

After the Copy: Creativity, Originality and the Labor of Appropriation
Dafen Village, Shenzhen, China (1989-2010)

by

Winnie Won Yin Wong

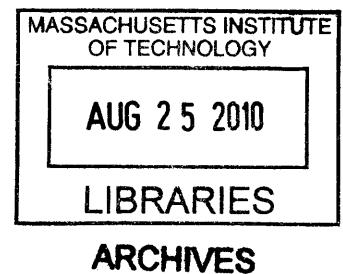
Submitted to the Department of Architecture in Partial Fulfillment of the
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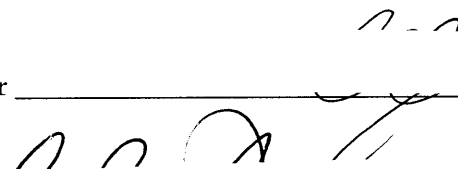
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Signature of Author  _____ Department of Architecture
August 6, 2010

Certified by  _____
Caroline A. Jones
Professor of the History of Art
Supervisor

Accepted by  _____
Takehiko Nagakura
Chair, Committee on Graduate Students

Thesis Committee

Supervisor

Caroline A. Jones
Professor of the History of Art
History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture and Art, MIT

Readers

Arindam Dutta
Associate Professor of the History of Architecture
History, Theory and Criticism of Architecture and Art, MIT

Eugene Y. Wang
Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Asian Art
Department of Art and Architecture History, Harvard University

Jing Wang
S. C. Fang Professor of Chinese Language and Culture
Foreign Languages and Literature, MIT

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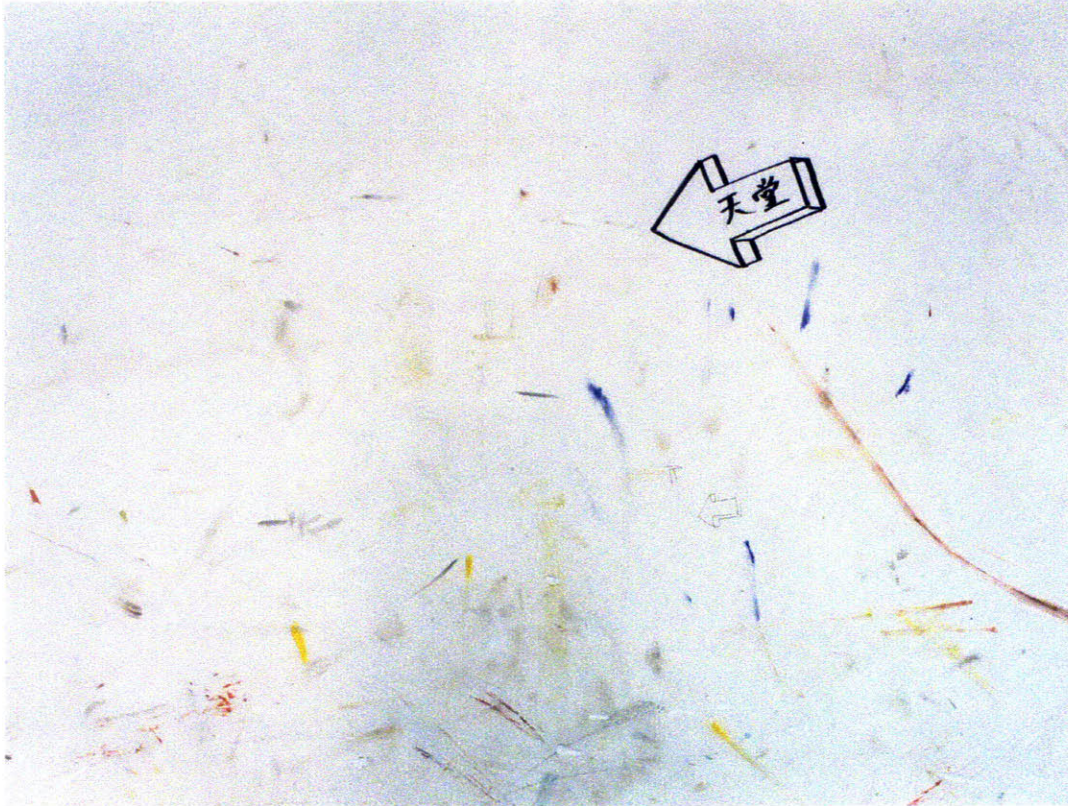
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ABSTRACT

Since 1989, Dafen village in Shenzhen, China, has supplied millions of hand-painted oil-on-canvas paintings each year to global consumer markets. Accused of copying Western masterpieces, and spurred by the Chinese party-state's creative industry policies, Dafen village's eight thousand painters have been striving to become original artists. Simultaneously, conceptualist artists from outside Dafen village have engaged with the creative alienation of Dafen painters, by purchasing their labor in works of appropriation art. This study examines the discourses of creativity, originality, and appropriation that frame Dafen's painting production, and sets them against an ethnography of flexible work in the South Chinese painting trade. It explores the myriad ways in which Dafen village lends itself to intellectual and aesthetic explorations of the separation of painting labor from conceptual labor, as enacted in both modernist and postmodernist framings of artistic authorship.

The study begins by charting the historical categorization of Chinese "export painting" and the emergence of the "painting factory" as a cultural imaginary of Sino-Western trade. It then examines the political stakes of "creativity" as constructed in Dafen television propaganda made by the national and local party-state. Then, turning to a single Vincent van Gogh-specialty workshop and the transnational wholesale and retail of van Gogh trade paintings, it theorizes the relationship of "craft" to modernist authorship and signature style. Finally, it scrutinizes cosmopolitan conceptual artists' and designers' collaborations with Dafen painters, exploring the ethical and aesthetic terms of universal creativity raised by the Dafen "readymade." Establishing continuities between Dafen production and the making of "high" art while challenging their putative antinomies, this study shows how the ideology of individual creativity undergirds the cultural industry policies of the local party-state, the consumer demand for authentic craft, and the appropriation of labor in contemporary art.

Thesis Supervisor: Caroline A. Jones
Title: Professor of the History of Art



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Foreword

The research for this project spanned June 2006 to June 2010, and comprised sixteen months of fieldwork in Dafen village, Shenzhen, and the Pearl River Delta Region, including Hong Kong and Guangzhou. It also entailed limited fieldwork, museum and archival research in Xiamen, Beijing, Amsterdam and several cities in the United States including Salem, Los Angeles and New York. My research was funded by a CLIR Mellon Dissertation Fellowship in the Humanities in Original Sources, a SSRC Pre-Dissertation Fellowship for International Collaboration, a SSRC Mellon International Dissertation Research Fellowship, and an ACLS Mellon Dissertation Completion Fellowship. In association with their fellowships, the CLIR and the SSRC held workshops focused on interdisciplinary research methodologies that steered the design of my research.

My fieldwork in Dafen village and the Pearl River Delta region was conducted over four visits in the summer of 2006, in the winter of 2007-2008, from fall to spring 2008-2009, and during the summer of 2010. This onsite research included interviews, site visits, materials collection and participant observation as a buyer, dealer, painting student, interpreter, curator and historian. Each of these participant roles yielded different types of material, whose impact on the study I address here.

Presenting myself as a PhD student in art history, over the course of two years, I conducted interviews with over sixty Dafen and Xiamen painters, dealers, and bosses in either Mandarin or Cantonese Chinese. When verbal consent was granted, these interviews were recorded in audio, transcribed in Chinese with the assistance of Wei Chen in Shenzhen, and, when quoted, translated by myself. Initially, my interviewees were contacts provided to me by contemporary artists who had completed projects in Dafen village. From the fall of 2008, the majority of interviewees I met by walking into their galleries or studios, or, had introduced to me by previous contacts. In particular, Liu Zhen, who served as an interpreter for Christian Jankowski's 2007 project, introduced me to Yin Xunzhi, Li Tianning, Xiao Keman and several other Dafen artists mentioned in this study. Over two years, Yin Xunzhi in turn introduced me to roughly a dozen of his friends and associates, including Dafen spokesperson Huang Jiang and Jiang Qingbei, chair of the Dafen Artists's Association. Zhao Xiaoyong introduced me to the Shenzhen journalist Yu Haibo, who in turn introduced me to Dafen bosses Wu Ruiqiu and Huang Ye. Dafen boss Cai Chusheng introduced me to about a dozen painters in his network. Gu Tian introduced me to the artists who participated in an event organized by the CPC Youth Party Branch in early 2009.

In the winter of 2008, in addition to conducting interviews, I ordered several dozen paintings from Dafen village's painters, galleries, and workshops, including those that would later become my closest informants, and sold them without mark-up to American and European friends who were familiar with my project. In 2008, I assisted as an interpreter without payment for several American, European, Chinese and Hong Kong buyers, artists, tourists and traders with knowledge of my project during their visits to Dafen

village. These participant observation practices are recorded in my fieldnotes, and to many in Dafen village, situated me as a buyer, putter-out or contact to potential buyers. Through these transactions, I gained an invaluable perspective on the painting trade. I balanced this experience with continuing interviews, site visits, and participant observation practices in other capacities.

Over the course of two years, I followed most closely four individuals in Dafen village: Van Gogh painter Zhao Xiaoyong from Hunan province, painter-dealer Cai Chusheng from Chaozhou in Guangdong province, hyperrealist painter Wang Xuehong from Anhui province, and figurative painter/original artist Yin Xunzhi from Heilongjiang province. My selection of these four individuals was based on the diversity of their regional origins, training, and work in Dafen village. I also chose these individuals based on their own and their families' interest in my research, as well as a personal sympathy we developed. My time spent with them included participant observation in their shops, galleries and homes, and I participated in several aspects of their enterprises by interacting with their buyers, suppliers, or collaborators, and occasionally serving as an interpreter with their English- or Cantonese-speaking clients. I also privately interviewed some of their friends, family members, and business associates. In 2008, with their permission, I recorded in audio roughly fifty hours of activity in Zhao Xiaoyong's van Gogh workshop, where I also painted as a student, and twenty hours of activity in the gallery of Cai Chusheng. In addition, my conversations with them and several of their associates continued over time in multiple formats, including QQ and MSN chat, mobile SMS, and email correspondence. I introduced these four individuals, their spouses, Shenzhen interpreter Liu Zhen, and Shenzhen photojournalist Yu Haibo, to one another in March 2009. The discussion that developed from this meeting, comparing their experiences in the trade and assessing my research, influenced the writing phase of my project. Although only the careers of Zhao Xiaoyong and Yin Xunzhi are discussed in detail in Chapters Five and Six respectively, insights shared by these four individuals and their families shaped my understanding of Dafen village's painting and trade practices and enriched every part of this study.

In the spring of 2009 and 2010, I conducted site visits and interviews with painters and bosses in Beijing and Dafen village with the Beijing director and filmmaker Zhou Heyang, who recorded these interviews with a digital camera for television. As in my visits to Dafen village with Shenzhen journalist Yu Haibo, respondents used the presence of the media as an opportunity to immediately criticize local government policy more vehemently than I heard in private interviews. For this reason I have chosen to present the insights from these interviews without identifying the speakers.

In 2010, I participated as an unpaid curatorial consultant for a contemporary art exhibition held at the Dafen Art Museum in association with the Shanghai World Expo, which is discussed in Chapter Seven. In this capacity, I met and interviewed a number of participating Dafen painters, as well as Shenzhen- and Beijing-based artists, curators, and officials. In association with the exhibition, I was introduced to several

local officials in the Buji Propaganda Department and the Dafen Management Office, who supplied me with materials and informally answered some of my questions regarding official policy.

In addition to interviews with painters and bosses, from 2007 to 2009, I made telephone inquiries and conducted site visits as a potential buyer to factories, workshops, wholesale warehouses, galleries, and retail shops in Dafen village, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Beijing, Xiamen, Amsterdam, Long Island City, New York, Los Angeles, and Memphis. In addition, as a consumer, I surveyed retail outlets in six districts in Hong Kong. In a handful of cases, I returned to conduct interviews with employees and bosses of these firms. With few exceptions, distributors and retailers outside of Dafen village who agreed to be interviewed did not consent to be identified. As a result, much of the information I obtained on distribution practices could only be described in general terms in this study.

From 2006 to 2010, over twenty artists working in Berlin, Boston, New York, Beijing, Los Angeles, Amsterdam, Vienna, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong provided information about their ongoing or completed work in Dafen village, through both recorded formal interviews, skype conversations and email correspondence. These artists and their work provided me with detailed cases of art production in Dafen village that are discussed in this study. In particular, Cameron Gray (Los Angeles), Matthias Meinharter and Nikolaus Gansterer (Vienna), Leung Mee Ping (Hong Kong), Liang Yiwoo (Hong Kong), Liu Ding (Beijing), Christian Jankowski (Berlin), Sascha Pohle (Amsterdam), Michael Wolf (Hong Kong) and Yu Haibo (Shenzhen), each whose projects in Dafen village spanned several years, shared many insights that enhanced my understanding of the relationship between Dafen production and contemporary art.

Although the vast majority of painters and artists working in Dafen village whom I interviewed sought to be publicly named and recognized in my study, I found that many intermediaries, such as merchants and traders working outside of Dafen village, tended to obscure their own identities, roles or practices, as well as the roles of Dafen producers in their enterprises. In order to trace these chains of interaction and analyze the regime of anonymity within which Dafen producers work, I have chosen to identify my interviewees by name whenever consent was granted. In many cases, the practice of changing or suppressing individuals' names, as is common in ethnographic writing, would, in an art historical context, transgress their authorship of the works discussed. Therefore, when choosing to identify individuals by name, I have sought to balance the authorial and commercial claims of the painters and artists I interviewed against each other. For example, when discussing a particular painting or work of art, I have sought to identify the painters, commissioners, and artists of the work. However, unless consent was granted, I have anonymized any information that would negatively affect an individual's relationship with a current boss or active client.

Most of the artists—both "local" and "international"—whom I interviewed and directly cite in this study met me as an art history student studying Dafen village and contemporary art. Nevertheless, regardless of how closely acquainted my informants were with my research aims, I understand that I have often been

perceived as a potential buyer or promoter of any individual artists's work, since I often also acted in that capacity. In Dafen village, these ethnographic performances were both determined and enabled by my familial origins in Hong Kong (where many major Dafen clients were historically based), Cantonese ancestral origin and language ability (making me a co-provincial with many Dafen bosses), English language ability as a foreign-born Chinese, and educational standing as a doctoral student. Situated by these place-based identities, my social capital was determined by my access to outside markets and the institutions of art—access that is sought by Dafen artists, painters, dealers, and bosses. While presuming cultural and professional identities to be thus malleable, nevertheless, as a researcher I did not actively seek an *a priori* understanding of the Dafen painting trade that was "outside" the market. As a result, I often welcomed, rather than avoided, market-based interactions in my fieldwork. These positions thoroughly impacted the ethnography I constructed. Throughout this study, I have therefore highlighted how strategic deployments of cultural and professional identity illuminate the relationship between art and its markets, and between labor and its performances.

Notes On Translations

All translations are by myself unless otherwise noted. All Chinese names and titles are rendered in *banyu pinyin* romanization, simplified Chinese characters, and Chinese surname order, unless they are habitually rendered otherwise in previous publications. Where relevant, I have provided the romanization of Cantonese names in the form used either by the person named, or, as has been used in previous publications. In such cases I have also given the name in traditional Chinese characters. Names used repeatedly in the text are included in the accompanying index.

Dafen village (*Dafen cun* 大芬村) refers to the place of my study. Dafen Oil Painting Village (*Dafen youhua cun* 大芬油画村) refers to the state-led enterprise established by the Buji Street Office government in 2004.

Following current English language scholarship, I have opted to translate "*xuanchuan* 宣传" as "propaganda" rather than "publicity" (the Chinese term encompasses both meanings), which is the official English translation introduced by the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 1998.

I have used a consistent English equivalent for Chinese terms that are used consistently in Dafen village, including the terms for trade painting (*hanghua* 行画), painter-worker (*huagong* 画工), painter-master (*huashi* 画师), painter-dealer (*huashang* 画商), artist (*huajia* 画家), boss (*laoban* 老板), painting workshop (*huafang* 画坊), painting factory (*huachang* 画厂), painting studio (*huashi* 画室), gallery (*hualang* 画廊), copying (*linmo* 临摹), originality (*yuanchuang* 原创), and creativity (*chuangyi* 创意). However certain terms that encompass a range of meanings (such as "*gao* 稿" or "*xiesheng* 写生") have been rendered with a variety of English equivalents as required of context. Terms used repeatedly in the text are included in the accompanying index.



Dafen Village, Buji Street Office, Longgang District, Shenzhen City, Guangdong Province, China
中国广东省深圳市龙岗区布吉街道办事处大芬村

Introduction

After the Copy

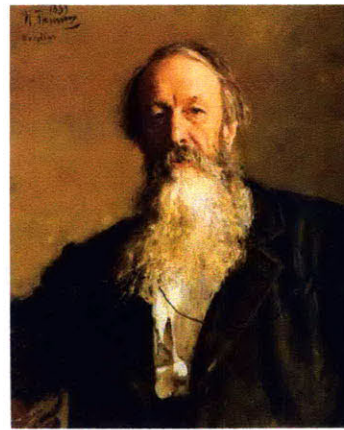
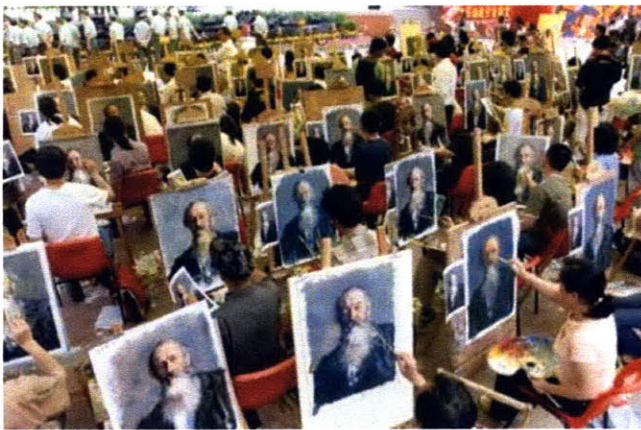


Figure 1. Copying Competition, First International Cultural Industry Fair, Dafen Village, 2004. Photo by Dafen Oil Painting Village Management Office. Figure 2. Ilya Repin, *Portrait of Vladimir Stasov*, 1883. Coll. St. Petersburg Museum.

After the Copy

In 2004, on the occasion of its designation as a National Model Cultural Industry Site, Chinese officials held a Copying Competition in Dafen village (figure 1). Located on the outskirts of the southern Chinese megacity of Shenzhen, Dafen village was being promoted by local officials as the

world's largest production center for handmade oil paintings.¹ Countering Western journalists' accusations that this "art industry" brazenly violated Western artists' copyrights by re-painting Western masterpieces, local officials argued instead that, through Chinese painters' skills of imitation, the high art of the world had been democratized for global consumers. The Copying Competition was a celebratory spectacle of this ambition, held in Dafen village's newly built outdoor Art Square as part of China's First International Cultural Industry Fair, an event overseen at the

¹ As of 2010, Dafen village was being administered as a residential neighborhood by the Buji Street Office (formerly Buji Township), in turn led by the Longgang District Party Committee and Longgang District Government. In 2004, Buji was converted from a township into a street office of Longgang district, which was itself created out of Bao'an district, formerly Bao'an county, in 1993. Since 1999, Dafen village's cultural industry has been largely overseen by the Buji Propaganda Department first headed by Shen Shuren and then by Ren Xiaofeng. Since 2005, the Buji Street Office's Dafen Management Office, established in 2005, has overseen official activities at Dafen. In this study, I use "local officials" specifically as a shorthand for these changing sub-municipal and sub-provincial party-state organizations of Buji and Longgang from 1989 to 2010, both prior to and after Buji and Dafen's 2004 urbanization and administrative incorporation into the municipality of Shenzhen. As (former) county- and township-level governments, Buji's and Longgang's centrality in the implementation of national policy is not uncommon in the Chinese political system. On the historical as well as reform-era dimensions of counties' and townships' importance, see Yang Zhong, *Local Government and Politics in China: Challenges From Below* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2003). On the Chinese propaganda system after 1989 and the Central Propaganda Department's formal powers over and of cultural production, aspects of which will be discussed in this study, see Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007). As legal scholar Donald C. Clarke succinctly put it, formally the PRC is a unitary state that rejects both the vertical separation of powers between levels of government and the horizontal separation of powers between branches of government. He argues that in practice the bifurcation of formal powers from the work of government results in a quasi-monopoly with complex constraints at the local level. Donald C. Clarke, "The Chinese Legal System," *George Washington University Law School* (4 JUL 2005). Although internal decision-making processes of local governmental agencies, their reporting structure within the party, and their institutional (i.e., sectoral-regional or *tiaokuai*) standing lies outside the scope of my research, local officials political-commercial interests and activities in Dafen village appears to coincide with other scholars' findings on southern Chinese cities of the reform era. See especially, Susan Shirk, "The Chinese Political System and the Political Strategy of Economic Reform," in *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, ed. Lieberthal et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

highest levels of the national culture administration.² During the contest, one hundred and ten painters competed to make the best copy of a painting in under three and a half hours. The painting, chosen by a jury appointed by the local propaganda department, was a portrait of the eminent nineteenth-century Russian art critic Vladimir Stasov, painted in 1883 by Ilya Repin, a Russian artist venerated for his socialist consciousness (figure 2).³ The painters' finished copies were judged, and ten painters were awarded cash prizes and the coveted opportunity to obtain urban household registration in Shenzhen.⁴

For the first three decades of China's post-Mao reform era beginning in 1978, urban household registration (*hukou* 户口) had offered great advantages in the new socioeconomic regime. Regulating rural and urban difference under China's planned economy, the household registration system automatically determined, solely through place of birth, a Chinese citizen's access to education, formal employment, property acquisition, medical care, police protection and more.

² The China International Cultural Industry Fair (*Wen bo hui* 文博会) has been held annually in Shenzhen since 2004. In 2004, Dafen village was designated the sole satellite site of the fair, and a series of official art and art industry events were held for official visitors and the public, and practice which continued into 2010. The fair is overseen by the National Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Commerce, State Administration of Radio, Film and Television, General Administration of Press and Publication, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, the Guangdong Provincial People's Government, and the Shenzhen Municipal People's Government. “文博会拉开大幕 [Cultural Industry Fair Opens On The Big Stage],” press release, 深圳政府在线 [*Shenzhen Government Online*] (18 NOV 2004).

³ The five-member jury appointed by the Buji propaganda department consists of members of Shenzhen Artists' Association. Initially the copying competition consisted only of a single portrait painting; in subsequent competitions a landscape painting was added and painters could opt to compete in either category.

⁴ Tang Xiaoqing 唐小清, “走近大芬油画村 [Walking Into Dafen Oil Painting Village],” 黑龙江日报 [*Heilongjiang Daily*], 文体新闻 [*Culture News*] (6 JUN 2006): 11. “大芬村临摹大赛人气旺 [The Lively Dafen Village Copying Competition],” *Shenzhen Municipal Library* National Culture News, Resources Appreciation Project (2008). Wei, Shan 韦山. “大芬油画村举办第二届油画现场临摹大赛: 临摹技艺高超将优惠入深户 [Dafen Oil Painting Village Holds 2nd Oil Painting Live Copying Competition: High Copying Skills Favored With Shenzhen Household Registration Transfer].” *Buji Street Office News*, 18 MAY 2006.

Formally transferring one's household registration was nearly impossible, thus rendering precarious the status of millions of rural migrants who worked in the rapidly industrializing cities. Nearly all of Dafen village's estimated 8,000 painters were amongst this massive and illicit "floating" population. Household registration in the brand new city of Shenzhen was especially coveted, for Shenzhen was the utopia of the new China, the city "painted into existence" by the Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping as a site for policy experimentation and contact with the global market.⁵ Its creation amounted to a tacit acknowledgement of the failure of socialism to provide for the communist society once promised. Aside from its stunning economic achievements that became representative of the country's breakneck development, Shenzhen also took up the cultural flank of the "opening and reform" policy, serving as the civilizational frontline in an attempt to "join tracks" with the rest of the world.⁶ This desire was splendidly displayed in the city's famous theme park, *Windows on the World*, a forty-eight hectares park containing one hundred and thirty scaled replicas of the world's cultural landmarks, arranged radially around a 1:6 reproduction of the Eiffel Tower. Built in 1994, it first served as a primer of the world's cultural heritage for China's political elite; by the time of the

⁵ Deng Xiaoping was said to have simply drawn a circle on a map designating the site of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in 1979. This image of a city "painted into existence" was monumentalized in the stirring 1997 propaganda song, "A Story of Spring" (*Chuntian de gushi* 春天的故事) as noted in Philip Tinari, "Original Copies: The Dafen Oil Painting Village," *Art Forum* October (2007): 344-51. The song's first stanza describes Deng's 1979 decision and the miraculous "fairy tale" appearance of the great city of Shenzhen ("神话般地崛起座座城"), and the second stanza refers to Deng's 1992 Southern Tour, awakening a national rebirth that is likened to the "unfurling of a new and everlasting picture scroll" ("展开了一幅百年的新画卷"). Within the official mythology of Shenzhen, Dafen village can thus be constructed as the realization of economic policy expressed through cultural forms. On demonstrations of political power through calligraphy—to which painting is closely connected—see Richard Curt Kraus, *Brushes With Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁶ The militaristic language of the cultural avant-garde was explicit in the establishment of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, whose border with Hong Kong was termed the "frontline" and its internal boundary separating the Zone from the rest of China was defensively termed the "secondary line" (*erxian* 二线).

Dafen Copying Competition ten years later, former farmers from Shenzhen had vacationed in Europe several times over,⁷ and *Windows on the World* was only one of many middle-class amusement parks in the city.⁸

While the promises of post-socialist plenty and global cultural access had been fulfilled for many in Shenzhen, the plight of migrant workers in Dafen village—those rural migrants capable of painting the world's masterpieces but without hope of visiting them *in the original*—remained a poignant reminder of the inequities of Chinese reform-era development. Prominent Shenzhen journalists called for a resolution to Dafen painters' illicit status, and the Shenzhen Municipal Labour Department announced it would provide urban household registration for the best professional painters at Dafen village.⁹ The Copying Competition was established as an annual event, art history and drawing exams were added, and over one hundred painters would qualify over the next five

⁷ On the crucial role that the former rural villages, later "villages-in-the-city" (*cheng zhong cun* 城中村), played in the urbanization of Shenzhen, as well as the way rural villagers have profited from this process, see Jonathan Bach, "From Peasants to Citizens: Urban Villages in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone," *Cultural Anthropology* (forthcoming).

⁸ On Shenzhen's *Splendid China* and the *Folk Culture Villages*, two theme parks adjacent to *Windows on the World*, see Ann Anagnost, "The Nationscape" *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 161-176. Like large-scale theme parks that offer Chinese and foreign visitors the chance to "tour" China and the world, Shenzhen's amusement parks catering to migrant workers make use of miniaturization and supplementary travel, only within a more bounded geographical scope. Nanling village, adjacent to Dafen, built an amusement park that features a miniature replica of the "Zigzag Bridge" of Shanghai's *Yu Gardens* and a replica of the Great Wall. This local Great Wall appears prominently as a site for outdoor painting for the hero of *Painted Fate*, the television melodrama set in Dafen village discussed in Chapter Three.

⁹ Shenzhen Municipal Library, "A Lively Dafen Copying Competition," unpagued.

years.¹⁰ These painters became full citizens of Shenzhen, able to live, work and travel in the city legitimately, and eligible to vote in local elections.¹¹



Figure 3. Ilya Repin, *Burlaks on the Volga*, oil on canvas, 1870-1873. Coll. St. Petersburg Museum.

Ilya Repin's *Portrait of Vladimir Stasov* would seem an appropriate choice for the soft inauguration of this new labor policy integrating social and cultural goals with the city's ongoing urbanization. In China, Repin (列宾 1844-1930) is widely exalted for his socialist and revolutionary consciousness, and is recognized as a painter of "critical realism" who utilized close observation and depiction of the disenfranchised to influence great social change. His representative work, well known in China, is *Burlaks on the Volga* (伏尔加河上的纤夫), a monumental 1873 painting that depicts the misery of landless peasants who worked as boat haulers along the banks of the Volga

¹⁰ In lieu of competing in the Copying Competition, painters can also opt to sit for an annual painting exam from which the top ten winners of the Copying Competition are exempt. Examiners are provided with a textbook from which to study for the art history exam: Jin Yufeng 金玉峰, 美术：高级中学美术课本 [Art: Upper Secondary School Art Textbook]. (Beijing: Renmin meishu chubanshe, 2001).

¹¹ Since, by this time, Shenzhen's rural villages were being converted into urban neighborhoods, Dafen painters who passed this exam were not given the perpetual land rights that rural villagers once held. Glossed as "Special Villagers," Dafen village's new citizens were profiled in the Buji government publication: Ren Xiaofeng and Zhou Zhiqian, eds. *Special Villagers of Dafen* 大芬村的特殊村民 (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 2006).

river (figure 3). In the late nineteenth-century, the art critic Vladimir Stasov (斯塔索夫 1824-1906) championed Repin for his rejection of European artistic trends and for taking up Russian authenticity in his subject matter and style.¹² Stasov's interpretation of Repin was mythologized by the Soviet arts system which made both men into exemplars of national artistic achievement, and copies of Repin's paintings were regularly produced in Stalin's Russia for museums, public buildings, and traveling exhibits—a practice common also in Mao's China.¹³ By showcasing Repin's *Portrait of Stasov* for the competition, Dafen village's propaganda officials signaled their own political correctness, associating their political-commercial project with an unimpeachably socialist artist. At the same time, in choosing a canonical and pre-revolutionary Russian artist's portrait of a Russian critic who championed a Russian national style, the event also asserted Dafen village's mastery of world-cultural heritage.

But by 2004, the Chinese party-state's claims of allegiance to the worker and the artist—the two class types unified in the figure of the Dafen painter—seemed only to demonstrate the bureaucratic power of what Chinese art historian Julia Andrews has called the "empty shell of the socialist art establishment."¹⁴ The special ideological status of the socialist artist had been impoverished not only by fast-evolving Chinese reforms, but also by the rise in China throughout the 1980s and 1990s of Western art buyers and curators, to whom the autonomy of the artist from the state was taken for granted as part and parcel of the avant-garde artist's "originality." Through the challenge wrought by the art market and the adaptations within the socialist arts administration

¹² Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

¹³ Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, "Politics in Russian Art: The Case of Repin," *Russian Review* 37, no. 1 (1978): 14-29.

