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Polished Memories

Zhang Xiaogang's *Bloodline: Big Family No. 3* and the Ideal Family of the Cultural Revolution

Abby Wiggins

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Abstract

Zhang Xiaogang's series of paintings, *Bloodline*, is a strange, surreal, and haunting collection of family portraits. As a Chinese artist who was young during the Cultural Revolution of the 60s and 70s, Zhang has a complicated relationship with his own national history. The paintings of *Bloodline* are not photorealistic portraits; rather, they are constructions coming from within his mind as he returns to his memories and feelings decades later. This essay examines *Big Family No. 3*, a painting for the series done in 1995, exploring the influences and processes that contributed to its creation. It argues that this work in particular reflects on the Cultural Revolution, the artist relying on his own memories and retrospection to create a picture of an idealized family.



Figure 1. Zhang Xiaogang, *Bloodline: Big Family No. 3*, 1995. Oil on canvas, 180 x 230cm. With permission of the Asia Art Archive.

Zhang Xiaogang is a Chinese artist who was born in Kunming in 1958. His childhood was rather tumultuous, as he grew up during the period in China known as the Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966 and lasted for about a decade. During that time, his parents were mostly away being re-educated, and Zhang and his brothers were left to fend for themselves until schools reopened. From 1978 to 1982, he studied at the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts in Chongqing.¹ Early in his career, he spent a great deal of time imitating Western paintings and pursuing a style he deemed "expressionistic." As he progressed as an artist, though, he began to find his own visual language, a surreal style defined by smooth surfaces, muted colors, and eerie feelings. Arguably his most famous work, the *Bloodline* series

was a project he began in the early 90s that investigated his notions of family and memories. Zhang is still an active artist today, creating mostly oil paintings.

Reminiscing about his childhood, Zhang recalls one especially salient memory from when he was about three years old. The artist remembers trying to draw a soldier with a crayon, and "wanting to draw [him] with an angry expression, but no matter how hard he tried the soldier's expression came out sad, not angry."² This permeating sadness has followed him into his adult life, haunting the faces of the figures he paints in his pensive questioning of the state of Chinese individuals' lives. Zhang began work on the *Bloodline* series in 1993 after discovering old family

1. Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu, *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 298.

2. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 18.

portraits at his parents' home in Kunming.³ The series is a strange collection of "portraits," containing anywhere from one to five figures within each work. Several of the paintings in the series appear to be idealized pictures of nuclear families, and while it is clear the images are based on historical artifacts (the photographs), there is evidence of Zhang's calculated "re-touching" as he transforms his source material in an exploration of memory.

Zhang's paintings become a space where personal and national histories intermingle, where the line between real and fabricated memories begins to blur. His ghostly, almost alien-like figures stare at (or perhaps beyond) the viewer and communicate a quiet sense of grief, nostalgia, or possibly both at once, that is hidden deep beneath the surface. Zhang often evokes memories of the Cultural Revolution in his work (such as the military dress often worn by citizens at the time). However, he does so in a manner much different than his contemporaries, many of whom were satirically using icons (such as Mao's image) to create Political Pop art.⁴ Zhang's approach is not one of judgment, but rather curiosity about the past. Every painting in the series contains a "bloodline," a thin red line that pierces through each character's body and links them together. These bloodlines are used to connect people across time and space and to illustrate how pain can be transmitted across generations. Zhang's use of symbols is always deliberate in his careful investigation into memory—and how he encodes meaning in his work has evolved along with his *Bloodline* series.

Cultural Revolution

Zhang's 1995 painting *Bloodline: Big Family No. 3* (fig. 1) is an entry from the series that contains some of the most obvious allusions to the Cultural Revolution. It depicts a revolutionary family of three sporting military dress and Mao badges. Those Mao badges are situated on their hearts,

which the bloodlines also pierce through.⁵ Born in 1958, Zhang spent much of his youth under the policies of the Cultural Revolution. Many who were young during those years have hopeful and exciting memories; however, viewing the past with present knowledge sheds light on the profound sadness left behind by the events that transpired. To make sense of these contradictory feelings, Zhang has developed an extensive visual vocabulary in terms of costume, light, color, facial features, process, and style—all symbolic gestures that simultaneously make historical references and allow the artist to explore his latent childhood memories. Zhang's *Big Family No. 3* reflects on the Cultural Revolution, the artist consulting and correcting his memories to create an idealized family within which the line between individual and citizen is blurred.

