

GAO BROTHERS' EXECUTION OF CHRIST;
VISUAL LEXICON TRANSCENDING
CULTURE, TIME, AND PLACE

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ABSTRACT

After the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1979, China began a national transformation from a once self-imposed isolated culture to one that hoped to be economically and culturally engaged with the rest of the world. Chinese artists were exposed overwhelmingly to Western contemporary arts and philosophies. With both exposure to new Western artistic concepts and a desire to diverge from traditional Chinese art, which was seen as outdated form of art, Chinese artists wanted to modernize the Chinese arts by creating new visual lexicons and artistic languages.

This thesis will discuss how The Gao Brothers were able to apply Western artistic concepts to integrate the Chinese culture and create a unique artistic language while remaining separate from the Western contemporary arts and traditional Chinese arts. The

discussion will examine major influences and inspirations that led to the creation of the Gao Brothers' 2009 sculpture, *The Execution of Christ*, including the artists' family history, occurrences of major historical events, challenges in creating a new identity for a nation, and artistic responses to international influences. Works of the Gao Brothers will be compared and contrasted with other Chinese contemporaries and with Western and Eastern art concepts, philosophies, and techniques. These insights into the Gao Brothers' artistic development process were obtained through criticisms, catalogues, and other published materials, in addition to the author's in-person interviews with The Gao Brothers, their curator, Author Hwang, and the artists' personal art dealer and friend, Melanie Lum.

The Gao Brothers are continually evolving the artistic language of their art to reflect changing world. They strive to push cultural and social boundaries to express their feelings of their cultural past as well as hope for the future. The artists are successful in creating avant-garde art by borrowing Western art philosophies and redefining conventional iconographic interpretations within their works, specifically in *The Execution of Christ*. The combined and redefined uses of art iconography, religious and cultural philosophies in *The Execution of Christ*, resulted in an artistic language that communicates to all humanity that transcends culture, time, and place.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Gao Brothers’ Execution of Christ: Visual Lexicon Transcending Culture, Time, and Place,” presented by Christina S.Y. Leung, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF “NEW WAVE” CHINESE ART

China had suffered decades of cultural oppression from socialist and communist agendas since the late 1800's. By the 1980's China went through one of the greatest openings of human liberation in its history.¹ It was a time when the Chinese government loosened its censorship policies and tolerated, even encouraged, greater artistic freedom, igniting stylistic movements in artistic exploration in an attempt to modernize Chinese Art and make it relevant to the current times. The period of the 1980's and the 1990's was referred to as the “New Wave” by scholars, like Martina Koppel-Yang's who authored an important the book *Semiotic Warfare: A Semiotic Analysis, the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989*. While other scholars referred to the same period as “The Opening,” like the scholar Jianxion Mao, who authored the dissertation entitled, “A Study about the ‘Cultural orientation’ in Chinese Avant-Garde Art.” Both period references indicated and emphasized a new liberal state of governing policies, which once shielded interactions from outsiders, to opening up to international philosophical and economical exchanges. New cadres, who took positions within the Chinese government once held by elder Maoists loyalists, instituted and enacted liberal directives lifting strict censorships and oversight from local government administrations.

¹ Koppel-Yang, Martina. *Semiotic Warfare* (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003) 22.

This new, young Chinese government began to expand opportunity for artists to explore new forms of art and expression in China by encouraging and praising scholars, artists, and institutions for their contributions in modernizing Chinese art. The year 1979 was considered to be the beginnings of Chinese modern and contemporary art movements.² During the post Cultural Revolution period in 1979, the Chinese were exposed to an overwhelming stimulus experience of a sudden cultural opening within the economic and political environment. This “New Wave” or “The Opening” expanded beyond the borders of a once self-imposed isolated culture into a new enlightening climate of Western concepts, ideologies, and philosophies, thus providing new foundation and inspirations to artists, who were once restricted by traditional censored jurisdictions. During the 1970s and 1980s, Chinese artists were impetuously exposed to Western avant-garde art; however, Chinese artists were not yet prepared for the new visions nor had they forgotten the Great Cultural Revolution, which in turn had presented a circumstance that brought “inevitable confusion for artists as to know exactly what to want”³ in terms of focus and objectives for their art. Many artistic styles of the early and mid 1900’s were reformed or eradicated in China⁴. Modernist arts were considered as bourgeois, while traditional arts were associated with

² Koppel, 22

³ Peng, Lv, “Political Allegory and Symbolism,” *The Gao Brothers Grandeur and Catharsis* (Kansas City: Kemper Museum, 2010) 367.

⁴ Andrews, 181

feudalism and landlordism.⁵ Certain religious arts were banned and seen as superstitious, while some commercial arts were seen as a pornographic display.⁶

Chinese artists were anxious to explore new art, with an aim to set themselves apart from traditional Chinese literati art, and make it more relevant to the current period. These artists must also overcome challenges of creating unique artistic expressions that would set them apart from the Western contemporary arts. By the time Chinese avant-garde artists experienced modern and contemporary art during “The Opening” in China, European and American artists had already been introduced to expressionist art modes such as Surrealism, Fauvism, and Realism. Modern Chinese artists had integrated their cultural influences with “appropriated” Western art concepts, varying from Impressionism to Pop Art, which were artistic expressions that were “already discarded by the West.”⁷ Some modern Chinese artists denied Western artistic influences and affirmed that their ideologies were disseminated from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhist Chan, which were philosophies in self-cultivation and meditation.⁸

Nevertheless, modern Chinese artists were attempting to get caught up with the Western avant-garde art movements, which became a catalyst that drove Chinese artists to move toward more radical forms of expressions.⁹ Chinese artists were also challenged to distance themselves from traditional “literati” art, once regarded as intellectual work that

⁵ Andrews, 181

⁶ Andrews, 181

⁷ Jianxiong, Mao, “A Study about the Cultural Orientation” Diss. (Ann Arbor: West Virginia University, 2000) 12.

⁸ Mao, 16

⁹ Mao, 22

propagated social ethics, values, and interests of the powerful, now only regarded as a representation of formalism lacking vitality, rationality and spirituality.¹⁰

The radicalism found in the motivations of modern Chinese artists resulted in artistic output often misunderstood and criticized as an artistic hoax, a form of artistic “monkey business”¹¹ or had artists characterized as “peddlers selling Western artistic concepts to Chinese viewers.”¹² A well-known translator and art critic, Xiao Shen, who also introduced many Western arts to China, once bitterly commented that modern Chinese art exhibitions should substitute exhibition names with “Reprint Exhibition of Western Art Relic.”¹³

Optimistic changes and advancements made in China during “The Opening” or the “New Wave” period implicated a more liberal authoritative tolerance for the citizen’s freedom of expression. However, the level of tolerance by government did not correlate with the level of the population’s social desires for expression. Jiang Feng, chairman of the Chinese Art Association and an influential supporter of avant-garde art during the early 1980’s, reminded modern Chinese artists that the liberal attitudes of officials were limited.¹⁴ Joan Lebold Cohen summarized the general attitudes of the Chinese government towards the new emerging arts in a single statement: “You can paint whatever you like, but that does not mean we will support you.”¹⁵ Conservative government officials had classified Chinese

¹⁰ Mao, 15

¹¹ Mao, 8

¹² Mao, 11

¹³ Mao, 35

¹⁴ Koppel, 44

avant-garde art, or art that rejected traditional and standard Chinese art, as “anti-elite” and “anti-cultural.” With the continued official denouncement of contemporary art concepts and continued government interference and restrictions on their practices, many avant-garde artists were forced to go outside China to continue their work. The migration of talented Chinese scholars included in numerous Chinese avant-garde artists settling in foreign countries bringing with them a new Chinese aesthetic.¹⁶

The displacement of the Chinese cultural ideologies and iconographies from their original cultural environmental and social contexts subjected Chinese artists to an additional challenge to effectively create a dialog with their foreign audience. This, in turn, exposed an opportunity for modern Chinese artists to explore and create new visual lexicons to remedy the cultural disconnect between their audience and their works. Now into the 21st century, China continuing to reinforce strict censorship and limitations on what can be presented to the public, thus continues the introduction of emerging Chinese avant-gardes art by art collectors and institutions from countries outside of China.

Modern Chinese artists developed innovative artistic expressions and maintained the dissemination of current cultural and philosophical concepts that continue to communicate and relate to both international art enthusiasts and domestic art supporters. The Chinese avant-garde innovativeness was inspired by the standards of traditional Chinese art and conventions of contemporary Western art. Modern Chinese artists continue to maintain a

¹⁵ Koppel, 44

¹⁶ Lisa Movius. “Mainland Avant-Garde Makes its Way to the West” 20 August 2010
<<http://www.movius.us/articles/awsj-ccainamerica.html>>.

position in the forefront within the contemporary arts world by drawing ingenuity from their cultural and historical past.

CHAPTER 2

THE CRITICAL CONTEXT OF UNDERSTANDING THE EXECUTION OF CHRIST

This thesis will focus on the creative developmental processes and evolution of artistic formalities influenced by Chinese historical events. Specifically, this discussion analyzes artistic lexicons created by the Gao Brothers in their sculpture, *The Execution of Christ*, which exemplifies influences both of China's historical events and tragic personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution.

The paper includes in its agreement published reviews and criticisms¹ of the Gao Brothers' works as well as this author's personal interviews and experiences with the Gao Brothers during their visit to Kansas City, Missouri, for their first solo exhibition in the United States at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. The author held the position of Manager of Finance at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, which allowed her access to exhibition insight and experiences usually not accessible to individuals outside the institution, including the Gao Brothers' visit in Kansas City and exhibition discussions and preparations. This thesis demonstrates how the Gao Brothers embraced their cultural past and translated their unique personal experiences through *The Execution of Christ*, by creating a visual dialog open to multi-layers of interpretation, from a micro realm of imitate expressions to a macro realm of national and international social challenges crossing cultural boundaries and expounding humanitarian relevancies transcending time.

¹ The notation of (*) in the reference list indicates articles and publications can also be found online at http://www.gaobrothers.net/crit_re/index.html.

Although the Gao Brothers' works, including *The Execution of Christ*, established their notoriety due to their controversial nature, this paper will not attempt to justify actions nor make judgments on Chinese historical events, such as criticisms of communism or actions of China's leadership. In addition, to make personal judgments on certain historical events would be irrelevant in terms of understanding influences and the evolution of modern Chinese art. According to a Buddhist proverb,² to obtain a complete understanding of the cause-and-effect relationships between different events would be impossible, because an individual does not possess the capability or the intellectual capacity to comprehend the complexities of the universe. Therefore, to accurately define and explain reasons why certain events and social behaviors occur would be similar to explaining the concept of electricity to a caveman. To define an event objectively and accurately would be impossible and irrelevant in understanding artistic response to particular events.

The Gao Brothers were among Chinese Neo-Traditionalists in the Post-Mao era, who were "formally trained in traditional Chinese art and techniques."³ The Gao Brothers

² Arthur Hwang, Personal Interview, 17 September 2010. According to the Buddhist philosophy, one action will not offset only one direct reaction. Like a pebble dropped in the middle of a lake, the ripples caused by a single pebble will continue to expand and eventually affect the swaying of vegetation along the shores miles away. An action of an individual or event produces a non-linear pattern of events offsetting countless direct and indirect reactions. To understand all the cause-and-effect relationships from a single action is impossible, let alone to analyze cause-and-effect relationships from countless actions occurring simultaneously. Due to that fact, having the ability to trace all the cause-and-effect relationships from a single event would be incomprehensible. According to the Buddhists, when given the correct set of circumstances and social conditions, specific collective behaviors will persist regardless of who the individuals were. In effect, history is inevitable and the specific individuals enacting history are irrelevant. If Chairman Mao was not the leader of the communist government in China, there would have been another person that would have taken the role, as long as the same social circumstances and conditions persist. The same social factors, that brought Chairman Mao to power, would bring any other individual to the same destiny. In other words, there would always be another Hitler, Dali Lama, Marx, and Mother Teresa, as long as the same sets of circumstances and social conditions exist. One would be able to predicted future events when they understand the patterns of social conditions and human behaviors.

