WENDA GU’S *UNITED NATIONS* SERIES AND THE GREAT PROLETARIAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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Introduction

Wenda Gu is a Contemporary artist whom many historians recognize as the father of conceptual Chinese ink painting.\(^1\) He was born in Shanghai, China in 1955 and spent his childhood and adolescence during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), surrounded by propaganda artworks that the dictator Mao Zedong’s government promoted. After the GPCR ended, Gu received his Master’s degree in Fine Arts from the China Academy of Art with the focus on Traditional Chinese landscape paintings. He moved to the United States in 1987 and started creating art installations entirely made of human body waste products, including human hair.\(^2\) Gu’s art installation series *United Nations*, which is entirely made of human hair, is one of the major artworks he is known for. Among his twenty-two installations in the *United Nations*, there are two installation works titled the *China Monument*. Those *China Monument* installations refer to art and its production in the GPCR period both visually and conceptually. However, the content of the *China Monument* installations is the opposite from the content of artworks created during the GPCR. In the *China Monument* installations, Gu expresses his image of an egalitarian universal utopia, where humans coexist in harmony regardless of their political beliefs. In contrast, many of the artworks produced during the GPCR carried a message for Chinese citizens to fight against their “class-enemies,” which meant any person who did not advocate Mao’s leftist ideologies. These enemies included the foreign government officials and armies, and any Chinese citizens who were suspected of having different political beliefs than Mao’s. During the GPCR period, Chinese government used artworks to promote Mao’s Communist ideologies. Many of those visual artworks were accusatory towards Mao’s political

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\(^1\) Carol Lutfy, "FEATURES - Asia - Brush with the Past - Wenda Gu has influenced the genre of Chinese ink painting with unexpected characters -- And Materials," *ARTnews* (Sep. 2000): 140.

\(^2\) Carol Lutfy, ibid., 140.
opponents. Those artworks were produced to encourage Chinese citizens to participate in Mao’s political revolution by fighting against the class-enemies. Referring to Mao’s political practices in the *China Monuments*, Gu expresses his disagreement with Mao’s policy of discriminating people based on their political beliefs. Although Gu supports the Communist ideology of eliminating social class divisions, which will be discussed later, he does not support the view that Chinese government promoted, in which mankind can be divided either into Mao’s political allies or enemies and people of different political beliefs should fight against each other. This paper analyzes Wenda Gu’s *United Nations, China Monument* installations to show Gu’s criticism toward Chinese government for having propagated creating divisions between the citizens through its use of visual art during the GPCR period. First, this paper will introduce the *United Nations* series and the artist’s aim of uniting humanity with his use of human hair in this art series. Second, a general introduction of the GPCR and artworks produced during that period will be provided to give a historical background, and Gu’s personal experience in the GPCR will also be discussed. Third, Gu’s earlier works right after the GPCR and their connections to his reaction to that period will be analyzed. Fourth, this paper will analyze *United Nations*, in more detail, focusing on the two *China Monument* s from that series. Fifth, both visual and conceptual references to the GPCR in both *China Monuments* will be discussed. Sixth, by comparing *China Monuments* with the government’s propaganda artworks, this paper argues that *China Monuments* show the artist’s criticism toward the government which propagated creating divisions among Chinese citizens with the use of artworks. Gu expresses such criticism to Mao’s practice through his rejection of the contents, art styles, and the purpose of propaganda artworks produced during the GPCR period.

The *United Nations* Project
Started in 1993, the *United Nations* is Gu’s ongoing worldwide art installation project. All of the installations in the *United Nations* series are completely made of human hair, which the artist collected from the barbershops across the world. By the end of 2004, he created twenty-two *United Nations* installations and exhibited those in fourteen different countries. The art critique Minglu Gao analyzed that the *United Nations* was Gu’s presentation of a utopian universality of humankind.3 Having hair on the head is one of the shared characteristics of human beings. Making installations out of human hair collected across the world, Gu underlines the universal characteristics of humankind in the *United Nations*. In his artist statement, Gu expresses his belief that if humans could focus on similarities rather differences between each other, they can co-exist in harmony.4 By emphasizing the common feature of human beings in the *United Nations*, Gu represents his idealistic image of a utopian society where humans across the world unite.

