



Photo: Peng Yining

Don't be afraid to face history. This is what we have done and this is our nation.

Zhang Dali
Artist

Fast facts: Zhang Dali

- 1963 Born in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province
- 1987 Graduates from Central Academy of Arts and Design in 1987 and works as a freelance painter in Beijing
- 1989 Moves to Bologna, Italy
- 1992 Paints his trademark profile of a bald man on the street of Bologna, and names it *Dialogue*
- 1995 Back to Beijing, as China's first graffiti artist.
- 1998 A photo of his graffiti appears on the cover of *Newsweek* in the United States
- 2003-2005 Portrays 100 immigrant workers in life-size resin sculptures of various postures, with a designated number, the artist's signature and the work's title *Chinese Offspring* tattooed onto each of their bodies.
- 2008 Work about migrant workers *Wind Horses Flag* exhibits in Beijing
- 2009 *A Second History* exhibits in Walsall, UK.

► Zhang Dali

Pictures expose peculiar prejudices of the propagandist

By Peng Yining

Zhang Dali realized he had been living in a distorted world for many years. The world he had believed in collapsed, history all a great big lie.

He began collecting the old news photos in 2004, going to archives to find the original negatives and then comparing them with the published versions: shabby old houses transformed into multi-story buildings where residents were leading the good life, bonus pigs pasted beside a farm to add prosperity, revolutionary heroes moved in front of pine trees and red flags plus of course famous politicians airbrushed out of history.

"I felt so depressed when I found that things I had seen with my own eyes might not be true," he said.

"Like being manipulated by something or somebody for years and one day, you suddenly feel it in your soul: 'I live a fake life.'"

Zhang first heard about doctored photos in the 1970s. His father showed him a calendar. There used to be four leaders in the photo, his father said: Liu Shaoqi, Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. Liu had gone.

Global habit

In 1993, Zhang read Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and so he knew a bit about propaganda image manipulation, but the Czech writer's book had not prepared him for the discovery of so many wrong Chinese mainland photos.

He picked 130 out of more than 300 he had collected and named his work *A Second History*.

"There are different versions of history," Zhang said. "The first is objective, but usually we only get to read the second: history that was revised."

"I want to find the hidden truth that was revised or deleted."

Some photo alterations are easily understood, like cutting a tall person out of a group photo from alongside propaganda folk hero Lei Feng.

"The publisher wanted to make Lei Feng look taller, more heroic," Zhang said. "That's just standard practice in China. It could have been revised by the publisher or art editors. Anyone could revise it."

But other changes confuse us today.

"It's like 'Spot the Difference'," said Zhang. "A man's hat has been removed for no obvious reason."

"Maybe he was the only one in the photo who wore a hat and that nonconformity made people uncomfortable back then. But it seems only natural today."

To obtain the original negatives, Zhang went to almost every archive in China, even managing to get hold of some classified film through some sympathetic connections.

Most of these archives are not open to the public, he said, so collecting the original film was actually the hard part.

"I knew some photos of leaders were sensitive, but I really enjoy finding the truth I never knew," he said. "The leaders and political issues are just a part of history, an element of the truth."

Mao disappears

The very last photo of *A Second History* concerns Mao Zedong. The original photo was of Mao and many villagers, but all the villagers were deleted to make the photo focus on the leader. So far as expected.

But what makes the exhibit so surprising is the 2007 version of this photo: Mao has been deleted.



The editors just wanted to compare the view with today's view: the place had changed so much they had found it impossible to locate a picture with the old view. Until they saw Mao.

This little story showed in his opinion that everything changes, and the photo just represents a

change in people's own sense of worth. Important things might be ignored in another context, Zhang said.

As the process of collecting continued, Zhang became more and more optimistic. He stopped to think about what is real and what is fake and



stopped obsessing over all the lies and deceit. He realized the whole process of revisionism reflected the whole country's mindset, not just propaganda and cultural policies but also the lives and habits of every ordinary Chinese person.

"And we can still trace answers for today's China in those photos," he said. "Why we are so cocky but blush at our own mistakes and poverty?"

"Why we are so sensitive and inferior that we refuse to admit there are problems?"

"Don't be afraid to face history. This is what we have done and this is our nation. Every rational intellectual has the capacity to uncover our real history. An artist is part intellectual."

A Second History just finished exhibiting in the New Art Gallery of Walsall in the United Kingdom in May this year.

"They said the artistic expression of *A Second History* surpassed any individual painting or statue," said Zhang, who was delighted by the rave reviews.

"It's the best way to display China's cultural policy for a long time."

Some of his photos admittedly contain some relatively sensitive political issues, Zhang said, but he urged authorities to think carefully about the message his exhibition sent.

"I didn't set out to criticize anything," Zhang said. "Fake photos exist all over the world. If someone uses my works to attack China, I can't help that. I'm just an artist. I just show what I see."

Zhang will try to get *A Second History* exhibited in Beijing this year, but he conceded there was little chance he could succeed and so he is already thinking about other Chinese cities. The display boards are all now leaning against the wall of his study.

"Such a pity," he said. "My work is for Chinese."



Far left pair: Zhu De, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai salute the first PLA national sports meet in 1952. The bottom photo was published in *Selected Photographs of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*. The altered version appeared in *People's Pictorial* of 1977.

Left pair: A portrait of Mao Zedong and the slogans "Follow the Communist Party" and "Listen to Chairman Mao" replace a shabby wall and door in the new photo of Chengzhang Agriculture Labor School published by *People's Pictorial* in February 1969.

Above: *A Second History* exhibits in the New Art Gallery of Walsall in the United Kingdom in May 2009. Photos: courtesy of Zhang Dali

Did Zhang Dali sell out?

There's a lazy stereotype of artists that they loiter about the street all day, growing long hair and then suddenly get hit with a flash of inspiration, Zhang Dali told the *Global Times*.

"People should ask themselves where this so-called flash of inspiration comes from," he joked.

Well, perhaps it came from Zhang. Zhang himself had long hair 22 years ago when he graduated from the Central Academy of Arts and Design in Beijing and started painting.

"I am not that into Beijing now. People here wandering all the time and calling themselves 'artists'," said the lesser-known artist in the 1988 documentary film *Drifters in Beijing*. Zhang was huddled in a cramped rented room, his straight black hair hanging to his shoulders, unclean beard obscuring a small chin.

The Zhang of today sports a crew cut and a clean-shaven face. Only the Harbin draw remains the same, perhaps a bit softer.

Returning from Italy in 1995, Zhang made his name as the "first graffiti artist of China" for his trademark profile of a bald man on Beijing streets.

But annoying many of his fans, he stopped graffiti in 2007.

"Zhang cleaned up," Liu Yuansheng, a photographer who spent years documenting Chinese graffiti, wrote in his blog. "He became rich and his life was changed, so he abandoned graffiti."

Some new graffiti artists agree with Liu.

"He disparaged graffiti after becoming famous from it, but I can understand why Zhang quit," Seven, a member of a graffiti crew in Beijing told the *Global Times*. "He's a rich man now."

"They think like that about me?" Zhang lifted himself out of the sofa and paused for a moment in thought.

"Well, I suppose to some extent, they're right. It's true that today I just don't get that sudden yen to sneak out at midnight and ride a bicycle to spray a blank wall."

"But their conclusion about me is simplistic," he shook his head, and fell back into the sofa.

"I am beyond street graffiti now. I seek fulfillment through something more complicated, more magnificent, like *A Second History*."