

Voices from a Distance: Monumental Portraits by Xu Weixin

By Natsu Oyobe

In daily life, how often do we stare at the faces of others, even those to whom we feel close? The act of looking into another's face may cause us to feel uneasy, as if we are treading into the personal life and inner thoughts of that person. The portraits of close-up faces painted by contemporary Chinese painter Xu Weixin force us to have this uncomfortable experience. The faces, with their candid expressions, painted in a naturalistic style on large canvases, penetrate forcefully the consciousness of the viewer. Individually, each portrait relates a personal story and experience; collectively—as these portraits are intended to be shown together—they begin to tell of the larger human condition. Xu Weixin is an artist dealing with historic events and contemporary social issues in China and in the world; in these remarkable portrait series, emerging from his background as a Realist painter in China, Xu is poignantly bringing forward concrete voices often obscured by abstract and fragmented information.

The subjects of the portrait series *Chinese Historical Figures: 1966–1976* are people who lived during the Cultural Revolution (aka the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution), a social strife instigated by Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong to revitalize the Communist Revolution and reestablish his political power over opposing factions who were promoting a revisionist, capitalist approach. In May 1966, Mao called for citizens, especially the younger generation, to stand against the “old ideas, culture, customs, and habits” of the “exploiting” and “bourgeois” classes, such as landowners, business owners, intellectuals, the clergy, and any individuals who were socially in senior positions, including teachers, administrators, and senior managers. The army composed of these young revolutionaries, the Red Guards, went on to destroy cultural and religious properties and harass the people who were Mao Zedong's targets. Even when the initial brutality was subdued after 1968, the social upheaval continued until 1976, when the Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Mao Zedong, followed by the arrest of Mao's top officials, including his wife Jiang Qing, and the Communist Party's official statement of condemnation of the era.¹ By the end, an estimated thirty-six million people were

persecuted and at least 750,000 perished in the rural areas alone. The enormity of the destruction affected almost all people living during the decade; yet while the memories and stories still torment many people in contemporary China, the government's reluctance to look back, and the current economic prosperity thanks to post-Cultural Revolution policy changes, make it difficult to openly talk about the period.

Another series in the exhibition, *Miner Portraits*, depicts miners working in coal mines in China. Coal mining and miners represent both the bright and dark side of China's remarkable achievement as a global economic superpower in the past two decades. China's economy has been boosted since the 1980s by a series of economic reforms by Deng Xiaoping's government; a large part of that boost depended on the rapidly increasing production of coal, the country's main source of power. Today China is the world's largest coal producer with vast deposits of reserves spread all over the country. Yet behind the growth are poor working conditions and violations of safety regulations in the mining industry; in 2014, the death toll in mine accidents was 930. In the shadow of economic prosperity, the workers, who are mostly immigrants from the countryside, endure long hours and a dangerous work environment in exchange for steady wages.

Realism, Xu Weixin's painting style, has long been recognized as the official style of China since the Communist Revolution in 1949. Commonly known as Socialist Realism, it has dominated art academies, exhibitions, and art circulation. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, as the art scene, fueled by international attention and commercial success, became more diverse, Realism came to be seen as archaic and not suitable to represent complex contemporary issues, although it remained a strong current in government-sponsored exhibitions. Wu Hung, who curated the 2012 exhibition of Xu's series *Miner Portraits*, said that Xu's style of Realism does not belong to any of the various visual art movements that appeared after the mid-1970s in China, either those stylistically sprung from Socialist Realism or those that stylistically rejected Realism. Xu's painting is certainly not a part of abstraction or contemporary Conceptual art, both of which have received tremendous international attention, nor is it a part of recognized Realist groups. As Wu Hung says, "[Xu Weixin] is conducting experiments within Realist Art and reflecting upon

this artistic tradition in the contexts of both modern painting and contemporary Chinese art.”ⁱⁱ

