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艺术简历

张红年 1947年生于南京(祖籍山东)。1969年毕业于中央美术学院附中,任职于北京画院(1974—1984)。1984年就学于中央美术学院油画系研究生班,1985年于美国纽约市立大学美术系读研究生。

中国美术家协会会员(自1979年)。1998—2001年在纽约美术学院任教,与露易丝·乌丽合著《绘画中的阴阳》。

现居住、作画于美国纽约州乌兹达克。

Resume

Zhang Hongnian (Americanized name is Hongnian Zhang)

Zhang Hongnian was born in Nanjing in 1947 to a family originally from Shangdong Province. Graduated in 1969 from Central Art Academy's Affiliated High School in Beijing. Artist-in-residence at Beijing Art Academy 1974-1984. Member of All-China Art Association since 1979. Studied in the oil painting department at Central Art Academy's graduate program, and in the MFA program at CUNY's City College in New York. Instructor in the graduate program at the New York Academy of Art 1998-2001. Co-wrote with Lois Woolley, *The Yin-Yang of Painting*.

Zhang lives and paints in Woodstock, New York.

序言

我第一次见到张红年本人和他的画，是在1980年北京的一次“当代人”的聚会。“当代人”，是全由年轻、男性和有造诣的油画家友人自行组成的团体，旨在讨论绘画和展览。他们在当时都是创新的一群人，因为他们皆为独立的艺术家，整个团体并不是由当时的中国官方艺术家协会所创立。当时，艺术仍被小心翼翼地控制着，目的是要确保正确的政治信息，以特定的社会主义艺术风格传递到群众之中。直到邓小平从事包括艺术领域等多项改革，以及相关的一些限制才被放宽。

包括张红年在内的许多“当代人”的成员都曾就读于著名的中央美术学院附属中学，在那里他们学习了油画、肖像、解剖、空间和光影。但到1980年，他们都在寻求新的方法来表达自己和实验。在告别了让中国从西方孤立30年的“竹幕”，他们庆祝中国加入了国际艺术的世界。

张红年是一位“历史画”的大师，采用一种盛大的方法诉说一个由英雄史诗和戏剧所构成的人物故事。但他的人物并不是充满社会主义官方写实风格的伟大劳工，而是像他一样的英俊青年。他对中国和世界历史充满激情，将古代的生命栩栩如生地呈现在画布上。他游刃有余地处理大场面的史诗构图。他对电影的兴趣使他以插曲式的叙事方法描绘个别的场景。

张红年是一位对中国未来发展拥有许多梦想和卓越艺术表达方式的艺术家。他绘画戏剧场面、捕捉瞬间动感，和将所有入、事、物组织在同一环境中的能力更是一流。

美国人能接受这样一位天才艺术家一起生活是何等的幸运。张红年在美国已非常成功，和美国国家地理学会及许多人也已

合作了许多史诗项目。他是一位金童，因为他的存在和天赋为我们增添了无限的光彩。

琼·乐博特·科恩
(《新中国绘画1949-1986》的作者)

曾智杰 张海然 翻译

PREFACE

I first met Zhang Hongnian and saw his paintings in 1980 in Beijing. It was at a gathering of “The Contemporaries”; all young, male, friends and accomplished oil painters who had organized themselves into a group to talk about painting and exhibit together. They were innovative for their time because they were independent artists, not formed by the government Artists’ Association of the People’s Republic of China. Art was carefully controlled at that time to make sure that proper political messages were delivered to the masses in the designated socialist artistic styles. Deng Xiaoping presided over many reforms, including in the art field, some relaxation of stylistic restrictions and of subject matter.

Many of the Contemporaries, including Zhang Hongnian, had attended the highly prestigious art high school attached to the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where they had learned to command the techniques of oil painting, portraiture, anatomy, deep space perspective and light and shadow. But by 1980 they were all seeking new ways to express themselves, and to experiment. They celebrated China’s entry to the international art world, the parting of the “Bamboo Curtain” that had isolated China from the West for 30 years.

Zhang Hongnian is a master of “history painting”, which is a grand manner method of telling a story with heroics and drama by the principal characters. Yet his figures are not giant workers in the former socialist realism official style, but rather handsome youths like himself. He pursues his deep passion for Chinese history as well as world history and brings ancient times to life on the canvas. He handles large crowds of figures with great ease in these epic compositions. Through his interest in film he developed an episodic method of story telling with narrative areas that depict individual scenes.

Zhang is an artist with many dreams for China’s future development and a remarkable command of his medium to deliver the message. His ability to paint the drama of a scene, to catch the immediacy of the action and organize all that within an environment is superb.

