

If the aesthetics of tyranny and totalitarianism had a manifesto, perhaps it would read something like this...  
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## Let a Hundred Schools of Thought Contend

by Artistic Director Jamil Khoury



Embedded within Christopher Chen's [The Hundred Flowers Project](#) is an introduction: Mao Zedong meet Facebook, Facebook meet Mao Zedong.

If an academic treatise were to emerge from this chance meeting, perhaps it would be titled *The Metatheatrics of Revolution: Where China's Cultural Revolution and America's Social Media Revolution Congeal*.

Assuming all the world's a stage, then Mao (any Mao, any dictator—take your pick) becomes an ideal antagonist in a big, bloody, macabre sort of real-time spectacle.

In 21st century America, playwright Chen sees parallels with 20th century China, albeit parallels with far less violent consequences. Simply swap the megalomaniacal dictator with the internet-social media-surveillance state complex, and follow the thinking curve.

A curve made all the easier to follow thanks

to Chen's excellent questions: Does media reflect reality? Interpret reality? Create reality? Do images follow facts or facts follow images? Is it the event that matters or the words surrounding the event that matter? Are history, fiction, and autobiography all the same genre, just dressed up in different guises?

Naturally, my mind wants to apply these questions to today's headlines and trending topics. For instance, is the media's "robust" focus on the ebola virus a manufactured crisis meant to induce panic and fear, divert people's attention, perhaps manipulate their actions, or is it an urgent, responsible preemptive response to a potentially catastrophic epidemic? Or is it both?

By now I've watched *The Hundred Flowers Project* a number of times (with many more viewings to come) and I've begun to recognize some recurring thoughts the play inspires in me. Granted, for me personally, it's more Mao than Facebook, more Saddam than Snapchat, more ISIS than Instagram, but I love Chen's connections, his extrapolations, and I appreciate his warnings. This summer I deactivated my personal Facebook account and the results have been liberating and clarifying. Facebook had begun to feel oppressive and stifling. Perhaps I'll return if and when it feels fresh again.

As for demagogues and totalitarians, allow me to share where my mind has been going with this.

Yes, I've written it as a litany of infinitives and declaratives, but this format captures my current thinking on the zeitgeist (which will become clearer once you've seen the play). If the aesthetics of tyranny and totalitarianism had a manifesto, perhaps it would read something like this:

To erase old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas

To eradicate history and memory and knowledge and ancestry

To extinguish beliefs and divinities and traditions and mythologies

To disrupt orders and hierarchies and structures and laws

To rewire thinking and learning and transmitting and messaging

To reinvent identities and relationships and kinships and communities

To mold a population that is docile and malleable and fearful and obedient

You must shock and confuse and manipulate and brutalize



You must intimidate and coerce, penetrate and violate

You must be arbitrary and act with impunity, wield absolute authority

You must pit loved ones against loved ones, strangers against strangers



You must define insecurity as security, powerlessness as power

You must align your vision as their vision, convince them they are you

You must treat history as a means to an end, something to reimagine, edit and revise

You must promise a future that is glorious, worthy of sacrifice and hardship

You must own the story, subsume the narrative, control the speech

You must build a cult of personality, be father to the nation, make children out of subjects

You must elicit their love as much as their terror, their respect as much as their desire

You must groom leaders out of followers, "perpetual revolutionaries" out of yes-men

You must make them dread the thought of losing you, make life without you unthinkable

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