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They're seeing red over Mao

After a complaint, Alhambra evicts a Warhol-style painting of the communist leader. It inspired anger, amusement.

By David Pierson, Times Staff Writer February 24, 2007



Popular art? click to enlarge

Mao Tse-tung's image has received the iconic Andy Warhol treatment. It's been plastered onto tens of millions of kitschy cigarette lighters, medallions, watches, T-shirts and snow domes.

Yet when a painting bearing the former Chinese communist leader's visage was displayed this week as part of a lunar new year celebration in Alhambra, it set off a debate in Southern California's Chinese community about ghosts from the past and the promise of the future.



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A former basketball player for China's national team demanded the city remove the painting, saying the display romanticized a despot responsible for the death and suffering of millions of Chinese. The artists behind the exhibit agreed that Mao was a tyrant but countered that Mao brought about a new era of Chinese nationalism, one that would springboard the nation into modern times.

The debate bounced from holiday dinner banquets to Chinese-language talk radio after organizers of Alhambra's Chinese New Year festival — set to begin today — decided to remove the artwork from City Hall.



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Many of the immigrants, who make up America's largest Chinese community, arrived in the San Gabriel Valley to get away from the repressive thumb of the Chinese communist government. And for decades, the community had an undeniable anti-communist bent.

But with the economic rise of China and the passing of generations, Chinese Americans have come to admire what the country has become while still being wary of the

government.

Two years ago, a Chinatown businessman raised the red Chinese flag atop a building — a move that just a few years earlier would have certainly generated protests but ended up causing little rancor.

But the Mao paintings touched a chord.

Although some admit they have a conflicting view of Mao — not only recognizing the suffering that occurred under his rule but also his role in guiding China into becoming a global power — most are wondering what the fuss is all about.

They see the spat as overblown and are questioning how a single complaint could result in the removal of the artwork.

"We live in America. We see caricatures of George Bush and George Washington all the time. What's the big deal?" said Philip Young, president of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance Los Angeles Lodge. "I'm for free speech."

Some say it's too late to change the perception of Mao.

"He's such a pop icon, like the image of Che Guevara, that it has less meaning," said Patrick Lam, owner of Munky King, a toy art store in Chinatown.

The store recently sold out of a vinyl bust of Mao with Mickey Mouse ears. Lam tried to give the \$200 item to his mother as a gift, but he said she was uneasy with the piece knowing that her parents had lived through the Cultural Revolution.

Charlie Woo, a toy manufacturer and a member of the influential Chinese American organization Committee of 100, said China's economy had taken more of the sting out of Mao's legacy.

"With China's turnaround, I think his harsh image has been softened," said the Hong Kong native who remembers nothing but vitriol for the communist leader when he lived in the former British colony. "I saw the story about the art exhibit in the Chinese Daily News and wasn't sure what to make of it. I'm just watching with amusement."

In November, John Kong and a crew of three other artists — all from various Beijing art schools — started creating 35 silk-screen paintings playing off a Year-of-the-Boar theme with Andy Warhol-inspired renderings. At the request of a festival organizer, the paintings

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were put on display Feb. 1 at City Hall and were set to remain there until today's new year parade.

The exhibit went on without a hitch until last week when someone walked into the lobby and noticed among all the paintings of pigs one that depicted Mao and George Washington's images on piggy banks.

He told Kai Chen, the former basketball player who is now an author and real estate owner. Chen was so livid to learn that Mao was being displayed in a municipal building that he called the assistant city manager and demanded the artwork be removed. A day later on Feb. 16, the painting was gone.

"We didn't mean to upset anyone," said City Manager Julio Fuentes. "There's a lot of history in this city, and we want to respect everyone's rights."

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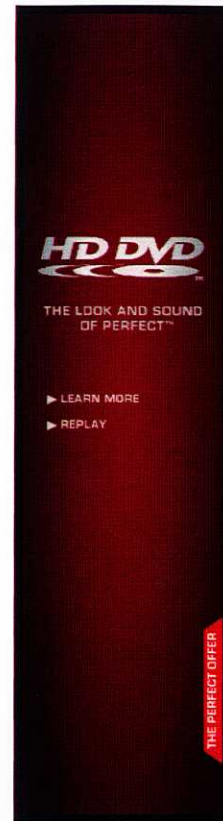
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