¹⁴ Julia F. Andrews, "Art Under Mao, 'Cai Guoqiang's Maksimov Collection,' and China's Twentieth Century," in *Writing Modern Chinese Art: Historiographic Explorations*, ed. Josh Yiu (Seattle, WA: Seattle Art Museum, 2009).

to embrace the new cultural economy, the exalted political role of artists in socialist life had all but been evacuated of its idealism. To win the Dafen Copying Competition would hardly provide the Dafen painter with the kind of social relevance a celebrated artist might have expected in the Sino-Soviet bloc, for the ability to paint a painting with a socialist consciousness has uncertain—if any—value in the new socialist market economy.¹⁵ As a result, instead of symbolizing an uplifting socialist cultural achievement and a redistribution of socioeconomic benefits, the choice of Repin's *Stasov* for a Copying Competition could be little more than a backwards-looking publicity stunt or a cynical bureaucrat's inside joke: a socialist statement in a post-socialist age.¹⁶

From the perspective of cultural historians in China and the West, it would thus be the belatedness of the Dafen Copying Competition that is remarkable. Instead of being an image of progress and achievement, the festive, timed and judged copying of a nineteenth-century socialist realist painting for a local Communist Party propaganda organ as a showcase for a "model cultural industry" would, by this logic, seem rather to celebrate what Clement Greenberg had decried when he called Repin's realist painting "kitsch" and linked it to state indoctrination of peasants in the Soviet bloc.¹⁷ Instead of appearing worldly, Dafen's officials appear doubly anachronistic: purveyors

¹⁵ Not long after the installation of the annual exam, the desirability of urban household registration was already on the wane. In 2008, the Chinese government abolished rural taxes, lowering the desirability of urban status for rural migrants like Dafen painters. Relaxation of other restrictions (for example, rural-registered or unregistered children started to attend local schools for a higher tuition rate, and the reduced enforcement of the Shenzhen internal boundary after 2003-04 which previously restricted movement of migrants) also started to limit the advantages of urban status. As a result, fewer and fewer Dafen painters sought to gain Shenzhen household registration and in 2009, Dafen village's annual professionalization was suspended, and that year's Copying Competition had only a cash prize.

¹⁶ The irrelevance of socialist realism in "post-socialist" China, which the Dafen Copying Competition dramatizes, is akin to the "sad joke" which Julia Andrews ascribes to Cai Guoqiang's 2002 installation of his collection of the socialist realist paintings by the influential Soviet painter Konstantin Maksimov (1913-1993) at the Shanghai Art Museum. Andrews, "Art Under Mao," 67.

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6, no. 5 (Fall 1939): 34-49.

of simulacral Soviet propaganda for the kitsch market, and on top of that, from an outdated Cold War worldview. In 2009, when the *Ilya Repin State Institute of Painting* in St. Petersburg announced a five-year cultural exchange agreement with the same International Cultural Industry Fair for which the Dafen Copying Competition was held, promising to exhibit a minimum of 150 paintings per year from the *Repin State Institute* which the Trade Fair would henceforth "promote and sell," it would seem that the alliance between the international "socialist art establishment" and the "cultural industry" run by the Chinese party-state had achieved yet greater heights of irony.¹⁸ Here it would seem appropriate to recall the apocryphal Deng Xiaoping dictum to avoid engaging in speculation as to whether China's reform policies are "socialist" or "capitalist."

Despite the ready irony of such scenarios, this study seeks to challenge the conceptual dichotomies that seem to structure a spectacle such as the Dafen Copying Competition.¹⁹ To see China's reform-era cultural history ironically—that is, to delight in its apparent anachronisms and to imagine it as an ignorant victim of historical progress—occludes a more complex historical drama. In this case, the mocking pleasure with which we might view the Dafen Copying Competition rather too comfortably resurrects an age-old Eurocentric idea to which local officials are responding: that China is a totalitarian society made up of automatons who make and consume copies, whereas the West is made up of liberal and free-thinking individuals who create and collect original things. Upon closer examination, such cultural binaries are not so secure. In 2004, Dafen village's officials showcased copying at the cultural industry fairs in order to contrast it all the more starkly with

¹⁸ The Repin Institute is also known as the St. Petersburg Academy of Art. Wu Libing (trans.), "ICIF and Repin State Academic Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture of Russia Signed Letter of Intent: A Special Hall Will be Set for Repin Institute of Painting in the Coming ICIFs for Five Years," original article in *Shenzhen Economic Daily* (29 JUL 2009).

¹⁹ To follow D.C. Muecke's formulation, irony requires a victim. D. C Muecke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969), 20.

"original creation" (*yuanchuang* 原创 and *chuangzuo* 创作), a matter of local and national cultural policy that has since continued to receive far more publicity, capital investment and bureaucratic attention. At the 2004 Fair, after 110 painters competed in the Copying Competition, 1100 painters lined the newly paved streets of Dafen village, each to paint an original painting (figure 4). Meanwhile, the demand for masterpiece copies which fuels Dafen village's 300 million yuan (US\$ 43 million) annual revenues originates neither in China nor its government, but rather in the vast consumer art market of the United States and Western Europe. If the Dafen Copying Competition re-enacts Cold War cultural politics, the ironic mode of reception only affirms that belatedness is in the eye of the beholder.



Figure 4. Thousand Painters Painting Demonstration, First International Cultural Industry Fair 2004, Dafen Village. Image from Shiyang Zeng, *Speak of Painting, Think of Buji: News Photography Record*, 2005.

My goal in this study is neither to demonstrate the kitschiness of Western taste nor to champion the creativity of the forgotten Chinese village painter. For if the outmoded master narrative of Chinese stagnation and Western progress is overly simplistic, so too is the counter-

narrative that reifies Chinese civilization as an unbroken tradition of skilled imitation and Western modernity as the fount of cultural pollution and debased consumption. Here too, it is the breadth of Dafen village's historical reach that reveals the limitations of this alternative narrative: In Dafen, traditionalist ink painters, who make up a small but significant portion of the trade, have declared their Chinese paintings "authentic" and "original," and deride their colleagues' Western-style paintings as "mimetic" and, therefore, commercial.²⁰ Meanwhile, Dafen's oil painting dealers often tell potential buyers that Dafen's *Mona Lisas* are "better" than the original found in Paris.²¹ Such claims—which invert the historian's expectations of the Dafen artist's belatedness and derivativeness—suggest that "originality," "authenticity," and "creativity" are mutable terms whose periodization comes unfixed in the contemporary. As I show throughout this study, Dafen village illuminates the ways in which this cluster of terms accrues new cultural, nationalist, aesthetic, market, and consumer values, which are in turn re-deployed in cultural policy, contemporary aesthetics, and the global market.

The 2004 Dafen Copying Competition and China International Cultural Industry Fair coincided with the turn, throughout urban China and the post-industrial world, towards policies that foster cultural and creative industries. Under the leadership of the local Buji Street Office (*Buji jiedao banshichu* 布吉街道办事处) and Longgang District (*Longgang qu* 龙岗区) governments, Dafen

²⁰ He Zijin, an ink painter with an open studio-gallery at Dafen village, argued that the difference between oil painting and ink painting was that oil painting, being Western, was "mass produced" (*piliang shengchan* 批量生产) and hence more commercial, whereas ink painting was singular, individual and original. Yet he himself produces his ink landscape paintings far faster and in higher volume than do the oil painters. He Zijin, interview with author, 8 AUG 2006. Zhang Zitang, an ink painting gallerist, also derided the "wholesale" (*pifa* 批发) methods of oil painters, and called the ink painters to whom he put out orders, his "elders" and "teachers" in Chinese tradition. In 2006, Zhang moved his gallery to Shenzhen's Antique Curio City (*Gumancheng* 古玩城) in order to distance it from Dafen village's "Western" painting. Zhang Zitang, interview with author, 15 Aug 2006.

²¹ Zhao Xinxiong, interview with author, 8 AUG 2006. Author's fieldnotes, 25 OCT 2008.

village was administratively reorganized into a residential neighborhood (*jumin weiyuan hui* 居民委员会). At the same time, a state-led enterprise was established under the parallel name of "Dafen Oil Painting Village," which immediately won the national status of Model Cultural Industry Site (*Wenhua chanye shifan jidi* 文化产业示范基地).²² This governmental appropriation and renaming of Dafen village as an "artists' village" summarily demonstrates the party-state's attempt to encompass a migrant-worker settlement into an urban administered and nationally visible creative industry.²³ For the first time, Dafen painters were officially counted and registered (at 8,000), as were firms (at 500), production figures (5 million paintings per annum), and revenues (300 million yuan per annum).²⁴

Pursuant to national and municipal creative industry policy and urban planning, local governments soon concentrated their energy on redevelopment-cum-cultural projects in Dafen

²² For this reason, throughout this study I use "Dafen village" (*Dafen cun* 大芬村) to designate the place, and "Dafen Oil Painting Village" (*Dafen youhua cun* 大芬油画村) to refer to the state-led enterprise. The Dafen Oil Painting Village is managed by the Dafen Management Office (大芬管理办), it had a temporary management team without a leader until the fall of 2008, when Chen Qiping (陈崎平) assumed that post.

²³ Although the promotional power of the Dafen Oil Painting Village "brand" has been quite effective both nationally and globally, its Management Office and Museum did not have a formal institutional structure, budget, or leader (*jigou*) until late 2008. Its stated goal, to become a publicly-traded company within five years of establishment, clearly has also not yet been attained. That is, although the enterprises' political goals have certainly been met, its commercial achievements remain less impressive. As Lance Gore has argued, "the significance of bureaucratic entrepreneurs as politically-embedded economic actors is that they subject market forces to the particular jurisdiction of their office, unlike the private entrepreneurs who recognize no political boundaries to market profits." Lance L. Gore, "The Communist Legacy in Post-Mao Economic Growth," *The China Journal* 41 (JAN 1999): 31-32.

²⁴ Shenzhen City Longgang District Government Affairs Publicity Office, "Dafen Oil Painting Village," available: <http://www.lg.gov.cn> (accessed NOV 2006). A 2008 promotional magazine produced by the Buji propaganda department provided new figures: 839 studios, 626 galleries, 61 traditional painting studios, and 5000 total industry workers. Ren Xiaofeng, ed., "Industry Situation," *Dafen Art*, May 2009, 8.

village that specifically supported "original" art and "original" artists.²⁵ Buji and Longang governments have built residential developments that offered subsidized housing and studios only to those artists administratively designated as "original artists," sponsored artists' organizations to fund their "creative" activities, paved the way for the establishment of an auction house to sell their work, and established satellite creative painting centers to send them on sketching trips. The most visible of these projects was the building of the Dafen Art Museum in 2007. Overseen by the municipal Urban Planning and Land Resources Commission and designed by the Shenzhen-based architecture and urban design firm Urbanus, the Dafen Art Museum is an imposing 100 million yuan (over 14 million USD), 16,800 square meters museum in the heart of Dafen village.²⁶ Between 2007 and 2009, the museum mounted exhibitions of "original" paintings, including paintings by Shenzhen culture department officials, Russian academic painters, and Dafen village's officially approved "original" artists. Most of the museum's galleries however, have stood empty and closed to the public. Noting its propensity to leak and flood, many Dafen painters and bosses nicknamed it "the giant toilet." The insult gives some indication as to the widespread skepticism towards governmental policies that sponsor an officially-defined "originality." Nevertheless, in the summer of 2010, the governmental remaking of Dafen village was celebrated at China's 2010 World's Exposition in Shanghai. Here, the continuation of the Shenzhen "miracle" was represented in an exhibition about

²⁵ Huang Chun 黄春, "第二届深圳文博会大芬油画村分会会长隆重开幕 [Opening of the 2nd Shenzhen Cultural Industry Fair At The Dafen Oil Painting Village Satellite Site]," *Guoji Shangbao* 国际商报, *Zhengzhi shichang jingjizhixu zhoukan* 整治市场经济秩序周刊 (19 MAY 2006): 008.

²⁶ Fang Jianhong 方健宏, ed., *A Guide to Cultural Industry in Guangdong* 广东文化产业投资指南 (Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Press 广东人民出版社, 2006), 72. Urbanus architecture and design, 都市实践, *Village/City, City/Village* 村城城村 (Beijing: China Electric Power Press 中国电力出版社, 2006), 120-159.

Dafen village curated by the architects of the Dafen Art Museum.²⁷ The 2004 Dafen Copying Competition and the 2010 World Expo Dafen village exhibition serve as bookends to the party-state's triumphant transformation of its economy in the post-Mao era, leveraged with the tropes of creativity and urbanity.

The success of this propagandizing and publicizing enterprise has spawned dozens of Dafen-type cultural industry art districts in Chinese cities.²⁸ Xiamen city, the largest painting production center after Dafen village, boasts no fewer than four separate artists' villages set up after 2007, each led by a different sub-municipal government: one in a former rural village much like Dafen village, one in a residential development, one in a city center mall, and one in former factory dormitories.²⁹ *New Yorker* contributor Peter Hessler vividly described the 2009 state-led creation of "Barbizon Painting Village" in Lishui city, a provincial town in Zhejiang province.³⁰ Local government policies

²⁷ "Shenzhen Signs Urban Best Practices Area Contract," *Press Release, Shanghai China Expo 2010* (30 SEP 2009). *Shenzhen Pavilion Guidebook*, May 2010.

²⁸ These range from urban art villages in small provincial towns to big cities like Xiamen, and even in the centers of high art like Beijing and Shanghai.

²⁹ Author's fieldnotes, 24 MAR 2009. Sun Liping 孙丽萍, "乌石浦油画村机身国家队 [Wushipu Oil Painting Village Ascends to the National Team]," 厦门日报 [*Xiamen Daily*] (27 FEB 2006): 001. In 2007, Shenzhen also established the Guanlan Woodblock Print Creative Industry Base. Liu Youyang 刘悠扬, "从油画村到版画村 [From Oil Painting Village to Woodblock Print Village]," 深圳商报 *Shenzhen Economic Daily* 文化广场 (13 MAR 2007): C01.

³⁰ Peter Hessler, "Letter From Lishui: Chinese Barbizon, a Factory Town's 'Art Village,'" *New Yorker* (26 OCT 2009): 68-77.

for Lishui's Barbizon and Xiamen's art villages—the subsidizing of original artists' housing, the promotion of original art galleries—follow the now-established "Dafen model."³¹

As a "Chinese hand-painted art product industry" and a "socialist market-economy cultural industry," Dafen village flouts modernist expectations for art's autonomy and newness because it derives its valuations from a global consumer art market and not from the modern institutions of high art (although it is quite capable of appropriating their forms). In addition to being an instance of the commodification of art under an evolving socialist political-economic system, Dafen village also stands at one of the major historical intersections of global trade and cultural exchange. It is located just outside the boundary of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone, a liberalized trade and export-processing zone that emerged as the world's largest manufacturing base in the late twentieth century. The Shenzhen Special Economic Zone itself borders on the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, the former British colony that, through colonial laissez-faire policies, became a major light manufacturing center in the post-WWII world. Hong Kong lies at the mouth of the Pearl River Delta, whose largest port city, Guangzhou (known in the West as Canton), was for centuries the center of Sino-Western maritime trade under the "Canton trade system" (1686-1842), functioning as the exclusive Qing-era export processing zone for tea, ceramics, and silk manufactures. In this study, I show that Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Guangzhou each sustained a large industry of oil-on-canvas painting for the Western consumer market at the height of its importance as a center of global trade. Dafen village, emerging in the post-Mao reform period as a

³¹ The Dafen model has been discussed in national cultural industry publications and internal party publications. A lengthy analysis is offered in Su Xiaofang 苏晓芳, "大芬村油画 唱上艺术的产业化之歌 [Dafen Village Oil Painting: Singing the Tune of the Industrialization of Art]," 中国文化报 [*China Culture News*] (25 DEC 2006): 006. Officials from throughout China have also visited Dafen village to learn from the model. I examine the national policy context of the Dafen model in Chapter Three.

new center of the painting trade, was a product of an alignment of both historical precedent and longstanding global demand.

As early as the seventeenth century, the artistic and artisanal production of the Canton trade in southern China had begun to reconfigure the global shape of manufacture and luxury. While the impact that Chinese ceramics, tea, and silk had upon modern European and American culture is well known, the growing consumption of Chinese things also entailed an intensified Western consumption of knowledge about Chinese industry and art.³² Visual images produced in the Canton trade were an index of this Sino-Western encounter, as they became central to the efforts to categorize one another's artistic practices. Although the relationship characterized by curiosity and fascination between China and the West largely ended with the Western imperial invasions of China starting in 1839, the Chinese production and trade in paintings for the West did not disappear. Despite the immense growth of photographic, print, and now digital reproduction of visual images beginning in the nineteenth century, the market for paintings “made by hand” in South China continued to thrive at a scale and scope that defies any conception of painting as a rarity. Nearly as soon as daguerreotypes were available, captains and merchants brought them to painters in Guangzhou to be painted and enlarged in oil on canvas.³³ Likewise, despite the ubiquity of digital photographs in the twenty-first century, Dafen village's painters continue to produce oil-on-canvas

³² Amongst many studies in this area, see Maxine Berg, “Britain, Industry and Perceptions of China: Matthew Boulton, 'Useful Knowledge' and the Macartney Embassy to China 1792-94,” *Journal of Global History* (July 2006): 269. Erik Mueggler, “The Lapponicum Sea: Matter, Sense, and Affect in the Botanical Exploration of Southwest China and Tibet,” *Society for the Comparative Study of Society and History* (2005): 442-79.

³³ One Canton trade painter “Hing Qua” (active c. 1850-1880) specialized in this practice. Two examples of his large portraits clearly made from daguerrotypes are a pair of portraits of an unidentified sea captain and his wife at the MFA Boston, 1993.143-5. See also Carl L. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities* (Woodbridge, Eng: Antique Collectors' Club, 1991), 145.

portraits from digital images emailed to them from clients around the world. Nevertheless, as widely as these paintings produced in South China have circulated, they remain one of the most overlooked genres of visual imagery in the West. This vast visual culture is currently treated in both Chinese- and English-language scholarly literature as Qing or Chinese "export painting" (*waixiaohua* 外销画), a term adopted in the 1950s by art historians working in England and the United States, and in the last two decades by art historians working in China.³⁴ It is a term that reinforces national boundaries and erases the density of transnational interactions that are the very root of the trade.

In this study, I instead refer to the *longue durée* of painting production in modern South China by the term *hanghua* (行画), or "trade painting."³⁵ Although the term did not enter written records such as newspapers until very recently, it has been used by painters to describe their own profession in the Cantonese Chinese dialect since at least the 1960s, and possibly much earlier. The multiple meanings of *hang* (行) allow the term to be translated into English as "professional painting," "commercial painting," "factory painting," or "merchant painting"—each illuminating particular nuances of the more comprehensive translation, "trade painting." Importantly, this

³⁴ Wilson Ming, and Liu Zhiwei, eds. *Souvenir From Canton: Chinese Export Paintings From the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Shanghai: Shanghai Publishing House, 2003), 10. The literature on the art of the Canton Trade is further addressed in Chapters One and Two. Chinese-language scholarship on the Canton trade began in the 1990s. Since the objects and paintings of the Canton trade reside in Western museums, much of this scholarship currently relies on Western primary sources. See Jiang Yinghe 江滢河, *Western Painting and Canton Port During the Qing Period* 清代洋画与广州口岸 (Beijing: 中华书局, 2007).

³⁵ In addition to the Pearl River Delta region, trade painting has been prevalent in the environs of the city of Xia'men (also a free-trade zone in both Qing and post-Mao eras) in the southern adjacent province of Fujian. In the contemporary period, Xiamen and the Pearl River Delta continue as the two major centers of Chinese trade painting, and Hong Kong and Taiwan are two of its major re-exporting markets. Following Lee Ching Kwan, I use the term "South China" to refer to this transnational region even though trade painting has also been practiced in northern China, though at a smaller scale, in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai. Trade painting has also been practiced in other countries such as the United States, Korea, Brazil, Mexico and Italy.

etymology connects it to the period of the the "Canton Trade" (1686-1842), when foreign trade was exclusively conducted through an official-merchant guild monopoly known as the Thirteen Factories or Thirteen Merchants (*shisan hang* 十三行).³⁶ In the following two chapters, I trace the genealogy of trade painting in the Pearl River Delta from the Canton trade to the present, and offer my 2006-2010 research on contemporary Dafen village as a starting point for opening up historiographic questions of artistic labor, social history and global consumption in the South China painting trade.

In both its origins and contemporary practice, the history of art is predominantly a history of artists, patrons and nations. But trade painting in the Pearl River Delta has been historically the work of itinerant and non-elite painters, and as such, it rarely furnishes biographies of great artists, or histories of groups, schools, and movements. Intended for dispersal to a wide consumer market for private consumption, trade painting likewise seldom registers the influences of a strong patron or of major social institutions. More importantly, as products made for a foreign market, trade paintings rest uncomfortably in the artistic categories of the nation-state.

When a work of "non-western" or "traditional" art is made for an outsider, it is often deemed "inauthentic."³⁷ When it is made for a non-elite outsider such as a Western tourist, merchant, sailor, or decorator—the work is not only inauthentic but potentially holds the embarrassment of forgery. Furthermore, if the work is clearly based upon a Western artist's work, it is regarded as a derivation so divorced from the original's civilizational context that it could be, at best, no better than a mechanical reproduction. By this logic, the greater the success of non-Western "export art"—that is,

³⁶ W. E. Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade*, (London: Curzon Press, 1996). Paul Arthur Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005).

³⁷ See Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

the wider its works are sold and the closer they approach a formal resemblance to Western art—the greater is its perceived decline from an idealized national, popular, or folk tradition.³⁸ Needless to say, in a Eurocentric modern order, the corollary does not hold true; there is no equivalent category of Western "export art."³⁹ Western artists who sell their work outside their own nations are celebrated rather than derided for their international appeal, and Western artists who imitate the art of other cultures are praised for their synthesis of global influence.

The odds of achieving art historical significance are thus implicitly stacked against "export" art. Craig Clunas, one of the few art historians to address Chinese art in the Canton trade period as a historical object, made this narrative explicit in a 1987 exhibition catalogue: According to Clunas, in the seventeenth century, the majority of Chinese-made decorative work for export was "purely" within the "Chinese tradition," with only basic shapes and forms altered to suit European use. In the eighteenth century, Western influence through the "intervention" of merchants and traders increased dramatically, resulting in the European category of *chinoiserie*. Later nineteenth-century Chinese export design then became a kind of "debased exoticism," a self-orientalizing production for foreign consumption. After the nineteenth century, with increased global contact, Chinese export art continued its steady decline into "tourist art."⁴⁰ Following this historical schema, in which contact with the Western market leads unquestionably to artistic decline, twenty-first-century export painting done in Dafen village for an even more globalized market must presumably be the most debased of all. Yet in the centuries of decline so convincingly set out in such a narrative, Chinese trade painting

³⁸ Larry Shiner has argued that the ideology of authenticity is a failure on the part of art historians to recognize the contemporaneity of producers of so-called primitive fakes and tourist art. Larry Shiner, "Primitive Fakes, 'Tourist Art,' and the Ideology of Authenticity," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52, no. 2 (Spring, 1994): 225-34.

³⁹ Despite the fact that the history of Western art is replete with artists whose produced work that was explicitly for export to patrons, collectors and dealers beyond the artist's national borders.

⁴⁰ Craig Clunas, ed. *Chinese Export Art and Design* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1987), 18-20.

only grew in scope and global reach. How is it that a practice in a state of constant depreciation can achieve such enduring growth and global ubiquity? There is something lacking, in other words, in the explanatory power of these paradigms of non-Western authenticity and their narratives of inevitable degeneration caused by an expanding market. From the Canton trade to Dafen village, the same skill sets and trade networks were used to produce the putatively “native” art as it was used to produce the “non-native” or “Western” art—for the same market.

The high-low binary, especially when filtered through the lens of non-Western primitivism and Western tourism, is conceptually ineffective when the scope of trade painting is considered in greater detail. Far more than simply reproducing canonized masterpieces, the contemporary trade painting industry produces a staggering range of product categories that includes, to name only a few:⁴¹ “classical” and academic painting, abstract decorative works for modernist interiors, landscapes and still life paintings for hotels and homes, orientalist erotica, custom portraits from photographs, ink painting, decorative paintings, souvenir paintings, antiqued painted home decor, collectible art works, original paintings, and, of most interest in this study, readymades for conceptual art projects.⁴² Each of these categories could be seen as “pseudo-” categories of “true art.” Are landscape paintings sold in souvenir shops at Mont Blanc made by a Dafen painter who

⁴¹ Here, I limit myself to the contemporary post-1978 trade, although in Chapters One and Two I will address the product categories of the earlier trade.

⁴² Painters from this group whom I interviewed for this study are listed here, where possible with their stated year of arrival to Dafen village, and then their stated academic affiliation. Li Tianning (2003, graduated National Painting Academy), Wang Xuehong (2000, graduated Anhui Normal University), Peng Bide (2005, graduated Xijiang Normal University), Yang Lixin (2005, graduated Lu Xun Art Academy), Huang Tiesheng (2005, graduated Lu Xun Art Academy), Yao Jianjun “Gu Tian” (2005, board of dirs. Shenzhen University Art Study Group), Li Zhaoyan (studied Guangxi Art Academy), Li Yin (2000, graduated Lu Xun Art Academy), Yang Dunjian, (2008, professor Jiangsu Normal University), Wang Yingliang (graduated Hainan University), Li Yi (2001, graduated Central Academy of Fine Arts), Jiang Qingbei (2003, graduated Lu Xun Art Academy).

has never seen the mountain "souvenirs"? Are hand-painted and distressed furniture screens made for sale at Target and JC Penny "antiques"? Are canvases painted by a Dafen painter, signed and editioned by a fictive American artist and sold in a furniture store, "forgeries"? The dichotomous conception of primitivism and tourism fails to account for these "modern" and "contemporary" objects.

One could go on unendingly with this web of simulations that constantly refer to "authenticity" without reference to "the real thing."⁴³ This postmodern condition is characteristic not only of the consumer market and popular culture, which conjures its own values of authenticity, it is at the root of contemporary trade painting practice: Although every trade painting is derived from visual sources (*gao* 稿), after decades of formal transformation by anonymous practitioners, worked on by many assistants and competitors, those sources are often unidentifiable. This lack of a discernible chain of influences traceable to a single canonical origin confounds the art historical practice at its very core. In a sense, since trade paintings are produced "after the copy"—that is, both after the use of the copy as a source of paintings, and after the "culture of the copy" within which the copy attains its own cultural status⁴⁴—it is the art historian's practice of source identification that appears anachronistic. When it is possible to make or consume a copy without knowing its origins, trade paintings may be thought of, always, as "originals after the copy."

If this is a caricature of the situation, founded on presuppositions of the inviolate definitions of originality and the copy, it is only further evidence of how the unabashed market-orientation of Dafen village and the earlier Canton trade lends itself to the ironic dissimulation of aesthetic dichotomies. The expectation that the market has a contaminating influence on "true art" depends

⁴³ "Art can be imitation without any identifiable source, what Jean Baudrillard has called 'simulation.'" Richard Shiff, "Originality in the Visual Arts," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. M. Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴⁴ Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (New York: Zone Books, 1996).

on a post-enlightenment definition which presumes that works of art are the expressions of uniquely creative individuals rather than bespoke commodities. This presupposition was shared by thinkers from Immanuel Kant in the eighteenth century to art theorist Chen Hengke, an art theorist writing in Beijing during the 1920s.⁴⁵ Quite uniformly, creativity is defined as the condition of being free from either market or political restraints, and, although absolute freedom from either is hardly attainable even in the case of the "great" artist, it is paradoxically a minimum standard for any person who seeks recognition as an "artist." Chinese trade painters are thus consistently positioned as subaltern subjects by those who engage with them—particularly their Western clients and customers, who desire to see them as artists and artisans (when they patronize them), or, as victims of market exploitation or an authoritarian state (when others patronize them). Indeed, whatever the specific processes of its production, I argue in this study that it is primarily *as art* that a trade painting is (knowingly or unknowingly, referentially or reverentially) produced by its painter and consumed by its end-consumer. For trade painters, ever sensitive to market demands, creativity thus becomes a matter of constant self-invention and professional performance. The presumed requirement for autonomy turns trade painting into a practice of non-art production forever striving futilely towards the conditions of modern art.

As globalization, particularly in the contemporary post-Mao period, has eroded the boundaries between Eastern and Western, modern and traditional, socialist and capitalist societies, "authenticity" and the modernist discourse of "originality" are said to have lost their cultural and intellectual legitimacy. From this perspective, Clunas' 1987 schematic narrative of the inevitable debasement of

⁴⁵ Chen Hengke: "The thing called literati painting is 'spiritual' (*xingling*), 'intellectual' (*sixiang*), 'active' (*huodong*), it is 'non-mechanical' (*fei qixie*), and 'unsimplistic' (*fei danchun*)." Chen Hengke, "The Value of Literati Painting," 1921. As Aida Wong has argued of Chen's aesthetics: "Freedom of the mind is the main point here." Aida-Yuen Wong, "A New Life for Literati Painting in the Early Twentieth Century: Eastern Art and Modernity, a Transcultural Narrative?," *Artibus Asiae* 60, no. 2 (2000): 306.

export art would seem elitist and Eurocentric. Yet postmodernist claims about the death of the author obscure broader continuities in the modernist project at the social and political level. Crucially, while globalization has brought far more non-Western art into the discourses, institutions, and markets of the West, the impact of this inclusion has been to broaden and strengthen the Western intellectual property regimes that emphasize the legal persona of creative authorship, rather than to erode it. This is evident, for example, in strident political demands and campaigns for "copyright education" at Dafen village,⁴⁶ even though the legal status of a hand-painted copy has never been tested in the post-WTO Chinese legal context.⁴⁷ In other words, while originality and authenticity are said to have lost their cultural purchase, the regimes and "rights" of creativity have conversely strengthened in their power and reach.

