

OF COLD WAR AND POLITICAL ORTHODOXY

From the Masses to the Masses Documentary Film Explores Tension Between Art and Politics in Mao's China

By Gregory Lewis



Jin Zhilin

Image source: Combat Films Artist's Bio page at:
http://www.combatfilms.com/bio_jin.asp

FROM THE MASSES TO THE MASSES: AN ARTIST IN MAO'S CHINA

PRODUCER: ERIC HYER, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY
DIRECTOR: DODGE BILLINGSLEY, COMBAT FILMS AND RESEARCH
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Political scientist Eric Hyer first captured the dramatic appeal of China's revolutionary history in his incisive documentary on Helen Foster Snow (2001). With *From the Masses to the Masses*, he delves substantially deeper into the cultural and political milieu of Mao's China both before and after 1949. Hyer takes as his subject Jin Zhilin, an artist born in 1928 in Hebei province who began his formal training during the Anti-Japanese war. Jin's discovery in Yan'an of what was to become his lifelong passion—local peasant folk art—coincided roughly with Mao Zedong's oft-quoted *Yan'an Talks on Art and Literature*. As the filmmakers emphasize, this meant that art existed only to serve the masses, and no art could exist apart from politics. Artists like Jin were thus primarily trained to serve the revolution and the Communist Party by creating didactic, propagandistic art.

Art historian Amy McNair (University of Kansas), elaborating on the relationship between art and politics, downplays the apparent rigidity of Mao's message. Chinese art, she says, has always been political, and in fact the wonderful, uplifting themes emerging from the Yan'an talks were "so open" they could be reinterpreted differently by succeeding generations.

For Jin Zhilin's generation, this reinterpretation would come

only after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. Along the way, art manifested itself politically in several ways and in different mediums. Before the liberation, woodblock prints inspired by the German Kathe Kollwitz enabled Chinese artists like Gu Yuan to lodge bold and dramatic political protests using Chinese themes of war and revolution. Jin first discovered the folk art tradition of Yan'an in Gu's prints.

After 1949, Soviet style "socialist realism" in the form of oil paintings combined what McNair called "the right political pedigree and the right style" to convey the heroism of workers, peasants, and soldiers. Chinese artists like Jin readily adopted the broad brush strokes and stark contrasts that distinguished the Russian form from European modernism. Viewers are not informed about the relative success or failure of socialist realism, only that Jin Zhilin learned the new medium and style from renowned artists Xu Beihong and Konstantin Maksimov. In these years, Jin produced several examples that depicted the budding collectivist movement in the countryside, but did not realize his hope of returning to Yan'an until the Great Leap Forward.

Jin's activities in Yan'an during the ill-fated Leap are also largely unexamined, but he did not study local folk art. Instead, in 1964, he completed a massive three-by-nine-foot socialist realist mural depicting the intimate relations between party officials, the local army, and the peasants. The significance of this work, called *Nan ni wan*, is established in the documentary only by its placement in China's Revolutionary Military Museum. Unfortunately, the painting was taken down during the onset of the Cultural Revolution, as the leader portrayed in it had become an enemy of Mao's.

More than a third of *From the Masses to the Masses* is devoted to the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Here, particularly, the documentary comes alive, juxtaposing images of political activism and chaos with matter-of-fact declarations by Jin that his return to Beijing might be punctuated by the Red Guards breaking his legs or gouging out his eyes.

A remarkable poster-size photo remains showing Jin Zhilin's persecution during the Cultural Revolution. He is stooped over, wearing a sign around his neck that labels him as a Nationalist Party

... the filmmakers include Jin's marvelous watercolor of the revolutionary masses hoisting a red flag. Fearful of painting Mao incorrectly, Jin instead merely attaches Mao's official photo to the flag.

spy and historic counterrevolutionary. Ominously, his students observe him with expressions of defiance and anger.

In the absence of any information about how Jin's family coped with the Cultural Revolution, viewers must assume that the beatings and imprisonment of Jin by his students caused him to want to take his own life. In an ironic commentary on the limits of revolutionary zeal, these Beijing-based youth found it incomprehensible that Jin would want to live and work in Yan'an, the cradle of Mao's revolution.

Finally, Jin survived and learned yet another artistic style in the process. The Sino-Soviet split in 1960 resulted in China rejecting the socialist realist style for insufficiently idealizing socialism and the revolution. A new direction advocated by Jiang Qing merged revolutionary romanticism with revolutionary realism, a style Amy McNair describes as "theatrical, like a play."

Theatrical in form the art may have been, but for older artists like Jin who had been subjected to the worst humiliation and degradation of their lives, few subjects seemed safe to paint. Here the filmmakers include Jin's marvelous watercolor of the revolutionary masses hoisting a red flag. Fearful of painting Mao incorrectly, Jin instead merely attaches Mao's official photo to the flag.

