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ASIA

THEY'RE MADE WHERE?

Chinese craftsman Zhu Ming-jiang is earning raves for the world-class violins he makes--and exports

BY MARY BINKS/GUANGZHOU

Three years ago a little-known craftsman from the dusty backstreets of southern China's Guangzhou city caught the cloistral world of classical musicians off guard. Zhu Ming-jiang was awarded a gold medal from the prestigious Violin Society of America--its highest accolade--for an instrument sculpted by hand in the tradition of Italian masters of the 17th century, the great age of violin-makers. Seasoned music critics were aghast. China was one of the world's biggest exporters of violins, but its instruments were notorious for their inferiority and sold by the truckload primarily because they were cheap. That general picture won't change overnight, since Zhu makes just 10 violins a year, but at least China can now lay claim to producing a contemporary equivalent to the famed Stradivarius.

Zhu's achievement is all the more remarkable because he had never stepped outside communist China, and he can barely even play the violin. His introduction to music didn't come until the age of 20, when he was drafted to make instruments for a propaganda troupe that Mao Zedong sent out to perform revolutionary songs for the masses. "I had no interest in music," concedes Zhu, who is now 41. "I had grown up with an ear for little more than the melodies of patriotic folk songs."

His life has been full of surprising turns. The second son of two accountants, Zhu was forced as a teenager to abandon his education and, like tens of thousands of other intellectual young Chinese during the 1960s

and '70s, was sent to the countryside to be "re-educated" by peasants. "I wanted to be a carpenter, even a painter," says Zhu. "But at 18 I was laboring in fields of sugarcane and looking for a way out." Zhu seized his chance to escape the rural backwaters of Panyu County just south of Guangzhou two years later in 1976 when China set up the Guangzhou Musical Instruments School. He was one of 25 students chosen nationwide because he had shown promise as a sculptor of wood, an essential skill in the delicate crafting of musical instruments. "I was desperate to escape the manual labor of the fields, and I soon realized I had to take what chances I had," Zhu says.

As he began to absorb the art of violin-making, Zhu was exposed to western classical music. It opened a new world, though one his superiors considered it decadent, bourgeois and a distraction from the revolutionary thoughts of Mao. He carefully hid a battered recording of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. Zhu eventually realized he would never become a musician but dedicated himself to making quality instruments. "I decided to turn my craftsmanship into an art form."

Under the instruction of Liang Guohui, China's finest violin-maker, Zhu rapidly improved his skills, and by 1986 he had graduated from the school and was working for the Guangzhou Musical Instruments Research Institute. Zhu's craft gained international recognition because senior Communist Party cadres often entered his violins in international competitions. They also flitted abroad to collect the prizes, giving him little opportunity to enjoy the acclaim. By that time Zhu was secretly making violins at home because he wanted to use his own name in competitions and he felt that many of the violins produced by the institute were of poor quality. He borrowed \$50 from a friend to buy imported pine and maple--better material than the local timber from which most Chinese violins were made--and sold the first of his hand-crafted instruments to a violin teacher for about \$60. "It was a very simple instrument but it meant a lot," says Zhu. "I was on the way to showing the world that Chinese-made instruments could be as beautiful and as intricate as any in the West." Zhu struck out on his own in 1991, setting up a tiny workshop in his suburban apartment. In addition to the Violin Society of America gold medal, Zhu has collected nine other international awards, and his instruments are now keenly sought by musicians in the United States, Europe and Asia. Says Lu Chun-he, violin master with the respected Guangzhou Symphony Orchestra, who recently bought one of Zhu's creations: "His instruments have that rare pitch that is both haunting and inspiring at the same time." Says Edward C. Campbell, himself an award-

winning violin-maker in the U.S.: "Zhu is in the top 5%." Zhu won't reveal the secrets of his craft, or even explain the precise contents of the old bottles of homemade varnish that he lacquers on each instrument. His prices, too, are secret to all but serious potential buyers. "Price?" Zhu asks. "What price the sound of a violin that makes you feel that you have just tasted sweet spring water after a long journey over the mountains?" For a country boy who reluctantly gave up carpentry to court the respect of composers and musicians, the rewards of that journey have been sweet indeed.