It is within this broader reconfiguration of "world culture" that Dafen village, precisely because of its subaltern status, has emerged in both popular and critical consciousness. As seen in the Dafen Copying Competition, the creativity, skill, and professional status of Dafen village's painters have drawn the attention of the highest levels of government in China. Through their

⁴⁶ Yao Wenping 姚文平 et al., "大芬油画村：艺术与市场的成功对接 [Dafen Oil Painting Village: The Successful Meeting of Art and Market]," 中国知识产权报, 行动广东 (16 NOV 2005): 007. Xu Zi 许子, "大芬油画村开幕知识产权教育 [Dafen Oil Painting Village Begins Intellectual Property Rights Education]," 中国文化报 [*China Culture News*] 新视觉 (9 MAY 2006): 006. Yang Liuchun 杨柳纯, "深圳规范大芬村复制行为 [Shenzhen Normalizes Copying Conduct At Dafen Village]," 中国新闻出版报 [*China News Publishing Newspaper*] 7 (16 MAY 2007).

⁴⁷ China has been a signatory of the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (1886, last amended 1979) since 1992, when the Geneva and Paris conventions were also ratified. In accordance with the Berne Convention, in China works by artists who have died fifty years earlier are in the public domain. China joined the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights or TRIPS (1994) with ascension to the WTO in 2001. In 2007 the World Intellectual Property Organization Copyright Treaty (WCT) also came into effect in China. The WCT (1996) does not include the copyright term extension although the United States and European Union enacted copyright term extensions in 2000. The majority of masterpiece paintings reproduced by contemporary trade painters are images in the public domain. Moreover, even when copied at a high quality, trade paintings are produced with significant changes in size, palette and brushwork..

promotional efforts, Dafen village has been featured in virtually every major media outlet in Europe, North America, and Asia. Amongst the first to act on the "news" of Dafen village's existence were artists from cosmopolitan centers in China and the West. Between 2005 and 2010, at least twenty conceptual artists, designers and new media artists visited Dafen village as clients, collaborators, and documentarists. Under aesthetic rubrics such as "appropriation," "the readymade," "site specificity," "performance," and "cultural intervention," these artists, in tandem with Dafen village's painters, workshops, and galleries, have realized a body of work that further complicates the status and values of trade painting. A central part of my fieldwork thus documents the collaborations between these "cosmopolitan" artists and "subaltern" ones. However, I find that, despite their ever-intensifying desire to encounter the other, these art projects result from the willed ignorance and strategic authenticity enacted by both the Dafen painter and the cosmopolitan artist. The failures on both sides to collaborate as they claim expose the modernist stakes of these ostensibly postmodernist constructions.

Through ethnographic approaches to the encounters between Dafen painters and their interlocutors, this study explores the expansive interpreting, conceptualizing, publicizing, propagandizing, documenting, consuming, and art-making enterprise that surrounds Dafen village. Like myself, the artists, officials, journalists, photographers, documentarists, architects, interpreters, curators, consumers and clients engaged in these endeavors position Dafen village as a conceptual challenge to the hierarchies of modern art. Our representational engagements with Dafen village share one important condition: the contemporary juncture between the universalist belief that "everybody is creative" and the postmodern effects of "the death of the author." As in the case of the Dafen Copying Competition, Dafen village enters critical consciousness because irony and ambiguity operate at the boundaries of these two globalist ideas—neither of which can be fully enacted in practice nor dismissed in theory. Globalism, in other words, pulls in two opposing

directions: towards the inclusion of the artisanal subaltern into the cultural economy, and simultaneously, away from older groundings of authorship in which they might claim legitimacy. As Dafen village enters the globalizing frame, the conceptual legacies of the Chinese copyist and the Western originalist re-emerge in unexpected and intractable ways.



Figure 5. Public sculpture installed at entrance gate of Dafen village, 2005. Photo by Wang Junhong, 2009.

After Authenticity

Where do new images come from? Do they arise purely from the mind of the artist or do they come from images he or she has previously seen? When a painter paints while looking at an image or model, is he or she by definition "copying"? Does it matter whether that image is a photograph, a print, a digital file, a painting, or nature? Does originality arise out of the process of rejecting precedents and models, or does it arise from the labor of making itself, through sketch, composition, repetition, correction, and execution? When a painter paints "solely" from the mind, the heart, the memory, or the imagination, is he or she by definition being "original" or "creative"?

The discipline of art history proposes that different artistic cultures ask and answer these questions differently. Where Wölfflin famously stated in 1915, "Every artist finds certain visual

possibilities before him, to which he is bound. Not everything is possible at all times,⁴⁸ so Oleg Grabar argued in 1982, "What is required of the historian is to discover the national or ethnic culturally discrete meanings of a certain kind of visual language."⁴⁹ Painting, because of its formal connection to the mechanically-produced images that have continually challenged it, has been a privileged index of the problem of originality in both China and the West.

Historians of Western art have long maintained that originality is a concept born in nineteenth-century Paris. For Richard Shiff, it emerges in conscious dialogue with the discourses and practices of neo-classicism.⁵⁰ For Rosalind Krauss, it is an anxious response to technologies of reproduction such as photography and to the de-centering of origins.⁵¹ It follows from these historically contingent and geographically specific theories of originality that the concept is either lacking or yet-to-be-constructed in other cultures and other times. In particular, China's artistic production has been commonly invoked in contradistinction, as evidence that the non-Western world inherits or exhibits counter-examples to French originality.⁵² Chinese literati painting has been

⁴⁸ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History; the Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art*, trans. Marie Donald Mackie Hottinger (New York: Holt, 1932), 11.

⁴⁹ Oleg Grabar, "On the Universality of the History of Art," *Art Journal* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 281-83.

⁵⁰ Richard Shiff, "Phototropism (Figuring the Proper)," in *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, ed. Kathleen Preciado (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1989), 161-179. Richard Shiff, "The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France," *Yale French Studies* 66 (1984): 27-54. Richard Shiff, "Representation, Copying, and the Technique of Originality," *New Literary History* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1984): 333-63.

⁵¹ Rosalind E Krauss, "Retaining the Original? The State of the Question," in *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, ed. Kathleen Preciado (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1989), 7-11. Rosalind E Krauss, "You Irreplaceable You," in *Retaining the Original*, 151-160. Rosalind E Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1985). Rosalind E Krauss, "Originality as Repetition: Introduction," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 35-40.

⁵² Wen Fong, "Why Chinese Painting is History," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June 2003): 258-80.

positioned as the epitome of an exalted imitative tradition, one based on the transmission of the past through models that offer a highly sophisticated alternative history of art. If the *Mona Lisa* is made to represent the culmination of a particular myth of Western European individuality rooted in the figure of the artist and his invention, then the faceless and monochrome appearance of Chinese literati painting has mutually served as its radical opposite.

Historians of Chinese art working in English have long attempted to undo this ahistorical stereotype of Chinese painting. In contrast to the notion that Chinese painting is defined by imitation par excellence, they have countered that originality—understood as the personality of the individual artist expressed through the brushwork and stylistic treatment of the painting—has been crucial to the discourse, appreciation, and practice of Chinese literati painting. Notably, James Cahill has argued that "the hand of the maker and his original style are absolutely central" to appreciating Chinese painting and calligraphy, which emphasize authenticity and brushwork as the "true traces" of the artist's self.⁵³ To this end, Jerome Silbergeld has also elaborated upon the centrality of the hand: "In China the elevated status of painting evolved very gradually through strategic comparisons of painting with writing. These two arts alone, calligraphy and painting, among all other media, were considered to reveal a distinctive 'hand' associated with individual personality, defined in terms of originality, and regarded as *meishu* (high art) as opposed to *gongyi* (craft) in modern Chinese."⁵⁴

⁵³ "Traces reliably from the hands of persons of a certain moral stature and spiritual attainment, then, were authentic in both senses. One was supposed to 'see the man himself' in the painting. For this kind of appreciation, attention to brushwork, to the hand or touch of the artist, was paramount—far overriding any judgment of the work as representation, a category that was relegated to the lowest position on the scale of critical concerns. This emphasis on brushwork, along with a heavy reliance on documentary evidence—signatures, seals, inscriptions, records in catalogs—is the basis of traditional Chinese connoisseurship." James Cahill, "Chinese Art and Authenticity," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 55, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 21.

⁵⁴ Jerome Silbergeld, "Chinese Art and Authenticity," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 55, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 29-36.

Despite the formidable efforts of these and many other Chinese art historians, the belief that there is an essential difference between Western and Chinese aesthetic interest, definition, and valuation of originality persists.

For Craig Clunas, this is a Eurocentric trope that dates back at least to Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*. To illustrate its lack of historical grounding, Clunas has described the social, artistic, economic and political conditions of Ming-dynasty Suzhou (1368-1644) in a way that pointedly echoes the milieu often presumed to be exceptional to Renaissance Florence.⁵⁵ He has argued: "There can be little or no justification for seeing what was happening in (Renaissance) Europe as a dynamic 'rebirth,' while what was happening in Suzhou at the same time (i.e. conscious references to past styles) is considered so radically different that concepts such as 'originality, creativity and orthodoxy' might well need a major redefinition."⁵⁶ Martin Powers, pointing out that the terms "style," "belief," and "influence," are terms that "matured at a time when Europeans were intensely concerned about defining the national identities and essences of non-European peoples," argued that they invariably invoke a moral correlate.⁵⁷ Many other historians of China have pointed out that it is no accident that this stereotype of Chinese art plays into the larger European Enlightenment trope of Chinese historical stagnation and European progress, which would reach its height in the mid-nineteenth century alongside European imperial aggression in Asia.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

⁵⁶ Craig Clunas, *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 92.

⁵⁷ Martin J. Powers, "Art and History: Exploring the Counterchange Condition," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 3 (1995): 384.

⁵⁸ Jonathan D Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, (New York: Norton, 1998). Ming Wilson, and John Cayley, *Europe Studies China: Papers From an International Conference on the History of European Sinology* (London: Han-Shan Tang Books, 1995).

In a forthcoming work, Ming art historian Katharine Burnett argues that the longevity of this conceit can be explained by a host of factors, reinforced over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by elites who favored Ming- and Qing-era imitations of Song- and Yuan-era paintings.⁵⁹ Burnett argues that a transnational connoisseurial enterprise—exemplified for example in the relationship between Pang Yuanji (1864-1949) and Charles Lang Freer (1854-1919)—concentrated exclusively on the "Chinese tradition of copying" and established the collecting principles for national American collections of Chinese art, and therefore the foundations of twentieth-century American scholarship on Chinese art.⁶⁰ Burnett further argues that in twentieth-century China, the novelty of originality was self-consciously privileged in the ideology of 1919 May Fourth movement, which worked to re-emphasize modernity's "newness" over the stagnation of tradition, a duality that was reinforced in the Cultural Revolution's iconoclasm of the "old." Burnett argues that the first generation of American historians of Chinese art who trained in the post-WWII period were formed by their experiences in Taiwan, where many of them studied Chinese language and were influenced by Chinese intellectuals who came of age with the May Fourth movement. For Burnett, the rise of this bias coincided with the influence Cold War politics, in which the "expressiveness" of American painting, apotheosized in the figure of Jackson Pollock, was juxtaposed against the automatism of socialist societies—a new venter on the old trope of Chinese imitation.⁶¹ This, in retrospect, can be seen in both Cahill's and Silbergeld's approbation of the "hand," generationally privileged in American painting of the 1950s as well.

⁵⁹ Katharine Burnett, "Some Problems of Expectation Or Speculations on Why Originality Can't be a 'Traditional Chinese' Value (When it is)," in *Dimensions of Originality: Essays in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Art Criticism* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, forthcoming). I am grateful to Katherine Burnett for sharing with me a draft version of this text which I cite here.

⁶⁰ Burnett, "Some Problems of Expectation," draft, 25-29.

⁶¹ Burnett, "Some Problems of Expectation," draft, 35.

Burnett's historiography suggests that the notion of an essential Chinese preference for imitation over originality has often been reinforced by the interaction of Chinese and Western cultural brokers working towards the formulation of a distinctly Chinese art tradition. For Burnett, this is an orientalizing and self-orientalizing procedure of obfuscation.⁶² However, in offering an alternative explanation for the twentieth-century persistence of the "Chinese tradition of copying" in English-language scholarship, in Burnett's narrative, the term "originality" crosses wide expanses of time and practice in Chinese art. Burnett argues, for example, that even though originality was "persistently demanded" by artists and art critics in China in the seventeenth-century, the Chinese preoccupation with originality has instead been masked in English-language scholarship by the systematic translation of Chinese terms into English words like "untrammled," "eccentric," "strange," "new," "unique," "uncategorizable," and even "unorthodox and dangerous."⁶³ And yet, should all historically-situated Chinese terms that relate to notions of the superlative, the excellent or the distinctive, be harmonized into an equivalent of the modern Western term "originality"?⁶⁴ In the effort to consolidate "originality" in many (if not all) periods of Chinese art, the term is compelled to take on a universal scope. The danger with either constructing originality as exclusively nineteenth-century French, on the one hand, or also Chinese of any or all periods, on

⁶² Burnett, "Some Problems of Expectation," draft, 20-21.

⁶³ See Burnett's discussion of Nelson Wu's 1964 translation of two passages by the influential Ming painter, historian and theorist Dong Qichang (董其昌, 1555-1636). She argues that, as a scholar of the Cold War generation Wu was "cornered" into a forced and self-contradictory interpretation when he translates "qi" into "unorthodox and dangerous" when given the context, to Burnett it most clearly means "originality." Katharine Burnett, "A Discourse of Originality in Late Ming Chinese Painting Criticism," *Art History* 23, no. 4 (November 2000): 522-58.

⁶⁴ Amongst other Chinese term-clusters proposed by Burnett for equivalency to the concept of originality are combinations of "shen 神" (inspired), "neng 能" (capable) "miao 妙" (excellent); also "qing 清" (pure) "qingxin 清新" (pure and new), "xiaosa 潇洒" (free and unfettered), "du 独" (independent). Burnett, "Some Problems of Expectation," draft, 7-20.

the other, is that both presume that aesthetic practices and discourses take place within self-contained and geographically-bounded civilizations, within which the intellectual dynamics of the putative center and periphery have no effect beyond that of origin and difference.⁶⁵ Like export art, so export art history.

This art historical schema, which we inherit today, has particular effects on the constructed modernity of Chinese oil painting. In the early twentieth century, Chinese theorists sutured European and Japanese modern influences into a national discourse of style. Through national educational and cultural policy, cultural elites in the Republican period (1911-1949) split modern Chinese art into two categories: ink painting defined as "national" painting (*guohua* 国画) and oil painting defined as "Western" painting (*xihua* 西画).⁶⁶ The polarities that this created in modern Chinese art resulted in much over-simplification of artists' positions and works, which scholarship has only begun to undo.⁶⁷ For example, although the academic realism championed in Republican and post-liberation China by Xu Beihong (徐悲鸿 1895-1953), has been seen as "a regressive mission" from a Eurocentric understanding of modernism,⁶⁸ Eugene Wang has pointed out that Xu's realism was also motivated by his rejection of Chinese traditional painting's "intensive

⁶⁵ Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995).

⁶⁶ The history of this complex period has been comprehensively examined by numerous authors, including: Julia Frances Andrews, and Kuiyi Shen, eds. *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998). Maxwell K Hearn, and Judith G Smith, eds. *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions* (New York: Dept. of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).

⁶⁷ Richard Vinograd, "Relocations: Spaces of Chinese Modernity," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, eds., M. Hearn and J. Smith (New York: Dept. of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).

⁶⁸ Julia F. Andrews, "A Century in Crisis: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Twentieth-Century China," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, eds., J. Andrews and K. Shen, (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 6.

subjective orientation and a determined renunciation of verisimilitude," aesthetic values coincidentally championed by the contemporaneous Parisian avant-garde. As Wang put it, "one's traditionalism is another's modernism."⁶⁹

Terminologies of progression based on an exceptionalist European modern experience may be an insufficient framework for twentieth-century Chinese history, but they define boundaries of "authenticity" that reverberate in educational institutions, art criticism and art markets even today. The split of historical agency along the lines of medium is the source of another trope haunting modern and contemporary Chinese art, in which oil painting takes on realist and socialist concerns while ink painting is ever engaged in the project of combining East and West in a formalist synthesis.⁷⁰ Julia Andrews (1994), chronicling the ascendance of socialist realist practices in oil painting between 1949 and 1979, has argued that, "by the time of Mao's death and the beginning of the reform era, "the art of the People's Republic of China was strikingly different in style and subject matter both from contemporary Western art and from the art practiced in other Chinese areas such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore."⁷¹ After 1979, whereas American higher art

⁶⁹ Eugene Y. Wang, "Sketch Conceptualism as Modernist Contingency," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, eds., M. Hearn and J. Smith (New York: Dept. of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001), 103. See also Wu Fangzheng 吳方正, and Zhou Fangmei 周芳美, "1920-1930 年代中國畫家赴巴黎. 習畫後對上海藝壇的影想 [1920-1930 Chinese Artist Fu Bali: The Influence of Drawing Practice on Shanghai Art Circles]" (Paper presented at the 區域與網絡—近千年來中國美術史研究國際 Area and Network: Proceedings for the International Conference on a Millennium of Chinese Art Historical Studies, Taipei, 2001), who also argue against the prevalent notion that realism was regressive in the 1920s.

⁷⁰ See for example, the debate between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo (1897-1931) over the 1929 National Exhibition of Art, and painters such as Lin Fengmian and Liu Haisu, as treated in Wang, David Der-Wei, "In the Name of the Real," in *Chinese Art: Modern Expressions*, eds., M. Hearn and J. Smith (New York: Dept. of Asian Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001).

⁷¹ Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-2.

education was focused on the "mark-making" and "gestural" exercises of a more subjective practice of anti-verisimilitude (i.e., not unlike "Chinese tradition"),⁷² China's higher art education was offering rigorous academic training in realism alongside a socialist discourse on the political role of art (i.e., not unlike "French tradition"). This training in socialist China pointedly combined nineteenth-century French academic and Impressionist practices: sketching (*esquisse*), drawing from plaster casts and then from life, *plein-air* painting, and travel sketching—unified by the Chinese term *xiesheng* (写生).⁷³ In addition to a focus on foundational technique, matters of composition and color are the hallmarks of painterly skill under this aesthetic system, just as its critical discourse would make use of formal and thematic standards applicable to genres from humanistic portraiture to monumental mural painting.

Although painters in Mao's China were isolated from Western consumers, trade painting, like so many pre-revolutionary cultural practices, remained active in the British colony of Hong Kong. After 1979, when the mainland Chinese artistic labor market was opened to Hong Kong bosses, painters skilled in academic practices added academic and modernist oil paintings to the existing repertoire of trade painting.⁷⁴ Many contemporary trade painters in Dafen village completed their education in art-specialty high schools that serve as feeders to China's art academies and normal universities' art departments. For these painters, painting Ilya Repin's *Portrait of Vladimir Stasov* in under three and a half hours would be a familiar mode of academic testing, and well within their

⁷² See Charles Lachman, "The Image Made By Chance" in China and the West: Ink Wang Meets Jackson Pollock's Mother," *Art Bulletin* 74, no. 3 (1992): 499-510.

⁷³ For a study in the historical roots of *xiesheng* in Republican China, see Gu Yi, "Scientizing Vision in China: Photography, Outdoor Sketching, and the Reinvention of Landscape Perception, 1912-1949," doctoral dissertation (Brown University, Dept. of Art History, 2009). *Xiesheng* in China is influenced by the Japanese practice of *shasei*.

⁷⁴ I examine trade painting in Hong Kong and its return to the mainland in Chapter One.

secondary school training.⁷⁵ In a sense, post-Mao Western consumers and clients have come to rely on the invisible hands of China's painters to reproduce the West's own traditions—a mode of consumption at the opposite pole from the tourist's consumption of primitive art.⁷⁶ If *chinoiserie* was the making of non-Chinese Chinese things, then contemporary Chinese trade painting became, once again, a visual culture for the westernizing of the West.

As seen in the Dafen Copying Competition, the local party-state has made great use of the westernness of oil painting in its promotion of Dafen village. In the re-emergence of trade painting in South China, the socialist art establishment has found new life. Socialist institutions such as the art academies, propaganda bureaucracies, festivals, and competitions, have been revitalized in contemporary Dafen village in order to project a new ideology of individual self-expression and creative agency. But it is the political legacy of oil painting as a modernist *and* a socialist practice that lends Dafen village to this kind of official triumphalism. If the Chinese Cultural Revolution was marked by radical experimentation with agency and subject formation in the realization of an intense "mass culture,"⁷⁷ then originality in trade painting has served the realization of a self-consciously modern artistic identity and market niche in reform-era China. Copies, once the populist icons of a collective culture, have been re-imagined as creative commodities for a new age of making and consuming. Originality, no longer simply the rejection of a "regressively" subjective artistic practice, has been reconstituted as the mastery of a modern cultural skill, democratically validated by the consumers of the West, from whence it originates.

⁷⁵ Entrance and placement examinations in the Chinese art academic system usually entail a portrait or a still life completed in three to three and a half hours.

⁷⁶ Even though the end consumer may not be aware that the paintings they are buying come from China, Dafen village clients include European, North American, Russian, North African, Middle Eastern, and East Asian firms.

⁷⁷ Liu Kang, "Popular Culture and the Culture of the Masses in Contemporary China," *boundary 2* 24, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 99-122.

After Originality

The Western theoretical construct of copying—when set against "true originality"—is sustained by several hypothetical figures. The first is the truly creative and truly free artist. The second is the unknowing consumer, primed to be deceived. The third is the skilled painter capable of producing a perfect copy yet, for some reason, is unable or unwilling to produce a "true" work of art. Neither a machine nor a complete human being, this third figure has all of the outward appearance and skill of a free artist and yet lacks that most human of qualities—the exercise of a creative mind.

Modern art can be made under constraints of the market, of artistic tradition, and of social and political norms, but if the construct of a self founded on creativity is to be preserved, then the modern artist must somehow activate his special freedom to make the work of art. The unveiling of artistic agency likewise determines the position of Dafen's painters. When they are asked to become "creative," they are asked, in effect, to demonstrate a non-automatic use of their imitation skills. Paradoxically, they are asked to do so either through the official structure of academic originality, or, through the knowing practice of "appropriation" in contemporary art—operating with prescribed understandings of "conceptual" work. To participate as humans in a cosmopolitan contemporary milieu, Dafen trade painters are thus asked to demonstrate that they are more than pawns of a naive bureaucracy or cynical industry: that through the performance of "creativity," they might triumph over the machinations of industry, the repetitions of craft, and the slavishness of imitation.

The imagination, knowledge, and faith that artists, historians, journalists, and officials required to see Dafen village as a site for "originality" and its painters as "creative artists" constitute one of the central issues explored in this study. Sometimes this transformation is made simply in the claims of a dealer to a customer. Sometimes, it requires a complex aesthetic move. Sometimes it requires a full melodrama. The Dafen painter, whether painting for a cosmopolitan "free" artist, an assembly line factory, a propaganda event, or for him- or herself, manages the complex valences of creativity,

copying, and originality in the making of a painting. In exploring a wide range of situations of making, ordering, and hiring in Dafen village, this study aims to illuminate questions of labor in the casting of "creativity." If creativity is produced in the elusive space between work and play, how is it labored upon and imagined in labor? How is the work of creativity and the work of making creativity visible performed and displayed? When was creativity imagined to have taken place?

The most common way to characterize trade painting is to dismiss it in the stock terms of ape- or child-like mimicry. This is the strategy local officials chose in highlighting within Dafen village a clear discursive and administrative difference between "copying" (*linmo* 临摹) and "originality" (*yuanchuang* 原创).⁷⁸ Without a doubt, trade paintings are produced to meet a market demand for a likeness to existing images and conventions, and, the vast majority of paintings produced in Dafen village do in some way derive from a preexisting source. Because these same conditions hold true for most any work of art, Dafen village's trade painting challenges us to explore how any given work is determined to be either an "original" or a "copy."

The four classical Chinese terms for copying, *lin* (临), *mo* (摹), *fang* (仿), and *zao* (造), operative in Dafen village, map the complexity of this theoretical terrain. In Chinese usage, each character carries nuances, but all have been used as equivalents for "a copy." *Lin* and *mo* are both used for close free-hand copies that can be differentiated from a classical illuminated trace copy (*xiangtu*), whereas *fang* is a copy made "in the manner of" and, *zao* is a "created" or "invented" copy—a fake.⁷⁹ These terms can be also used as compounds to evoke still more specific manners of reproduction:

⁷⁸ In Dafen village, creativity has been measured, administered, and professionalized. Announcing the founding of the Dafen Artist's Association in 2009, Buji Street Office proudly reported that Dafen artists who had "creative capabilities" (*chuangzuo nengli* 创作能力) now numbered over 200. Huang Rongqiang 黄荣强, "大芬油画村美术家协会成立 [Dafen Oil Painting Village Artist's Association Founded]," *Buji Street Office News* (8 JUN 2009).

⁷⁹ Joan Stanley-Baker, "Repainting Wang Meng: Problems in Accretion," *Artibus Asiae* 50, no. 3/4 (1990): 161-231. Wen Fong, "The Problem of Forgeries in Chinese Painting," *Artibus Asiae* 25, no. 3 (1962): 95-119, 121-140.

the verbs *linmo* (临摹), *mofang* (模仿), and *fangzao* (仿造) each also denote ways of copying that we might respectively translate as: to imitate, to paint in the manner of, to appropriate and to invent. In other words, *lin mo fang zao* forms a four-term spectrum for the degrees of creativity within copying: *lin* and *mo* suggest closer attention to an actual model, while *fang* and *zao* slide closer towards the skill and knowledge (and thus, arguably, creativity) necessary to produce a forgery or a skilled appropriation. Like the Latin terms *spolia*, *imitatio*, and the English terms "influence," "innovation" and "appropriation," *lin*, *mo*, *fang*, and *zao* also signify a range of practices that have embedded within them historical valuations concerning formal processes, modes of reception, notions of individuality and authorship, and theories of artistic influence and invention.⁸⁰ Elizabeth Cropper has argued that Renaissance "imitation" closely resembles postmodernist "appropriation;"⁸¹ Likewise, the variety of Chinese terms for copying need neither be thought of as frozen within the figure of "tradition," nor mapped onto a single narrative of historical progress or hierarchy of aesthetic value.

The spectrum of relations drawn between copying and creativity adds yet another layer to the cultural hierarchy of the market. In a 1997 exhibition catalogue of copying practices in Chinese ink calligraphy and painting written by Chinese art historian Yang Renkai, Yang set out sixteen different categories of copying and accords the lowest value to commercial copies because they are made for an uneducated or foreign buyer.⁸² Yang assigns higher artistic values to the techniques of imitation "in the manner of" and to "extreme" or "invented" fakes. In other words, at the highest level of

⁸⁰ This classical sequence of terms is transformed in a local government-sponsored propaganda melodrama set in Dafen village discussed in Chapter Three.

⁸¹ Elizabeth Cropper, *The Domenichino Affair: Novelty, Imitation, and Theft in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 193-207.

⁸² In this catalogue the lowliest copies are: Suzhou *pian* (苏州片), Henan *zao* (河南造), Hunan *zao* (湖南造), Guangdong *zao* (广东造), Houmen *zao* (后门造). Yang Renkai, *Zhongguo Gujin Shuhua Zhenwei Tidian* 中國古今書畫真偽圖典 (Shenyang: Liaoning huabao chubanshe, 1997).

copying—forgery—this taxonomy approaches an idea of creativity. The unknowing consumer can be the victim of a creative and inventive form of copying made or sold as something "original."⁸³ The high-profile history of Zhang Daqian (张大千 1899-1983) and his work as an artist, forger, dealer, and advisor to many British and U.S. collectors and institutions provide a case in point: as museums have come to acknowledge the scope of Zhang's creative-copying, they have moved quickly to encompass Zhang Daqian's forgeries within a particular conception of his oeuvre, mythologizing the author function of the forger-artist,⁸⁴ in ways quite different from parallel Western figures such as Han van Meegeren (1889-1947).⁸⁵

Forgery both upsets and reinforces this would-be Foucauldian reading of the connoisseurial and historical order of things, to say nothing of the Foucauldian author-function. For philosopher Sándor Radnóti, forgery challenges each of the historicist aspects of originality: identity,

⁸³ Yang contrasts the various types of copies with the "genuine specimen (*zhenji* 真迹)" an object he leaves undefined. As many Chinese art historians have pointed out, since the canon of Chinese art is largely unstable, the discernment of a copy from a genuine specimen is itself a fraught enterprise.

⁸⁴ James Cahill, "Chang Ta-ch'ien's Forgeries of Old Master Paintings." Paper delivered at symposium at Sackler Museum, D.C., Nov. 1999, on the occasion of exhibition of Chang's paintings. Judith G Smith, and Wen Fong, *Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting* (New York: Dept. of Asian Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999).

⁸⁵ See Dennis Dutton, ed. *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (University of California Press, 1983). Essays in this volume re-examine van Meegeren's Vermeer forgeries in light of 1970s radio-graphic evidence that finally proved van Meegeren's claims that he was the artist behind *The Disciples of Emmanus*, a painting he once successfully sold as a Vermeer. Noted Vermeer experts had maintained the canvas a Vermeer masterpiece even after van Meegeren's had demonstrated his forging skill before court-appointed witnesses and journalists when he was charged with Nazi collaboration in 1945. (Van Meegeren had been accused of selling a Vermeer that ended up with a Nazi art dealer which was in fact a forgery from his own hand.)

individuality, novelty, and authenticity.⁸⁶ Hence it has functioned as an occasional critique of modernity's cultural orders, but one that ultimately serves to reinforce all of modernism's markers: the author, his style, and his rightful place in history. In material and economic terms, a South Chinese trade painting seldom rises to this philosophical standard of forgery.⁸⁷ A trade painting can hardly hold any hope of deception, since they are sold for so low a price that they could never deceive any but the most optimistic consumer.⁸⁸ Moreover, copies made by trade painters are done with scant use of the original and far from its presence.⁸⁹ Like most art, trade paintings are often copies but rarely forgeries.

