

2011

My Life as an Art Soldier in Mao's China: Art and Politics

Shaomin Li
Old Dominion University, sli@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/management_fac_pubs



Part of the [Chinese Studies Commons](#), [International Business Commons](#), and the [Painting Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Shaomin, L. (2011). My life as an art soldier in Mao's China: Art and politics. *Modern China Studies*, 18(2), 55-82.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Management at ODU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Management Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ODU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@odu.edu.

My Life as an Art Soldier in Mao's China: Art and Politics

Shaomin Li

Old Dominion University

Abstract: The author narrates how in Mao's China his personal experience took unexpected turns when China dramatically transformed politically, economically, and culturally, and how in reacting to these overwhelming changes he evolved from the role of artist to student activist, businessman, political prisoner and academic. The article focuses on the relationship between art and politics in Mao's China and how the two evolved into what the author characterizes as "market communism" in today's China.

Key words: Mao's China, art and politics, market communism

Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Ken Daley, Kenneth Fitzgerald, Elizabeth Childs-Johnson, and Ying-ying Lai for their comments and suggestions.

當毛主席的美術兵

李少民

歐道明大學

摘要：作者從自己在毛時代當美術兵的經歷，說明毛的去世如何引發中國翻天覆地的變化，並把中國引入一個市場經濟加共產專制的新型社會。作者在這巨變中捲入了政治漩渦，經歷了海外學生民主運動，經商，在大學教商業管理，被中共監禁，到重新恢復繪畫。其不尋常的經歷生動的展示了當代中國藝術和政治的關係。

關鍵字：毛時代的中國，藝術與政治，市場經濟加共產專制

My Life as an Art Soldier in Mao's China: Art and Politics

Throughout my life I have wanted to be an artist. In the early 1970s, I majored in art at the Tianjin Normal School at Hangu (天津师范学校汉沽分校) and later was active in the art community in Hebei province where I lived. However, what happened in my life led me to study social sciences and eventually become a faculty member in a business school. Although I no longer work as a professional artist, my training and artistic experience during the Mao era has left an indelible imprint on me. After my artistic career, China's rapid and fundamental changes were like a hurricane sucking me in yet providing me the personae of a student activist, businessman, political prisoner, and academic. Now living in America, I consider myself still more than ever in the eye of the hurricane yet enabled to look at art and politics in China from a unique perspective that may provide some insights to the readers interested in the topic.

Painting Mao

On September 9, 1976, the Great Leader Chairman Mao died. The entire country was immersed in great sorrow. Everywhere, throughout the nation, people were in mourning. Scenes of weeping crowds were seen on TV and in newspapers, and were reported on the radio. It seemed as if the sky was falling and we the ordinary Chinese people felt like Chicken Little of children's literature: scared and clueless. Nationwide memorial services for Mao were announced by the central government. On September 18th everyone in the country was ordered to stop working. All "work units" -- factories, farms, military units, and neighborhoods -- were ordered to hold a memorial service for Chairman Mao.

At the time Mao died, I was a foot soldier in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA). My main duty was to guard a military compound that no one had ever attacked. Actually I did not join the army to be a guard. I had joined the PLA a year earlier at the age of eighteen as an artist-in-residence, a much sought after position for which I went through fierce competition to obtain. Unfortunately, a few months after I became an art soldier, I was quickly demoted as a guard due to my "bourgeois tendency," which, according to the

political commissar of my unit, needed to be cleansed by the humiliation and hard work of being a foot soldier. Angry and heartbroken I bid farewell to my drawing and painting tools and picked up the rifle. As fate can turn, I was soon summoned by the propaganda department in my army compound to expedite a black and white painted portrait of Mao for the memorial service there. According to Chinese tradition, pictures of deceased persons that were hung for memorial services were painted in black and white. All flowers had to be white. No color is allowed. Yet Mao's portraits at that time--tens of thousands of them, hanging everywhere in China--were all in color.

Ironically Mao's death had dragged me away from my guard duty into an empty art studio. I was overjoyed! Finally, I was able to paint again, even though it was under the watchful eyes of the omnipresent Chinese Communist Party. One small mistake might send me away—yet not back to guard post duty, but to be guarded in detention for desecrating Mao's god-like image. I knew the seriousness of the task, but was happy to accept it. After all, it was art work again, and anyway I did not have much of a choice. The real challenge for succeeding at my task was not my painting skills. I had studied portrait painting with several masters for many years; furthermore, I had painted Mao portraits many times. His distinctive face had made an unmistakable and permanent impression in my mind. I could draw his head with my eyes closed. No, the challenge was in my attitude. Chinese Communist Party rules forced absolute ideological control under which the people must show correct attitude toward the party and its leader. Thus as the party required, I had to show an expression of deep sorrow over Mao's passing. That was difficult. For inexplicable reasons I did not feel sadness when Mao died. Yet, at the same time this lack of remorse made me feel horrible. I was deeply ashamed and terrified as well of the potential for someone to accuse me for a "lack of proletarian feeling toward Chairman Mao." My army career would surely be over and there may be even other more serious consequences such as being criticized or denounced in public meetings.