Big Family No. 3 depicts a nuclear family that embodies uniformity and order, using symmetry and a smooth approach to painting that emphasizes these qualities. It mimics the format of a family portrait, though Zhang is not simply copying a picture; he is instead creating an archetypal family with his own feelings and memories in mind. The work is composed (presumably) of mother, father, and son, each of whom have large heads, long necks, and airbrushed features. This causes them to appear not quite human, or at least unnatural. The three figures are arranged in a nearly perfect line, their squared shoulders all aligned at the exact same height. Symmetry governs the composition, with the son in the middle perfectly balanced by his parents on either side. A gray cloud of fog constitutes the background, giving the painting a vagueness that suggests this is a constructed memory rather than a specific moment. Zhang uses color sparingly, creating a grayscale, dreamlike atmosphere punctuated by pink, green, and red. The figures bear nearly identical facial features, and the same shadow is cast on the right side of their faces.⁶ They stare ahead blankly, yet there

3. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 76.

4. Biba Duffy-Boscagli, "Intrinsically Linked: Selfhood, Politics and Complex Emotions in Xiaogang's *Bloodline* Series," *The Macksey Journal* 41, no. 2 (2021): 3, <https://mackseyjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/27891-intrinsically-linked-selfhood-politics-and-complex-emotions-in-xiaogang-s-bloodline-series>.

5. Verity Wilson, "Dressing for Leadership in China: Wives and Husbands in an Age of Revolutions (1911-1976)," *Gender & History* 14, no. 3 (2002): 609-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00284>. The clothing depicted closely resembles the Zhongshan suit, which was designated as the official dress of civil servants after Sun Yat-sen's death. It continued to be popularized by leaders after him, including Mao Zedong.

6. It appears that this same exact shadow is present in nearly every one of Zhang's "family portraits"—light always coming in from the right side of the composition, casting the entire right

is an ineffable hint of some feeling hidden beneath. Art historian Li Xianting remarks that the figures “become a kind of epitome of Chinese people—often teased by fate, who still . . . manage to retain that still-water like serenity.”⁷ They appear calm on the surface, but there is a tinge of grief or disappointment that Zhang has imbued in their gaze. Each of the three figures is touched by a faded patch of pink, a disruption that comes from a light source unknown to the viewer. They appear to be sort of impressions left behind, though Zhang does not show what has caused them. A thin red line snakes through the picture, piercing the hearts of each character and providing a symbolic link between them.

The similarities, as well as the slight differences, between each of the figures index details and feelings that provoke questions about how truthful this presentation of the family is. The mother, on the right side of the composition, wears a Mao suit with a pen in her pocket, a symbol of her education.⁸ Her face is a bright pink, standing in contrast to the gray tones that the other two are rendered in. Her left eye is crossed ever so slightly, an abnormality that contradicts the uniformity of the entire composition. The son, in the center, stands upright with his arms behind his back. The grass-green uniform, red armband, and metallic belt buckle are unmistakably a People’s Liberation Army military outfit, an outfit that embodies the idealistic zeal of the Cultural Revolution’s youth.⁹ He has an overbite, his mouth barely hanging open, indicating a slight defect that communicates a sense of unease.¹⁰ Like his mother, he wears a badge bearing Mao’s profile. The father, on the left side, is the only figure devoid of any small defects. He too wears plain military dress, his hair cut short and head uncovered by the caps both mother and son wear. There seems to be a separate bloodline that links the father and son, emerging from the

side of the face in shadow except for the planes of the face surrounding the eye.

7. Dan Mills, Xianting Li, and Xiaozhe Xie, *Regeneration : Contemporary Chinese Art from China and the US* (Lewisburg, PA: Samek Art Gallery, Bucknell University, 2004), 17.

8. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 86.

9. Li Li, “Uniformed Rebellion, Fabricated Identity: A Study of Social History of Red Guards in Military Uniforms during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and Beyond,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 14, no. 4 (2010): 440, <https://doi.org/10.2752/175174110X12792058833852>.