How fortunate the Americans are to receive such a talented artist and have him live with us. Zhang has had great success in the U.S. and gone on to paint epic works for the National Geographic Society as well as many others. He is a golden boy who has graced us with his presence and talent.

Joan Lebold Cohen

(author of *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1976*)

归去来兮

——张红年的艺术人生

陶咏白

张红年，对于80后出生的新一代人来说只是一个符号，而对于经历过“文革”年代风雨的人们，张红年的名字是有质感的，他的油画《那时我们正年轻》、《在命运的列车上》曾牵动了多少人的心！20多年前他去了美国，人们惋惜他的出走。如今，他带着他的艺术作品集回来探亲了，他将给我们带来怎样的答案？

画坛新锐

美籍华人画家张红年，曾是我国改革开放初期活跃于画坛的新星。在中国新时期的美术史上，他是位不可忽略的代表人物，他不仅以敏锐的思想，深切的人文关怀，高昂的英雄情结，使画作具有深厚的历史意义。他又能在油画语言的探索中不断出新，成为当时艺术新潮流中的先锋。

张红年的名字，是与他的油画《发人深思》（原名《不！》）、《那时我们正年轻》、《在命运的列车上》等为人们所熟知、所追捧。在他的作品里，没按通常“瞬间”定格画典型环境典型人物的手法来表现主题，而是把自己对社会问题思考过程中在脑海中闪现出的原始的流动的视觉形象，一古脑儿搬上了画布。这些零散的情节不拘时间、空间，似电影多镜头重叠组成了连续性的画面。不仅扩展了画面空间，更增强了画面的深度和广度。他的这种表现手法当时被称为“意识流”。张红年用自己独到的绘画语言，把一个动乱年代中一代人对共同命运的思考呈现于画面，让观众在多瞬间，多视点，多空间的画面中共同去体验、去经历、去回忆那段迷惘、失落、无奈……不堪回首的往事。有观众来信说：“在你的画前，我流下了热泪，我的泪决不是因为受过苦，被迷人的英雄主义欺骗过，而是因为我们那时正年轻。”这一代人的青春，是与国家命运紧紧联结在一起而显得沉重，而历史的前进，也是以这一代人的青春为代价的。他的作品也成为这个时代标记性的图像。无可置疑的，张红年

是发生在70—80年代的伤痕美术的代表人物。但他并未停留在伤痕的悲情中。他背起画箱，独自游走在母亲河——黄河岸边。他说：“我就像没见过亲娘的孩子，既激动又辛酸。”以往作画，都是领导出题目，画家再用生活去套，难免不公式化、概念化。他的《啊，黄河》把他的真实感受，以超越时空概念的画面，把缅怀祖先，保卫黄河及建设黄河，这样一个气势磅礴上下几千年的历史，纵横数万里的地域，揉为一体，画面恢宏深远具有史诗般的魅力。而他的《山乡吟——故乡月、杏儿歌、峡谷风》三部曲、《大地的馈赠》、《大地的深情》等组画，在“意识流”的多视角、多空间的画面结构中，采用河北蔚县民间剪纸鲜亮、明丽的色彩，开拓着艺术民歌风的新形式。新时期之初，他是一位在艺术上不断出新，勇于探索的画坛新锐。

然而，1983年一次赴藏写生的行程，改变了他艺术探索的规迹，在广袤、无垠的雪原高山下，在空旷、寂寥的蓝天白云间，时间失去了意义，在大自然中，人那“诗意的栖居”，是多么自在和美丽。这不就是古人追求的那“天人合一”的大境界！他被震撼了。这里每一个角落、每一方土地，每一位人物、每一件服饰、每一组动作、每一种场景，都具画意，是那么直观和单纯，其本身就具有绘画形式的美感。他感到以往拼命地追求新颖独到的绘画语言的种种尝试，显得多么矫情，多么别扭，多么累。从此他开始回到绘画的本源舍弃文学性的拐杖，舍弃“意识流”或民歌风的形式探索，从绘画的“视触觉”着手，追求绘画本身的存在价值。看起来，他像是又回到写实绘画的起点，重新迈步。1984年的全国第六届美展上，他的一幅获铜奖的具象作品《准备冬草》，其细腻却疏松的笔致是如此灵动，那素雅而饱满的灰调如此优美，令人惊叹不已。人们纳闷，在艺术勇往直前不断创新的张红年，怎么又回到了现实主义写实的原路？其实，他漫长的探索之路仅仅是开始。

