

Red Collections in Contemporary China: Towards a New Research Agenda

Emily Williams
Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University

Abstract

“Red Collecting” is a widespread phenomenon in contemporary China. It refers to the collecting of objects from the Chinese Communist Party’s history. Red Collecting has received only minimal treatment in English-language scholarly literature, much of which focuses on individual object categories (primarily propaganda posters and Chairman Mao badges) and overemphasises the importance of Cultural Revolution objects within the field. Because of this limited focus, the collectors’ motivations have been similarly circumscribed, described primarily in terms of either neo-Maoist nostalgia or the pursuit of profit. This article will seek to enhance this existing literature and, in doing so, offer a series of new directions for research. It makes two main arguments. First, that the breadth of objects incorporated within the field of Red Collecting is far broader than current literature has acknowledged. In particular, the importance of revolutionary-era (pre-1949) collections, as well as regional and rural collections is highlighted. Second, it argues that collectors are driven by a much broader range of motivations, including a variety of both individual and social motivations. Significantly, it is argued that collectors’ intentions and their understandings of the past do not always align; rather, very different understandings of China’s recent past find expression through Red Collecting. As such, it is suggested that Red Collecting constitutes an important part of contemporary China’s “red legacies,” one which highlights the diversity of memories and narratives of both the Mao era and the revolutionary period.

Keywords: Red Collecting, Red relics, Chairman Mao badge, propaganda poster, Cultural Revolution, Red era, revolutionary era, Red legacies

Spend any time in China today and it will be clear that legacies of the Mao era remain omnipresent. From Mao Zedong’s portrait on Tian’anmen rostrum and the currency, to the periodic revival of “red songs,” the appearance of Cultural Revolution-era restaurants, and the continued influence of Mao-era aesthetics in art, advertising, and design, there is no doubt that the first thirty years of the history of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) continued to impact upon its later era of “reform and opening up” and now the “new era” (xin shidai) of Xi Jinping’s leadership.

The Mao era, and the revolutionary era before it, also continue to be visible in contemporary China in the form of the art, objects, and documents of the period, which are collected, researched, and exhibited throughout China under the label of “Red relics” (hongse wenwu). The range of objects included within the field of “Red Collections” (hongse shoucang) is wide, from the Chairman Mao badges, posters, and statues that are frequently on sale at tourist sites (albeit many of which are fakes) to less visible but often more valuable: paintings and posters, stamps, coins and medals, books and other documents, and all sorts of military and daily-life objects relating to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) history after 1921.

The field of Red Collecting, which began to emerge in the 1980s but only gained its current nomenclature in the early 2000s, is surprisingly wide and has tens of thousands of committed participants and hundreds of thousands of hobbyist adherents. And yet, until now it has received only minimal treatment in English-language scholarly literature, much of which focuses on individual object categories (primarily propaganda posters or Chairman Mao badges) and overemphasises the role of Cultural Revolution-era objects within the field. Because of this limited focus, the collectors' motivations have been similarly circumscribed, described primarily in terms of neo-Maoist nostalgia or the pursuit of profit.

This article, therefore, seeks to make four main contributions to the field. Firstly, it is argued that the current literature is disproportionately focused on the Cultural Revolution, which prevents us from fully appreciating the diverse connotations of Red Collecting. For observers outside China, the spectre of the Cultural Revolution often seems to loom large. Without discounting the obvious importance of this crucial decade, it is not the only time period that influences people's memories and views of the CCP. It is argued that we need to take a more comprehensive view of the field in order to understand the legacies of the Chinese revolution in ways that go beyond the Cultural Revolution, and that continue to interact with the party-state in complex and often contradictory ways. Secondly, by expanding our understanding beyond the Cultural Revolution, this study reveals a previously unappreciated breadth to the field, particularly the extent of revolutionary-era (1921–1949) collections as well as the local or regional nature of many collections. Thirdly, this expanded temporal and geographic understanding reveals a variety of motivations driving Red Collectors, which allows us to question the dominant interpretations, which are limited to primarily profit-oriented engagement or expressions of nostalgia. Collectors, like the objects they collect, are diverse, and simple motivations cannot capture the complex actions of these individuals, who come from different family backgrounds, class positions, and geographical regions, and who have had different experiences of both the Mao and the reform eras. In particular, this article highlights a variety of individual and social motivations that suggest Red Collecting's alignment with prominent social and political trends in contemporary China. Finally, it is argued that this new understanding of Red Collecting will open up new avenues for research, which will not only add nuance to the understanding of Red Collecting as a field, but also demonstrate the plurality of contemporary understandings and interpretations of China's recent past.

My basis for making these arguments come from my ethnographic experience in the field of Red Collecting as a participant-observer over the period 2016 to 2019. My argument represents my combined reflections on the ways in which my experiences over a prolonged period of fieldwork differed from that presented within the existing literature. It is a reflection of my realisation that the field is much broader than the existing literature suggests, in terms of the time period of objects collected, the breadth of object categories, and the sheer number of participants. From that perspective, my attendance at Red Collector events (*jiaoliuhui*) has been particularly instructive. The article is based on observations made during my attendance at twelve Red Collector events (which frequently include markets, exhibitions, lectures, auctions, banquets, and formal ceremonies), over twenty formal interviews and collection/museum visits with collectors from eight different provinces and municipalities, as well as informal personal and WeChat conversations with dozens of collectors. In addition to these ethnographic experiences, I have also relied on the extensive publications of collectors, including catalogues, collecting association journals, and online publications. This has given me unmatched exposure to and experience of Red Collecting, allowing me to develop a more comprehensive approach to the field, which I aim to articulate in this article.

This article will begin with a brief overview of existing English-language literature on Red Collecting. It will then offer an expanded picture of the field by, firstly, offering a new typology of collections, and, secondly, developing an expanded matrix of collector motivations.