10. Yiju Huang, *Tapestry of Light: Aesthetic Afterlives of the Cultural Revolution* (Leiden: BRILL, 2014), 92.

boy’s collar, winding its way behind the father’s back and appearing again from his chin. It is just as likely, though, that this is a separate red line, as the connection between father and son is not explicitly clear, left ambiguous and forcing the viewer to wonder if they are indeed linked.

A Later Perspective

Though Zhang was young during the Cultural Revolution, he later experienced incredible sadness in his adult life, and after the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989, he began to seek an understanding of how growing up in China during the 1960s had affected his mental life. Prior to 1989, many of Zhang’s paintings were very personal, and he often emulated Western painting techniques, using a brushstroke and style he often described as “expressionist.” In the 1980s, Zhang lived in a sort of lonely dream-world; he was constantly reading existentialist writers and absorbing Western art, trying to reconcile his strong sense of individuality with the massive society he was a part of.¹¹ In a 2009 interview, though, he explained that “June 4th pulled me back from a dreamland. I suddenly had the intense feeling that as a Chinese artist, I was living in a very specific Chinese environment.”¹² Growing up in 20th-century China, there was little separation between public and private life. He remarked in an interview with Phillips Auction House that “for Chinese people, politics is not an art form; it’s daily life, it’s something you face every day.”¹³ It is in the *Bloodline* series—especially *Big Family No. 3*—that Zhang truly began to explore this inextricable connection and acknowledge his uniquely Chinese identity. In the wake of the disaster of June 4th, Zhang realized that he had to contemplate China’s past to make sense of his own suffering.

Remembering the past from the vantage point of the present imbues memories with a regretful sort of nostalgia, and it is through this method that Zhang has created the idealized but doubtful group seen in *Big Family No. 3*. Zhang was

11. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 33.

12. Zhang Xiaogang, “Interview with Zhang Xiaogang on Chinese Contemporary Art in the 1980s,” interview by the Asia Art Archive, *Asia Art Archive*, July, 2009, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=5VLOmr0GD-E>.

13. Zhang Xiaogang, “Zhang Xiaogang: In Conversation,” interview by Phillips Hong Kong, *Phillips*, May, 2018, <https://phillips.com/article/32296875/zhang-xiaogang-in-conversation>.

only eight years old when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, and he remembers it as being fun, because he did not have to go to school.¹⁴ It was not until he grew older that he realized what a horrible period it had been. Both of his parents (despite their enthusiastic support for the Party) were sent away for re-education, thus causing dysfunction early on.¹⁵ His mother suffered from schizophrenia, and he was emotionally distant from his father, which exasperated the difficult relationships he had with his parents. Considering the fact that Zhang was essentially deprived of his parents (by the state) for much of his childhood, the strange sadness in *Big Family No. 3* begins to make more sense. It was not until his parents grew old and lonely that they became involved in his life again.¹⁶ Indeed, there is an incredible emotional distance between the family members, each "[inhabiting] its own time-space" as Jonathan Fineberg and Gary Xu observe in their important 2015 examination titled *Zhang Xiaogang: Disquieting Memories*.¹⁷ Zhang must have felt this distance when painting *Big Family No. 3* in 1995. He retroactively understood that the revolution took his parents, and he grieved the separation that came in the years to follow.

Zhang's process for reconciling with these memories of the Cultural Revolution and his childhood is one of refining and improving them, creating an image of something between what the family was and what it was supposed to be. The military uniforms serve as an example of how Zhang portrays this idealized citizen. Children were encouraged to become militant from an early age, and their young age did not spare them from becoming implicated in the "class struggle."¹⁸ The artist remarks that during the Cultural Revolution, "I could see things that a boy my age would want to see, such as weapons and people walking freely along the streets."¹⁹



Figure 2. Photograph of Zhang Xiaogang's family, taken in 1958. With permission of Jonathan Fineberg.