闯荡海外

1984年考入中央美院油画系攻读研究生，艺术正处于喷涌勃发的高峰期的他，1985年又匆匆出国，进入美国纽约市立大学艺术系深造，跟着洋老师学起抽象艺术来了。面对陌生的艺术市场，其流派，风格，题材纷杂，竞争激烈，又诸多选择，他明智地决定“画自己最熟悉，最喜欢的题材，用自己最擅长，最能画好的风格”，他依旧画着具象的西藏题材，揉进从洋老师那儿学来的抽象处理。而在《生于斯，长于斯》、《中午的梦》等作品中，也许更见得一种感情的需要，西藏悠远、辽阔、寂静的景象，与他在异国的寂寞孤独的心灵相吻合。他孤身一人在举目无亲的异国闯荡，举步维艰。幸好他的艺术被一个曾是萨金特创建的“大中央画廊”所接纳，在这个西方世界顶级的画廊展出作品，并获得成功。1986年，他与金高，王济达，陈丹青，李全武的联展“来自中国的现实主义”更成了中国油画打开西方艺术市场的破冰之旅。至此，他的作品，不断有画廊展出，生活总算安定下来。不料他的爱妻李新，一位聪慧极有才华的艺术家，不幸罹病去世，期待团圆的美好愿望随之破灭，他的精神近乎崩溃。但他不甘心放弃美国这世界性的艺术大舞台，他得拼下去。于是背着已获绿卡却未能赴美的亡妻骨灰牵着年仅10岁的小女儿又回到美国。为了摆脱新移民的怯弱和惯性，他做出了一个大胆的举动，带着女儿搬到远离唐人区的乡村小镇——历史悠久的艺术家居住地乌兹达克生活下来。他决心要直接走进美国人的生活中，让自己的艺术融入美国文化中。

美国虽然是个多民族的国家，但对于美国人来说，美籍华人画家——张红年的作品，依然是“他者”，他们只是以猎奇的心理欣赏着异国风情，并不认为这是美国的文化。在美国已生活了六、七年的张红年，深感这样画下去永远是美国的边缘文化而进不了美国的文化主流中。终于，作为一个新移民，艰难

的创业经历，使他认同了四百年前的早期移民史，着手研究美国的文化渊源和民风习俗，画了一批画。如《新家》等。如果说此前的作品，他是以一个华人画家的文化身份，延续着国内开始的西藏题材的描绘，在美国创造着良好的市场效应的話，那么，1992年后推出的系列画美国的作品，可以说是融入美国文化战略步骤的实施。又从历史进化到现实，画美国的《万圣节》的节日狂欢、画《工会公园》中的美国人的假日休闲生活……他从大场景、多人物的美国的风俗或美国的历史或现实生活题材，到被他视为“养眼”（为了眼睛对色彩的敏感性）的美国的风景、静物、人物等作品，无一不表明他这位新移民，已是美国大家庭中的一员。他的这些作品展出时，也赢得了美国百姓排队观赏的盛况并吸引了来自各地的求学者。同时，他也得到了一位美丽温柔的美国女画家露易斯·乌丽的爱情，组成了一个幸福的新家。

这一时期他的创作是自由自在的，涉及的题材多种多样，绘画技艺的熟练，使他随心所欲地把控着画面的完美，画什么变得不那么重要，而热衷于发掘艺术的内质是他所追求的至爱。他忘情地琢磨画面的效果和笔墨的品味，追求艺术本身独立的审美价值，让艺术进入至善臻美的境界。他也被聘任于纽约艺术学院执教。

张红年的早年艺术经历，铸就了他与周围生活息息相关的艺术个性，对他而言，艺术不是花边装饰品，是精神活动的结晶。就在美国的“9·11”事件之后，那个悲伤惊恐的一周里，他画出天使在废墟上哀悼的《零爆点》，据悉，这幅画是最早对此事件作出反映的画作，被印刷出版，还被不知名的人士张贴到世贸大厦的废墟边来祭奠死难者。在美国人惊魂未定的时候，只有一个中国画家，以他的敏感、敏锐，敏捷地作出反应，又一次，他画出了具有历史性的画作。

魂系华夏

张红年绘画上的成就，获得了具有百年历史著名的美国国家地理学会的青睐，1996年其杂志社请他创作一批中国历史画。真是天赐良机，圆了一个多年的梦，自打少年时代，他就定下了志向：以欧洲古典大师表现古希腊古罗马，苏里科夫表现俄罗斯历史的大家风范，画中国的历史画。1976年，他画了《送别》，1977年，他画了《红旗永在》，1981年，画了电影《双雄会》片头，片尾，展示出他特有的定格历史瞬间，把握史诗基调的天赋。但人在美国，艺术市场上，巨幅中国历史画在艺术市场上的机率几近乎零。张红年的梦，似乎快成绝响，而国家地理学会的签约，竟使之起死回生。

