

## Perceptual Revelations of the Rationalist Avant Guard - Re-reading Jiang Shuo's "Red Guard" Sculptures

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As people go about constructing their own history, so history – which carries within itself the changes and developments that occur within society – becomes a textbook of viewpoints and opinions that differ from one another. No matter if these histories are “empirical” or “fictitious”, people have always managed to obtain timeless meanings from history through its constant reinterpretation. The saying: “All history is contemporary history” is really the scholar’s judicious point of view. Over the past two years, the acclaimed Austria-based sculptress, Jiang Shuo has been working on a series of works based on a “Red Guard” theme. The language and manner of these sculptures are derived from her first hand experience of the Cultural Revolution, as well as her observations on the growing rationalization of contemporary thought. They show the artist’s perspective on the past in the light of the present; a dual play that adds an extra element of poignancy to her work. These works display a uniqueness and style that immediately attracts the viewer’s attention. As such, the “Red Guards” become readable ciphers of identity, both for those who experienced or were born after the Cultural Revolution.

History can be understood in many different ways and situations, resulting in a whole series of different answers and interpretations. It could be said that the richness and complexity of history arises from this state of affairs. As a sculptor at home with the language of her profession, Jiang Shuo is naturally inclined to view society and everyday life from a “formal” perspective. Her view of the Cultural Revolution is no exception. Using the Red Guard theme as a focus point, she juxtaposes the history of Cultural Revolution with observations on the state of contemporary society. In this way, the contrast between revolutionary fanaticism and rational judgment further accentuates the changes that have taken place over the course of history. Humorous,

ironic remarks and metaphoric symbolism heighten the ideological and philosophical implications of these works. Compared to her former output, Jiang Shuo has subverted her previous delicate and decorative sculpting style with the ironic and absurd language of Post-Modern art. The witty, cartoon-like look of the Red Guards brings them closer to contemporary ideas of beauty as embraced by certain styles of the pop culture. The theme is solemn, yet the presentation is comparatively relaxed and entertaining – provoking laughter while at the same time bringing about a complex and inexplicable sense of disquiet. Such sober and foreboding intimations give viewers much to dwell upon.

The significance of the Red Guard sculptures lies not only in the artist's ability to shake off her previous artistic habits, but also in her concise grasp and lively interpretation of the Red Guard theme. During the ten-year period that the Cultural Revolution took place, the swirling vortex that called itself the "Class Struggle" swept across China, leaving no one unscathed. At that time, the Red Guards, as the main force of this revolutionary front, attempted in an extreme manner to bring about a uniform political consciousness. Wearing green military uniforms and red armbands, they fervently proclaimed their loyalty to the common cause; quoting from their "little red books". To replace the old and antiquated with the new and revolutionary became the prevalent ideological stance of the Red Guards. As the red and green complimentary colors spread across the whole of China, so did the dogged notion of upholding the revolutionary spirit. Bravely marching forwards with fists to the air and never looking to the past for consolation, this image of the Red Guards remains familiar to this day. Although this may seem somewhat comical from today's point of view, the Red Guards seriously believed in the sacred importance of their actions. Beneath any rational justification of their actions and extreme behavior, one finds a deeply irrational form of blindness. Here, the serious turns into the absurd, loyalty turns into infatuation, and the sacred turns into the insane – a truly senseless state of affairs. Looking back, it is hard to believe that the Cultural Revolution could actually have taken place.

Jiang Shuo's Red Guards, with their innocuous, expressionless appearance and stiff, upright poses suggest that blind obedience is the result of impulsive, thoughtless actions. Through the medium of artistic expression, the sculptor has managed to poignantly capture the misfortunes that befell a whole generation of impressionable youths, who failed to think before they acted. Countless personal tragedies and historical disasters are recounted in the poses of these figures. Accordingly, one's heart shudders when confronted by the careless and carefree youths of the present. As such, the artist provides us with moving and levelheaded reflections on social and moral responsibility.

It is particularly worth noting the way in which Jiang Shuo's Red Guard series makes use of various elements and ideas from contemporary popular culture. Golf, Karaoke, Coca Cola, McDonald's and gold coins, becoming rich, self-help, public displays of affection and the like; all take the place of the Red Guard's little red book. The Red Guards, who have long disappeared from contemporary life, are thus resurrected, albeit transformed. They now cling to the very items of material culture that were frowned upon during the Cultural Revolution, when the Red Guards' professed aim was to break from the "old world order". This ironic juxtaposition of contrary elements strengthens the dramatic effect of the sculptures. The sardonic take on history presented by these works is but a part of the greater joke that history plays on mankind, and as such contain within themselves a much deeper meaning. As living beings, we are often unable to control the arrangements that fate has in store for us. Moreover, one cannot escape from the ceaselessly changing roles that are assumed over the course of our existence. Just as the Red Guards in their day contributed to the writing of history, so the living generation remains actively involved in the creation of the present. Here, the saying: "reviewing the past helps one to understand the present" is meaningful in that it suggests a way out of the phlegmatic state of contemporary society. The insights that the sculptor [Jiang Shuo] can provide lies in the fact that she experienced both the trials and tribulations of the past as well as the current era of prosperity and economic growth. She has witnessed the beginning and

the end of the Red Guards – the end of one era and the beginning of another. The significance of the current revival of rationalist thinking is that it not only leads to the revitalization of the nation, but can also rescue the lives and the future of a whole generation. From experiencing the Cultural Revolution in person to becoming the creator of the “Red Guard” series, Jiang Shuo’s sculptures reflect her maturity and sophistication, not to mention the path chosen by a whole new generation of people.

It could be claimed that this is a good sign. It is a good sign because we have a chance to fathom the depths of a sculptor’s critical mind. Besides embodying the huge transformations that China is currently undergoing, Jiang Shuo’s works illustrate the rational and intelligent advances made by the present generation.