Literature Review

There has been very limited English-language literature that touches explicitly on the topic of Red relics and Red Collections, in part because the nomenclature has only emerged in Chinese in the past fifteen years. The earliest events and publications that explicitly used the term “Red Collections” (*hongse shoucang*) first emerged around 2006, when the first Red Collecting Association was founded in Hunan, and events, explicitly branded as “Red Collection” events, soon after began to occur in major cities like Shanghai and Beijing (Qin, 2007: 10–11). The term’s significance was solidified in 2011 when the China Association of Collectors Badge Collection Committee (*Zhongguo shoucangjia xiehui huizhang shoucang weiyuanhui*) changed its name to the China Association of Collectors Red Collection Committee (*Zhongguo shoucangjia xiehui hongse shoucang weiyuanhui*) (*Zhongguo hongse shoucang Editorial Department*, 2011: 1).

Given the fairly recent emergence of the term, it is not surprising that there has been little English-language literature explicitly on the topic of “Red Collecting” and Red relics. However, literature on the collection and preservation of Mao-era objects began to appear as early as the 1990s, discussed typically in object categories. The earliest objects to come to academics’ attention were badges, largely in the context of the revived interest in Mao (known as the “Mao fever,” or *Mao re*) that emerged around the centenary of the leader’s birth in 1993. Badges, as well as posters, remain the most well-documented Red relics, not least due to the work of a number of key individual and institutional collectors (Evans and Donald, 1999; S. Landsberger, 1995; Landsberger and van der Heijden, 2009; Schrift, 2001; Wang, 2008). A number of prominent Chinese collectors first published catalogues of their collections at this time, and the discussion that emerged in the English-language literature at the time has largely defined the ways in which the field has been subsequently discussed. Early sources tended to position collectors’ motivations within the changing ideological and economic environment of the reform era: collectors were seen as either aiming to resist this transformation and as collecting to demonstrate their devotion to Mao and nostalgia for the Mao era, or as embracing the market transformation and the economic rewards that collecting now brought (Bishop, 1996; Hubbert, 2006). A second approach drew on a similar binary of devotion versus money, but tracked these changing associations over time. Red objects are interpreted as symbols of the change China has gone through: from a focus on a type of devotional politics in the Mao era to a celebration of commercialisation and money in the reform era (Benewick, 1999; Dutton, 1998, 1999; White, 1994).

Much of the early scholarship focused primarily on trying to understand the role played by these objects during the Mao era and the Cultural Revolution, an important lacuna of knowledge at that time. The discussion of reform-era collecting tended to serve, therefore, as more of an afterthought than a primary focus. For much of the early 2000s, there was little new scholarship about Mao-era collecting, with the exception of Hubbert’s (2006) important article, referenced above. However, in the last ten years, a renewed interest in both the cultural history of the Mao era and its legacies in contemporary China has resulted in a resurgence of publications on the topic (see, in particular, Li and Zhang, 2016). This new research has demonstrated convincingly that part of the explanation for the continued presence of Maoist culture and aesthetics in post-Mao China is because it had a deeper meaning for its producers and audiences than our concept of “propaganda” allows (Evans, 2016; Mittler, 2012; Pang, 2017). Much of the recent work has helped explain the complex and often contradictory memories that people hold towards the Mao era, and that too has influenced how authors have written about contemporary collections.

In particular, much has recently been written about the large-scale museum cluster of Fan Jianchuan in Anren, Sichuan, and his series of museums on the “Red age” (Dutton, 2005; Ho, 2020; Ho and Li, 2015; Landsberger, 2019; Rowlands, Feuchtwang, and Zhang, 2019; Zhang, 2020). These works collectively highlight both the encyclopaedic tendencies of Fan Jianchuan as a collector, as well as the complexities of memories that surround the objects from the Mao era. It is noteworthy, however, that in addition to his well-documented “Red-era” museums, Fan also has a series of museums that focus on the Second Sino-Japanese War and the revolutionary period in China more broadly: indeed, Fan initially rose to prominence in China for these revolutionary-era relics, rather than for the Mao-era ones (Qin, 2007: 5). And yet, most of the literature continues to focus on Mao-era collections, and particularly Cultural Revolution-era collections (Coderre, 2016), despite the fact that “Cultural Revolution collections” is not a category of collecting that exists in China.

The existing English-language literature has greatly expanded our knowledge, both of how material culture functioned during the Mao era itself, and its continued impact and influence in the post-Mao period. It has highlighted the changing meaning of objects as China introduces a market economy and develops a consumerist mindset. It has highlighted the competing grassroots memories of the Mao era and particularly of the Cultural Revolution, and the ways in which they continue to find expression, despite the state’s attempt to limit discussion of the decade after its official evaluation of the period, issued in 1981. These studies have made important contributions in the fields of cultural history, art history, and cultural studies. And yet, as this article will demonstrate, the field of collecting as described in the English-language literature in many ways does not resemble the field as it is actually practiced in China. I suggest that taking an ethnographic approach, based on extensive participant-observer fieldwork, can make a contribution to the literature in two main ways. Firstly, I argue that the academic focus on collections of Cultural Revolution and Mao-era material overlooks the much broader field of pre-1949 collecting, which is seen as part of Red Collecting, not as a separate field. Secondly, I argue that once we have an expanded concept of the scope of Red Collecting, we can also develop an expanded understanding of collector motivations.

Towards a Typology of Red Collections

This section aims to offer an enhanced understanding of the field of Red Collecting. It will expand the temporal span of Red relics as well as the breadth of object categories. It will also introduce new ways of understanding the organisation of collections. It seeks to do so by offering a tentative tripartite typology of Red Collections: medium/object category collections, location-based collections, and theme-based collections. This system is derived from the answers to what is always my first question to a collector: “What do you collect?” The answers come in a series of roughly aligned categories: “I collect Mao badges”; “I collect objects to do with the Jiangxi Soviet Republic”; “I collect objects to do with the revolutionary model operas”; etc. In other words, in deriving my typology, I start from the ways in which collectors themselves speak and write about their collections.