Not only representing the universal identity of humankind, Gu also uses human hair to show the local identities of people. Gu often creates each *United Nations* installation with human hair that he collects from the barbershop in the country where he exhibits that installation. Each installation is dedicated to the specific city, region, or country. For example, his *Hong Kong Monument: The Historic Crash* (Figure 1) is dedicated to Honk-Kong region in China, as a memorial of Opium Wars and Hong-Kong’s return to China. In the year Gu exhibited this installation, Hong-Kong returned to China from the UK’s occupation. Hong-Kong was ceded to the British as a result of China’s defeat in the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century. The installation includes some references to the Opium Wars. For instance, Gu used human hair that he collected in the UK and in China in this installation

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as one of his conceptual references to the war. Gu’s *Poland Monument: Hospitalized History Museum* is another example from the *United Nations* project. Gu dedicated this monument to Poland, where Nazi’s concentration camps were located during WWII. Hair collected in Poland was scattered around the history museum of the city named Łódz.\(^5\) In the early 1940s, Nazi Germany built a ghetto in Łódz and put approximately 160,000 Jewish people there. Many of them were deported to other cities to be sent to the gas chambers.\(^6\) This installation reminded some local viewers of a practice in the holocaust during WWII: right before being sent to the gas chambers, the victims in the concentration camps were forced to cut off their hair.\(^7\) Wenda Gu states that for each *United Nations* monument, he often chooses the political event that he thinks significant in the human history, and he dedicates each of his monument to the place that strongly relates to that historic event.\(^8\) In the *United Nations* project, Gu represents the local community and a part of its historic background in each of his monuments, and he connects all monuments together with his consistent use of human hair.


The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR)

Besides the return of Hong Kong to China, the GPCR was also one of the most significant events in Chinese modern history. Most historians understand that the GPCR started with the adolescents’ revolt, which Mao Zedong advocated, against the government in May 1966 and ended in 1976 with Mao’s death. During the GPCR, Mao was the dictator of China and tried to reform China into a Communist nation. Mao executed any politicians around him who would be able to threat his “throne,” by accusing them as the “class-enemies,” who do not support Mao’s agenda. In Chinese society, scholars, teachers, and any person considered capitalists and political rightists were also persecuted as class-enemies. Citizens, especially the Red Guard, the political associations of adolescents, fought each other to prove that their strategies were more consistent with Mao’s wills than

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11 Frank Dikötter, ibid., 15.
Regardless of the fact that Mao’s verdict could completely change overnight, a number of citizens were mesmerized by Mao’s revolutionary ideologies and worshiped him as a political hero.\textsuperscript{13}

In order to maintain Mao’s dictatorship, the government used visual art to mobilize Chinese citizens and to strengthen Mao’s power by criticizing and accusing the class-enemies. The government controlled all art productions in China, and Chinese workers in the art production firms had to follow the restriction of art media, style, and subject matters set by the government. Big character posters and Social Realism style posters, paintings, and sculptures were the only types of art that the government permitted workers to make (Figure 3). Those posters were mass-produced and exhibited in the public spaces. Many propaganda artworks produced during the GPCR carried clear messages: promoting Mao’s political ideology and revolution and attacking anyone disagreeing with Mao’s Communist ideologies.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image3.png}
\caption{Imperialism and all reactionary forces are paper tigers (1971).}
\end{figure}

The artist Wenda Gu went through a difficult time under the GPCR. As Gu’s grandfather, Gu Jianchen, had a rightist politician friend, Gu’s entire family was often discriminated by his neighbors.\textsuperscript{14} Gu Jianchen was sent to the countryside and died there.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
without any presence of his family members. In a sense, Gu’s family had to abandon Gu Jianchen to show their loyalty to Mao so that the discrimination against them would not get worse. In addition, Gu, who dreamed to be a painter from his childhood, had to practice his painting in secret during the GPCR period. Chinese government at that time associated most forms of the traditional artworks with the literati and bourgeois culture. Thus, citizens could not practice any forms of traditional art in public. Gu could not start pursuing his dream to be a painter until Mao’s dictatorship ended in 1976. He was made to work at the big character poster production firm until the art schools resumed teaching traditional Chinese art. Such painful personal experiences could be reflected in Gu’s opinion on the GPCR.