Lü Peng et al. also explain that children in the housing compounds like the one Zhang grew up in would become "Little Red Soldiers," though this status would be revoked if the child's parents were accused of anti-party sentiments.²⁰ The boy in *Big Family No. 3* can thus be understood as a representation of ideal revolutionary youth combined with the sentiments of Zhang's own childhood. He is what Zhang and his brothers were supposed to be, but that was an expectation that they could never live up to because of their family's situation. Zhang's goal is not to portray what actually was, but instead to come to terms with his own bittersweet memories and the disillusionment he felt.

Zhang creates characters in *Big Family No. 3* that seems on the surface to be an epitomized version of the Chinese family of the 1960s, reflecting standards that the state deemed ideal. The small nuclear family was desirable during the Cultural Revolution, and images of it dominated China's visual culture.²¹ The family was not off limits from being mediated and influenced by party officials. Zhang explains that "family portraits should be categorized as symbols of privacy, but they have instead been standardized and

14. Zhang Xiaogang, "Interview with Zhang Xiaogang," interview by Anjali Rao, *Cable News Network*, October, 2007, <https://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/07/19/talkasia.zhang.script/index.html>.

15. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 18.

16. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 34.

17. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 30.

18. Orna Naftali, "Chinese Childhood in Conflict: Children, Gender, and Violence in China of the 'Cultural Revolution' Period (1966–1976)." *Oriens Extremus* 53 (2014): 88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26372425>.

19. Zhang Xiaogang, "Interview with Zhang Xiaogang."

20. Lü Peng, Zhang Xiaogang, Rosa Maria Falvo, and Bruce G. Doar, *Bloodlines: The Zhang Xiaogang Story* (Milano: Skira, 2016), 34.

21. Nicole Huang, "Locating Family Portraits: Everyday Images from 1970s China." *positions: asia critique* 18, no. 3 (2010): 677, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-2010-018>. Though the One Child Policy was not yet in place, families were encouraged to have fewer children. This image of parents with one to two children, looking happy and healthy, was the ideal pushed by government officials.

turned into ideology.”²² Even a family picture, an image of a private institution, follows a certain standard with its uniform poses and composed expressions, implicitly reinforcing this notion of an “ideal family.” The portraits are largely serene and solemn, their subjects facing the camera with relatively unemotive expressions (fig. 2). Throughout the years that Zhang has worked on the *Bloodline* series, he is always approaching this standardization, refining the image of an ideal family made up of the one “type” that has emerged from this process. The trio in *Big Family No. 3* checks these boxes of family expectations better than any other *Bloodline* paintings, a perfect nuclear family with flawless faces and a son already eager to take part in the revolution.

Western Influence

In the summer of 1992, Zhang went to Germany to study art, and during his visit his understanding of his role as a Chinese artist deepened.²³ He found the Western contemporary art scene to be commercialized and aristocratic, leading him to search for an approach to art that better represented his inner truths and feelings. Coupled with Zhang’s already emotional and introspective temperament, this new understanding of how his uniquely Chinese background informed his identity was a key turning point that made *Big Family No. 3* possible.

While in Germany, Zhang discovered the work of artist Gerhard Richter, which inspired him to use the photograph as a mechanism for making sense of his early memories. Richter belonged to the “generation that came ‘after’ the perpetrators of the Holocaust,” and their recollections of the era are from their youth, composed mostly of images, stories, and moments that “occurred before their adult consciousness,” according to art and photography historian Kris Belden-Adams.²⁴ An obvious parallel can be drawn between Zhang and Richter here. Both artists were left with incomplete and even strangely fond memories of a terrible period in history; their



Figure 3. Gerhard Richter. *Uncle Rudi*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 87 × 49.5 cm.

understanding of current events was limited by their age. Richter and Zhang were young during the Holocaust and the Cultural Revolution, respectively, and had to reconcile their fragmented childhood memories with retrospective knowledge.

