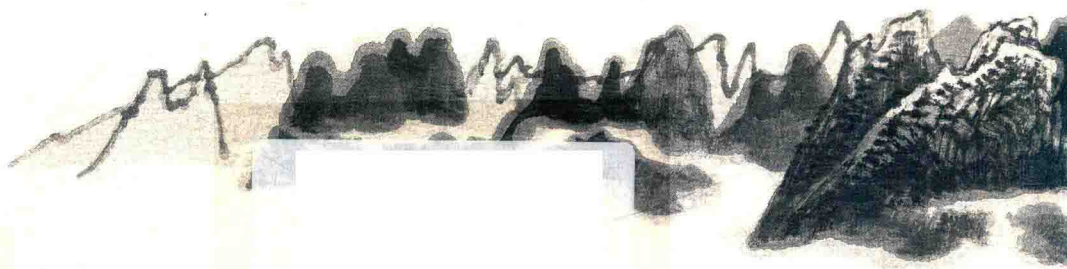


HUANG GESHENG'S ROAD TO ART

A Case Study of an
Artist of the Lijiang
Painting School

Written by
Zuo Jianhong

Translated by
Zhen Yu, Claudio D. Lucchi,
Ning Lizheng, Zeng Yangting,
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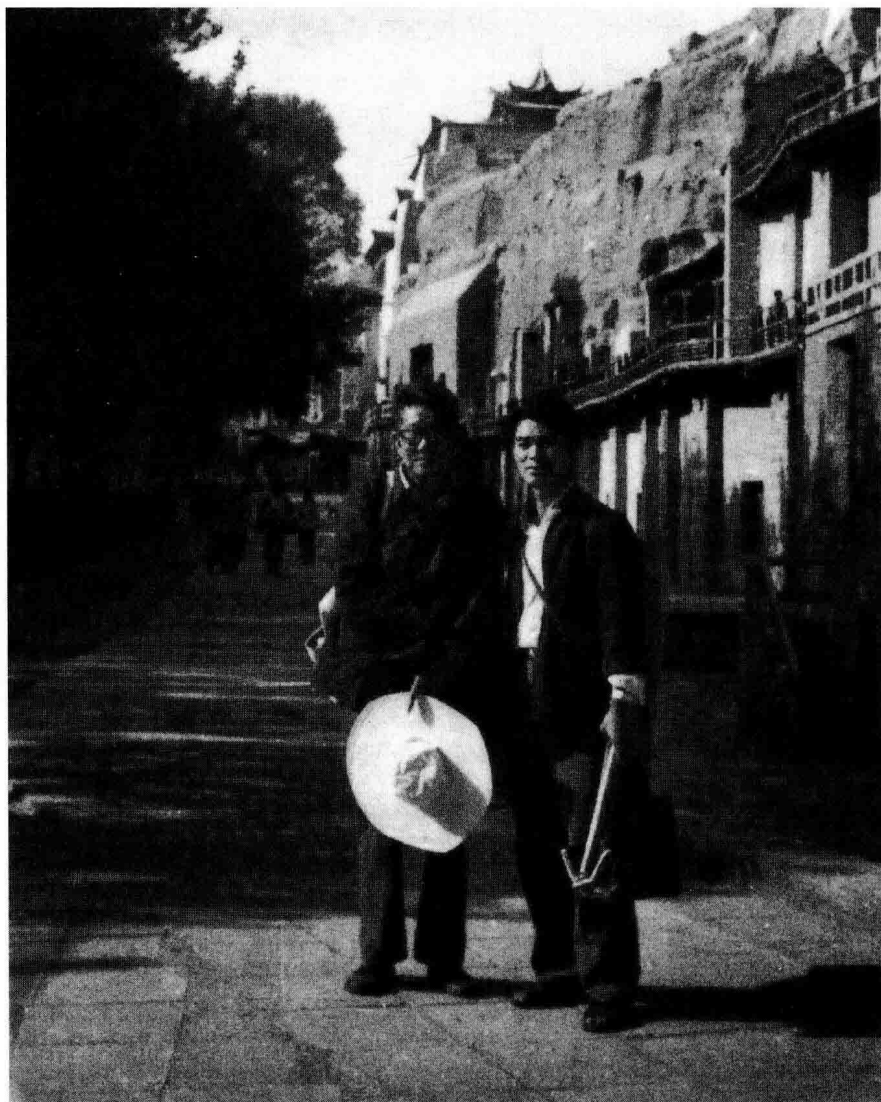
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✦ Painting from nature with Professor Huang Dufeng in Dunhuang, 1982

