

CERAMIC ART

# PORCELAIN ACTIVIST

Liu Jianhua is trying to break down the clichés associated with the delicate material to make it reflect social problems, **Lin Qi** reports.

After working with porcelain for many years, Liu Jianhua believes that the process of making an artwork is more important than what materials are used to create it. In his installation series *Trace*, which is now on display at the Singapore Art Museum, Liu has put up black, ink drop-like porcelain pieces on a white wall, giving the impression of something dripping. The series won the 53-year-old professor of sculpture the Jurors' Choice Award of the Asia-Pacific Breweries Foundation Signature art prize in 2014.

Liu says he was inspired by *wu lou hen* (rain stains on the wall of a leaking house), an expression in Chinese calligraphy, where ink strokes are compared to shapes of water stains.

The artist, who teaches at Shanghai University, says that he changes the presentation of *Trace* according to different exhibition venues. At the Singapore Art Museum, for instance, he placed the porcelain drops on a wall near the spiral staircase that connects the first and second floors. As audiences climb up the stairs, more and more drops come into view.

"The 'ink drops' are like traces of the human mind and imprints of the human soul," Liu says. "When people enter this tranquil space, leaving behind the hustle and bustle of the real world, I hope the work will soothe their conflicted psyches."

At the age of 12, Liu left his native city of Ji'an in eastern China's Jiangxi province, for the town of the country's "pottery capital" Jingdezhen.

He apprenticed under his uncle, a technician at a local ceramic factory in the town, and received lessons in pottery for years.

Liu's gifts and diligence won him top prizes in Jingdezhen and at the national level too. Yet no matter how superb his skills were, Liu says, he then saw a bleak future for himself, imagining that he would most likely end up as a "replaceable screw on a production line", much like retired workers from his uncle's workshop.

But after reading *Auguste Rodin*:



Top: A visitor views artist Liu Jianhua's installation series *Trace*, which features porcelain drops on a wall.

Above: Liu works at his studio in Shanghai. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

### If you go

10 am-7 pm, Mondays to Sundays, 10 am-9 pm on Fridays, through March 15. Singapore Art Museum, 71 Bras Basah Road, Singapore. 65-65899-580.

*L'art*, by Paul Gsell, he was inspired to change tack: learn sculpture in college.

After about three years of preparations, Liu was enrolled in the sculpture department of Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute in 1985. He thought he would never touch ceramic clay ever again.

After graduation, he landed a teaching job at an art college in Kunming in Southwest China's Yunnan province. Meanwhile with great vigor, he experimented in the contemporary art field.

His early works, mostly semi-abstract sculptures, expressed a certain amount of self awareness. He

tried out various materials from mud to wood to colored fiberglass. In the *Inharmonious* series of 1994, he modeled a woman's body parts with fiberglass to mock consumerism on the rise in Chinese society.

But porcelain came into his life in a big way with the *Memories of Infuturation* series. His perspective of art had changed by then. He returned to Jingdezhen and found that no medium other than porcelain could give his work the texture and effect he desired, and created ceramic *qipao* (cheongsam dress) sculptures, human female forms without heads and upper limbs but only legs wearing high-heeled shoes.

Liu says that the tightness of the cheongsam is comparable to the repressed sexual curiosity of adolescence among Chinese who were born in his generation — the 1960s.

Through his *qipao* series, he seeks to show the contradictions between traditional culture and the modern world. The sophistication of ceramic texture, the shapes of cheongsam and the twisted legs are all meant to bring to the fore social issues trig-

gered by consumerism, such as changes in the relationship between men and women.

"Porcelain looks hard, but it is actually fragile. So is life. Beautiful things in life will eventually be broken," he says.

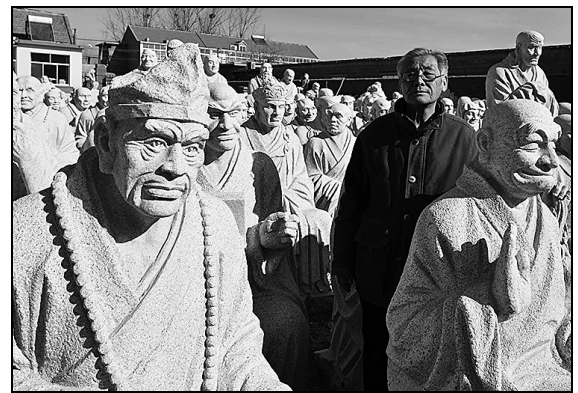
Porcelain has recurred as the main material in Liu's many creations in the past few years. He has taken advantage of its many features to highlight the dilemma of urban development. Since 2008 he has been exploring the subject of "no meaning, no content" in this regard.

He detaches porcelain from the clichés associated with it to make the material speak to the social problems. Liu experiments with it to magnify personal emotions by enriching the form and presentation of porcelain.

"The more I work with porcelain, the more I discover its possibilities as the novelty medium of expression."

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PROFILE



Sculptor Chen Xiulin with statues of the arhats at his residence-cum-studio on the outskirts of Weifang city in Shandong province. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

## Former PLA pilot creates Silk Road statues for Italy

By **WANG QIAN**  
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Chen Xiulin, when in his 20s, flew a military plane over areas where China had conducted its first nuclear missile test in 1966, to collect some air samples.

But back then he didn't realize that one day he would take a route that's rather different for a People's Liberation Army aviator — that of a sculptor.

The 78-year-old Weifang native, from eastern China's Shandong province, is now working day and night to finish a set of bronze sculptures for the 2015 Milan World Expo. His work at the event to be held in May will depict scenes from China's trade and cultural exchanges with other parts of the world along the ancient Silk Road.