另外，少年时特别迷恋电影的张红年，美院附中毕业时，就打定主意考电影学院，而命运却安排他当了专职画家，虽然他也一直与电影和电影人有些接触。参与过《黄土地》的酝酿，为《双雄会》画过油画，给《西洋镜》电影当过色彩顾问，闲余时间，还写了一部电影剧本《孔雀》。但这都是打的“擦边球”。独立制作巨幅历史画，就像由自己导演一出历史剧让他兴奋不已。

又因为张红年生活在美国人中间多年，深感大多数人对中国的了解实在太表面、太肤浅了，只是从某些老照片上看到拖着辫子的男人、或裹着小脚的女人。似乎中国人就是这么愚昧、落后。现在，他有了一个舞台，要以艺术的形象改变这些偏见，向世界展现五千年辉煌的中国文化！

《国家地理》杂志要求他能否画几幅有关商代的画。他脱口而出《酒池肉林》，对于一般中国人来说，商代，是多么遥远的古代，而《酒池肉林》又是多么陌生的一个题目。他何以如此敏捷，如此自信？

他从小就爱读中国古代历史，对演义、传说中的故事想入非非。对于创作历史画，他胸有成竹。那么，他何以首选《酒池肉林》题目作画？也许，他想到西方人把古罗马的文明奉为

至高无上的神灵，而远比之更古老的中国商周奴隶制社会，一个以青铜器发达为标记的时代，一个距今三千多年前古中国的文明，完全堪与古罗马相媲美。而骄奢淫逸，腐化堕落至使国家由盛转衰，商与罗马同是今人前车之鉴。接着他又画了《最后的祭拜》（三星堆），着力宣扬青铜器时代的辉煌，《妇好征战》，宣扬在中国商代有一位皇后又是女将军叫妇好的伟大女性。历时三年完成的这三幅作品，被国家地理学会全部收藏陈列，通过十几种文字遍布世界。初次尝试的成功，他信心倍增，也不断有藏家签约，请他画秦、汉、唐、明各朝代的历史画。他几乎成为在美国创作中国历史画的“专业户”，有人称他是“中国的文化大使”！岂不是对他的画最高奖赏。

他所选择的历史画题材中没有避开《酒池肉林》、《焚书坑儒》这些历史上黑暗的一页，前者是商周时代，贵族的穷奢极欲；后者永远是中国知识分子内心的痛。这本是中国历史上的疮疤，他也不管这是“家丑”不可外扬，依然以“匹夫有责”的担当，没有忘“夫画者，成教化，助人伦”古训，但愿画起到警世作用。他更多的作品是弘扬祖国灿烂的文化文明。《张骞归来》、《郑和下西洋》、《丝绸之路》《敦煌——供养人肖像》、《飞天》等作品，除了宣扬郑和的船队浩浩荡荡庞大壮观得像海上的陆地；丝路上的一个小镇如“世贸会”那么繁华；而敦煌的石窟艺术美轮美奂、美不胜收，让你流连忘返……在他竭尽华丽之笔，勾勒出如此悠久悠长，如此光辉灿烂，如此震慑人心的中华文明图像中，贯穿着一条主线：中国是一个热爱和平，广交天下朋友，谋求世界共同发展进步的泱泱大国。

张红年十年来创作历史画的热情一发不可收，他甚至感到画的场面越大、人越多、越复杂，才叫过瘾。因为，他并非只是为画而画，他把作画的过程当作课题研究的过程。也使我们感到了张红年历史画与以往我们所熟悉的模式有所区别：

人性美——爱的主旋律。我们看惯了以阶级斗争为纲的历

史画，而张红年在画作中追求着人性的光芒，即使在残酷的《焚书坑儒》中，他并不张扬暴力的残忍，更重着于遭难的儒生与家人、亲朋、学生之间亲情、友情、爱情在生死诀别时的悲情，悲剧在爱的旋律中奏出人性美的主调。《妇好征战》中，把原是残酷的战争场面处理成兄弟相残的《安魂曲》，暖灰的调子，像陈旧退色的照片，似乎沙场的厮杀声已远去，空留一片黄土地，让人在惆怅中反思。而《张骞归来》、《郑和下西洋》更是高扬着国际主义精神，《四海皆兄弟》让世界充满爱的主旋律。