Classification is central to the activity of collecting, regardless of what is collected. The act of choosing what to collect is implicitly the act of choosing a preferred category of the physical world with which to engage. Scholars in recent years have moved away from the dominant twentieth-century view that saw things as “only real insofar as they are sensible to a human subject” (Kerr, 2016: no pagination), in order to embrace firstly the idea of object agency (Appadurai, 1986) and, more recently, object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2017), both of which highlight the more complex networks in which humans and objects engage. This has highlighted that objects act on us, just as we act on them, and has begun to envision the diverse and potentially unknowable lives of objects. And yet, despite this, collecting, as an activity that emerged in the European

context out of an Enlightenment ideal of the perfectibility of human rationality and knowledge, continues to make claims to the identity of objects through their insertion into sets (e.g., posters, badges, etc.). Collecting, then, is fundamentally the application of human categories of knowledge to material culture: in short, collecting is classification lived; experienced in three dimensions. Of course, classification is always an imperfect exercise, and this too is true of collecting. Each collection comes up against the question of boundaries: at what point does something stop being a badge and become a medal? What are the temporal boundaries that limit a collection? For example, should a contemporary representation of a revolutionary model opera still be considered a Red relic?

Just as collectors themselves have to make somewhat arbitrary decisions about the boundaries to their own collections, I too, acknowledge the necessary imprecision of my typology. There are overlaps between the collection categories as well as collectors who fit imperfectly within any category. The aim, however, is to expand understanding of both what is collected and how collections are organised, in particular, by highlighting the types of collections that have previously been largely overlooked. I set up these categories not as exact prototypes, but as examples that necessarily demonstrate the limitations of the nature of categories themselves.

Typology category	Characteristics	Most prevalent categories	Frequency
Object category /medium	Collection defined by specific type of object. Tend to be national in scope. May or may not have temporal boundaries	Mao badges/medals, propaganda posters, paper goods/documents (including Mao's writings), stamps, coins/money, porcelain/ceramics	High, and includes many of the earliest collections
Location	Collection defined by object's proximity to a specific historical location. Typically related to the revolutionary period (1921-1949). Local in nature. Tends to have historically-determined temporal boundaries	Early Communist base areas, the Long March, the Shaan-Gan-Ning border region and Yan'an, various army campaigns from the Sino-Japanese or Civil Wars	Has become more prominent in the past 15-20 years
Theme	Collection defined by a relation to a specific event, individual, cultural object, etc. Often local in nature	Themed collections tend to be niche, and thus there are no 'typical' categories, but many of them do revolve around cultural products, such as the revolutionary model operas or famous individuals such as Lei Feng.	Fairly uncommon, although make up a portion of many larger collections.

Medium/object category

The designation of collections by object category is the most visible approach in the existing literature. It is also a type of classification frequently used by collectors themselves. There remain, for example, collecting associations dedicated exclusively to badges and (military or labour) medals (huizhang), or documents and paper (zhipin), as well as the broader Red Collecting associations. Even if individuals collect a wide variety of objects, they often organise and exhibit them in their different object categories. For example, at the Jianchuan museum cluster, object categories are a frequent theme for individual museums, including porcelain, mirrors, and badges.

The largest single category of Red relics are Mao badges, a fact that is unsurprising given that it has been estimated that up to five billion Mao badges were produced, primarily between

1966 and 1969. Qin Jie (2007: 10) estimated in 2007 that there were at least 100,000 people in China who collected Mao badges, with varying collection sizes. However, Mao badges was not the earliest object category to come to prominence: by the 1990s, CCP-issued stamps were already changing hands for high prices both within and outside China, and the price of these stamps has continued to rise ever since. For example, in 2018, a rare and pristine 1968 stamp sold at the China Guardian auction house for 13.8 million yuan (over £1.5 million) (Chen, 2018). Propaganda posters came to prominence slightly later, becoming a popular field of collectibles from the late 1990s onwards. Other popular object categories include porcelain, Mao's written works, ration coupons, and coins and paper money. There are also a series of much more niche collections, including notebooks (such as those in the collection of Wu Junlong, in Nantong), alcohol bottles (such as those of Yang Yiping, in Zaozhuang), and school and university graduation certificates (such as those of Shanghai's famed collector Zheng Jiaqing) to name just a few.

As the field of Red Collecting has expanded, a trend towards specialisation within a given object category has become increasingly common. Most badge collectors have, in addition to a general focus on Mao badges, a smaller, and more rare and valuable subsection of badges within their collection. For Ningbo collector Li Jun, for example, his broader badge collection is given greater status and recognition for its important sub-set of military and labour medals from the 1950s (Williams, 2017). Similarly, Shanghai collector Huang Miaoxin is particularly well known for his sets of badges (Huang, 2017: 38). It seems likely that as the field continues to expand and diversify, this tendency towards specialization will continue to develop.

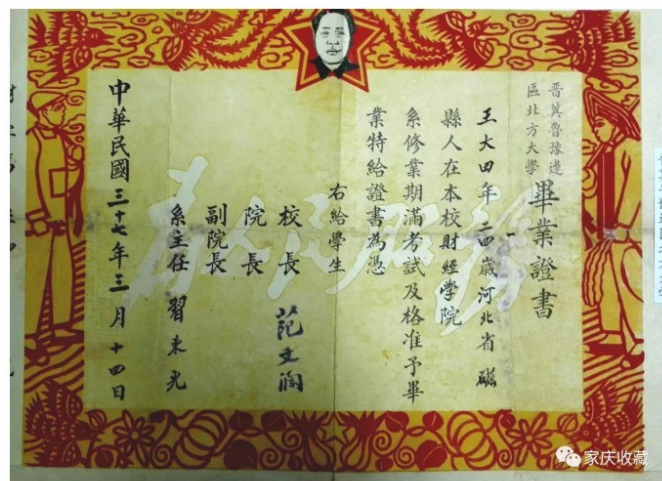


Figure 1: A 1949 graduation certificate from the Northern University of Jin-Ji-Lu-Yu Border Region, in the collection of Zheng Jiaqing. Source: Jiaqing Shoucang Wechat platform (Zheng, 2020).