Yet Walter Benjamin's prediction of the dissolution of aura in the age of art's reproduction has proven wrong, and indeed, appears thoroughly inverted when one considers that the inexhaustible market for trade paintings is not possible without the highly constricted market for originals. In his discussion of 1920s forgeries of van Gogh works, the art historian Walter Feichenfeldt concludes that: "It is apparently easy to make a superficial copy of a work by van

⁸⁶ "However, it is the gesture of forging that we are interested in: the criticism of the work's historicity. This criticism is related to all four notions of originality: It pretends to be identical with something which it is not; it expropriates the work of another personality; it expropriates the novelty value—or broadly speaking, the problem solution—of another person's work; and finally, it lends historical authenticity to a work that the work (that for the time being at least) is still not entitled to, thus claiming a false pedigree and occupying a place in history it does not disturb." Sándor Radnóti, *The Fake: Forgery and Its Place in Art* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 44.

⁸⁷ Alfred Lessing: "Forgery is a concept that can be made meaningful only by reference to the concept of originality, and hence only to art viewed as a creative, not as a reproductive or technical activity." Alfred Lessing, "What is Wrong With a Forgery," in *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Denis Dutton (University of California Press, 1983), 68.

⁸⁸ Craig Clunas: "The notion of forgery is intimately connected with the notion of a market, either a real or a symbolic one, in the types of objects concerned, and the history of forgery in China in luxury goods, the scope of forgery expanding in keeping with the expansion of that market-place, as more and more types of cultural products came to be viewed as having the potential to be commodities." Clunas, *Superfluous Things*, 109.

⁸⁹ I examine the process of trade painting production in detail in Chapters One, Two and Four.

Gogh. It even seems that it is not too difficult to capture van Gogh's spirit in such forgeries, or what the beholder considers to be his spirit."⁹⁰ In fact, forging "spirit" (or aura) in trade painting is possible, and indeed prevalent, because the consumers of a van Gogh copy demand not van Gogh's "own" hand, but rather the trace of *any* hand. Signature style and signature authorship—particularly the touch and myth of genius summated in the figure of Vincent van Gogh—are amongst the products that Dafen village provides. It is fitting therefore, that of all contemporary South Chinese trade paintings, a van Gogh painting is considered the easiest to produce, and its producer lowest in the professional ranks.⁹¹



Figure 6. Painted green *Marilyn* in Dafen alley with trash can, 1 JAN 2009.

For a viewer who is conditioned to see all images against the historical canon—that is, on the basis of period, medium, style and nationality—Dafen village offers a visual orgy of images that

⁹⁰ Walter Feilchenfeld, "Van Gogh Fakes: The Wacker Affair, With an Illustrated Catalogue of the Forgeries," *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 19, no. 4 (1989): 299.

⁹¹ I explore the special status of van Gogh trade painting, the hand, and craftsmanship in Chapter Four.

appear unmoored from history itself. These savvy consumers often find the availability of hand-painted oil paintings of silk-screen prints by Andy Warhol in Dafen village deeply ironic (figure 6). This irony is derived from the now-canonical notion that Warhol represents the introduction of "factory" production that putatively removes the hand of the artist from the silk-screened work of art, manufactured according to commodity logics.⁹² The image of Dafen painters painting *by hand* Warhol's *Marilyn* seems ironic because it offers a belated reversal of this "truth."

Yet the ironic dissimulation of the simulacral in the "hand-painted original" illuminates very little, since this irony cannot undo the rarity required of art. From the standpoint of the trade painter, medium transfer from a digital image file, photographic print or silkscreen image into a painting, as required to turn a *Marilyn* into an oil-on-canvas painting, is hardly remarkable because all trade paintings are painted from "copies"—that is, sources.⁹³ Warhol trade paintings are indeed popular with Western buyers, to whom this "irony" can either be of central importance or of no consequence at all. Here is another practical exposition of the double operation found in Walter Benjamin's *Work of Art* essay: the dissolution of aura through photography and reproduction simultaneously works to produce new ways of re-consuming the original work of art.

Since 2006, a young artist couple have operated a gallery in Dafen village, selling their original paintings (figure 7). Their gallery occupies a small hallway that runs through the first floor of a building, and features whitewashed cement walls, IKEA furniture and potted green plants. Unlike most galleries in Dafen, the pair of artists offer only their own work for sale and exhibit only a single series of paintings at a time. Their paintings are hung in white-cube gallery style—framed,

⁹² Caroline A Jones, *Machine in the Studio: Constructing the Postwar American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 266.

⁹³ That is, virtually all images reach trade painters through the medium of photography or photographic reproduction. On one interesting exception, that of Gilbert Stuart's pre-photographic *Washington*, see Chapter One.

signed, and widely spaced. Of the pair, the academically trained, male, original artist, paints outdoors everyday. The female artist, a university graduate in interior design and now learning to paint from her boyfriend, minds the gallery and interacts with customers. She spends her spare time making pointillist pastel-on-canvas drawings based on memories of her childhood in Sichuan and her recent everyday life in Shenzhen. Their gallery's name, handwritten on a rusticated wood awning, is "One Way Street" (*Danxingdao* 單行道).⁹⁴



Figure 7. One Way Street Original Oil Painting Studio, Dafen village, 6 APR 2009. Photo by author.

Visiting the gallery in 2009, I asked its proprietress to explain the source of her gallery's memorable name. She answered that it had no particular meaning. I explained that I had asked because there was this essay by a German philosopher..., but before I could finish my sentence, she brought out a Chinese anthology of Walter Benjamin's writings, in which, she told me, she'd read

⁹⁴ One Way Street Original Works Studio (*Danxingdao yuanzuo huafang* 單行道原作畫房).

the essay "One Way Street." Excitedly, I asked whether or not her gallery was named after the 1928 essay. She explained that it was well after she and her boyfriend had opened the gallery that they were given the book by a friend, who had found it at one of the many used-books stalls in Dafen village. Apparently, this friend had merely noted the similarity between the name of their gallery and the text found in the book.⁹⁵ In other words, despite the fact that this artist-gallerist had at her fingertips the Benjamin essay—"the original referent" which is the source of the tourist-ethnographer-consumer's cultural capital—she chose to forego the opportunity to claim that precedent. Like her, many Dafen artists hold the tools of appropriation at their disposal, and yet rarely does this deployment of authorship serve their purposes. Their refusal is neither primitive nor belated: rather, it reveals the limits of the historical function of appropriation to resolve the paradox of authorship in which they are situated.

If originality is an aberration of the modern, a value constructed in response to an expanding market and given a legal standing within a globalizing intellectual property regime, then the postmodernist embrace of "the copy" has directly engaged the full imaginary scope of "creativity." Just as references to the fiction of Jose Luis Borges that open many key postmodernist theoretical texts explicitly link the contours of copying to the idea of anti-chronological or circular time,⁹⁶ postmodernist artists have sought a kind of creative renewal in appropriation and repetition at a moment when chronologies of fact and fiction appear uncertain. Yet this postmodernist return to a pre-modern imaginary signals its conceptual status only in the register of irony, a mode of reception that locks us within a paradoxical understanding of our own, and Dafen's, contemporaneity. Dafen

⁹⁵ Chen Sixiu, interview with author, 6 APR 2009. Amongst other uses in China by culture-related firms and organizations, "One Way Street" is the name of a Shenzhen-based rock band formed in 1995, and, in Beijing, a well known chain of bookstores.

⁹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), trans. S. Glasner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: an Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

village's quest for originality, authenticity and creativity in the milieu of trade painting grounds that simulacral conundrum.

After Creativity

This study places the vectors of cultural or aesthetic expectations for originality, authenticity and creativity, against the myriad processes and techniques of production operative in Dafen village between 2006 and 2010. I argue that the production of painting in contemporary Dafen village refutes two modern and contemporary conceits about modes of production: The first is that mass production must occur within a "factory." The second is that a "village" signifies artisanal forms of production. Though it can be fairly called one of the world's largest producers of oil paintings, Dafen village is neither a "village" nor a "factory" in the sense those terms would have in a Fordist context. Its production is characterized neither by large industrial enterprises that exploit workers in sweatshop conditions, nor artisans dedicated to the quality reproduction of a single product in obsequious obeisance to tradition. Indeed it is questionable whether either ideal or counter-ideal exists at all in Dafen village. Instead Dafen's contemporary painting trade combines numerous practices of putting out, flexibility, and the appropriation of labor, in ways that recognize the cultural purchase of both Fordist production and craft, but rarely resemble them. However, and most important to the art historical stakes of my argument, it would be erroneous to presume that these particular modes of production are co-determinate with aspirant definitions or practices of "art." Rather, I show that Dafen artists' aspirations reveal the contradictions of this circuitous terrain.



Figure 8. Dafen village (left and foreground), with Dafen Museum of Art (center), Dafen New Village (background), and residential development (right), 2007. Image courtesy of Urbanus Architecture and Design.

Dafen village is a "village" in three historical senses: prior to 2004, it was a four hundred square meter cluster of rural dwellings classified by authorities as a rural village and headed by a village head. This pastoral picture however, had already been completely altered by the mid-1990s. By then, the village had formed a collective for-profit corporation to develop its land and property, referred to in English-language scholarship as a "township and village enterprise" (TVE). Most of the villagers moved to new high-rise residential towers built nearby and replaced their rural dwellings with multistory walkup residential buildings that trade painters and bosses rented as living and working spaces. Leveraging collective land use rights, foreign investment, and migrant labor in this way was the basic pattern of industrialization throughout the Pearl River Delta in the early reform period, and in Shenzhen, the village-owned urban forms built in this manner has been called, in contemporary architectural discourse, "urban villages" or "villages-in-a-city" (*cheng zhong cun* 城中村). Their densely built "handshake buildings"—so called because they are so close to each other that neighbors can shake hands through their windows, repurposed as living and working spaces, are

what have been sometimes misleadingly called "factories." From 2004 onwards, the local government began to physically remake the 400 square meters of Dafen village. Though most of these handshake buildings remained as of 2010, they are now surrounded and dwarfed by high-rise residential towers, large commercial developments, a museum of art, and a metropolitan subway station to be completed in 2011 (figure 8). Since 2004, Dafen has been administered as a residential neighborhood within the municipal governance structures of Shenzhen city. However, in remaking the village, the local government retained and indeed widely promoted the designation "Dafen Oil Painting Village" in order to link it to artists' villages like Beijing or New York's East Village. Occupying the historical site of a rural village, forming a migrant workers' urban village, and promoted as an artists' village, it is thus accurate to call Dafen a "village." However, Dafen village is no more "rural" than is the East Village in Manhattan.

Although Dafen village between 2004 and 2010 was officially said to house five to eight thousand painters and to produce three to five million paintings a year, another misconception about Dafen production I challenge is that quantity *alone* signifies both mass production and mass consumption. When "kitsch" or "commodities" are used to describe Dafen paintings, it serves to generate two obfuscations: one that conflates high quantity with industrial production, and another, that conflates scarcity with art or authenticity. The scale and flexibility of the global hand-painted art product industry, in which Dafen village forms only one production node, operates in ways that complicate this image of "mass" production: Although orders habitually come into the hands of Dafen bosses in the hundreds or thousands per image, through putting out practices, the vast majority of these paintings are ultimately produced in Dafen from beginning to end by a single painter, who might be producing anywhere from one or two to a dozen or more a day. Even in the largest instances of what I call "assembled labor"—that is, a workshop or a studio—at most, under ten paintings might be worked on by several painters at a time, who could then together produce up

to a hundred paintings of the same image per day. Over the course of a year, 10,000 paintings may well be produced by one painter working mostly alone, and yet in no way require what outsiders might imagine to be "factory production." On the consumption end, the same holds true. Although wholesalers do habitually place orders of hundreds or thousands of paintings at a time, these wholesalers generally sell to retailers who purchase a dozen or a few dozen paintings at a time—with few repeated images. As a result, most end-consumers of a Dafen painting encounter them as unique objects alongside a dozen different paintings in a furniture store, a souvenir store, a frame shop, an art gallery, a website or the outdoor stall of a sidewalk artist. Likewise, even when a Dafen boss supplies over a thousand paintings to decorate an entire hotel, the hotel guest is not likely to notice any particular painting repeated during his or her stay. Though the scale of the trade might well amount to "mass" production and consumption, this massiveness is consistently obscured by its global distribution.

According to a 2006 study by Yao Dingkang of the U.S. Chinese Chamber of Commerce—a Chinese-American trade organization based in New York—China is the world's largest supplier of trade paintings and the United States the world's largest trade painting market. However, direct Chinese exports to the U.S. account for only 1.5% of annual painting imports to the U.S.⁹⁷ Seeking to promote greater direct Sino-US trade, Yao points out that despite the centrality of the U.S. terminal market for Dafen village's paintings, relatively few American-based traders directly visit and put out orders in Dafen village, and that Chinese companies have no formal sales representatives in the United States.⁹⁸ Rather, it is through re-exports via Hong Kong (especially from 1989 to 1999)

⁹⁷ Yao Dingkang 姚定康 and Chen Qiming 陈起明, "中国油画与美国市场 [Chinese Oil Paintings and the U.S. Market]," *U.S. China Chamber of Commerce*, http://www.ccmdu.com/bbs26_26504.html (accessed 1 NOV 2007).

⁹⁸ Yao Dingkang 姚定康. "大芬村油画与美国市场 [Dafen Village Oil Paintings and the U.S. Market]." *U.S. China Chamber of Commerce*, (New York), 20 DEC 2007. http://www.ccmdu.com/bbs26_56112.html

and Europe (especially from 2003 onwards) that Chinese paintings enter the U.S. market via the ports of New York City, California and Florida.⁹⁹ As Yao points out, although it is estimated that 60% of paintings imported to the U.S. are made in China (with 80% of those estimated to be made in Dafen), re-exporters claim (and often, sign) the paintings as their own products, allowing them to mark-up the paintings by orders of magnitude.

These findings match the distribution patterns I have found in 2008-09 interviews with bosses, traders and wholesalers, for whom the American consumer market is of central interest, and yet, their contact with American clients remain relatively rare. Although Yao quite logically seeks to promote a strategy by which Dafen paintings could be branded, trademarked and sold directly in the United States, to the benefit of both American and Chinese businesses, in this study, I show that the obfuscation enabled by transnational transit actually makes possible the large demand for oil-on-canvas paintings. As many Dafen painters and bosses complain, the prices that American clients offer are far too low—because in the global trade of paintings, traffic through other countries accrues to the painting the added values of art and authenticity. At the Hong Kong, American, and European sites where trade paintings are sold, they are habitually retailed as though they were works of art which the sellers purport are painted by themselves, by European artists, by local art students, by unknown (but potentially famous) artists or by other fictive figures that nevertheless evoke the modern institutions of art. In some cases, the paintings are sold as though they are the work of the

⁹⁹ According to Yao, 2005 US customs records indicates that New York city accounts for 70.9% of painting imports, California 6.9% and Florida 6.9%. Yao also finds that from 1989 to 1999, the total value of painting imports from Hong Kong to the United States accounted for the majority of the trade, however, this steadily declined after 1999. 2005 U.S. customs records indicates that nearly 90% of painting imports into the United States arrived direct from France, England, Germany and other European and Middle Eastern countries. Imports also sharply increased from 2003 to 2006, most notably from Russia, Greece, Israel, Monaco and Morocco. Yao Dingkang, *Chinese Oil Paintings and the US Market*, unpagged.

name signed on them, and although certificates of authenticity and artist biographies are sometimes offered, these names are rarely verifiable as actual individuals (let alone artists). In one Hong Kong gallery displaying stacks of unstretched canvases, a salesperson explained to me that the paintings were the works of "Russian art academy professors—but not very famous ones."¹⁰⁰ When directly asked whether their paintings are painted in China, most retailers usually claim that they do not know where their wares originate (or that the buyer cannot be reached today), and amongst the more noted retailers of trade paintings, only one firm—Kunstfabriek (est. 1999 in Amsterdam)—openly advertises that its paintings are painted in China but "designed" in Amsterdam by the firm.¹⁰¹ In other words, at present, trade paintings are invisibly made in China, "signed" in Europe or other locales, and sold or displayed to the Western consumer; But it is through this regime of anonymity and author-function production that they become "art products." The distance (not nearness) enabled by Chinese liberalization and global trade is precisely how values of authenticity, originality and creativity become operative in consuming and producing the fictions of trade painting.

Just as no consumer can know the true origin of the painting offered, no outworker can ultimately know the end consumer of his work. Global and flexible production thus allows for the painter to labor as an artist or artisan, producing work for an art dealer or client, as it allows for the consumer to understand that the painting is the work of a particular artist or artisan. Likewise, in the custom records from which existing international trade statistics are derived, there is no distinction between a "trade" painting and a "true" painting by "a real artist." Thus, an examination of the painting trade as a statistical domain—as well as an artistic domain—separate from the "high" art

¹⁰⁰ Author's fieldnotes, 24 SEP 2008.

¹⁰¹ Pieter Van Os, *Kunst En Kapsones [Art with Attitude]* (Amsterdam: De Kunstfabriek B.V, 2005). Author's fieldnotes, 18 DEC 2009.

market is not actually possible.¹⁰² Although the vast majority of publicly viewable trade paintings are displayed in hotels, shops, and restaurants without the conventional exhibitionary conventions of art institutions, the fact that *hand-painted oil-on-canvas* paintings are demanded at all, demonstrates that modernist expectations of art's originality frames even the most distracted reception of the painting as "decoration."

Another prevalent cultural conceit that Dafen's painting practices complicate is the prejudice that repetition or reference on the part of a Chinese painter denotes mimicry, piracy, copyright infringement, alienated labor, rote mechanization, or mechanical reproduction, even as the *very same* procedures of repetition or reference on the part of Western painters are regarded as individualistic, creative, novel, appropriative, signature, or original. In looking at the conjunction between cosmopolitan (both Western and Chinese) artistic practices and Dafen practices throughout the ensuing chapters, I show that the activity of repetition itself is never simply the antithesis of "originality," "authenticity" or "creativity." In so doing, I am arguing that the Dafen trade painter is an "artist" working within the same spectrum of aesthetic concerns as any "high" or "contemporary" artist. My focus, then, is on the affects of originality, the strategic performances of the artistic persona, and creativity as a technology of the artistic self—affects shared by the lowliest Dafen painter with the most internationally-recognized of contemporary artists.¹⁰³

The predominant mode of painting production and work organization in Dafen village is a flexible piecework and putting-out system: the vast majority of Dafen painters are independent

¹⁰² Fariba Razavi-Tavakoli. "International Flows of Selected Cultural Goods, 1970-1987." UNESCO (Paris), 1992. Statistical reports and studies, no. 32: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000943/094309eb.pdf> (accessed AUG 2007).

¹⁰³ In other words, creativity may be seen as a modern concern with self-renunciation and the invention of a new self. Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, ed. Michel Foucault, et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 48.

producers who work in their own home, oversee their own time and work process, are free to refuse any offer, and often put out to their own network of family, co-villagers, former apprentices and friends. Although many are able to sustain a modest living income of approximately 1000 to 2000 yuan per month (roughly the income of a low-level government worker or a taxi driver), some fare far better while most others fare far worse, forcing them to leave to try other markets or jobs, though they often return. Many painters thus circulate between both "commercially"-branded locales like Dafen village and "avant-garde"-branded painting locales like Beijing's Song Zhuang, suggesting that the derisive "high-low" structure of the contemporary painting market is built on a national circulation of urban artistic labor.

Labor migration to Dafen village can be divided into three periods in which painters with different skill sets entered the trade. The first group of migrants arrived in Dafen village from within Guangdong province between 1980 and the early 1990s, with only some secondary education and no formal training in art.¹⁰⁴ As teenagers, they usually entered the trade through an extended family member or a co-villager, and worked for urban workshops during a period in which orders were high and labor scarce. Most came to specialize in a specific type and style of low-cost and high-volume painting, and worked in labor intensive conditions. Those who still remain are the "old hands" of the trade; they have long ceased to paint, and are now the bosses of Dafen's large- and medium-scale firms. As bosses, they put out to a large network of painters, and are sharp adjudicators of images, painting skills, and art markets. They vehemently reject the "dead" techniques of the

¹⁰⁴ Painters from this group whom I formally interviewed for this study are listed here, where possible with their stated year of arrival to Dafen village and the name of their current firm. Cai Chusheng (1993, dir. Huidan Arts and Crafts Co.), Wu Ruiqiu (1989, dir. Shenzhen Art Lover Co.), Huang Jiang (1989, dir., Huang Jiang Oil Painting Co.) Huang Tong (1989, manager, Huang Jiang Oil Painting Co.), Huang Ye (1993, dir. Noah Art), Wu Zhannan (1993, dir., Baimei Gallery), He Ke (late 1980s, Yihai Auction Co.), Zhou Shaojian (1989, Creative Art Oil Painting Studio), Gu Feng (dir. Non-Formula Art Studio).

academy, and instead value speed, ease of brushwork, freshness of color, and novelty in imagery. They are sardonic about cultural romanticisms concerning "true art," pride themselves on knowledge of art markets both high and low—often citing up-to-date auction prices per square meter of a given artist's work. They often also find the conceptual art projects discussed in this study clever and amusing marketing devices. These dispositions developed in the trajectory from painter to boss come to parallel those of the conceptual artist, who acquires increasing managerial and design knowledge, appropriates the skills of others, and flaunts his lack of involvement in the manual labor of art.

The second group of painters arrived in the mid 1990s and early 2000s from more distant and labor-exporting provinces.¹⁰⁵ Many had completed secondary education in an art-specialty secondary schools or had trained in an academy-related atelier, but failed to get into an art academy or a university art department. They therefore entered the trade with relatively high oil painting skills and settled into higher-skilled specialties such as figurative, realist, or classical painting.¹⁰⁶ In the early 2000s, many opened their own galleries in Dafen village, and in this way, attained relative success by establishing a network of clients, or have sold some of their own "original" work. However, most were forced to close their galleries periodically when orders fell, and have since found both the financial stability and artistic recognition they desire elusive. Caught among the complexities of

¹⁰⁵ Painters from this group whom I formally interviewed for this study are listed here, where possible with their stated year of arrival to Dafen village or Xiamen, along with their current specialty. Yin Xunzhi (1994, figurative), Qin Shaobin (1993, Ding Shaoguang), Du Renmeng (2000, Thomas Kinkade), C.W. "Speedy" Lai (1999, Hong Kong-scapes), Qin Feng (1995, Gustav Klimt and Ding Shaoguang), Jin Shan (Rembrandt and still life), Yang Mo (1992, abstract decorative), Yang Mingjie (1995, Impressionist figurative), Zhang Jianbin (photorealist portraitist), Liu Junpeng (1998, African scenes and London streetscapes), Xiao Keman (2001, figurative).

¹⁰⁶ In the painting trade "classical" (*gudian* 古典) painting would include Renaissance, Neo-Classical and eighteenth and nineteenth-century French Academic paintings.

market, official, and historical constructions of "originality," and continually seeking to demonstrate their aspirations as "free artists," many claim to have plans to leave Dafen village, believing that it is not so much social knowledge of the art world that they lack, merely access to the markets and institutions that would recognize their work as original.

The third group of migrants arrived in Dafen village around 2004, concurrent with the introduction of local policies favoring "original artists." Many of these artists graduated from a Chinese art academy or are graduates from the art departments of China's normal universities (teacher's colleges), and often came as retirees from other arts-related professions. With formal academic credentials, they make up the very small group of artists who are able to take advantage of the local government's subsidies and benefits for "original artists." Amongst this group, the Chinese academic practice of *xiesheng* (painting from life, *plein-air* painting, and travel sketching) dominates their work, which the local government supports through funding, exhibition, and publications. Despite the fact that most of these artists still regularly paint "on commission" at Dafen village, they disparage "trade painting" and attempt to separate themselves from it through the practice of *xiesheng*. Like many artists who work outside of Dafen village, they defend their practices as "free," "from the self," and "true art," but these grandiose claims cannot hide the thin line between the "bespoke" and the "speculative" conditions of their work, revealing only that "free art" requires the existence of "commercial art."

In other words, the boundaries of "original" and "trade" painting, or "free" and "commercial" labor, are highly fraught in Dafen village, as they are in other artistic contexts. Unskilled migrants arrive in Dafen still today, seeking a way become artists, while academically trained original artists regularly accuse each other of faking their credentials or painting for the market. In the context of these emerging and contestable professional hierarchies, the efforts of officials, journalists, and visiting artists to "assist" in the transformation of Dafen painters into "real artists"—presuming that

they never have been—brings into contact a bewildering range of discourses and practices of art. It is thus a complex, but also unravelling, apparatus which Dafen's self-proclaimed and aspiring "artists" (*huajia* 画家) or "original artists" (*yuanchuang huajia* 原创画家) navigate. They have found it difficult to enact either a romanticist rejection of the market or an academic retreat from it, since the trade has so sardonically ironized both elite and official history. On the other hand, the particular discourses and institutions of "creativity" and "originality" that have been brought by Chinese and foreign officials, journalists, clients, buyers tourists, consumers, and art historians to Dafen village, are constructed to be the antithesis of Dafen village's supposedly prevalent industrial production or peasant craft. These imaginary versions of Dafen village turn out to be as elusive as the historical and cultural conceits of "true art."

This study explores the myriad ways that Dafen village lends itself to intellectual and aesthetic explorations of the separation of painting labor from conceptual labor enacted in both modernist and postmodernist framings of authorship. In the first two chapters of the study, I argue that this division of labor has had a long historical gestation in the Sino-Western trade, delineating the domain of production I call "trade painting." Chapter One, *Manufactured Hand Paintings*, chronicles the transfer of trade painting from Guangzhou to Hong Kong in the late nineteenth century and then from Hong Kong to Shenzhen in the 1980s. Examining these painting practices against the emergence of modern print and photographic culture, and tourist and export markets, I argue that the regime of anonymity that has rendered trade painting invisible in the histories of Chinese and Western art are maintained through persistent cultural imaginaries that separate "true art" from the market. Chapter Two, *The Great Painting Factory*, focuses on the narrative trope of "assembly line painting" from Goethe through early nineteenth century European travel writers' accounts to present day journalists' reports on Dafen village. In addition to questioning these accounts, however, I detail the rise of Dafen's two largest firms in the 1990s whose bosses claim to run assembly line

factories. In examining the division of labor, separation of tasks and work hierarchy in Dafen's trade painting practices, I argue that the cultural imaginary of assembly line painting in Dafen village has had one notable effect: the emergence of the artist-boss.

Chapters Three to Five explore the themes of originality, creativity and appropriation used to frame these historical market conditions in post-2006 interventions in Dafen village. Specifically, my interest in each chapter is to clarify the art historical roots of aesthetic engagements with Dafen village whether instigated by officials, consumers, or by artists, but importantly, to set these engagements against the artistic and commercial practices within the Dafen context. Chapter Three, *Paint Whatever You Want To Paint*, introduces originality as an official Dafen discourse, and illustrates the construction of creative agents in propaganda fictions produced after 2006 by the party-state. Chapter Four, *Step 18: Sign "Vincent,"* theorizes the relationship of "craft" to modernist authorship and signature style by examining a single van Gogh-specialty workshop and the transnational wholesale and retail of van Gogh trade paintings. Chapter Five, *Framed Authors*, dissects cosmopolitan photojournalists' and conceptual artists' collaborations with Dafen painters, exploring the aesthetic terms of universal creativity raised by the Dafen "readymade." In projects discussed throughout these chapters, I argue that officials, journalists, and artists alike have constructed a global division of skilled painting labor from conceptual labor in their representations of Dafen village. In these chapters, I show how creativity simultaneously serves as a policy of the contemporary Chinese party-state, as a consumerist ethic of authentic craft, and as a postmodernist aesthetics of conceptualism.

The study concludes with an account of the presentation of Dafen village at the 2010 Shanghai World Exposition by the city of Shenzhen, and a concurrent international art exhibition held at the Dafen Art Museum in association with the World Expo. Assessing the display of Dafen village's "creativity" on this national stage set against the art exhibition held at Dafen Art Museum, I

return to the theoretical themes introduced in this chapter by reviewing them as exhibitionary terrain negotiated by Dafen painters. In returning to many of the works discussed in the preceding chapters, the conclusion reappraises the constructed creative alienation of Dafen village's painters against the labor of appropriation necessary to produce it.

Chapter One

Manufactured Hand Paintings: Origins and Practices

Guan Zuolin, courtesy name Cang Song, from Zhujing, Jiangpu. From a poor family. Wishing to take up a trade to make a living, but not wanting to work beneath someone in a craft shop, he thus joined a seafaring ship and travelled to the countries of Euro-America. There he was enamored with its vivid oil painting, and learned from it. After mastering it, he returned. He set up a shop in Guangzhou, painting portraits for people so lifelike that they were thought to be alive. Every viewer would sigh with surprise. This skill thus came into China in the middle of the Jiaqing reign [1760-1820]. Surprised Westerners also considered it strange and unprecedented.

—Nanhai County Gazette, Biographies, 1910.¹

The Western Manner

In 1910, a county gazetteer near Guangzhou (known in the West as Canton), a major Chinese commercial and cultural center and the exclusive maritime trading port of the Qing empire, recorded this short biographical entry on the painter Guan Zuolin (关作霖).² Scholars have speculated that Guan Zuolin was the painter known in the West as "Spoilum" (active 1770s-1790s),

¹ 关作霖,字苍松,江蒲司竹径乡人。少家贫,思托业以谋生,又不欲执艺居人下,因附海舶遍游欧美各国,喜其油画传神,从而学习。学成而归,设肆羊城,为人写真,栩栩欲活,见者无不诧叹。时在嘉庆中叶。些技初入中国,西人亦惊以为奇,得未曾有云 [sic?]. <<续南海县志>>,卷二十一,列传,页八,宣统庚戌十月。 *Nanhai County Gazette*, vol. 21, biographies, page 8, tenth month, 1910.

² South of Guangzhou city, Zhujing village and Nanhai county are located near Foshan city (佛山) in Guangdong province. Foshan was one of the four largest commercial and cultural centers of the Qing that was not also a center of political administration. On migration of commercial and cultural figures between Guangzhou city and its environs, see Steven Miles, *The Sea of Learning: Mobility and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Guangzhou* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006).

who is considered by some scholars to be the first Chinese painter to have painted in oil on canvas or cloth.³ "Spoilum" (also "Spoilem" or "Spillem") is a pidgin trade name found on some of the earliest Guangzhou-made portraits extant in American and British collections today. This pidgin, an amalgam of spoken Cantonese dialect, Fujian dialect and English, was the language a painter like Guan Zuolin would have used in his transactions with Euro-American, who in turn attached these various written forms to the name.⁴ Since he is identified only by such idiosyncratic names in the accounts of his Western clients and on his painting labels—names that furthermore correspond to none of the Chinese names under which he might have been identified in Chinese sources—much can be speculated about the artist-persona who worked under the trade name "Spoilum," except, of course, his historical identity.