抽象构造——平面上的戏剧大舞台。他的历史画，场面宏大，人物众多，如何在平面的画布上合理地把众多的人物安排在大场景中而不杂乱，如何在画幅巨大，“不能一目了然”时，有时有序地引入情节发展中？抽象绘画原理，使他在宏阔的画面图形设计上变化迭出富有生气，在空间层次的推、拉中运转自由，他把人物、情节安排在运动线的律动中拉开“舞台”戏剧性冲突的帷幕。人们不难发现，他善于运用光和色块来组织画面起伏运动前行的运动线，而这束光，并非偶然，也无一定，应画面运动所需而设定，《敦煌——供养人肖像》较突出地表达这种理念，画正中是著红衣的女供养人，左上角的烛光从身后照来，照到地下的画纸，而从远处门洞里照进来的自然光经过长长的画廊和众多的人物直照到画师肩上。在烛的暖光和自然的冷光相交替中画面出现了两个空间，站在这空间的交叉处的供养人在冷暖光的衬托中显得格外的美丽动人。在他那些宽银幕似的画幅中人们不难发现光带像“一条游走的龙”扭动着、腾越着向前。他以抽象的构成驾驭着写实的绘画，在多视点、多空间繁复而有序中奏出饱满、丰富、浑厚、深沉的交响乐的气度和力度。其间既有“命运交响乐”，也有“欢乐颂”。

色彩的魔术——对比色的奥妙。他的历史画大多是2-3米宽的大尺幅，但画面色彩干净、利落，透明、鲜亮，这是积15年的对比色研究，摸索出的一套色彩规律。他画一幅画，调色

板上只有两组颜色，或红绿，或蓝橙，或紫黄，《郑和下西洋》、《三星堆》用蓝橙，可调出正蓝、暖蓝、冷蓝，再由此与橙不断演绎暖或冷的灰蓝……《敦煌》、《丝绸之路》则用红与绿调制。2000年他和妻子露易斯合著出版了英文版的《绘画中的阴阳》，依据中国古老的阴阳互补的哲学原理，发现在绘画中用两种补色，可以推导出无尽的色彩变化。此书的出版，在美国影响极大，成为艺术畅销书。有读者反映说：“我的画再也不脏了”。

历史画中的张红年。他沉浸在自己的画作中，三千余年以来的历史，对于一般人来说是多么遥远，多么陌生。而对他来说，似乎都曾亲历过一样，在创作中不惜把自己也每每画进画里，成为角色，参与政事。《酒池肉林》中他是被拖出去问斩的忠臣；《妇好征战》中右下角，一把尖刀，插入胸膛，那死不瞑目的勇士；《焚书坑儒》中站在右上角记录这场惨案的史吏；《郑和下西洋》站在郑和身边展图的随员；《敦煌》中的执灯的画师……每幅画就像每出戏剧，都有他的角色，有他的位置，他是忠臣、勇士、史吏、画师。这不正说明他所追求的人生吗？

如今，张红年已六十开外的人了。电影梦虽未实现，但在历史画创作中他过足了导演瘾，享受着绘画中交响乐般的气势和力量。虽然， he 现在是华裔美国人，但也是美籍华人，两种身份使它具有超越国界的眼光和胸怀，站在世界文明发展的立场上，在美国扮演着“中国文化使者”的角色，在世界艺术新潮流的涌动中，他仍不放弃对新艺术的追求，下次他又将给我们带来怎样的惊喜？

2008年5月10日 北京 名佳花园

THE RETURN OF A NATIVE: THE LIFE AND ART OF HONGNIAN ZHANG by YongBai Tao

The name Zhang HongNian (HongNian Zhang) is little more than just a name to most Chinese born after the 1980s. Yet for those who endured the Cultural Revolution, that name is an icon. How many were deeply touched by his paintings, such as *We Were Young Then* and *On the Train of Destiny*! Over two decades ago Zhang left for the United States, a departure regretted by many. Now he returns, bringing with him a stunning collection of his art. What epiphanies can it bear for us!

THE RISING STAR

Zhang was an active rising star in the Chinese art-world during the Reforming Era that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution. In Chinese contemporary art history, he is a representative figure that cannot be ignored. His sharp thinking, deep humanity and excited heroic feelings prevail throughout his paintings, giving them profound historical meaning. Also, his brave experimentation led to fresh language for Chinese oil painting, becoming the pioneer of the new art current.

Zhang's well known paintings *No!* (alternate title *Provoking Thoughts*), *We Were Young Then* and *On the Train of Destiny* are examples of his experimental originality. In these works, Zhang rendered his primal visions directly from uninterrupted streams of his reflections on given social issues. Many different pictures float on the canvas, superimposed or shading off into each other, and together forming one pictorial composition. This was a distinct departure from the prevailing tradition of painting a single scene at a specific moment. Zhang's loose, dreamlike arrangements have no limits in time or space; rather, they form a continuous picture, similar to a movie montage. These "stream-of-consciousness" and "flashback" techniques extend the profundity of a painting in multiple dimensions.