To assure accuracy in the proportions, I drew transfer grids on the model portrait issued by the government and on the gigantic piece of white canvas on which I would paint. My painting work went smoothly; with short breaks and no sleep, I painted throughout the night. After finishing, I stepped back to take

an overall look: Mao's huge head loomed large, the two big eyes were staring at me, as if accusingly inquiring: Why don't you feel sad about my death?!

The loudspeakers in the compound repeatedly broadcast the official funeral music. The speakers, along with the official newspaper, *The People's Daily*, were our only source of news. We—the people—were told that Chairman Mao had made our country the greatest in the world, and that we should carry on his flag and continue the revolution until the whole world is liberated. Virtually all outside information sources such as BBC and Voice of America were labeled as "enemy stations" and banned. Yet even without outside information or any point of comparison, my intuition -- as that of most of my army comrades -- was that things were pretty bad in our country: most foodstuffs and daily necessities were in short supply and rationed, and as soldiers we only received RMB 0.46 yuan (about \$0.25) for food each day. (Later Deng Xiaoping raised it by one cent to RMB 0.47.)

Mao's death made me feel a bit excited, but certainly not at all sad. I felt like a beggar watching a big gamble in which everyone, including the beggar, puts his wealth in a jackpot for a lucky draw. Since the beggar has little or nothing, he has nothing to lose or to fear. Therefore any change of his lot would be for the better. Mao's ultra-radical anti-market policy had driven the country into poverty. In this sense he had made most people in China almost like beggars. I say "almost" because begging was officially banned in China since it was viewed as an act of "smearing our great socialist country." Things could not be worse and we all longed for a change, any change.

I continued painting and was actually enjoying it. Yes, painting was much more pleasant than guarding a gate at three o'clock in the morning. I mixed big globs of oil paints, white, gray, and black, and practically threw them on the canvas. Mao's big head was taking shape. I kept telling myself: Don't make a mistake! I remembered a frightening story about one of my art teachers, Mr. Hu, a first-rate oil painter. He was painting a portrait of Mao, but it did not turn out as he expected, so in frustration he scratched into the paint of the portrait. But this act was seen by someone who reported to the authorities that he had "defamed Chairman Mao's portrait," a grave crime that could receive the death penalty in the era of the fanatic cult of Mao. Mindful of this story, I paid close attention to my progress. I knew that in the process of painting, an unfinished portrait could look ugly or even horrible, and as in the case of my

former teacher, this could be misinterpreted. If some superiors decided to check on my progress and saw my Mao with only one painted eye or in some other questionable state of completion, I could easily get in trouble. Thus I adopted a strategy similar to photo development, painting the whole portrait one layer at a time so that at any given time, should my bosses come by, they would see Mao's head in good shape, from light shade to full tone.

I stepped back from time to time to assess the overall effect. At one point I thought the tone was too dark -- I had used too much black. Not good. I had better make sure to position two big lights on the sides during the memorial service to overcome the darkness of the portrait. And as was inevitable, my boss, Officer Bi, came to inspect my painting. Officer Bi was a handsome man in his late thirties. He had joined the army as a tenor singer, based purely on the quality of his voice, and he had performed with the prestigious Zhanyou ("Fighting Comrade") Chorus in the Beijing Military Region. Unfortunately Officer Bi had no training in music and he had terrible intonation. He told me that he always sang out of tune and eventually had to leave the chorus. When our military compound was recruiting a "Culture and Entertainment Officer," he was transferred to my unit and became my boss.

"Xiao Li (Junior /Small Li),¹ how is the painting going?" His voice was smooth and high. "I think it is OK." I responded with a low, tired voice—it had been more than 20 hours since I started. "On the contrary, I don't think it is OK," he continued. [My heart sunk.] "I think it is excellent!" What a relief! Officer Bi had a sense of humor and liked to exaggerate and to catch others off guard with his jokes. He was only at the entry of the studio—converted from a huge conference room—how could he know it was excellent without even taking a careful look? It was just a portrait. I was merely copying from an official standard portrait without any creativity. But who would care? In the entire military compound, Officer Bi was the most sophisticated person as far as art was concerned. "Great, Xiao Li, a job well-done! Let me take a picture of you." Taking a photograph at that time was considered a luxury. Very few individuals had cameras and film and photo paper was very expensive. As the Culture and Entertainment Officer,

¹. "Xiao," (pronounced as "Hsiao"), meaning "little," is a prefix used to address someone junior in age or status.

Officer Bi had a German camera and a good supply of film and photo paper. Normally I would have jumped at the chance, but now, completely exhausted, I thought, “Why bother?” Before I could reply, with a big flash, he had already taken my picture. I did not realize until some thirty years later, that this is one of the rare historical photos that recorded 1976, the year that fundamentally changed China. Where is the Mao portrait I painted now? It probably ended up in a storage room somewhere. To destroy a portrait of Mao at the time required permission and no one back then would want to take such responsibility. If it could be recovered, Sotheby’s would probably be interested.