³ Gao Brothers, Personal interview, 16-20 September, 2010.

expressed their thoughts on traditional art standards, “[We] found traditional Chinese ink and landscape paintings too perfect, and we didn’t want to do it anymore.”⁴ They began to focus on creating other forms of artistic expression that eventually deviated from the artistic trends of Chinese contemporary Neo-Traditionalist art. The Gao Brothers explored intimate emotions and challenged social roles in the Chinese culture through the unconventional utilization of modern Western art concepts and by redefining religious art iconography. *The Execution of Christ* was one of several works by the Gao Brothers that had not been allowed to be publicly viewed in China due to its political criticism. *The Execution of Christ* made its first public debut in an American Midwest solo exhibition at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri, that was on display from September 17, 2010 through January 2, 2011. *The Execution of Christ*, which was to be one of the Gao Brothers’ two final Mao related works,⁵ demonstrates the Gao Brother’s engagement with an artistic language in creating new methods of artistic communication and maintaining subject relevancy that transcends cultural boundaries and time by heavily appropriating Western art influences, as well as captivating essence of their culture.

⁴ Gao Brothers, Personal interview 16-20 September, 2010.

⁵ Gao Brothers, Personal interview 16-20 September, 2010. The Gao Brothers stated that “The Execution of Christ” and “Mao’s Guilt” would be their final projects that would be focused on Chairman Mao as the subject of their works. They wanted to continue to study and explore other subjects and forms of artistic expressions.

CHAPTER 3

GAO ZHEN AND GAO QIANG

Gao Zhen (1956) and Gao Qiang (1962), are siblings who have worked in an artistic partnership since the 1980's. Upon my initial meeting with the Gao Brothers, they appeared as a soft-spoken timid pair who seemed temperate in nature,¹ which exhibited the disconnect with the monumental scale and aggressiveness of their works. Upon reuniting with their works at the Kemper Museum, the brothers imperceptibly separated themselves from the crowd and quietly discussed among themselves over each artwork relative to its position and placement within the gallery space. The Gao Brothers continued to carefully inspect each work and noted their concerns to the museum curator. When their concerns were not satisfied, they would remedy their concerns by calmly reasoning with others on how the display of certain paintings was crucial in tying the rest of the exhibition's pieces together. The Gao Brothers had shipped several paintings to the museum which did not get put up in the gallery due to space limitations. An important painting was the *Karl Marx and Skull* painting, which was eventually included with the exhibition. The Gao Brothers explained that the skull was the pinnacle symbol to the exhibition's theme of tragedy and death.

As a partnership, the Gao Brothers start the art creation process by discussing a philosophical concept, taken from their dreams or literature they had read. Together, they

¹ The Gao Brothers' timid deposition may be a result of being in a foreign environment.

would then re-examine their concepts and filter out ideas that may not seem as significant.

Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang explain their processes:

...the concept behind the work we have always discussed and we have agreed upon. And we often disagree and veto the ideas of the other person. Because creativity tends towards the impulsive so if it was just one of us working we would end up making work which afterwards we would think was of not great importance. Whereas because of this process where the both of us cooperate, we can tend to prevent this production of works which ultimately is of not that important. That's not to say that everything we do is important...yet, for us all our works are in a sense in evadable.²

The Gao Brothers continue to explain that with two people determining what is worth creating, the importance of their works is not found in the final product, but found in the meaningful process in making the art.³

Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang were raised in a large family of eight in Jinan, a small Chinese village. The brothers' interest and influence in art began with their mother's interests in paper cut-out art, but was later fueled by an experience of a traumatic family incident during their teenage years.⁴ Their father was murdered for political reasons. Shortly after their father's death, the Gao family moved from Jinan to the capital city of Beijing, to seek justice from the government for the degenerate treatment and murder of their father. The Gao Brothers recalled:

² Gao Brothers, *Talk and Panel Discussion: Gao Brothers*. Kansas City, Mo, 18 September 2010.

³ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*, Kansas City, Mo, 16 September 2010

⁴ October 1st 1986, Gao Brothers' father, a factory worker manufacturing fire-prevention equipment, was accused of being "counter-revolutionary" and was detained by local authorities. On October 25th authorities informed the Gao family that their father had committed suicide that morning.

If someone didn't like you at that time, they arbitrarily labeled you a class enemy. We came to Beijing to petition our father's death. That was a very painful period of our life, "...”We were six brothers and a single mother; we didn't have a penny.⁵

The family's quest for their father's justice concluded with monetary remuneration from the Chinese government, in an equivalent of two hundred and ninety U.S. dollars. Without a formal apology, Chinese officials sent the Gao family on their way.

The Gao family remained in Beijing where Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang continued their formal education traditional Chinese art and painting. The brothers felt traditional Chinese art was too restricted and lacked the vitality they needed to express themselves, and turned their interests to Western contemporary art during the mid 1980's.⁶ Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang were referred to as the Gao Brothers when they participated in an exhibition by other artists and shortly after adopted their artist identity as the Gao Brothers. The Gao Brothers headquartered in a studio in Beijing, China in the 798 Art District, which is a small art community and tourist attraction site. Many Chinese youths would spend an afternoon at the street café and attain artistic inspiration ranging from souvenir art to experimental modern art. The Gao Brothers also maintained separate studios located in the remote countryside away from the city, to produce and store large artworks and to elude attention from the police. Their works often challenged Chinese conventional and social boundaries, which often prompted surprise police raids on their studios and the confiscations of works categorized as counter-patriotic.⁷

⁵ Yuechuan Wang. "Recalling Misery and the hope of Mankind." 20 August 2010 <<http://www.Gaobrothers.net>>.

⁶ Gao Brothers, Personal Interview 16-20 September, 2010.

⁷ The head of the foundry that produced the sculptural head of "Mao's Guilt" was imprisoned by the Chinese government for his participation in producing "illegal" materials. According to their friend Melanie Lum, the

The Gao Brothers explored their artistic expressions in the realm of Cynical Realism and Political Pop art. Cynical Realism and Political Pop art emerged in a rebellious spirit living on the edge of the socialist society. The height of the movement's popularity among Chinese artists peaked during the 1990's, when artists expressed their grave disappointment with the governing administration and their response to the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. Cynical Realism and Political Pop movements emphasized and criticized modern society's growing greed and materialism within the proposed new world and modernized society. The Gao Brothers achieve dark humor through utilization of visual political and religious puns, often to criticize authoritative bodies and systems as well as to challenge the public to identify when religion, government, and media served as social facades for greed and propaganda. Works by the Gao Brothers also questioned the individual spirit, its place within a society, and how it evolves through the rise of the perceived new and improved world. The Gao Brothers questioned their own social perspectives and political stance, through the development process of their works. Works of art reflecting the brothers' vernacular observations and social responses were not expressed through a single artistic theme or mode of execution. In addition to sculptures, the Gao Brothers' artistic media portfolios also encompass photography, digital manipulation, painting, sculpture, video, and performance art. Gao Qiang and Gao Zhen explain the focus of their works:

We don't worry about whether individual works will have a relationship to each other, the actual fact there is continuity. Present works have a relationship to works from the past. Future works will also probably have a relationship to the works in the

Chinese government did not want to spark human rights controversy by punishing the Gao Brothers, who by now had occupied the international spot light. It was common practice for government officials to punish friends and family to indirectly coerce desired actions, by turning an individual's support group against them.

past. We will continue to work with past themes in order to generate the possibility of new concepts and artistic language.⁸

Works portraying lighthearted and humorous themes, which include *Miss Mao series*, *the Utopia of Hugging*, and *Embrace*, exhibits a more optimistic outlook for the Gao Brothers. Despite reports of economic advances in current times, the brothers felt they were left with little optimism for positive change when the system remains broken. Humor, compassion, and humility were emphasized in their works to embody the brothers' continued diminutive hope in human fortitude.

The Gao Brothers challenge their viewers to question complicated social and individual conventions. The Gao Brothers regarded their works as social tools to “liberate contemporary man from the bondage of technical materialism and power.”⁹

The Gao Brothers comment on the importance of art and the role it played in their lives:

We believe that the nature of life is fundamentally lonely and empty and without hope, therefore we use art as a way to transcend the loneliness and emptiness. We also use it as a tool to discuss these issues. We also use art as a tool to connect the individual and the world to bring these two spheres together. These few years we have been able to use art to communicate with the rest of the world.¹⁰

During the “New Wave,” Chinese academia and artists were flooded with images, publications, and various media of contemporary Western art within a short period of time. Many Chinese artists were heavily inspired and influenced by Western avant-garde realizations, philosophies, aesthetics, as well as Western methods in the utilization of

⁸ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*. Kansas City, Mo, 16 September, 2010.

⁹ Oliva, Achille, “Dream of Art in the works of the Gao Brothers.” *Portrait: Gao Brothers' Oil Painting Exhibition* 20 August 2010
<http://archivesandwarehouse.com/Gallery/CAAW/new_gallery/54_gaobrothers/all.htm>.

¹⁰ *Kemper Webcast Part 1*, Kansas City, MO, 16 September 2010.

religious allegories and symbolism.¹¹ The overwhelming flow of contemporary Western stimuli brought Chinese artists exposure to wide range of subject matter and artistic techniques. Chinese artists absorbed information from art publications and journals and developed group discussions to share their thoughts and ideas. The Gao Brothers work to elucidate self-awareness and exploration in individual roles within a society which pushes the boundaries of social norms and even assaults sensitivities, which are attributes of their works that separate them from other Chinese contemporaries as well as contemporary Western art.

The Gao Brothers' work examines and questions human nature's tendency for power by integrating religious figures and symbolism to emphasis their message to international audiences. With *The Execution of Christ*, the brothers borrowed the powers from Western painting to express their disdain for brutality of war, by appropriating the composition for the sculpture from such works as Edouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867-69) (fig.1) and Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (fig.2). The image of Jesus Christ emphasized and symbolized the martyrdom of the innocent. The images of Chairman Mao alluded to the cruelty of the Chinese communist government.

¹¹ Peng, 87

CHAPTER 4

THE EXECUTION OF CHRIST

The Gao Brothers' exhibition at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art was arranged within an open-floor gallery, which allowed full view of the exhibition to flow from one side of the space to the other. There were two themes within the exhibition set on each side of the gallery with *The Execution of Christ* in the center, which bridges the two themes together: 1) *Standard Hair Style*, *The Gesture*, and the sharp-fanged *Miss Mao* (fig.3), exhibited at one end of the gallery, evoked a sense of cynical humor and assault of the senses by the sheer size of the works. 2) The sublime and personal theme of loss and tragedy were portrayed on the other end of the gallery with displays of *Mao's Guilt* and photographs of the Gao Brothers' family (fig 4.).

The Execution of Christ features a life-size depiction of a squad of seven identical Mao Zedong soldiers, dressed in buttoned shirts and trousers with belts, aiming their rifles with bayonets at the petite and barely clothed figure of Jesus Christ (fig. 5-9). One Mao soldier is withdrawn from the firing squad and turns his attention towards the ground. The visual composition of the piece was appropriated from Edouard Manet's *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867-69) which in turn mirrored Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814) as noted above. The figure of Christ¹ stands with his eyes closed and his palms facing out to expose stigmata wounds on his hands. The group of six larger-than-life sized Mao

¹ Xia Kejun. "Image Politics," *The Gao Brothers Grandeur and Catharsis* (Kansas City, Kemper Museum, 2010), 117. The life-sized figure of Jesus Christ was modeled on a Frenchman.

soldiers are hunched over their rifles to take aim at Christ. A seventh Mao soldier, behind the firing squad, withdrew his rifle and stands apart from the crowd. The seventh soldier gazes down to the floor as if he were occupied in a state of contemplation or deep in thought.