³ "Spoilum" and "Spillem" are found on the labels of one 1774 painting, possibly of Captain Thomas Fry, one 1786 oval oil-on-canvas portrait of an unidentified Englishman, and several other portraits of the 1790s. Based on these labelled portraits and merchants' accounts, Spoilum was considered to have been active in Guangzhou from at least the 1770s, first painting on reverse painting on glass and then in oil on canvas by the 1790s. Carl Crossman associated Spoilum with this 1910 account of Guan Zuolin, noting the match in dates and the possible similarities between "Zuolin" ("Zou Lum" or "Jok Lum" in Cantonese) and "Spoilum." Through stylistic speculations and other circumstantial evidence, Crossman has identified a corpus of Spoilum works. Carl L. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities* (Woodbridge, Eng: Antique Collectors' Club, 1991), 35-53. See also Patrick Conner, "The Enigma of Spoilum and the Origins of China Trade Portraiture," *Magazine Antiques* 153, no. 3 (March 1998): 418.

⁴ Pidgin replaced Portuguese as the spoken mediating language of the Canton trade around 1700. In any given year, only three to five "linguists"—interpreters who couldn't necessarily write in any language of their expertise—were permitted to learn pidgin English and work for the foreigners, to the foreigners' great frustration. But the production of universal knowledge was not the purpose of these linguists' work as conceived by the Canton authorities. As Paul van Dyke has argued, as designated mediators, the linguists were less focused on accurate translation than on compromise and the smoothing over of trade relations. Paul Arthur Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 58-79. "Spoilem" may have been used in this pidgin to mean "killed"—William Henry Low records in a letter that his Chinese linguist told him that after a naval battle, a hundred people were "all spoilem"—but this does not appear to clarify matters. "The Canton Letters 1839-1841 of William Henry Low," ed. J. D. Phillips, in *East Essex Historical Collections*, vol. 84 (1948), 36, cited in Conner, "The Enigma of Spoilum," fn. 3. The surprising connection to the Latin term *spolia*, while appropriate to the very themes addressed in this study, would seem to be only coincidental.



Figure 1. Spoilum, *Portrait of Ralph Haskins of Roxbury, Massachusetts*, 1803, oil on primed cloth, 23 1/4 x 18", priv. coll.

Written at the close of the Qing (1644-1911) and the founding of the new Republic, the Nanhai gazetteer's entry on Guan Zuolin also provides an explanation as to how oil painting came to be practiced by thousands of painters in the city of Guangzhou. It describes oil painting as a "Euro-American" practice, exemplified in the practice of portraiture, taken up by a poor man with no other education, and presents it as a new skill—"xiexhen" (写真) or "painting truth"—that was valued by both Chinese and Westerners for its lifelikeness.⁵ Although no contemporaneous records have yet been identified to support the claim that Guan Zuolin travelled to the West, historical accounts attest to a brisk trade in painted portraits for foreigners and Chinese that developed at the turn of the nineteenth-century in Guangzhou.⁶ In 1803, Ralph Haskins of Roxbury, Massachusetts

⁵ On "Euro-America" (*oumei* 欧美) as a modern Chinese construct, see John Clark, *Modern Asian Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998).

⁶ Carl Crossman has noted the uncanny stylistic similarities between Spoilum's portraits and those of his contemporary American portraitists such as William Jennys. Crossman suggests that either Spoilum did visit America—proving the Nanhai gazetteer's account, or that the American portraitists were influenced by the work of Spoilum. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, 42-44. However, it would seem unlikely that Guan Zuolin did visit either Europe or America without any Western record of it. Crossman noted that the visit of Chitqua to London was a much publicized affair, and John Haddad has shown how the landing of a Chinese junk in 1834 in New York, and the presence of a Chinese woman in 1830s New York were both great public spectacles. John Rogers Haddad, *The Romance of China: Excursions to China in U.S. Culture, 1776-1876* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), chapter 3.

(figure 1), wrote in his diary during a stay in Guangzhou: "While nothing else could be done, I went to Spoilum and sat for two hours to have my portrait taken. He was \$10 each and does a great deal of business in that line."⁷

As the directional pulls of this trade suggests, by the nineteenth-century the painting economy around Guangzhou was already characterized by individual mobility, image circulation, and entrepreneurship. The painter known as "Lam Qua" (b. 1801-02), thought by some to be either Spoilum's son or grandson, would become the Chinese oil-on-canvas portraitist most well known to Westerners in the early nineteenth century.⁸ Both the China trade art historians Patrick Conner and Jack S. C. Lee have alternatively argued that Lam Qua may have been the same "Guan Zuolin" referred to in the 1910 gazette entry. But again, there is no evidence to show that Lam Qua visited

⁷ Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, 49.

⁸ "Lam Qua," "Lamqua," or "Lamquoi," are pidgin English trade names for the painter thought to be either Guan Qiaochang (Cantonese: Kwan Hiu Chin 關喬昌) or Guan Zuolin (Kwan Jok Lam 關作霖). It is possible that both Chinese names were used by one man. Jack S. C. Lee, "Painting in Western Media in the Early 20th-Century Hong Kong" (Hong Kong University, 1996), 12-17. If the painter born in 1801 known as Lam Qua was indeed the son of Spoilum and if indeed Spoilum's name was Guan Zuolin, then it is thought that he might have taken on the third character of his father's name (霖 "Lum" in Cantonese pronunciation), i.e., the second half of "Spoilum" for a trade name. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts*, 55. If Guan Zuolin (Kwan Jok Lam 關作霖) was his name, then he probably used the last character for his trade name. William Sargeant and Huang Shijian have noted that the suffix "Qua" used by many Canton trade painters is a homonym in the Fujian dialect for the title "guan" (官), meaning "official," used by the Thirteen Hong merchants, many of whom were Fujianese, who also used the "Qua" in their pidgin trade names. They speculate that the "Qua" used by trade painters would have sounded respectable without denoting a status the painters did not hold. Huang Shijian and William R. Sargent, *Customs and Conditions of Chinese City Streets in 19th Century: 360 Professions in China*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1999), 19. Amongst the Hong merchants, pidgin trade names were often passed from heads of each firm to their sons or inheritors, and the same is therefore assumed to be true for the trade painters. Interestingly, inscribed on the reverse of one painting is an inscription, dated at 1864, with the Chinese characters "唸" and "卦" with a mouth radical (*Lin gua* or *Lum gua* in Cantonese), which would be a phonetic re-transliteration for "Lam Qua." The inscription identifies this Lam Qua as Guan Xiaocun (Kwan Siu Chuen 關曉村), presumably Lam Qua's younger relative using his trade name. Conner, *Lam Qua*, 62-3.

the West.⁹ Instead, the documented travel was east- and not westwards, for by the mid-nineteenth century, Lam Qua's portrait studio had become a regular destination for foreigners visiting the port of Guangzhou. In 1848, the British colonialist William Fane de Salis visited Lam Qua, and recorded that the painter offered "to paint me English fashion (that is in good drawing and perspective) or China fashion (out of all drawing and proportion and perspective)—China fashion to be £8, English fashion £10."¹⁰ Meanwhile, the documented traffic in the paintings was definitively westwards. Lam Qua's paintings were exhibited at the Royal Academy in London in 1835 and 1845, in France in 1846, and soon after in other British and American art institutions.¹¹ The China trade art historian Carl Crossman thus called Lam Qua "the first Chinese artist working in the Western manner to exhibit in the West."¹²

⁹ Both Crossman and Conner have noted that contemporary members of the Guan family reported that, by family tradition, Lam Qua was Guan Zuolin. Jack Lee has noted that a 1940 exhibition catalogue on the painter Kwan Wai Nung, a descendent of the Guan family, states that Guan Zuolin met George Chinnery in Canton, thereby placing Guan Zuolin in Lam Qua's time and not Spoilum's. Patrick Conner, "Lam Qua: Chinese and Western Painter," *Arts of Asia* 2 (March-April 1999): 63. Jack Sai Chong Lee, "Painting in Western Media in the Early 20th-Century Hong Kong," (Hong Kong University, 1996), 12.

¹⁰ William Andrew Salius Fane de Salis, *Reminiscences of Travel in China and India in 1848* (private circulation, 1892), 12. Cited in Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, 89. Although Lam Qua seemingly offered paintings in both Western and Chinese styles, no Chinese ink on paper painting (least of all a portrait) attributable to Lam Qua has yet to be identified in publication.

¹¹ Extant research provides little clues as to the exhibitions of Lam Qua's work. Scholars only indicate that a Lam Qua painting titled *Head of an Old Man* was exhibited in the 1835 exhibition, and one entitled *Captain W.H. Hall* in the 1845 exhibition. In 1846, Lam Qua's *Portrait of a Young Chinese Woman* was also exhibited at the Ecole Turgot in France. Portraits by Lam Qua or his studio were also exhibited at the Apollo Club of New York (1841), the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (1851) and the Boston Athenaeum. Conner, *Lam Qua*, 61. Lam Qua's "medical portraits" for the American missionary doctor Peter Parker (1802-1888), which now reside in the Yale University Cushing Whitney Medical Library, were also exhibited by Peter Parker as a fundraising tool in the United States. Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 42.

¹² Crossman, *The Decorative Arts*, 61. I examine Westerner's accounts of Lam Qua's studio in Chapter Two.

In the retrospective search for the earliest reports of recognizable or named artistic activity, however, it is significant that this 1910 Chinese gazetteer's account does not characterize this practice of portraiture in the Western manner as an "art." On the contrary, it emphasizes that the practice was a craft, foreign in origin, commercial in application, and valued only for its verisimilitude. In this we see the outlines of the dominant Chinese aesthetic discourse which, at the turn of the century, bifurcated Chinese ink from Western oil painting, abstraction from realism, elite amateur expression from market-based professional skill, and free art from commercialized labor. In early twentieth-century Guangzhou, elite artists such as Gao Jianfu (1879-1951) and his brother Gao Qifeng (1889-1933) were engaged in social and political reform movements in which art and artists were central to the formation of a new national culture.¹³ These political and artistic elites saw, in the scientist practices of Western oil painting and the subjectivist modes of Chinese art, distinctly opposing civilizational trajectories that confounded their historical moment and required a modern synthesis. For elites, practices that painters like Guan Zuolin were engaged in over a century ago—portraiture for hire, produced in the realist Western style out of an urban shop—would have been far outside the social and political concerns for the higher art of an emerging nation. So far outside, in fact, that Wu Zifu (吴子复 1899-1979), a renowned Guangzhou artist and educator, would later write that there was no such thing as Western-style painting in Guangzhou before 1910.¹⁴

While painting in "the Western manner" for a Western market may have been seen as irrelevant by the elites who set the terms for aesthetic valuation at the start of the twentieth century, I argue that it was well in place by the eighteenth century in Guangzhou and that it has endured in

¹³ Julia F. Andrews, "A Century in Crisis: Tradition and Modernity in the Art of Twentieth-Century China," in *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China*, ed. Julia Frances Andrews, and Kuiyi Shen (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998).

¹⁴ Wu Zifu (also Wu Wan 吴琬), *Wu Zifu yitan* 吴子复艺谭 (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 1994), 145, cited in Jack Sai Chong 李世莊 Lee, "Painting in Western Media in the Early 20th-Century Hong Kong" (Hong Kong University, 1996).

South China's Pearl River Delta Region to the present day, exemplified by the trade in Dafen village. Although this "creative industry" of twentieth-first century China has never before been connected by scholars to the "export art" of the Qing, I propose here that the two are remarkably close in structure and function, and not coincidentally, marked by geographical proximity. And although there is a substantial gap in historical records between the 1880s and 2004, I further propose that the Qing-era production of paintings in Guangzhou and the contemporary era of painting in Shenzhen are connected by a crucial transitional period taking place in twentieth-century Hong Kong. By my account then, this painting trade—ongoing in similar guises for more than two centuries—reached one height in the mid-nineteenth century port city of Guangzhou at the head of the Pearl River, another in the 1970s British colony of Hong Kong at the river's mouth, and another, in reform-era Shenzhen on the eastern bank of the river's delta.

This extensive painting trade has largely remained invisible in the normative histories of Western and Chinese art and in the histories of modern China. Despite its scope and expanse over two centuries of Sino-Western trade, it has been consistently characterized by a regime of anonymity reinforced by the trade painters' non-elite status, the bespoke status of their work, the obfuscating actions of their middlemen, and the distance of their foreign market. In proposing an alternate history of the painting trade as a continuous practice in the Pearl River Delta, I thus argue that the 1910 Nanhai gazetteer's entry is only one of several improbable originary tales for this distinct profession employing a migratory class of painters in South China. Exploring a number of other originary tales from 1910 to 2010, I further argue that the origination narratives of the painting trade work to order and display consistent values of this practice amongst both its producers and consumers. Finally, by examining the reemergence of the practice in the Pearl River Delta in the 1980s, I explore the rise of a new narrative that marks notable transformations in the geographical and cultural imaginaries in the contemporary period.



Figure 2. Unidentified artist, Port of Guangzhou (Canton), with the Thirteen Factories, c. 1800, watercolor and gouache on paper. Coll. Peabody Essex Museum E79708.

The Canon in Canton

Strategically positioned in the harbors of the Pearl River in the South China Sea, the city of Guangzhou emerged as a major port of Southeast Asian maritime trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, following the decline of the overland silk routes. In 1511, the Portuguese established a monopoly trade in Guangzhou (or "Cantao") until 1557, when they were expelled by the Ming court to Macau, a peninsula located at the western mouth of the Pearl River Delta. The "Canton Trade system," which would designate Guangzhou as the only free-trade port of the Ming and Qing empires, developed gradually over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries alongside the decline of the Southeast Asian junk boat shipping and trading network and the rise of the European National Companies.¹⁵

The formal regulations of this Canton system were enacted by the Qing court in 1760, but by then the system overseen by local and provincial administration was largely in place: all foreigners

¹⁵ Cheong, *Hong Merchants*, 1-17.

were permitted to trade and live a part of each year in the area of the Thirteen Factories, a restricted area of the port outside the city walls, owned by the guild of the Thirteen Hong merchants.¹⁶ This merchant guild, whose most prominent leaders were from Fujian province, held the exclusive authority to trade with the foreigners, and traded in the major up-country commodities of silk, ceramics and tea with the foreign national companies.¹⁷ They also policed the foreigner visitors, regulated and managed the compradors (agents), linguists and shopkeepers permitted to interact with them,¹⁸ and conducted quasi-diplomatic functions with representatives of the foreign nations.¹⁹ Under the Canton system, both the Dutch East India Company and the United British East India Company established Guangzhou as one of their chief maritime trading bases. By the third quarter of the eighteenth century, they were joined by maritime companies of the French, Danish, Swedes, Austrians, Spanish and, in 1783, the Americans.²⁰ The Canton trade system has been justly called

¹⁶ The foreigners were only permitted to reside in Guangzhou for six months of the year when the natural tides permitted large ships to navigate up the Pearl River. For the other six months of the year, foreigners were required to retreat to Macau. Foreign women were prohibited to visit or reside in Guangzhou, so paintings of European women made in Guangzhou are attributed to a print or miniature source, unless it was documented that the painter visited Macau for a sitting. Of the many images made for Westerners of the thirteen factories see Patrick Conner, *The Hongs of Canton: Western Merchants in South China 1700-1900, as Seen in Chinese Export Paintings* (London: Martyn Gregory, 2009).

¹⁷ Cheong, *Hong Merchants*, 15.

¹⁸ Further research is required on the position that the trade painters occupied within the Canton trade system. Were Canton trade painters such as Lam Qua and Spoilum amongst these registered shopkeepers, of which there were reportedly more than 100? Cheong, *Hong Merchants*, 95-96. Does this registry verify the total number of painting shops in Guangzhou and list the names of their proprietors? W. E. Cheong further notes that the shopkeepers were required to register in groups of five to guarantee each others' debts. If painters guaranteed each others' debts, were they likely to be family members, and did they cooperate in other ways (perhaps sharing inventory, training, orders, and workers)?

¹⁹ The Canton trade system thus permitted the Qing government to retreat from direct involvement with the rising Western powers and to withdraw from state-to-state diplomacy. Paul Arthur Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 1-10.

²⁰ American trade in Guangzhou began in 1783 following the Treaty of Paris, which ended British Mercantile regulations on the American colonies' trade.

"one of the most important contributors to the rise of modern 'global' economies."²¹ The one-time head of the Hong merchants' guild, Howqua II (Wu Bingjian 伍秉鉴 1769–1843), now believed to have been one of the wealthiest men of the nineteenth century (figure 3), commissioned many oil portraits of himself (one, by the crucial exemplum George Chinnery), and presented them as gifts to many American merchants, who brought them home to hang in their Chinese rooms.²²



Figure 3. George Chinnery, Portrait of Howqua II (Wu Bingjian 伍秉鉴), c. 1830. oil on canvas, coll. Peabody Essex Museum.

Hanghua (行画), I argue, is the colloquial Chinese term that would come to encompass the set of practices that had its genesis in the Canton trade. "*Hang*," or "*hong*" (行) in the Cantonese dialect, translates from modern Chinese as a "profession," an "expertise," an "industry," or a "trade," but

²¹ Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade*, 191.

²² Lam Qua's studio also produced many portraits of How Qua. Cynthia Crossen, *The Rich and How They Got That Way: How the Wealthiest People of All Time—From Genghis Khan to Bill Gates—Made Their Fortunes*, (New York: Crown Business, 2000).

also a firm, a business, and a place of trade.²³ In the Qing, however, the term *hang* was also prominently used to refer to the "Thirteen Hongs" (*Shisan hang* 十三行), the guild of thirteen merchant-officials.²⁴ The Thirteen Hong merchants owned the Thirteen Factories or "foreign factories" (*yanghang* 洋行), where the European "factors" (or merchants) worked and lived (figure 2).²⁵ *Hanghua* thus are "trade paintings" in numerous senses of the Chinese word: commercially and professionally produced paintings, but also paintings made for the factories and merchants of the Canton trade.

These paintings were part of the ensemble of Chinese goods produced for the seemingly insatiable Euro-American consumer market: tea, raw and decorated silk, porcelain and ceramics, silver and pewter objects, furniture and other luxuries. In addition to painting done by hand on ceramics, silk, fans, screens, and furniture,²⁶ Canton trade paintings included a body of stand-alone painting in oil on canvas or ivory, gouache or watercolor on paper, and reverse painting on glass

²³ e.g. *hangye* 行业: a trade; *neihang* 内行: professional insider; *waihang* 外行: professional outsider; *yinhang* 银行: a silver firm, or bank. A colloquial term, *hanghua* does not appear in dictionaries and has only recently been used in newspapers in articles about the contemporary trade painting industry. Although it is therefore hard to be certain how long it has been in usage, my interviews with Hong Kong trade painters suggest that it was in use in Cantonese by the mid-1960s.

²⁴ The guild of thirteen were simply made up of the top thirteen firms in Guangzhou. These changed with the rise and fall of firms throughout the period, and different merchants served as the head of the guild, also referred to as the "Co-hong." W. E. Cheong, *The Hong Merchants of Canton: Chinese Merchants in Sino-Western Trade*, (London: Curzon Press, 1996), 6-8 and 128-190. Many of the top guild merchants were originally from Fujian province. On the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century migration to Guangzhou, including the Fujian merchants, see Steven Miles, *The Sea of Learning: Mobility and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Guangzhou* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 34-42.

²⁵ Johnathan A. Farris, "Thirteen Factories of Canton: An Architecture of Sino-Western Collaboration and Confrontation," *Buildings and Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum* 14 (2007): 67

²⁶ Further research is required to establish whether there were any connections between painters of objects and painters who worked on two-dimensional supports.

(*eglomisé*).²⁷ These often depicted the material and imaginary world of the Canton trade itself, including portraits of its merchants, captains, ships, and gravestones of its lost sailors; architectural and landscape views of the Pearl River Delta coast, the Guangzhou port and the Thirteen Factories; illustrations of the manufacture of tea, ceramics and silk; and typological images of Chinese people, flora, fauna, customs, and street life. Made for a European market, the images served the classifying and descriptive desires of European sinology, and many paintings on paper were assembled into albums that took the form of lists that offered encyclopedic claims of entertainment conjoined with truth-value: *Three Hundred Sixty Professions*, *Twelve Ranks of Chinese Mandarins*, *Fifty Types of Shops*, *Chinese Tortures and Punishments*, and so on. Likewise, many painting albums presented a page-by-page visual narrative of the manufacture of porcelain, tea, and silk as though they were treatises of knowledge (akin to Diderot's technically-minded *Encyclopédie*)—even though such "instruction" was, by that time, unnecessary for Euro-American industrialists.²⁸

²⁷ *Eglomisé* is a technique, popular in Europe since the middle ages, in which paint is applied to the back of a sheet of glass, in reverse order. Viewed through the glass, the painting has a luminous surface quality. The earliest *eglomisé* paintings from Canton are dated to the 1760s. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts*, 35-6. Mirrors were also incorporated into Canton trade paintings, resulting in complex compositions.

²⁸ I discuss further the images of the manufacture of tea, ceramics and silk in Chapter Two.

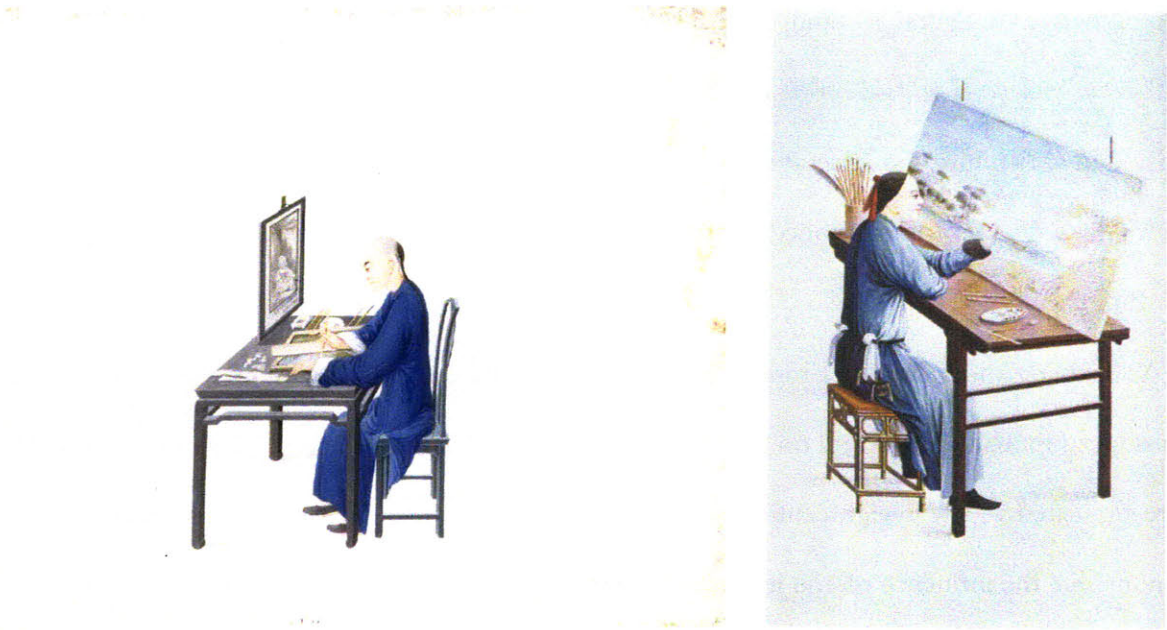


Figure 4. Unidentified artist(s), *Chinese painter working on reverse painting on glass from an English print*, c. 1790, watercolor on paper, 42 x 35 cm., coll. Victoria and Albert Museum. Figure 5. Attributed to Puqua, from the *360 Professions*, *Chinese painter working on landscape painting on stretched canvas or cloth*, c. 1849, watercolor on paper, coll. Peabody Essex Museum.

Canton trade paintings were sometimes painted from life—that foundational relationship that in Western historiography set up art and artist in crucial relation to modernity. But, like Western and modern artists, Canton trade painters also painted with reference to a vast range of sources including other paintings, miniatures, engraved prints, postcards, lithographs, woodblock prints, daguerreotypes and—as evinced in the repetitive appearance of multiples in Western collections—works already present within the trade. A late-eighteenth-century gouache depicts a painter at work on a reverse painting on glass, copying from an engraved print identified as English (figure 4); A mid-nineteenth-century watercolor of a trade painter depicts a painter at work on a landscape painting on stretched canvas but he is not shown to be working from any source (figure 5).

Although little research has been endeavored in this area, Canton trade painters must also have regularly adapted Chinese visual sources to generate new compositions.²⁹ For example, several known trade albums of silk and rice production clearly exhibit the reuse, reiteration and

²⁹ Clunas, 1987, *Chinese Export Art and Design*, and Kee Il Choi Jr., "Tea and Design in Chinese Export Painting," *The Magazine Antiques* 154, no. 4 (1998): 510-19.

recombination of figural groupings and compositions from the widely circulated woodblock prints of the *Yuzhi Gengzhi tu* (御製耕織圖). A series of images that depict a utopian society of gender division in agriculture and sericulture first compiled in the Song dynasty around 1237, the Qing-era *Yuzhi Gengzhi tu* was commissioned by the Kangxi Emperor and re-illustrated by the court painter Jiao Bingzhen (焦秉貞) in 1696.³⁰ It was subsequently reissued several times with variations under the Yongzheng and Qianlong Emperors. Images from the various Qing editions were widely reproduced in many media and on objects, and both printed editions and these subsequent works were circulated widely in eighteenth-century Europe.³¹ Where Jiao Bingzhen's illustrations demonstrate the influence of the Jesuit missionaries' introduction of linear perspective at the court, so too do the trade albums show the influence of a circuit of Sino-European trade. In a nineteenth-century trade album now in the British Library, each album image is clearly made from two plates of the *Gengzhi tu*, joined together to explicitly generate a single-point perspective composition that would have been more familiar to Western buyers (figures 6-8).³²

³⁰ See also the *Yinzhen xiang gengzhi tu* (*Portraits of Prince Yinzhen Engage in Agricultural Activities*), late Kangxi period (1662-1722), coll. Palace Museum, Beijing, discussed in Wei Dong (Jin Weidong), "Qing Imperial 'Genre Painting': Art as Pictorial Record," *Orientalism* (July-August 1995): 18-24. I am grateful to Roslyn Hammers for sharing her knowledge of the Qing-era *Gengzhi tu*.

³¹ In one version of the imperial *Gengzhi tu*, the Kangxi Emperor is depicted as the farmer, and this image of the Emperor plowing the fields was widely reproduced in European prints and porcelain. Under the influence of Quesnay and the physiocrats (who admired the "natural order" of Chinese civilization), in 1768 Louis XV conducted a plowing ceremony at Versailles in Chinese dress using a miniature plow. The following year, the Austrian Emperor Joseph II did the same with a full size plow. The ceremony was modeled on descriptions of the Qing Emperor's annual rites and, most probably, images from the *Gengzhi tu*. Timothy Brook, and Gregory Blue, eds. *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 67.

³² Much further research is necessary to explore other connections between popular Chinese visual sources and the work of Canton trade painters.

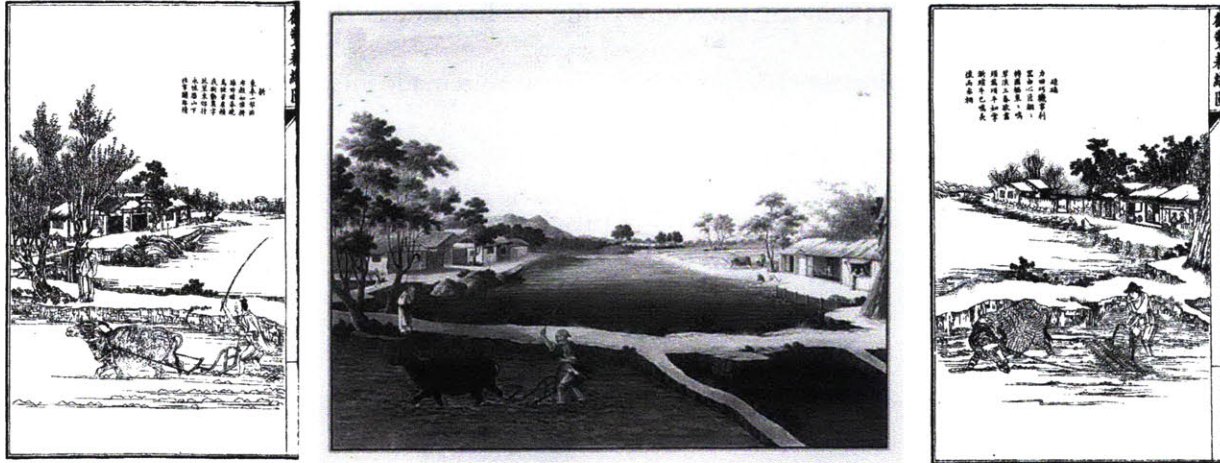


Figure 6. Image one from *Yuzhi Genghi tu*, 1696 (edition in *Siku Quanshu*, 1773-1782, 1997 printing). Figure 7. First image in ten-step series on the manufacture of rice, from an album, *Chinese Manufactory of Tea, China, Rice*, date unknown, 36 drawings in bound album, coll. British Library. Figure 8. Image four from *Yuzhi Genghi tu*, 1696 (edition in *Siku Quanshu*, 1773-1782, 1997 printing).