As the Cultural Revolution neared its end in 1976, a new wave of younger artists appeared. They largely avoided the political and personal calamities visiting Jin's generation, but they also found themselves bound by government dictates to paint certain subjects using the revolutionary realist style.

Among these, Song Ruxin can be counted as one of the most active. Reared in Yan'an, Song acquired a reputation for painting Mao's portrait in a vivid revolutionary romantic style, so that "many officials and workers would come and sit around (it)." Song engaged in propaganda by executing wall paintings for area villages that he readily admitted served a political agenda. Yet Song was mindful of art as social criticism too. More than a generation removed from Mao's *Yan'an Talks*, he produced a series of woodblock



Jin Zhilin

The People March under the Banner of Chairman Mao, 1971
Watercolor and charcoal, 10 1/8" x 19 1/8"

Combat Films: http://www.combatfilms.com/gallery_masses_10.asp

Although he went to Yan'an empty-handed, Jin soon immersed himself in the study of Yan'an peasant folk art. He supervised younger artists like Song Ruxin, and sought to have them identify with the rich earthy qualities that marked the pre-liberation Yan'an tradition that had piqued his interest as a young man.

Students received a veritable smorgasbord of art instruction based on Jin's varied experiences. He painted in oils and watercolors, made woodblock prints, and in the permissive atmosphere fostered by Deng Xiaoping after 1978, even studied the papercut techniques of local peasant women. Styles varied from socialist idealism, socialist realism, and revolutionary romanticism, but in almost every case the artists themselves could choose the style they thought most closely resembled the local people's lives. Jin counted his consequent preservation and development of popular culture, or what he called the revitalization of folk art, as his greatest professional contribution.

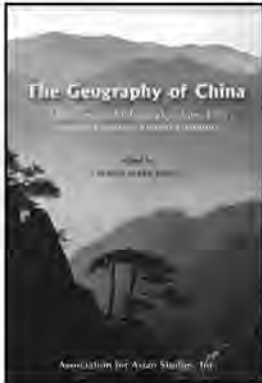
Jin returned to the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1986 and later retired. He still believes that the connection between artists and ordinary people is the key to representing Chinese culture and what he calls the sentiment of the masses. In this, he differs from today's artists, whose works are impacted by a force characterized by the filmmakers as "stronger than politics—the market." As the documentary concludes, Jin had come full circle, identifying with the folk art that had so impressed him as a young student sixty years before.



Song Ruxin

Old Woman of North Shaanxi at Free Market, 1979-1980
Woodcut, 21 3/4" x 16 1/2"

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The sadness, confusion, and ultimate destruction that descended upon Jin and others because of the Cultural Revolution is a compelling human drama that should not be forgotten, . . .

Hyer's documentary recommends itself in several important ways. He offers a credible narrative that adheres closely to his interviewees' comments. The sadness, confusion, and ultimate destruction that descended upon Jin and others because of the Cultural Revolution is a compelling human drama that should not be forgotten, nor should the powerful ideology and overbearing orthodoxy of the Maoist party-state, which evidenced itself in the artistic world through several distinct phases. On the production side, Hyer's keen eye in selecting documentary footage enables him to effectively place Jin's story in proper historical context. With these strengths, the educational value of *From the Masses to the Masses* for both generalists and specialists is unquestioned. The social and cultural history embedded in the film makes it appropriate for students of high school age and above, and for almost every discipline within the social sciences and the humanities.

I also offer a few cautionary notes. First, given the film's emphasis on politics and ideology, the ambiguity of Jin's own beliefs is perplexing. Viewers are apt to conclude that Jin—a product of his environment, after all—is much more Maoist in orientation than one who would embrace Deng Xiaoping's market economy. In turn, this begs the question regarding the relative success or failure of various artistic styles and movements during the Mao period. Where is the audience for these paintings, and what was their reaction? At least in the case of Song Ruxin, audience reactions influenced the artist and gave him an identity (and presumably, self-worth) that existed quite apart from politics. Finally, the documentary could have been more specific as to dates, periods, and defining otherwise ambiguous terms like "political agenda," "revolutionary line," or "party line."

Additional Reading

For a detailed look at different artistic styles and mediums during the Mao period (including a brief profile of Jin Zhilin and his masterpiece *Nan ni wan*), see Chen Lusheng's two-volume *Xin Zhongguo meishu tushi, 1949–1976* [The Art History of the People's Republic of China, 1949–1976] (Beijing 2000). Michael Sullivan's *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley 1996) gives perhaps the best English-language introduction to this period. ■

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