While each of these categories may sound somewhat limited in themselves, they each individually attest to Susan Stewart's (1993: 155) statement that, "To group objects in a series because they are 'the same' is to simultaneously signify their difference. In the collection, the more the objects are similar, the more imperative it is that we make gestures to distinguish them." It might be suggested that part of the popularity of Mao badges is the realisation that what seems like such a simple category – badges with Chairman Mao's visage – is in fact a complex field, featuring tens of thousands of individual designs, which represent the complex factional and devotional politics of the early Cultural Revolution. This is true, too, of other object categories. Any object category, when viewed in large enough numbers can speak to historical changes over time in ways that represent more than just that object itself. Zheng Jiaqing's graduation certificate collection, for example, represents a way of tracing the development of Chinese education through the late imperial, Republican and PRC periods (Lin and Li, 2009). Through their text and design,

these certificates track political and social changes over time and speak to different ideas of the Chinese nation.



Figure 2: A 1969 set of badges depicting Mao at various stage of his life, in the collection of Huang Miaoxin. Photo by author.

Conceiving and organising a collection based on object category has long been the most prevalent type of Red Collection. These collections tend to be national in scope, and may or may not have temporal boundaries. They represent one of the cores of Red Collecting, and so it is not surprising that the English-language literature has focused on collections organised in this way. What this section has demonstrated, however, is that object-based collections go far beyond badges and posters. They include many of the categories associated with both traditional elite collecting practices (porcelain, paintings, literature, etc.) and with “folk” (minjian) collecting (cigarette packages, liquor bottles, matchboxes, etc). The basic typology of “object category” thus contains a huge variety of collectibles, from the cheap and mass produced to the rare and expensive, all of which represent different ways of imagining recent Chinese history.

Location

While Red Collecting is a nationwide field, it is also deeply local in nature. Red Collecting is strongest in the north and centre of the country: the areas that powered the CCP’s rise to power. Southern China is not bereft of Red Collectors, but they are fewer in number. Many collectors also choose to focus at least part of their collection activities on topics related to their hometown or region and the special place it played in CCP history. These types of collections tend to focus on areas that were important in the pre-1949 revolutionary period. For example, the Fujian collector Hong Rongchang collects objects from the Jiangxi Soviet Republic, a main CCP base area from 1927 to 1934, when the majority of the leadership departed on the Long March (Hong, 2014). Hong, a former local party cadre and businessman, argues that the CCP’s experience in the Jiangxi Soviet, which included part of Fujian, laid the foundation for the future birth of the PRC, and thus that its relics ought to be preserved (Hong, 2020).

Other collectors combine a broader focus on an object category with a particular interest in the objects from their own or another locality. The Mao badge collector Liu Jian, from Bengbu in Anhui, for example, is particularly interested in Anhui-made badges, which he displays in a free “club” (julebu) in Bengbu city (Liu, interview with author, Bengbu, May 2016). He published a catalogue of his collection in 2003, which included numerous sections of Anhui-made badges, as well as brief biographies of other local badge collectors (Liu, 2003). Similarly, badge collector Zhang Luoshou, originally from Henan, but now based largely in Hong Kong, has a sub-set of badges from Hong Kong, Macau, and Xinjiang, reflecting an interest in badge production and distribution on China’s margins (Zhang, interview with author, Hong Kong, November 2017).



Figure 3: A Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region-labeled water bottle, lying on a textile with the same text. In the personal collection of Xu Haihang. Photo by author.

Most collectors who focus on a particular location still have an object category that is at the heart of their collection. However, one Shaanxi collector, Xu Haihang, takes a purely locational focus to his collection: he acquires anything that has the phrase “Shaan-Gan-Ning Border Region” (Shan-Gan-Ning bianqu) on it (Xu, interview with author, Jingbian, October 2020). This CCP-run base area, straddling the borders of Shaanxi, Gansu, and Ningxia provinces, had its capital at Yan’an. It was where Mao and many other top leaders were based for much of the period from 1936 to 1947, and it has thus acquired a fundamental position in the history and mythology of the rise of the CCP. Xu has acquired over 10,000 objects from the 1930s and 1940s, including documents and document folders, paper and cloth money, medical tools, military equipment, and clothes and other textiles, as well as thousands of photographs of the time (Xu, interview with author, Beijing, September 2018). Xu lives in Jingbian, a city a few hours to the north of Yan’an, and which hosted Mao and other senior leaders for a major strategic meeting after their evacuation from Yan’an in 1947. Xu has a small exhibition hall-cum-store room in town, as well as a newly opened museum in his hometown of Zizhou (Zhou, 2019).

The revolutionary and historical legitimacy of his collection is assured by its provenance, and Xu is convinced that pre-1949 objects are the most important part of Red Collecting (Xu, interview with author, Beijing, September 2018). Despite this, the financial value of these local objects is often much lower than the nationally sought-after objects (Hong, 2020); their value is primarily emotional and historical, rather than financial.

Xu Haihang is not alone in feeling a pride in his own region: in a country as large as China, regional identities are often firmly felt, and regional contributions to the revolution are often well known within the locality. Of course, regional pride and an interest in local history are

not unique to China; an interest in local history, and particularly in the moments in which one's locality contributed to events at a national level, is common in many countries. But given the existing literature's focus on Mao-era and Cultural Revolution-era objects, as well as its frequent focus on collectors in large cities, it is important to highlight both the role of revolutionary-era collections and the role of rural collections, which have, over the past fifteen or twenty years, become an increasingly visible and valuable part of the field (Qin, 2007: 10).

