



The cast and the crew, 2009
synthetic polymer paint on canvas

La Trobe University, Geoff Raby Collection of Chinese Art.
Donated by Dr Geoff Raby AO through the Australian
Government's Cultural Gifts Program, 2019. © Guo Jian.
Photo: Jia De

Five soldiers painted in tones of grey smile from the canvas. Two hold out their hands making peace signs. One leans against another in camaraderie. Others hold hands and they smile jovially as if posing for a photograph. The conventional sobriety of military images is subverted by their playful poses. Conventionally, Maoist propaganda was designed to glorify the military and, as a large-scale painting, this image conveys a comparable sense of monumentalism. However, this is undercut by the cartoonish quality in the soldiers' exaggerated smiles.

Part of a series also titled *The cast and the crew*, the title of both the series and the painting suggests that these soldiers are merely actors in the greater production and theatrics of warfare. In creating the series, Guo Jian drew on his experiences as a military artist working for the People's Liberation Army during the Sino-Vietnamese War and the paradox of the Chinese fighting North Vietnamese forces. They had been united until 1975 as communists fighting against American forces. Then in 1979, they turned against one another. In Guo's painting, two of the soldiers are in a different military uniform from the other three but they all bear the communist star; are they all part of the People's Liberation Army or the North Vietnamese army? The deliberate use of monochrome is a visual pun on the delineation between enemy and ally being 'black and white'. However, this dogmatic distinction is no longer clear as Guo paints the 'grey areas' of politics, casting doubt on the binary of us and them.

Soo-Min Shim, 2022