

Weimin's incredible journey

Sylvia Vetta meets a Chinese artist who lived through Mao's Cultural Revolution and experienced the Democracy Movement first hand before finding inspiration in Oxford

Dr Weimin He, artist in residence at the University of Oxford, at work in the Radcliffe Observatory

Photographs: Andrew Walmsley

Passing by the Radcliffe Infirmary during the recent demolition work, part of the development of the new Radcliffe Observatory Quarter for Oxford University, you may have seen a solitary figure in a hard hat and carrying a clipboard, eyes focused intently on the scene and hand busy with a pencil.

You may have idly wondered if this was the architect, an engineer or project manager? You may be surprised to discover that the tall figure was Chinese artist Weimin He, artist in residence at the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter.

This is not the first building project in Oxford that Weimin has recorded. He was artist in residence during the building of the new Ashmolean. A copy of his book, *Building the New Ashmolean* was presented to the Queen when she opened the new building.

Weimin was born in Manchuria in 1964, just two years before the Cultural Revolution.

“My father, He Jixing, was born in Jiangxi province, once the centre of the Imperial porcelain industry in the warm south,” Weimin said.

“Leaving the army at the end of the Korean War, he wanted to return there, but was given no choice but to stay in the cold climes of Manchuria and teach Chinese literature in Mudanjiang,” Weimin explained.

“He quickly became head teacher in the

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secondary school where he met and married my mother, Lu Lilian, who taught mathematics. My older sister, He Haiyan, was born in 1962 and I have a younger sister, He Yinyan.

“At the time I was growing up, Maoist propaganda was ubiquitous. My name means ‘To serve the people’ in a Maoist sense. When I was 17, I tried to change it to ‘Blue Sky’. Written Chinese is hieroglyphic. The characters for blue sky and ‘to serve the people’ are different but they sound the same. Bureaucratic problems made it almost impossible to do officially but I signed my early adult pictures Blue Sky.”

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I asked Weimin what happened to his family.

“My father was tortured and sent to the countryside for re-education as a peasant. My great-grandfather on my mother’s side had worked in the Imperial court, so my mother was labelled landlord. The ostracism was painful for her for decades,” Weimin said.

“In 1970, when the situation was becoming more normal, we were allowed to join father in



Weimin He with his 1840s printing press inside St Luke’s Chapel, and, right, a self-portrait, aged 11

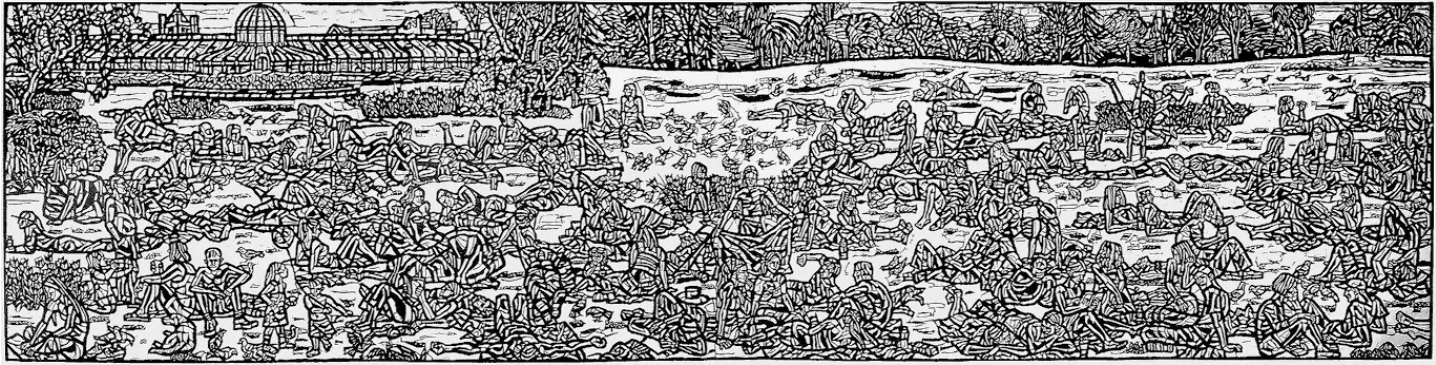
a village 70 miles from Mudanjiang. There had been no secondary school in the area and my parents, with help from villagers, built a school calling it ‘New Dawn’.

“Despite all that had happened, people were eager to learn. I was lucky because my mother had taught me maths and taught me to read. So when I went to primary school, I was bored and sometimes played truant.

“My parents’ life was tough, but as a six-year-old, I enjoyed much more freedom than the Chinese children of today. I explored the countryside, caught fish, picked water melons and was close to nature. We all had to

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work hard on the land if we wanted to eat," Weimin said.