Preface

By Ruan Rongchun

The Li River offers the most beautiful natural scenery in southern China. Artists in Guangxi have gradually established a unique style to depict the majestic Lijiang as it winds its way through the ~~green valleys and plains~~ of Guangxi. From this originated the Lijiang Painting School. ~~Pan Qi, former deputy secretary of the Party Committee of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, who was in~~ charge of public relations, offered a definition of the school. In ~~the first place, the Lijiang~~ Painting School expresses itself through traditional realistic techniques. Secondly, it takes real life and Guangxi's landscapes and sceneries as its main subjects. Thirdly, its primary creation method lies in painting from nature. Encouraged by Pan Qi, artists of the Lijiang Painting School worked with redoubled enthusiasm and a number of outstanding artists have gradually emerged. As the leading artist of the Lijiang Painting School, Huang Gesheng has attracted much interest, causing Guangxi art theorists to put research and studies on Huang Gesheng and the Lijiang Painting School in the first place.

Zuo Jianhong, author of this book, sets a clearly defined starting point. In his own words, "A real artist should strive as much as possible to make new achievements. As a flourishing artist, Huang Gesheng reveals to us what makes his success. Why for

instance, do people recognize and admire him? What are his knowledge structure, abilities, and concepts? To study Huang Gesheng means to find out the elements that lead to his success by looking into his work, personality, and other aspects." Therefore, Zuo Jianhong makes a thorough study covering four aspects. He first of all organizes the artist's background materials and analyzes them, giving a clear picture of the social context of his art. Secondly, the author puts Huang Gesheng's works in order, depicting the course of his various art stages. He then inspects the elements of his art, stressing its form, style, and features. Last, he discovers the aesthetic and cultural values contained in Huang Gesheng's artwork. With a broad cultural vision, Zuo Jianhong makes an objective analysis and research on Huang Gesheng's life and art. The study is based on academic and artistic concepts and stands therefore to reason. By setting the study of one single Chinese artist in the realm of contemporary art, Zuo Jianhong avoids making an isolated research which focuses on Huang Gesheng and the Lijiang Painting School alone.

As a person familiar with painting history, its theory and practice, I am impressed by Huang Gesheng's features. It would be unthinkable to study the history of contemporary Chinese art without passing by Huang Gesheng. As the leading artist of the Lijiang Painting School as well as one of its most influential painters, he is not only the most prominent painter in South-west China, but also presents the highlights of contemporary Chinese painting. His personality, character, and emotions have been shaped by his time, region, family, and cultural background, while his life and art experience mirror contemporary Chinese society.

As a standing committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), vice-chairman of the Central Committee of the Chinese Zhigong Party, vice-chairman of the Guangxi Committee of the CPPCC, and former representative of the 9th National Congress, he is a painter enjoying the status of a high

government official. His numerous and various administrative affairs do neither hinder nor delay his art creation, nor does his virtuous and gentle personality fall prey to mundane temptations. He puts on his shoulder the duty of innovation and development of traditional Chinese painting. As an old saying goes, the highest branch is not the safest roost. Although Huang Gesheng is a high official, he remains quiet, peaceful and calm, and takes things coolly. "A truly wise man disguises himself as a high official."

When it comes to painting from nature, Huang Gesheng is ranked number one by other painters and recognized as being by far the most prolific of them all, since his portfolio already exceeds ten thousand pieces. Classical Chinese painters placed an emphasis on painting from nature because they took it as their teacher. Jin Hao (850-?), for an instance, created tens of thousands of works depicting pine trees and Huang Binhong's (1865-1955) landscapes were not less numerous. Huang Gesheng undoubtedly follows and innovates this concept. When painting from nature, he directly creates works of art with brush and rice paper. With his heart and soul, he communes with nature by watching, observing, appreciating, comprehending, transforming its natural objects, rather than imitating it or merely collecting painting materials and references. The ensuing works are thus a perfect and balanced marriage between art creation and painting from nature. He therefore completes his paintings in natural circumstances, bringing in lively vitality, depicting vivid customs and geographic features.

There were a number of artists such as Ruan Ji (210-263) and Liu Ling (221-300) of the Weijin period, Wang Qia (323-358) of Tang Dynasty, Li Cheng (919-967) and Liang Kai of Song, and Fu Baoshi (1904-1965), quite fond of drinking

and able to create fantastic works while wrapped in ecstasy.^① Huang Gesheng likes drinking too and gets often carried away by his precious nectar. Before starting a new painting, he is often merry, which brings him beyond our material world and plunges him into an atmosphere of art. The resulting painting is therefore tremendous, magnificent, elegant, and enchants the viewer. For him, alcohol is not simply culture, but also the spark that unleashes the flames of art.

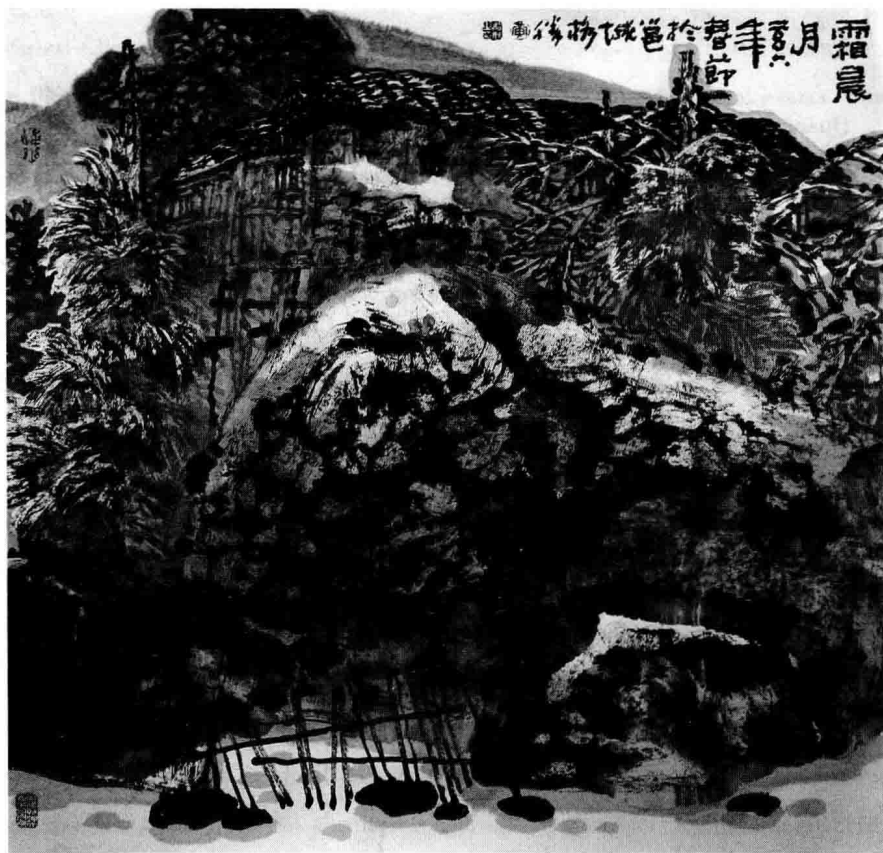
It seems that Huang Gesheng was born to be a leader. He is often the center of everybody's attention. People are enchanted by his unique personality and repeat his witty words and funny stories. His language is spontaneous, witty, and cheerful, teasing life, relieving pressure, and causing him to be regarded as a most humorous painter. He calls himself a farmer, never posing as a person of high social status or a serious scholar. With less scholarly manners, he is in fact a real artist who puts his heart into painting. I cannot help thinking of Liu Ling (221-300), one of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, who took the universe as his house, and his house as clothing. Huang Gesheng is as natural, pure, sincere as Liu Ling, but without his cynicism. In other words, Huang Gesheng is a real man and a real painter isolated from hypocrisy.

