurs – the Godzilla-like “T-Rex” and Spielbergian “Raptor” in particular – are taken from the movies, comic books, and toys of popular culture, that global network of commerce that disregards history, transcends ideology, and to which all of Sui's students are intimately connected.

A national audience and market for contemporary Chinese artists is just now emerging. Art dealers, collectors, corporations, and museums are increasingly realizing that the best new Chinese art constitutes a kind of national treasure-trove of paintings, sculptures, photographs, videos, exhibition catalogues, websites, and works of performance art that bear witness to the epic changes taking place in 21st century China – at least in its urban centers. In the 1990s, Chinese artists had no choice except to become internationalists, since it was primarily Western audiences and institutions that were interested in their works. Early on, some chose to become expatriates in cities like New York or Paris. Today, however, the artistic “commerce” between China and the rest of the developed world is flowing freely (although the “balance of trade” favors China, which seems to export more art to the West than visa-versa). Chinese artists are no longer compelled to seek refuge beyond their homeland, choosing instead to produce work and manage careers – including international careers – from places like Beijing and Shanghai. While affiliations between artists and galleries are loose-knit (meaning, the rules of business, if any, are still forming), a nascent but definite scene is on the rise in China, and it is attracting and keeping its successful and emerging artists. In this respect, Sui was always ahead of the curve: he never intended to leave.

Painting, installation, large format photography, videotapes, and what might be called the “residue” of vanguard performances have been the international dialects of contemporary Chinese art (and not only Chinese art).

Roughly speaking, they travel well. Sculpture, on the other hand, has seemed anchored in the mainland, unable to escape its physical and ideological weight. It isn't just that sculpture is heavy (some paintings and installations are massive, leaving viewers to marvel at how they got from, say, China to Italy or Belgium); it's that sculpture is often rooted in its place, as if reaching down through its pedestal to draw meaning up from the ground.

During the era of Mao, Socialist Realist sculptures occupied the sites of monumental public address. Symbolically and literally, they drew upon China. The great avenues and squares of urban China were filled with the rhetoric of revolution by larger-than-life statues of the usual proletarian cast of characters, including, of course, the Great Helmsman himself – usually with an arm outstretched in benevolent acknowledgement of the masses. Thus, sculpture holds a special place in modern China: the official public sphere of revolutionary sentiment etched in a

neo-classical vocabulary – rather (and ironically) like the paintings of Jacques-Louis David during the French revolution.

Sui's sculpture is less an attack on official art than an infiltration of it. He likes to get under its skin, cloak it in ironies. For example, a recent body of work involves painted fiberglass sculptures in which familiar Greco-Roman and Renaissance statues are clad in garments commonly thought of as Mao suits. This pearl-white embrace of ancient Western bodies and modern Chinese uniforms is of course ironic; classical nudes draped in the "classic" Mao suit.

An implied synthesis of East and West, it's a perfect "fit." The ancient sources here are Michelangelo's "Dying Slave" and "Rebellious Slave" (1513-16), as well as Roman copies of the original Greek "Doryphorus" (Spear Bearer) and "Discobolus" (Discus Thrower), circa 450-440 BC.

Sui's witty equation cuts both ways: expressive nudes draped in repressive attire, or staid and stately uniforms animated from within by writhing, passionate bodies caught in the throes of death, struggling to be free, or poised to launch a spear. One observes a struggle between passionate, naked bodies and impassive, a-sexual garments. It is no accident that the themes Sui appropriates from his classical Western sources involve an unsteady mix of enslavement, death, and rebelliousness, as well as the athletic projection of power (in the forms of a spear or a discus), all awash in an eroticism tied to submission (the slaves) or naked prowess (the athletes). These sculptures remind us that aesthetic academicism, with its emphasis on technical perfection, its idealization of the body, and its seemingly detached rendering of form, is among the most effective means for repressing sexual (and especially homosexual) expression. It also encourages the rationalization of the erotic into a science for which the studio is a clinic.

Sui copies his classical sources exactly from replicas and photographs. In a Chinese academic setting, copying is etched into the curriculum. Young art students commonly copy classical sculptural knock-offs before being allowed to draw from the figure. Sui ups the ante on this convention by copying ancient statues that are themselves copies: Michelangelo copying generations of classical figures, Romans copying the Greeks. The lineage of Sui's classical figures traces not to originals, but to replicas. Moreover, the classical sculptures he replicates are not simply proposed as the Western equivalents of the Mao suit, but, more interestingly, as a distant source for modern Chinese academic art itself, which is the basis of Socialist Realism. The image of the classical figure draped in a Mao suit is a nearly literal description of Chinese Socialist Realism - but here, Sui drapes the figure ironically, not so much as an ironist or a parodist, but because he makes the two principle components of Socialist Realism – classicism and ideology – literally apparent. He is a literalist.

