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Punks at Kinko’s

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Microfilm is deadly. Deadly for the eyes, the brain and, as I recently learned here on a research jaunt to Beijing, the stomach. So when a CD booklet on the bar of a Haidian district livehouse caught my weary eye I thought I’d found a good wall ornament for the apartment and a better image to set my evenings eyes on. The only problem was the insert – a black & white sketch of a mass of punks tossing Molotovs at a grinning Mao – wasn’t big enough. I was thinking poster size, so I took it to the first place that came to mind: my local Beijing Kinko’s.

The attendant lifted the thing to her face and, yes, things got uncomfortable. There was no mistaking the message on the graphic’s palace backdrop to the Chairman: fancui xiangfa, pohuai (criminals minds, destroy). And I felt a bit awkward walking in as an American with this suggestive graphic, so I made sure the staff took in the CD cover: two hands, a bloodied hatchet and the head of George W. Bush. These rockers were clearly out for everyone.

The manager and attendant conferred in mutters while a third staffer busied himself with the printed album lyrics, half rendered in English. (E.g. “Kill your Television. We sit back passively as OUR culture is commoditized and force-fed back to us. We have nothing to talk about except TV’s imaginary lives that are safe and sanitized, while the real hours of our own lives are sold away as advertising space to corporations. Our lives become the commodity as the things we buy, the words we speak and the way we live all become reflections of what we watch. Smash your TV and live YOUR life!”; or “We destroy the red dream… The dream turned into a nightmare without end. Now it’s time to destroy this dream gone stale. Smash it up and find a new way!”)

The answer was in the negative. “Political” was the word, and the attendant directed me to the list of rules that Kinko’s (a.k.a. FedEx Office) had posted by the copiers.

I bought this up the street, I said, could it really be illegal?

Again, “political” was the word, and, I suppose, I could’ve been shooed out the door. Instead I got profuse apologies and the suggestion that I take it to a smaller shop in the area where waving cash might get someone to bend the rules. But I didn’t get around to it.

Weeks later I pulled the offending item out of my bag. This time I was in Irvine, California. It too has the convenience of a neighborhood Kinko’s.
Did you make this? asked the woman behind the counter.

I went with honesty: No, I bought it in a bar in Beijing.

You’ll need a release letter from the artist, she said.

A letter? I said. From Chinese punks?

The irony, of course, was lost on her. Legality? Property? She had to read the stuff she was holding. But then there was no chance that that would happen. She was one of two or so staffers. The Beijing branch was crawling with some twelve.

How about I copy it myself, I asked.

She wouldn’t have any of it. Poohed away by this haughty, middle-aged woman like a petty thief, I realized I’d been stumped by the respective power and property obsessions of two reigning systems. But at least the Beijing branch had offered an apology and a back-up plan.

Back to Beijing, and the first candidate I could think of: a photo shop at one of the Peking University gates. I figured I’d print and break the image up in quadrants; for some reason I thought it’d look better up on the wall that way. The young woman didn’t bat an eye when she brought my image up on her PC. I confirmed that I wanted each quadrant at 6 by 8 (cun, or inches; photos here, I learned, are measured American-style). It was smaller than I’d planned, but the price was right and I had them in hand the next day.

Now I’m working on the frame. I’m thinking I’ll go safe with black.

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