

**Tea with the Gao Brothers:
The Gao Brothers reflect on the 60th Anniversary of the PRC and the gentrification
of the Factory 798 Art District**

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A couple of weeks ago during my first visit to Beijing's famous Factory 798 art district I had all but given up on finding any semblance of real political dissent in contemporary Chinese art when I wandered into a coffee shop called The High Place and stumbled upon a bronze sculpture of a disgruntled Chairman Mao, hunched over and clenching a rifle. That is how I discovered the Gao Brothers.

Gao Zhen and Gao Qiang were born in Jinan, Shandong Province, but have been producing art in Beijing since the 1980's. In 2009, as the People's Republic of China was preparing to commemorate its sixtieth anniversary with one of the most elaborate celebrations in the history of the world, the Gao Brothers were commemorating Mao's accomplishments in their own way, by privately exhibiting their latest sculptures. In one of these works, *Mao's Guilt*, an anguished Chairman Mao kneels as he confesses his crimes. In the other, *The Execution of Christ*, a firing squad of Mao Zedongs takes aim at Jesus. The sculpture that I had seen was in fact part of this second work.

The Gao Brothers agreed to meet me at The High Place to chat over tea. They were very friendly, though soft-spoken and concise. All the patriotic zeal surrounding the sixtieth anniversary celebrations this fall left me feeling somewhat overwhelmed, so I asked the Gao Brothers what their reflections were.

"When Chairman Mao stood at Tiananmen and proclaimed the Founding of the People's Republic of China," said older brother Gao Zhen, "when he proclaimed that China had stood up, it was really *he* who stood up while the people bowed down. It was him saying *Mao Zhudu Wan Sui* (long live Chairman Mao)." In *Mao's Guilt*, he said, he wanted to portray Mao as a flawed human being with remorse for his actions.



The Gao Brothers with their piece *The Execution of Christ*.

During the Cultural Revolution Zhen and Qiang's father was arrested, and died mysteriously not long afterwards. Naturally, much of their work expresses rage but they are also full of optimism. On September 10, 2000, they organized a performance piece in which one hundred and fifty volunteers hugged for twenty minutes. When asked about it, they told me that "traditionally Chinese people don't even hug their friends and relatives, so we wanted to get people to hug complete strangers". They were invited to recreate this performance in Venice the following year, but the Chinese government denied them passports from 1989 until 2003.

The Gao Brothers come from a generation of artists that enjoyed considerable freedom during the rule of Deng Xiaoping up until the pro-democracy actions of 1989. Then the government clamped down hard, resulting in a migration of artists out of the centre of Beijing to the relatively remote 798 district, where they set up their studios inside defunct Bauhaus factories. As Beijing expanded, their haven grew closer to the city, and the past few years have seen 798 turn into a gentrified tourist destination with as many boutiques and cafes as studios and galleries. The development of the area has also brought increasing government scrutiny, and many artists have moved away to places like the village of Songzhuang to focus on their work. The Gao Brothers now have their own private work space elsewhere (they would not say where), and the "studio" that they keep at 798 is mostly an exhibition space for visitors. As Gao Zhen explained "most of us [artists] came here because it was free and because it was cheap. Now it is neither of those. Many people left because rent prices went up. That's not why we left. We left because the government was getting too involved."

On the 1st of October, 2009, the day of the PRC's sixtieth Anniversary celebration, the power to the Gao Brother's studio at Factory 798 was cut in what they



The Forever Unfinished Building No. 4, photomontage, 2008. Image courtesy of the artists?

believe was a not-so-subtle attempt to dissuade visitors. This hardly came as a surprise: in 2007 a pair of guards had been sent by the Party to keep people out of the space, and certain works were confiscated.

After tea the brothers took me over to that studio to see more of their work. I gawked at *The Forever Unfinished Building No. 4*, a photo montage with an Escher-like sense of infinity. Completed in 2008, it depicts a modern-day Tower of Babel—an endlessly expanding concrete high-rise whose human occupants are lost in the fray. Gao Qiang pointed out a number of recognizable figures within the image, including George W. Bush and the Dalai Lama, who is balancing on the wing of an F-18 fighter plane. But he was especially interested in pointing out Liu Xiaobo, the Beijing intellectual recently sentenced to eleven years in prison for his involvement in the pro-democracy Charter 08 movement. For all the international media surrounding the figures, they are all lost in the frenzy of construction.

At the front of the studio is *Miss Mao*, a series of sculptures of Chairman Mao with full breasts that the brothers have been asked to remove in the past. The sculptures define iconoclasm at its simplest. “It seems like it would be easier for you to produce your art in another country,” I pointed out to Gao Zhen. “You wouldn’t have so many restrictions. Why not move overseas?”

“We are Chinese,” he answered. “All our work is related to China. We want to stay here and see it develop.”

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