The Execution of Christ is composed of hollowed copper-alloy statues, covered with a thin layer of pigmented-paste, which gives the material of the statues the appearance of bronze. An additional thin layer applied over the pigmented-paste is composed of soft wax, which provides a sheen to the statue surface creating a faux aged bronze exterior.² The *Execution of Christ* and *Mao's Guilt* was described in preliminary information sent to the museum as bronze. However, shortly after the sculptures were unpacked and removed from the crates, museum conservation staff found the sculptures' medium not to be true bronze. A hint of discoloration rubbed off onto a towel during the cleaning of the artworks indicated that the appearance of bronze medal did not originate from the metal itself, but instead from an application of pigmented paste over the surface of metal alloy. The existence of green oxidation formed from moisture, collected during the transportation of the sculptures, indicated that the true medium of the sculptures was actually a copper alloy. A thin layer of pigmented wax was later applied over the metal surface, giving the sculptures an earthy and bronze-like character. The soft texture of the pigmented wax led the conservator to believe the pigmented film to be made with bee's wax. Sharp stainless steel bayonets were welded to the alloy rifles. The smooth reflective surfaces of the bayonets, in contrast to the dull, dark metal textures of the figures, direct the visual focus from the mass of heavy figures on one side of the composition to the fragile, brittle-like figure of *Christ*. The polished reflective

surfaces of the sharp stainless blades accentuate the drama of violence by implicating the acts of cutting and stabbing.

The petite body frame of Christ compared to the larger-than-life sized Mao soldiers projects a visual distortion relative to the power relationships suggested in the formation. The proportions of the figures within *The Execution of Christ* emphasize the drama of overwhelming forces and threats imposed upon the victim. The three-dimensional element of *The Execution of Christ* draws the dramatic scene to the viewer with its life-like figures. A passive observer becomes an active participant within the drama. The observer's role and experience with the *The Execution of Christ* shifts from an observer from the distance to an active participant, who is stepping onto equal plain-level with the figures and into the scene. Scholar Xia Kejun, author "'Losing Mao': The Gao Brothers' Miss Mao Works," explains the significance of the Gao Brother's three dimensional works:

The conversion of a painting into a piece of sculpture goes beyond a simple change of medium, ...by rendering it into three dimensions, the sense of corporeal presence is made even stronger as life-sized statues possess considerably more physical impact... [involving viewers to the scene as] onlookers, so that we, [as viewers], are unable to avoid the role of participant, entering into the scene of the murder.³

The prominence of disquieting pain and distressing sadness arises through details of the scars and wrinkles on the face of Christ. Viewers experience feelings of panic and shock as they place themselves beside Christ and witness a massive crowd aiming rifles at the viewer at eye-level. The intimidating and violent nature of the firing squad is tempered by the Mao soldiers' jocular civilian attire with their belt and pants worn high to mid-chest. Although the Gao Brothers' cynical humor is often portrayed to show within their works,

³ Kejun,117.

Mao's attire was accurately portrayed to how the real Mao had dressed during his reign.⁴ The humor portrayed in *The Execution of Christ* lies within the actions of the Mao soldiers. A common satirical statement among the Chinese people implicated that Mao Zedong was responsible for the deaths of millions of people; however, he had never been seen with a weapon. Gao Zhen explains, "Too many people, Mao and the gun had no relationship; because he uses others to kill therefore he does not need a gun."⁵ Mao Zedong had always been photographed and portrayed as a noble and fearless leader. Mao Zedong's images were often associated with performing aristocratic tasks such as reading, negotiating, and addressing massive crowds.

The narrative of the scene continues to unfold as the viewer steps away from the figure of Christ with expectations of a certain outcome of the scene, but then notices the isolated Mao soldier on the periphery of the action. The isolation of the lone soldier contributes to the climax of the execution scene. The conclusion of the narrative told by *The Execution of Christ*, however, is left open for the viewer's interpretation. The viewer remains an active participant by determining how the action of the lone soldier would be interpreted, thus providing the conclusion of the story told in *The Execution of Christ*. If the action of the lone Mao soldier is perceived to be disgust and remorse, *The Execution of Christ* portrays emotions of mourning and closure to the horrors committed in the past. However, if the action of the lone soldier are interpreted as pulling away from the collective

⁴ Melanie Lum, Personal interview. 16-20 September, 2010.

⁵ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*, Kansas City, Mo 16 September 2010.

to assess his values and conscience, *The Execution of Christ* projects a theme of hope for possible change and thus possible opportunities for a different future.

CHAPTER 5

COMPOSITION AND FORMAL INTERPRETATIONS

“[The Chinese] borrow from abroad, to enter into the spirit of Western art rather than simply to produce pastiche.”¹ The Western influence for the compositional arrangement of *The Execution of Christ* was based on the composition of Edouard Manet 1867 painting, *Execution of Maximilian*. Manet’s politically charged art was in response to his dislike and disapproval of Napoleon III and views on modern barbarism.² Edouard Manet’s, in turn, appropriated his composition from Goya’s 1808 *The Shooting of the May Third* to expose the horrors and brutality of man in times of war. Goya depicted the execution of Spanish citizens by the French after the uprising of May 2, 1808.³ Art historian Kenneth Clark’s discussion of *The Shooting of the May Third*, best explains the reason why the Gao Brothers chose to depict this particular composition for their *The Execution of Christ*. According to Kenneth Clark, the *Third of May 1808* was "the first great picture which can be called revolutionary in every sense of the word, in style, in subject, and in intention." Goya did not paint the *Third of May* as a patriotic gesture, but rather to demonstrate the horrors and

¹ Kejun, 116. The author states since the Chinese were incapable of self-reflection, they borrow abroad to funnel their intentions through established spirits of existing and past successful Western works as an assisting tool.

² The Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian (1832 - 1867) was appointed by Napoleon III in 1863 as a puppet emperor in Mexico. He was dependent on the support of the occupying French army and when Napoleon withdrew his troops Maximilian was captured by the Mexican forces loyal to their legitimate republican government. He was executed alongside two of his generals, Mejía and Miramón, on 19 June 1867.

³ Also known as *El tres de mayo de 1808 en Madrid*, or *Los fusilamientos de la montaña del Príncipe Pío*, or *Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo*. Goya sought to commemorate Spanish resistance to Napoleon's armies during the occupation of 1808.

brutality capable by man. The “symmetrical composition of the subjects emphasizes the drama: those being shot with their faces looking ahead, filled with feeling, and the soldiers from behind, depicting evil's machines.”⁴ *The Execution of Christ* implicated the soldiers as identical robots, which were incapable of independent thought and mindlessly following commands, in jest a reflection of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

The uses of Mao’s image were not intended to directly target and criticize an individual. Mao’s image served as a device to encapsulate the essence of the Chinese governing body in the Gao Brothers’ artworks. The use of Mao’s image in the Gao Brothers’ *Mao’s Guilt* does not implicate the artists’ desire for Chairman Mao to personally make an apology, which would have been impossible, but represents the governing system to recognize crimes and injustices committed on the innocent of the past. By recreating the scene of the crime through *The Execution of Christ*, the Gao Brothers create a psychological place in history where Mao’s image is removed from a godly perception and recreated as a mortal being “in order to change history.”⁵ The Gao Brothers bring Mao back from history into the view of the public for what he really was. The artists focused on Mao’s malicious cruelty and murder of the innocents in their sculpture, *The Execution of Christ*.⁶

The Gao Brothers utilized the Christ image in a similar manner as they did with Mao’s image in *The Execution of Christ*. The figure of Christ does not specifically implicate an individual or a particular religion. The image of Jesus serves as an iconographical and

⁴ Kenneth Clark. *Looking at Pictures*. (Beacon Press, New York, 1968), 130.

⁵ PRI interview

⁶ Kejun, 117

philosophical essence of innocence, which is a concept independent of physical and demographic classifications. In addition, *The Execution of Christ* conveys a conflict of God verses a pseudo-God.⁷ In an attempt to unify China, Mao Zedong suppressed organized religion and fed the people's need for religion by placing himself in that role. Public religious practices continue to be subjected to government restriction for the Chinese citizens; however, foreign missionaries were allowed to operate in China as a façade for the outsiders.⁸ Suppression of religion was part of the country's unification plan and one's need for religious focus was fulfilled with the image of Mao. Onlookers of *The Execution of Christ* cannot objectively witness the scene and would be forced to choose a position to stand by: "Will we be the victim, the onlooker, the perpetrator, or the transformer?"⁹

The artists noted that the evolution of the art process, from the conceptualization phase, was paramount in success of their art. The Gao Brothers articulated that their art is about life, therefore, the process in developing a work of art represents the journey taken in life was as important as the final outcome of their works. The Gao Brothers stated, "Our art is not for beauty, it's not for money, it's to explain events and conditions. It's for humanity. Of course this is from a conceptual angle, but the way we express ourselves is still very personal."¹⁰

The Gao Brothers explains the process of how the idea was first contrived and evolved for *The Execution of Christ*:

⁷ Kejun,117

⁸ Melanie Lum, Personal interview. 16-20 September 2010.

⁹ Kejun,117.

¹⁰ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 1*, Kansas City, Mo, 16 September 2010.

It took us a long time to develop the Execution of Christ. When we create pieces and come up with a concept we don't immediately do it. It's in the process that it changes. Early on in the development, we initially wanted to make this piece about Lin Zhao.¹¹ Lin Zhao is a person that many Chinese don't really understand. Although many might not understand or recognize her, to us she is extremely important. During the Mao era she was an intellectual that was executed. At the time people were blindly idolizing Mao. Lin Zhao clearly saw Mao with a critical attitude therefore she had to pay the price. Initially we wanted to make a photographic portrait but then we decided to make a sculpture. In this sculpture we wanted Mao to execute her. In the process of developing this piece, we discovered that she was Christian. As the concept developed, we decided that Mao was persecuting now only her but also Christianity, which stands for love of sacrifice. As the concept changed, we decided to consider the relationship with this piece with art history; therefore we saw inspiration in Manet's Execution of the Emperor Maximilian. The selection of the model for Jesus Christ in this piece took a very long time... With this piece we wanted to reveal Mao's violent nature.¹²

The Gao Brothers and other Chinese contemporary artists borrowed from the Western lexicon of “figurative and nonfigurative styles...for their formal value, in ways disassociated the style from the aesthetic and social relevance in which they originally emerged.”¹³ This method of image and formal usage allows the artist to interpret and “arrange the narrative of Chinese contemporary art story according to Western art-historical precedents and labels,

¹¹ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 1*, Kansas City, Mo, 16 September, 2010. Lin Zhao (林昭), also known as Peng Linzhao (彭林昭), was born in Nanjing, December 16, 1932. Lin Zhao was an outspoken intellect during the Hundred Flowers Movement of 1957 who criticized the Chinese communist party of China. Lin Zhao was accused for being a counterrevolutionary in October 1960 and was later sentenced to serve a twenty-year prison term. She had once considered herself as a devoted Communist and a loyal socialist. During her time in prison, she wrote numerous critical commentaries about Chairman Mao Zedong and how he used her “blood” against her. She was encouraged to be outspoken and be critical of the government but only later punished for her criticisms. She was eventually executed by the government on April 29, 1968. The story of Lin Zhao was unknown to many Chinese and was revived and brought out to public by documentary filmmaker Hu Jie, whose documentary 纪录片寻找林昭的灵魂 (In Search of Lin Zhao's Soul) won numerous awards.

¹² *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*. Kansas City, Mo, 16 September 2010.

¹³ Hwang, China-Art Now 6.

[injecting their art with] inherit power of the story told by its predecessors.”¹⁴ Despite direct references of Chinese culture found within *The Execution of Christ*, the Gao Brothers are able to relate to a global audience. The Gao Brothers’ artistic methodology implemented in *The Execution of Christ*, in terms of the utilization of recognizable figures and conventional art iconography, makes them attractive to a wider audience. The Gao Brothers’ decision to use the image of Christ rather than Lin Zhao, who was the Gao Brothers’ initial inspiration for *The Execution of Christ* shows their concerns in making their art relevant to the widest possible audience. “Early on in the development, we initially wanted to make this piece about Lin Zhao [...] but after finding out that she was a Christian we decided to use Christ.”¹⁵ The Gao Brothers’ decision to use the image of Christ, instead of Lin Xiao, was based on “public preference, due to the fact that identifiable images are familiar and easy to comprehend”,¹⁶ which would make the sculpture “easier to understand and audiences would be able to see the possibilities of the sculpture.”¹⁷ The Gao Brothers’ use of iconographic imagery for potential allegorical references, such as in the case of Christ or Mao Zedong, are unconcerned and unconstrained with an image’s political correctness or chronological place in history.¹⁸ The Brothers had studied the Christian religion¹⁹ and recognized that Christ’s

¹⁴Hwang, China-Art Now 6.

