

The melting phallus of Jin Shan's My Dad is My Dad is Li Gangqi



by Claudia Norton
Illustration by Diane Zhou

JIN SHAN'S FIRST SHOW in the US consisted of a mock-up of the cosmos under which a silicone policeman dangled, periodically slamming into the floor. The exhibition, held at the Spencer Museum of Art of the University of Kansas, examined Chinese state authority and the Mandate of Heaven, a concept equivalent to the divine right of kings. Apparently, a few days after the exhibition began, professors who worked underneath the gallery's floor organized together in protest.

My Dad is Li Gang!, which will be shown in the Bell Gallery until November 4, is Jin Shan's second show in the US.

Born in Jiangsu, China, Jin Shan now lives and makes art in Shanghai. Jin is known for being playful, employing dark humor and satire rather than direct statements. Jin thinks of himself as a court jester, a subject employed to amuse and criticize his master and his master's actions. Jin explained that because the heavy political climate in China isn't going to shift anytime soon, he makes art to soften people's emotions. As a politically minded artist, Jin at once brings light to social ills and makes light of them. Jin, while speaking about his philosophy, had trouble translating this idea of "self-laugh" into English. "You must have a word for this," he implored on stage at the opening reception of the exhibition last Friday. Laughter as catharsis is present in his previous work. With *Desperate Pee* (2005), Jin constructed a silicone cast of his own body and placed it in different settings, allowing the mannequin to urinate on and into various objects: a Venetian canal, school desks, bubble wrap.

Like his better-known contemporary Ai Weiwei, a Chinese artist-dissident known for his run-ins with the Chinese authorities, Jin uses Chinese politics as the subject of his art. While Weiwei is a vocal human rights activist, Jin seems to fly under the radar of the Chinese government, or if he doesn't, he wouldn't admit it. When asked if *My Dad is Li Gang!* could be shown in China, he told the *Independent* that maybe he'd have to change the name of the piece. Such a blasé attitude toward the government's censorship of his work likely comes from the fact that Jin Shan has not yet reached great renown. Also, while Jin critiques power and authority in his pieces, he was more tight-lipped about the subject in front of an audience at the opening last Friday, letting the art speak for itself.

The title of Jin's piece at the Bell Gallery, *My Dad is Li Gang!* is a reference to a string of events that began at

Hebei University in Baoding, China. On October 16, 2010 22-year-old Li Qiming was intoxicated, late, and rushing to pick up his girlfriend in his car when he hit two women rollerblading down the street. Refusing to stay at the scene despite efforts from campus police, he sped off, stopping to shout "Go ahead, sue me if you dare; My dad is Li Gang!" The next day, one of the women died. Li Qiming's father was the deputy police chief in Beishi, Baoding. Following the incident, University students and the public at large rebuked Li Qiming for his shamelessness and expectations of impunity. Hebei University and communist party officials took steps to limit coverage of the accident, as exemption from consequences based on social or economic privilege isn't exactly in keeping with communist standards. Although the university implemented a gag order for witnesses and Chinese news networks refused to report the event, the story crept onto the Internet.

The Chinese Internet community attached strongly to the story, as it exemplified a lamentable trend in China's socio-political sphere: corruption and the privileged class's lack of accountability. So they fought back against the censorship, employing a technique known as 'Human Flesh Search Engine,' a crowd-sourced search for information about a person: a search by flesh, off/for flesh. Dubbing this particular campaign 'Official Second-Generation,' a reference to the offspring of the class of privileged officials, 'the people's' search engine uncovered evidence of Li Gang's corruption by revealing his ownership of five properties, assets whose values clearly exceeded the means of a man of his profession. The search engine also uncovered personal photos of Li Qiming that were later posted on the Internet.

On October 22, China Central Television aired the public apology of Li Qiming and Li Gang. Both men were shown crying. Instead of placating the public, the apology and its broadcast by a network known for its close ties with the communist party put off many Chinese who assumed the redress was insincere. Despite expectations that Li Qiming would not be held accountable for his mistake, he was arrested on October 24, sentenced the following January to six years in prison, and ordered to pay reparations. This event, while disconcerting due to Li Qiming's blatant abuse of his familial power and authority to evade punishment for his crimes, also indicates a growing political efficacy facilitated by the Internet and crowdsourcing.

IN *MY DAD IS LI GANG!*, Jin Shan works with concepts of power and privilege, along with complications around national technological advance at the expense of the common worker. *My Dad is Li Gang!*, which will be shown in the Bell Gallery until November 4, is one extended work. In the center of the gallery stands a mirror-clad replica of the Tiangong 1, or Heavenly Palace 1, launched in September 2011 as China's first space station. The craft is wedged in a pile of ooze while the upper-most cylinder of the space station rotates clockwise underneath a replica of a three-wheeled bicycle, the type commonly ridden by the urban poor of China. Jin's version of the bike is covered in melted glue. The bicycle is missing its two rear wheels, as if peddling would not propel the cyclist forward, but would power the space station instead. As the cylinder of the Tiangong 1 rotates, light refracts from its mirrors, suggesting, as Ian Russell, the curator of the Bell Gallery, puts it, a cosmic "socio-political disco party." A series of burnt, wooden hands, cast from workers in Shanghai who typically ride the bicycles, grasp the handlebars and frame of the bike tightly. Around the centerpiece are four walls constructed from American lumber and dented plaster, beaten with casts of the hands of the bicycle-riding, working poor.

June of this year marked the first time a manned space capsule docked at Tiangong 1. This event holds significance for many Chinese, indicating China's technological capabilities and its position in the space race. Jin's pairing of the masculine, technological object with white and yellow goo indexes China's 'arrival.' The high-tech craft garnering with national pride beneath the tool of the marginalized laborer forms a critique of power. While the bicycle consists of glue, the space station's many mirrored surfaces pervert and shatter the images that reflect into it. Everything is falling apart. Despite this, burnt hands still grasp the tool with which they work.

CLAUDIA NORTON B'14 is disappointed by the way that lil' Gang rose to stardom.