Although the scant research on Chinese merchants and traders permits us only to speculate on their roles in the painting trade, the role of Western merchants, traders, missionaries and colonialists is well recorded; they were clearly actively involved in the production of Canton trade paintings through their orders and commissions, and through the transfer of visual media and objects to and from Euro-America and Guangzhou. In this sense, the foreign "middleman" functioned as an agent of the market, as a circulator of visual sources, as the buyer, and sometimes the manager of production. By the end of the eighteenth century, it had become common practice for British naturalists to hire Canton trade painters to produce scientific illustrations of their collected specimens from Asia, a practice which had begun as early as 1690.³³ One eighteenth-century album of botanical illustrations, used as a guide for finding more specimens and presumably, making more illustrations, is recorded to have travelled between England and South China several times in the

³³ In 1690, James Cunningham, Company Surgeon of the British East India Company, assembled a collection of several hundred botanical illustrations painted by Canton painters. John Reeves (1774-1856), the Inspector of Tea for the British East India Company and amateur naturalist, employed several Cantonese trade painters—"Akut, Akam, Akew and Asung" ("Ah" is a colloquial form of address)—whom he had work in his own house in Macau under his supervision so that they could achieve "scientific accuracy" in their paintings. Fa-ti Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China: Science, Empire, and Cultural Encounter* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 46, 50-51.

hands of British naturalists.³⁴ Peruvian *costumbrismo* lithographs made in the 1830s were brought to Guangzhou by American captain-merchants, where they were remade into paintings, and then taken back to Lima where they were sold as costume albums by native Peruvian artists.³⁵ These transnational, multimedia and entrepreneurial enterprises, in other words, found their amanuenses in Canton trade painters.

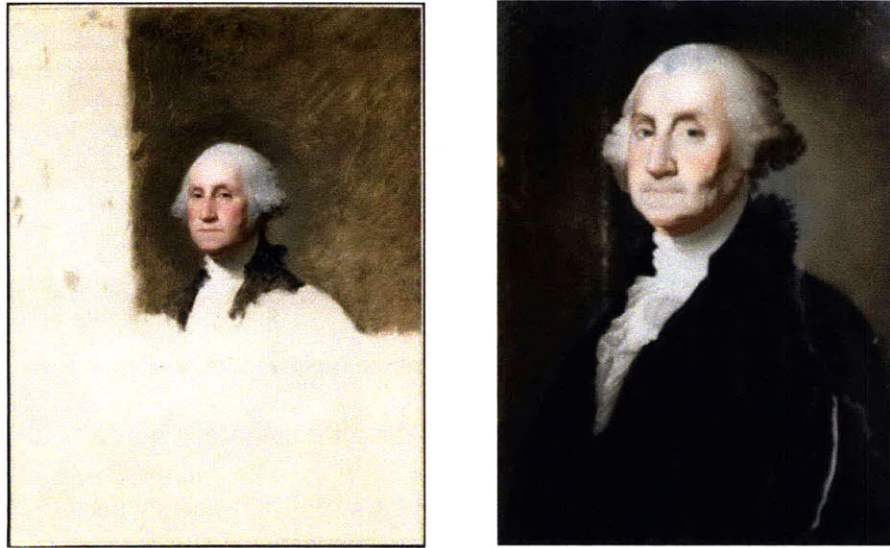


Figure 9. Gilbert Stuart, *Portrait of General George Washington* ("Athenaeum" Portrait), 1876. coll. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and National Portrait Gallery. Figure 10. Attributed to Foeiqua, unauthorized copy of Gilbert Stuart's *Portrait of General George Washington*, reverse painting on glass, 1800-5, coll. New Britain Museum of American Art, Connecticut.

In perhaps the most noted instance of these far-reaching ventures, Guangzhou painters were not only working from prints, but also from an "original"—that is, an oil painting. This was the case with the 1796 portrait of George Washington (1732-1799) painted by Gilbert Stuart, now known as

³⁴ The book was used as a handbook by the two Gardeners of the MacCartney Embassy, and later by William Kerr. Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China*, 46.

³⁵ Natalia Majluf, "Pattern-Book of Nations: Images of Types and Costumes in Asia and Latin America, Ca. 1800-1860," in *Reproducing Nations: Types and Costumes in Asia and Latin America, Ca. 1800-1860* (New York: Americas Society, 2006), 39.

the Athenaeum portrait (figure 9).³⁶ Guangzhou-made copies of it, often executed in reverse painting on glass and sometimes in oil on canvas, are well known today and are held by several American museums (figure 10). Gilbert Stuart (1775-1828), a British portraitist who had fled his creditors in England and Ireland for Philadelphia, had left a portrait of Washington commissioned by Martha Washington intentionally unfinished and undelivered (to his client's frustration), so that he could continue to make commissioned replicas of it.³⁷ During his lifetime, Stuart painted more than sixty known copies of the Athenaeum portrait in order to stave off his many creditors.³⁸ In the words of the historian James Flexner, Stuart "gaily called the copies of Washington his 'one hundred dollar bills,'" and, "[h]is daughter remembered that toward the end of his life Stuart dashed off Washingtons at the rate of one every two hours."³⁹ Evidently, while Stuart was painting two-hour copies of Washingtons in Philadelphia, his contemporary Spoilum was painting (from life) two-hour portraits of American merchants in Canton. The categorization of these paintings today

³⁶ The Athenaeum portrait followed after Stuart's first portrait of Washington from a 1795 sitting, now known as the "Vaughn type" because the original was once thought to be the portrait acquired for Samuel Vaughan, a London merchant. In 1823, Stuart wrote that he had rubbed out the original, which is therefore now considered lost. Worcester Art Museum, "Gilbert Stuart (1775-1828): Artist Biography," http://www.worcesterart.org/Collection/Early_American/Artists/stuart/biography/index.html (accessed FEB 2008). The unfinished Athenaeum portrait remained with the artist until his death in 1831, when it was bought for the Boston Athenaeum and transferred to the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1876, where it was held until 1980, when it was sold by the Athenaeum to the MFA and National Portrait Gallery in joint ownership. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Acc. No. 1980.1-2.

³⁷ Avoiding delivery to his portrait sitters was a regular tactic of Stuart's. He later claimed, after the death of Washington, that the President himself had verbally told him to keep it, but historians doubt this in light of the many times that George and Martha went to Stuart's Germantown studio to collect the painting and came away angry and empty-handed. James Thomas Flexner, *Gilbert Stuart; a Great Life in Brief*, (New York: Knopf, 1955), 144. I am grateful to the late Edward St. Germain for sharing his research on Stuart and his portraits of Washington.

³⁸ Janet Comey, et al., *MFA Highlights: American Paintings* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2003). George C. Mason, *The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart (1879)* (New-York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1894), 141.

³⁹ Flexner, *Gilbert Stuart*, 147-148. See also James Thomas Flexner, *America's Old Masters*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 143.

demonstrates how confounding the discourses of originality and copying have become over two centuries of Sino-Western exchange: Though both groups of works "originate" in the two-hour labor of oil painting, Stuart's Athenaeum portrait and its numerous "replicas" are icons of nationhood made by an "original artist" and now reproduced on countless American one-dollar bills, yet Spoilum's unique and far scarcer portraits are deemed to have been produced by a Chinese "copyist."

In his own time, Stuart's image of Washington was so iconic that he himself could barely keep up with the orders. He also used the Athenaeum head in his own numerous copies of his earlier full-length portrait of Washington, now known as the Lansdowne portrait. Stuart, however, was not the only producer of copies of "his" popular portrait. He was already furious after the Englishman James Heath (1757-1834), the Historical Engraver to the King, had a burin engraving of the Lansdowne portrait made in 1801 before Stuart could do it himself.⁴⁰ Heath was lucratively selling the prints in America;⁴¹ and upon being shown an impression, Stuart reportedly uttered, "By this act the family of a painter is ruined."⁴² Meanwhile the British artist William Winstanley (active 1775-1803) was selling painted oil-on-canvas copies of the Athenaeum portrait in Philadelphia

⁴⁰ James Heath had Stuart's "Lansdowne" portrait engraved in 1800, probably with the permission of Lord Lansdowne (later, Marquess) (1737-1805). Lord Lansdowne was given the portrait as a gift from William Bingham (the banker in Philadelphia that commissioned it), who neglected to inform Lansdowne that the gift came with strings—namely that Stuart had stipulated that no copy would be made. As Heath's venture was very profitable, and Stuart was still running from his creditors, he was understandably upset. Mason, *The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart*, 93-95.

⁴¹ According to a descendant, the prints were sold for five guineas each. J.J. Heath-Caldwell, "Engraved Portrait of George Washington By Gilbert Stuart," <http://www.jjhc.info/heathjames1834georgewashington.htm> (accessed APR 2010).

⁴² Mason, *The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart*, 94.

where Stuart himself was living and working.⁴³ Fearing further loss in market share, Stuart extracted promises from each of his buyers that they would not have their own copies of his Athenaeum portraits made.

Despite such efforts, and without recourse to copyright law, in 1802 Stuart was forced to appeal to the U.S. Circuit Court of the Eastern District of Pennsylvania alleging that the 1801 Captain of the *Connecticut*, John E. Sword, had purchased a *Washington* portrait from him, taken it to China, and had over one hundred copies produced in reverse painting on glass.⁴⁴ The Court granted Stuart the injunction, ordering Sword to desist in selling "copies of the Portraits" under penalty of a fine of two thousand dollars.⁴⁵ The Chinese painter as the infringing copyist thus emerges here in the prodigious British and American copying culture and market, as an anonymous figure overshadowed by the Western commissioner-merchant and out of reach of American legislation.

⁴³ According to one account, Winstanley was asked by the committee charged with furnishing the President's house to pack and ship a portrait of Washington owned by Mr. Laing, head of the committee. However, Winstanley apparently copied the portrait, sent it to the President's house, and kept the original which he sent to England. Hence Stuart later claimed that the painting hanging in the President's house was a "forgery." Winstanley then offered six copies for sale in Philadelphia, first presenting himself at Stuart's home and studio, suggesting to Stuart that he apply the "finishing touches" on them, before Stuart apparently threw "the pert" out. Mason, *The Life and Works of Gilbert Stuart*, 101-102.

⁴⁴ Stuart's Appeal and the Court's Order are reprinted in E. P. Richardson, "Notes and Documents: China Trade Portraits of Washington After Stuart," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 94, no. 1 (January 1970): 95-100. Richardson suggests that Sword was in the habit of smuggling. The inbound manifest of the *Connecticut* did not list 100 paintings (only "three trunks of merchandise" belonging to Sword), but did list "one case painting" which would presumably be Sword's Stuart.

⁴⁵ The National Archives, Records of the Bureau of Customs, Record Group 36, reproduced in Richardson, "Notes and Documents," 100.

Guangzhou-made reverse glass versions of Stuart's Athenaeum portrait, possibly from Sword's commission, are currently held in several American museums.⁴⁶ As objects painted by hand, and indeed in a medium quite different from the oil-on-canvas "original," they each bear many formal differences from the unfinished Athenaeum portrait—the most obvious variable being that of size and (literal) finish.⁴⁷ Yet today they retain notoreity in the category of "copies," while Stuart's copies from his own hand are valued as though they were each "original." Although Stuart consistently called his own copies and others' copies, "copies," there has been a marked tendency in twentieth-century art historical literature to describe the copies made by Stuart as "replicas," "original replicas," or "original copies."⁴⁸ This terminology, of course, is meant to assert that the copies made by the artist's hand are more "original" than all others' copies. The assignation is in fact a modernist one, made possible by the notion that the modern artist's originality is a "becoming of the first of

⁴⁶ The Peabody Essex Museum holds two, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Henry Luce Study Center holds one, and the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut holds one. Milton Esterow, "The Many Faces of George Washington," *ArtNews* (2009). According to Esterow, "A few historical societies have copies of the Chinese version of the Stuart Washington portrait." But it is not clear whether Esterow refers to American-made copies of the Chinese copies of the portrait, or Chinese copies of the American copies.

⁴⁷ However, at least some Guangzhou-made Stuart Washingtons were made from prints. Edward Carrington wrote in a journal entry of January 1805 that he had bought a print of a Stuart portrait of Washington from the Canton painter Fouqua (or Foeiqua). Crossman argued that this "conclusively places these prints used for copying in the hands of the artist Fouqua." This seems to be the source of current attribution of most Canton trade Stuart *Washington's* to Fouqua. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, 62 and note 13, page 444. There is, however, no reason to believe that all Guangzhou-made Stuart Washingtons came from one studio or one commission (such as Sword's).

⁴⁸ See for example Edward S. King, "Stuart's Last Portrait of Washington: Its History and Technique," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 9 (1946): 80-96. Linda J. Docherty, "Original Copies: Gilbert Stuart's Companion Portraits of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison," *American Art* 22, no. 2 (2008): 85-97. On the nineteenth century developments in these distinctions in relation to lithography see Stephen Bann, "Reassessing Repetition in Nineteenth-Century Academic Painting: Delàroche, Gerôme, Ingres," in *The Repeating Image: Multiples in French Painting From David to Matisse*, ed. Eik Kahng (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2007), 28.

oneself," in the words of art historian Richard Shiff.⁴⁹ This myth of creativity—founded in the act of painting itself—presumes that, in copying, Stuart has access to a unique creative process that another person does not. It implies that, even if an artist copies his original over and over, the process would still be more "original" than if another artist copies him even once.⁵⁰ However, if it is in the process of painting from a model that Stuart *each time* enacts his creativity, then we might very well question how and why this special "process" might be inaccessible to painters other than Stuart such as Winstanley or the Canton trade painter—who might indeed be said to be less slavishly devoted to "the" original.

The first U.S. Copyright Act was enacted in 1790 (closely modelled on Britain's Statute of Anne of 1709), and copyright protection was extended to printers, engravers and publishers in 1802. However, it was not until 1870 that copyright protection was extended to include pictures and drawings.⁵¹ Thus, in Stuart's time it was the issue of authorization that was paramount. That is, the problem was not the act of copying the painted image itself, but rather Stuart's commercial relation to the copy (whether or not made by himself). Stuart's 1801 appeal took place in the context of his own need to benefit financially from the reproduction of his portraits and his failed tussle with print

⁴⁹ "Originality amounts to becoming the first of oneself: 'I am the primitive of my own way,' Paul Cézanne was reported to say..." Richard Shiff, "Originality in the Visual Arts," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. M. Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Or, Monet: "it always seems to me that in beginning again I will do better," quoted in Steven Z. Levine, "Monet's Series: Repetition, Obsession," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 72.

⁵⁰ In evaluating Stuart's "last" copy of Washington at the Walters Art Gallery over that of another Stuart Washington at the Maryland Historical Society with "the most credible documentation" of its provenance, Edward S. King argues that radiographs of the Maryland copy show that: "The facture of this portrait can be described only by negatives which contradict Stuart's creative pictorial means point by point." King, "Stuart's Last Portrait of Washington," 94-5. King's argumentation presumes that Stuart had but one "creative pictorial means" of facture, and that Stuart must have utilized it in each and every instance of his copying.

⁵¹ U.S. Congress, *Copyright Act of 1790*, 31 MAY 1790. U.S. Congress, *Amendment to extend copyright to the art of designing, engraving and etching historical and other prints*, 29 APR 1802. U.S. Congress, *Second General Revision to the Copyright Law*, 8 JUL 1870, Sec. 86.

culture. With respect to print reproductions, Stuart had failed to secure his own authorship by means of his relations with his clientele (which by extension included a Lord he likely did not wish to offend). Neither could he win in the court of public opinion nor in the market that eagerly purchased the unauthorized copies, despite his public protestations and even an erroneous "signature" which named him "Gabriel."⁵² Indeed, Stuart did not fight James Heath's prints in court; he did so only in the case of the Chinese hand-painted Sword commissions. Thus, whereas Stuart found himself forced to tolerate the engraved print made invariant by manufacture, it was the multiple made by hand—the variant trade painting—that he could successfully challenge as a "copy."

This early nineteenth-century cultural-legal rubric would appear to a contemporary viewer as a reversal of our understanding of the relative status of original artists and copyists, and of hand over mechanical reproduction. We might expect that the widely varied hand-painted "copies" would enjoy legal protection as fair-use works that derived style or inspiration from an ur-portrait provided by a single patron. Similarly, the invariance of the Heath reproductions might seem to infringe upon Stuart's right to control the circulation of his original work. Yet this twentieth century framework has been expanded into a universal and timeless institution of property rights that Chinese have (still) not developed. Thus, significantly, Stuart's appeal against Sword's Chinese copies would often be mistaken in the twentieth century for a "copyright lawsuit" when this was clearly not the case, since copyright protection was never available to a painter such as Stuart. Further conflating the early nineteenth-century hand-made painting with contemporary intellectual property infringement, in 2009, the curator Milton Esterow remarked of his museum's unauthorized Guangzhou-made Stuart *Washington*: "It was painted 200 years ago, and 200 years later we're dealing with the same issues. There are still works being pirated in China today—movies, books, CDs."⁵³ In the curator's

⁵² In the correspondence between Lord Lansdowne and James Heath, Stuart was erroneously referred to as "Gabriel Stuart" and thus Heath's prints were published with that name. On every print, "the author of the original was given as 'Gabriel Stuart.' 'They will make an angel of me despite myself,' Stuart would say." Flexner, *Gilbert Stuart*, 135.

⁵³ Esterow, "The Many Faces of George Washington," unpaginated.

remark, we see how, in the two centuries since Stuart's appeal, the American business and culture of mechanical reproduction has come to be projected onto the moral character of distant Chinese painters who worked by hand. Canton trade paintings, figured as "copies" of Stuart's "original" prove the timelessness of the Chinese disregard for intellectual property, even though Stuart himself never "owned" it.

Although European Jesuits had promoted oil media and Western techniques of chiaroscuro and linear perspective in the Ming and Qing courts where some of these techniques were explored by court artists, and although painting for the market was prevalent in China centuries before the Canton trade, it was this particular eighteenth-century Western market for images that set the stage for so many Guangzhou trade painters to take up a different sort of "Western manner." While many Canton paintings, such as the Stuart portraits, show that Canton trade painters were capable of painting in a Western style visually indistinguishable from their American counterparts,⁵⁴ nineteenth-century Canton trade paintings of Chinese subjects take on a distinctly exotic and "amateurish" idiom, as though these painters had only just learned the basic skills of linear perspective and naturalistic modeling and coloring. This "technical" disparity can be seen in the marked contrasts between the "English grand manner" portraits by Lam Qua, and the "naive" gouache and watercolor paintings of Chinese subjects by his younger brother Ting Qua (Guan Lianchang 关联昌).

Although this is often read as a "degeneration" in Chinese export artists' skill, I propose a different paradigm: that the varying product lines of Canton trade painting were molded to the taste of their distant consumers.

⁵⁴ Copies of Canton trade paintings were probably made by American painters too. Today one of the few means of identifying a painting of the Canton trade made in China is through the construction of stretchers and frames, in the rare instance where the painting is still housed in its original stretcher and frames.

Due to the lack of written records by and about individuals of low social standing (certainly not a problem unique to Canton trade painters), scholars of the Canton trade remain uncertain about many aspects of Canton trade painting: how its labor market, training and production may have developed, and how the business and culture of transfer, cooperation and competition between firms and painters may have operated. Artistic influence can hardly be securely narrated if the identities of the painters remain unknown, and the current art historical scholarship on this corpus thus depends on considerable speculation. Since little can be established of the socioeconomic conditions of the Canton painting trade, current scholarship also relies on little more than Western expectations of artistic development to discern the contours of a social history. The surviving paintings, found in Western museums and private collections, are suggestive of striking stylistic developments and distinctions, and, because of their direct resemblance to Western images, formal study of the paintings alone became the basis for adducing the social realities of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Guangzhou. Since these surviving paintings are themselves products of European commissions, when used as empirical illustrations of historical China—as they very often are—we are in doubly phantasmic terrain.

The picture that currently persists of the historical Canton painting trade is that of a pre-industrial artisanal practice (not dissimilar to Gilbert Stuart's, it should be said), but also one in which a practice of reproduction could only naively imitate shadows of a more advanced "art" brought from afar. Yet we already know enough to complicate this picture. Canton trade painters, like their counterparts in the West, were caught up in a circuit of orders, commissions, and desires for specific preexisting images produced and reproduced by other means and media. The "hand" did factor centrally in the Western demand for paintings made in Guangzhou; but handwork as a method of image production was itself a value in flux, as was that hand's relationship to shifting notions of artistic authorship and originality.

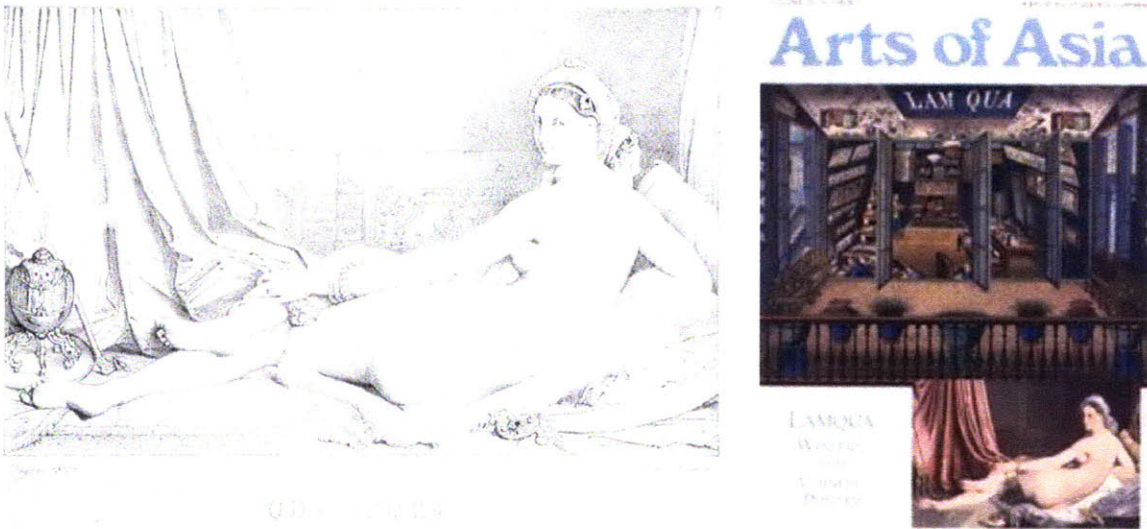


Figure 11. Ingres, *Odalisque*, lithograph, 1825. Figure 12. Cover of *Arts of Asia*, with Lam Qua's painting after Ingres's *Odalisque* in lower right corner, date unknown, private collection.

We have seen that Stuart was already experiencing the instability of "authorship." The French neoclassical painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867), also famed like Stuart, Spoilem, and Lam Qua, for his prolific commercial portraiture, has been identified by both Richard Shiff and Rosalind Krauss as a key figure marking a nineteenth-century Western transition from a classicist performance of originality towards a modernist or postmodernist one. While Richard Shiff has argued that Ingres exemplified the academic practice of originality—one that worked against both modernism and photography,⁵⁵ for Rosalind Krauss, Ingres was a "trafficker in the copy," because he produced "version after version of essentially the same picture, sometimes *exactly* the same picture."⁵⁶ Although photography—as a technology of reproduction that triggered an aesthetic reassessment of originality—is situated centrally in the debate between Krauss and Shiff, the art historian Stephan Bann has argued that the watershed moment assigned to photography was incipient in printmaking. Like Gilbert Stuart, Ingres also attempted to harness lithography to his

⁵⁵ Richard Shiff, "Phototropism (Figuring the Proper)," in *Retaining the Original: Multiple Originals, Copies, and Reproductions*, ed. Kathleen Preciado (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1989).

⁵⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, "Originality as Repetition: Introduction," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 36.

professional practice and self-presentation, with somewhat better success, by entering into commercial agreements with lithographers.⁵⁷

The China trade art historian Patrick Conner has identified an undated Lam Qua painting of Ingres's 1814 *Grande Odalisque*, which had been exhibited at the Salon of 1819 and first known to have been lithographed in 1825 (figure 11). The composition of the 1825 *Odalisque* lithograph follows from Ingres own near-replica in oil on canvas of the *Grande Odalisque* now at the Musee des Beaux-Arts at Angers.⁵⁸ Since the lithograph features small variations notable in the lithographic process, Stephen Bann has concluded that the 1825 lithograph was "probably by Ingres" himself.⁵⁹ By this phrase, Bann implicitly refers to a multistep process, performed by a host of anonymous workers which Ingres may or may not have been overseeing, by which a source image is drawn, redrawn, signed, and dated with Ingres's name, in oily crayon on a stone slab that is repeatedly coated with water and then inked, from which is pulled multiple proofs and prints, which are then sold by the Parisian lithographer or publisher Delpech (who is more like a manager and financier). In other words, condensed in this contemporary phrase "probably by" is a form of artistic authorship that contains within it many images, hands, tasks, and means of their appropriation.

From 1826 to 1851, at least four prints of the various Ingres *Odalisque* canvases have been identified using various publishing and printing processes.⁶⁰ Lam Qua's painting, in all likelihood following one of these prints, is painted in reverse, but features the peacock fan of the *Grande Odalisque* instead of the silk fly whisk featured in the 1825 lithograph. While the overall palette of Lam Qua's painting is remarkably close to the "original" *Grande Odalisque* of 1814, Lam Qua's

⁵⁷ Stephen Bann, "Ingres in Reproduction," in *Fingering Ingres*, ed. Susan L. Siegfried, and Adrian Rifkin (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

⁵⁸ Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Ettore Camesasca, *L'Opera Completa Di Ingres*, vol. 19, *Classici Dell'Arte* (Milano: Rizzoli, 1968), 32c.

⁵⁹ Stephen Bann, "Ingres in Reproduction," 59.

⁶⁰ Dimitri Salmon, *Ingres: La Grande Odalisque* (Paris: Musee du Louvre Editions, 2006), 37-40.

painting also prominently features a pink, instead of a blue, curtain (figure 12).⁶¹ Larissa Heinrich has suggested that Lam Qua's interest in Ingres's *Odalisque* was specifically in its eroticization of bodily deformity, a feature of Ingres's work that also characterizes Lam Qua's extraordinary series of medical pathology portraits for Peter Parker, a surgeon and missionary who founded the Ophthalmic Hospital in Guangzhou (est. 1832).⁶² Heinrich suggests, then, a hint of artistic influence of this most notable aspect of Ingres's canonical *Odalisque* on Lam Qua's even stranger—but "original"—corpus. More significant to my purpose, however, is the alteration of insignificant detail in the copies and how it might be interpreted: for depending how we schematize intention, history, accident or creativity in the Canton painting trade, these variations could easily be cast as a creative license, the fulfillment of a commissioned request, or happenstance in the naive transfer of an image across media and milieus. The art historical status of Lam Qua, of course, would admittedly influence the historian's choices.

Ingres's own painted replicas exemplify for Rosalind Krauss a master oeuvre in which "there [was] no beginning uncorrupted by a prior instance." In this language of defilement that elides into a defense of modernity's incorruptible boundaries, Krauss finds support for the post-structuralist tenet that any origin is "fractured at its very core," and "always already self-divided."⁶³ If there is no singular original or origin of a work of art, then the orders of copying conceived to hierarchically descend from a single original must themselves be put into question. In effect, the work of art transformed by the age of mechanical reproduction has a prehistory well before the self-division of originality triggered by photography. The work of art was already dis-singular by the time we enter the age of "truly" mechanical reproduction, because, as the repetitive productions of Ingres, Stuart

⁶¹ Reproduced on the cover of *Arts of Asia* in which Connor's article appears. Patrick Conner, "Lam Qua: Chinese and Western Painter," *Arts of Asia* 2 (March-April 1999): 46-64.

⁶² Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images*, 56.

⁶³ Krauss, "Originality as Repetition: Introduction," 36.

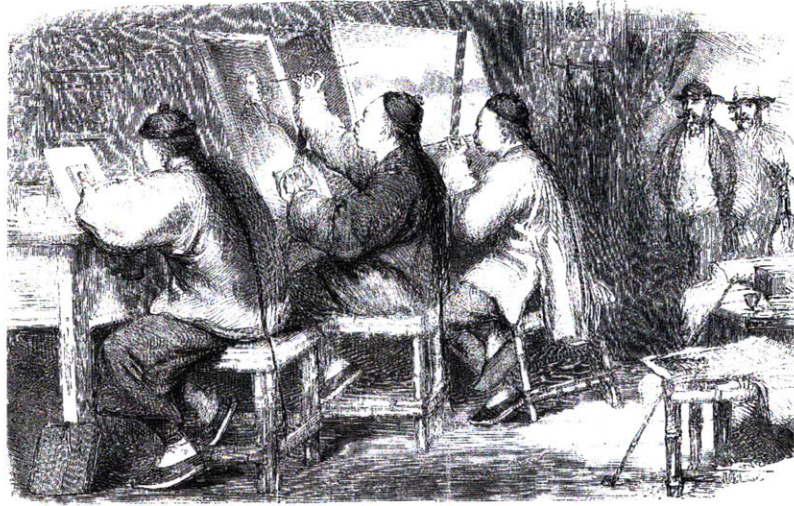
or Lam Qua show, the "mechanization" was already available within the artist himself. The question, then, is how to treat the human "machine"—in our case, the Canton trade painter. To designate Lam Qua's *Odalisque* painting a copy is to assign a mechanization to the hand that is categorically different from the mechanisms of artistic originality. The Canton painter, though working from "mechanically" reproduced Western things that he would have to re-create by hand, is invidiously deemed an anonymous automaton *par excellence*. This categorical designation, though, is made possible by the machinery of genius.

Manufactured Hand Paintings

The study of Chinese "export painting," or trade painting, began in earnest as an art historical enterprise in the West in the 1950s. At the time, scholars attributed the origins of Canton trade paintings to George Chinnery (錢納利 1774-1852), a British portraitist who lived for twenty-seven years in Macau from 1825 to his death in 1852. One scholar called Canton trade painters "Cantonese Chinnerys," and it was widely believed that Lam Qua was a "house boy" who was assigned to clean Chinnery's paintbrushes.⁶⁴ Until recently, many museums utilized "Follower of Chinnery" or "School of Chinnery" as a default attribution for all paintings of the China trade. Now that Lam Qua's age and a basic chronology of his work has been established long before Chinnery's arrival, scholars view figures like Chinnery and Lam Qua as only two of many market competitors rather than as teacher and pupil or originator and copyist.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Albert Ten Ecyk Gardner, "Cantonese Chinnerys: Portraits of How-Qua and Other China Trade Painters," *The Art Quarterly* (Winter 1953). Francis Lothrop, *George Chinnery (1774-1852) and Other Artists of the Chinese Scene* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 1967). Crossman, *The Decorative Arts*, 55.

⁶⁵ Unless, of course, one believes that there was more than one Lam Qua. Patrick Conner, however, does identify a pre- and post-Chinnery influence in Lam Qua's work. Conner, "Lam Qua," 46-54. Patrick Conner, *George Chinnery (1774-1852): Artist of India and the China Coast* (London: Martyn Gregory Gallery, 1993).