Figure1 Photo of the author painting Mao’s portrait, taken by Bi Wencheng, photo paper print, Shijiazhuang Military College, 1976.

The sky did not fall after all. All of the Chicken Littles like I felt cautiously optimistic; anything spinning out of the political reshuffling would probably be a windfall for us since we already had so little. Indeed Mao’s death ushered in a new era for China. Without Mao’s death, Wal-Mart would not be able to stock its shelves with all those inexpensive Chinese products! And needless to say, Mao’s death changed my life forever.

Art Under Mao

Art in China's revolutionary era under Mao (1949-1976) was tightly controlled by the Communist Party. It can be said that the party's art policy was extremely radical in ideology and conservative in style. The most fundamental document that set the tone of art under Mao was a speech he made in 1942, seven years before his party took power in China. Mao proclaimed that "art and literature must be a well-running part of the revolutionary machine, a powerful weapon to unite and educate the people, and attack and destroy the enemy" (Mao 1942). Mao clearly forced artists to submit to and serve the party's political goals. In an official textbook, the official theory and function of art is defined thus:

"...scientifically summarize the art practice of mankind, while depicting the goals and tasks of the proletariat revolutionary struggle, demonstrate the positive role of art in the development of the human society, and lead art to the road of constantly, consistently and thoroughly serving the people."

(Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics 1962: chapter 3)

Ironically, the Communist Party's policy on the style of the art was not revolutionary—it was old fashioned and retrograde. While the art outside China since the end of World War II was dizzying in its variety, complexity, and unlimited expression of individual creativity and freedom (Getlein 2005), artists in China had virtually no freedom in form or style. Everyone was required to make visual images in a realistic manner.

In contrast with the Chinese setting, art in societies that respect individual rights and liberties may be viewed as a "zone of freedom," as phrased by Julian Stallabrass (2004:1). Artists were free to use the most extreme means to draw viewers' attention and critical adulation or outrage. For example, human waste in the form of urine was used to make art by Robert Mapplethorpe in creating *Jim and Tome, Sausalito*: one man urinates into another man's mouth. Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* represents a small plastic crucifix submerged in a

glass of the artist's own urine. An artist could become famous by putting a huge dead shark in a tank, as in the case of Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1991. Someone else, such as Ron Athey, an extreme performance artist and carrier of the AIDS virus, in an excerpt from *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis made cuts in a co-performer's back, then hung strips of the blood-stained paper towel over the viewers to scare them. Takashi Murakami, an artist who blends high and low art, in his sculpture titled *The Lonesome Cowboy* depicted a young boy masturbating. This work was a huge success.

While such art works were being created outside China, counterparts in China, unable to learn what was happening in this outside art world, earnestly followed the party's call to create new proletariat art, which was anything but new. It seems that the art of the "East" (e.g., the communist states such as China) and the art of the "West" (the capitalist world) are "negative images" of each other (Stallabrass, 2004:7). Thus, if artists in the capitalist world use art to freely express their feelings and challenge their viewing audience, the artists in the communist bloc, having no freedom to do so, must be pragmatic and didactic. If the art in the communist block must serve a positive political purpose to uplift people's life and achieve the revolutionary goal, then the art in the free world must produce works that are seemingly egocentric, useless and decadent. If the artists in the communist world must follow realistic styles of representation, those artists outside the communist world must make a statement by deviating from it. During the Cold War era (1950's through 1990's), Western artists who practiced realism styles were often viewed as leftists in the free world (Arnold, 2004: location 1128).

Artists in China had to become politically sensitive in order to survive. They had to study party policies and try to decipher what Mao or any other party leaders thought and wanted so that they could produce works that the senior officials liked and authorized. It was a very dangerous game because of the high level of uncertainty and frequent changes of political alliance within the Communist Party. Mao often abruptly denounced his allies as enemies without warning, putting the artists who tried to please him in great jeopardy and humiliation.



Figure 2 Xiwen Dong, *State Founding Ceremony*, oil on canvas, 2.30m x 4.05m, Chinese Revolutionary Museum, Beijing, 1953

This oil painting made in 1953 depicts Mao announcing the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Other state leaders stand behind him. Merely one year after the painting was completed, one of the leaders behind him in the painting, Gao Gang (first on the right) was purged by Mao and committed suicide. So the artist was ordered to wipe out Gao. Some ten years later during the Cultural Revolution, Liu Shaoqi (third from the left) was purged by Mao. The artist was ordered to erase him. Later another figure, Lin Boqu, needed to be removed because he opposed Mao's marriage to Jiang Qing. But by then the artist had died of cancer. Another famed artist, Jin Shanyi, was given the task. After Mao died, Jin revised it to restore Dong's original version. The version shown above is the eighth (Chen, 2000: 183).



Figure 3 Zhong Han, *On the bank of Yan River*, oil on canvas, 1.80m x 3.60m, destroyed, 1963.

