



# Guo Jian

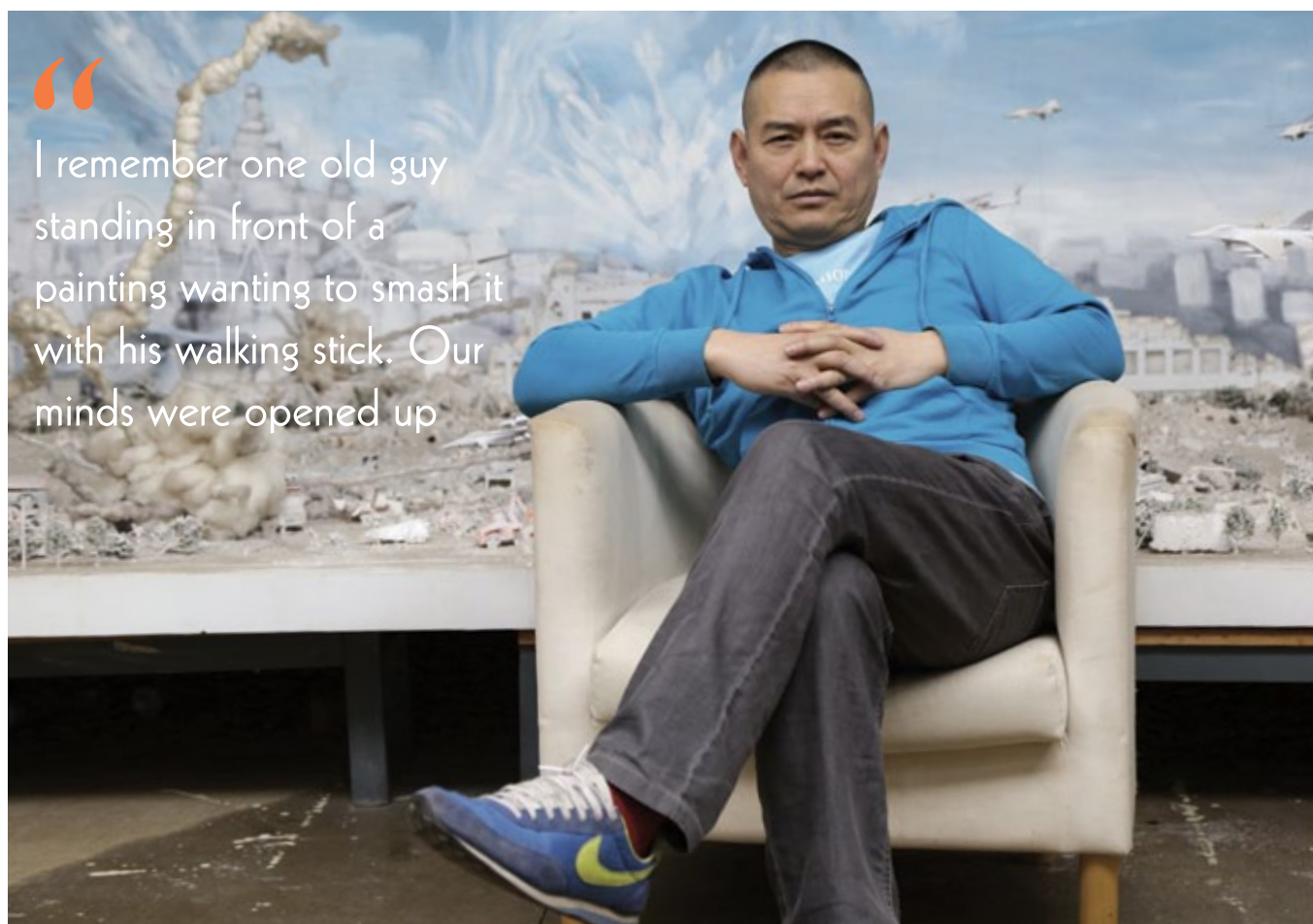
STORY PAUL FLYNN

**A**RTIST PROFILE visits the Beijing studio of painter Guo Jian to discuss the paintings inspired by his time in China's military that reveal the contradictions behind the country's propaganda machine.

Performance, music and visual arts have long been used by armies as a way of rousing troops to their cause, but perhaps nowhere on such a grand and systematic scale as China. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has been the central actor in the Chinese Communist Party's myth making. Since the founding of the Republic in 1949, traditional novels, ballets and operas have been reconfigured into stories and images of the PLA's modern military triumph. While the disastrous policies of The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a destructive social-political campaign aimed at purging the party of Mao's imagined enemies and enforcing Maoist orthodoxy, are now officially repudiated, major works from that era such as the 'Red Detachment of Women', performed for US President Richard Nixon during his 1972 visit, are still part of the repertoire of the National Ballet of China.

Even today an estimated 10,000 'entertainment soldiers' – dancers, singers, musicians and acrobats – are charged with the business of raising morale both for the military and the public at large. Peng Liyuan, wife of current Chinese leader Xi Jinping, was until very recently herself a performer to troops, more famous among the general public than her husband before his current rise to





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power. Popular media also plays its part: turn on state television and there is a devoted channel for gala performances, blockbuster movies and countless hours of popular TV dramas on military themes. The message through all is clear: the PLA is the bedrock of China's modern identity and the key to its future security.