In effect, Sui is trying to reclaim Socialist Realism for the present by literalizing its realism and relegating its socialist component to a kind of ideologically fashionable garment – its fashion, of course, being retro. In so doing, he reminds us that the "realism" in Socialist Realism is a remote source for Chinese academic art that precedes its "socialization." A deep – but nearly hidden – irony in Sui's classical figures draped in Mao Suits is that the realism which is their distant Western source was long ago accepted by the Chinese academy, so Sui is showing Chinese academic artists something they already like. The "socialist" affectations that were grafted onto realism are revealed as mere labels, a kind of designer ideology. Thus, stodgy academics can't criticize the realism of the sculptures, not even that of the Mao garments, which are assiduously fitted to the figures they adorn with as much precision as are sinews to bone. It also matters that the figurative sources are Western. By making those sources explicit in his own works, Sui suggests the rootlessness of Chinese academic realism – that it did not

come from China's past, but migrated from Modern Europe. Likewise, the melodrama and histrionics of Chinese Socialist Realist statuary are shown to emerge from such classical motifs as dying slaves, tortured saints, and Spartan athletes. In this sense, East and West resolve only in melodrama.

If there is a "Chinese" feature to these sculptures it is the Mao suit, and even it is a copy appropriated by the Communist Party from the original "zhong shan fu" or Sun Yat Sen suit commissioned by Dr. Sun on the eve of the Chinese Republic of 1911.

This was his idea of an elegant Chinese suit fit for democracy, the antithesis in its plainness of Qing Dynasty opulence. In fact, it even served during the war against Japan as a sign of unity among China's otherwise warring leaders, but the Communists, and Mao in particular, ideologically skewed the meaning of the Sun Yat Sen suit away from its intended sense of tasteful democratic commonness toward a kind of paired-down militarism. Emerging with Mao from the countryside as a harbinger of peasant revolt, the "zhong shan fu" became a military uniform conflated with a peasant blouse.

Sui trades further upon the symbolism of the Sun Yat Sen suit by fabricating steel and fiberglass versions of the suit's empty jacket, standing upright and rigid from waist to collar. Ranging in size from two to twelve feet high, the jackets always seem imposing, no matter how small.

Sometimes their surfaces are painted (usually a Party gray) and other times polished or ground (like a David Smith stainless steel cube), absorbing or reflecting external light. The hollow interiors are always dark and, with their headless open collars, eerie too (the headless helmsman?). The larger jackets look and feel industrial, but not quite monumental, perhaps because so much of what fills them up is missing – namely, Mao himself. Indeed, it is the missing contents that turn the jackets into anti-monuments, like half-buried tombstones.

Despite their literal emptiness, the jackets are nonetheless quite voluminous in appearance, as if filled with warm air or, given their narrow upper arms, flat, almost sagging chest, generous mid-section, and overall slouching formality, the jackets seem pressed from within by the unmistakable body shape of Mao himself. It's a shape known universally, like the Buddha's. For Chinese who were conscious before 1970, Mao was a constant presence in their lives, but few had actually seen him in the flesh. He was a myth reflected in images filling every public and private space, an omniscient but absent parent, invisible like the emperors of dynasties past. The space that fills Sui's jackets is ripe with the ambivalence that clouds every child's love of the parent: the hope for liberation on the one hand, the fear of abandonment on the other. Just so, the idea – for some, the memory – of Mao both appears and disappears in these sculptures. It can fill out the jacket or recede into its core. It is never quite present and never quite gone. The space inside Sui's jackets is pregnant with the missing contents.

In Sui's sculptures, the Mao suit has been turned inside out: a cipher of authority empty at its core, classical now by default. It is certainly possible to see the imprint of the Buddha – not only Mao – behind these jackets, suggesting that the emptiness they contain is some sort of Buddhist quietude. (Mao, after all, rather resembled the Buddha.) Ultimately, however, the jackets seem closer to 19th century romantic ruins, reminding us that many such ruins were once classical temples – in this case, ruined temples in what now seems like an ancient cult of Mao. Thus, the Sun Yat Sen suit, once the unadorned garment of a modern democratic China, is represented here as a hollow, ideological shell.

The hollow spaces inside Sui's Mao jacket sculptures open up the question that most urban Chinese citizens would grasp of what contents should now inhabit the ruined temples of Maoism. The question is highly destabilizing, for whatever content it admits is necessarily social, even political. To return such questions – which are profoundly democratic in nature – to the public “space” of sculpture is not only significant politically, but a compelling appeal to the idea of a nation's missing contents, to what has been forgotten or repressed. Half underground (as if planted in the earth), the jackets embody a sense of density and gravity that not only taps into the history of sculpture per se but which returns to modern Chinese sculpture the possibility of cultural and political memory. If so, then perhaps we can think of Sui Jianguo's work as a kind of Realist Socialism in which realism is not merely in the service of ideology, but where some realistic, grounded sense of Chinese identity and experience may emerge from the ruins of 19th century ideology.

With the suited Western statues and the standing Mao jackets, what seems at first like an ironic – and straight forward – embrace of Chinese and European references reveals itself as a lineage of adaptations and appropriations that ultimately turn in on themselves as a critique of the way classicism hardens into academicism when pressed into the service of ideology under the paternalistic gaze of the state.

