



Home studio, Rancho Cucamonga, California

"I THINK THIS SYSTEM IS BETTER THAN ANY OTHER SYSTEM. MOST IMPORTANT IS THAT IT PUTS PEOPLE AS NUMBER ONE . . . EVERY HUMAN BEING IS IMPORTANT."

— YI KAI

Yi Kai

In the days after the Red Guards came for his mother, after he had cried and begged her to stay alive in the labor camp, ten-year-old Yi Kai buried himself in his drawings. It was 1966, the start of China's Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong. With schools closed, Yi Kai spent hours at home alone with his younger brother, drawing and tracing woodcuts of Mao's image with pen and ink on newspaper. The Red Guards had raided his home to confiscate books that had belonged to his mother's middle-class family.

When his middle school reopened in 1968, his mother having returned, Yi Kai became known for his talent drawing propaganda posters. That same year, his skill helped him avoid a grueling work assignment in the countryside. Instead, he gained a coveted position in the People's Liberation Army. At age fifteen, far from home, Yi Kai drove military trucks between army stations to show the government's latest propaganda films to young soldiers. But surrounded by villagers near starvation, Yi Kai began to doubt those films. After all their sacrifices, who was helping the people?

In 1973, Yi Kai was chosen to show his work in a national art exhibition in Beijing. He was picked to manage a different national exhibition in 1977, a year after Mao died. Afterward, officials let him join two art professors on a six-month trip to a northwest province. Weary with political themes, he drew and painted images of the struggles of the minority Uyghur population. In 1979, when the army reopened its art institute, Yi Kai helped establish its art department and was among 400 applicants allowed to sit for the entrance exam. Yi Kai won one of the thirty-five spots available, and was the only student to get a unanimous vote.

He received a bachelor's degree in fine arts in 1983 in traditional Chinese painting, then taught art for eighteen months. Absorbing Western influences, Yi Kai returned to school, specializing in impressionism at the Central University

for Nationalities in Beijing. There he received a master's degree in fine arts and oil painting in 1988. At thirty-three, he quit the army and taught at the university. With public sales of art prohibited, Yi Kai snuck his paintings to foreign visitors, who paid him in cash. International trade was on the rise, but Yi Kai felt smothered by the government.

In late May of 1989, Yi Kai marched with thousands of protesters on Tiananmen Square, demanding democratic reforms. After midnight on the morning of June 4, he and his then-wife, an army journalist, were in their home when they heard gunfire. Their compound was locked down. The next day, Yi Kai walked outside and saw bodies in the street. Later at the university, he learned that two of his students had been killed along with possibly thousands of others in the government crackdown.

"I have to get out of here," he told himself. Using savings from private sales and a national art competition he'd won, Yi Kai slipped \$3,000 to an American journalist. "Could you get this money to the Midwest China Center?" he asked. The Minnesota center had invited him to visit but did not have the money to sponsor him. With the money delivered and a new invitation issued, Yi Kai arrived in San Francisco on a tourist visa in March 1990, having paid his own way.

He bought a Greyhound bus ticket for \$120 and rode from California to Minneapolis, where he stayed at a boarding house. Knowing just a few words of English, Yi Kai scoured the Yellow Pages for area galleries. With more than forty paintings rolled under his arm, he took a city bus to each one. Several galleries bought his paintings and consigned more. He sold drawings at street festivals and paintings to friends of his housemates. Within a few months, he had his first gallery show.

Yi Kai was taken aback by Americans' material wealth, how bluntly they spoke of money, how private and aloof they could be despite their apparent friendliness. Yet his opportu-

nities seemed endless. He could sell his paintings anywhere. There were laws that protected individuals' rights. Once, during a trip to an immigration office with an American doctor friend, he watched, stunned and amused, as the friend berated a rude official, something he'd never witnessed in China.

After the hardships he'd seen in China's countryside, he felt convinced that in America, the human spirit could thrive. Yi Kai applied for a green card under a visa awarded to artists of extraordinary ability. In 1993, after his wife was able to join him, Yi Kai became a permanent resident and reunited with his nine-year-old son, who had been waiting in China, living with grandparents. In 1998, Yi Kai was sworn in as a U.S. citizen. In his paintings, he combined images like the American flag, the yin and yang symbols, Chinese words, and the U.S. dollar. He wanted to reflect the bicultural mix possible in America but also to decry the country's materialism.

As galleries around the world promoted him, in 2004 Yi Kai co-founded an Arizona-based nonprofit agency called Global Harmony Through Art. In 2005, he moved to southern California with his new wife, who did business in China. Over the next several years he frequently traveled there with her. He was astounded by the new prosperity in his homeland, but he was dismayed by a society that now mirrored the materialism in America, without the benefits of U.S. legal and political protections. Through his artwork and Global Harmony, Yi Kai tries to convey his message that the only sure path to happiness—and antidote to war—is not power or wealth, but the freedom to create.