This painting depicts Mao chatting with a farmer at sunset. Mao's silhouette is very vivid. It was an instant success. However, during the Cultural Revolution, even this highly acclaimed work meant to praise Mao was denounced as defaming Mao because his back was painted in shadow rather than showing the front image of the Great Leader. As a result, the artist was denounced and the painting was destroyed (Chen, 2000: 199).

During the heyday of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution, the official art policy was *San Tu Chu* (三突出), which may be roughly translated “three emphases” or “three focal points”: (1) emphasis on the positive (good) figures among all figures, (2) emphasis on the heroes among the positive figures, and (3) emphasis on the major heroes among the heroes (Wikipedia, 2010a). When I first learned the policy, I thought it was too simplistic and redundant: all three can be summarized by the third emphasis, which was what happened in art during the Cultural Revolution, as the photo below shows.



Figure4 Photo of Revolutionary Hero Guo Jianguang released by the Chinese Government during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Yaxin Zhang, Beijing, 1971.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao mobilized the whole country to destroy the education system. Most knowledge was useless, Mao told the

people. "The more knowledge one has, the more reactionary one is." "High-class people are stupid, and low-class people are smart" (For Mao's quotations, see Ifeng.com and baidu.com). The smartest people were the workers, peasants, and soldiers. As a result, schools and universities were occupied and ruled by representatives of workers, peasants, and soldiers sent by Mao. They were unable to provide much formal education. Many schools were closed. Nonetheless art flourished, because as with all dictators, Mao needed art to praise himself, and to create him as a god-like image. I spent all my time studying drawing and painting through the private tutoring of several masters. Back then students were not expected to pay the teacher since it would be considered capitalism. The thought of paying a teacher simply never occurred to me or my parents. But why then should an established artist take on any students? Though there was not much incentive for artists to take on students, I think there are two explanations. Firstly, *guanxi* (relationship), or whom you know, is significant in traditional Chinese thinking and practice (Li, Park, Li, 2004). Students were introduced to the master through a connection. And usually the student was from a family with certain resources that could be helpful in some way for the prospective teacher. Secondly, there was an element of altruism in many established artists that compelled them to take on students so that their art skills, techniques, and traditions could be carried on to future generations. In this sense an aspiring student had to be talented and show good potential. Ideally, both conditions had to be met to form a tutoring relationship. Thankfully I had both back then. My father, Honglin Li, was an official in the art and literature field, and because of his guidance, I became a hard-working art student. I had the good fortune to study with Xie Zhigao, Ning Daming, and Li Hui, and watched demonstrations of other talented artists in Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei where I lived and studied, located a couple of hundred miles south of Beijing. Every day I would draw and paint, carry my portfolio, and ride my cycle zigzagging through the city to different masters to get their advice. I remember Xie Zhigao was impressed by my progress and invited me to watch him paint, which was a great privilege. As artists all know, watching a master at work is the best way to learn.

As a young artist, I ardently participated in using art to serve the revolutionary goal. During the Cultural Revolution, Mao sent virtually all the youths from cities to the country to work as farmers in the name of

“re-education.” Life was hard in rural China. Hours were long, work was harsh, and food was scarce. In comparison, a soldier’s life was much better: it was prestigious, a fast track to get into the party, and a chance to be promoted to officer, so when discharged, one might be assigned to a job in one’s hometown. A job in the city was a dream of millions of youths. Only in few societies (usually economically challenged) is becoming a soldier considered a “hot” job. In China there is an ancient wisdom: “A good piece of iron should not be made into nails and a good man should not become a soldier.” When everyone is competing to join the military, something must be wrong in the society. Much like American colleges recruiting athletes, the PLA cherry picked artists to do propaganda work, and I took this path to become an artist in a military compound in Shijiazhuang, right in my hometown. An artist job in the army included making gigantic political posters, drawing and showing propaganda slides, showing movies, publishing art works in newspapers, and participating in exhibitions. Below (next page) is an ink drawing I made to participate in the 1976 political campaign by Mao against Deng Xiaoping. I drew a scene of students composed of workers, peasants, and soldiers preparing a political rally on a university campus. I guess I was really daydreaming of attending college when I drew this.



Figure5 *Angry Fire on a Campus* by author, ink on paper, published in *Hebei Ribao*, 1976.

Soon after he waged the 1976 campaign against Deng, Mao died. Under his despotic and irrational ruling, China was on the verge of a total collapse; things could not have been worse. His death nonetheless presented a rare opportunity for China to change course. In 1977 universities restored normal operations and began to admit students through scholastic testing. This rekindled my hope to go to college. My childhood dream was to go to the Central Academy of Arts (中央美术学院) in Beijing, but I didn't think that I had a good chance to be accepted. The army had forced me to stop doing art work for almost three years. I felt that I had been left behind by my peers.