His 170-meter-long sculpture, which comprises 23 statues, will be shipped to Italy in March and placed at the Sino-Italy Pavilion for display in Venice, a sub-venue for the exposition, according to Lu Yintao, the executive director for Chinese Art and Craft Association and an art adviser to the pavilion team.

Among Chen's other works invited to be showcased at the global fair are his stone statues of the 500 Arhats, disciples of the Buddha on advanced paths of enlightenment.

"Chen's portrait sculptures, especially the arhat statues, are perfectly proportioned and extremely vivid in facial expressions. Each one can rival world-famous works," says Lu, who introduced the former pilot's works to the expo organizing committee.

"The expo will be the best international stage to showcase Chinese culture. I hope my works can help people better know Chinese traditional culture," Chen says.

Born in Weifang, which is among the country's main production centers of traditional wood-print painting, Chen was fascinated by local folk artisans since his childhood.

After joining the air force in 1961, he studied drawing and sculpting techniques and copied thousands of illustrations from books in his spare time.

"The first work I carved out nearly 50 years ago was based on images of my comrades-in-arms.

The sculpture is still on display at the Chinese Aviation Museum in Beijing," Chen says.

In 1966, after China's first nuclear missile test, Chen and two other air force colleagues accepted the assignment of collecting air samples over the blast site. The exposure to radiation made the three extremely ill five years later, and Chen was the lone survivor. He retired from the air force in his 30s.

Since then he has immersed himself in the world of sculptures and other artworks.

"I push myself to work hard as long as I think of my colleagues who died in their early years," he says.

In the front courtyard of his residence-cum-studio on the outskirts of Weifang city stand statues of the arhats. It took Chen nearly 30 years to complete them. Slightly larger than life size, the statues depict the Buddhist monks in different ages ranging from energetic youth to old, toothless people.

"They are different from traditional solemn Buddhist statues. I've tried to show these monks' true feelings and affections based on my experiences and observations in real life," Chen says, adding that each statue has a different facial expression, body posture and personality, and seems to be telling the viewer a story.

Chen spent two years visiting numerous temples in India, Nepal and the Tibet autonomous region where Buddhist paintings and sculptures have been preserved, in a bid to understand his subjects well.

"It usually took one or two months to create a statue, but some even took several years as I came across new ideas while making them," says Chen.

Besides the sculptures, Chen has made statues of numerous Chinese mythology, historically and cultural figures such as Confucius and his 72 disciples.

"Traditional Chinese culture includes a wide range of virtues such as benevolence, faith, tolerance and harmony," Chen says. "I try to use my sculptures to express the ideas ... which are also needed in today's world."

Chen rises at 5 am and works for more than 12 hours daily. There's still much he needs to do, he says. "I'm always afraid of not having enough time."

EXPANSION PLAN

# More Chinese cultural centers along Silk Road by 2020

By **DENG ZHANGYU** in Istanbul  
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China will hasten the process of building cultural centers in countries along the ancient Silk Road as part of an expansion plan for such institutes. The central government is looking to have at least 50 such centers by 2020, up from the current 20, officials from the Chinese Ministry of Culture said during a recent Chinese New Year celebration in Istanbul.

In Sri Lanka and Nepal, which are included in China's "Belt and Road" initiative, China has already built two culture centers that will open soon, Yu Jian, director for the Division of Western Asia and Northern Africa Affairs at the Ministry of Culture, said at the Feb 14 event. He added that China and Turkey are prepared to have the China Culture Center in that country soon.

Under the "Belt and Road" initia-

tive, more highways, railways and air routes will be established, and Chinese regions will further integrate resources, policies and markets to connect with the outside world, according to Xinhua News Agency.

As a link for transportation between the West and the East, Turkey played a key role on the ancient Silk Road.

"We hope Turkey's China culture center will be a landmark building. The center should attract as many young people as possible and maintain close cooperation with local communities," Yu says.

Xiang Zhaolun, China's deputy minister of culture, was also present at the Istanbul gala that was held to promote the Spring Festival.

The nations that share good relations and have close cultural exchanges with China will be among the top places where the centers will come up, according to Yu.

Last Wednesday, Yan Dongsheng,

deputy director of the Ministry of Culture's finance division, said that for setting up cultural centers overseas, China had invested about 1.33 billion yuan (\$214 million) by the end of 2014. This year, the budget for developing and running the institutes abroad is 360 million yuan, up 181 percent compared to last year.

China set up its first culture centers in Mauritius and the Republic of Benin in 1988. From 2002, it opened more, in Cairo, Paris, Malta, Berlin and Tokyo.

They are "windows" to showcase Chinese culture, Yan said.

Yu said that Chinese high-tech companies will also join the campaign to promote China's technological innovations in the overseas markets.

In Cairo, the center that was built in 2002 has been a good platform for locals to know China and learn about Chinese art, music, dance, cuisines and languages, says Chen

Dongyun, director of the Cairo center.

Standing next to the pyramids, the five-story Cairo center has trained more than 8,000 Egyptians in Chinese languages and martial arts. In addition, it offers regular classes on Chinese cooking and kite-making.

Chinese movie weeks and exhibitions of traditional arts such as calligraphy are also available.

Chen, the director, says that the number of the center's followers on Facebook reached 10,000 in less than a year. More than 11,000 attended a Happy Spring Festival activity held by the center at a Cairo park, double the number of visitors to the same event last year.

Unlike the Confucius Institutes that mainly focus on teaching Chinese language, China's culture centers lean more toward promoting culture and showing the lives of ordinary Chinese, says Chen.



Middle school students visit the China Culture Center in Cairo to gain knowledge of Chinese traditional medicine. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY