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Art & Politics in Mao's China

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JIN ZHILIN (1928–)
Beijing, China
“The People March
Under the Banner of
Chairman Mao” 1971
watercolor and charcoal,
10 1/8" x 19 1/8"



Introduction

Art is a medium of expression where the individual and culture come together. What happens to the individual artist when culture becomes a tool of the government? How does politics impact art as an expression of the times? Can art and culture survive and overcome government repression?

Following the rise of the communists to power in 1949, all artists in China were compelled to adhere to the party line on art. During the 1950s, this meant adopting Soviet-style “social realism,” an overtly didactic art style that promoted communist ideas. During the devastating decade of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, artists were forced to adopt a style called “revolutionary romanticism,” and during the healing years immediately following the revolution, artists returned to more personal styles and revived folk art styles.

These three periods are reflected in the brush strokes and carvings of Jin Zhilin and his students Song Ruxin, Chen Sanqiao, and Feng Shanyun, who were trained at the Yan’an Masses Art Studio under Jin’s direction. “At that time [after the communists took power] art changed directions because of the revolution. Now, art should serve the people—the workers, peasants, and soldiers,” declared Jin.

Historic Setting

Jin Zhilin’s career was altered dramatically by the currents that shaped the history of communist China. Educated as an oil painter in the Western tradition by one of modern China’s preeminent oil painters, Xu Beihong, Jin’s interest was drawn to the folk art adapted by the Chinese communists in the

1940s to promote their political agenda. Upon first seeing art from the Communist’s base in Yan’an (1942), Jin remembered, “I fell in love with those paintings instantly, especially to feel such a strong folk style, and its down-to-earth, local artistic style. Since then, I had a strong desire to go to Yan’an.”

After the 1949 revolution, he followed Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong’s call for artists to serve the masses and devoted his artistic talents to political ends. Said Mao, “There is in fact no such thing as art for art’s sake, art that stands above classes, art that is detached from or independent of politics.”¹

After Mao called for a Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to purge China’s intellectuals and those he deemed insufficiently “red,” Jin found himself on the wrong side of the Communist Party’s new artistic mandate. “At the time, when one worked for the government, [we] paint whatever was politically required regardless of how one felt,” recalled Jin. Imprisoned and tortured by Red Guards in 1966, he attempted to take his own life.

In 1973, following nearly eight years of internment in a labor reform camp, Jin was sent to Yan’an, the cradle of the communist revolution. As the Cultural Revolution was winding down, another shift took place in the Communist Party’s political line, and Jin found himself in the position to direct the Masses Art Studio. There he pursued his lifelong passion: to learn from the masses—now focusing his attention on reviving the traditional folk art of Yan’an and Shaanxi Province.



SONG RUXIN (1946–)
Yan'an, China
"Come Back" 1971
woodcut, 24 1/4" x 20 3/8"

JIN ZHILIN (1928–)
Beijing, China
SONG RUXIN (1946–)
Yan'an, China
"High Ranking Cadre
and daughter" 1977
gouache on paper,
13 1/2" x 15 7/8"



From 11 September to 16 October, the Springville Art Museum in Springville, Utah, exhibited *From the Masses to the Masses*, a Chinese art collection of over fifty pieces, spanning twenty-five years (1955–83) with support from the Utah Humanities Council. That was the first public viewing of this visual history encompassing the Maoist years, and the early years following his death known as a period of "opening up and reform." In November, the documentary was screened at the Asia Society in New York City along with a few selected pieces of art for display,* and in January 2006, the film will be screened at the International Conference on Art and Literature in Honolulu, Hawaii. Other screenings and exhibits include the Spori Gallery at BYU—Idaho in February and the University of Eastern Oregon in March 2006.

As director of the studio, he recruited peasant artists from the surrounding countryside to Yan'an, where he conducted classes on painting and print making. Following the Maoist dictum of learning from the masses, Jin also required his students to go to the countryside and study local folk art with the peasants.

Over a period of thirteen years, Jin and the other artists captured the life and history of northern Shaanxi's rich folk art in varying mediums: woodcuts, watercolors (gouache), and, on occasion, oil. Woodcuts and water-based paints were common because oil painting in the countryside was impractical.

One of his most significant endeavors was to revive local folk art. Part of the process was recruiting elderly women skilled in making paper-cut art to teach his students this traditional folk art typical of northern Shaanxi province where Yan'an is located. Reviving traditional art forms influenced the young artists' own evolving styles, and the influence of paper-cut art style is obvious in many of the woodblock prints that Jin's students produced in the 1970s and early 1980s.

As a group, he and his students have become known as the *Yaodong huapai* (cave artist group). The yaodong is the typical cave home in which the people live in this region of northern Shaanxi. Their artistic style is noted for its close connection with the local people and culture, a style that the group maintained even as many Chinese artists have pursued modern- and Western-style art in the post-Cultural Revolution era.

In 1986, Jin returned to Beijing and was appointed director of folk art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, but he has

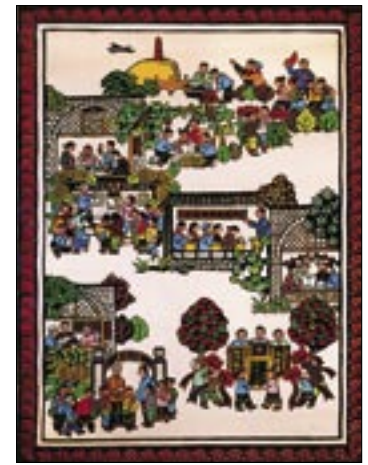
SONG RUXIN (1946–)
Yan'an, China
"Fan (color)" 1976
color woodcut, 16 5/8" x 26 1/4"



Jin Zhilin (1928–)
Beijing, China
"Brigade Secretary of the Yugeng
People's Commune, Huailai County,
Hebei Province" 1960
oil on cardboard, 15 1/8" x 12 1/2"



JIN ZHILIN (1928–)
Beijing, China
SONG RUXIN (1946–)
Yan'an, China
"Target Practice" 1977
gouache on paper, 13" x 15 1/2"



FENG SHANYUN (1949–)
Yanchuan, China
"Education" 1977
woodcut heightened by gouache varnished,
52 1/8" x 36 1/4"

maintained his intimate connection with the local artists of Yan'an. Still actively engaged in their art, Song Ruxin continues to live in Yan'an, Chen Sanqiao resides in Xi'an, and Feng Shanyun lives in his native village of Yanchuan, several hours drive from Yan'an.

Finding a Hidden Treasure

While working on location in Yan'an filming a documentary on Helen Foster Snow (*Helen Foster Snow: Witness to Revolution*, produced by Combat Films and KBYU in 2000, see *Bridges* archive <http://kennedy.byu.edu/bridges/pdfs/bridgesF2000.pdf>), our common interests in political art drew us to prints on display by Song Ruxin, a local Yan'an artist. Visiting at his home one evening, we were shocked to find that Song had dozens of prints and watercolors from the 1970s and early 1980s stashed under his bed.

Most of the pieces were in very poor condition, and Song hadn't paid them much attention in the past decade. "It used to be very stressful to do art work," said Song. "If you weren't careful, you could get into serious political trouble. Now it is different. I can create much more freely and depict local people's lives." This chance encounter with Song led us to Jin, who had been Song's teacher. Finding Jin in a small apartment and studio located in a *hutong* (narrow alleyway) in downtown Beijing, we discovered a treasure trove of oil paintings, woodblock prints, and watercolors he had piled up.

Even more exciting was Jin's intimate knowledge and experience as an artist who had survived the Cultural Revolution. "We don't follow the mainstream. Our Yan'an group does its own thing. We want to represent the sentiments of the masses. Today we are still united with the masses. Even though we are out of the mainstream, we are close to the people—the masses," said Jin. He is passionate about preserving and cataloging the propaganda art and folk art of Yan'an that he came to love as a young student while studying art in Beijing in the 1940s.

During these first meetings with Song and Jin, Dodge purchased several pieces of their art, and upon his return to the U.S., he had them restored. During several subsequent trips to China, we both developed a close friendship with Jin and Song and also met other students Jin had tutored while he was living in Yan'an in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The paintings were collected in and around the revolutionary capital of Yan'an, Shaanxi Province, in northwestern China, a remote and poor rural area, and the location of the communist base camp for thirteen years (1936–1949). "At that time [1949 to late 1970s], all paintings had to serve certain political propaganda purposes. They are not like today's creative, artistic paintings. The paintings were required for political reasons," explained Song.