"From my earliest memories, I loved to draw. By the age of five, some of my sketches of people were recognisable. Of course, my father was not pleased by my truanting, nor by my habit of compulsively sketching in the margins of my school books, but those experiences have affected me.

"Daoism is an important Chinese philosophy that is close to nature. In Daoist art, the empty spaces are important. I often make use of that concept in my work," he added.

Weimin showed me some of his sketches from the Cultural Revolution. In one there is a smiling benevolent looking Mao Zedung and an idyllic village scene with Maoist slogans.

"After Mao's death, I erased the characters 'Long Live' from *Long Live Chairman Mao*. Some people keep a written diary. I have sketched every day of my life – that is my visual diary," he said.

In 1975, the year before the death of Mao, his family was able to move back to the city. I wondered whether his formal art education began then, at age 11?

"Yes and informally, too. A colleague of my mother had been able to hide a book of western art from the Red Guards," Weimin explained.

During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards raided homes destroying 'poisonous books'. It was not just Western art that was attacked but traditional Chinese landscape painting was banned. Socialist Realism, featuring workers and peasants, was the only acceptable form of art to the authorities.

"The book was my first sight of Western art and especially of Renaissance art," Weimin revealed. "I was fascinated by the sketches of Michelangelo and Leonardo.

"The art teacher in my mother's school taught me western techniques of light and shade and from then on I used it. I even went over some of my old drawings adding shade. I joined a youth art club. The most inspiring thing I could have on your desert island would be Michelangelo's *David*."

In 1982, Weimin became an undergraduate student at the Harbin College of Art.

"Father would have preferred me to become an official, but I am lucky that my family have always been supportive and respected my choice of career. It is a passion, a way of life for me really," he explained.

"At college, I studied oil painting and traditional Chinese ink painting. In 1982, I was still occasionally subversive. I took a piece of wood from a classroom chair so that I could make my first wood block print.

"I saw my work published for the first time when still at school, aged 17. I was really

Above, Weimin He's In the Sunshine, made while he was living in Belfast. Right, Weimin with the silver-mounted claw given to him by his grandmother. "I take it with me everywhere. I feel it has some mysterious power and represents my family," he said.

Below, Weimin's sketch of Mao Zedung from the time of the Cultural Revolution



'After the demonstrations were suppressed, security bureau officials were sent everywhere to investigate. I had painted posters to mourn the dead and was in a difficult position. But I was fortunate in that the official who investigated me turned a blind eye to them'

surprised because I received letters from all parts of China about it everyday in the post for months – sometimes 20 per day."

Weimin taught art in a teacher training college for one year before attending a famous



art school in Luxun Academy of Fine Arts as a post graduate.

"I was still in Luxun, in 1989, when the Democracy Movement took to the streets," he said. "Like most young people, at the time, I was excited by it. It was not just happening in Beijing.

"After the demonstrations were suppressed, security bureau officials were sent everywhere to investigate. I had painted posters to mourn the dead and was in a

difficult position, but was fortunate in that the official who investigated me turned a blind eye to them. So in 1991, I was able to work as a professional artist at the Heilongjiang Artists' Association."

How did Weimin come to leave China? "Christur von der Burg and the late Verena Bolinder-Müller (founders of the Muban Foundation) came to China to collect prints. They liked my work and introduced me to Professor David Barker from Ulster University.

"They also agreed to support me financially so I could go to Belfast to study for my PhD. I arrived, in September 1999, two days before my 35th birthday," Weimin said.

"Although I had learned some English in school, I had only studied it seriously for six months in 1997. So my English was not good – and I was floored by the local accent. I felt completely lost and unable to communicate.

"I lived in a dirty shared flat with a Kosovan refugee and a local man living on benefits. Professor Barker was supportive and I moved into better accommodation in the city centre. I was adapting so well I even came to enjoy Guinness, which at first I thought was like drinking soy sauce!" Weimin laughed.

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Weimin He on the longest unsupported stone staircase in Britain inside the 18th century Radcliffe Observatory building. It has 92 steps and the construction matches the elliptic shape of the orbit of Venus

*Photograph:
Andrew Walmsley*



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“One morning I was woken by the police saying ‘Bomb, get out!’ and, in pyjamas, I found myself on the street. A pipe bomb had been thrown through the next door’s window. Up until then I had felt safe in Belfast, but after that experience, I decided to move out of the city centre.

“One day I was in the park and I started to sketch. I realised that the people lazing there enjoying the sun were Catholic and Protestant, Unionists and Nationalists, enjoying a shared experience. I called my picture *In the Sunshine*.”

Meanwhile, the Ashmolean Museum had advertised a post for a research fellow and Professor Barker encouraged Weimin to apply. He arrived in the city in 2005, with an accent part Chinese part Northern Irish!

The first exhibition he curated was entitled *The Mystery of Empty Space*. It was well received and reported in the national press.