¹⁵ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*. Kansas City, Mo, 16 September, 2010.

¹⁶ Hwang, China-Art Now 6.

¹⁷ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*

¹⁸ Francesca Dal Lago, “The Voice of the ‘Superfluous People’”. Essay

¹⁹ Gao Brothers, Personal interview, 16-20 September, 2010. The Gao Brothers’ personal religions preference is Atheism. However, if they were to choose a religion, Christianity would be their choice, based on their readings.

imagery utilized in art often symbolized humility, innocence, martyrdom, and love.

According to the Gao Brothers: “If [the] original subject Lin Zhao [was used] people would be more puzzled and this piece would need more explanation.”²⁰

In addition, *The Execution of Christ* has the ability to connect with audiences outside the Chinese culture, due to the fact that the Gao Brothers interpreted human emotions through portrayals of expressive facial and body language, a universal language that surpasses all cultural barriers. Regardless of whether an observer had a knowledgeable background in religion or art history, the Gao Brothers provided enough evidence for any observer to postulate the narrative or allegory portrayed in *The Execution of Christ*.

The Gao Brothers also invite the observer to actively engage with their works by establishing their own interpretations through the filters of the viewer’s personal views, backgrounds and experiences.²¹ The Gao Brothers are not concerned about whether viewers agree with their position, as long as their work provokes the viewers to question society and social norms as well as to challenge an observer to “choose a side” through their works. The author placed an image of *The Execution of Christ* on a Facebook page and invited responses of viewers without the context of the gallery exhibition. An American viewer responded to the image of *The Execution of Christ* as a depiction of brutality and injustice. She felt the body language of the victim exhibited strength and fearlessness.²² In a similar instance in

²⁰ *Kemper Art Webcast, Part 2*

²¹ Melanie Lum, Personal interview 15 September, 2010. When and how the Gao Brothers handled interpretations of their works by international audiences when their art is taken out of its social and cultural contexts, she stated the Gao Brothers were not too concerned about portraying a specific interpretation through their works but rather left the interpretations up to the viewers themselves.

²² Facebook posting, 21 December, 2010.

China, a gentleman recognized the image of Mao Zedong and interpreted the sculpture as a portrayal of Chinese dominance over the Westerners.²³

²³ Melanie Lum, Personal interview 15 September, 2010.

CHAPTER 6

CATHARSIS AND REMINDER OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

The Gao Brothers obtained international recognition for their Mao-related works over the past decade. They announced that they will discontinue their Mao related works after the completion of *The Execution of Christ* and *Mao's Guilt* and continue practices and exploration of other subjects relevant to China's current times. The significance of their announcement parallels with the Gao Brothers psychological search for closure to the death or their father.

The Execution of Christ corresponded with a personal psychological crossroads for the Gao Brothers. "Art makes the impossible possible", said Gao Zhen. By recreating a scenario and displaying Chairman Mao's mortality to the world, the display of Mao's repentance becomes a reality and, therefore, becomes a part of history. Many years after the death of Chairman Mao, the memory of Mao still occupies the psyche of the Gao Brothers' state of mind and, in a sense, continues to remain in control of their psychological lives. For the Gao Brothers, it is impossible for their family to get closure with an actual apology from Chairman Mao. Their art provided this closure. By recreating the Chairman in a vulnerable state of regret and repentance, closure for the Brothers became possible. Thus, the Mao sculpture series represents a catharsis by allowing the Gao Brothers the ability to leave behind their anger built up over the past twenty years. Many of the Gao Brothers' better-known works, which brought them into the forefront of international attention, were

galvanized with emotional energy towards the Chinese communist party. Their search to for recovery, closure, and empowerment had been expressed through their creations of figures in caricature, fantastic ambiance, and satirical themes including, such works as *Midnight Mass* (1989), *Crisis: the Great Crucifix* (1996), *Beijing Fable* (1998), *Sense of Space* (2000), *The Miss Mao Series* (2006-2007), *The Forever Unfinished Building* (2008), and *Miss Mao Trying to Poise Herself at the Top of Lenin's Head* (2009). The psychological paths the Gao Brothers could have chosen were either to continue to hold onto the tragic memories and allow past adversities to influence their future, or to choose the path of forgiveness and move forward in hopes of a better future. The creation of *The Execution of Christ* and the Gao Brothers' commitment to leave the subject of Mao signified their emotional closure and their readiness to put tragic memories behind them.

Similarly, the people of China also have same choice to make when it comes to determining the country's next course of action. Curator Arthur Hwang explains the significance of the Gao Brothers' latest Mao sculptures in relations to the country's collective psychological recovery from Mao's reign and the Cultural Revolution:

The poignancy of this work lies in its universality and in need of vast numbers of people in the country for a similar act of release so that they can finally let go of the past. It is a wish for repentance and for reconciliation, the desire for acknowledgment so prevalent wherever there has been conflict and atrocity. [*The Execution of Christ*] transcends [the] limitation of time and place to become a broader symbol of humanity and of forgiveness.¹

The experiences of the Gao Brothers can be mirror in the experiences of thousands of families across China during the Cultural Revolution. The People's Republic of China

¹ Hwang, Arthur. "Grandeur and Catharsis." *The Gao Brothers Grandeur and Catharsis* (Kansas City: Kemper Museum, 2010) 15.

suffered from a nationwide famine from 1958 to 1960, which came to be known as “The Years of Natural Disasters,” or 三年自然災害. Despite the implication in the name as the cause of the event, the nationwide famine was primarily the result of mismanagement of resources and failed policies, such as the Great Leap Forward, or 大躍進, instituted by the Communist Party of China, which was led by Chairman Mao Zedong. Although the Chinese authorities had never released official records of deaths, scholars have estimated that the number of deaths during the nation’s famine was between twenty to forty-three million.² The personal catharsis for the Gao Brothers found in *The Execution of Christ* can thus be seen as a national need.

Citizens of The People’s Republic of China continue to overcome many restrictions and many are still deprived of some basic human rights. Despite China’s economic opening to the rest of the world in the early 1980’s, Chinese authorities continue to maintain strict control and censorship over the people’s freedom of expression. Chinese internet, television, radio broadcasts, and news publications remain under the strict oversight of the Chinese government and are subject to rigorous scrutiny before being released to the general public.

The Gao Brothers’ controversial works often challenge the boundaries set by the Chinese government. The controversy within *The Execution of Christ* is not found in the portrayal of exaggerated demonized characters of Mao, as such instances found in other Gao works including *Miss Mao Series* and *Small Idols*, but in the portrayal of Mao as a vulnerable and weak man. The lackluster texture and monochromatic and unappealing representation of Chairman Mao in *The Execution of Christ* connotes Mao’s accountability for the grim

² Peng Xizhe , "Demographic Consequences of the Great Leap Forward in China's Provinces," Population and Development Review, 13, no. 4 (1987), 639-70.

hopelessness future. Traditionally, the image of Chairman Mao had been portrayed as an intellect and a model of unwavering leadership in China. The Chinese had viewed Mao's image as a symbol and representation of their nation's cultural and psychic space. Therefore, to see their leader as anything less than powerful and honorable would be perceived as an insult and subordination by the government, and to insult a nation's leader would be considered insulting to the people of China.

A New York Times article, written by Jimmy Wang, entitled "In China, a Headless Mao is a Game of Cat and Mouse," discusses some tactics the Gao brothers used to elude government agents. The Gao Brothers created *Mao's Guilt* in two pieces, so that it could be stored in different locations to avoid government raids and confiscation of their works. *Mao's Guilt* and other similar works were considered too controversial, anti-nationalistic, and a threat to the communist's mission for the people.³ Friends and family members suspected involvement with crimes of anti-patriotism were harassed and interrogated by official authorities, including acts of participating and visiting art exhibitions featuring works in contempt of society.⁴

Gao Zhen's response to a question about his future outlook on China's future:

I am of the opinion that reality does not give rise to much optimism. But in spite of this, we need to retain hope about the future. And we are prepared to hope this [that] there will be a good future. Because if we really believe that the future will be good then maybe good things will come towards us in the future. Because hopelessness [is useless].⁵

³ Wang, Yuechuan. "Recalling Misery and the Hope of Mankind." *The Gao Brothers* 20 August, 2011, <<http://www.gaobrothers.net>>.

⁴ Hwang, Arthur, *China-Art Now* (Kansas City: The Byron C. Cohen of Contemporary Art, 2008) 6.

⁵ Gao Zhen, *Talk and Panel Discussion: Gao Brothers*. Kansas City, Mo, 18 September, 2010.

The Execution of Christ depicts a scene filled with hopelessness as Christ stands before the firing squad with a certain fatal destiny. The lone soldier's act of stepping away from the group, rather than to continue to blindly follow orders, signified a moment of possible change and hope for the innocent. The soldier's act of defying orders symbolizes a collective humanity and reveals an awakening conscience of an entire country's actions. The awareness of an individual could result in the collective's awakening to feelings of regret, shame, and disgust. The lone soldier either could encourage his brothers to follow his actions and spare a life or he could stand aside, remain quiet, and allow the innocent to continue to suffer. *The Execution of Christ* represents a crossroads of an event, when one small action could determine the outcome of the story and thus change in the future.

Stories of the Gao Brothers' personal perseverance and dedication to their art despite social challenges undoubtedly contribute to capturing the fascination of the general public. However, as curator Hwang had expressed "[it] would be the greatest tragedy" to only view the Gao Brothers' works with a micro context within their family struggles during the Cultural Revolution. To see the Gao Brothers' works simply as a tool to raise controversy within their government would only distract a viewer from grasping the ingenuity and execution of the Gao Brothers' artistic language." Hwang continues to explain the objectives of the Gao Brothers' works:

[Works by the Gao Brothers are] not just about the politics, about the controversy, about the society in China at the moment. We should be looking at the artistic language and the art itself rather than just the content.⁶

⁶ Arthur Hwang, *Talk and Panel Discussion: Gao Brothers*, Kansas City, Mo, 18 September, 2010.

Their art is about life and emotions experienced by everyone, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. Life, in this instance, was portrayed through the cultural lens and from personal experiences of the Gao Brothers. However, their mode of expression within their art should not be limited to individual social and cultural contexts. Gao Zhen, during the Nelson-Atkins Museum question and answer discussion, expressed his concerns over the audience's fascination of Chinese struggles during the Cultural Revolution:

Well we've answered a lot of questions, so now I have question for [all of] you. Of course these questions are all concerned with our art. But I'm slightly worried because these questions don't seem to have anything actually to do with our art itself. [It saddens me] a little bit. Does that mean that the visual side of our art, the actual language of our art is not particularly remarkable? So even though we don't feel that we make art for art sake, every time we approach a new work, we try very hard to engage with an artistic language and to try and come upon some new method of artistic communication [to communicate about the human condition. I only mention this in hopes] that when you all go and see [our] exhibition you'll bare [our intentions] in mind so that in the future, in future symposiums, in future discussions, that then this can become part of the dialogue.⁷

The Gao Brothers wanted to make clear that their contribution in the arts and to the Kemper Museum was not only to share personal thoughts and responses to a historical event, but also to share an artistic language that is in constant evolution, inspired by historical events, such as the Cultural Revolution.

The suppressions throughout the Cultural Revolution, which ended with China's "New Wave" or "The Opening" during the 1980s, was not China's only experience with mass censorship. An infamous mass Chinese censorship occurred in 221 BCE – 207 BCE during the Qin Dynasty.⁸ Qin emperors had suppressed Confucius's ideas through public

⁷ Gao Zhen Gao, *Talk and Panel Discussion: Gao Brothers*, Kansas City, Mo, 18 September, 2010.