Learning more about Huang Gesheng belongs to the process of studying

① In traditional Chinese culture, and most particularly among scholars and artists, enjoying wines and spirits, especially in great amounts, has always been regarded as a form of art. More than a form of art, it was and still is a means to free one's soul and spirit and enter a particularly high state of rapture and inspiration enabling the artist to create poems, paintings, works of calligraphy of a most high value and unique taste. Artists deemed it necessary to resort to this method so as to free themselves, if only for a short moment, from the restrictions and taboos imposed on them by China's (particularly Imperial China) conservative culture, and which did not fail to hamper their artistic expression. To name a most famous example among so many others, the great poet Li Bai was not simply known for his cheerful and eccentric drinking habit but also for his numerous poems about wine.

contemporary artists and culture. I hope this book will help people to get a clearer picture of Huang Gesheng and the Lijiang Painting School, and contemporary Chinese painting.

July 2, 2009



❖ Frost and Moon at Dawn

Preface

By Su Lv

Huang Gesheng is an extraordinary man.

Born into a disgraced family, he spent his youth working as a cinema art staff in a mountainous county. After decades of struggling, he became vice-chairman of the Central Committee of the Chinese Zhigong Party, vice-chairman of the Guangxi Committee of the CPPCC, and vice-chairman of the Chinese Artists Association. The post of vice-chairman of the Chinese Artists Association is a landmark defining his life-long accomplishments. His life is so filled with experiences that it would take a whole book to contain them all. Written by Zuo Jianhong, *Huang Gesheng's Road to Art: A Case Study of an Artist of the Lijiang Painting School* has now finally been published.

As Huang Gesheng is an unusual and unique person, it is not easy to write a book about him. As an old saying goes, "A tall tree may be torn down by the wind." Since Huang Gesheng is "a tall tree", a "wind" could come and try to blow him down. Zuo Jianhong is aware of this and readily takes this burden upon him without hesitation. I see three reasons motivating him to do so. Firstly, Zuo Jianhong appears deeply touched by Huang Gesheng's experiences, struggle, pursuit of art, and achievements. Secondly, as an artist who studies fine arts in Guangxi, Zuo Jianhong cannot carry on without learning more about Huang Gesheng. Once the key link is grasped, everything

else falls into place. By studying Huang Gesheng, Zuo Jianhong catches hold of the key link of the artistic development in Guangxi. Thirdly, by doing this study case, he fulfills his duty as Huang Gesheng's friend. Although Zuo Jianhong is not a writer and writing essays containing hundreds of thousands of words is no easy task for him, he still accepted this important responsibility. Anyone would be proud to have him as a friend.

The early twentieth century saw Guangxi actively contributing to China's history. As we all know, Guangxi was a famous model province during the Republic of China (1912–1949). Various powerful warlords entered into alliances and created the Old Guangxi Clique and the New Guangxi Clique, greatly impacting China's history from the 1920s to the 1940s. Guangxi fell into silence during later historical events. Since the beginning of twenty-first century, influential writers such as Dong Xi, Gui Zi, and Li Feng have emerged from Guangxi. There are noted singing and dancing performances in Guilin (*Impression: Sister Liu*), and there is of course the Lijiang Painting School. A number of artists in Guangxi would not keep silent anymore, determined to reach the peak of Chinese and international arts. Huang Gesheng is one of these outstanding artists.

As the leading artist of the Lijiang Painting School, Huang Gesheng reshapes Guangxi's artistic spirit, never admitting to be marginalized or to be left lagging behind. He dares to challenge the highest standards of Chinese art and is not impressed to be regarded as the number one in his field. He sets an example by creating huge amounts of works, many of which measure more than ten times his height, such as his 200-meter-long scroll *Hundred Miles of the Li River*, or the *Hundred Splendid Scenes of China* series which was composed on hundreds of eight-*chi* sheets of rice paper. Huang Gesheng did not only succeed in establishing a most unique style of landscape painting, but also became a legend through his ability to create countless works of high artistic value. Interestingly, most of these artworks were created in the evening, only after the completion of his daily administrative affairs. Indeed, the prosperity of

Guangxi's culture would soon be reestablished if there were more leading artists like Huang Gesheng, daring to adventure into the unknown.