Gu’s Early Calligraphy Work

Indeed, Gu’s criticism toward the GPCR government’s polarized view on the world, where all humans are sorted into either Mao’s political allies or enemies, is expressed in his early calligraphy work. Gu’s experiences during the GPCR inspired him to create the conceptual calligraphy work titled Negative and Positive Characters from his Chinese calligraphy series, Mythos of Last Dynasty (Figure 4). Negative and Positive Characters was produced only five years after the GPCR ended. Gu juxtaposes some pairs of opposing concepts in this artwork. First, references to Western Modernism and an Eastern traditional art are juxtaposed in this composition. The artist shows his influence from Surrealism in the two distorted black figures in the lower half of this artwork. Surrealist art typically represents what comes from its artists’ unconscious minds. Chinese government banned citizens from practicing any Western art styles and publications, except Social Realism. The government

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claimed that Western art and literature reflected the taste of the Western bourgeoisie, which Mao recognized as a class-enemy. On the other hand, the government allowed citizens to practice a form of traditional Chinese art, calligraphy, in the big character propaganda posters during the GPCR period. The hanging scroll in the middle of Negative and Positive Characters, where two written Chinese characters are represented, works as a visual reference to the big character posters. In this way, Gu contrasts both socially appropriate and inappropriate arts in the GPCR period in this composition.

(Figure 4) Mythos of Last Dynasty Series: Negative and Positive Characters (1984-85), ink on paper, three hanging scrolls.

Gu wished to learn more about the art styles that Chinese government labeled as inappropriate during the GPCR period. As it was mentioned earlier, Gu could not pursue his dream of becoming a painter during the GPCR period. The government banned the artists’ free expression during the GPCR so that no one could express any criticisms toward Mao’s dictatorship. Immediately after the revolution ended, Gu started studying Western oil painting and Western philosophy, both of which used to be prohibited by the government.\textsuperscript{16} He absorbed many influential thoughts from Western philosophers and started including those in his art. For example, Gu mentions Wittgenstein’s theory, that describes how the mystery of

\textsuperscript{16} Yan Zyou, ibid., 61.
the universe can never be described by languages, was influential to him. Gu’s depiction of Surrealistic figures in this composition shows Gu’s influence both from Wittgenstein’s idea and Western paintings. As an artist, Gu received many positive influences from Western art and philosophy, which Chinese government used to ban citizens from practicing. The government censored all publications and did not expose citizens to ideas from foreign countries. The government worried that some Western thoughts, like democracy, could possibly make citizens realize the evil of Mao’s dictatorship. On the contrary, from practicing Western art and philosophy, Gu, realized that the way which Chinese government treated Western culture during the GPCR period was wrong. By incorporating Surrealistic figures into his Chinese calligraphy work, Gu criticizes the Chinese government for twisting the truth and hiding information from the citizens in order to maintain its dictatorship.

Second, Gu juxtaposes two Chinese characters, whose meanings oppose each other, in the middle of this composition. Those two Chinese characters: 正, which means “correct,” “proper,” “positive,” and “orthodox,” and 反, which means “reverse,” “opposite,” “against,” or “rebel” are placed vertically on the hanging scroll. The character that means “correct” is, in this hanging scroll, written as a mirror image of a correct form of the word, 正. With this treatment of the word 正, “correct,” Gu confuses his viewers with the overall meaning of paired written characters, 正反, in this hanging scroll. As the Chinese written character for “correct” is flipped in this composition, the audience who reads Chinese would wonder either the written character 正 keeps its original meaning, “correct,” or it should means the

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opposite, “incorrect.” This flipped character 正 “correct” could be the artist’s reference to some truths that were bent by the government during the GPCR. The government censored all the publications and did not disclose true information that could shake Mao’s political leadership to the citizens. The government also spread false information to the public occasionally, in order to keep Chinese citizens mesmerized by the cult of Mao. The government often treated falseness as truth and vice versa in order to maintain its dictatorship. As this flipped image of the character 正 is followed by the character 反,” which means “opposite,” the overall meaning of these paired written characters 正反 could mean either “correct” or “incorrect” depending on the viewer’s interpretation. Either interpreting the written character 正 in this composition as “correct” or “incorrect,” when the viewers interpret the words 正反 in this artwork, they only have a choice between “correct” and “incorrect.” It reflects Chinese society during the GPCR period where the citizens had to believe what the government propagated as a truth.

Lastly, the entire composition is colored with black and white. This is also a juxtaposition of two opposite ideas. While the color white often symbolizes innocence and correct, black often symbolizes guilt and wrong. Ultimately, there is no in-between; only those two opposite concepts of right and wrong are represented in this calligraphy work. By contrasting those three opposites, Gu criticizes the government for restricting the citizen’s right to seek the truth in order to maintain Mao’s dictatorship.

In addition, the two black figures depicted in the bottom half of Negative and Positive Characters seem to express suffer. Especially the one on the left of the composition has a part which look like a right arm and a hand. The top part of the figure has a tilted oval shape,

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and several lines are attached that oval. Those shapes and lines make the figure look like a human body with long black hair. On the torso of the body, Gu wrote Chinese characters 反 and 正. One can interpret this Surrealistic figure as a person, who is twisting one’s body from suffer, which comes from the society’s pressure on the people to always act correctly following the norms set in the society.