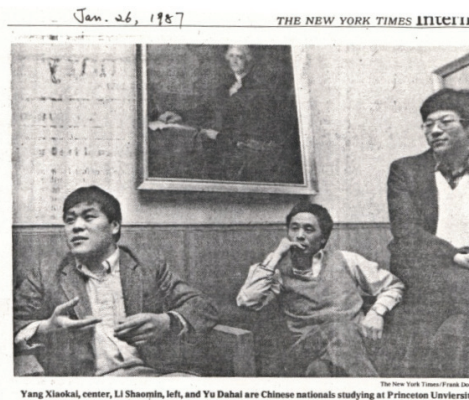
During the ten years of the Cultural Revolution, many talented youths were studying art, and China had accumulated tens of thousands of extremely talented artists whose skills were of the standard that allowed them to teach drawing and color in any first rate art institute. They would all be competing to get into the Central Academy of Arts as students! But it was not the fierce competition that prevented me from trying; it was the fact that I was *not free* to try. In the army, soldiers were not free to choose to which college to apply. I could only apply to a set of schools designated by the army. Of the schools designated, none were art schools and none offered art majors. My hopes of studying art at the university level were dashed. The only way for me to get into a university was to compete for one of the slots in social sciences in several universities assigned to our military unit. I decided to try despite the fact none of the university options had the potential to study art. To get into any university, one must take a nationwide college entrance examination that tested four subjects at the high school graduation level. Yet I had only three years of formal education at an elementary school before the Cultural Revolution. I quickly borrowed a pile of high school textbooks and began to read them. Several months later, I took the exam and came out first among all contestants from my army compound! This is how I changed from an artist to an economics student at Peking University. Life takes unexpected turns indeed!

Prison Drawings

In 1981, when I was about to graduate, Peking University was recruiting six graduate students in sociology, and one of them would be given a highly sought-after scholarship to go to the United States to study. I decided to apply

and took the nationwide graduate study entrance exam. I did well in the exam and was awarded the scholarship to study in America (subsequently I received a scholarship from an American university and thus did not use the Chinese government scholarship).

During 1986 and 1987, while I was a student at Princeton University, the Chinese Communist Party waged a political campaign to purge the reform-minded party leader Hu Yaobang. Other students and I wrote the first open letter to protest the purge. The letter eventually gathered over a thousand signatures and drew quite a bit of attention internationally and in China. *The New York Times* published a front page story (January 26, 1987, page 1) about the three major organizers of the letter in Princeton, who were Xiaokai Yang, Dahai Yu and me. Our nickname became the “three Princeton musketeers.”



Yang Xiaokai, center, Li Shaomin, left, and Yu Dahai are Chinese nationals studying at Princeton University

Chinese Students Defend Open Letter

Continued From Page A1

other Princeton students who signed the letter, and telephone interviews with students at other universities, mark one of the few times Chinese students have allowed themselves to be quoted by name in the Western press on the Government's actions. It is an act that some students say is dangerous for them and their families in China.

"I put my name on the letter because I want to capture an opportunity to find a constructive and independent rela-

tion. It is very bad, the events that have been going on after the reform that had been going on. But we are being critical of our Government in a constructive way. What the Government is doing now isn't rational."

"It is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution — they start criticizing a few intellectuals," said Li Shaomin, 30, a graduate student in demography at Princeton.

"I just cannot concentrate on studying because of this. I have been worried a lot, but those worries are not rational. When I reason who I should worry

about, I realize I have done nothing wrong. Even so, Li Shaomin said, his student at the State University of New York at Albany, called him every last week "just to make sure" he still at Princeton. "She thought I might be ordered back to China."

Despite concern over the situation, students interviewed over the week said they planned to return home for their summer vacations. They said many of their colleagues who signed the letter felt the same way, though they did not say that they would re-

Figure 6 “Chinese Students Defend Open Letter” *New York Times*, January 26, 1987, front page

By then I was firmly convinced that capitalism is superior to communism in delivering economic prosperity and political liberty and that China must

adopt capitalism in order to develop. One of my studies while at Princeton was a comparison of the political and economic development in China and Taiwan since the 1949 separation. In the study I concluded that Taiwan's capitalism had won the political and economic race. In 1989, amidst the pro-democracy movement in China, I wrote a commentary in *The Wall Street Journal* titled "Taiwan Was Right All Along," (May 11, 1989, A15) without realizing it would cause so much trouble for me later.

Fast-forward ten years to the early 2000's when I was a faculty member in the City University of Hong Kong teaching business. In February 2001, I went to Shenzhen for a meeting and a lecture, and was secretly arrested at the border by Chinese state security agents. The charge was the usual: "endangering state security." The international community condemned the arrest, thousands of scholars signed an open letter asking for my release, and the United States Congress passed a resolution (*S Res. 128) to demand China free me. My daughter Diana wrote to President Bush asking for help and the president wrote back promising to do so (Bush, 2001; *Newsweek*, 2001). After five months, I was set free. During the ordeal, I had many long hours every day to stare at the police and my surroundings. In most art curricula, artists are trained to draw from memory—to develop a kind of graphic memory. After my release, I sketched some of the scenes of my captivity.



Figure 7 Author, *Riding while wearing a pair of “dark glasses” flanked by two plainclothes agents*, ink on paper, artist's collection, 2001

This is how they would transport me: I would sit in the middle and wear a blindfold that looked like a pair of sun glasses.