With these unique ways of expression, he depicted on canvas a whole generation's fate and struggle of the Cultural Revolution years. His device of using multiple scenes, thematically related yet with different aspects, helped bring us back to a past full of confusion and devastation. One observer wrote in a letter, "I shed tears in front of your painting. These were not tears for my suffering or the bitter betrayal by the delusional heroism, but because we were young then." An entire generation's youthful years were gone; sacrificed in the name of history. After all was washed away, Zhang's paintings marked their existence. He made viewers remember, examine, and feel the unbearable confusion, bewilderment, and helplessness of those turbulent years. Without doubt, Zhang is a leading figure of

the "Scar Art" movement of the 1970s and 1980s.

The artist didn't choose to dwell in yesterday's sorrow. Based on his own initiative instead of simply fulfilling a leader's assignment, he traveled alone with a paint-box along our mother river, the Yellow River. "I felt like a child who'd never met his own mother," Zhang described, "excited and saddened at the same time." After the trip, he painted *Ab, Yellow River* with images emanating from his true feelings. In the continuous flow of the Yellow River he found a blurring of the boundaries of time and space, a blending of the memories of our ancestors, past struggles and the building of a new era. Thousands of years of history across our vast land came into one epic painting with overpowering momentum.

In the process of painting the triptych *Ode to Village Life: Moon Over Home, Song of Apricots; Wind From the Valley*, and the paintings *Presents From the Earth* and *Deep Love of the Earth*, Zhang combined "stream-of-consciousness" with the brilliant colors found in China's traditional craft of paper cutting, creating the "folk-song" style. Zhang was truly an innovative explorer in China's budding avant-garde art world.

In 1983, a field trip to Tibet spun Zhang's compass to a new direction in his artistic journey. Somewhere in between the blue sky and clouds, on the immense highland and at the foot of snow-covered mountains, time lost its meaning. His mind felt released, his eyesight loosened. Zhang was shocked. This liberating experience was the essence of what he wanted his audience to feel. But how could he convey that? The "stream-of-consciousness" and "folk song" styles he had been pursuing suddenly seemed overly sentimental and even pretentious. He saw perfect beauty in the simplicity of each and every object and scene, every person, their clothing and gestures. Immersed in Nature, their life was blessed with poetic beauty and freedom. Since ancient times, people have dreamed and searched for this kind of beauty where humans and heaven unite. He found a deeper truth in the reality of what he saw than in any abstraction or social commentary he could make.

He never looked back. Returning to the source, the visual experience, he commenced a new journey in search of artistic truth. In 1984 Zhang won the Bronze Award in the Sixth National China Art Exhibit for his painting *Preparing Hay for Winter*. His sculptural, yet fresh and sprightly brushwork was mysteriously spiritual; his saturated, yet subtle silvery color was so elegantly graceful that viewers stood in front of the painting in amazement. It caught everyone by surprise, leaving them

wondering what had made this member of the avant-garde return to Realism. In reality, his long journey of searching was just beginning.

ADVENTURES ABROAD

In 1984 Zhang was admitted to China's Central Academy of Fine Arts as a graduate student in its oil painting program. Driven by his ever-restless dreams and abandoning his exploding success in China, he left a year later for City College of New York to study Western abstract painting. Life was bitter living a world away from home and family. He was facing an unfamiliar art world, with various styles and subjects, where competition was tough and one had too many choices. Despite his study of abstraction, he continued painting Tibetan motifs; seeking comfort for his loneliness by recalling those remote and peaceful scenes. *Close to the Land* and *Dreaming at Noon* were both painted during that period.

China did not have an art market at that time, and entering the American art scene required Zhang to assess the salability of his artwork. Following the advice often given to writers, Zhang chose to paint what he was familiar with that he could paint well, combining newly-learned principles from abstract painting with traditional techniques. There were private sales, but in America an artist needs a gallery.

Fortunately his career came to a turning point in 1986 when Grand Central Art Galleries on 57th Street in New York City invited Zhang to participate in a ground-breaking exhibition. The theme of the show was "Realism from China" and its purpose to introduce Chinese oil painting to the Western market. In addition to Zhang, the following noted Chinese artists were included: Jin Gao, Wang Ji Da, Chen Dan Qing, and Li Quan Wu. The exhibit was a tremendous success, receiving enthusiastic reviews in *Art News*, CBS, and later featured in articles in the *New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

As Zhang's fame rose, his life settled down. He longed for a family reunion after years of separation from his wife and daughter. However, he was devastated by the unexpected and tragic death of his beloved wife, Li Xin, a talented artist in her own right. Yet he had to pick up the pieces of his shattered life and keep walking. His journey in the Western art world must go on.

Zhang returned to the United States, this time bringing with him his 10-year-old daughter and his wife's ashes. Soon after

his return he made the brave decision to give up a typical comfort zone sought by new immigrants and move far away from his New York City Chinese community. In Woodstock, a long-time artists' colony in upstate New York, he determined to merge his art and life with mainstream American culture.