Such suffer expressed in *Negative and Positive Characters* parallels the Gu’s childhood experiences during the GPCR period. In one of his interviews, Gu mentions the GPCR as “all about right or wrong.”\(^\text{21}\) Gu recalls that, in Chinese society under the GPCR, as long as the local community members categorized one person as politically correct, he or she was always safe and approved of in the society. However, if one was labeled as politically incorrect, he or she was always rejected.\(^\text{22}\) Gu and his family members, especially his grandfather, were the ones rejected by the local community during the GPCR period. Having a friend who was a political rightist, Gu Jianchen was being suspected of being class enemy by his neighbors during the GPCR period. He was exiled to the countryside and passed away.\(^\text{23}\) Wenda Gu’s neighbors in Shanghai also suspected that members of the whole Gu family of being political rightists. Gu’s family was often discriminated by their neighbors.\(^\text{24}\)

As shown in *Negative and Positive Characters*, Gu does not support the polarization of humankind into political allies and enemies because setting such sharply defined categories in society often causes people, rejected by their community, to suffer. The Chinese authorities closed down Gu’s first solo art exhibition in 1986, which included *Negative and Positive Characters*. Those authorities did not want Chinese citizens to see this kind of artwork, which expresses the artist’s criticism against the nation’s recent political history.

\(^\text{21}\) Wenda Gu, interview on the Metropolitan Museum of Art, ibid.
\(^\text{22}\) Ibid.
\(^\text{23}\) Yan Zyou, ibid., 56.
\(^\text{24}\) Ibid.
The *United Nations, China Monument* Installations

Gu also expresses his response to the GPCR in his later work, the *China Monument* installations from the *United Nations* project. Compared to his earlier work *Negative and Positive Characters* however, the expression of his criticism toward the GPCR is more implicit in those two installations. The artist exhibited both *China Monument* installations: the *Temple of Heaven* (Figure 5, 6) and *The Great Wall of People* (Figure 8, 9) in the state of New York in the U.S.A. As the names of the installations suggest, both monuments have visual references to two Chinese historical monuments in Beijing, *Temple of Heaven* (Figure 7) and *The Great Wall of China* (Figure 10). A viewer who does not know much about the GPCR could interpret both *China Monument* installations as the artist’s appreciation of Chinese culture. The *China Monument: Temple of Heaven* was exhibited in 1998, which is the year when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) decided to add Beijing’s Temple of Heaven to its list of World Heritage Sites. A Ming Dynasty Chinese emperor built the Temple of Heaven to pray to the heaven for a good harvest in the country during the fifteenth century.\(^2^5\) Reflecting the history of Temple of Heaven, Gu placed Ming Dynasty style tables and chairs in the installation space. Viewers were encouraged to sit on those chairs and to share their comments on Gu’s *Temple of Heaven*. Also, on those chairs, the artist integrated TV monitors, where he played a video, projecting the images of the sky.\(^2^6\) The sky reflects the Chinese traditional way of worshipping Heaven and their ancestors, who is believed to live in the sky. In addition, semi-transparent curtains, which are made of woven human hair, rope, and glue, soften the lighting

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from the ceiling.\textsuperscript{27} That lighting effect gives this monument a solemn and peaceful atmosphere, which is typical of a place of worship. Such tranquil atmosphere in religious architecture often makes its visitors appreciate the culture, history, and tradition which the building represents. Gu recreated Temple of Heaven’s tranquil atmosphere in his installation, \textit{Temple of Heaven}. In this way, Gu expresses his celebration of another example of Chinese historic architecture, whose value in history is recognized by the world’s major cultural institution UNESCO.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{images/temple_of_heaven.jpg}
\caption{Temple of Heaven in Beijing, China}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{images/temple_of_heaven_installation.jpg}
\caption{Wenda Gu, \textit{United Nations, China Monument: Temple of Heaven} (1998), Human hair curtains, which are made of human hair, glue, and ropes, a video titled \textit{Heaven}, and Ming dynasty style tables and chairs.}
\end{figure}