This density of place is a burden that large-scale public sculpture carries in China. History, idealism, melodrama, propaganda, politics, ideology, memory, and purpose: these are heavy contents for sculpture. They are heavy contents for sculptors too, especially today, when the dispersal of images, ideas, and identities across the mass communications media – and thus across the fields of our attention – contributes to an uneasy feeling that the world is rather insubstantial and weightless when compared with the existential gravity of, say, the Cold War era, or modernity before television or the internet. Our general sense of the world today is as a background of visual white noise that offers us everything (images, the news) and nothing (experiences, meaning). The metaphor of our age continues to be that of the network and its electronic web entangling the globe in a luminous filament of images and information. In part, Sui's sculptures refer to an historical time when modern China closed in on itself of its own ideological weight, before opening to the atmospherics of global consumerism. At the same time, they offer themselves as images – from history, from art, from popular culture – to a world reduced to in images. They are not merely figurative sculptures, but three-dimensional pictures – especially the jackets and dinosaurs – easily recognizable as historical, cultural, and political icons. Their physical weight as sculptures is analogous to their iconic punch as images.

Therefore, Sui's sculptures are forms of Chinese Pop, but they are not cynical. Rather, they are iconic and ironic, but sincere. Their classical formality, industrial materiality, and minimalist reserve represent the antithesis of the arch melodrama that characterized the themes and subjects of Socialist Realist art. This cool indifference to the histrionics of political propaganda mirrors the artist's disenchantment with the era of his youth.

Many Chinese today speak both of loving and hating Mao, and it is precisely this ambivalence, which is personal, not only social or artistic, that churns beneath the manifold industrial skins of Sui's sculptures. It inscribes a space for the expression of public mourning for an adolescence stolen by misplaced and manipulated idealism. The art may be cool, but the experiences that inform them are still too hot to touch directly – hence the ironic detachment embodied in Sui's work. Irony is important in China because it can still be used as a tactic to mean the opposite of what it appears to say. This misdirection allows artists to, as in this case, point out the Emperor's new clothes while also seeming to drape them over the naked or empty rhetoric of the ancient regime. In the West, irony has too often deteriorated into cynicism, which is why we've become cynical about irony. In China, irony is a way of actually saying something important, perhaps for the first time.

And then there are the dinosaurs. Around 2001 Sui began casting various species of Mesozoic reptiles in fiberglass, bronze, and plastic, and in sizes ranging from miniature to monster. Modeled after plastic children's toys, they are almost always a bright, glistening red, and they seem to prowl the forbidden and forbidding cities of China (and beyond) looking for settings in which to be photographed, or, put another way, in which to be "captured" and then "released" as images. Roaming father a field from sculpture per se, into the much wilder domain of pop iconography, the dinosaurs are quickly becoming Sui's signature pieces, whether as objects or pictures. Whereas the suited statues were destined for museum spaces, and the Mao jackets are made for public space, the dinosaurs are swarming across the artscape and going pretty much wherever they want – as dinosaurs do. They show up as key chains, on shopping bags, in posters, throughout art magazines, and – from time to time – on the front steps of art museums. Though some weigh as much as two tons (Jurassic Age, 2004, painted bronze), their physical presence, while undeniably physical, is animated by reference to the pop culture sources from which they emerge (hatch?): comic books, movies, and toys. Whatever their material density or kilo-tonnage, Sui's dinosaurs seem ready to pounce.

One of the motifs passing through Sui's sculpture is a masquerade regarding weight. The suited Greco-Roman or Renaissance statues are cast in fiberglass but look like granite or marble. The Mao jackets are hollow but heavy, with certain smaller versions made from rubber latex but colored like lead – they look heavy but fold easily into a suitcase. With the dinosaurs, this slight-of-hand between visual appearance and physical density is more playful, as befits an art derived from toys. For example, certain two-foot tall T-Rex's are made of plastic while others are cast in bronze. Both are painted red. Each looks identical to the other. The only way to tell the difference is to pick them up, the plastic dinosaur feeling buoyant and its bronze twin heavy as a fire hydrant. Or, among a nest of smaller plastic dinosaurs of various species – some squat and fierce, others svelte and serene – Sui will plant a few that have been cast in bronze, filled with lead, and painted to replicate the rest. The result, if you pick through them, is the surprise of trying to lift something much heavier than it looks. In a museum, where you're not supposed to touch the art, even knowing (by reading the tags) that some dinosaurs are plastic and others are leaden registers in the mind as a metaphor of gravity, be it physical or literary. Dinosaurs being (having been) generally heavy, they sank into the swamps eons ago; likewise, sculpture, no matter how amenable to the world of images, is always heavier than it looks. And sometimes its meanings are denser than whatever it looks like – toy dinosaurs, for example.