The highlights of this book lie in the detailed narration of Huang Gesheng's struggle for life and the profound analysis of his artistic concept, style, characteristics, aesthetic values, and cultural orientation. Emphasis is placed on Huang Gesheng's art, a subject which is given elaborate and extensive attention. Anyone having composed a case study before knows how big a challenge it is to compose a book containing a detailed biography, an extensive artistic study as well as various academic analyses. Zuo Jianhong handles this complicated task with great ease, setting the study of Huang Gesheng in a contemporary artistic context. His study strategically covers a wide range of aspects including his art methods, form, brush and ink work, images and shapes, composition as well as their significance and influence on contemporary art. He applies an approach based on abundant quotations and proofs from Chinese classic literature. He gains true recognition by offering convincing arguments, leading his research from the surface towards the heart of the matter. The book is enriched with vivid anecdotes about Huang Gesheng's personal experiences, picturing various faces of his life, which proves the writer's efforts. I regard this book as a great achievement and am convinced it will help more people to get to know Huang Gesheng, the Lijiang Painting School, and the development of Guangxi's culture and arts during the New Age.

I would like to offer my congratulations to Huang Gesheng for the artistic success he has achieved in Guangxi during the New Age. My congratulations also go to Zuo Jianhong who has made his breakthrough as both a good painter and writer.

Written at Banshan Pavilion, summer 2009

Introduction

By Zuo Jianhong

A real artist should strive as much as possible to make new achievements. As a flourishing artist, Huang Gesheng reveals to us what makes his success. Why for instance, do people recognize and admire him? What are his knowledge structure, abilities, and concepts? To study Huang Gesheng means to find out the elements that lead to his success by looking into his work, personality, and other aspects.

Contemporary Chinese landscape painting has strong artistic vitality. In the era of globalization, it bears the concept of the harmonious relationship between man and nature, defining the cultural identity of the Chinese people. It differs from traditional Chinese opera which fails to follow and adapt to modern times despite its perfect form. Neither is it comparable to traditional Chinese medicine, regarded as a mystery although still in use in eastern Asian countries. Contemporary Chinese landscape painting possesses open elements and prosperous forms, even though it lacks of quietness and solemnness featured in the masterworks of the Song and Yuan dynasties. Landscape painting was revived in the twentieth century by a number of great and innovative painters, later to be transmitted to the emerging generation of the twenty-first century. Huang Gesheng is one of these prominent painters, whose style is shaped by time, hometown, family, cultural background, personality, character, and emotions. His life experience and artistic career move side by side with modern Chinese society. He grew up with his motherland, walking through many historical moments like the Seventeen-Year Period (1949–1966), the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the reform and opening policy, the Leftist Movement, and the Mind-Liberation Movement.

No matter what may come his way, he sticks to his faith and art creation. He never lost his mind in a commercialized society or when he was offered the chance of a better material life in a foreign country. His style is bright, pleasant, and magnificent because he believes it is in accordance with the vigorous times of his prosperous motherland, whose children now exceed 1.3 billion. Huang Gesheng has Qu Yuan's (BC 340–278) patriotism, Li Bai's (701–762) romantic spirit, Qi Baishi's (1864–1957) simplicity and spontaneity, Bai Juyi (772–846) and Liu Yushi's (772–842) interest in folk culture and aesthetic tastes. He adopts towards life a positive and Confucian attitude, while being as carefree and unrestrained as a Taoist. Although he hasn't dedicated himself to the study of Confucianism or Taoism, he puts both into practice. He establishes new artistic standards, mixing the aesthetic tastes of folk art with those of literati painting. He voices current artistic problems and is never carried away by fashion or trends. Those who attracted attention by using eccentric concepts or tricks often became fleeting clouds in the clear blue sky. Huang Gesheng does not seek for superficial cultural symbols and always strives to sincerely express his passion for life and nature. He often says, "An artist should not paint without passion. Do not be emotionless while painting." He therefore creates artworks with passionate emotion and energetic vitality. Creating from nature is the most distinctive feature of Huang Gesheng's work. He adheres to his ideals and establishes a successful art style of his own with his honest faith in life, artistic passion, and obsession with nature.

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