Another work by Gu, *China Monument: The Great Wall of People* can be analyzed as his celebration of a long-lasting symbol of Chinese history. As the title suggests, the Great Wall of China in Beijing is the inspiration for this installation. In *The Great Wall of People*, human hair is consolidated into thick blocks, which by their proportion and scale visually represent bricks. The human hair bricks are piled up to create walls, which is approximately between two and three meters tall at the highest part. Gu placed human hair walls to enclose one area of the floor into a rectangular shape. A number of bricks were randomly placed both inside and outside of the enclosed area, and the walls of uneven height suggest that the walls are still under construction or in ruins. The top parts of the human hair walls form steps,
which parallels the architectural design of the Great Wall of China. Traditionally, the Great Wall of China was created to mark a northern border of China, in order to protect the country from nomadic invasions. Starting from the seventh centuries BCE, people of China kept extending the Great Wall with piling up stone bricks with their hands. Thus, the Great Wall of China is a symbol of Chinese history because it is an accumulation of the past activities of Chinese civilians. Paralleling with Temple of Heaven, semi-transparent human hair curtains are hung in an orderly fashion in this installation space. These human hair curtains’ visual lightness and their effect to the lightings add a tranquil atmosphere to this installation. In The Great Wall of People, Gu visually represented the Great Wall of China, which symbolizes Chinese history, by focusing on humans, who have contributed to the history of the nation. Thus, both installations of China Monument express the artist’s appreciation towards Chinese history and tradition, both of which are at the core of Chinese culture. One significance of the China Monument installations in the United Nations project is that those two installations are the only works which the artist did not exhibit in the region to which his monuments are dedicated.

Considering the authorities reaction to his previous artworks, there is still a possibility that the artist expresses his response to the GPCR in the China Monument as well, but he did it more implicitly than in his Negative and Positive Characters. When viewers who are familiar with the GPCR see both China Monument installations, they will find some visual references to the GPCR. In Temple of Heaven, human hair is woven into written languages on the semi-transparent curtains. The focal point of this installation is a sequence of ancient Chinese characters on the human hair curtains, which are hung from the ceiling. Each of the ancient Chinese characters on the ceiling are approximately two meters tall. This image of

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29 “The Great Wall,” ibid.
large-sized Chinese characters on the thin paper-like surface reminds Chinese people of the big character posters, which were produced during the GPCR for Mao’s propaganda purposes.

Compared to the *China Monument: Temple of Heaven*, the reference to GPCR is more implicit in the *China Monument: The Great Wall of People*. In this work, human hair bricks were piled up to create walls. A number of human hair bricks are also placed randomly on the floor. The walls of uneven height and scattered brocks on the floor remind viewers of a primitive construction place, where people worked with their hands without using any construction machines. Such primitive construction strategies were widely employed among Chinese people during the GPCR. One of Mao’s ideologies reflects the reason behind this primitive construction process. He believed that people could increase the output merely by working hard, thus he thought investments in facilities were not necessary.\(^{31}\) In addition, as this monument refers to Great Wall of China, disorganized placement of the blocks on the floor may also evoke thoughts of destruction of traditional buildings. In the beginning of the GPCR, Red Guards vandalized traditional art, buildings, and objects that reflected the Chinese Four Olds: old ideas, old customs, old culture, and old habits.\(^{32}\) The government propagated Four Olds as symbols of social hierarchy. Also, as it was mentioned earlier in the *Poland Monument: Hospitalized History Museum*, a mass of human hair can lead some people to picture the loss of life. Indeed, one study says that at least 34,800 people were tortured to death during the GPCR period, but there is no way to count the total numbers of deaths in China in these terrible years.\(^{33}\) For people who have experienced the GPCR, both visual images of *China Monument* installations may evoke their memories of human loss in Chinese culture.

\(^{31}\) Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, ibid., 786-87.


\(^{33}\) Scott Watson and Shengtian Zheng, ibid., 7.
Besides the visual references in the design components, there is a conceptual reference to the GPCR in the China Monument installations as well. The use of human hair is consistent in Gu’s United Nations series. The artist states that he wants to include his audience in his installation by using hair collected in the audience’s own communities.\(^{34}\)

Having the audience contribute to the art prevailed in China during the GPCR period. Mao made citizens produce propaganda artworks in order to make them relate to the revolution. No individual signed the artworks, and Chinese society, at that time, treated artworks as the citizens’ collective achievement and exhibited them in the public areas.\(^{35}\) In this way, artworks became a symbol of the audiences’ collective achievement. Being able to see their artworks helped boost the citizens’ pride in participating Mao’s revolution. In this way, the government utilized visual art and the art production to spread the cult of Mao.\(^{36}\)

As Gu worked in the big character poster production during the GPCR period, Mao’s art production process might have inspired Gu’s idea of using his audience’ human hair. Besides each United Nations monument, Gu placed the list of all local barbershops where he collected hair he used in that monument. In this way, the local audience of a United Nations monument can know that the hair collected from their own country and regions is contributing to the installation. Gu, in a sense, forces his audience to participate in his installation by using their hair. Some of the audiences may feel a sense of pride in their local community when they look at their monument made by Gu.\(^{37}\) Ultimately, the artist’s use of human hair in United


\(^{36}\) Scott Watson and Shengtian Zheng, ibid., 7.