To understand the nature of Xu’s experimentation in the realm of Realism, it is illuminating to consider his early life, artistic training, and experiences. Xu was born in 1958 in Urumqi, Xinjiang province, one of the largest cities in inner west China. Urumqi has flourished as a major hub of commerce since the time of the Silk Road in the Tang dynasty (618–907). As Xinjiang province borders with Central Asia, the population in the city is diverse, with multiple ethnic groups mixing with Han Chinese and Uyghurs. Xu grew up surrounded by people of colorful costumes and customs, who would become his main subjects in his group portraits of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1966, the fervor of the Cultural Revolution reached to the far flung parts of Xinjiang; in response to Mao Zedong’s call, eight-year-old Xu drew a hideous caricature of his classroom teacher, who was a daughter of a landlord, and posted it in the classroom (fig. 1). When the teacher saw the picture, her face turned pale, but she did not say a word. Xu, still feeling guilt for attacking his beloved teacher, says that this experience—and the realization that even a small child could be a harasser—motivated him to depict individuals when he later began his portrait series of the past.

After studying painting at the Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts, Xu entered the graduate school of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (now China Academy of Arts) in Hangzhou in 1985. One of the most prestigious art schools in China, Zhejiang Academy was a hotbed of new ideas and experimentation in the first decade of the post–Cultural Revolution era. During that time, there was an open criticism of political intervention in art and a quest for freedom of expression, to catch up with international standards, following the state party’s condemnation of the extreme leftism of the Cultural Revolution. Art historians Julia Andrews and Kuiyi Shen observed that, “Given the mandate to encourage intellectual freedom and the development of the succeeding generation, but no specific direction, party organizations fell over one another in promoting artistic innovation by young artists.”ⁱⁱⁱ Zhejiang Academy was especially open to exposing their students and faculty to international currents: the school actively collected foreign art books, and invited

instructors from overseas, including Chinese-French abstract painter Zao Wouki (1921–2013) and Bulgarian textile designer Maryn Varbanov (1932–1989). In this open environment, artists such as the academy’s young instructor Gu Wenda (b. 1955) and students Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1960), Zhang Peili (b. 1957), and Huang Yongping (b. 1954) created controversial pieces, using mixed media, site-specific installations, and found objects, that reflected on their recent experience of the Cultural Revolution.^{iv}

While his fellow painters at the Zhejiang Academy boldly experimented with innovative media and concepts aligned with the international art scene, Xu Weixin continued oil painting in the Realist style. In 1987, his technical mastery was recognized at the *First Oil Painting Exhibition* sponsored by the government, where he received first prize for his work *The Nang Bread Kitchen*, which depicts a scene of bread making by women from the Chinese Muslim community (fig. 2). His paintings of ethnic minorities are remarkable studies of people engaged in daily activities, derived from his earlier experience living in the western region of China. The artist pays tremendous respect to the mundane activities of these people, depicting them with solemnity and dignity. Within the Realist style, Xu’s approach in pursuing an authentic representation of his subjects is akin to the work of some of the young urban artists who were forcefully relocated to the countryside for re-education (the so-called “sent-down generation”) during the Cultural Revolution, and were drawn to and depicted hard-working peasants and ethnic minorities without idealization or political agenda.

The air of openness and free expression was suspended in the late 1980s as the government tightened political control over the rise of pro-democratic and anti-corruption demonstrations. During this time, many of those progressive young artists went underground without the intention of publicly displaying art, while some of them left the country. From 1988, Xu Weixin was teaching painting at the Guangzhou School of Art while continuing to depict groups of ethnic minorities, and showing the paintings at official art exhibitions. During this time Xu began to change the orientation of the portrayal of his subjects, as he developed a new understanding of what could be possible in Realist painting. In his 1995 work *Tibetan Butter Tea House*, his figures are oriented frontally,

showing their faces (fig. 3). Although they are engaged in an activity, their frontal orientation makes the relationship between the painted subjects and the viewer completely different from Xu's earlier work. Each of them—even the small child and the baby—is aware that they are being observed, as if demanding reciprocal interaction.