Embossed in thick block letters along the chest of the larger dinosaurs is the by-now familiar phrase, "Made in China." These words clearly "brand" each creature as having come from the imaginative world of children's toys. The actual size of the biggest dinosaurs is thus caught in our awareness of scale, which, of course, is based in our foreknowledge of the pint-sized plastic playthings from which they derive. It is in this sense that even Sui's most "gargantuan" T-Rex never quite escapes the pages of comic books, movie or television screens, or the lost world of the living room floor.

Not that the world of children's toys is a realm of innocence. It is a multi-billion dollar domain of product testing, mass marketing, and industrial production – it is international big business. This is another of the "scales" to which Sui's fearsome reptiles refer. We are all familiar with the idea that China, riding (and trying to control) the world's fastest growing economy, is in line to become the "economic dragon" of the 21st century. In Godzilla-like prose, a recent analysis in [The Economist](#) (May 13, 2004) states that "during the past three years China has accounted for one-third of global economic growth," and that such "scorching growth" has helped prop up other economies by "sucking in" imports while accounting for "90% of the growth in demand for steel" and "one-third of the growth in global oil consumption." The image of a glistening red dragon freed from its (Marxist) economic

cage and roaming the planet to feed its voracious appetite, though the stuff of bad movies, is not far from the reality of a market-driven China.

If China is sometimes regarded by its Asian neighbors and the nations of the West as an emerging economic dragon – which is to say, powerful but unpredictable – it is worth recalling that in China dragons have been revered for centuries as celestial beings who rule over the waters with wisdom, courage, and benevolence. In the West, dinosaurs are man-eaters. In China, they are magical cosmic forces. Representing the ultimate manifestations of nature, these Chinese serpents – of which there are nine classical types – are associated with the active, masculine concept of yang (the flip side of yin) and symbolize abundance, prosperity, and good fortune. They have also been emblems of the Emperor and Imperial power, a monarchist association discouraged after 1949 (the Chinese government preferred Pandas instead).

It is hard not to sense the ancient Chinese dragons inside Sui's modern-day comic book dinosaurs – especially the toy-size dinosaurs, with their long necks, sweeping tails, and coiled trunks, undulating together in serpent-esque wave patterns reminiscent of the manner in which dragons are so often depicted in the traditional Chinese arts, whether ink drawings or street dances. In Chinese folklore, small dragons make minor mischief; Sui's little dinosaurs conceal their weight and density behind appearances (some are toys, others sculptures of toys). In the big dinosaurs, we glimpse mammoth urban monsters that crush police cars and topple tall buildings (that's modern folklore); meanwhile, dragons advise the Imperial court, and are vain enough to be offended if the Emperor doesn't heed their advice. The dinosaurs are hatched from Western popular culture; the dragons cavort in a primal Chinese cosmos – if only in the mind.

Like Sui's dinosaurs, the figures in Socialist Realist statuary are depicted standing upright, scanning the horizon, marching onward, coiled and ready to attack. The language of their bodies is steeped in the melodramatic contortions of a kind of revolutionary contrapposto – but instead of the equilibrium of hips and shoulders aligned in counterpoised directions (one side open, the other closed; an expression, since the Greeks, of intellectual reason and balance), their ideological fervor carries them forward, towards Utopia, as they storm the barricades of history like Liberty leading her people (ironically, a prototype that would inform the plaster "Goddess of Democracy" statue crushed by tanks in the ill-fated Tian-an-Men Square demonstrations of 1989).

Thus, we sense not only the dragons inside Sui's dinosaurs, but the exaggerated gestural vocabulary of Socialist Realism itself. Even the swollen, corpuscular skin of Sui's red Tyrannosaurus-Rex recalls the patterns and textures of ripe abundance that satiate paintings of the harvests during the era of communal farming.

The dinosaurs – now understood as a child's dream of the heroic farmers and workers and soldiers of the revolution – embody that vocabulary on the 21st century scale of pop iconography, the present and future site of all cultural revolutions. In this sense, the dinosaurs are not so different from Sui's other sculptures; instead of radical departures in form, they are the subliminal extensions of the slaves and athletes churning inside the Sun Yat Sen suits and the missing deity haunting the hollow Mao jackets.

Since the early 1990s, when he wrapped and wedged small boulders with steel webs and rods (another expression of liberation versus constriction), Sui has produced other bodies of figurative works, including a series of colorful fiberglass copies of the "Panda" trash receptacles that decorate many parks throughout Beijing, the difference being that Sui's Pandas are taller, so they look like rows of Kitschy sculptures to foreigners, while locals

assume they are spiffed-up (i.e., pre-2008 Olympic) trash cans made to accommodate the expected influx of generally taller Westerners (Yao Ming notwithstanding).