Theme

The third way in which we might consider Red Collections is the focus on a particular theme. Themes can in many ways overlap with locality. For example, the Hebei collector Niu Shuangyue collects objects to do with the revolutionary opera, ballet, and film *The White-Haired Girl* (Bai Mao Nü), which he displays in a museum in Shijiazhuang (China Association of Collectors, 2017: 17–18). The story of *The White-Haired Girl* is set in Hebei province, and Niu feels, as a Hebei native, it is his responsibility to collect, preserve, and pass on this revolutionary story (Niu, personal communication, June 2018). For Niu, therefore, locality drives his choice of theme. The decision to collect these locally and historically specific types of objects is usually driven by a more specific motivation than simply collecting a generic category such as Mao badges.



Figure 4: A selection of “The East is Red”-labelled objects, from the collection of Hou Feng. Photos courtesy of Hou Feng.

A similar link between locality and theme is seen in Shaanxi collector Hou Feng's collection of objects relating to “The East is Red” (Dongfang hong), a folk song composed by northern-Shaanxi peasant singer Li Youyuan during the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was written to express Li's love and gratitude to Mao and the CCP (Ba Qianxian 8, 2017). Some years ago, Hou met the grandson of the song's creator, and in listening to him talk about the song's origin, Hou developed a deep and abiding interest in it. In 1964, as part of events to commemorate the PRC's fifteenth anniversary, “The East is Red” was turned into a music and dance epic, which brought it to nationwide prominence. As such, for Hou, “The East is Red” is almost a “national song,” but one that has particular significance because it originated in the CCP's revolutionary heartland. Some fifteen years ago, Hou began collecting objects that reference “The East is Red” in some way, and he has now acquired well over 1,000 objects, including porcelain and enamel wares, badges, textiles, musical instruments and recordings, and posters and prints. For Hou, keeping “The East is Red” objects in northern Shaanxi is very important. He writes that an outsider once wanted to buy his whole collection, but he refused. He considers that it does not just belong to the country, but that it is representative of Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi) folk culture, and so should stay in Yulin, where it has more meaning (Ba Qianxian 8, 2017).

Themed collections sometimes overlap with the individual's career. Fujian collector Yang Wenhai collects objects to do with the military and the police, which recalls his own personal experience in both the military and the police, and which embody, for him, the important contributions these institutions have made to China's development (Yang, 2015). Similarly, Shanghai collector Shangguan Wanping, a former paediatrician who now runs a medical supplies company, collects anything to do with medicine from the late imperial, Republican or PRC periods, with a particular focus on medical literature (Shangguan, interview with author, Shanghai, September 2017).

Themed collections clearly demonstrate that the phenomenon of collecting goes far beyond just an abstract love for Mao and a desire to remember history. They highlight that collecting is often a deeply personal process, tied to the personal narrative and self-imagination of the collector, their locality, their profession, and their desired relationship with the larger nation and its history.

This section has demonstrated the wide range of objects that are currently collected under the rubric of Red relics, going far beyond our current focus on badges and posters from the Cultural Revolution. In particular, I have highlighted the importance of revolutionary-era objects, from various historically significant localities, which are tied not to the difficulties of the Cultural Revolution, but to the historically and politically untainted period of the CCP's rise. These more directly historical collections are important to foreground given the discussion on motivations in the following section.

Collector Motivations

Early English-language literature on Red Collecting primarily presented collector motivation through the binary of nostalgia and commerce. More recent literature has already begun to expand on this framework, particularly in discussions of the prominent Sichuan collector Fan Jianchuan. He, like many collectors, has spent substantial amounts of his personal wealth developing his collection, and given that it will be at least partly donated to the state, he is unlikely to be motivated by simple speculation, although his recent reinvention as a "cultural consultant" may suggest that there are at least some commercial motivations at work (Zhang, 2020). He is undoubtedly a patriot, deeply interested in the local history of Sichuan province; but particularly in light of his own family's suffering during the Cultural Revolution, subversive, rather than nostalgic, motivations are often ascribed to him (Ho, 2020; Ho and Li, 2015). Rather than ascribing collectors' actions to singular motivations, I suggest that motivations are typically multiple and often less straightforward than might be expected. Devotion and love for Mao is commonly felt, as is an interest in the rising market value of the collected objects, but these are not necessarily oppositional views. One can love and respect Mao, whilst also feeling that these objects would be a good investment. They often sit alongside a series of other motivations: the desire to preserve these important historical objects for the nation and the next generation, an interest in collection and research as methods of connoisseurship and self-cultivation, an interest in the aesthetics of the objects, and even just the feeling that collecting is a fun hobby. In other words, there are a range of serious and frivolous, personal and societal motivations for engaging in collecting.

In Table 2, I outline a matrix for collector motivations, which seeks to expand our understanding of the factors that drive collecting. I have identified four key factors or orientations (present-oriented, past-oriented, value-oriented, utility-oriented) and Table 2 shows how these factors engage with each other. As suggested above, each individual collector may be motivated by a combination of these different factors: a nostalgia for an idealised or imagined past may power the idea that these objects are valuable social tools for the education of the next generation; the historian's pursuit to document the past may also be a type of leisure and entertainment. The

matrix should be interpreted as explicating collector's motivations in the plural, not the singular. It should also be noted that a collector's motivations can change over time, based both on individual life experiences and the changing cultural, social, and political context in which they collect. There has been renewed attention to China's revolutionary history under Xi Jinping; I suggest that the present-oriented interest in the contemporary social value of these objects has become more prominent during his tenure. This means, necessarily, that such a matrix might look very different in ten or twenty years, in ways that cannot be anticipated now.