Artist Guo Jian has known the PLA from both behind and in the front of front lines – from enlisting in the late 1970s to escape the drudgery of small town life as an army propaganda painter, to a decade later finding himself among the students carting bodies off Tiananmen Square as those same forces opened fire on him and his classmates during the tragedy of June 4, 1989. His extraordinary experience has been the inspiration for a life's body of work that reworks elements of the state's propaganda to document the milestones of his generation: from a rag-tag bunch of poor rural kids manipulated by a closed cultural and political system, through momentous, heartbreaking change as China struggled to absorb the influence and criticism of the outside world.

Guo Jian was born in 1963 in China's southwest backwater province of Guizhou. At 17 (claiming to be older), he joined a group of 400 teenagers from his community on a train to a military training camp as part of the recruitment drive for the Sino-Vietnamese war. The innocence and idealism of their enlistment is captured in his series '1979', where we see romantic black-and-white images of Guo and his friends as stereotypes of the patriot soldier – dressed in new uniforms and staring off into the distance much as young soldiers still do in the countless military propaganda posters that litter Chinese cities today.

“At first, they put us on a nice train – and everyone came to the station thinking we were heroes,” he recalls. “I was really happy, but my classmate was crying. He told me to stop fucking smiling because we're all going to die.” Once in the neighbouring province of Yunnan,

he and his friends were ordered off their comfortable ride and into a freight train, where they were “packed in like pigs”. As he recalls, this was his first lesson in the grim reality of army life.

The training camp where they were eventually offloaded was a village warehouse 300 km from the border with Vietnam – with one gun and no bullets: “In China, the first thing they train you in is how to march and how to listen to orders. Every day we were told the Vietnamese were coming to kill us,” he notes bluntly. “We were given the army newspaper and made to read it every day. After a few months we got really angry about the Vietnamese. We were brainwashed ... we had to volunteer ourselves to go to the war and that is how they made us want to go.”

Guo Jian had been brought into the army as a propaganda painter, recognised in his home town for artistic skills he had developed through copying – first from images in the bottom of decorated wash basins or, when available, sketch books borrowed for a hasty ten minutes from those lucky enough to own them. But while his talent was to be put to use rousing the troops, he recalls the army had a difficult enough time keeping them from deserting.

“People hated the army life,” he said. “I would try to get sick by standing in the sun or in the cold. One day a soldier came back who I hadn't seen for a month. He said he'd been in the hospital so I asked him ‘oh what disease did you have’ and he said he had his foreskin cut off. So then we all went to the doctor and said, ‘I have an infection, I need to get circumcised’. The doctor said no but I persuaded him to let me go to the hospital. I got a month off but I had to get a real circumcision. We would all go – two or three at a time.”

One of the few respites from the cycle of propaganda and exercise was the occasional visit of singers and dancers brought in to perform



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郭坚 2009  
GUO JIAN





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for troops before they headed to war – a heightened experience for these groups of agitated, isolated young men. In the series of satirical paintings 'The Day before I went Away' (2008), Guo Jian offers impressions of how young women were positioned by the army in these covertly erotic performances to manipulate the soldiers to the point of sexual hysteria and blood lust.

Following his military service, he returned to his home town, again as a propaganda painter for a local transport company and later for a government department promoting the one-child policy. A chance encounter with a teacher gave him the opportunity to apply for art school in Beijing, and after being selected as one of just three from 6000 in his province, he arrived in 1985 at Beijing's National University of Minorities just as the city's watershed 'New Wave' movement was galvanising a new generation of radical artists.

"1985 to 1989 were China's best years," he recalls. "We had only learned the propaganda style but 1985 was the first year I saw [Robert] Rauschenberg's show at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing. People were queuing, laughing, arguing about the art. It was totally shocking. I remember one old guy standing in front of a painting wanting to smash it with his walking stick. Our minds were opened up."

In 1989 pressure for political reform also drove thousands of students, Guo Jian included, to join the protests and hunger strikes on Tiananmen Square, sparked by the death of liberal reformer and deposed Premier Zhao Yiyang. Guo Jian was there to its bloody end, where he faced down young soldiers trucked in from the countryside, much as he had been ten years prior, as they began shooting. Memories of that day and carrying bullet riddled bodies from the square still haunt him.

"No one came [to Tiananmen] for just one thing," he recalls. "I thought we needed to become like the Soviet Union – we didn't know the West.

Something in me changed – I knew we needed freedom and we didn't have it. And you realised lots of people shared the same feeling, even though we didn't know where or how to get it... China before that, we had been locked up so long."

Blacklisted for his role in the protests, Guo Jian was unable to find work for three years as he waited for approval to emigrate to Australia, which he did in the early 1990s. Today, he has returned to China and set up a studio in the thriving artist community of Songzhuang on the eastern outskirts of Beijing. While his exhibition options in the country are curtailed because of his past political actions, Guo Jian continues to exhibit outside of China with new paintings, photographic work and collage that examine the environmental degradation and cultural malaise that are the underbelly of his country's economic success, and the propaganda experience of soldiers in China and abroad. ■

Guo Jian is represented by Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

[www.arcone.com.au](http://www.arcone.com.au)  
[www.guojianart.com](http://www.guojianart.com)

- 01 The Day before I Went Away, 2008, oil on canvas, 320 x 227cm
  - 02 Guo Jian in his studio. Photograph by Zhang Xin
  - 03 Untitled #5, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 213 x 152cm
  - 04 Untitled, 2007, oil on canvas, 152 x 213cm
  - 05 Untitled #2, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 213cm
  - 06 Guo Jian's studio
  - 07 Cast and Crew, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 250cm
  - 08 Diorama of Tiananmen (detail), 2010-2011, mixed media, 460 x 220cm
  - 09 Picturesque scenery, 2012, digital photography, 330 x 500cm (ten panels)
- Courtesy the artist