FENG SHANYUN (1949-)
Yanchuan, China
"Four Benefits of One Child Policy" 1978-1979
woodcut, 31 1/8" x 21 1/4"



JIN ZHILIN (1928-)
Beijing, China
"Study for Historical Painting of
'Nanniwan' #2" 1961
oil on paper on wood,
11 3/4" x 15 5/8"



Chen Shanqiao (1949-) Xi'an, China
"Farmer's Yard" 1979, woodcut, 15 1/2" x 14"



CHEN SHANQIAO (1949-)
Xi'an, China
"Under the Big Pear Tree" 1982
woodcut, 18 1/8" x 18 5/8"

On each trip, Dodge convinced Jin and his students to sell him a few more pieces, so that he could organize a representative collection including Jin's art beginning in the 1950s and 1960s, along with his students' art as representative works from the 1970s and early 1980s. Their art reflects the historical and political significance of the area as well as the influence of local folk-art styles on the works of Jin's students.

Documenting a Life

During each meeting with the artists, we conducted extensive interviews: recording details of their training, lives, and explanations about the significance of each piece of art that was collected. Between 1999 and 2004, after four trips to China, we had recorded several interviews with each artist and collected still photos of the artists documenting their lives and art. We conducted dozens of hours of interviews, collected important original works of art to assemble a coherent collection for the period covered by the documentary, and completed the necessary library research to bring this project to fruition.

Jin and his fellow Yan'an artists became the major focus of the documentary, *From the Masses to the Masses*, which uses the life work and experiences of Jin as a springboard to examine the broader historical, political, and philosophical context of the history of art in Communist China.

After returning from China to Provo in July 2004 and armed with funding from the Kennedy Center to produce *Beyond the Border*, a collection of documentary films, Eric and Sue Bergen wrote an initial script for the *Masses* documentary. Together we polished the script and completed the editing process in September 2004, when post-production work began at the LDS Motion Picture Studio in Provo.

Presented through the artists' perspectives, the film traces Mao Zedong's views on art as a "political weapon" articulated during the 1942 Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature, the development of Chinese "social realism" in the early 1950s, the demand for art characterized as "revolutionary romanticism" during the Cultural Revolution, and concludes with the present artistic climate in China. "We quickly accepted the political agenda and policy on art enunciated by Mao at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature to serve the workers, peasants, and soldiers—serve the masses," Jin declared.

Jin's personal experiences provide a window on the lives of artists in a revolutionary society and offer a unique opportunity to approach some of the larger questions of the interplay of art and politics. Using images of art collected and restored from the period between 1950 and the early 1980s, interviews with artists and academic experts, the documentary captures the political environment and travail of artists during this important watershed period in modern Chinese art history.



Feng Shanyun, artist



Jin Zhilin, artist being persecuted



Chen Shanqiao, artist at work

The one-hour documentary was screened at the Kennedy Center during International Education Week, on Tuesday, 15 November at 3:00 P.M. in 238 HRCB. Hyer introduced the documentary and provided a post-screening discussion on the topics raised.

In late September 2004, a thirty-minute version of the documentary premiered on KBYU-TV. Over the next several months, Eric rewrote and lengthened the script to include additional interviews and historical background material. This one-hour version premiered on KBYU-TV in April 2005.

Bringing to Light

Because the art was neglected for decades and stored under beds or in damp and dirty rooms, it was in poor condition when we collected it from the original artists. Dodge hired experts to restore, preserve, and frame the art in preparation for public exhibit.

In a sense, this lost art from a bygone period in China's history has been restored to life so that an American audience may appreciate the artistic quality of the art, and, along with the documentary, may place the art in its political and historical context—the key to truly appreciating art. "After the Cultural Revolution, I realized that art did much more than just serve the political cause," Song related. "I started to depict the lifestyle of the countryside in my work. I found it fascinating to observe the Shaanbei peasants' lives."

The collection is original, and the pieces had not been sold as there was no commercial value to the art when it was produced. Instead, art was utilized for social and political purposes. In most cases, the artists were not even sure what happened to their work once it was turned over to local authorities to be reviewed and exhibited. As a result, most of the pieces in this collection are the only known copies that survived.

Conclusion

A community is enriched by a broad range of humanities programs, but what are the positive and negative influences of government involvement in such programs? China is one example of the very overt involvement of party and government in the humanities—with often dire consequences for the artists and their art.

One of our goals has been to help others appreciate the value of free expression by better understanding the impact on Chinese artists from government manipulation of art for political purposes. Foremost in our minds was to create a collection of art and produce a documentary that would open a window on this important period in China's modern history. 🌍

Eric Hyer, the film's producer and writer, has conducted research on the influence of politics on artists and art in China for the past five years and has a professional commitment to education about Asia.

Dodge Billingsley, the film's director and script editor, is an accomplished documentary filmmaker who has studied and collected Socialist Realism art in communist countries for nearly a decade.

NOTE

1. Zedong, Mao. "Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art," *Selected Works*, Vol. III, May 1942, p. 86.