In the late 1990s, Xu Weixin departed from rural subjects, and turned his gaze to city dwellers. After moving to the capital Beijing to take a teaching position at the School of Fine Arts at Renmin University in 2001, he started to paint day laborers working and living at the bottom of the glittery urban cityscape (fig. 4). In these works, the attention to the individual is even more intense. Almost approaching hyperrealism, each person is painfully real, their life and personality revealed to be as complex as any other human. In the oppressive mood which hovered over society during this period, many younger artists turned to depicting human figures and faces, to express the mundane concerns of lives of inertia and without purpose. Called "Cynical Realism," those works were in a figurative style, though their style was more individualistic and quite distant from the naturalistic depiction of Realism, and more aligned with international art. Xu Weixin's group portraits of day laborers are far from the cynicism of this more recognized trend; however, the urge to reveal the inner self of a human being, while rejecting superficial agendas (i.e. political intentions), is quite similar.

In 2005, Xu completely shifted from depicting groups of people on a single canvas to a series of paintings with close-up faces of single subjects, producing a new series called *Miner Portraits*. These paintings are based on photographs of miners he took during trips to two state-owned mines, the Mu Cheng Jian Mine on the outskirts of Beijing between May and July 2004, and the Gao Yang Mine in Shanxi province in July 2005. For an artist who had become increasingly interested in revealing individual human psyches through the representation of individual faces, it was a logical development. At the same time, he was aware that by focusing on close-up faces, he was taking the great risk of losing the narrative element that a group portrait setting would provide. Without signifiers of location and setting, the portrait becomes more ambiguous in its intent. For example, in his 2004 painting *Work Shed*, the viewer is first drawn to the overcrowded, unsanitary environment

that these day laborers would have to endure, before finding individual faces. The *Miner Portraits* still had the same agenda as *Work Shed*, which is to express Xu's humanist focus on the people of the "bottom rung of society,"^v but single portraits of miners would pull the viewer's attention more directly to the subjects.

It's remarkable that Xu, almost stubbornly continuing to explore the possibilities of Realist painting, was not tempted by the variety of innovative ideas and media that flooded the contemporary art scene at the time. Looking back on the path leading up to the moment when he conceived the *Miner Portraits* series, Xu says that, during that period, "The time was not right. I was not ready."^{vi} Indeed, one needs to take into account enormous external changes in the exhibition system that allowed artists like Xu Weixin to be more experimental. In early 2000, as government-sponsored exhibitions in China lost much of their authority and influence, public museums began to rent their spaces for independent art shows. At the same time, new private museums were opening in major cities, reflecting the growing interest in contemporary Chinese art from domestic and international collectors, art professionals, and the public. Artists now had great opportunities to show their work, and at an unprecedented scale. Xu's portraits of miners were intended to be shown as a group; compared to his earlier works, these canvases, each measuring 250 by 200 centimeters, required a large space. The timing and circumstances allowed Xu to expand his interests. The next series, which he started later in 2005, *Chinese Historical Figures: 1966–1976*, was even more ambitious. The first exhibition of the series in 2007 at Today Art Museum in Beijing included sixty-three portraits (fig. 5); as the series expanded, it totaled more than 110 works.

As previously mentioned, since the 1980s numerous Chinese artists have critically approached their country's recent past and social issues. Artists have adapted China-bred Socialist Realism, or more internationally oriented abstraction, installation, and Pop art, to reveal painful experiences of class struggle, political drama, rapid industrialization, and rural fatigue, and the conundrum of material excess at the expense of the suffering of the lower ranks. Despite art critics and art historians in China being accustomed to socially conscious topics, when Xu Weixin exhibited the *Miner Portraits* series in 2007,

quickly followed by the exhibition of sixty-three works from *Chinese Historical Figures*, many of them were stunned with the concept and the representation.