Richter’s work uses the photograph as a subject rather than a source material. This approach informed Zhang’s own work and led him to create photorealistic paintings imbued with his inner musings. Richter capitalizes on the nature of family photographs as artifacts that prompt memories and reflection. He understands this power and does not drastically change the photos he paints from; the illusion of the painting as a photograph contributes to the work’s meaning. Richter’s style can be observed in his 1965 painting *Uncle Rudi* (fig. 3), where he presents someone who was a Nazi and a beloved family member simultaneously. By subtly blurring the image in his painting, Richter attempts to reconcile with something unsettling at the intersection of national and family history.²⁵ This approach served as a starting point for Zhang’s work in his *Bloodline* series of paintings, the artist explaining that

22. Zhang Xiaogang, “Report From the Artist’s Studio (1996),” interview by Huang Zhuan in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, edited by Wu Hung and Peggy Wang, 190–191, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010.

23. Lü et al., *Bloodlines: The Zhang Xiaogang Story*, 286–89.

24. Kris Belden-Adams, “Gerhard Richter: ‘Post-Remembering’ the Holocaust in German Contemporary Art,” *Remembrance and Solidarity: Studies in 20th Century European History*, no. 5 (2016): 271.

25. Belden-Adams, “Gerhard Richter,” 273.

"I also went through my own process of refining old photos—though, my purpose was to reconstruct old memories."²⁶ Richter's use of photo-realistic work had a considerable impact on the trajectory of Zhang's work, though the way he processes the photographs deviates from Richter's methods. Zhang himself admits his interest was piqued by the "formulaic 'polished-ness'" of Chinese family portraits, and it is this very effect that he has sought in his work.²⁷ Comparing *Uncle Rudi* to *Big Family No. 3*, it becomes clear how Zhang too presents a memory that is multi-faceted and lets the various conflicts play out on the surface of the canvas. Both paintings emphasize how individual and public identity overlap, and how their connectedness complicates our understanding of people and events.

Zhang also considers how photographs were carefully crafted, rather than simply captured, during the Cultural Revolution in order to produce the perfected trio of *Big Family No. 3*. During the Cultural Revolution, images were staged, perfected, and smoothed over before being presented to the people.²⁸ Clearly, Zhang has found a way to capitalize on this, and observing the evolution of *Bloodline* paintings, it seems to culminate in the ideal revolutionary family of 1995. As Lü et al. assert, Zhang would "contemplate, scrutinise, rank, and organise the historical details he wanted to reinstate, and to discard those things he felt should be forgotten."²⁹ Each time Zhang creates a *Big Family* painting, he consults his memory, itself ever-changing. Just like those creating the images of the Cultural Revolution, Zhang too exercises discretion in deciding what should be left out and what remains. In creating his *Big Family* paintings, Zhang uses the format of the family portrait as a starting point, but in turning over his memories, thoughts, and feelings in his mind, the picture of the family is transmuted. What he ends up creating is not a historically accurate image but something else entirely—a space that questions how we view the past through our lens of the present, with all of our own perceptions and predispositions.

26. Zhang Xiaogang, "Interview with Zhang Xiaogang."

27. Zhang Xiaogang, "Report From the Artist's Studio (1996)," 190.

28. Huang, "Locating Family Portraits: Everyday Images from 1970s China," 673.

29. Lü et al., *Bloodlines: The Zhang Xiaogang Story*, 307.

Photography and Memory

In addition to mimicking the process of a photograph's creation, Zhang also reflects on the effect time has on the photos themselves; drawing a comparison to memory and its tendency to warp over time, never leaving us with a genuine account of the past. According to Yiju Huang, the light patches are "reminiscent of the patches on the photographs from deterioration and overexposure."³⁰ Zhang meditates on the meaning of photography as he adds these touches, considering how he can best represent memory and how it fails us as the years go by. These patches serve to represent a deteriorating—or at least changing—memory of a bygone era, a history that is not a series of facts but an endless cache of impressions and feelings. Zhang's is a history that lives inside of our minds, a history that, just like old photographs, houses memories that are ever-evolving, subject to time and change.