Table 2: Collector Motivation Matrix		
Characteristics of motivation	Value-oriented	Utility-oriented
Past-oriented	Love for and devotion to Mao	Historical pursuit to preserve/document the past
	Nostalgia based on childhood memories	Attempt to document (and at times promote) the history of a particular region, locality or individual
	Nostalgia for idealised imagined past	
Present-oriented	Social commentary as expression of criticism of Reform Era Changes	Entrepreneurial pursuit of profit
	Social commentary as expression of patriotism	Connoisseurial pursuit of status/recognition with the field and broader society
	Social value as 'tool' for education etc	Connoisseurial pursuit of self-cultivation through the practice of collecting
		Leisure/entertainment/hobbyist engagement

The concept of value-oriented motivations refers to the idea that the objects themselves contain a moral lesson within them. They are appreciated for representing a specific ideology, a moral standpoint, or a specific social or cultural phenomenon. Utility-oriented motivations, on the other hand, refer to the idea of the objects as offering some sort of other value (financial, social, personal, etc.) to the individual collector. These two categories of motivation are already reflected in the existing literature, in the sense that nostalgia is a value-oriented motivation, while investment is a utility-oriented one. These two categories are thus useful, but need to be expanded.

Value-oriented motivations

Devotion to Mao, nostalgia, and social commentary

A devotion to and love for Mao, coupled with nostalgia for the era of his leadership, is the most frequently mentioned motivation for collecting in the existing literature. However, my research suggests that these two ideas need to be de-coupled. Devotion to and respect and love for Mao is indeed widespread throughout the field. The most frequent explanation I receive when I ask collectors why they collect is because they worship (chongbai) or love (re'ai) Mao. There is no doubt that the cult of personality that inspired the original production of some of these objects continues to encourage their preservation and collection. A love for Mao, and respect for Mao as a great revolutionary and founder of the PRC, is undoubtedly a key motivation driving collector actions.

This is often linked in the existing literature to an expression of criticism of the reform-era changes. There are indeed examples of this: one of the most-researched collectors, Chengdu

Mao badge collector Wang Anting, clearly linked Maoist devotion with nostalgia for the Mao years. As Jennifer Hubbert (2006: 150) writes, for Wang, “The existence of the badges proved Mao’s greatness and the correctness of the social and moral hierarchy of his day.” In other words, there is a clear link between a nostalgia for an idealised past and a social commentary of criticism of the direction China has taken. Similarly, the Shanghai film and newspaper collector Liu Debao, who travelled to Beijing to see Chairman Mao during a Red Guard rally in 1966 and whose mother was in a women’s militia during the Second Sino-Japanese War, disagrees with the broad direction of reform-era policies, and recalls fondly China’s determination to find its own path to socialism during the Mao era (Liu, interview with author, Shanghai, October 2017; Berry and Chenkin, 2011). Liu clearly cherishes his childhood memories and the stories passed down in his family, sees them as embodied by the objects, and uses them as the basis for his criticism of China’s present.



Figure 5: A selection from Liu Debao’s film collection. Photo by author.

One of the early Chinese texts that explicitly discussed Red Collecting as a phenomenon, similarly pointed out that much of the cultural craze for Red Collecting in the 1990s came from the working classes whose emotional memory of the fairness and justice of the revolutionary and Mao eras heightened their anger at the reform era expansion of the gap between rich and poor (Qin, 2007: 12). This type of collecting is focused on the present, and views the objects as vehicles for a social critique of reform era changes. It is not surprising that many collectors who are making this type of social critique of the reform era also hold idealised views of the Mao era, and particularly of the Cultural Revolution, which is remembered as a time of honesty and mass democracy. My research suggests these collectors also tend to collect primarily Cultural Revolution-era objects, as representing the period in time just prior to the beginning of the reform era, the changes of which they disagree.

It is true, therefore, that for some love and respect for Mao is tied to disagreement with reform era policies and at times a feeling that the original course of the revolution has been abandoned. But this is not always the case. Indeed, many collectors are party members, with military or political connections to the party-state, and they often see the reform era not as a forsaking of the original mission, but as a continuation and restoration of it. Hong Rongchang, the Fujian-based collector of Jiangxi Soviet Republic objects mentioned above, is a party member and former government official, who took advantage of reform era investment opportunities, and indeed it is this money that has enabled his collecting. He sees the reform era changes as a restoration of the correct policies that helped power China’s development (Wang, 2015). Hong’s understanding of history very closely matches the party’s own narrative: the CCP led China to victory in the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Chinese Civil War, before suffering a failure of leadership during the Cultural Revolution, and then witnessing the restoration of CCP authority

in the reform era. For collectors like Hong, therefore, collecting is also a value-laden activity, but in the form of an expression of patriotism and support for the CCP, not of criticism. For many, particularly those who collect objects from the revolutionary period rather than the Mao era, the Cultural Revolution was an aberration to overcome, and while Mao deserves love and respect, they see nothing incongruous in supporting the current policies of the CCP, and especially Xi Jinping, whilst collecting objects from the revolutionary past.

Devotion and nostalgia are, then, key motivating factors for collecting, but they are not necessarily as simple as might be assumed. In particular, we need to move away from the idea that Red Collectors are, on the whole, neo-Maoists or Cultural Revolution apologists. Love for Mao does not necessarily mean complete agreement with his rule, nor a desire to return to prior systems of social, economic, and political organisation.

Collecting for society

Collectors motivated by the value-oriented aspect of Red Collecting are often keen to demonstrate the merit of the objects and collections to contemporary society. Many collectors worry that the younger generations take the wealth and stability of Chinese society for granted and fail to understand the struggle and sacrifice that previous generations made. They see Red relics as what Denise Ho (2020: 355) has called, in another context, “object lessons”: the embodiments of ideological and moral values to be inculcated into their viewers. In this sense, the objects’ values have not radically changed from the Mao era, and if anything, collectors see their importance as ever growing, as China becomes more consumerist and socially stratified.