⁸ The Qin dynasty was most famously known for the construction of The Great Wall of China. The Qin Dynasty also made significant contributions in standardizing weights measurement systems, established better

book burnings and executions of scholars to keep the populace uninformed of new ideas and philosophies as a tool to maintain power and control. After generational experiences of China's long history of economic chaos, violent religious conflicts, and empirical overthrows, historians insinuated that "oppression [may have been] the only thing that kept China together."⁹

Despite the fact that the Gao Brothers were directly effected by the oppressions of the Cultural Revolution in China, they acknowledged that since the time history was recorded governments, religious authorities, and self-appointed leaders had always attempted to regulate how an individual should live, think, and believe, as well as control what individuals can read, write, see and depict. Furthermore, implementation and reinforcement of mass censorship and oppression of minority groups was not only limited to China. Other countries throughout time can be held capable of similar injustices. In ancient Greece, Socrates, the Greek Athenian philosopher, was censored for corrupting youth by spreading affirmations of unorthodox divinities; he was punished with a sentence to drink poison in 399 BC. In Europe from 1563, Charles IX of France and other secular European rulers, enacted strict controls over scientific and artistic expressions, which were perceived as threats to the moral and political order of society, by implementing strict regulations through systems of governmental licenses for printing, publishing, and distributing such materials. Pope Paul IV and Pope Innocent X deemed exposure of sexual genitals as immoral and insisted that inappropriate art in the Vatican be covered with fig leaves. Adolf Hitler, Führer of the Third

writing systems, and achieved numerous advancements including increased agriculture improvements, trade agreements, and national security reforms.

⁹ *The Rise and Fall of Imperial Han*. n.d. 22 Sept 2010. <<http://history.cultural-china.com/en/183History5999.html>>.

Reich, and the Nazi regime enforced strict artistic censorships in all countries occupied during World War II during 1940 through 1945. National newspapers, publishers and radios of Nazi occupied countries, were over taken or halted operations. The Nazis sponsored the Degenerate Art Exhibition of 1937, or the exhibit of Entartete Kunst, to showcase art deemed corrupted or considered worthy of ridicule. Norway, a Nazi occupied country, enacted strict censorship, which made listening to foreign radio newscasts, and producing, reading, or disseminating illegal news media punishable by death.

The United States has also instituted public forms of censorships restricting the freedom of expression. In 1950, New York Museum of Modern Art excluded Charles Demuth's painting, *A Distinguished Air*, from the exhibition, on the grounds the theme of the painting was too controversial for museum officials. More recently in 1999, the Kansas board of education required for all publicly funded schools to exclude any mention of evolution, including Darwin's Theory of Evolution from school science curriculums to promote a conservative religious agenda. Presently, similar mass media controversy of filtrated and limited information to the global audience continues its battle into the cyber arena.¹⁰

Although, the Gao Brothers have presented obvious personal bias in their works in response to certain events, the Gao Brothers' true intentions were to confront and challenge viewers' actions and challenge personal and social values. The Gao Brothers saw their works as a tool for "human liberation" by questioning relationships and responsibilities

¹⁰ *NBC Nightly News*, NBC, 12/4/10. Reported a global warrant for Julian Assange, founder of the WikiLeaks for making private government documentation available to the public. Julian had proclaimed, "History will ultimately win and the world will elevate to a better place."

between the individual and society.¹¹ *The Execution of Christ* challenges passive observers to become active participants by forcing them to pick a position within the dramatic scene and to remind them of injustices taking place in the present. The Gao Brothers question individuals and their roles within society. Is the society the protectors of the innocents or will it turn a blind eye and deaf ear when the small and weak are pleading to be heard? Will individuals choose to stay ignorant and repeat what is told to them or do they attempt to right the wrongs even during times when it seemed futile? As leaders, will they be strong enough to admit their mistakes or shall they always move with full force ahead leaving behind those who fell through the system? As a country, do they only criticize abuses, cruelty, and injustices committed upon other nations and fail to criticize themselves for the same crimes? *The Execution of Christ* reminds observers to listen to their conscience and to stand for what is right for the sake of humanity and in hope of a better future, even when that act seems futile.

¹¹ Peng, 87.

CHAPTER 7

THE GAO BROTHERS AND THE NEO-TRADITIONALISTS

During the turn of the 21st century, Chinese artists were faced with adapting their art to a rapidly changing environment. New technologies led to the industrialization and urbanization of cities, which changed the way of life for many people. China opened their ports to foreign trades and businesses, which brought in new types of art patrons. Western art conventions introduced artistic breakthroughs, such as compositional structures, use of color, figural rendering, spatial conceptions, and technology including photography, into the Chinese art world.¹ China transitioned into a new identity as the People's Republic of China, which was established in 1949, and traditional Chinese arts that once viewed as superior to Western arts and reinforcements of past national identity and propaganda, were now viewed as an art detached from reality and too complex to appreciate. Western arts, on the contrary, were viewed as a subject that reflected the current reality and were easier to understand than with traditional Chinese arts and paintings. Chinese artists, who were over-stimulated and overwhelmed with changes in their environments, now must decide to what degree they wanted to adopt or reject these changes, as well as for whom their arts were intended.

Author Julia Andrews discussed in her book, *A Century in Crisis: Modern and Tradition in Twentieth Century China*, three types of modern art and artists in the late 1900s: Literati-Expressionists, Neo-Traditionalists, and Post-Traditionalists. The differences in the

¹ Julia Andrews F., *A Century in Crisis: Modern and Tradition in Twentieth Century China*, 1

categories of artists are reflected in the artists' training, departure of Maoist art ideologies² and level of influence of traditional Chinese and contemporary Western arts.

The Literati-Expressionists were artists born during the turn of the 20th century. They were generally well educated and trained in the traditional Chinese arts.³ Their works demonstrated mastery of traditional painting techniques and exhibited subtle restraint and elegant beauty.⁴ Neo-Traditionalists were born during the mid-20th century. They received their art exposure through the public in the form of Western publications, magazines, journals, and discussion forums. Post-Traditionalists were artists who were trained in Western art techniques and exhibited little concern for traditional brushwork.

Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang who were among the Neo-Traditionalists, were born in 1956 and 1962, respectively, and raised in Jinan, China. The Gao Brothers studied traditional Chinese art techniques in ink and landscape paintings.⁵ They found traditional art constrained in expression and confined with rules and techniques. The Gao Brothers admired and were inspired by traditional Chinese artists, Fan Kuan (范宽),⁶ and Zhang Zeduan⁷

² During the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art of 1942, Mao Zedong extended his philosophy in the role that art can play within a society from the traditional literati art philosophy. Mao declared art was a servant to the people and should function as a collective tool for mass propaganda. *A legacy: Politics and History*, 13.

³ Andrew, 7

⁴ Andrew, 7

⁵ The Gao Brothers, Personal interview, 16-20 September 2010.

⁶ Fan Kuan was considered among the greatest landscape painters of the Sung Dynasty (960-1279). Almost no biographical details survive about him. He modeled his early work after artist Li Cheng (919-967), but later he concluded that nature was the only true teacher. Patricia Ebrey Buckley. *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.163.

⁷ Zhang Zeduan was famous court painter of the Northern Song Dynasty during the 12th century and experienced the transitional period from when the Northern Song fell to the Southern Song Dynasty. His paintings were criticized by the new dynasty. However his paintings, depicting city life on painted on wide hand scrolls, were instrumental in the early history of the Chinese art style known as shan shi.

(张择端);⁸ and also studied Western arts in search for a more expressive form of visual communication.

Neo-Traditional art, such as *The Execution of Christ*, engages the viewers' psychological state by creating a fictional event within a fictional space and time. This trend is exemplified in the Gao Brothers' works, including *The Forever Unfinished Building*, *Outer Space Project-Map of China*, *High Place*, *The Interview*, as well as *The Execution of Christ*. Neo-Traditional art exhibits strong physical and aggressive qualities and are often first experienced physically, rather than intellectually.⁹ The sheer size of works overwhelms the senses while the subject matter assaults it. The life-sized figures and form in *The Execution of Christ* bring the event to life for the viewers. The imagery and subject matter of *The Execution of Christ* assaults the religious, cultural, social, and political senses; however, the sculpture's intense actions and sheer size make it hard for the observer to ignore, to a point of a psychological intrusion. The Neo-Traditionalists were recognized for innovations, not of imagery or technique, but of scale and intensity.¹⁰

The Gao Brothers took their art to another level by diverging from the trends of the Neo-Traditionalists. Neo-Traditionalist art addressed an anonymous ideological sympathetic public, whose audience is not an individual but a collective of anonymous passive targets.¹¹ Neo-Traditionalists create detached, simulated spaces, and communicate to their observers at

⁸ The Gao Brothers, Personal interview, 16-20 September 2010.

⁹ Andrews, 283

¹⁰ Andrews, 283

¹¹ Andrews, 283

an “agonizing” distance.¹² It would be difficult to experience *The Execution of Christ* as a collective audience. The individual is encouraged to explore the artwork by walking around and getting up close to the sculptures. As the observer views the work from different vantage points, the narrative of the sculpture begins to unfold. *The Execution of Christ* utilizes religious and cultural political imageries, enhancing the intensity of the scene, drawing out personal emotions and confronting the observer’s personal values. The dialog generated between the viewer and the art is an internalized experience, filtered through personal beliefs and observations.

The Gao Brothers, and Neo-Traditional artists, were formally educated in the traditional Chinese arts, but found the art inadequate in expressing the changes of the new China. The Gao Brothers set off to create an artistic language that challenge the conventions of their Chinese modern contemporaries, they surpass conventional limitations where modernism merges with conventionalism, where man verses God, and where the East meets the West.

¹² Andrews, 281

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The Gao Brothers represent many emerging avant-garde artists in China since the rebuilding of a nation and establishment of The People's Republic of China. The Gao Brothers' desire to create a new artistic language, to adequately express their feelings and beliefs about their lives and their ever-changing environment, is emblematic to the Chinese population's desire to overcome the chaos within their country, to forget the pains and mistakes of the past, and to heal by creating a hopeful and purposeful future. The Gao Brothers attempt to execute change through their art by challenging personal, social, and political conventions. Their artworks, not only enlighten others by motivating acts of personal exploration and self-cultivation, but they infuse strong emotions of disgust, sadness, and disappointment, which spark and encourage individuals' actions for change. Such displays of revolutionary ideology embody a sympathetic public into revolt towards laws and objectives set by the Chinese government. The result is the theory that the best interest of the Chinese government is to repress the public's freedom of expression and to censor and ban any revolutionary declarations.

Like their country, the Gao Brothers are witnessing a transitioning process, as both the nation and the Gao Brothers begin to leave their past memories behind and step forward into an uncertain future. The Gao Brothers have allowed tragedies of Mao's leadership occupy their psychological lives as well as in their art. The integration of Western influences

in *The Execution of Christ* exposed a world larger than Mao and presented opportunities for healing and forgiving. Like the Gao Brothers, the Chinese people are recreating their identity and are craving for modes of expression that can encompass the complexities of their worlds, physically and psychologically, and continue to evolve their language with them as they advance as a country.

The Gao Brothers have publicly announced their decision to deviate from Mao imageries as the focus of their future works. Their decision reflected their commitment with the contemporary arts philosophy, which is to create art that was relevant to current social issues and to the current reality. The Gao Brothers and the older Chinese generations grew up in China during the time Mao dominated life in China; however, younger generations of Chinese were raised without the memories of Chairman Mao and his reign. The Gao Brothers acknowledge that the Mao era was no longer the interest of the new and younger generations and therefore they must continue to evolve their artistic language and subject matter to maintain interests of the current and foreign populations. They expressed their ambitions to focus on topics of the modern age and to experiment with artistic media other than paintings and sculptures, such as short films.

Chinese political views and opinions expressed by the Gao Brothers do not represent the views of the entire Chinese population. Many Chinese saw Chairman Mao as a great national leader and continue to praise his efforts and leadership during the Cultural Revolution. Many Chinese maintained that the failed efforts of the government were attributed to conditions outside the control of any man. The Gao Brothers' continued artistic radicalism was criticized as compromised expressions influenced by the international

spotlight. The promotion of the Gao Brothers' art and political views were interpreted as foreign propagandist acts towards China encouraged by those who did not agree with Chinese policies.