CHINESE ARTISTS.—FROM A SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST IN CHINA.

Figure 13. Unidentified artist(s), "Chinese Artists—from a sketch by our special artist in China," *London Illustrated News*, print from engraving from drawing, 1850.

The Canton Trade as a regulatory system ended with the Opium Wars and the Treaty of Nanking of 1842, through which Britain and other Western imperial powers forced the Qing court to abolish the Canton system. In addition, the Treaty forced the Qing to open up five coastal free-trade zones in Guangzhou, Xiamen (Amoy), Ningbo (Ningpo), Fuzhou (Fuchow), and Shanghai, and to cede Hong Kong Island to the British Empire.⁶⁶ With the intensification of the Western presence, trade painting in the Pearl River Delta spread to the Portuguese and British colonial entrêpôts of Macau and Hong Kong, where Guangzhou painting firms set up studios.⁶⁷ Lam Qua had "a room" in Macau by December of 1843, and in September of 1845, the Chinese Repository

⁶⁶ After 1860 and the Second Opium War, more than 80 treaty-ports were established in China. The Kowloon Peninsula was also ceded to the British Empire, and in 1898 Britain obtained a 99-year lease on the New Territories, which expired in 1997, when the whole Hong Kong colony was established as a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.

⁶⁷ It seems likely that trade painting also spread to Xiamen and the other treaty ports at this time, however further research is required to establish this.

reported that he had opened a studio on Queen's Road in Hong Kong.⁶⁸ Many photography studios operating in the Chinese treaty-ports in the 1840s and after also offered painted portraits for sale, and the incredulous 1875 British report of a Chinese photographer in the northern city of Yantai who could amazingly produce a portrait *without a camera* was, of course, more like a painter.⁶⁹



Figure 14. William Pryor Floyd, Queen's Road, albumen print, c. 1867-1874

The close association of photography and painting was notable in Chinese-run photography studios in Hong Kong, and we can surmise that this dual production was a result of the presence of

⁶⁸ Conner, "Lam Qua," 61. There is not sufficient evidence to determine whether these studios were operating concurrently or whether they were operated by Lam Qua himself, his associates or by family members who were known to have adopted his trade name.

⁶⁹ Roberta Wue, "Essentially Chinese: The Chinese Portrait Subject in 19th-Century Photography," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Wu Hung, and Katherine R. Tsiang (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 257. On this story and its relationship to painting, see Gu Yi, "Scientizing Vision in China: Photography, Outdoor Sketching, and the Reinvention of Landscape Perception, 1912-1949" (Brown University, 2009).

skilled portraitists and painters from the earlier painting trade in the Pearl River Delta. In Hong Kong, Chinese-run photography studios prominently offered painted portraits alongside photographic ones, and portrait painting studios offered paintings of photographs, just as Canton trade painters used to offer portraits and portraits enlarged from miniatures on ivory and then from daguerrotypes.⁷⁰ An 1850 article in the *London Illustrated News* featured an engraving made from a sketch that depicts three "brothers" at work in a Hong Kong painting shop: one, painting a miniature from a daguerreotype, the second, enlarging the same image in oil on canvas, and a third, painting a large port view of Hong Kong (figure 13).⁷¹ Two Englishmen are depicted entering the shop to have their portraits done. The accompanying article mocked "free and enlightened" England for its comparative lack of "art," even while its colony Hong Kong is "full of these painters, and luckily almost every requisite for painting can be had."⁷² In other words, for some time after the departure of Gilbert Stuart from England, painting, enlarging, transferring and copying, was an "art" that was still desired by the English consumer.

A striking photograph by William Pryor Floyd (active in Hong Kong 1867-1874) gives some evidence of the proliferation of photography and painting studios in Hong Kong by the 1870s (figure 14). Floyd's photograph is a gelatin silver print that depicts his own photographic studio on Queen's Road ensconced among several other competing studios.⁷³ The visible studio signs tout "Nam Ting/Photographer and Ship Portrait Painter" and "[?]hing Cheong/Photographer Ship

⁷⁰ Wue, "Essentially Chinese," 264.

⁷¹ "Chinese Artists," *Illustrated London News* (30 APR 1850): 427-28. I am grateful to Ifan Williams for this source. The engraving repeats features of the Ting Qua's famous gouache of a painting studio, discussed in Chapter Two. Here, three painters are at work in a row, though each are clearly working on different types of paintings.

⁷² "Chinese Artists," *Illustrated London News*, 428.

⁷³ On the competition between Chinese and Western photography studios in the treaty ports, see Regine Thiriez, "Photography and Portraiture in Nineteenth Century China," *East Asian History* 17/18 (1999): 77-102.

Portrait/Painter Chart Coppier [sic] & Frame/Maker Upstairs."⁷⁴ The Peabody Essex Museum's latest dated Chinese export painting is an 1860s or 1870s oil-on-canvas Gainsborough-esque painting of a young Englishwoman in a blue bonnet, labelled with a painter's name, "Chaichong," who is identified as a "portrait painter/upstairs/Hong Kong."⁷⁵ Whereas the British-run Hong Kong photography studio produced photographs only, the Chinese-run studios serving the same consumer market were offering photography, painting, copying and portraiture, and advertising all without an obvious hierarchy of medium or genre.



Figure 15. John Thomson, Hong Kong Painter's Studio, Hong Kong, 1869, cropped print from John Thomson, *Illustrations of China and Its People*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Sampson Low, Maston, Low, and Searle, 1873), plate IV.

⁷⁴ Reproduced in Wue, *Picturing Hong Kong*, 48.

⁷⁵ Coll. Peabody Essex Museum AE85434.

An 1869 photograph made in Hong Kong by John Thomson (1847-1921) relies on simulation to depict the interior of a Hong Kong trade painter's studio, several of which Thomson published written accounts (figure 15).⁷⁶ Clearly taken inside a photographer's studio and not a trade painter's studio, Thomson's photograph depicts a male trade painter working on a stretched canvas at a desk equipped with a mahlstick—a long bar for propping his painting hand. The painter is holding the paintbrush in Chinese calligraphic style, as was characteristically depicted in Canton trade images of trade painters.⁷⁷ Thomson's arrangement of the painter's work station conspicuously resembles earlier painted depictions of Canton trade painters at work (figures 4-5), although the improbable detail of the painter working on one painting while it is propped against a finished one has been contrived—perhaps to indicate the low value of the painter's work.

Trade paintings are also conspicuously displayed in the photograph. Mounted on the wall of the studio set-up, are two images of Chinese women, and a view of a junk boat in the harbor with a treatment of clouds often seen in Canton trade port scenes. While one of the paintings depicts a Chinese woman in three-quarter profile very similar to Canton trade images of "Chinese Ladies," another uses a seated full-length composition that suggests it is a portrait and not a genre image. The depicted painter appears to be working on a figural group in a vernacular outdoor setting—a subject less common for Canton trade painting.⁷⁸ These depictions of trade painters at work in late nineteenth-century Hong Kong suggest that there were at least continuities in the depiction of

⁷⁶ John Thomson, *Illustrations of China and Its People*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (London: Sampson Low, Maston, Low, and Searle, 1873), plate IV. The Scottish photographer John Thomson arrived in Hong Kong in 1868 and established a photography studio in the Commercial Bank building. I am grateful to Claire Roberts for her discussion of this image.

⁷⁷ Contemporary painters also use this long wooden bar to steady their hands for detail work. The same bars are shown, but placed at an improbable angle, in the London Illustrated News engraving discussed above.

⁷⁸ One of the paintings pictured unstretched canvas. This is unknown in earlier depictions of Canton trade painters at work, but absolutely dominant in contemporary trade painting practice.

practices between the Hong Kong and the earlier Canton trade, though it hints that new product lines were also developing in the trade, particularly in relation to photography.

In the deluxe edition of his 1873 four-volume publication of photographs of China, the Hong Kong-based Thomson reproduced two hundred photographs alongside a detailed travel narrative intended for his British imperial male audience.⁷⁹ Of the painting trade in Hong Kong, his assessments were clear and disparaging:

They drudge with imitative servile toil, copying Lumqua's or Chinnery's pieces, or anything, no matter what, because it has to be finished and paid for within a given time, and at so much per square foot. There are a number of painters established in Hong Kong, but they all do the same class of work, and have about the same tariff of prices, regulated according to the dimensions of the canvas. The occupation of these limners consists mainly in making enlarged copies of photographs. Each house employs a touter, who scours the shipping in the harbour with samples of the work, and finds many ready customers among the foreign sailors. These bargain to have Mary or Susan painted on as large a scale and at as small a price as possible, the work to be delivered framed and ready for sea probably within twenty-four hours.⁸⁰

Thomson's emphasis on the voracity, crass commercialism, and servile imitation of the Hong Kong painting studios, and the lovesick foolhardiness of their customers, were implicitly contrasted with the market niche he would construct for his own art—a slow and manly world of documentary photography. Indeed, in the context of trade painting, early photography was the scarcer and more laborious medium. In another short 1872 text for the *British Journal of Photography*, Thomson described his visits to Chinese-run painting studios in Hong Kong. Here he took pains to deride the slovenly, pidgin-speaking, opium-addicted Hong Kong painters, and their inability to achieve the

⁷⁹ For an extended analysis of Thomsons' albums see, Allen Hockley, "John Thomson's China, *Illustrations of China and Its People*, Photo Albums (1873-1874)," *MIT Visualizing Cultures*, http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/john_thomson_china_01/ct_essay01.html (accessed APR 2010).

⁸⁰ John Thomson, *Illustrations of China and its People*, plate IV caption.

truth-telling realism that was implicitly attained by photography.⁸¹ The "soul of the original" which Thomson declared lacking in the Hong Kong painters' paintings was precisely the access to China he claimed to offer through his camera and travel narratives.⁸²

Although largely uncatalogued and very provisionally dated, Chinese-made paintings, gouaches, eglomisés and watercolor albums made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are commonly found in American and British public and private collections,⁸³ suggesting that trade paintings from China continued to be collected in the West well into the twentieth century, though less and less in oil on canvas.⁸⁴ Photographs of the Yamanaka & Co. Boston shop (est. 1907)—the influential early-twentieth century Asian art and antiquities firm based in Osaka, Japan with branches in Boston, Chicago and New York—show roughly a dozen "ancestor portraits" and paintings of Chinese "ladies," probably painted on glass, offered for sale as framed paintings (figure 16). A photographic inventory of the firm's Boston holdings, probably from 1944, indicate that it held only

⁸¹ John Thomson, "Hong-Kong Photographers," *The British Journal of Photography* 20, no. 658 (13 DEC 1872): 591. Reproduced in Wue, *Picturing Hong Kong*, appendix B, 134-5.

⁸² "It would be difficult to describe wherein these painters fail in rendering the human face. I shall be best understood by saying that, like the figures in a wax-work exhibition, in their delineation they come so near the object intended to be represented, and yet want the divine modelling and soul of the original so utterly as to render the picture perfectly hideous." John Thomson, "Hong-Kong Photographers," *The British Journal of Photography* 20, no. 656 (29 NOV 1872): 569.

⁸³ May Bo Ching, and Cheng Cunjie, eds. *Views From the West: Collection of Pith Paper Watercolors Donated By Mr. Ifan Williams to the City of Guangzhou* (Beijing: *Zhongguo Shuju*, 2001). Other works in private collections suggest that trade paintings were available for sale in China well into the twentieth century. For example, a complete and bound rice paper album in a private collection (Cambridge, MA) of miniature paintings of Canton trade subjects (professions, games, processions) was bought in China as a souvenir in 1939. The album is stamped with an English label from a "picture house" of Chou Ch'i Ming, with listed address in the South Ward of Beijing.

⁸⁴ The Belz Museum of Asian and Judaic Art in Memphis, Tennessee, holds an extensive collection of late Qing export objects and paintings, including several reverse paintings on glass, ancestor portraits, and a series of album leaves on pith-paper depicting the manufacture of rice. Although most of its collection has not yet been catalogued or securely dated, the collection was formed in the 1960s through dealers in Los Angeles and New York.

about a dozen paintings in each of these two product lines (figure 17).⁸⁵ Indeed, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when major American private and public art collections of Chinese art like the Freer and the Walters were being formed, institutions and collectors focused on "traditional" Chinese ink painting of the cultural capitals and not the "Western-style" art of South China. This consumption pattern would hold true until well into the 1990s, when oil painting and non-ink works from China began to be accepted into the canon of "authentic" Chinese art in the West. That is, the high period of Western appreciation for Chinese ink painting might also be seen as a long gap in the still longer history of Western consumption of Chinese oil paintings.



Figure 16. Yatsuhashi & Co., Boston. Interior, lower level, possibly 1944. Figure 17. Yatsuhashi & Co., Boston, inventory sheet, photograph, possibly 1944. *Yatsuhashi Harumichi Family Papers (1906-1976)*, series 3, coll. Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution.

⁸⁵ *Yatsuhashi Harumichi Family Papers (1906-1976)*, series 3, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. The inventory that lists these paintings are undated but probably belong to the 1944 inventory taken when the firm's U.S. holdings were liquidated by the U.S. Alien Property Custodian. I am grateful to David Hogge for identifying these images. On the rise of "ancestor portraits" for Western interior decoration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the connection between the frontal portrait pose and colonial ethnography, see Jan Stuart, "The Face in Life and Death: Mimesis and Ancestor Portraits," in *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. H. Wu, and K. Tsiang (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005).

Although still fragmentary, histories of twentieth-century China indicate that trade painters and firms continued to migrate from Guangzhou and other coastal treaty ports to the British colony of Hong Kong well into the twentieth century. Eugene Cooper, a historian of the furniture trade in Hong Kong, has examined the migration of Guangdong and Shanghai woodworkers, painters, and firms to Hong Kong throughout the Chinese Civil War and after 1949.⁸⁶ Several generations of Lam Qua's descendants took up painting professions, emerging as logo designers, calendar poster painters, stage designers and advertising illustrators in Hong Kong.⁸⁷ It is plausible to suppose that many anonymous trade painters were similarly adopting and adapting to new visual media, contributing to the rise in twentieth-century Hong Kong of a dizzying visuality including woodblock prints, magazine and newspaper illustration, caricature, cartoon magazines, comic books, illustrated storybooks, graphic design, advertising, and cinema sign painting.⁸⁸ Of course, practices such as commissioned portraits continued to be practiced among Hong Kong painters as well.⁸⁹

In the 1960s, trade painting in oil on canvas reemerged in high volume in British colonial Hong Kong, which was flourishing as one of the four rapidly industrializing economies of urban East Asia. Hong Kong's industrialization was led by an immense growth in export-oriented light manufacturing underpinned by British colonial free-trade economic policies, enabling its

⁸⁶ Eugene Cooper, *The Wood-Carvers of Hong Kong: Craft Production in the World Capitalist Periphery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

⁸⁷ Jack Lee discusses especially Kwan Wai Nung, four generations removed from Guan Zuolin, a calendar poster painter who also founded the Asia Litho Co. in 1915. Jack S. C. Lee, "A Study of Calendar Poster Paintings in the Early 20th-Century Canton and Hong Kong," *Besides: a journal of art history and criticism* (1997): 91-110. Jack Sai Chong 李世莊 Lee, "Painting in Western Media in the Early 20th-Century Hong Kong" (Hong Kong University, 1996), 20.

⁸⁸ See also Wendy Siuyi Wong, *Hong Kong Comics: A History of Manhua* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002). Laikwan Pang, *The Distorting Mirror: Visual Modernity in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).

⁸⁹ Chui Tung Pan (b. 1900, Dongguan and active in Guangzhou until 1939) worked in oil painting and ran studios in Hong Kong's Central and North Point districts, where he worked as a commercial portrait painter. Like other trade painters, he charged depending on the size of the work and whether it was painted from life or a photograph (indicating that he worked in both forms). He returned to Guangzhou in 1956. Lee, "Painting in Western Media," 46-49.

development into the new workshop of the world. As previously in Guangzhou, paintings were only a small part of the world's consumer goods made in Hong Kong, joining toys, watches, housewares, furniture, clothing, jeans, umbrellas, plastic flowers, sandals, consumer electronics, and much more. By the 1960s, these oil paintings—painted on canvas, wood panel, or black velvet—depicted the postwar world of oriental travel: junkboats in the Hong Kong harbor, streetscapes and nightscapes of the modernizing "Pearl of the East," and the orientalist erotica of a vintage empire. But, as with the Canton trade, trade painters also produced high volumes of paintings for the Western consumer market that were not "native" in subject matter or style.

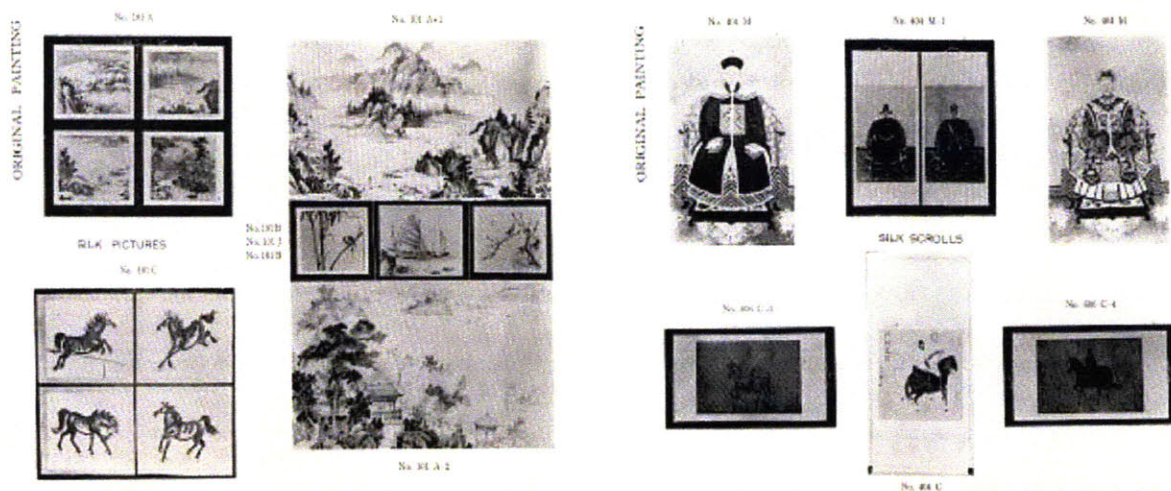


Figure 18-19. The Asia Co. (HK) Ltd., sheets A4S and A7S from product catalogue, c. 1950s. From www.theasiaco.com.

In 1954, a Hong Kong ink painter named Y. F. Wong founded the Asia Company Ltd., a Hong Kong firm that "manufactured hand paintings."⁹⁰ At first, the firm primarily produced ink paintings on scrolls, wallpapers, screens and wastepaper baskets, together with what the company's catalogues designated as "original paintings" (figure 18). These paintings included what likely would have been purchased in the West as "ancestor portraits," and other ink paintings in the Chinese "traditional

⁹⁰ "About," *The Asia Company (HK) Ltd*, <http://www.theasiaco.com/> (accessed JUN 2008).

style" (figure 19).⁹¹ By the mid-1970s, however, the firm had turned exclusively to trading in oil-on-canvas paintings, which had become a far more profitable product line.⁹² By then, several dozen wholesale firms like the Asia Company were operating in Hong Kong, putting out to a local network of southern Chinese painters, and exporting to Western (mostly European) clients.⁹³ This Hong Kong trade reached its highest point in the late 1970s and 1980s, when galleries and outdoor stalls that sold oil paintings were found throughout Tsim Sha Tsui and Stanley Market, two high-traffic touristic port districts.⁹⁴

Among Hong Kong trade painters who worked in that period, another tale of foreign origins for trade painting in Hong Kong circulates. According to Choi Fun Yeung (蔡奋杨), a painter active since the 1960s, trade painting in Hong Kong was founded by a Hong Kong artist who worked as an apprentice in the American studio of John Singer Sargent (沙金 1856-1925), the American portraitist. This student of Sargent's was said to have returned to Hong Kong to train two individuals, Ma Kai Bo (Ma Jir Bo 馬家宝) who founded the Hong Kong Fine Art School (est. 1952), and another painter surnamed Lee. Lee was Choi's own teacher and, Choi claims, Hong

⁹¹ The Asia Company formerly reproduced photographs of its catalogues from the 1950s and 1960s on its website. "History," *The Asia Company (HK) Ltd*, <http://www.theasiaco.com/index.cfm?id=280298&fus> (accessed JUN 2008).

⁹² Patrick Wong Man Wai (黄万伟), director and son of founder of the Asia Co., interview with author, 20 NOV 2008.

⁹³ *Hong Kong Yellow Pages*, Hong Kong Central Library, Hong Kong Special Collections, 1975-2009. As of 2008, approximately one dozen wholesale firms remain in operation in Hong Kong; at least five were founded in the 1970s and 1980s. The largest are Modern Art Products in Wan Chai district and Pan-Art Oil Paintings in Tsim Sha Tsui, again two historically high port-traffic areas.

⁹⁴ Hong Kong artists, painters, gallery workers, and local residents consistently state that oil painting stalls and galleries were plentiful in these two areas in the 1970s and 1980s. However, further research is required to uncover more specific dates, names and addresses. One former gallery worker recalled selling mostly oil paintings and paintings on black velvet at a gallery in the (now redeveloped) Harbor Centre. In Stanley Market, one painter and proprietor of a trade painting gallery claimed that he had been working in the neighborhood since the late 1960s, and that several trade painters had been working and living in the area since the 1970s. Anonymous, interview with author, 1 MAR 2009.

Kong's first trade painter.⁹⁵ According to Choi, Lee first worked as a cinema sign painter and then started filling painting orders, later establishing a painting factory in Hong Kong's North Point district in the 1970s.⁹⁶

Choi Fun Yeung's account of his teacher, "Lee," is likely composed out of the biographies of a number of painters active in Hong Kong in the mid-twentieth century. This includes Li Tiet-fu (Li Tiefu 李鐵夫 1869-1952), a prominent artist and teacher of the official founder of the Hong Kong Fine Arts School,⁹⁷ and Lee Byng (b. 1910), the well-known sign painter for King's Theatre, Hong Kong's first cinema.⁹⁸ Li Tietfu and Lee Byng are amongst a number of painters who were born in Guangdong province in the early twentieth century, travelled and studied painting in Canada, United States and/or France in the 1910s to the 1930s, returned to Hong Kong and Guangzhou before WWII, and moved back and forth between Guangzhou, Hong Kong and North America before and

⁹⁵ Choi Fun Yeung, active as a trade painter in Hong Kong since the late 1960s, recounted this anecdote to me in 2009 in Tsim Sha Tsui during a discussion with two other elderly Hong Kong trade painters. Choi Fun Yeung, interview with author, 4 APR 2009, Hong Kong.

⁹⁶ The factory was located on Seven Sisters Street (北角七姐妹街) and was active until the early 1980s. Choi Fun Yeung, interview with author, 4 APR 2009. Lai Chuen Wan, interview with author, 31 MAR 2009.

⁹⁷ According to the school (now: Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts), the school was founded by Chan Hoi-ying (陳海鷹 b. 1918). The biography of the school's founder states that Chan's teacher was Li Tiet-fu, whom the school describes as "the first Chinese person to study Western art abroad, and learned from the great American artists John S. Sargent and William M. Chase from 1905 to 1925." Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts, "Founder," http://gotoart.edu.hk/cn-t/index_founder.htm (accessed MAR 2010). Hong Kong Academy of Fine Arts, "About—Historical Development," http://gotoart.edu.hk/en/index_adout.htm (accessed MAR 2010). Li Tiefu, born in Heshan, Guangdong, studied at Arlington College in Canada, New York University and the New York International Academy of Design in the 1910s, returning to Guangzhou in 1929. Jack Lee, "Painting in Western Media," 54.

⁹⁸ Lee Byng was born in Taishan, Guangdong, but grew up in Winnipeg, Canada, where his parents ran an Oriental Shop. He graduated from Winnipeg School of Art in 1928. He then attended Ontario Art College. Upon his return to South China to Hong Kong in 1930, Byng was commissioned to paint a cinema posters for King's Theatre in Central in 1931, where he worked on salary with four assistants, even through the Japanese occupation. Many other artists were working in Hong Kong as poster painters for theatres and department stores, including Huang Yongyu, Li Binghong, Chan Chik, Wu Lie. Jack Lee, "Painting in Western Media," 68-69.

after the wartime Japanese occupations of these Chinese cities. Nearly all of these artists made their living as professional painters—producing cinema posters, department store posters, or portraits—while running artists' associations, evening art classes and studios that may have also produced bespoke work. Tracing what remains of their oeuvres, Hong Kong art historian Jack Lee has also shown that in their leisure time, these painters principally took up impressionist-influenced *plein-air* painting of Hong Kong's harbor, countryside and urban streets. Notably, these subjects and styles link trade painting in Hong Kong before 1900 and after 1949.

As trade painting grew dramatically in volume in Hong Kong starting in the late 1960s, it did so under a wholly new social and economic context from that of the Canton trade. Trade painting, as it manifested in Hong Kong, had indeed survived a world remade by war, colonialism and revolution. Whether as "tourist" or "export" art, Hong Kong trade painting also incorporated the early twentieth century training of Guangdong artists in Western academic styles, the practice of *plein-air* painting at local sites, and Chinese modernist ink and oil artistic movements, not to mention the influence of photography, portraiture and popular media.

From the 1910 Nanhai gazetteer's account of Guan Zuolin to the 2009 anecdote of "Lee" in the studio of Sargent, repeated inventions of origins for trade painting attest to its invisibility as a continuous practice, even in the same region and amongst its active practitioners. As if to invent it anew each time, these stories express the desire to explain trade painting's seemingly sudden and wide commercial market acceptance in the West. Although it might appear self-aggrandizing, painters such as those in Hong Kong who suddenly find themselves selling hundreds of their works every month to foreigners rightly find their own success perplexing. However, despite emphasizing trade painting's Western origins and markets, the legends of Guan Zuolin, George Chinnery and "Lee" uniformly obscure the role of the middleman—Western agents who commission the paintings. These middlemen are instead likened to art dealers, and regarded as transparent intermediaries to a broad and eager art-buying public.

Notably, the narrative of the origins of Hong Kong trade painting provided by Choi Fun Yeung in 2009 repeats the 1910 gazetteer's use of a single male painter's personal experience in a foreign land as the source for the whole profession. Like the 1950s art historians' mythology of George Chinnery—an Englishman who travels to South China (rather than a Chinese painter who travels to the West), each of these tales inaugurate the trade painting profession as one of direct artistic contact. In contrast to the art historian's explanation of export art as begotten by the presence of the Western artist, but later contaminated by Western tourists, the imagined first trade painter in Chinese narratives is original and sophisticated, his technical influence is presumably vast, and his expanding global clientele is only a positive consequence of his founding place within the profession. In a reversal of the trope of artistic primitivism—wherein a Western artist travels to the non-West to discover his originality, the Chinese trade painter travels westward in technique and experience to become both primary and originary.

The First Man

With the onset of the economic liberalization policies in the People's Republic of China in 1978, trade painting moved back to Guangzhou and to the reform-era versions of the treaty-port: the Special Economic Zones of Shenzhen (est. 1979) and Xiamen (est. 1980) in southern China. The new regime deregulated the flow of capital and trade between Hong Kong and the mainland parts of the Pearl River Delta region where most Hong Kongers still had family ties, encouraging them to shift their production to the mainland and employ lower-cost mainland painters. Hong Kong trade painters who could not compete with the lower rates of mainland Chinese painters moved into renovation work which was plentiful during the 1980s property boom in Hong Kong.⁹⁹ In effect, they switched to painting walls instead of the canvases that would hang on them.

⁹⁹ Lai Chuen Wan, interview with author, 31 MAR 2009, 4 APR 2009.

Throughout the 1980s, trade painting production moved back to mainland China through a putting-out or simple subcontracting system extended from the Hong Kong trade. High-volume orders enabled Hong Kong trade painters to establish studios in their ancestral villages in Guangdong or Fujian provinces where they trained rural youths to paint. In the mid-1980s and early 1990s, it was not uncommon for these rural studios to produce hundreds or even thousands of paintings of a given type every month. The vast majority of the images were landscapes, still lifes, Paris streetscapes (*bali jiejing* 巴黎街景) or Hong Kong harbor scenes, street scenes and nightscapes (designated uniformly as *gangjing* 港景). Some rural studios were as small as ten to twelve painters, but others assembled together as many as fifty or more painters. In these rural studios, apprentices began by priming canvases, blocking out underpainting, and filling in large areas such as trees, sky, and water, but would progress to painting the whole canvas, which the master would correct. Learning to sketch out the basic composition in order to begin the painting, and to paint particularly difficult elements such as human figures and furred animals, were the benchmarks of the apprentices' training. Meanwhile, correcting paintings was the master's central activity. Thus master and apprentices jointly specialized in product lines of a particular type and style of paintings.

In this rural studio production, the relationship between master and apprentice was formulated as a pedagogical rather than a commercial one. Years later, painters who trained in such studios were rarely able to recall their own earnings during their apprenticeships, and consistently described the period as "painting with my teacher," rather than as "*dagong*" (打工), the term later used by trade painters to connote migratory and commodified urban labor.¹⁰⁰ In these rural studios, the painter-masters provided materials such as paints and canvas, determined their apprentices' tasks

¹⁰⁰ "*Dagong* denotes a process of turning individuals into working subjects, particularly for a capitalist boss...*Dagong* means not just a departure from the socialist boss but also the coming of new bosses from global capitalist societies....In other words, the term *dagong* signifies the change to capitalist labor relations and the *dagongzai/mei* is a new configuration imbued with an awareness of exploitation and class consciousness." Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 12.

and wages, and controlled all knowledge of the client networks that were the source of their painting orders. Since many apprentices were also the younger relatives of the master, their relationships were often reinforced by familial and kinship ties.