To discerning art critics and art historians, Xu Weixin's large portrait series presented a very different kind of representation of the traumatic historical events and social issues than that of Political Pop artists such as Wang Guangyi (fig. 6) and Feng Mengbo, or Conceptual artists such as Gu Wenda and Ai Weiwei.^{vii} Instead of cynically critiquing or presenting overarching views, Xu focuses on a single subject and his or her personal story. The stark quality of his presentation lies in his utter neutrality: paintings in a uniform size, in the same composition and style, lined up along exhibition walls alphabetically by the subject's name, regardless of position, social status, gender, or age. In *Chinese Historical Figures*, the subjects include Mao Zedong, his wife and major political figure Jiang Qing, intellectuals, Red Guard soldiers, and schoolteachers.^{viii} The common characteristic of these people was that they lived between 1966 and 1976. In the case of *Chinese Historical Figures* and other historic series, photographs collected from family members and friends, or from the media, serve as the starting point. For the *Miner Portraits*, the artist took photographs of miners during his visits to coal mines and later painted them in his studio. As critic Liu Xiaochun has observed, Xu's approach to these subjects is simple and straightforward, rather than the criticism or sarcasm seen in the other art forms.^{ix} Xu Weixin's portraits let each subject convey his or her personal experience.

However, behind the simplicity, it is clear that Xu Weixin is aware of and tries to exploit the history and significance of the portraiture genre in China. In China, single portraits have a long history in ancestral worship, especially among the Imperial families and court officials of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) (fig. 7). The portraits, in which the subjects were usually painted in a seated, front-facing orientation, dressed in intricately embroidered official court attires, were staples of family rituals, where they were hung on an altar. Through the worship ritual, the spirits of the ancestors would ensure prosperity and health for their descendants.^x In modern Chinese history, idealized portraits of key political figures and model blue-collar workers have played major roles in the legitimizing of

ideology and the exercise of authority, being displayed in public buildings, workplaces, schools, and private homes. The most recognizable image is of Mao Zedong, whose large portrait still appears on the Tiananmen Gate, a reminder of the ideological foundation of the state (fig. 8). And multiple versions of Mao's portraits have been circulated in China from the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, during the Cultural Revolution, and afterward. Following the Cultural Revolution, though, there has been a critical response to those portraits; the most famous example is Luo Zhongli's hyperrealistic image of an old farmer, *Father* (fig. 9), which shows a large close-up of the farmer as if he were equal to Chairman Mao.

For the Chinese viewer in particular, in Xu's portrait series of modern history, such as *Chinese Historical Figures: 1966–1976* and his more recent series *Intellectuals of the Republic of China: 1912–1949*, there is a strong sense of remembrance and commemoration. Although they might not assume a ritual function as guardians of a blood lineage as in the ancestor portraits, the large size of these canvases commands the attention of the viewer like many Imperial portraits. There are also the texts describing the life and experience of the subject, which are inscribed after the portrait is finished by those close to the subject or by the artist himself (fig. 10). Xu says that in the beginning, the text was added simply to provide a space for the subject's personal information; later it became an integral part of the series.^{xi} The practice of writing commentary about a painted subject is a long tradition in China among the literati, or scholarly elite—public servants who engaged in painting, calligraphy, poetry, and music as their pastime while holding higher government positions. In these inscriptions, the literati praise the integrity of the subject as a government official and scholar and laud their artistic talent. Like this literati practice, in Xu's portraits there is a strong intention to more accurately remember the subject's life and personality.

Portrait painting in China and elsewhere was replaced by photography during the first half of the twentieth century. The reproducible nature of new media such as photography took away the "aura" a one-of-kind artwork might have had, as Walter Benjamin famously claimed. In the practice of several artists who use portrait photos in their works, however,

the photograph's ability to multiply and then imprint its multiplied image on the public consciousness is subverted, connecting the subject and the viewer in a new way. German artist Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) paints blurred portraits, based on portrait photographs and snapshots, of public figures, criminals, and anonymous citizens involved in tragic events. French artist Christian Boltanski (b. 1944) uses photographs of Jews who perished in Nazi concentration camps to create installation works reminiscent of altars. In their work, reworked and re-contextualized images of people collapse the divide between past and present, allowing the viewer's emotional penetration of the subject, and inviting the act of "mourning" that the original mass-circulated photographs do not permit.^{xii} Moreover, when the single images are grouped together, as in the works by these two internationally known artists as well as Xu Weixin, the individual life stories of their subjects begin to speak a collective story. The viewer of these works goes back and forth between a sense of the individual and the larger whole the individual belongs to—the event, the period, or the society. In this powerful experience, the viewer is moved to understand the condition of these individuals in a truly "holistic" way, experiencing all at once an emotional reaction and a cognitive, intellectual one.^{xiii}