Regardless of how the works of the Gao Brothers are contextualized, the artists were inspired by the conditions of their lives and challenges to overcome communication barriers with audiences outside of China. The Gao Brothers appropriated and incorporated Eastern and Western visual lexicons within their works, by stripping and redefining traditional iconographic interpretations, usage of figural representations, and compositional contexts. The artistic language of the Gao Brothers' works is indicative of the human spirit, is visually empowering, and is an expression of acute genuine confidence. As Gao Zhen had once befittingly stated:

Our works are not exclusively politically and [were] not exclusively meant to generate controversy, [but instead], should be about human nature as much as possible [...] Because if our art was just about raising questions or just making simple points, then I don't think the Kemper [Museum] would particularly want to exhibit our art.¹

As long as the artists continue to remain authentic to their passion in art and not allow superfluous influences, such as financial prosperity and fame, to augment their views of life and their art, the artistic instincts of the Gao Brothers will no doubt continue to generate powerful works of art that communicate the voices of humanity as it does in their work, *The Execution of Christ*.

¹ Gao Zhen, Nelson Atkins Museum Panel Discussion. 16 September, 2011.

IMAGES



Figure 1 Edouard Manet's The Execution of Maximilian (1867-69)



Figure 2 Francisco de Goya's The Third of May 1808



Figure 3. Kemper Museum: Gao Brothers Exhibition View 1. Photograph by the Gao Brothers.



Figure 4. Kemper Museum: Gao Brothers Exhibition View 1. Photograph by Gao Zhen.



Figure 5. *The Execution of Christ*, View 1. Photograph by Gao Zhen.



Figure 6. *The Execution of Christ*, View 2. Photograph by Gao Zhen.



Figure 7. The *Execution of Christ*, View 3. Photograph by Gao Zhen.



Figure 8 Detailed view of *Christ and Mao Soldier*. Photography by author



Figure 9. The Gao Brothers and *Christ*, Photograph by author.



Figure 10. The Gao Brothers and the author. Photograph by Gao Brothers

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW NOTES

INTERVIEW NOTES AND TRANSCRIPTS

The following Kemper Art webcasts, KCUR, and PRI radio interviews were recorded within two studio sessions. The KCUR interview with Kemper Museum curator, Barbara O'Brien, and Sylvia Maria Gross was recorded in the gallery on September 15, 2010 before the arrival of the artists and their curator Arthur Hwang.

The PRI interview was recorded on September 16, 2010 in the studio with Sylvia Maria Gross, Arthur Hwang, Melanie Lum, and the Gao Brothers. The Kemper Webcast was later re-edited from the same recording used in the PRI interview by Museum webmaster Drew Bolton. Before the recording, Hwang sat with the Gao Brothers in the back room and discussed the type of questions he would be asking them in the interview. He then would make suggestions as to how the Gao Brothers should answer the questions to emphasize certain aspects of the interview leading towards the promotion of the exhibition opening at the Kemper Museum. The Gao Brothers would give their answers in Mandarin and Lum would translate their answers into English. There were many instances during the recording when Hwang would stop the interview to reword Lum's English translations of the artists' responses to emphasize or dramatize certain subjects, such as the brothers' feelings and experiences with their art. To speed up the process, the recording studio eventually had Hwang ask the questions and have Gao Brothers responses recorded in Chinese. Hwang and Melanie would later work together to carefully reword the recorded English responses, which would later be added into the interviews.

APPENDIX B

KCUR 89.3 INTREVIEW TRANSCRIPT

KCUR 89.3: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Recorded September 16, 2010 and transcribed by Christina Leung in support of her M.A. Thesis in Art History.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: Kemper curator Barbara O'Brien says one of the Gao Brothers' sculptures arrived in the largest truck she's ever seen carry art. It is a 20 foot high stainless steel statue of Lenin's head with a small statue of a female, naked chairman Mao balancing on top. O'Brien help set it up outside the museum.

BARBARA O'BRIEN: Every car that drove by the people kind of – you could see them rubber-necking and trying to see what was happening. People were honking their horns, people were yelling the most marvelous supportive things like, "Oh, look at big shiny!"

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: Now days before the exhibit opens, O'Brien's watching nervously as canvases are stapled onto 13 foot frames. Because these works were banned in China, she says getting it from Beijing to Kansas City was a delicate time consuming process.

BARBARA O'BRIEN: The methods in which the works were shipped had to be less publicly organized than what we would usually do a work of art in terms of how crates were marked or who the shipping company was. Everyone all the way along wanted to be protected in terms of their relationship with the government.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: Look around and you might guess why the Gao Brothers' work is censored. Irreverent statues of communist China's founder Mao Zedong are everywhere. Over there seven life sized Maos aim rifles at a statue of Jesus. One Mao turns away. And over here, another Miss Mao, a giant shiny bust with breasts, a braid, and a Pinnocciho's

nose. Gao Zhen, the older brother, says through translator that their Mao obsession goes back to a childhood trauma.

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): 1968 was a very specific time during the Cultural Revolution. There was a lot of cleaning out of people. Our father was taken to jail and he was just a normal factory worker. And til this day we still do not know if he actually committed suicide, which the officials told us, or if he was killed in jail.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: A large photo shows the Gao's father as a young man and their mother as the older woman she became, floating against a delicate sky. Nearby is a sad kneeling statue called *Mao's Guilt*.

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): There's no one who has influenced the Chinese people more than Mao. For us we lost our father so instead of making or keeping Mao as this godly image, we wanted to create him into a real person in order to change history.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: And it's not just Chinese history they are tempering with. The large painting shows faces of other world leaders and their baby pictures too. Like Saddam Hussein, Mother Theresa, and the Dalai Lama. From far away they look like grainy images you might see on a TV screen, close up they're bright and geometric.

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): We believe that children are born innocent and it's society that molds them and creates them into the monsters or the saints that they become.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: London-based curator Arthur Hwang worked with the Kemper to plan the exhibit. He says that Gao Brothers had consistently produced provocative work over several decades despite government censorship.

HWANG: They've really stuck to their guns. It's about humanity, it's about injustice, it's about truth and distortion of truth.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: People in Kansas City might come to this exhibit without the same cultural baggage as a Chinese viewer might carry. But Gao Quang says that allows for more genuine and real response.

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): We want the people to have an emotional response and to internalize something out of that exhibition.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: Back in China, after all, very few have had the chance to see these large form sculptures, paintings, and photos in person. The Gao keep the sculpture of the repentant Mao with the head and the body in different places so authorities won't recognize it. Gao Quang says that he hopes all of this will change.

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): We hope that we eventually someday that we can show pieces that we have shown at the Kemper in China.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: Gao Brothers Grandeur and Catharsis opens tonight at the Kemper museum of Contemporary Art. Sylvia Maria Gross, KCUR news.

Source:<http://www.publicbroadcasting.net/kcur/arts.artsmain?action=viewArticle&id=1701642&pid=77&sid=16>

APPENDIX C
KEMPER ART WEBCAST PARTS 1

KEMPER ART WEBCAST, PART 1

Recorded September 16, 2010 and transcribed by Christina Leung in support of her M.A. Thesis in Art History.

NARRATOR: Welcome to the Kemper Art cast. Exhibition curator, Arthur Hwang met with China's Gao Brothers for an interview before the opening of their exhibition, Grandeur and Catharsis.

HWANG: What is the meaning, the purpose of art to you?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): To us, art is a very important part of life and also is a way of life. In addition we believe that the nature of life is fundamentally lonely and empty and without hope, therefore we use art as a way to transcend the loneliness and emptiness.

We also use it as a tool to discuss these issues. We also use art as a tool to connect the individual and the world to bring these two spheres together. These few years we have been able to use art to communicate with the rest of the world. Even now when we are in Kansas it is because of art that we come here and create a discussion with the city.

HWANG: From this view point, how do you see the works in this present exhibition? For example, which work or works are the most meaningful to you?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): This exhibition provides a complete narrative for our recent creative period. This exhibition also showcases some of our more important works. For example, The Execution of Christ, within this piece, we are examining Mao's image and the possible communication with the West.

HWANG: How was your viewpoint regarding your art evolved over the last twenty years?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): On a fundamental level for the last twenty years, our art has not changed. Our art is not for beauty, it's not for money, it's to explain events and conditions. It's for humanity. Of course this is from a conceptual angle, but the way we express ourselves is still very personal.

HWANG: How do you think your art will develop in the near future? Do you have any new projects in mind?

GAO BROTHERS: Yes, there are new pieces. Some subjects and topics we believe we've already completed and some of these pieces are shown in the exhibition. In regards to painting, we have not yet finished what we want to express. Currently we are developing new concepts and methods. We want to analyze our previous works and see how we can develop the paintings' artistic language. But at the same time, we are developing a new piece. We have already finished a complete script and we believe that next year we'll try to film it.

NARRATOR: Gao Brothers Grandeur and Catharsis is on view through January 2nd at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

APPENDIX D
KEMPER ART WEBCAST PARTS 2

KEMPER ART WEBCAST, PART 2

Recorded September 16, 2010 and transcribed by Christina Leung in support of her M.A. Thesis in Art History.

NARRATOR: Exhibition curator, Arthur Hwang, continues his conversation with the Gao Brothers on the work in their exhibition *Grandeur and Catharsis*.

HWANG: When did you decide to work as brothers and why did you decide to do so?

GAO BROTHERS: In mid-1985 we started to work together. But at that time, we did not use the name Gao Brothers. In 1989, we exhibited a piece in China avant-garde art exhibition, which was China's first contemporary art exhibition. We collaborated on an installation called *Midnight Mass*. From then, people called us the Gao Brothers and then we started using that name.

HWANG: How do you think working together has impacted your work and do you think could have achieved this working individually?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): I think the fortune of us working together is that we can create discussions and communicate with each other which prevents blind spots. If one person is creating an artwork, maybe that person only has one thought and idea and wants to push it and immediately to do it and that artwork might not be important or that concept may not be important. If there are two people they can discuss and create a dialogue in order to judge what is worth creating. The importance is not the final product, but that if there are two people, the process of making the art piece becomes more meaningful.

HWANG: Working together as brothers in China, um... This is not common but it's not unique. Do you think that this method of working has something to do with Chinese culture?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): I don't really know if it has anything to do with being Chinese but I know that it's because we share a lot of mutual experiences. We know that in China there are many brothers working together but we don't think those brothers work together the way we do. We openly and honestly discuss all of our artworks including our views on society.

HWANG: Can you describe how your cooperation has affected the conception and the realization of one particular work this present exhibition?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): For example, it took us a long time to develop the *Execution of Christ*. When we create pieces and come up with a concept we don't immediately do it. It's in the process that it changes. Early on in the development, we initially wanted to make this piece about Lin Zhao. Lin Zhao is a person that many Chinese don't really understand. Although many might not understand or recognize her, to us she is extremely important. During the Mao era she was an intellectual that was executed. At the time people were blindly idolizing Mao. Lin Zhao clearly saw Mao with a critical attitude therefore she had to pay the price. Initially we wanted to make a photographic portrait but then we decided to make a sculpture. In this sculpture we wanted Mao to execute her. In the process of developing this piece, we discovered that she was Christian. As the concept developed, we decided that Mao was persecuting not only her but also Christianity, which stands for love of sacrifice. As the concept changed, we decided to consider the relationship with this piece with art history, therefore we saw inspiration in Manet's *Execution of the*

Emperor Maximilian. The selection of the model for Jesus Christ in this piece took a very long time. At the beginning we chose a Chinese model because he was very skinny and his image resembled classical Christian iconography. But later on we met a French model and we decided he was the best choice and perfect for this role. With this piece we wanted to review Mao's violent nature. To many people, Mao and the gun had no relationship; because he uses others to kill therefore he does not need a gun. Like Gao Zhen said at the beginning we wanted to use Lin Zhao but after finding out that she was a Christian we decided to use Christ in order to expand the concept so that when the audience views this piece they see the possibility and it's easier to understand. If you used our original subject, Lin Zhao, people would be more puzzled and this piece would need more explanation. Therefore we are putting her image in other pieces for example an oil painting.

HWANG: For new projects how do you arrive at the idea together?

