

Wanxin Zhang



Curiosity Drives Artist Wanxin Zhang

Rebekah Moan, April 2015

Wanxin Zhang considers his art to be a question, not an answer. That quiet curiosity is evident not only in his sculptures, but his demeanor. Zhang's personality and artist sensibility can likely be attributed to his formative years in China, which coincided with the Cultural Revolution.

Born in 1961 in Changchun, Zhang grew up in a time when Mao Zedong, then chairman of China's Communist Party, set out to purge remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society. Paintings, books, and buildings were destroyed. "Two years after the Chinese Cultural Revolution started, I began attending a local elementary school," he wrote in his catalog *Wanxin Zhang: A Ten Year Survey, 1999-2009*. "The first phrase that I remember hearing in school was, 'Long live Chairman Mao!' The imagery and words of Mao were everywhere, and we worshiped Mao like he was a God. We did what he said and we believed what he preached."

Mao played a part in Zhang's desire to become an artist. During the Cultural Revolution, being an artist was a desired job; work was guaranteed because it was commissioned by the government. However, only professional artists were allowed to portray Mao.

"One of my classmate's father was a professional sculptor...I was beginning middle school, I went to my friend's father's studio and saw him working on a Mao statue," he said in an interview with the *View*. "In that particular moment [I thought] 'Oh my gosh, an artist can do this kind of thing.' I told my friend, 'Let's do a Mao statue,' and we grabbed some clay. My friend's father stopped us and said, 'Hey, don't do that. You're going to get in trouble. You can't do the Mao, you can do something else, you can sculpt a dog, a rock, you cannot do Mao.'"

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When he asked why, Zhang was told Mao was a leader, a God, and couldn't be sculpted by regular people. In that moment Zhang thought that perhaps someday he could do the sorts of things his friend's father did; he, too, could sculpt Mao. He decided to become an artist.

"Unfortunately, I have never had a chance to do the Mao statue after that. I used to memorialize Mao like a God, but not anymore," he said. After the Cultural Revolution, the new Chinese government criticized Mao and emphasized that he was a regular person, not a God; that Mao could make mistakes like everyone else. Zhang lost his desire to sculpt Mao.

While it was the Cultural Revolution that inspired Zhang to become an artist, it's what came after that shapes his work today. After the revolution, China moved from a completely isolated society to a more open one. "We were suddenly learning different things. Art is not just propaganda, it's not just in service to Mao," Zhang said. "We never heard about Picasso, we never heard about Andy Warhol before. In the 1980s, you know, suddenly the Wild West came to China, especially for the young students...It was so exciting to see something different. That's why I just want to explore different things. Not just art."

The quest to explore still drives Zhang. It's what motivated him to come to California. He was an established artist in China, but decided to attend graduate school at the Academy of Art in 1992. He hasn't left the Bay Area since.



"Basically, San Francisco was my first stop when I arrived here and then I did the cruise for other cities – New York, Chicago – but eventually I wanted to set up here because it's more attractive,

not only is there a lot of Chinese population, there are also cultures, diversity, museums, and good artists in the Bay Area,” he said.

Before coming to the U.S., Zhang worked in abstract sculpture; primarily using metal and other finished materials. In China he was considered a contemporary, cutting-edge artist, but in California he realized that what he thought was edgy was actually quite common. He shifted to relying on clay after being exposed to the American Clay Revolution, and the work of the Bay Area Figurative and Funk art movements, represented by artists Peter Voukos – whose studio Zhang worked in briefly – Robert Arneson, Stephen De Staebler, and Manuel Neri, among others.

Clay enabled Zhang to work from his heart. There’s emotion in clay; the move from metal let him deliver a different kind of message, he said. It also won him a number of accolades, including the Joan Mitchell Painter and Sculptor and the Virginia A. Groot Foundation grants, as well as exhibitions around the world. In 2012, the *San Francisco Chronicle* identified Zhang’s Richmond Art Center exhibition as one of the Top 10 Exhibitions in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Catharine Clark Gallery, on Utah Street, showed Zhang’s work in an exhibition titled “Totem” that ran last fall and winter.

According to Zhang’s wife, Diane Ding, also an artist, what she loves about her husband of 29 years is his spirit. “He is brave, determined, and has a strong and compassionate mind,” she said in an interview with the *View*. “I often like to call him a ‘warrior’ both as a term of endearment and to jokingly connect him to the pieces he makes.”

Ding said Zhang is a great husband, father, and an optimist, believing in working for what he wants, a person who treasures his freedom and loves America.

“To me, I appreciate how he was able to combine aspects of our upbringing in the East with the values of the West,” she said. “For instance, he’s a stronger believer in meritocracy and individuality; yet he also deeply appreciates the peaceful mindset philosophy. And this combination allows him to make wonderful art with many layers of humor, compassion, and humanity. He uses his art to question and discuss history, society, politics, and the interconnection of them all. And as he likes to say, ‘Art made from the heart will be timeless.’”

Besides working in his own studio, Zhang teaches ceramic art at the Academy of Art, University of California, Berkeley, California College of the Arts, and San Francisco Art Institute.