The enormous size of a single canvas in Xu's portrait series gives monumentality to the subject. In the case of *Miner Portraits*, this monumentality functions as a way to demand that we see human worth in the faces of the miners whose hard work is not often recognized. The monumentality in his more historically oriented series, such as *Chinese Historical Figures*, reaches beyond the individual human being; the exposure of their humanity quietly challenges official narratives, and demands an alternative reading of history.

Speaking about the motivation behind the making of *Chinese Historical Figures*, Xu Weixin says that he wants to teach the younger generations, those raised during the Cultural Revolution and those born in the 1980s and later, what happened, who made it happen, and to whom it happened. There is an amnesia pervasive in Chinese society. On the one hand, the older generation is reluctant to speak about the past, in a desire to protect the younger generation's opportunities and material wealth. On the other hand,

the government insists on the official narrative that the decade was misled by a certain group of political figures, and normality was restored with their purge. In his more recent series, Xu engages other periods—the *Intellectuals of the Republic of China: 1912–1949* focuses on political thinkers, literary figures, and artists in the early twentieth century when China was emerging as a modern democratic state; and *Figures in the Early Chinese Economic Reform Period: 1980–1999* takes on public figures of the post-Cultural Revolution era. With these works Xu continues his mission of bringing the past into contemporary consciousness.

ⁱ For a concise history of the Cultural Revolution, see Roderick MacFarquar, “The Cultural Revolution,” in Melissa Chiu and Shengtian Zheng, *Art and China’s Revolution* (New York: Asia Society, 2008); and Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

ⁱⁱ Wu Hung, “Xu Weixin: Seven Miners,” in *Xu Weixin: Seven Miners* (Beijing: The University of Chicago Center in Beijing, 2012).

ⁱⁱⁱ Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 215.

^{iv} Andrews and Shen, *The Art of Modern China*, 214–218.

^v Xu Weixin, *Figures* (Beijing: Self-published, 2012), 113. The phrase is Xu Weixin’s title for the section of his self-published catalogue in which *Miner Portraits* and *Work Shed* are included.

^{vi} Interview with the artist, August 2015.

^{vii} Historian Stephanie Hemelryk Donald points out the distinction between Xu Weixin’s *Chinese Historical Figures: 1966–1976* and Political Pop in “Monumental Memories: Xu Weixin’s *Chinese Historical Figures, 1966–1976*,” *New Formations* 75 (2012): 45–62.

^{viii} For details of their lives, see the biographies in *About the Portraits*, in this volume.

^{ix} Liu Xiaochun, “Sculpting a Social Behavior,” in Xu Weixin, *Figures*, 110.

^x For more on Chinese ancestor portraits and their socio-religious function, see Jan Stewart and Evelyn S. Rawski, *Worshipping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits* (Washington, D.C.: the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, in association with Stanford University Press, 2001).

^{xi} Interview with the artist, August 2015.

^{xii} Gerhard Richter, “Conversation with Jan Thorn Prikker Concerning the Cycle 18 October 1977, 1989” in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, ed., *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962–1993* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 189. See also Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, “Monumental Memories: Xu Weixin’s *Chinese Historical Figures, 1966–1976*,” 61–62.

^{xiii} Several art critics use the term “holistic” to describe their experience of viewing Xu Weixin’s portrait series. See Jun Tan, “Justice through Time and Justice through History—Understanding Xu Weixin’s Portraits of the Cultural Revolution” (a blog entry), quoted in Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, 49.