Although the United States is a multi-cultural society, Zhang's paintings were still perceived as the works of an outsider. Viewers appreciated the exotic foreign settings, but Zhang realized that, without change, he would never belong to the American art world. So he turned to America's four hundred years of cultural history for inspiration. Identifying emotionally with America's early immigrants, the Pilgrims, he painted a series of paintings about their struggles. *New Home* is one example. This shift in subjects began his transition into his adopted country's fine art genre. American traditions and customs are presented in *Woodstock Halloween*; and modern-day life reflected in *Union Square*.

His position as a genuine part of American culture became secure: numerous collectors, art-lovers and students flocked to his shows. Among them he found a new love, Lois Woolley, an American artist who became his wife.

Zhang's creative ideas ran freely. What to paint was no longer important: he followed his heart and his sense. As his subject matter grew in variety, his skills became more masterful. He passionately sought to discover and reveal the inner quality of art; the painting surface; brushwork qualities, the independent value of the beauty of the paint. Attaining this ideal was his guiding principle. In this period, he became a professor at the famed New York Academy of Fine Arts.

Always sensitive to the life around him, Zhang's American paintings conveyed his deep feelings just as his earlier Chinese contemporary paintings had. Art was not simply decorative; it was spiritual. After sleepless nights following the horrific events of September 11, 2001, the anguished artist expressed his outrage in the painting *Ground Zero*. In this painting a winged angel in her full glory stands atop the ruin, mourning the lost and the perished. Said to be "a first" expression by the art world, printed copies were posted by anonymous people at the site of the World Trade Center ruins, also, it appeared in many publications. Zhang's painting once again became part of history, reaching out with love and truth in a time of devastation.

CHINESE SOUL

Zhang's accomplishments attracted the attention of the National Geographic Society. In 1996 he was invited by their magazine to create a series of Chinese historical paintings. Zhang saw this as a great opportunity that would help him fulfill several lifelong ambitions.

As a teenage art student, Zhang didn't intend to have a career as a painter: he had wanted to make films! After graduating from the Central Art Academy's affiliated high school, he was going to go to the Beijing Film School, but the Cultural Revolution ended that dream. Even so, his lifelong enthusiasm for movies never died, and led to many connections within that industry. He created two epic paintings for Chen HuaiKai's movie *Two Heroes* that were used as the opening and closing frames. Zhang advised Chen KaiGe and Zhang YiMou on their movie *Yellow Earth* during its early, brewing stage. Ann Hu's first movie *Dream and Memory* was based on his story, *Peacock (Kong Que)*. Later he was color consultant for her movie *Shadow Magic*.

As a painter, Zhang longed to show Chinese history in the grand fashion that European masters had painted ancient Greece and Rome, or that Surikov had painted Russian history. He had already demonstrated his natural ability to catch the historical moment in epic style in his paintings *Farewell, Premier Zhou* (1976), *Before the Long March* (1977) and *Two Heroes: Prologue & Epilogue* (1981.)

His two different passions were related: he was drawn to cinematically powerful scenes filled with figures in dramatic action. Creating these large-scale paintings would be like being a director of his own historical movie! National Geographic's offer seemed heaven-sent: Their commission dissolved the financial risk of creating large-scale Chinese history painting with no apparent Western market. He was also eager to change the Western world's superficial notion of Chinese history. The West's visual impressions should not be limited to images of a backward 19th century society where men wore pigtailed and women had bound feet. National Geographic gave him the stage to showcase China's five thousand years of magnificent history and culture!

His first assignment was about the Shang Dynasty (1551-1066BC), a highly developed Chinese Bronze Age civilization. Zhang chose events unfamiliar to most people today, even the

average Chinese. Based on his early interest in history, he knew the rise and fall of the Shang Dynasty paralleled the rise and fall of Rome. His painting *FuHao's Battle* focuses on their military culture, with a battle led by Queen FuHao, a female General. *End of the Shang* reflected the corrupt and dissolute life of the Shang royals, with orgies similar to those of the Romans. *Last Rites (SanXingDui)* shows how advanced Chinese bronze-making was during this era. These three paintings took three years to complete. All were acquired for National Geographic's permanent collection and published world-wide.

Zhang continued creating works on subsequent dynasties that have been collected privately as well as by National Geographic. As his historical paintings became more sought after, some patrons called him the "Chinese Cultural Ambassador", a compliment he considers his most prestigious award.