*Nations* functions similarly to the workers’ participation in the art productions in the GPCR period. Especially in *China Monuments*, the human hair is woven into a resemblance of Chinese big character posters and a resemblance of stone bricks used in the Great Wall of China. Gu made his audience participate in creating those Chinese cultural icons. This artist’s choice parallels with what Mao did during the GPCR period, such as making Chinese workers produce his revolutionary icons at the art workshops. Thus, the artist’s use of human hair in the *China Monuments* functions as a conceptual reference to the practices and ideas during the GPCR.

Even though the *China Monument* installations have multiple references to the art and productions in the GPCR period, some of their contents contradict with the typical subject matters, meanings, and the purpose of the art produced during that time. One of the prominent characteristics in *China Monuments* is the lack of human figures, which were the most popular subject matters of the GPCR propaganda posters. As a large number of those propaganda posters were displayed in the public, Chinese people, including Wenda Gu, saw those artworks on a daily basis during the GPCR period. Most of the human figures appearing in the GPCR propaganda posters can be categorized into three groups: figures of anonymous workers, including peasants; heroic soldiers, including Mao himself; and “enemies” being defeated by Chinese soldiers.\(^{38}\) Whether the figures were anonymous or not, those human figures were clearly divided into two extremes: either supporters or enemies of Mao’s Communist ideologies. Writer Jung Chang, who survived the GPCR, recalls that many of the propaganda posters commonly expressed a violent tone against Mao’s political enemies.\(^{39}\) Those posters often depicted militaries and government officials of certain countries, including the Soviet Union, the USA, and Japan, whose governments supported different ideologies from Mao’s. The posters often depicted Chinese soldiers accusing the

\(^{38}\) Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, ibid., 786.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 783.
politicians or defeating the armies from those countries. By depicting the foreign enemies of Mao’s regime in propaganda posters, Chinese government warned its citizens to prepare for those political enemies’ future invasions into the nation. By keeping the public’s attention focused on those imaginary enemies, Mao and his government ministers protected themselves from being accused of being a dictatorship by their citizens.

In contrast, Gu neither depicted any human figures in his China Monuments nor expressed any feeling of fights and division between people of different political groups. In contrast, by weaving human hair, which represents mankind, together in his United Nations installations, Gu eliminates any differences, including political beliefs, among people in his monuments. Hair can show the genetic makeups, and racial characteristics of its owner, and Gu underlines that a person’s hairstyle is one way of expressing his political and religious beliefs. As Gu mixes all human hair he collected, viewers cannot identify which hair used to belong to whom in the United Nations installations. The difference in political beliefs among hair donors is also erased, as their hair is woven together to create a cohesive artwork. In the United Nations installations, Gu eliminates any differences in political beliefs among his audience with mixing their hair. In addition, the use of human hair throughout the whole installation unifies each China Monument; therefore, the design of both China Monuments does not suggest any sense of divisions and tensions between certain political groups. In this way, in the China Monument installations, Gu represents his image of a utopian society, where humans do not fight against each other because of their differing political beliefs. This way of depicting the human society is completely opposite to Mao depiction of the society in his propaganda posters. Thus, the absence of human figures in Gu’s China Monuments represent the artist’s disagreement toward the government’s hostile view on the society,


where people fight each other to validate their political beliefs.

Also, Gu does not follow any restrictions that Chinese government set on the nation’s art productions during the GPCR period in his China Monument installations. The government during the GPCR period set the strict rules in art produced so that those artworks could effectively contribute to its political propaganda. In those artworks, the government tried to justify Mao’s dictatorship: as Mao fights in the cause of the social justice and stands for the nation’s good, people should support Mao’s Communist revolution, and everyone who does not support his revolution must be evil and must be accused so. In order to express its message clearly to Chinese citizens, the government eliminated any art styles and art media that could possibly lead the audience to interpret art differently than the government intended. For example, conceptual art was not allowed to be produced during the GPCR period because of its vagueness in meaning. For instance, in Gu’s China Monument: The Great Wall of People, as it was mentioned earlier, the walls of uneven height and scattered human hair bricks on the floor suggest that the walls are either under construction or in ruins. Viewers could interpret The Great Wall of People either as a representation of construction or the deconstruction of the walls, and both interpretations are relevant. Conceptual artists often leave ambiguity in their designs and allow their audience to find their own interpretations in artworks. This ambiguity was what Chinese government did not want in their propaganda artworks during the GPCR period. The government also limited the use of art media from the same reason. Canvas, paper, and clay were allowed to be used in art productions partially because they carry fewer contexts in themselves compared to the unconventional art media such as human hair. Human hair carries rich content. It reveals the DNA, racial characteristics, and health and economic conditions of its owner. Human hair also carries different contexts in various cultures. For instance, Native American people treat hair as the