Another somewhat infamous sculpture involves a bronze casting of a young Chinese businessman, standing with a jacket slung over his arm, holding a mobile phone to his ear. The realistic pose and rendering is Socialist Realist in casual business attire, but the figure is standing knee-deep (for the most part) in a wide river snaking its way through the near-vertical slopes of the mountains of Guilin, perhaps the most recognizable in China. When the river rises and recedes with the seasons, the bronze businessman is alternately submerged by the water or seen emerging from its depths. The image of a lone male figure walking serenely through the undulating topography of China recalls Liu Chun-hua's famous painting from 1968, "Chairman Mao Going to An-yun," in which a young Mao, holding an umbrella under his arm, is depicted wearing a traditional Qing robe, as if a monk – or the Buddha – bringing wisdom to the masses (he was actually on his way to organize coal miners in the 1930s). Unlike Liu's young Mao, Sui's young businessman strides not out of the mountains, but into the river. When the tide is high, only his head is visible – like Mao's in the iconic 1966 photograph of his "swim" in the Yangtse River (at age 70). But when the water recedes, a different sort of prophet appears, one Mao could never have imagined in his quest for an ideological modernity – a postmodern capitalist. "Tuned in" to the global matrix, and yet oblivious to the "classic" landscape around him, Sui's businessman strides confidently toward China's future by, ironically, wading back into its ancient time-stream.

Sui has also crafted larger-than-life fiberglass sculptures of folkloric icons, such as "Shouxing," an old wise man with a bald forehead and a long white beard who is clad in a traditional robe, holds a peach (a heavenly fruit symbolizing long life), and carries a gnarled cane (that often looks like a tree).

Shouxing, or "Longevity Star," is one of three celestial "stars" in Chinese folklore, the others being Happiness and Wealth. The salient point here is that such folkloric characters are depicted in a non-naturalistic manner that does not derive from art academies or royal courts, but from the countryside. They are forms of Chinese folk art. Their images may be found throughout China on everything from teapots to jade carvings. Shouxing, in particular, lends itself to a cartoon-like exaggeration, with the wise man's bulbous head and flowing whiskers. Western analogues of this form of popular caricature might include Santa Claus, Pop-Eye (his chin), Richard Nixon (his nose), Homer Simpson (his belly), or ... dinosaurs!

In China the modern analogue would be Mao.

As the central character of Chinese Socialist Realism, Mao Tse-dong was depicted countless times by uncounted artists, both trained and untrained. A malicious caricature of Mao would have been unthinkable during his rule, or even today. Indeed, every attempt was made to represent his image with academic precision, but in one of the deep ironies of Socialist Realist practice in China, artists were expected to render from life – except when drawing Mao, their primary subject. Him they never saw, except as images. They learned to copy his likeness from photographs and other paintings, that is, from among themselves. Even Liu Chun-hua's "Chairman Mao Going to An-yun" was a romantic composite of thirty year-old photographs of Mao.

Though artists trained in the academies believed they were representing Mao exactly, they also knew they were expected to imbue the Chairman's image with the ideological spirit of which he was said to be the supreme embodiment. That is, his realistic depiction required the caress of an idealizing hand. Was his color red enough? His gaze wise enough? His skin smooth enough? His stride youthful enough? Over time, this constant idealization of Mao's image became its standard, and few could tell the difference between an idealized image of a man and

a realistic image of an ideal man. Either way, Mao's image was copied so often, and so assiduously, that its features were gradually generalized into clichés of the academic style. His plump face, his slight smile, the mole on his cheek, his high hairline with those odd waves of hair hugging each temple, his effortlessly raised hand, his relaxed but confident stance, his unruffled namesake suit – all became conventional elements in a visual index that added up to the similitude of Mao. As an image, he was an exquisite corpse composed (and recomposed) of his own parts – and those parts were articles of visual faith, since Chinese artists of the Socialist Realist era were, in effect, painting blind.

Faith is the means by which all deities are rendered by the artists who cannot see them, except in visions and other art. Mortals can never gaze directly upon the face of God, but only caress its image. Of course, we usually mistake the image for the deity, which is how likenesses of the Gods become iconic over time, coming to stand for the deity who cannot be – who never could be – seen. “I only remember the mole on his face,” recalls a Chinese bartender, speaking of Mao. “His hairstyle was rather special too.” Meanwhile, an art gallery attendant in contemporary Beijing can only conjure his likeness “from Mao badges and memorabilia.”

A Mao badge from the 1950s or 60s is probably as close to a religious icon as a nominally communist country can get. After having been discarded by the countless millions in the late 1970s and early 1980s (when the government sought to distance itself from the “cult of Mao,” and when the Chinese people, once forced to wear Mao buttons, carry Mao's little red books, and memorize Mao's quotations, tried to erase the Cultural Revolution from their personal and collective memories), Mao memorabilia in China enjoyed a resurgence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In part, this was an expression of nostalgia for the presumed egalitarian morality and political stability of Chinese society before the high inflation and rampant corruption that accompanied Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms left many Chinese feeling dejected and pessimistic. It was not uncommon during this period to see amulets or talismans with Mao's picture hanging across the rear-view mirrors of taxis (to protect against accidents), or to see people wearing watches with Mao's benevolent arm ticking upward as a second hand. Pens, posters, calendars, cigarette lighters, children's school notebooks, and other consumer items proliferated. Some called this “Commie Kitsch.” Nostalgia for the ideological past, however, soon gave way to market economics as people began realizing that Mao paraphernalia – and Mao badges in particular – were worth money. By 1994 there were over 100,000 badge collectors in China. People stopped wearing them and started selling them.