GAO BROTHERS (through translator): Although we don't simply worry about whether individual works will have a relationship to each other, the actual fact there is continuity. Present works here have a relationship to works from the past. Future works will also probably have a relationship to the works in the past. We will continue to work with past themes in order to generate the possibility of new concepts and artistic language. Therefore we want to create a film because to us this is a completely new dimension. In our assessment of Chinese directors we figured out that their methods and ours are not the same, therefore their understanding of film and our understanding of film are not the same. We hope that through the processes, through the creation of this film, we can highlight the differences in our outlooks.

NARRATOR: Gao Brothers *Grandeur and Catharsis* is on view through January 2nd at Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.



Figure 111 Gao Brothers at KCUR recording studio. Photography by The Gao Brothers

APPENDIX E

PRI THE WORLD INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

PRI, THE WORLD: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Recorded September 16, 2010 and transcribed by Christina Leung in support of her M.A. Thesis in Art History.

LISA MULLINS: The two Chinese artists known as the Gao Brothers have sometimes run afoul of authorities. It seems those in charge in China just don't appreciate the brothers' irreverent portrayals of major figures and events in Chinese history. But a new exhibition of the Gao Brothers' art should have no problem at all with the censors. That's because it's at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri. Reporter Sylvia Maria Gross of station KCUR shows us around.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS: A few weeks ago, Kansas Citians got their first glimpse of the exhibit when a 20-foot stainless steel statue of Lenin's head went up outside the Kemper museum. Balancing on top of the famous bearded cranium is a small Mao Zedong, naked, and with breasts. Barbara O'Brien is the museum's curator.

BARBARA O'BRIEN: Every car that drove by the people kind of – you could see them rubber-necking and trying to see what was happening. People were honking their horns, people were yelling the most marvelous supportive things like, “Oh, look at big shiny!”

GROSS: But what looks fun and bold to Americans, is politically potent in China. Brothers Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang, who make all their work together, have had pieces censored and even confiscated by the government. O'Brien says getting these massive sculptures and paintings out of China was a delicate process.

O'BRIEN: Everyone all the way along wanted to be protected in terms of their relationship with the government.

GROSS: Looking around the exhibit, irreverent images of Mao are everywhere. Over there, six life-size Maos aim rifles at a statue of Jesus. One Mao turns away. And over here is what the Gaos call *Miss Mao*. A giant, shiny bust with breasts, a braid and a Pinocchio's nose. The Gaos think a U.S. audience might have a more genuine emotional response to their work than they usually receive in China. Brian McQuain viewing the exhibit on its opening weekend, looks at a realistic statue of Mao, on his knees.

BRIAN MCQUAIN: It's touching in a way that they show him that he's just asking forgiveness in the most vulnerable way, on your knees, and just grasping his heart. It portrays someone in a way that they necessarily wouldn't want to be portrayed.

GROSS: But some people think it's the context in China that makes the work interesting. Like another visitor Ellen Vessels.

ELLEN VESSELS: In America, people would say, oh that's very stereotypical, or contrived, or they're trying too hard to be political. But because it's banned in China it's like, oh it's very brave that they put such a political piece of work out there.

GROSS: For the Gaos, though, politics in personal. Gao Zhen, the older of the two brothers, says through a translator that their obsession with Mao goes back to a childhood trauma.

GAO ZHEN (speaking in Mandarin): 1968 was a very specific time during the Cultural Revolution. There was a lot of cleaning out of people. Our father was taken to jail. And he was just a normal factory worker. And to this day, we still do not know if he actually committed suicide, which the officials told us, or if he was killed in jail.

GROSS: A large photo shows the Gaos' father as a young man, and their mother as the older woman she became, floating against a desolate sky. Nearby is that kneeling statue, which is called *Mao's Guilt*.

GAO ZHEN (speaking in Mandarin): There's no one that has influenced the Chinese people more than Mao. For us, we lost our father, so instead of making or keeping Mao as this godly image, we wanted to create him into a real person, in order to change history.

GROSS: Since the Gaos began creating their provocative work in the 1980s, China has changed. And the art scene has flourished. But curator Arthur Hwang says most contemporary art in China has become very commercial.

ARTHUR HWANG: Whereas for the Gao Brothers, they said more than 20 years ago in an essay that their art is not about beauty. That it's about life. And they've really cleaved to this idea throughout their career. It's about humanity, it's about injustice. It's about truth and distortion of truth.

GROSS: Hwang says the Gaos are respected in the Beijing art world for their integrity, but few in China actually get to see their work. And if they do, it's in reproductions. The Gao Brothers say they hope someday their pieces will be viewed in China as art rather than simply provocation. For the World, I'm Sylvia Maria Gross, in Kansas City.

MULLINS: The Gao Brothers exhibit runs at the Kemper Museum in Kansas City through December. Check out that statue of Lenin's head with a naked Mao on top. It's right there on our website, TheWorld.org

Source:http://www.theworld.org/2010/10/05/provocative-chinese-art-in-missouri/?awesm=fbshare.me_AUYkw&utm_content=fbshare-js-large&utm_medium=fbshare.me-facebook-post&utm_source=facebook.com

APPENDIX F
NELSON-ATKINS DISCUSSION PANEL

THE NELSON-ATKINS DISCUSSION PANEL

Barbara O'Brien - Kemper Museum Curator

Arthur Hwang - Independent Curator

Dr. Megan Green - Associate Professor and Director of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Kansas

September 18 2010, Atkins Auditorium: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. (1:46)

Q&A Forum

Hwang translates questions and answers for the Gao Brothers

Transcribed by Christina Leung in support of her M.A. Thesis in Art History.



Figure 122 The Nelson Atkins auditorium. Photography by The Gao Brothers

O'BRIEN: My first question is how do you collaborate in terms of decision making and how do you decide if a subject is to be rendered using the ironic or the humorous or the tragic and the violent?

GAO: This is something a lot of the people ask, even artists ask this question. And one time a friend of theirs who are also artists asked them. "Well I am an artist and my husband is also an artist, but we never ever cooperate." At the time a lot of people said how could you two possibly cooperate produce artwork? I really don't know how to give you an answer, but maybe we just don't have any personality. Just joking. So we have similar experiences and we also have similar world view. These points of views arise from experience and also from our mutual discussions. So for example if there was a book that I read and I thought it was very interesting I would then tell my bother to read it and in the same way if he read something interesting he would introduce it to me. And we also tend to have dreams and when I have a dream I would talk to him about it and when he has a dream he would talk with me about it and maybe tell me his interpretation. So these intimate experiences and this kind of intimate process gives us as collaborators some very unusual conditions. Of course there is no way that we can the two of use hold just one pen or one brush to make a painting. In actual fact, the technique that we use to complete the work is for us not the most important thing. And often some of the works are completed by myself and some of the works are completed by my brother. So for example of course the concept behind the work we have always discussed and we have agreed upon. And we often disagree and veto the ideas of the other person. Because creativity tends towards the impulsive so if it was just one of us

working we would end up making work which afterwards we would think was of not great importance. Whereas because of this process where the both of us cooperate we can tend to prevent this production of works which ultimately is not that important. That's not say that everything we do is important...yet, for us all our works are in a sense inevitable. Because as artist we don't only consider the actual visual language as the important thing in our art, but we hope that our expression is related to our experiences and our lives. We also hope that our creative output would have a relevance both to our own lives and to our nation. I've already said too much.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: I have two questions, I'm David Cateforis, my first question is can you show the Miss Mao works in China? Are you allowed to without difficulty and if so what types of reaction you get out of China verses the reaction you get out of the U.S.?

GAO: In actual fact Miss Mao originally came out in 2006. Originally we intended for it to be exhibited in China. First time this work was exhibited was actually in London and after exhibited in London we intended to exhibit it in Beijing. But before we could actually put in the exhibition we were warned that this was not a good idea. At the time also the curator for this exhibition in Beijing was actually an English curator and he was afraid that if he put this piece in the exhibition which was a group show, that it would actually impact negatively on the whole show, but ultimately, unfortunately the whole exhibition was canceled and none of the works were ever exhibited.

And to address the second part of the original question as to different reactions of China and the West, this work has not been publicly exhibited in China but of course people had exposure to it through the Internet. In China there is a website called *Who Ling Wong* (sp)

and there is an enormous amount of controversy in this blog regarding this particular sculpture.

O'BRIEN: And David your second part of your question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #1: My second question unrelated, can you describe whether you use assistants in your studios to help you with your sculpture and painting?

GAO: Yes, there is.

(Barbara O'Brien informs and invites audience of "Gao Brothers Focus" a small exhibition in the Kemper East building that has images of the foundry, working drawings and other Miss Mao works.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: Hi my name is Kit Dodson and I'm curious if you see a particular relationship between Christianity or religion in general and Maoism, just kind of because of the representation of the Christ and the word 'Mass' and things like that in the art?

O'BRIEN: I think that's something that maybe we have Professor Greene and the Gao Brothers can address.

GREENE: I won't address their work because they should. But I would say that, I guess the way I would answer that question is that Maoism itself kind of functioned as religion. The aim of Maoism was to eradicate traditional religions and that would include Christianity. But then it really began to take the place of that. And so there was an ominous religious devotion to Mao, to the party and to the state that was encourage very much especially through the 1960s. This is less the case in the 50s and that has really subsided in the decades since Mao's death. And even at the moments that which Chinese Communist state has sought to try to

evoke that kind of religiosity in people and get them to focus it towards the state. They've been unsuccessful in the 80s, the 90s, and the current decade. So that they have never been able to accomplish that same kind of way of appealing to that side of the people. So I'm not sure if that exactly answered the question, but it sort of does.

GAO: In our points of view the values of Christianity and the values of Maoism are absolutely sort of an opposite, in opposition. Mao once said the philosophy of Communism is the philosophy of conflict. Whereas when I study the bible, the bible said this 'all man are brothers and sisters and as brothers and sisters they should love each other. On the hand obviously I view that Mao actually borrowed the techniques of Christianity. So from our points of view Maoism is about Atheism. He actually uses this concept of atheism and he tries to replace religion with himself.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #2: I'm Eric Schneider and my question for you is it seems like the new affluence in China, there's a resurgence of nationalism within China so I'm curious about within the art community in China today especially the youth, we're talking people high school or college, do you see them still challenging China's past? Or I guess my point is do you see them doing it less because the re-resurgence of nationalism or do you still seem this taking place within the youth?

O'BRIEN: A quick overcap, a parallel has been drawn between new affluence in china and perhaps an emerging nationalism and do the youth continue to challenge the norms given that they have perhaps, from the questioner's perspective, an increased level of affluence?

GAO: I don't deny there has been quite a lot of development in China at this point. But to say that China has become prosperous, we really need to define who in China has become

prosperous. Has the government become rich? Have the people with power become rich or is it that everybody has become rich? So we really need to clarify this problem before we even address that question.

O'BRIEN: May I say that in the Embrace performances, it is my understanding that the players, shall we say who are hired to hug, are often people from the country who come to the city and are challenged financially and who were given more money to embrace naked than if they were clothed as a statement about the pressures of the economy on the new city dwellers?

GAO: The series called *Embrace*, really sort of originated in the year 2000. Ordinarily, we would just get some strangers, volunteers, to take part in these occurrences, that we called *The Embrace*. This work is called *The Twenty Minute Utopia of the Embrace*. We also had one occurrence where we spent money and pay people to embrace. That is the work to which Barbara refers. In China, there are a lot of laborers. These people generally come from the countryside, from the villages, and they all hope to find work in the cities. But it's not easy to make money, to find work in the cities. So this one time we actually spent money and hired these laborers to perform *The Embrace*. And in a sort of the ordinary manner of speaking, this is in effect a sort of tragedy, because an embrace should be really about love between friends, that you would only want to embrace someone because you wanted to embrace them. Whereas these people from the countryside, they are doing it for money. And in making this performance we really wanted to investigate and to express the relationship between money and society today. In actual fact we didn't spend a lot of money this particular work. In fact we just found these people on the labor market, there is certain

place where laborers gather, and we ask them how much do you normally make in this... using a certain amount of time? And in actual fact we found that each person would only have earned maybe thirty-four to forty Yuan, which is... let's say sort of six or seven U.S. dollars. So really for someone taking part in this particular performance of the embrace, they're not really bothered by the embrace, they're really looking at the money they can earn. And so really because of such tiny sum of money they are actually doing something they don't particularly want to do and this really reflects how poor people are generally. And so this particular performance has within it a sort of investigative nature into social conditions. And this particular performance, even within Chinese society, generated enormous controversy. Some people criticized them saying that they actually, in the name of art, they were actually amusing themselves with poor people. But in fact why we did this work was to make people pay attention to the plight of the poor.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #3: My name is Walt Vernon and my question is, based upon your life experiences, your travels, your readings, as you look about, are you generally optimistic about the future out of both your nation and mankind?