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42 Shengtian Zheng, ibid., 13.
location of the soul, and in China, people used to consume processed hair as a medical tonic. Thus, each viewer from different cultural background interprets Gu’s use of human hair in his artworks in a unique way. In contrast, if human hair curtains in China Monument: Temple of Heaven were replaced with hanging scrolls, in which the artist uses calligraphy, the audience would simply interpret them as the artist’s reference to a Chinese tradition and would focus on the images represented on the rice papers. The use of conventional art media can direct viewers’ attention to what is represented on the surface of art media, not what the art media itself could represent. Chinese government during the GPCR period limited the use of art media in order to direct the audience’s attention to the image represented on the art media. Ultimately, Gu’s choices of art style and art medium in his China Monuments contradicts the proper art during the GPCR period. By resisting the art restrictions of the GPCR in the China Monuments, Gu show his resistance to the justification of Mao’s dictatorship by creating class enemies, which Chinese government propagated through its visual art.

In the China Monument: Temple of Heaven, Gu creates pseudo-languages with human hair. Considering that Mao also simplified the nation’s writing system, one can conclude that Gu’s use of pseudo-languages as a reference to the use of language during the GPCR. Regarding the function of written languages in the society, the art scholar Yujie Julia Li argues that written languages have been associated with political and intellectual authority in the human history. People who can read can receive knowledge passed on from former generations through reading the texts. In contrast, people who do not have good literacy skills are excluded from this system of inheriting knowledge. A literacy gap among citizens thus

Carol Lutfy, ibid., 143.
44 Patricia Powell and Joseph Wong, ibid., 784.
45 Yujie J. Li, ibid., 201.
creates an intellectual barrier, which helps the nation to sustain its social class divisions between the citizens. Mao was aware of the fact that literacy gap helped the social hierarchy to remain in China. In order to eliminate the literacy gaps between Chinese citizens, his government simplified the Chinese written characters. As simplified Chinese characters had fewer numbers of strokes than the traditional characters, it became easier for the peasants, who have never learned how to read and write before, to learn the writing system. By increasing the average literacy level of the peasants, Mao hoped to lessen the knowledge gaps between Chinese citizens. Gu received this government’s idea of creating a new writing system quite positively. While he was working at a big character poster production in Shanghai, the peasants’ calligraphy pieces attracted him. Those workers, who had never been trained in traditional Chinese calligraphy before, created big character posters by writing in simplified Chinese. Even though their calligraphy skill was immature, Gu recalls that those calligraphy works were “much livelier, more vital and contemporary” than any past calligraphy masters’ works. Gu’s positive reaction to Mao’s approach to the writing system is reflected in the China Monument: Temple of Heaven. Similarly to Mao’s approach to the language, Gu manipulated the world’s existing languages in the Temple of Heaven. Gu created pseudo written Hebrew, Arabic, English, and ancient Chinese and displayed those writings on the human hair curtains. Gu made all written texts on the human curtains unreadable; for example, the ancient Chinese characters are completely made up by the artist, and English words are randomly placed on the human hair curtains to create the meaningless text (Figure 11, 12). Thus, stepping into the Temple of Heaven, nobody can receive any knowledge from written texts on human hair curtains regardless of their literacy levels. Those

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47 Melissa Chiu, ibid., 101.
pseudo written languages in this installation lessen the social class divisions between the viewers. The artist’s choice to eliminate the social hierarchy by manipulating the conventional written languages is derived from Mao’s revision of the nation’s writing system during the GPCR period.

(Figure 11) The detailed image of Wenda Gu, *United Nations, China Monument: Temple of Heaven* (1998). Ancient Chinese characters on the human hair curtains are completely made up by the artist.

(Figure 12) The detailed image of Wenda Gu, *United Nations, China Monument: Temple of Heaven* (1998). English words are randomly placed on the human hair curtains to create the meaningless text.