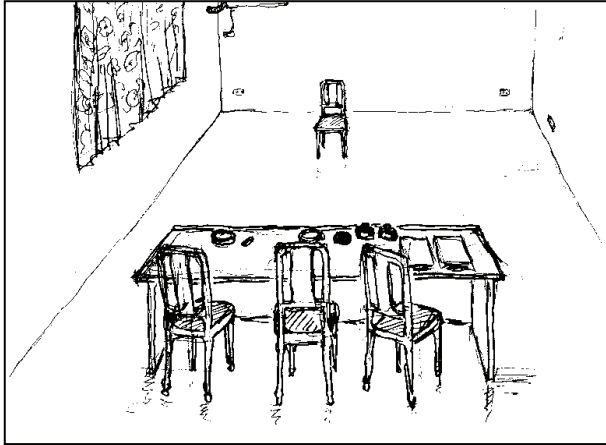


Figure8 Author, *The Interrogation Room*, pencil on paper, artist's collection, 2001

The accused would be put far away to make him feel isolated, exposed, and insignificant.



Figure9 Author, *Interrogation*, pencil on paper, artist's collection, 2001

“Interrogation” represents the bad cop and a good cop scenario, with a transcriber who wrote down many things that the accused did not say.

Recent Works

My 2001 ordeal in China somehow put the president of the City University of Hong Kong in an awkward position. Unlike academic institutions in the U.S. that enjoy substantial autonomy, universities in Hong Kong are held on a short leash by the government. And this president had political ambitions in China and therefore tried particularly hard to please Beijing and to be politically correct with the Chinese Communist Party. However, at the same time Hong Kong universities are the members of the international academic community and the president must at least act as if he were an autonomous academic officer. He welcomed me back so that he earned some points in the international academic community, and at the same time sent a subtle message to Beijing by telling me that the time I spent in the Chinese jail was counted as using my vacation time! It was time to return to my adopted country, America.

In 2002, I joined the faculty of Old Dominion University to teach international business. To my delight, I found that Old Dominion had an art department! I got to know several colleagues in the art department and was able to sit in a figure drawing class. Back in Mao's China, drawing from a nude model would have been a crime. So this was the first time that I was to enroll in a class in which students drew from live nude models!

When I stood behind a huge drawing board and faced an inviting sheet of white paper, suddenly a familiar feeling emerged. It was the feeling of creating art. I was a portrait artist again: capturing the image of a person is like hunting. I needed to obliterate all distractions—all sounds, surroundings, movements, and any other potential disturbance in order to focus on the figure in front of me. I then closed my eyes to arrange how to present this figure artistically. Being able to draw again was wonderful, especially after so many years of upheavals in my life. I felt like escaping from a meeting room filled with cigarette smoke and entering into a forest with fresh cool air.



Figure10 Author, *Class exercise #1*, charcoal on paper, artist's collection, 2006

The art classes I took at Old Dominion allowed me to make firsthand, although limited and maybe biased, comparison in art education between America and China. Based on my observation, one of the major differences between American and Chinese schools in teaching drawing is that in China the class is more structured. The emphasis is on drawing techniques, whereas in the American class I attended at Old Dominion, different styles are permitted or even encouraged. Students are free to choose their medium and style.



Figure11 Author, *Class Exercise #2*, charcoal on paper, artist's collection, 2006

In China, teachers offer explicit remarks about students' works. When I was a student the teacher would directly point to someone's work and comment without reservation. The teacher would pick a drawing and explain why it is an excellent work, or would criticize a student's work to show what is wrong. The teacher's words could be quite harsh and humiliating. As an art student I had experiences in which I thought I did a marvelous work, but when I presented it to my teacher, the teacher blasted it and scolded me with a comment like "How could you do such an awful work?!" In America, at least in the figure drawing class in which I participated, the teacher never gave harsh criticism to any student's work (which I think should be done if the student is to learn). It seemed to me that the teacher thought that any comments that may give the hint that one student is better or worse than another must be avoided.



Figure12 Author, *Class Exercise #3*, charcoal on paper, artist's collection, 2006

Another comparative observation is about the academic standard. Many of my classmates in my figure-drawing class who majored in art had no basic training in fine arts. In China, they would have no chance to enroll as an art major. Art programs in American colleges seem to be more tolerant and open in terms of student's technical qualifications. In the figure drawing class I attended, quite a few students struggled with basic composition, proportion, and shade. Their drawings reminded me of a Chinese saying about figure

drawing: “First try to draw a pretty girl; if you fail, make it a hairy guy; if that fails, make it a rock; if all else still fails, make it a sheet of black paper.” What American art students lack in technique, they make up in audacity, freedom, and creativity. With the advancement in computer-aided design tools, do we still need to acquire drawing and painting techniques in order to be a good artist? I think that everything else being equal (talent, imagination, vision, etc.), having the ability to draw and paint certainly enhances an artist’s ability to create good work.

