



The Beijing-born artist Jiang Shuo with a figure. (Alexandra A. Seno)

## **Imagining Red Guards in China today**

By **Alexandra A. Seno**

Friday, November 9, 2007

**HONG KONG:** Shaking her head gently, more in wonder than in dispute, Jiang Shuo says: "Unbelievable!" It is her response to various questions about her homeland's current economic prosperity or the international interest in the culture of today's China and the record prices being paid at auction for contemporary Chinese art.

Jiang, a respected Chinese sculptor - and one of the very few women in the field to achieve such success - has a unique perspective on these issues. She creates in bronze robot-like figures representing the Red Guards, Mao Zedong's young army that powered the Cultural Revolution.

"This is my generation," Jiang said in an interview here. "We were students and we listened to Chairman Mao. We were against culture, against tradition, against capitalism. But now, look, who are the leaders? Who are running the companies? My work is about this irony." Her latest pieces, recently the subject of her third one-woman show at the city's Plum Blossoms Gallery, continue to explore the Red Guards theme for which she became famous in the mid-1990s.

Zhao Meng, a sculptor who is also vice-dean of the Academy of Art at Beijing's Tsinghua University, contributed an essay to a book published to coincide with the exhibition. He notes Jiang's use of her signature Red Guard figures. They pose

alongside the stuff that has replaced Mao and the Little Red Book at the center of urban Chinese aspirations today: karaoke, McDonalds, becoming rich, the pursuit of the good life. "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," Zhao writes. "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."

In Jiang's latest works, Red Guards appear to cruise jauntily, as if on skateboards, atop flashy new automobiles, Little Red Book in one hand, money in the other. In a 76-centimeter, or 2 ½-foot, high piece called "Wu Fu Lin Men" that she created with her husband and sometime collaborator Wu Shaoxiang, five figures frolic on a laughing Buddha who shares Mao's distinctive hairstyle.

She also goes back to traditional symbols. She has Red Guards balance on sleeping cat figures, a nod to a popular animal in folk art. And in typical Chinese style, she engages in a little word play. Though the written characters are different, the word for cat (mao) can sound a lot like Mao.

Jiang was born in 1958 in Beijing. Her skill as an artist earned her admission to the elite Central Academy of Arts and Design, where she apprenticed under Zheng Ke. As a student, she designed film award trophies and public monuments for the government, considered highly coveted commissions. After graduation in 1985, she became a lecturer at the school, an affirmation of her talent.

In 1989, the year of the Tiananmen crackdown, Jiang won a scholarship to a university in Austria. Like so many of China's finest artists around that period, she moved her young family with her - by then, she and Wu had a 3-year-old son - and started from scratch.

"It was tough. I left my parents behind in Beijing," she said. She recalled how she and her family got by speaking English the first few years while learning German and settling into their new life. She joined shows when she could, gaining the interest of some European collectors and slowly building a reputation. By 1991, Austrian organizations were asking her to design awards and sculptures, and she was selling through galleries.

Her family gained Austrian citizenship in 1993. She visited China over the years to see her mother and father and slowly witnessed the changes taking place. In the mid-'90s, an English collector suggested that she try to sell her works in Hong Kong. Since then, the former British territory has been a key market for her works. Her 2.6-meter, or 8.5-foot, tall sculpture, "Going Forward! Making Money!" adorns the lobby of the Langham Palace Hotel.

After nearly a decade and a half of primarily filial visits, Jiang and Wu last year opened a 600-square-meter, or about 6,500-square-foot, studio in Beijing, where they plan to spend half their time. "All my ideas, my inspiration comes from China, so I need to be there," she said.

On the place of art in China now, she said: "Art is no longer like before. Art is now part of economic development." Jiang's smaller works, about 20 centimeters in height, sell for just over 55,000 Hong Kong dollars, about \$7,100. Bigger ones, like "Wu Fu Lin Men," sell for 510,000 Hong Kong dollars. In September, a Singaporean collector sold a 166.7-centimeter karaoke piece from 2004 at a Sotheby's New York auction for \$67,000, more than two and a half times the estimate.

"The insights that 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," Zhou wrote in his essay. "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."

Jiang's son is now in his 20s and attends university in Germany. He has spent most of his life in Europe, which he considers home. Sometimes he visits China with his parents, because "he likes to eat Chinese food," his mother said with unmistakable pride. Her face also lit up as she talked about how he is working toward a degree in "mathematics and informatics," maybe culminating in a doctorate. What about art for the child of two sculptors? "No, no. The artist's life is very hard," she said, smiling wistfully.