HUMANITY – LOVE AS THE MAJOR MELODY

In his selection of painting topics, Zhang did not avoid the dark pages of history, observing the artist's time-honored duty to inform in the name of humanity. Indeed, humanity seems to be his basic motive. Unlike many history paintings, his themes are not about class struggle, rather, he searches for the light in human nature. His painting *Execution of the Scholars* portrays the Qin's cruel murder of intellectuals who refused to renounce Confucius. This event was a terrible stain to Chinese history. Yet in the foreground of this violent scene, Zhang also presents human nature's best side: the love and tender friendship between victims, their families and students. In *FuHao's Battle*, a blood-shedding war scenario is transformed into a Requiem. The warm but grayish tones resemble a faded photo, suggesting the screams of battle are but echoes of a distant past.

However, more of his work is in praise of China's proudest moments. In *Return of Zhang Qian*, the Han explorer returns from the West with Persian emissaries for trade, in the Han period's *Silk Road*, the street is busy and rich with international commerce. In *China's Great Armada*, the Ming naval explorer Zheng He leads an enormous fleet of ships towards the Indian Ocean. In the *Patrons at Dunhuang* and *Flying Apsaras*, exquisite art adorns the Tang period's Buddhist caves at Dunhuang. Zhang threads these spectacular scenes together with one message: China's cultural ideals have always been about peace, friendship and progression in harmony.

ABSTRACT FORMS—THE BIG STAGE IN TWO DIMENSIONS

Ever since his passion for historical paintings was unleashed twelve years ago, he has been chasing after larger scenes, with more figures and greater complexity. Each painting is a process of learning and research, not only about the historical period but especially about compositional arrangement. The painting process for these epic works has been a laboratory for experimentation.

In his complex scenes, Zhang developed a different approach uniquely geared to address the demands of multi-figural painting. The challenge of artistically arranging many different figures into large scenes was met using abstract painting methods Zhang learned from Western teachers. With these techniques he designed vivid and unrestrained patterns underlying his magnificent scenes, creating layers of pushing and pulling spaces. He arranged his characters and “plot” to follow these movements, setting the “stage” for the dramatic conflict.

He is a master in using light and color to organize this visual path, where even the light source and direction is dictated by compositional requirements. *The Patrons at Dun Huang* offers an excellent example. In this painting, a torch blazes in the rear upper left corner, casting warm light diagonally across the space and figures to the pile of drawings in the right foreground. Cold daylight enters through a doorway deep in the background, spilling to the right and forward through the corridor and people, to end on the shoulders of the primary painter. Where the warm and cold light meet stands the main female figure, beautifully illuminated by the different tonalities of light. In Zhang’s paintings one can often find abstract light patterns suggesting a visual movement which, like a dragon, twists and turns across his widescreen format.

Abstract structure carries Zhang’s realism paintings. Their complex, symphonic arrangements are as powerful as Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* and as glorious as his *Ode to Joy*.

COLOR MAGIC— THE SECRET OF COMPLEMENTARY COLORS

Most of Zhang’s historical paintings measure between two to three meters in width. However, despite the large size, the entire image is always clean, clear and radiant thanks to the set of rules on color he has developed over the past 15 years.

For any given painting, you can find a range of two complementary colors on his palette: reds and greens; blues and oranges; or purples and yellows. *China’s Great Armada* and *Last Rites (SanXingDui)* were painted with blues and oranges. In mixing these two complements the artist created different shades of warm or cold blues, whence countless grayish blue tones derived. *The Patrons at DunHuang* and *Silk Road* on the other hand were based on reds and greens.

In the year 2000 Zhang co-authored with his wife Lois Woolley *The Yin-Yang of Painting* in which they explain in detail his theory of the infinite transformation of two given primary colors in a complementary harmony. The book quickly became a bestseller. One reader commented, “My paintings no longer look muddy, thanks to you.”

HONGNIAN ZHANG IN HIS HISTORICAL PAINTINGS

Three thousand years of history seems remote and unfamiliar to most people, yet for Zhang, it is as though he lived it. He often casts himself as a character in his works. In *Fall of the Shang* he is the loyal official being dragged to his own execution; In *FuHao’s Battle*, he dies as a warrior in the lower right hand corner of the image; he is the historian writing down the brutal events in *Execution of the Scholars*. He stands next to Zheng He on the deck of his flag ship; and is a painter working by candlelight in *The Patrons at Dun Huang*. Every painting is like a play, and there is always a role for Zhang.

Today HongNian Zhang has reached 60 years of age. Any regret for not having a cinematic career has been compensated by his joy in creating his historical paintings. He views the experience as symphonic; his dual background as an overseas Chinese and as an American endows him with a broad vision. He assumes the role of a cultural ambassador and at the same time never ceases his masterful pursuit for the zenith of the world of fine art.

What surprise will he bring us the next time?

May 10, 2008

Beijing, Mingjia Park

(Translated by Yinjie Jason Zhang and Yang Pingxuan)

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