Collectors commonly couch their motivations in terms of nationalism, giving back to society, and morality. The Anhui-based Mao badge collector Liu Jian, for example, states that he collects for the nation, seeing a role for private collectors to support larger government efforts (Liu, interview with author, Bengbu, May 2016). The desire to give something back to society also inspires many of the hundreds of small museums and exhibition halls that now exist. Hebei collector Yang You, for example, has set up a Mao Zedong Memorial Hall in Gaobeidian, as well as a “folk customs museum” (minsu bowuguan) in the surrounding countryside, acts that he sees as a “public service.” He is particularly keen to open further museums in the rural areas in which he grew up to educate peasants about a history that he feels is otherwise in danger of being forgotten (Yang, interview with author, Gaobeidian, February 2018).



Figure 6: Left: Liu Jian's public Mao badge display hall. Right: Yang You's Mao Zedong Memorial Hall. Photos by author.

The value of Red relics as “tools” for social education can be connected to either of the other two present-oriented values: social criticism or patriotism. For some, China’s widely felt moral crisis is the result of the abandoning of Mao-era moral and spiritual values, and can only be restored through a return to them. For others, however, the belief in the moral value of the objects is linked less to criticism of government, and rather to a broader patriotism based on the idea that Chinese people themselves need to raise their civilization and quality (*suzhi*). For Hong Rongchang, the return should be to revolutionary objects, which he believes are the most effective carriers of “Red culture,” through which the cultural confidence of the Chinese people can be cultivated. He argues that they can help people address the spiritual crisis in contemporary China, encouraging patriotism, dedication, sacrifice, and perseverance (Hong, 2020).

Value-oriented motivations for collecting tend to combine both past and present orientations. It is frequently due to an idealisation of the past – whether that is the Cultural Revolution, the revolutionary era, or simply the collector’s childhood – that allows them to imbue their collection with a social value for the present. The exact nature of the objects’ agency, how they will rectify current social failings or educate the next generation, is always left vague. But the feeling that these collections – and through them, the collectors themselves – have a valuable social contribution to make is a deeply-held motivating factor, and one that is underdiscussed in the current literature.

Utility-oriented collecting

Commercial motivations

As Table 2 shows, utility-oriented collecting encompasses a range of different motivating factors, relating to both China’s past and present. One of these motivations is commercial, which, as discussed in the literature review above, is frequently described as a key motivation. Much early literature focused on the growing market value of Cultural Revolution-era relics in the 1980s and 1990s, and this continues to be a commonly used explanation for collectors’ motivation. Julia Lovell, for example, suggests “an economic explanation for the large amounts of money that are being spent on these objects. ... Buyers acquire them because they hope and expect that their value will continue to increase” (quoted in Moore, 2014: no pagination). The rising market value of these objects has been well documented, and there is no doubt that a consumerist or capitalistic mindset plays a role in involving people in the field. Indeed, the field of collecting is enabled by a huge network of traders who buy and sell objects throughout the country. But while serious collectors are all intensely aware of the market value of their objects, it is problematic to assume that they collect primarily for financial reasons. I have only ever once met a collector who listed financial speculation as his main reason for collecting (Shanxi collector, personal communication, June 2018). More frequent are reports of collectors bankrupting their families to fund their collecting, and refusing to even countenance selling their collections despite this (Ba Qianxian 8, 2017; Jingbian Eye, 2017).

More broadly, the field has always been sceptical of those who only collect for financial purposes. In 2007, Qin Jie (2007: 13) warned about the dangers of marketization, and argued that the field must foreground the historical and idealistic nature of the objects, rather than their commercial attributes. Shanghai badge collector Huang Miaoxin has expressed a similar view: that collecting based only on or for economic purposes diminishes the significance of the collection itself. He (2017: 120, author’s translation) writes:

If we only rely on economic strength [*jingji shili*] in order to practise collecting, then the significance of this collection has been greatly reduced. Collection depends not only on the results, but also on the collection process. This process is a kind of enjoyment, a kind of accumulation of knowledge, a

kind of exercise of moral character, a kind of purification of thought, and a new understanding of history.

There is no doubt that commerce drives the field. But collectors are conscious that a too overt focus on money-making threatens to undermine the legitimacy of the Communist heritage of the objects they preserve. As such, while a collector's entrepreneurial interest may form one facet of their motivations, my research suggests that it is rarely the driving motivation.

Connoisseurship

The quote from Huang Miaoxin above hints at another key driver of collecting: connoisseurship. Hubbert (2006: 146) described Huang as an entrepreneur, driven by connoisseurship and profit, but aside from this, the importance of connoisseurship to the field has been underemphasised. My research suggests that connoisseurship has two main angles: firstly, the pursuit of self-cultivation through the practice of collecting; secondly, the pursuit of status and recognition within the field and broader society. Huang's quote above speaks primarily to the former: he describes the process of collecting as developing not just knowledge, but also a purity of mind and moral character. Collecting is a longstanding elite pastime in China, appreciated as a method of self-cultivation and of entering into a dialogue with China's cultural tradition, and a way of constructing elite networks of patronage and friendship. The second element of Red Collecting connoisseurship relates to this tradition of collecting, and we may see contemporary collecting associations as akin to the study societies and collecting circles of the past: as ways to develop status, social networks, and a public identity. The difference, of course, is that while collecting has previously been an elite activity, Red Collectors come from a variety of backgrounds; and while money and political connections certainly help, as Huang's quote shows, collections based just on high-priced acquisitions rarely garner much praise.

Collectors are intently aware of how their collections compare to those of their peers, and many are eager to take leadership positions in the national, provincial, and local collection associations that exist nationwide. They enter their objects in prize competitions and association exhibitions, and their publications often read more like a list of personal achievements than as a discussion of historical objects: clearly, status and recognition is important within the field, and drives collector actions.