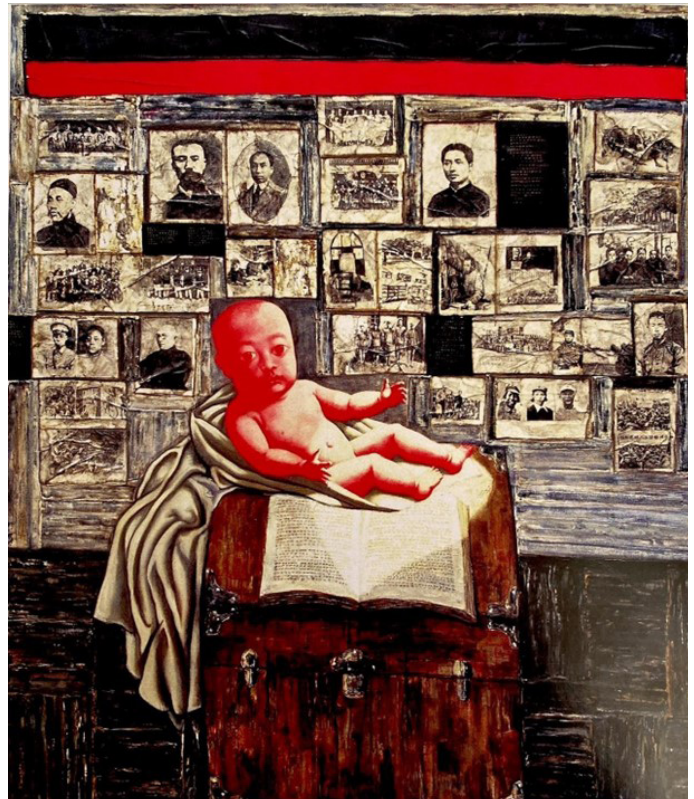


Figure 4. Zhang Xiaogang, *Genesis—Birth of a Republic No. 1*, 1992. Collage and oil on canvas, 150 x 120cm. With permission of the Asia Art Archive.

Political Paintings

Before he began *Bloodline*, Zhang was already considering the connection between individual

30. Huang, *Tapestry of Light*, 98.

and state, and identifying the ideas articulated in his earlier work is key to understanding them as they appear in *Big Family No. 3*. Zhang's 1992 work *Genesis—Birth of a Republic No. 1* (fig. 4) was one of the last paintings he did before his trip abroad and a hiatus from making art. One can see in *Genesis* several threads that appear in *Big Family No. 3*, though they are much more loose and unrefined, still in their earlier stages. In the center of the painting, a red baby sits atop a wooden chest. On the chest are also a book and a white sheet. The baby and book are illuminated by one of Zhang's hallmark patches of light. The background is composed of photographs of important figures in the Chinese Communist Party's pre-1949 history, such as a young Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Red Army soldiers—all crucial parts of China's national memory.³¹ Zhang claims this is the first of his pieces in which he used photographs in, the beginning of a practice that would define his work.³² The painting is rendered in a loose, expressive brushstroke, and personal symbols, like the chest and the sheet, are foregrounded against a monumental national narrative.³³ The baby is "infused with revolutionary red from birth," as Fineberg and Xu say, illustrating how steeped in politics a Chinese person's life is from its very beginning.³⁴

Comparing *Genesis* to *Big Family No. 3* illustrates how Zhang has since refined all of these ideas into a more polished picture of his memory. The military dress and Mao badges are indicators of national enthusiasm, but now instead of existing on separate planes as the symbols in *Genesis* do, they become a part of the characters, expressing the interconnectedness of memory. The little Red Guard in *Big Family No. 3* echoes the same sentiment as the red baby in *Genesis*, highlighting children's early exposure to political issues. Additionally, Zhang's smooth painting style in *Big Family No. 3* emphasizes a feeling of uniformity and order that is not possible in *Genesis* because of the expressive brushstrokes. This comparison illustrates Zhang's quest to idealize his memories; what he once

laid out rather obviously on the picture plane has become synthesized into an image that at least appears to be harmonious.



Figure 5. Zhang Xiaogang, *Mother and Son No. 2*, 1993. Oil on canvas, 148.5 x 178.5cm.



Figure 6. Photograph of Zhang Xiaogang's mother, taken in the 1940s. With permission of Jonathan Fineberg.

31. Lü et al., *Bloodlines: The Zhang Xiaogang Story*, 295.

32. Zhang Xiaogang, "Zhang Xiaogang: In Conversation."

33. The chest is a reference to memory, and the sheet is a motif that appears frequently in Zhang's prior work. As Jonathan Fineberg and Gary G. Xu explain on page 37 of *Disquieting Memories*, the sheets are sort of "ghosts" that Zhang imagined during his hospitalization in 1984.

34. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 73.

Family Relationships

Zhang uses his own family relationships to explore the infiltrations of public life into private, and his understandings of time, space, and identity become increasingly blurred as he revisits these ideas. In his 1993 painting, *Mother and Son No. 2* (fig. 5), Zhang depicts the present version of himself with a younger version of his mother taken straight from an old photograph (fig. 6). In *Mother and Son No. 2*, there is already a strange sense of space; Zhang appears larger even though his mother seems to be in front of him. He uses this dissonant illusionism to convey a foggy sense of memory and to create a space that defies temporal logic. Despite apparent disjunction, there is no ambiguity regarding the identity of these two figures, and it seems that Zhang is considering where his own identity fits into the national narrative. He refines this even further in *Big Family No. 3*. The family is posed believably as if for a portrait, but this composition is clearly a construct of the inner workings of his memories, not a picture of certain people. The characters are now all smooth-faced and polished, with no clear sense of identity. They do not appear to be particular people at a particular time; rather, they are the result of an increasingly distant memory that has been revisited time and again. They are the past and the present, which exist simultaneously in Zhang's mind as he creates his images.

Zhang injects details that serve as references to his own family members in *Big Family No. 3*, further complicating to the question of their identity and emphasizing the lack of clarity in our memories. He explained in an interview with Phillips that his brother was cross-eyed as a child, and he adds that detail to several figures in his paintings.³⁵ Considering how the woman's eye is crossed in *Big Family No. 3*, it becomes unclear whether she is his mother, his brother, Zhang himself, or somehow all and none of them at once. Not only does this confusion underscore the vagueness of memory, but it also creates a generalized image of the family that succeeds where traditional portraits fail in finding the language to meditate on these inner thoughts and feelings.

In *Big Family No. 3*, Zhang takes his own paren-

35. Zhang Xiaogang. "Zhang Xiaogang: In Conversation."



Figure 7. Chinese Government, Iron Girls propaganda poster, 1970. Digital image, 800 x 1166 pixels.

tal relationships and applies them to the standardized family and the "big family," thoughtfully exposing the tension between real and ideal memories of the Cultural Revolution. Zhang has always had a special connection to his mother, though her schizophrenia has always been a source of fear for him.³⁶ She was loving and supportive to the artist, while his father was tough and disapproving. This dichotomy between mother and father manifests itself in his work and seems to reference ideas of a patriarchal state as well. Indeed, Lü et al. contrast a "patriarchal pressure with its revolutionary background" with a longing for maternal comfort that Zhang has always sought.³⁷ In revolutionary China, filial devotion was not abolished; it was simply displaced, taking the form of worship of the state and Mao, who served as a father figure to the "big family."³⁸

36. Fineberg and Xu, *Disquieting Memories*, 18.

37. Lü et al., *Bloodlines: The Zhang Xiaogang Story*, 305.

38. Michael Dutton, "Mao Mao: Infections of the Sa-

Zhang explores his discomfort with this notion of collective devotion to the patriarchal state and his suppressed, individual longing for his mother's love in *Big Family No. 3*. As he noted in a 2018 interview, "every figure in my *Bloodline* series is a variation of my mother," though her image has been subjected to his obsessive re-touching.³⁹ The woman depicted in *Big Family No. 3* is a far cry from the recognizable image of Zhang's mother seen in his earlier works. She appears instead to be the classic image of a Red Guard girl with her uniform and pigtails, a familiar subject of many Cultural Revolution posters (fig. 7). In *Mother and Son No. 2*, she is an identifiable individual—in the same way that Richter's uncle appears as himself in *Uncle Rudi*—but has become generalized into a type in *Big Family No. 3*. This shift illustrates how Zhang's process of refining memories has gradually warped his perception, though it is clear he is still injecting his own personal sentiments. The mother's bright pink face contradicts the entire solemn mood of the painting. It is fair to assume that Zhang's use of a traditionally feminine color is a suggestion of a warmth in direct opposition to all that is militaristic, cold, and patriarchal. Further, the pink coloring makes a faint impression on the faces of the others by way of the light patches. Perhaps this is how Zhang articulates his own individual longing in his purified image of the family. Though he has processed his own personal memories and conflated them with China's national narrative, an undeniable impression of a feeling still persists.