However, the artist’s purpose of manipulating writing systems in his artwork opposes the government’s purpose of simplifying the nation’s writing system. Besides eliminating the social hierarchy by simplifying Chinese character, the government also aimed to increase the effectiveness of its propaganda. As mentioned earlier, simplified Chinese increased the
average literacy level of proletarians. The more workers and peasants learned to read written Chinese texts, the more accessible they found the big character posters and other government’s publications. The contents of those written texts were the criticism toward class enemies and the heroism of Mao as a leader of the proletarians standing against the capitalist exploiters. Mao and his government officials eliminated the risk of being accused by Chinese citizens by keeping the public’s attention fixed on those imaginary enemies.

On the other hand, Gu’s purpose of manipulating languages in his artwork was to increase the cohesion among humanity. Without having any meanings, Gu’s pseudo-languages created in the China Monument: Temple of Heaven work as mere icons of cultures from different parts of the world. As human hair, which represents humanity, connects the world’s cultural icons throughout the installation space, the Temple of Heaven represents the utopian society where humans around the world coexist in harmony. In addition, as all hair is mixed in this installation, not only the language and cultural barriers, but also all other differences between humans: political and religious beliefs, race, age, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds, are eliminated in the Temple of Heaven. By eliminating every difference between humans, Gu represents his image of a utopian world that is inclusive to all human beings in the Temple of Heaven. Together with the use of human hair, Gu’s manipulates the world’s existing languages in order to show his idealized image of the society, where humanity co-exist in peace. This image of inclusive global society conflicts with the exclusive society that the government propagated to the citizens during the GPCR period. In the Temple of Heaven, Gu mimics the government’s manipulation of the writing system as an irony: the government changed the written language in a purpose of dividing humans, and Gu did the same in a purpose of uniting humans. Thus, Gu’s use of pseudo-languages in the Temple of Heaven is the artist’s criticism toward Chinese government that, in order to sustain its dictatorship, made citizens accuse everyone who does not belong to the
Communist ideologies.

Conclusion

The artist Wenda Gu criticizes Chinese government’s use of artworks during the GPCR period in his *United Nations, China Monument* installations. During the GPCR period, the Chinese government restricted art media, style, and subject matters of the artworks produced. The government used artworks to propagate the criticism toward the class-enemies, who did not advocate Mao’s Communist agenda. In his *China Monument* installations, Gu refers to the artworks created during the GPCR period in multiple ways. First, Gu makes his audience participate in his installations by using their hair. It refers to the art production during the GPCR period, when Chinese government made the citizens collectively produce propaganda artworks such as big character posters and Social Realism paintings. Second, Gu made visual references to the GPCR in his *China Monument* installations. In the *China Monument: Temple of Heaven*, the woven human hair creates approximately two-meters-tall ancient Chinese characters on the human hair curtains. By creating this image, the artist mimics the big character posters produced during the GPCR period. In the *China Monument: The Great Wall of People*, Gu consolidated human hair into blocks. He piled up half of the human hair blocks and scattered another half on the floor to represent the construction of the Great Wall of China. The visual appearance of this art installation also suggests the deconstruction of traditional buildings that happened in the beginning of the GPCR. Human hair blocks on the floor also suggest the loss of life during the GPCR period. Third, in the *Temple of Heaven*, the artist visualized the written pseudo-languages that he created based on the world’s real languages. The artist’s action correlates with the government’s promotion of simplified Chinese characters. By increasing the literacy level of peasants, Mao eliminated the social hierarchies among Chinese citizens. By
mentioning the GPCR and the art produced during that period, however, Gu’s subject matter, art style, and purpose in creating *United Nations* contradict those in the propaganda artworks produced during the GPCR. By propagating the heroism of Mao and evil images of class-enemies, Chinese government led its citizens to criticize and accuse all people who could be a threat to the regime. In order to propagate the message to the citizens effectively, the government restricted the art media and style used in their propaganda artworks. On the contrary, Gu does not depict any human figures in his *United Nations* installations nor does he follow the art restriction that the government imposed to the citizens. By using human hair from around the world and weaving hair into pseudo written languages, Gu unites all humans from different cultural, geographical, historical, and political backgrounds in his *United Nations* installations. Gu uses his *United Nations* installations to represent his idea of a cohesive utopian society. Gu’s utopian image contradicts the government’s divisive view of the society, where people fight each other to validate their political beliefs. By referring to the GPCR while opposing to the contents, art styles, and the purpose of the government’s propaganda artworks during the GPCR period, Wenda Gu criticizes Chinese government for creating the divisions among Chinese citizens with its use of artworks in his *Unite Nations, China Monument* installations.
Bibliography