Historical preservation

Collections driven by a combination of entrepreneurial or connoisseurly motivations are fairly common, but so is another utility-oriented factor that has been underdiscussed in the existing literature: the collector's desire to preserve these objects as historical relics. When Red relics are understood primarily as mass-produced and cheap objects like Mao badges and propaganda posters, their historicity may seem less important, but with the expanded scope of the field that this article has argued for, it becomes clear that Red Collecting includes important historical relics from China's past century. Many collectors worry that in China's rush to modernize, this history will be forgotten and lost to time. The collection of Red relics as history has, I suggest, two main facets. The first, is simply that these are historical objects that demonstrate China's recent history: there are, then, patriotic motivations for collecting, which are often tied closely to celebrating the role that the CCP has played in China's "road to rejuvenation." This is tied at times to the more value-oriented desire to contribute to society and the nation, as in the example of Liu Jian, provided above, but at other times it is a more neutral statement. Many times when I have asked collectors why they collect or what their objects' values are, I have received the very straightforward reply: "it's just history" (jiushi lishi), implying that this alone explains the object's value and the point of collecting. Beijing-based military clothing collector Li Zhangdong, for example, suggests that clothes represent history, and help us to visualise history (Li, interview

with author, Beijing, September 2017). For him there is no moral or value judgement attached to these objects; he sees no problem in collecting military clothing from Nazi Germany: it's just history. While Denise Ho detects a series of deliberate curatorial strategies in Fan Jianchuan's exhibition of objects, Fan himself insists that his job is only to collect history, and that it will be left to future generations to make judgements (Ho, 2020: 365).

The second facet of collecting as motivated by a historian's interest in the past relates to the regionality of collections mentioned earlier. Anhui-based collector Zhong Xin, for example, owns a museum dedicated to the Huaihui campaign of the Chinese Civil War, a decisive CCP victory (Wu, 2017). His museum, opened in conjunction with the local government, is located near the site of the CCP's command post during the Huaihai campaign, where important leaders such as Deng Xiaoping were based. Zhong believes deeply in the ability of objects to represent history, and for the need to preserve them so as to enable a true recounting of the past (Zhong, interview with author, Huaibei, December 2017). In particular, he is proud of the role that his region played in the CCP victory, and wants to promote it through opening free museums.

In this sense, Red Collectors can be seen as similar to the local history enthusiasts that exist around the world. As well as collecting, most committed collectors are also engaged in research and publication on their objects. They can be seen, therefore, as amateur historians, who, through their focus on the objects themselves, often manage to circumvent many of the political sensitivities encountered in writing about recent Chinese history.

Leisure/entertainment

A final type of motivation is perhaps also the simplest: collecting motivated by leisure and entertainment. While there are thousands of committed collectors, there are many more hobbyists. For example, the Ningbo-based Mao badge collector Li Jun started collecting in the early 2010s, in a period when his work and daily life was very busy and stressful (Li, interview with author, Ningbo, June 2016). He started collecting badges as a way to unwind from work. Over time, his appreciation of the badges grew from the aesthetic to the historical, and while he continues to work full-time, he is also increasingly well known as a badge collector, and he has also undertaken and published research on badge origins.

Similarly, Hangzhou-based salesman and collector Luo Zhonghua takes a light-hearted approach to his collecting:

Personally, I think this kind of collecting is just for fun. I don't have such big ambitions for my collection. To put it more elegantly, it can help to cultivate one's temperament. If you have this hobby in your life, it will keep you in a happy mood. (Luo, interview with author, Hangzhou, July 2019, author's translation)

Luo grew up during the Cultural Revolution, and so objects from that time period are happy reminders of his childhood, regardless of the more painful associations others may have.

This section has demonstrated that collector motivations are diverse and complex. Collectors' views on history and the present do not always align; as such, neither do their motivations for collecting, nor their understanding of the contemporary significance of their collection objects.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the starting point for understanding the continued relevance of Red relics and the popularity of Red Collecting as a phenomenon must be an expanded idea of both

the scope of the field and the motivations that drive collecting. In particular, I have suggested that we ought to acknowledge that a significant portion of Red Collecting is directed towards the pre-Cultural Revolution period, and especially the revolutionary period. I argue that the field is engaging, not just with the legacies of the Cultural Revolution, but with the much longer legacies of the whole of the Chinese revolution. As such, collector motivations are not just about accepting or rejecting the direction of reform era policies from a comparative standpoint with the Cultural Revolution. Instead, the drive to collect is often tied to much larger ideas of China's historical rejuvenation and the role that the CCP played within it, and a variety of local, regional, and personal factors influence collections and their owners. For every collector that sees the value of Red relics for their embodiment of the supposed purity and incorruptibility of social life during the late Mao years, there is another who views it as preciously the opposite: the drive to restore the Chinese revolution after the aberration of the Cultural Revolution. Ultimately, collector motivations are complex and often contradictory: collectors occupy the full range of views on Mao, the reform era, and the contemporary party, from the outright critical to the baldly sycophantic. The field of Red Collecting, then, embodies the complexity of views and memories of China's recent past, and serves as a reminder that there are a range of historical touchstones with which people in China can engage, beyond just the Cultural Revolution. Finally, the field of Red Collecting demonstrates the extraordinary diversity of meanings that historical objects can embody, and reminds us, in Margaret Conkey's words, that "material objects are not, and have not been, just caught up in an ever-shifting world but are actually creating, constructing, materializing and mobilizing history, contacts and entanglements" (quoted in Gerritsen and Riello, 2015: 2). Red relics, then, are not just passive remnants from history; instead, their continued presence both reflects and enables a diverse series of engagements with the past. Contemporary politics, personal memories, and a variety of social phenomena all impact how collectors see their objects; but these objects too make meaningful their owner's engagement with the world around them. As such, Red Collecting and the continued existence of Red relics can be seen as an important aspect of China's "Red legacies," functioning as mediators between history, the individual, and contemporary Chinese society.

This essay offers a starting point for further research into a huge, important, and largely under-researched field in contemporary China. It points towards new avenues of research which can add nuance to our understanding of contemporary China's relationship with its recent past in ways that go beyond just the Cultural Revolution.

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