GAO: This is a huge a question. I am of the opinion that reality does not give rise to much optimism. But in spite of this, we need to retain hope about the future. And we are prepared to hope this... there will be a good future. Because if we really believe that the future will be good then maybe good things will come towards us in the future. Because hopelessness has no useful function...[is useless].

AUDIENCE MEMBER #4: I'm Craig Musman, nice to meet you, oh by the way I love the expression 'fatuous pomposity' that's brilliant. My question is about your outfits and if...

O'BRIEN: Oh we've got to the fashion question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #4: Sorry if that seems a bit shallow, but I was wondering... you know... what sort of comments you have to make about them and the choices in your clothing.

O'BRIEN: Are their fashion statements making a comment and perhaps how do people respond to them?

GAO: In actual fact we are not particular interested in fashion. but in such a propitious event, in such a prodigious time we hope that both the way we dress are our appearance and what is in our hearts is equally pure.

O'BRIEN & AUDIENCE: Awwwww

AUDIENCE MEMBER #5: Hi I'm Sara Tellini, and I was, I'm going to ask a question about your relationship between the concept and the material, specifically your use of stainless steel and wondering if its reflective nature has anything to do with the way that you decided to come up with the ideas of the sculpture.

GAO: Well of course, in all our works, we pay attention to the relationship between concept and material and that there is such a relationship. I signed your book yesterday. Can I actually turn around and ask you a question?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #5: Yes

GAO: Why you give me the book of Lenin?

AUDIENCE MEMBER #5: Cause it actually was a story. The day the sculpture came up, I went to the Art Institute library and there was in the trash can, in the dumpster many books

about Lenin and the West. (Gao Brothers laughed and clap their hands) And I gather them up and brought three books and set them in front of Big Shiny.

GAO: So this is actually a performance!

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6: Hi my name is Chi Hew, and I'm going to combine all my questions into one, so we can get to faster. From the first question you already said you have never exhibited your exhibition in China, but I sure because of your publicity international-wide of course, there will be people in China would will know about this....

HWANG: Can I sort of interject? Their... a lot of their work has been exhibited in China, both officially and unofficially. Just certain works are not, so it not true that their works had not been exhibited in China. So if you want to, with information, to rephrase your question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #6: So is there, were you ever in any risk in conveying your idea in concept into your art? Also I know that nowadays, China propaganda going on in China, a lot of time Internet or TV is not the best resources for people to gain the most updated information about the world and the past history? What is your point of view about that?

Thank you.

[Follow up on the second question for clarification] Actually the second question isn't really related to their work. I just wanted to know, as a artist, and as people influential in our c....in the Chinese culture, what do they about, nowadays the youngster cannot get the most updated information about democracy, and also about the past history... a lot of people, even text books they're corrected, they're manipulated in a different way so they cannot get the real truth, facts about the cultural revolution for example. So what's their point of view about that?

GAO: I feel that there is always risk in everything that anybody does. Of course if someone does something that has a critical component towards a society then, obviously, the risk is increased. In actual fact, we have had continuing troubles. But it has not been too great, the very fact that we can sit here and talk to you about all this, means that the difficulties that we have come across are basically bearable, can be put up with. And of course we hope that we can continue to have this freedom. So regarding the problem of propaganda of improper history of manipulation of the Internet, he thinks this is actually a very serious problem. This is something that a lot of intellectuals are extremely worried about. Well, the good thing is that you cannot suppress the Internet completely. And if a young person really wants to find out the reality in history, there are ways of doing it. And I do believe that today, young people more and more, are looking for the truth in order to, in counterpoint to the lies that had been fed in the past. And this is part of what I said just now as to the future giving me hope.

AUDIENCE MEMBER #7: Hello I'm Maria Crites. My question is about your practice; in fact this question could be for all of the panelists. I like to know aside from content or political perspective what is particularly Chinese about the Gao Brother's practice as artists?

GAO: In fact, our works are not exclusively politically, and they're not exclusively meant to generate controversy. In fact, we feel that art should really be about human nature as much as possible. We actually have a lot of works that concern life itself and concerns beauty. For example in *The Embrace*, there is a very famous philosophy in China called Confucius. The heart of Confucianism is about, the heart of Confucian philosophy is to do with harmony

and harmony is precious. In fact, when we try to promote the idea of a Well Hug Day in 2000 the intention was really very Confucius, the idea of promoting harmony.

Well we've answered a lot of questions, so now I have question for you. [Audience chuckles] Well of course these questions are all concerned with our art. But I'm slightly worried because these questions don't seem to have anything actually to do with our art itself. And it actually makes fee feel a little bit bad. [Audience chuckles] So does that mean that the actual, our actual, sort of the visual side of our art, the actual language of our art is not actually particularly remarkable? So even though we don't feel that we make art for art sake, even so every time we approach a new work, we try very hard to engage with an artistic language and to try and come upon some new method of artistic communication. So I hope that when you all go and see the exhibition you'll bear this in mind so that in the future, in future symposiums in future discussions, that then this can become part of the dialogue.

HWANG: Meaning it's not just about the politics about the controversy; about you know the society in China at the moment. It really we should be looking at the artistic language and the art itself rather than just the content.

GAO ZHEN: Because if our art was just about raising questions or just making simple points, then I don't think the Kemper would particularly want to exhibit our art. [Audience laughs] Of course that is a joke.

BEBE KEMPER: Art whether it be painting, or sculpture, or video, whatever it is, has to address the human heart if it is going to be successful. Once long ago we gave a Sergeant painting to the Nelson gallery, and a then critic at the paper here...it was a beautiful painting by Sergeant of a British socialite Mrs. Wade, or maybe she was American, American

socialite Mrs. Wade. And the critic said that is was a worthless painting, because it did not address social issues. I think the truth about that painting is that in a time of turmoil and I don't really remember what the particular social turmoil, at the time of the country was, but at the time of disturbance, beauty is very important. So while your work artistically was...blew us all away... [Audience laughs]

GAO ZHEN: Thank you, thank you

BEBE KEMPER: Truly it does. It's genius, artistically.

GAO ZHEN: Sorry, Now [I] feel little bit bad, because actually his last question really was to try to garner some praise from all of you. [Audience laughs]

BEBE KEMPER: But there's one more thing, the reason why, I think, you got the questions you did, is because this is a time of enormous tumult in this country and what you had the courage to do was to give us hope that good is important and evil is not. Thank you.

GAO ZHEN: Thank you, thank you very much. I'm so grateful for everybody having come here today and for the discussion. I don't know whether I dare suggest that maybe that we can actually perform the 'Embrace' today [Audience explodes with laughter and claps] in this location and to express our love for each other.



Figure 133 Gao Brothers hugging audience after discussion. Photography by The Gao Brothers

APPENDIX G
MELANIE INTERVIEW NOTES

MELANIE LUM INTERVIEW NOTES

September 15 2010: Discussion during the tour of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art with the author.

During the artists' visit in Kansas City I took Lum and the Gao Brothers to The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. I was able to spend some time with Lum and we discussed about her experiences in China when she became involved with the Gao Brothers and their works. Despite the challenges with Chinese authorities in China she felt her association with the Gao Brothers and the works were a worthy humane cause for freedom of expression in China.

Lum was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She is a graduate of Wellesley College where she majored in East Asian Studies and Art History with a concentration on Chinese contemporary art. She moved to China to continue her studies in contemporary Chinese art. Lum is currently based in Beijing, China working as an art dealer/critic. She maintains an online contemporary Asian art web blog, ML Art Source, at <http://mlartsource.com>.

She said her main strategy in terms with Gao's works was to bring as much publicity as she could about the Gao Brothers and their works into the public light to protect them from Chinese government backlash. She has become paranoid about government authorities spying on her and families and friends associated with the brothers and her. She sometimes has used different names and worn disguises when going out, but the government always can find them. She felt very scared for her safety and once had someone knock on our apartment

door. When she opens the door someone on the other side would take her picture and run away. Anonymous people would call or to harass people she knew. She said that oftentimes she gets so scared for her life that she would cry and feel it unbearable to live with. Even during our conversation about the Gao exhibitions in China, every time the word “Mao” came up Lum would cup her hand over her mouth, lean towards me and whisper “Mao”. I gave her a funny look and reminded her that it’s okay to say the word out loud here. She and I laughed at her realization that she was not in China anymore. But it was revealing that even simply saying a word would cause such anxiety in an individual.

The manager who headed the foundry that produced the head of Mao for the sculpture *Mao’s Guilt*, was arrested and put to jail, and Melanie felt the only reason why the Gao Brothers were spared was because they were well known in the international art realm and the Chinese government did not want the international community to raise human rights issues with them.

Lum also explained how the underground exhibitions in China operated. They would secure a secret location in old warehouses or remote countryside locations. Word of the exhibition will go out by word of mouth or a secret-coded advertisement would be placed in the newspaper informing where and when to meet. This particular location will not be the final location of the art exhibition itself. Once arriving at the meeting location, participants would then be screened for undercover government spies. Upon verifying each individual, participants would then be led in small groups of about three or four to the final destination. Trickling in small groups would prevent a large obvious crowd to the event. Even with all the precautions taken, Lum says government spies are still able to find their ways into these

events. She said during times when the authorities confront them, they were able to divulge exhibition details and knew who were involved in specific events. She even speculated, along with the Gao brothers, that some Chinese spies had followed them to Kansas City to observe and report back about the Kemper Museum's Gao Brother exhibition. According to Lum with the amount of publicity advertisement and communications between involved parties, it would not have been difficult for spies to trace down. In fact there was some concern that upon her return to China, the Chinese government may not allow Lum back into the country based on her activities and involvement with the Gao Brothers.

I asked Lum about how the Gao Brothers felt about artists leaving China and if that attitude had changed since their last recorded comment on these matters. Yes, their attitude has changed since then and in fact is currently consulting with an attorney to leave China. This matter, however, must be approached delicately to consider the well-being of their friends and family who would still remain in China.

According to Lum, they wanted to get public feedback on *The Execution of Christ* by going out to the streets with a photograph image of the sculpture. A Chinese man, outside of art academia, was pick randomly from the streets of China and was asked for his perception of the sculpture. Without any understanding of whom the targeted individual was, he found pride and approval to the piece as he interpreted the sculpture as a sign of cultural dominance and government strength.

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* Indicates references can also be viewed online at
http://www.gaobrothers.net/crit_re/index.html

VITA

Christina Soon-Ying Leung was born on May 28, 1980, in Independence, Missouri. She was educated in local public schools and graduated from William Chrisman High School, where she performed as orchestra concert mistress, attended Honors District Orchestra, competed in State Orchestra competition, and ranked within the top ten percent of her class in 1998.

She attended Truman State University in Kirksville, Missouri with a partial orchestra scholarship, became a member of Delta Sigma Pi, professional business fraternity, and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Accounting in December, 2001.

After college, Ms. Leung obtained a position at Ashok B. Bavishi, C.P.A., a private accounting firm as a systems administrator in Overland Park, KS specializing in forensic accounting, taxes, and system databases. She later assumed a position with an international engineering firm, Black and Veatch, Inc. of Overland Park, KS, as a Senior Corporate Financial Reporting Accountant IV. In 2008, Ms. Leung joined a position that combined her passion for the arts and business as Manager of Finance with the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri.

Upon completion of her degree requirements for her Masters of Art History, Ms. Leung plans to continue her career supporting the arts and the non-profit sectors.