The perception of artists as having a lack of earning power seems to be similar in both societies. However, American and Chinese students seem to weigh the economic factor differently in choosing the art major. According to Yang Bin, an avid art collector and supporter of art education in China, art students in China tend to come from affluent families. If this observation is true, it suggests that students and their families tend to make an economically rational choice about choosing a major: if one does not have to worry about money, choose art; otherwise, choose something practical. This does not seem to be the pattern in America. There are many reasons for this, including one’s right to freedom of choice. American art students are from all walks of life. Many art students I know come from working or lower middle class families. This implies that in comparison with their counterparts in China, American students tend to choose the art major without concern about the difficulty of professional or monetary success.

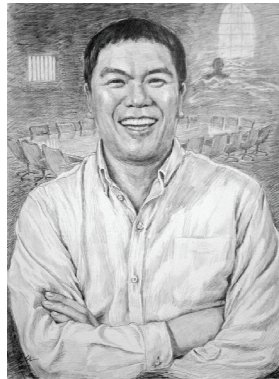


Figure13 Author, *Class Term Project: Self Portrait*, pencil on paper, artist's collection, 2006

At the end of a figure drawing class, the teacher asked us to do a project: to create a self-portrait. In my self -portrait, I used the background to briefly show the journey I took in life: I have been in the boardroom (I was a founding CEO of a high-tech firm in Hong Kong) and a jail cell. And I am still searching (swimming toward light). With these experiences behind me, I happily laugh, in the eye of a hurricane.

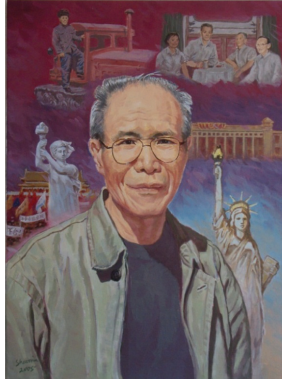


Figure14 Author, *Father*, oil on canvas, artist's collection, 2005

My father, Honglin Li, is an intellectual leader and reformer in China. This painting depicts his life. He was sent to the countryside by Mao to drive a tractor during the Cultural Revolution. After Mao died, he was recalled to Beijing (the train ride scene) and assumed a directorship in the Chinese History Museum (the Greek-style building), where he published a series of influential articles to demystify Mao. During the 1989 pro-democracy movement, he went to the Tiananmen Square to support the movement. After the PLA put down the movement by force, he was detained by the government for sympathizing with the students (*Wall Street Journal*, 1989). Under international pressure, he was freed and came to the U.S. to visit me in the early 1990's.

Art in China's Market Communism

Supported by newly created material wealth, China's art market is booming and moving forward by leaps and bounds. Talented artists in China who attend the elite competitive art institutions today employ their classical,

realism-based technique to create contemporary social, political, and cultural themes in an avant-garde, Chinese style. Artists in China enjoy freedoms unprecedented since the Communist Party came to power in 1949 (see e.g., *Art Collection and Design*, 2010). However, this newly found freedom in art is not without limit. The general policy of the Chinese Communist Party can be summarized as first and foremost: the party will protect its monopoly in power at any cost. Second, it wants to develop the economy (to gain legitimacy from the citizens). As long as the artists do not challenge the party's rule, they have great latitude to create whatever they like. However, if they are viewed by the government as posing a threat to the authorities, they will be dealt with swiftly and harshly.

Ai Weiwei (1957-) is one of the most prominent artists in China who is unconventional and provocative. He is internationally known for his instrumental role in the design of the Olympic Stadium (called the Bird Nest) in Beijing. But he is also active in participating in protecting citizen's basic rights, an activity for which the Chinese authorities have little tolerance. His success in art has helped him to achieve a movie star status in China, which in turn has made his political participation widely recognized and supported by the common people.



Figure15 Ai Weiwei, “*Missing*,” (Chinageeks.org, 2010)

Ai Weiwei has used art to commemorate the students who were killed in the 2000 Sichuan earthquake due to official corruption allowing inadequate and poor construction of their schools' structures. In his art work, "Missing," he dropped a valuable vase on the ground, symbolizing the loss of what is precious in life, particularly young lives of students. There is a wise old saying, "friends are like ceramics -- if you break one, you will permanently lose one." Because of his political participation, Ai has been harassed by the Chinese authorities many times. He was beaten by police in 2009 when attending the trial of a human rights activist; he was under house arrest in 2010 for hosting a dinner party; in the same year his newly built studio was condemned by the government for demolition (Chinageeks.org, 2010; Guardian.co.uk, 2010). In 2011 the government arrested and detained him for several months.

In the Foreword of the Eleventh National Exhibition of Fine Arts in 2009, the official organizers of the event, the Ministry of Culture, the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and the China Artists Association state that art must be "walking together with the People's Republic of China and resonating with the new era." Art must "follow the direction of two targets," which are serving the people and serving socialism (Ministry of Culture, et. al., 2009). While the Chinese Communist Party has become extremely pro-business and the Chinese economy has embraced capitalism, the art policy of the party is essentially the same as Mao's. This seeming discord has created great confusion and a paradox in today's China as well as the world. To illustrate this paradox, I made the following political poster using the rudimentary copy-and-paste function of Microsoft Powerpoint.