But whether quasi-religious icons or global investment vehicles, these images of the Chairman, once the state sanctioned subjects of Socialist Realism, had, by the end of the century, become objects of popular folklore – rather like the images of Shouxing or Santa. No longer sustained by its former ideological context, Mao's image became a cipher for just about any meanings that might be invested in it, whether nostalgia (for those old enough to remember), disdain (for those who wanted to forget), or simple adherence to fashion (young people wearing Mao badges because other young people wore Mao badges). As the Chinese economy shifted gears from a centralized behemoth to a market-driven dragon, the image of Mao underwent a no-less startling transition from academic cliché to pop icon. The nature of pop iconography is its weightlessness with regard to content. It can mean everything or nothing, depending upon the context in which it is presented (a political rally, a Pepsi ad) and the expectations of its audience (to be stirred, to be entertained). Thus, having been liberated from the strictures of Socialist Realism by the impulses of consumerism, Mao's image was set adrift in the visual atmosphere of popular iconography as a post-ideological apparition.

Perhaps the most daring of Sui's recent works is called “Sleeping Mao.” A painted, larger than life fiberglass sculpture, it depicts Mao laying comfortably on his side, eyes closed, head and hand on pillow, covered foot to

chin by a traditional faded blue peasant blanket decorated by a simple batik pattern of white quasi-floral abstractions. Mao's hair is black and his hairline rides high on his scalp. His face, painted a kind of peach-red, seems ripe, almost aglow – the color animates him, but his countenance is deeply at rest, nearly angelic, flush with the kind of serene and untroubled sleep we all long for.

Sui has not etched his sleeping Mao in the rugged contours of realism, Socialist or otherwise. Rather, he has chosen to round the shapes, smooth the surface, soften the image, and brighten the colors of his suddenly less-than-familiar subject. There is only one presentation of Mao in a prone position in China, and that is Mao himself laid out for public viewing in his mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. There, protected in a glass case, he lay rigidly posed on his back, dressed in an impeccable “Mao” jacket and wrapped to his chest in a taut Chinese flag. Oddly, perhaps appropriately, his face is red like the sun setting over smoggy Beijing. It is the face behind all the posters and banners and buttons.

During his lifetime, and until now, Mao was never represented lying down. Repose was not a part of the heroic visual vocabulary of propaganda art. Moreover, the human figure laid horizontal is a metaphor of death or sleeping, and even in death Mao seems more asleep than lifeless. Indeed, the reverential silence of the pious as they file past his body testifies both to their respect for the occasion as well as to an underlying sense that even a whisper might disturb the Chairman's eternal sleep. Mao's mausoleum is an elaborate architectural and ceremonial frame intended to preserve the symbolic order that Mao embodied during his lifetime. The preservation of that order means the physical preservation of Mao. In turn, we do not think him truly dead, since his body has been neither cremated nor entombed. As the personification of the ideals of the Chinese Communist revolution, his body must be preserved as an archive – a kind of “living” link to history. Were he to be cremated or entombed, i.e., treated as dead, those ideals would lose their embodiment in this world. It is curious that the only two major powers of the 20th century to denounce religion, China and the Soviet Union, are also those that preserved the corpses of their political prophets, Mao and Lenin. Mao is treated in his mausoleum as if he were sleeping, or at least not dead. The precedent for this state of being – of being not dead – lies not with Lenin, however, but with the Sleeping Buddha.

Images of Sakyamuni – the historical Buddha – on his deathbed some 2,500 years ago can be seen throughout China (and beyond) as sculptures in temples, frescoes in grottos, engravings on stone, carvings on wood and jade, drawings on metal molding, and (like the varied scales of Sui's dinosaurs) ranging in size from the sides of mountains to grains of rice. Among countless images of the Buddha standing or sitting, these depictions of the dying Sakyamuni show him reclining on his side, his head propped up by his right hand.

Often, he is portrayed being attended by disciples who express grief and lamentation at his imminent passing, even as he reminds them, for the final time, that “all individual things pass away.” Eyes half-closed, the Buddha then entered Nirvana, the state of enlightenment whereby the spiritual self is freed of attachment to worldly things. Says Ananada, his cousin and personal attendant, “He has arrived at the cessation of perception and sensation.” In other words, he has risen beyond corporeal existence.

The significant point here is that the Sleeping Buddha is represented not in the moment of death, but just prior, as he passes into eternal bliss. Thus, since we do not see him dead, we say he is sleeping. Sleeping is not dying, and there remains a sense that the reclining Buddha is not really gone, although he has transcended our physical existence, leaving us – in every sense – behind. This concept of eternal sleep is inherent in the nature of visual representation, which involves images fixed in time; as long as the Buddha's moment of transcendence is

prolonged as an image, it will never be otherwise, we will never see him die. Like Mao in his mausoleum, the Sleeping Buddha is shown as being not dead, but spiritually transcendent. Sui has made this symbolic resonance apparent by turning “Sleeping Mao” on his side, like Sakyamuni.