These strange patches of color are disruptions that Zhang uses to articulate the pain felt by each member of the family in *Big Family No. 3*, illustrating how even in a memory he has recreated to be ideal, there is still a sense of underlying discomfort that persists. They have occurred in Zhang's paintings for years, and the artist himself describes them as "like a light hitting the person's face, and slowly it becomes a scar that time leaves behind."⁴⁰ It is key that the light patches remain after all other details have been smoothed over, representing trauma that refuses to fade away, that marks each of the characters and subverts the stability of an otherwise

perfect image. They are not loud or expressive; they are instead quiet manifestations of the suffering experienced by Chinese families and its enduring effects. The scars remain on even the most serene and resolute faces.

Bloodline Theory

The bloodlines that connect the characters in *Big Family No. 3* do more than just delineate them as relatives; they represent the intergenerational damage of the Cultural Revolution and its inescapability, even in one's private life. It is a given that the bloodlines represent family relations, however, it is likely that they also refer to "bloodline theory," an idea that became destructive during the Cultural Revolution.⁴¹ This theory emphasized class background, asserting that "if the father is a revolutionary, the son's a hero; if the father is a reactionary, the son is a bastard."⁴² The notion gave rise to hierarchies and caused many young people to renounce their families. Taking the experience of Zhang's own family into consideration, the deeper significance of his bloodlines becomes clear. Transmitted through them is the generational pain experienced by those who lived through the Cultural Revolution. They are the memories of connections that have been damaged or severed altogether, only accessible through one's recollections. They link people to ideologies that eclipse the family, such as the bloodline connecting Zhang's mother to a TV screen displaying Tiananmen Square in *Mother and Son No. 2*. In *Big Family No. 3*, the characters wear "their politics on their sleeves by wearing their Mao badges on their hearts," as Michael Dutton puts it.⁴³ And indeed, the family wears their badges right on their hearts, next to where the bloodlines puncture them, indicating just how pervasive the revolution was in the lives of individuals. This is Zhang's way of indicating the inevitability of politics and Maoism in the everyday lives of citizens, intruding even into the private sphere of the family. Considering Zhang's own family history, the strain that the Cultural Revolution imposed on those relationships, and how he refines the surface of his paintings, the bloodlines are necessary to articulate the contradictory feelings of grief and love that plague his soul.

cred." *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 171. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-2-161>

39. Zhang Xiaogang, "Zhang Xiaogang: In Conversation."

40. Zhang Xiaogang, "Interview with Zhang Xiaogang."

41. Yiju Huang, *Tapestry of Light*, 97.

42. Quoted in Yiju Huang, *Tapestry of Light*, 97.

43. Dutton, "Mango Mao: Infections of the Sacred," 173.

Conclusion

Through *Big Family No. 3*, Zhang Xiaogang seeks an understanding of his own family, as well as the nature of the society he grew up in. Using family photographs and his own memory as points of departure, he meditates on his past and creates new images that combine leftover feelings from his youth with his current outlook. The figures, once clearly resembling his own family members, have been reworked and confused with one another, resulting finally in an unidentifiable face that can be understood as representing a certain ideal type. Taking inspiration from photographs, the process of their creation as well as their deterioration becomes Zhang's method of remembering. He reflects, choosing only to include certain details, the rest becoming lost to the recesses of his mind. Each time he remembers, he polishes his recollections of his experiences and feelings. He is remembering the past while situated in the present, and his memory cannot be objective; instead, it is full of the sentiments and scars that have become a part of him. Zhang turns his *Bloodline* series into an opportunity to process, remember, and revisit, and it is through these methods that he arrives at the image of the ideal yet closed-off and strangely sorrowful family in *Big Family No. 3*.



Author's Note

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Abby Wiggins ('24) is a junior double majoring in Art History and Studio Art. In addition to art, she is fascinated by philosophy, literature, music, and the humanities in general, and she is grateful that her study of art

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