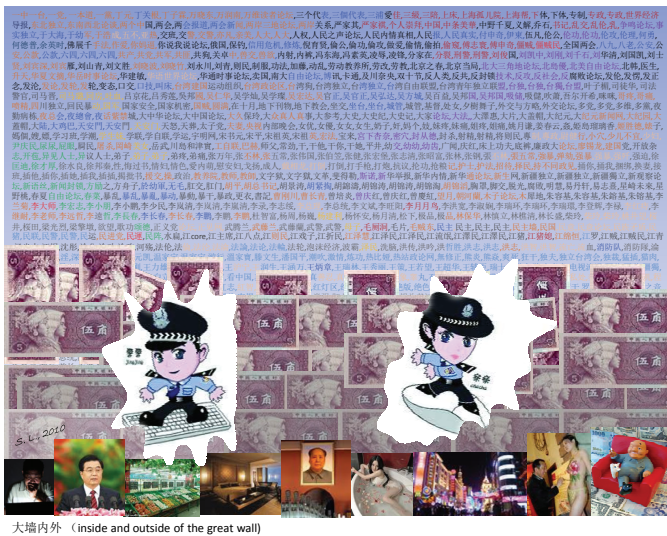


Figure16 Author, *Inside and Outside of the Great Wall*, photo collage, artist's collection, 2010

This poster is about control of the internet by the Chinese Communist Party, commonly known as “the great firewall.” The Chinese government forbids various contents on the internet that are deemed harmful to its authority. To block objectionable content, it maintains lists of sensitive words and phrases (such as “democracy” and “Taiwan independence”) and orders website administrators to use the lists to filter any objectionable content. Some websites are blocked altogether, such as youtube.com and facebook.com. The government also hires tens of thousands of internet police to monitor and shut down offending websites. Perhaps the most innovative measure of the government is to recruit people who are willing to post official views online as individual internet users in an attempt to sway public opinions. For each posting, the government allegedly pays 50 cents, thus earning these people the nickname the “50 cents party” (Wikipedia, 2010b). In my poster, the wall is built with images of 50 cent notes of Chinese currency; the sky is filled with the sensitive words and phrases copied from an official censoring list; the two cartoon figures are the official images of the internet police; inside the wall

coexist material affluence, worldly pleasure, party leaders, and net surfers who try to circumvent the wall. For artists in China to gain the same freedom as their counterparts in mature democracies, there seems to be a long way to go. Hopefully increasing interactions between art and politics in China will influence each other towards greater openness and personal freedom.

References

- Arnold, Dana. 2004. *Art History: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Art Collection and Design*, 2010, *New China, New Arts: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Artists*, Taipei: Artists Press.
- Baidu.com, Mao's quotation. <http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/55352016.html>
- Bush, George W., 2001. Letter to Diana Li, June 19, The Whitehouse, Washington, D.C. Private collection.
- Chen, Fusheng. 2000, *New China's Art History, 1949-1966*. Beijing: China's Youth Press.
- ChinaGeeks, 2010, <http://chinageeks.org/2010/05/ai-weiweis-newest-piece-missing/>, accessed November 23, 2010
- Freeland, Cynthia. 2001. *But Is It Art?: An Introduction to Art Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Getlein, Mark. 2005, *Living with Art*, New York: McGraw Hill
- Guardian, 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2010/nov/03/ai-weiweishanghai-art-studio>, accessed November 23, 2010.
- Ifeng.com, Mao's quotation. <http://bbs.ifeng.com/viewthread.php?tid=4546874&extra=page%3D1>
- Li, Shaomin, Park, Sueng Ho, and Li, Shuhe. 2004. "The great leap forward: the transition from relation based governance to rule-based governance." *Organizational Dynamics*, 33(1), 63-78.
- Mao, Zedong. 1942. *Speech at the Yanan Art and Literature Conference*, Beijing, People's Press.
- Marxism-Leninism Aesthetic Theory*, 1962, Beijing, People's Art Press.
- Ministry of Culture, et al., 2009. *The Eleventh National Exhibition of Fine Arts, China 2009, Works Collection of Oil Painting*, Beijing, People's Fine Art Press.
- New York Times*, 1987, "Chinese students defend open letter" by Nick Ravo, Jan 26, p. 1. *Newsweek*. 2001. "The crayon that roared" by Lynette Clemetson, Jul 2, Vol. 138, Issue 1; p. 40.
- Stallabrass, Julian. 2004, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wall Street Journal, 1989, “Lost in the Chinese gulag” by Claudia Rosett, August 8, p. 1.

Wikipedia, 2010a, <http://zh.wikipedia.org/zh/%E4%B8%89%E7%AA%81%E5%87%BA>, accessed November 25, 2010.

Wikipedia, 2010b, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/50_Cent_Party, accessed November 23, 2010_

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.