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MAO AND MAO, the revered Chinese chairman is satirized in the work of Zhang Hongtu.

ANTHONY CASALE DAILY NEWS

From Shanghai to SoHo

For Chinese expatriates, it's art for heart's sake

By JAMES DAO
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As a Shanghai art student 10 years ago, Zhao Sui-Kang was schooled in Socialist Realism — the Soviet-influenced style then fashionable among China's cultural czars.

But when he all-too realistically depicted China's grinding poverty, his teachers were outraged.

"We were supposed to show the peasants, workers and soldiers as heroes," said Zhao, now 32 and a student at Manhattan's School of Visual Arts. "They thought I was using realism against the state."

His punishment was perversely fitting: banishment to an impoverished village.

Such tribulations are familiar to independent artists from China, which has welcomed Western capital while trying to stifle "corrupting" foreign influences.

Settled here

Since 1980, more than 100 Chinese artists have settled in New York, part of the tide of intellectuals who left China when it loosened barriers to travel and study abroad.

The artists were drawn by the promise of intellectual freedom and the city's image as art capital of the world.

"Many hope that in New York, they can become Picasso: famous, rich, powerful," said artist Ling Ling, who calls himself Billy Harlem.

A few have succeeded, thanks to several well-known galleries featuring traditional Chinese watercolorists.

But the vast majority, who include some of China's foremost modern artists, struggle for recognition in the "gallery of the street" — the outdoor portrait-painting business now dominated



ZHAO Sui-Kang with work at SoHo show.

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by Chinese in Greenwich Village and on 42d St.

SoHo show

Recently, a show opened in SoHo that is giving some expatriates a chance to show their work — and fire back at the government that once tried to muzzle them.

Dedicated to the June 4 massacre of pro-democracy demonstrators in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, the show (through Nov. 11 at the Blum Helman Warehouse, 80 Greene St.) features 200 artists — most non-Chinese — from all over the world.

"To me, Tiananmen is a cultural thing," said Bob Lee of the Asian American Arts Centre, one of the show organizers. "It changed how people feel not only about China, but also basic human dignity."

75 doors

The show's centerpiece is 75 interlocking doors splashed with powerful images of repression, betrayal and violence. Other pieces are satirical thrusts at Chinese leaders and state-sanctioned culture.

Among the most striking is Zhang Hongtu's "The Last Banquet."

Based on Da Vinci's depiction of the Last Supper, Zhang's work substitutes Mao for Christ and his 12 disciples. Instead of Judas grasping a bag of gold, a young Mao holds a Little Red Book. On the table are chopsticks, rice bowls and a set of microphones.

"In China, Mao is still like a God," Zhang said.

Made jewelry

Ridiculed by his art teachers because he used colors and brush strokes influenced by French Impressionists, Zhang made jewelry and almost gave up painting rather than paint huge heroic murals of workers and peasants for the government.

When he came to America in 1982, he was confronted with a rush of new ideas, from abstract impressionism to the work of Andy Warhol. Suddenly, he was re-making his style.

June 4 caused him to change again, his paintings becoming more sharply satirical, overtly political.

"Art is not a weapon," he said. "Neither is a kitchen knife. But when somebody is coming after you, you can use it as one."