By representing Mao as the Sleeping Buddha of modern China, Sui again raises the question – as he does with the empty jackets and restless dinosaurs – of whether the Chairman (and the revolution he embodied) has truly passed into history, or if he remains in a state of ideological Nirvana from which he might yet arise in some transmogrified form (which, as cultism, Kitsch, and – in the vanguard arts – Pop, he already has). In fact, Sui plants the seeds of that awakening in a different ground – the Chinese countryside – by fashioning his Mao in much the same manner as Shouxing, that is, in an untrained, cartoonish, folkloric idiom. For example, Shouxing and Mao share the same high hairline and pate. Their colors are plain and bright, eschewing chiascuro or other academic techniques of rendering. As subjects for art, both are prone to stylistic generalization that borders on caricature. Shouxing’s traditional robe is, on Sleeping Mao, a common peasant (proletarian) quilt.

Upping the ante on this symbolism of Mao’s countryside origins, as well as on his ultimate return to folkloric iconicity, Sui made a daring conceptual move by commissioning a clay sculpture of “Sleeping Mao” (from which the fiberglass was later cast and painted) from an artisan who lives in Yan-an, the desolate rural city in Shanxi Province where Mao and other top Communist Party cadres sought refuge during the Chinese Civil War and World War II. Famed as the terminus of the Long March (1934-35) – an epic 370 day strategic military retreat in which 90,000 men and women of the Communist Army, led by Mao, escaped annihilation by Chiang Kai-Shek’s Nationalist troops in southern Jiangxi Province by trekking nearly 5,000 miles over formidable terrain while losing more than half of their numbers to fatigue, sickness, desertion, and battlefield casualties – Yan-an is hallowed ground for the Chinese Communist Party and the revolution it eventually won by driving the nationalists from the mainland to the island of Taiwan.

The de-facto capital of a would-be Communist China from 1936-48, Yan-an is laced with now-famous hillside caves that served as air raid shelters and living quarters for soldiers and party officials. It is also where Mao consolidated his personal rule over the Communist Party. In a sense, Yan-an is Mao’s Valley Forge.

During the early years of the Cultural Revolution Yan-an was besieged by trainloads of youthful Red Guards who saw the city as a sacred site, and pilgrimages by tourists surged in the late 1980s and early 1990s as the nostalgic cult of Mao reached its climax. Thus, to commission a local artisan – actually, a Mao devotee who otherwise crafts statues of the Chairman from clay – to fashion a sculpture of the patriarch of revolutionary China in a folkloric idiom while showing him laying on his side is like asking an American traditionalist painter to depict George Washington sinking into the Delaware. In fact, it took Sui months to convince the artisan that a prone Mao was not an insult to his memory, since – Sui argued – even he, the Great Helmsman, deserved sleep like everyone else.

Still, the artisan of Yan-an knew the symbolism of “Sleeping Mao.” He knew that he had never seen Mao lying down before, and that lying down sideways with his eyes closed likened him to the Sleeping Buddha. Being from Yan-an, he also knew that Sleeping Buddha statues are often carved into rock cliffs, like the caves (yaodong) in which Mao lived, worked, and slept during his long exile during the wars. It was in the caves of Yan-an, after all, that Mao achieved his ideological enlightenment; Communism, he realized, would emerge from the countryside

in the form of a self-reliant peasant army rising up in the service of a new Chinese Marxism forged in the Long March and refined at Yan-an. To achieve the revolution, he would cross the Yellow River with his army, much as Washington had once crossed the Delaware with his. At Yan-an, he studied Marxist theory in a cave, much as Lincoln had studied by candlelight in a log cabin (or the way Marx himself, an impoverished German philosopher, had toiled in an English slum). Like the Buddha spending forty days fasting and meditating in the wilderness, Mao's strategic withdrawal to Yan-an was steeped in the kind of epic sacrifice that changes human history. Yan-an is to Mao as Qufu is to Confucius: a spiritual hometown. By beckoning forth a truly unique depiction of Mao from the place where his image is most familiar and revered, Sui has done nothing less than intervene in the history of Mao's image, perhaps to change it forever. By laying him down like the Sleeping Buddha and stylizing him like Shouxing, he has returned Mao's spirit, if not his body, to the countryside, whence it came, and where it might finally come to rest.