Weimin went on to curate the stunning exhibition of Chinese prints at the Ashmolean with Shelagh Vainker, curator of Chinese art at the Ashmolean.

“Shelagh was such an encouraging person to work with,” Weimin said. “She trusted my judgement to go to China and select prints. It was interesting seeing the changes taking place as an outside observer. Prints throughout the 20th century reflected every change in

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Chinese society.”

How did Weimin become artist in residence at the Ashmolean?

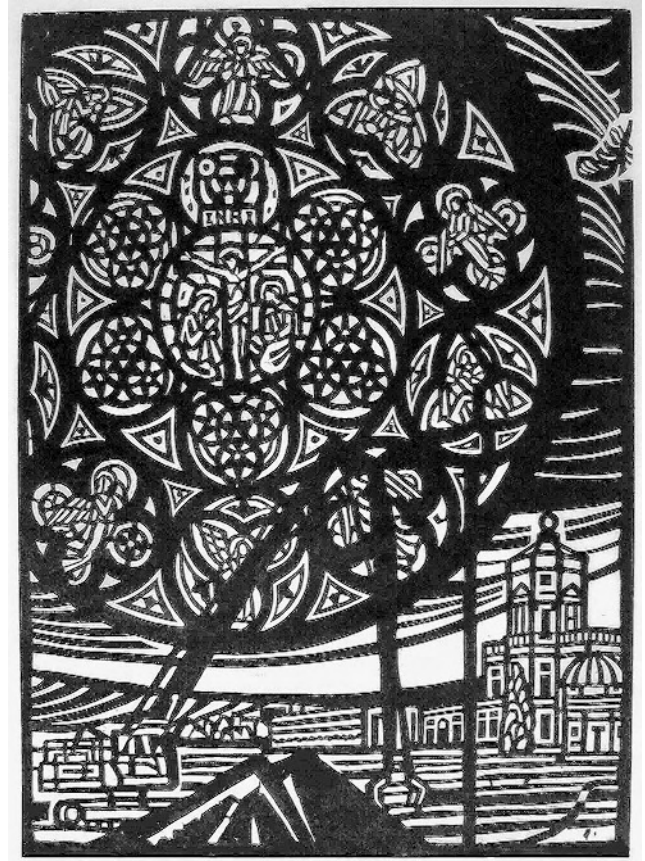
“It happened suddenly. My contract as a research fellow was about to end. I still sketched anything I could in my spare time and I had begun drawing the builders demolishing the back of the Ashmolean,” Weimin said.

“Christopher Brown, the director of the museum, heard about my sketches and, on my last day, invited me to stay on and be artist in residence. I was delighted, because I had come to love Oxford.”

Weimin’s *Building the New Ashmolean* was the opening exhibition. His parents were able to come and see his work – symbolic of an incredible life journey for the boy from a Manchurian village.

Weimin’s curiosity led him to his present post. While the building work on the Ashmolean progressed, his office was in the Gibson Building in the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter and so he could not stop himself sketching what was going on.

Weimin’s block print of the Radcliffe Observatory Quarter from St Luke’s Chapel. Below, the painting made by Weimin’s tutor Quan Xianguang



He explained: “Art doesn’t just record like a photograph, but expresses a spirit that touches you.

“When I saw the university was advertising for an artist in residence for the Observatory site, I applied and, of course, had plenty of work to show them.

“They have been extremely supportive of my project, and offered the prestigious St Luke’s Chapel as a place for me to restore a printing press from the 1840s. Block printing is time-consuming, but symbolic.”

But what items from his fascinating life would Weimin like to take with him to our desert island?

“If I had my printing press on the island complete with materials I could carry on working,” he said

“I have one little piece of jewellery, a silver mounted claw given me by my grandmother – she was of the generation who had bound feet. This is the only thing I have of hers and I take it with me everywhere. I feel it has some mysterious power and represents my family,” he added.

“In Daoist art, the void is the place where life originates; being comes out of nothing. I would like to take to the desert island something that symbolises that idea. I think a folder of absolutely blank Chinese album leaves, ready for creation, would do that.

“I would also need an example of the work of my tutor Quan Xianguang. His teaching method was unique and inspiring. He painted one especially for me of Zhongkui, who desired peace and fought evil spirits.”

I reminded Weimin that, in the end, he would have to choose just one thing.

He said: “In that case, could you assemble in one folio a collection of prints by Rembrandt, Durer and Goya and by Ren Bonian Wu Changshuo, Huang Qui Yan and maybe attach a Han dynasty seal from the Ashmolean? That way I would have plenty to inspire me, especially if they came on top of my press.”

■ Weimin is not the first Chinese artist to cast his eye over our city. Take a look at *The Silent Traveller in Oxford* (1944) by Chiang Yee and be delighted.