But it's a troubled sleep, this sleep of reason. In Sui's presentation of "Sleeping Mao" at the Asian Art Museum, we encounter the fiberglass sculpture of Mao reclining on a bed of twenty thousand plastic toy dinosaurs. As a mass, the dinosaurs resemble the mountains and valleys of China as seen from a high vantage point, echoing the lofty perspective of traditional Chinese landscape painting. They also look like a colorful bed of funeral flowers, recalling Mao in his mausoleum. Made in China but purchased by the artist in Japan, the dinosaurs – literal examples of Chinese economic expansion – come packaged for children in plastic bags. Each bag contains numerous reptilian species in lurid cartoon colors and a few plastic palm trees to simulate the Jurassic jungles of dino-lore. On the large platform surrounding Sleeping Mao, Sui has arranged his dinosaurs by kind and by color, each genus bunched tightly together in prickly packs that undulate in serpent-like waves across a writhing, primal topography like swarms of demons just beneath the threshold of Mao's awareness – as if he were dreaming them, as if they were marching to the rhythms of his dream.

There is a famous etching by Francisco de Goya, from the *Los Caprichos* series, in which a fitfully sleeping man, half-sitting, half-laying down, his head buried in his folded arms atop a drawing table, is shown dreaming a swarm of agitated bats and owls (the owls then symbols of mindlessness, unlike today) that pervade the space behind and above him. A lynx sits behind the sleeping man's chair, eyes wide and alert.

Published in 1799, the etching, called "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters," is probably the best picture of a nightmare ever rendered. By most interpretations, Goya himself is the sleeping man, an artist/intellectual whose drawings/writings lay scattered beneath him. Beset by beasts – one of which, an owl, hands him an artist's crayon – Goya seems to be posing the question of whether he, the artist/intellectual, can be inspired by the irrational without being consumed by it. Sometimes the only protection against the dark forces of human nature is a piece of paper on which to write or draw.

In theory, Marxism was reasonable. Founded on Hegelian (German) logic, it envisioned a rational model for ongoing change deriving from the tension between conflicting forces and ideas. This is not to say political change itself would be smooth, but that it would unfold, however fitfully, within a rational framework, on an historical scale, and inevitably (logic often seems inevitable). Called Dialectical Materialism, Marxist political philosophy sought to resolve social inequities through a process of dialectical reasoning in which opposing forces (thesis/antithesis) would fight-it-out, discarding unnecessary conventions until a synthesis was attained. The resulting synthesis, in turn, would recognize its antithesis in the world, commencing in yet another struggle resulting in a higher synthesis, and so on, until Communism in the daily lives of the people had been achieved.

For Mao, Communism was always an aspiration requiring constant revision through perpetual revolution, and socialism was merely its primitive stage. Hence the mass movements he instigated from Yan-an forward: “Let One Hundred Flowers Bloom,” the “Anti-Rightist Campaign,” the “Three Red Flags Movement,” the “Great Leap Forward,” the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” and so on. The Chinese people lived and died through these cataclysms, but they didn’t sleep through them. The social and political turmoil that rocked post-revolutionary China, and the immense human cost of that turmoil (especially mass famine), was the direct result of Mao’s dream of achieving, perhaps in his lifetime, a pure Communist state – a Marxist Nirvana.

Or was it a nightmare?

In the third century BC the Taoist sage Chuang-Tzu wrote of having woken from a long nap in which he dreamed he was a butterfly floating on the breeze, only to become confused and wonder: Am I a man who dreamed that I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man? The question drifts down through the ages and hangs in the hypnogogic pauses between history’s many dreams of Utopia. Per the Goya, one might also wonder: Does the absence of reason breed monsters, or is reason itself a kind of dream, a respite from the demons of this world? Perhaps reason is a high dream of the earthbound mind.

In its incarnation at the Asian Art Museum, Sui’s “Sleeping Mao” offers a breathtaking and ominous metaphor of the social, economic, and psychic forces churning beneath the sleep of Marxist reason. Having been “made in China,” are the countless plastic dinosaurs symbolic of Capitalist expansion and, thereby, Mao’s defacto ideological nightmare (from which his slumber protects him)? Or, do they symbolize the decades of chaos unleashed upon “the people” by his dream of perpetual revolution? Often he governed China – a land in constant turmoil – from the solitude of his palace bed. Did Mao dream Communism, or did Communism dream Mao? If and when he wakes, which will be the dreamer, which the dreamed?

Nirvana may be better than Utopia, after all.

There is something profound, by way of paradox, in the image of an ancient land of restless dragons presented as the bed for a modern-day sleeping Buddha. Such paradox cuts to the core of Sui Jianguo’s sculpture, and lay in its deft combination of seemingly antithetical elements: an ancient Western statue outfitted in a modern Chinese suit; a familiar rotund blouse filled with the missing contents; a plastic toy dinosaur grown to monumental proportions; a Socialist Realist bronze depicting a post-ideological businessman; the reddest red sun setting into the deepest deep sleep. The purpose of these dualities is not to force a rational synthesis (that would be Marxism), but to open each element to the dream of its opposite (that would be Democracy, a la Chuang-Tzu). Thus, one might think of Sui’s creative process as a kind of reverse dialectics, in which Mao lays down with the Buddha, China lies down with the West, the artist lies down with his demons – and the lion lies down with the lamb.