At the same time that orders from Hong Kong were put out to these rural studios, others were passed on to painting professors and instructors at the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Art (est. 1953).¹⁰¹ In notably similar fashion, professors gave their students piecework to do outside of formal classwork, themselves correcting the paintings.¹⁰² Academy-related ateliers in which academy-hopefuls trained for the entrance examination also offered piecework to its students. Orders produced in the academy and associated ateliers sometimes utilized students' skills in realist, academic or figurative techniques, and were often masterpiece copies. The academy's extracurricular commercial activities therefore added new images to the trade painting repertoire: classical and academic painting in both oil and ink, photorealist portraiture, landscape, seascapes and animal paintings, impressionist masterpiece copies and post-impressionist abstract painting. In both the rural studios and in Guangzhou, the notion of teachers and masters correcting paintings served to diffuse the function of authorship from the question of labor to one of trade identity and responsibility, loosely masquerading as artistic training.

¹⁰¹ This section is based upon anonymous interviews with approximately fifteen former and current students and professors of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts. Accepting "orders" to paint was acknowledged by them anonymously. An informal survey I conducted amongst Guangdong Museum of Art staff who were graduates of the Guangzhou Academy from the 1980s to the present revealed that all but one staff member had painted "orders" during their time at the academy. One graduate of the early 1990s, now a renowned international performance artist, related to me that after painting many orders in the academy, he then worked for a brief period after graduation in a Guangzhou trade painting firm, specializing in painting lions. Anonymous, interview with author, 13 NOV 2008. Former students of other Chinese art academies have also reported that similar practices were common there in the late 1980s and 1990s.

¹⁰² In the early 1980s, one professor recalled being paid five to fifteen yuan per painting—a significant amount since a professor's salary at the time was only about twenty-five yuan per month. Anonymous, interview with author, 28 FEB 2008.

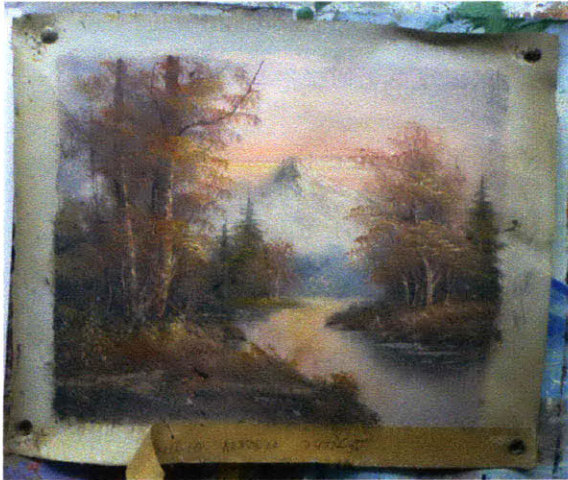


Figure 20. Faded "Zhongshan Landscape" product sample in studio of Luo Zhijiang, c. 1990. Figure 21. Bob Ross, *Bright Autumn Trees*, Joy of Painting c1985-2008.

Style in this context was a product line, not an artistic movement. Amongst trade painters working in the 1980s and early 1990s, for example, a "Zhongshan landscape" referred not to a landscape of Guangdong's Zhongshan county (中山), but rather, to a style of landscape painting associated with one master's studio in his native place of Zhongshan (figure 20).¹⁰³ Many American consumers would be familiar with "Zhongshan landscapes" as a genre of forest landscape paintings painted using the "wet on wet" and "fan-brush" techniques popularized and trademarked by the American painter Bob Ross (1942-1995) through his instructional PBS television program, *The Joy of Painting* (1983-1994) (figure 21).¹⁰⁴ Judging by the volume of Zhongshan landscapes that were made throughout South China, and their frequent availability today in American yard sales and flea

¹⁰³ I have recorded five other such rural place-based genre terms associated with specific painting styles—mostly landscape and still life. These terms are used only within the profession by older painters and have long fallen out of use when dealing with foreign traders and consumers.

¹⁰⁴ In the 1980s, "Zhongshan Landscapes" were often done in long horizontal formats framed in thin dark brown or gilded wood frames and were a popular North American middle class purchase. These paintings can now be commonly found in garage sales, yard sales, and flea markets. In 2008, I identified three for sale in a liquidation center in Long Island City for \$39.99 each. In 1997, Bob Ross Inc. filed the word mark "Bob Ross 'Wet-on-Wet' Technique" as a service mark for educational services in the fields of painting, claiming that it was first used "anywhere" on February 6, 1985. (Note that this is also approximately when rural studios in south China began to produce paintings using such techniques.) Trademark registration was granted in 1999, but cancelled in 2010. USPTO registration number 2252441.

markets, the paintings that Ross was teaching American television audiences to paint must have also been widely bought and sold in the United States throughout the 1980s.

On the basis of the growing size and volume of international orders through the 1980s, formerly Hong Kong-based trade painters began to set up what later came to be called "painting workshops" (*huafang* 画坊) and "painting factories" (*huachang* 画厂) in the cities of Shenzhen, Guangzhou and Xiamen. Guangzhou's Wende Street (文德路), a neighborhood of art galleries, art supply stores, and cultural institutions dating from the early twentieth century, emerged as a major center of the painting trade.¹⁰⁵ Although these urban workshops organized labor differently, they continued the piecework practices of the rural studios and the 1960s-70s Hong Kong painting trade. As this study reveals, the putting out practices prevalent in the 1980s remain largely in place today throughout South China. What has changed is the elevation of Shenzhen's Dafen village in 2004 as a unique national center of the industry by both government and journalism.

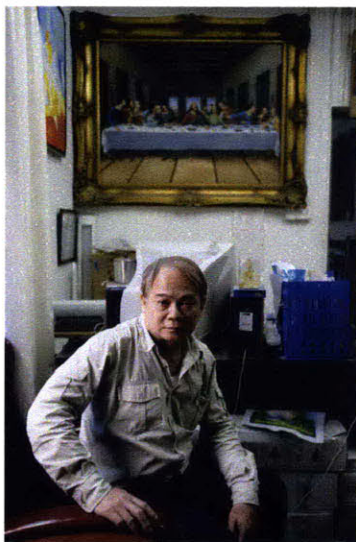


Figure 22. Yu Haibo, Portrait of Huang Jiang, from *China Dafen Oil Painting Village*, digital photograph, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

¹⁰⁵ Wende Street remains a large center of the trade, with an estimated 300 trade painting firms in operation as of 2009. Author's fieldnotes, 29 FEB 2008, 13-14 NOV 2008, 23 FEB 2009, Guangzhou. Further research is required to establish links between Guangzhou's International Commodities Trade Fair and the rise of Wende Street's painting trade in the 1980s.

Crucial to the official representation of Dafen village is the biography of Huang Jiang (Wong Kong 黄江), whom the local government has given the model citizen moniker: "The First Man of Dafen Village" (*Dafen diyiren* 大芬第一人) (figure 22), a title suggesting an originary and leadership role Huang himself has expressed reluctance to take up. Huang Jiang was born near Guangzhou and grew up in the city. He found a way into Hong Kong as an illegal migrant in 1972 where he began working in the painting trade. In Hong Kong he ran a small workshop where he trained apprentices and filled orders. From 1985 to 1989, like many Hong Kong trade painters who continually sought lower labor and overhead costs, Huang moved his painting workshops successively to various parts of Guangzhou city, Fujian province, and then to Luoho district's Huangbeiling (黄贝岭), an urban village inside the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone near the Shenzhen-Hong Kong border, where several other Hong Kong painter-dealers were already operating large workshops. As the trade grew, painters and workshops also began to move to other urban villages within the Special Economic Zone, but eventually, outside it. Particularly popular was Buji (布吉), a county-level town whose advantage was that it offered lower cost rent and easier access for migrant laborers, who could live and work there without the legal permits needed to enter the Special Economic Zone. Accessible in just a few minutes by car outside the Zone, Buji still maintained a suitable proximity for Hong Kong-based clients.¹⁰⁶ Finally, inaugurating his "first" status, Huang moved his workshop to Dafen village in 1989 (figure 23).

¹⁰⁶ This follows in a development pattern throughout Shenzhen in the 1980s. In the early years of reform, when Hong Kong entrepreneurs were reluctant to spend the night in mainland China, the optimal location for a mainland factory would allow Hong Kong entrepreneurs and investors to travel to the mainland facility and return to Hong Kong within a day. Carolyn L. Cartier, "Transnational Urbanism in the Reform-Era Chinese City: Landscapes From Shenzhen," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1513-32.

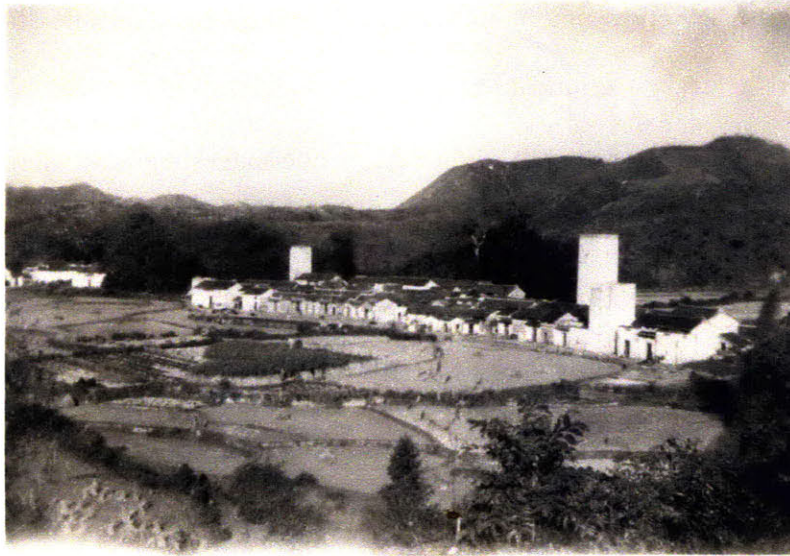


Figure 23. Dafen village, c. 1988.

Dafen was then a rural village very near Buji county town and also outside the Special Economic Zone, and Huang and his firm's manager, Huang Tong, negotiated a favorable agreement with the newly formed village enterprise to rent a three-story residential village building.¹⁰⁷ Repurposed as a "factory," the building was used by Huang's firm as a comprehensive production site—the ground floor for packing, storage, shipping and receiving, and the upper floors for dormitories and painting stations, reminiscent of the second-story workplaces of the nineteenth-century Canton and Hong Kong painting studios.¹⁰⁸ Painters who worked for the firm were provided with the correctly sized canvas for each order, paid upon delivery of each painting, and had the cost of paints and housing deducted from their pay.¹⁰⁹ While living and working in Huang Jiang's factory, these painters only worked on his orders, but they were also free to move onto their own

¹⁰⁷ On the formation of township and village enterprises in South China in the early years of reform, see Barry Naughton, *The Chinese Economy: Transitions and Growth* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

¹⁰⁸ Huang brought twenty-six painters from him from the factory in Huangbeiling, and the rent was 1500 yuan per month. Wen Youping 温友平, *大芬村的崛起* [*The Rise of Dafen Village*] (Shenzhen: Haitian Press, 2006), 18-19.

¹⁰⁹ Dafen dealers have told me that the standard practice of supplying canvas as part of putting out an order is "just a Huang Jiang idiosyncrasy." It also happens to be identical to academic examination practice.

living and working spaces in Dafen village or Buji.¹¹⁰ Those who did so also took on orders put out by other bosses. At the peak of its production, Huang Jiang's Dafen village factory housed sixty to eighty painters, and was estimated to have been putting out to as many as 800 to 2000 other painters. One of his largest sources of business were subcontracts from the American retailer K-Mart put out to Huang by Hong Kong re-exporters.¹¹¹ According to one report, his largest single order was 250,000 copies of a single 8 x 10 centimeters painting.¹¹² Huang Jiang's production became large and standardized enough that his company would publish annual product catalogues comprising well over two hundred paintings.¹¹³

These urban workshops operating in Shenzhen in the 1980s and 1990s may be distinguished from rural-based studio operations, even though they were often of the same size and produced the same type of paintings. First, the urban "bosses" offered little to no training as "masters."¹¹⁴ In fact, Huang Jiang's former workers regularly remarked that Huang Jiang "doesn't know how to paint," and Huang has himself acknowledged he had stopped painting by 1992.¹¹⁵ Instead, firms like Huang Jiang's took on new workers primarily based on demonstrated skill—an on-the-spot test was often administered in the presence of the boss or manager. Second, whereas a master or academy

¹¹⁰ Many did so and painters began conglomerating in Dafen village and nearby Buji town, especially near the Buji Middle School, where many painters still live today.

¹¹¹ Huang Tong and Huang Jiang, interview with author, 21 FEB 2008.

¹¹² Wen Youping gives the estimate of 2000 painters whereas Bi Guoxue gives the estimate of 800. Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 17. Bi Guoxue 毕国学, "深圳大芬油画村的拓荒者 [Pioneer of Shenzhen's Dafen Village]," *Shenzhen Economic Daily* (9 JUN 2004), unpagged.

¹¹³ Huang Jiang painting catalogues, 2000, 2002, 2003. Author's personal collection.

¹¹⁴ That Huang Jiang's role as a boss was quite different from a conventional master-apprenticeship training relationship is seen in journalist Wen Youping's romantic characterization of Huang Jiang as a "master of masters" (*shizhang* 师长) and his workers as "disciples" (*disi* 弟子). Wen also contradictorily argues that Huang and his workers' represented a "new model" of work that was "pure cooperation." Wen Youping *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 16.

¹¹⁵ Bi Guoxue, "Pioneer of Shenzhen's Dafen Village," unpagged.

professor would correct the work of his students, in this new setting, because the boss was not a teacher or master, the acceptability of painters' completed paintings was a constant source of conflict between painters and bosses. Hong Kong traders and firms, like Huang Jiang's, maintained a designated room and day of the week for receiving paintings, a moment filled with tension for painters who hoped to be paid for their completed products.¹¹⁶ Third, unlike rural studios in which apprentices were drawn from co-villagers, in the cities these workshops and factories employed migrant workers from throughout the country who would hear of such opportunities by word of mouth. They offered low-cost room, board and materials as well as workstations for the workers.¹¹⁷ As is common throughout reform-era China, migrant workers often borrowed from the boss and were thereby quickly implicated into a pattern of indebtedness to the workplace. But once in the city, workers were also able to assert a degree of independence and to find opportunities to meet other bosses from whom they could begin to accept painting orders.¹¹⁸ Painters thus learned to "*dagong*" or "work for hire," a condition that brought with it mobility, opportunity, and the need for constant self-reinvention. Relationships with "bosses" (*laoban* 老板) were distinguished from relationships with painting "masters" (*laoshi* 老师), and painters learned to acquire new skills and specialties to keep up with fluctuating market demands. They constantly sought to meet bosses and traders from whom they might gain orders, and found opportunities to establish their own galleries, workshops and firms.

¹¹⁶ Most painter-worker judgements on the character of bosses revolve around how lenient they were on receiving day.

¹¹⁷ Most workers, arriving with little savings, would begin by borrowing from the boss. This is a common arrangement for reform-era migrant workers which indebts them to the workplace. See Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law: Labor Protests in China's Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

¹¹⁸ Qin Shaobin, a painter of Ding Shaoguang images, lived and worked in Huang Jiang's workshop in the late 1990s. He recalls a period when orders were low enough that he began doing "free paintings" (*zìyóu huà* 自由画) on speculation, which he was able to show to other bosses. When he was offered higher rates, Qin decided to leave Huang Jiang's company and move to Buji. Qin recalled fervently that Huang begged him to stay. Qin Shaobin, interview with author, 11 FEB 2009.

Bosses of the urban factories and workshops generally made little effort to oversee any painter's particular method of production, and were primarily concerned with three demands: "correct quality, correct quantity, and on-time delivery."¹¹⁹ To fill their orders on time, many painters were painting up to thirty paintings in a day.¹²⁰ To achieve this rate of production, most worked sixteen hours or more per day, specialized in a single style or image, and developed idiosyncratic labor-saving techniques. They used a range of tools to lay out the composition quickly and in roughly standardized fashion: stencils, blue transfer paper, corn starch sprinkled over pinpricked transparency sheets, or a pantograph (a ruled scaling device). Significantly, however, images that painters would produce in the highest volume—hundreds or thousands per month—required no aids, so well did they know the particular image. The abandonment of the practices of "copying" in favor of painting "from the mind" for the highest volume of production calls into question the ideology of "creativity" in this mass "reproduction."

Drying the canvases was the most time-consuming step. A first layer of underpainting would follow the sketch of the composition, and, because drying time was long, subsequent layers would be determined by the time allotted. A three-layer painting was thus considered higher quality than a two-layer painting, and the lowest quality paintings were painted in one go.¹²¹ Since each layer was a discrete step that required as much drying time as was available, some painters would work on four to ten canvases at a time, tacking up the canvases in a grid at their workstation.¹²² Finished paintings were hung on wooden bars high up near the ceiling of the painters' working and sleeping spaces,

¹¹⁹ These three "principles" (*anshi anzhi anliang* 按时安置按量) would be repeatedly emphasized as the legalized workings of the industry in the television melodrama *Painted Fate*, 2008, discussed in Chapter Three.

¹²⁰ Recollections I have collected of individual painters' peak production in this period range from sixteen to thirty paintings in a day. This of course varies with the sizes and types of paintings.

¹²¹ The market-demand that privileges oil painting as more "authentic" probably leads traders and painters to use oil media rather than quickly drying acrylic. More recently, acrylic media has finally been taken up by Dafen trade painters, but only for original, one-off paintings done on speculation, and rarely for trade orders.

¹²² I examine practices of "assembly line painting" in Chapter Two.

simply to save space and to take advantage of rising heat to dry the pictures. Once dried, the paintings were delivered to the boss in flat piles.¹²³ The boss might reject the paintings or demand touch-ups. Stretching and framing would typically then occur at the Hong Kong re-exporters' warehouse.

Over the course of the 1990s, as Shenzhen's economic development intensified and direct exports to the Western markets increased, wood shops specializing in frame and stretcher construction opened in Buji town and Dafen village, bringing these formerly Hong Kong operations to town and allowing painters or firms to provide fully framed and packed paintings to clients.¹²⁴ As more and more foreign traders from markets beyond Hong Kong began to visit Dafen themselves, outworkers soon learned that it was important to ask the putter-out to which country the paintings were ultimately destined, distilling such scant information into supposed guides of production such as: Americans prefer pastel hues, Germans prefer a darker palette, and Chinese, brighter colors.¹²⁵ They also learned to ask the putter-out whether the paintings ought to be signed, and if so, with what name.¹²⁶

Like the rural studios, Dafen and Buji factories and workshops rose and fell with their ability to maintain order volume. By 2000, Huang Jiang's firm had fully converted its factory spaces to other uses since all of its workers had moved on by that time, maintaining their own residential workspaces. Like the vast majority of painting firms, Huang Jiang's company now puts out orders to painters in its network throughout Dafen village, Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and Xiamen. In 2009, the firm's registry contained over 800 painters, listed solely by their nicknames, skill sets and mobile phone numbers; these painters likely appear on the registries of other firms or might have firms of

¹²³ One can always discern a poorly dried painting on its surface, since soft paint will have been compressed in delivery.

¹²⁴ It is more profitable to import framed paintings into the United States than to import unstretched canvases and frames separately. This is because, as "art" the framed works are exempt from higher taxes.

¹²⁵ Shen Dan and Zhang Zitang, interview with author, 15 AUG 2006.

¹²⁶ There are numerous possibilities for clients' signature requests, which I explore in Chapter Four.

their own.¹²⁷ Huang Jiang thus became a "painter-dealer" (*huashang* 画商)—a seller of finished paintings and a putter-out of orders.

In 2004, Dafen village gained the attention of the local and national governments and journalists. The Shenzhen Economic Daily journalist Wen Youping compiled two years of his published articles into a book entitled *The Rise of Dafen Village*.¹²⁸ In Wen's 2006 volume, as in the work of virtually all Chinese journalists reporting on Dafen village, trade painting is constructed as a reform-era Shenzhen phenomenon, birthed from Hong Kong's export networks in the character of Huang Jiang. Although Wen's overall account includes discussion of a handful of other late 1980s trade painters, dealers and firms operating in Shenzhen, in official discourse even this short history has been distilled into the biography of Huang Jiang, the First Man of Dafen.

Like the former tales of Guan Zuolin, Chinnery and Lee, the official narrative of Huang Jiang, celebrates a single male painter's mobility and self-reinvention. Importantly though, Huang Jiang's mobility is now limited to South China, and his movement crosses only a colonial (i.e., illegitimate) boundary between Hong Kong and Guangdong province that was reabsorbed into the Chinese nation-state in 1997. The motivation for Huang Jiang's illegal migration to colonial Hong Kong during the Cultural Revolution is sketchily passed over, and he is often called a "Hong Kong painter" even though colonial law prevented him from becoming just that. Importantly, this new account of the origins of trade painting no longer points to the Westernness of a *skill*, but rather to the regional trade connections of a boss who coordinates the skill sets of others. The change furthermore points to focus on the South Chinese transnational economics of the 1980s and 1990s as a catalyst for China's reform-era development. Although I have demonstrated the links to much earlier Cantonese practices, this new origin tale emphasizes how the transnational economy is made

¹²⁷ Author's fieldnotes, 30 MAR 2009. Like most Chinese reform-era migrant workers, the painters' lack of a fixed address is a measure of their mobile lives, and the general use of informal names in the company's register is an indication of the worker's quasi-legal status.

¹²⁸ Wen Youping 温友平, 大芬村的崛起 [*The Rise of Dafen Village*] (Shenzhen: Haitian Press, 2006).

possible through a regional and diasporic network that incorporated former producers—now become re-exporters—in East Asia, and production centers spread throughout mainland China.

Like the earlier originary tales, *The Rise of Dafen Village* also emphasizes Huang Jiang's novelty, singularity and inventiveness. Practices that his firm regularly employed, such as providing painters with correctly sized canvases or meeting with them weekly to collect paintings, are portrayed as Huang Jiang's personal "inventions" or "idiosyncracies," rather than as prevalent, inherited, or even logical practices. In his role as "First Man," Huang Jiang is asked to serve as a public spokesperson for Dafen village as well as a figurehead for its organizations. Since Huang Jiang speaks Mandarin (the lingua franca amongst painters, though not bosses, at Dafen) with a thick Cantonese accent, painters whom he is meant to lead often remark that his public statements are incomprehensible. Official histories credit Huang Jiang with the invention of trade painting, for discovering Dafen village's ultimate "destiny," and for initiating its present-day realization.

Trade Painting

Trade painting practices in both Hong Kong and in the Mainland share several important aspects with the practices of the Canton trade. First, each site fostered large-scale painting industries that flourished in these manufacturing and export-processing cities of the Pearl River Delta region during intense periods of Sino-Western trade. Second, each produced Western-styled paintings intended for Western consumers with whom producers had little to no interaction. Third, consumers therefore had only vague knowledge and imaginings of the producers, and what they did know was carefully managed and often entirely invented by those from whom they purchased the paintings. Fourth, the trade was therefore heavily determined by the taste, language abilities and entrepreneurship of a relatively small number of mobile traders, travelers, and their translators.

Although piecework was probably a prevalent component of the Canton painting trade, and

although we might regard piecework (in the form of commissions) as a predominant mode of painting production even in high Western art, trade painting has been characterized by long chains of interaction in its production and distribution that erase the actual site or identity of the producer for the end consumer, and make mythic claims of authorship possible. In other words, the extended chain of transfer in the Sino-Western painting trade allows for many moments in which creativity, originality, or authenticity might be claimed in this author-saturated industry. When placed against the cosmopolitan narrative tropes of high art, the standardized commercial procedures of trade painting reveal precisely when and how arbitrarily authorship enters the production chain. This becomes clearer still when we review the commercial procedures of the contemporary trade.

A client places an order (*dingdan* 订单) by selecting the image to be painted, paying a 50% deposit, and setting a delivery date for the order.¹²⁹ Whether the order is for one painting or for 400,000 paintings, the same procedure applies. Even the largest firms and the biggest bosses take orders of one, while orders of even a thousand paintings or more are often put out to a single painter.¹³⁰ The client, usually a foreigner, might place the order in person or over the internet with a painter-dealer (*huashang* 画商) or boss (*laoban* 老板). The boss puts out the order to one or more painter-workers (*huagong* 画工) whose network might include extended family members, former apprentices, co-villagers and co-provincials.¹³¹ This painter might have apprentices (*xuetu* 学徒) or students (*xuesheng* 学生) who assist him or her with the order, in which case he or she might be

¹²⁹ The standard payment of 50% on orders of all sizes is one reason that factors of access to credit is not a great barrier to those seeking to take on large orders for the first time. There are rare cases in which a painter or firm might agree to receive less than 50% deposit.

¹³⁰ For example, all painting firms that have listed themselves on Alibaba, the business-to-business internet site for Chinese manufacturers, accept orders of one.

¹³¹ In addition to the expected levels of trust between people with even distant friendship or family ties, there is a pragmatic tool of the dialect shared within a network of co-villagers or co-provincials, particularly when business maybe conducted in front of clients, buyers, and competitors.

referred to as a painter-master (*huashi* 画师). To a boss, painter-masters are the same as painter-workers. To an apprentice, however, the difference is vital: an apprentice could not accept an order without altering or ending his or her relationship with the master. Apprentices, therefore, cannot rise to the level of "painter-worker" (or "artist") until they are economically independent of their master. Conversely, a painter-master must perform a certain artisanal control of his apprentices for the putter-out, in order to maintain his very slight and temporary economic advantage.

As a piecework putting-out system, trade painting is easily scalable and has a very low threshold of entry. Firms and studios as small as a single painter and as large as a several-hundred employees produce product runs of nearly any size.¹³² At the same time, firms can rise and fall dramatically or quickly be reduced to a one-person putting out "firm." Any painter can be a manufacturer, just as any boss can be an artist. An order as small as one painting or as large as several thousand may come from any person and, as such, an order might pass through many hands. Thus, no painter can know for sure for whom his paintings are intended, just as no client or boss can know for sure who physically painted each painting that he or she ordered, or even if the order were produced by a single painter. While the issues of artistic authorship raised by these putting out practices are explored in Chapter Five, establishing the factual identity of the physical painter(s) of any given order is not a priority for the putter-out who satisfactorily receives the products, since artistic authorship within the profession has no intrinsic exchange value. Trade identity (as in, "Lam Qua") does.

Through repeated orders, clients and painter-dealers establish their own shorthand to refer to the images being produced and reproduced—either a system of numbers or a short form of titles. Except in a handful of cases, this shorthand is rarely an artist name or title of the "original" work of art, which is in fact an image provided by the client in the form of a photograph or digital file. The painter-dealer or boss then provides the print of the image, not necessarily with any

¹³² But not, of any size within a short time period. On this see Chapter Two.

identification, to the painter-worker, who may or may not know the painting's art historical and authorial name. Images are thus divorced from historical precedent or institutional authority and the author-function can be refilled, for example, with optional "signatures."

The image source is identified by a single Chinese word, "*gao*" (稿), which more strictly means a "draft" or a "manuscript copy." In the painting trade, however, a *gao* refers to a host of image conditions. It refers to the digital file or print of the image provided by the client or putter-out and thus the image to be reproduced. It is also the physical manifestation of the image the painter would use in filling the order, whether found in a book, as a photograph, or printed from a digital file. The *gao* from which a painter might work could also be another instance of the same painting previously painted in the shop. Yet the *gao* can also refer to the various versions of a given work that constitute a series; for example, each work in Monet's *Waterlilies* series. This terminological conflation of many instances of an original painting and its various copies—or conversely, all the antecedent representations of any completed painting—emphasizes the fundamental reproducibility of the image as well as its variability and seriality. The work of art in the age of hand *and* mechanical reproduction comes to fruition in the flexible terminology of "*gao*," in which all images derive from a source whose origins are irrelevant and whose technology matters not. This detachment from historical precedent and anxieties of origin is one moment in the image circuit that enables free (uninfluenced) adaptation.

Upon completion of an order, the painter demonstratively returns the printed *gao* to the boss with the finished paintings, thereby implicitly promising he or she will not use the same image to paint additional copies (until the boss were to order it again). Certain firms in Dafen village, such as the Sunrise Mountain Collector Gallery, have placed greater emphasis on the management of *gao*. They have formalized this understanding through legal contracts that stipulate to its outworkers—or

"contracted artists"—that Sunrise Mountain's *gao* may never be repainted for another client.¹³³ This attention to the physical possession of the *gao* is not motivated by the issue of copyright infringement of the original artist's work, since most *gao* are already stripped of authorial identification. Rather the issue is one of market access. Since everyone in the trade can paint anything (or find someone who can), holding onto the knowledge of which images are selling yields a significant commercial advantage. One principal reason to run a workshop or factory—providing dormitories and workstations for workers despite the overhead cost—is that the boss, by controlling the circulation of the workers, can better control the circulation of the firm's images.¹³⁴ In practice, of course, the image to be reproduced has impossibly fluid boundaries and there are numerous means to access it—the painter who has the skill to produce so many copies of the *gao* hardly gives much proprietary knowledge back to the boss when returning the physical print of that picture.¹³⁵ To some extent, bosses' attempt to control the physical materiality of the *gao* only demonstrates how illusory the possession of innovation and intellectual property is; however, an entrepreneur needs only a temporary advantage to make a profit.

Since the governmental transformation of Dafen village into an urban art district that is visible to outsiders to the profession, an administrative typology of workplaces has been established. A studio (*huashi* 画室) is the place of work and sale of the painter. A gallery (*hualang* 画廊) is run by

¹³³ The Sunrise Mountain Collector Gallery, whose bosses are portrayed in the CCTV documentary discussed in Chapter Three, is an initiator of a number of new practices in Dafen village, including the multifaceted use of signatures, trademarking, and authorship, discussed in Chapter Four. Holding a very large library of art catalogues, they have built a very strong brand in Dafen, and are able to charge prices several times of other galleries in Dafen.

¹³⁴ Firms in Dafen village also bar competitors from entering or photographing their display spaces, for fear of other painters learning of their current or new *gao*.

¹³⁵ For example, photographic printing shops that print out many firms' and painters' *gao* also discreetly sell digital files to others. Some of Sunrise Mountain firm's contracted artists might take a photograph of their completed painting (technically not "the" *gao*) before delivering it, and discreetly repaint it for other clients.

a painter-dealer, who is usually selling the work of painters in his network.¹³⁶ A workshop (*huafang* 画坊) indicates a set of rooms in which five to twenty painter-workers might live and work under the employ of a boss. A factory (*huachang* 画厂) is a larger firm which has the capacity to house upwards of twenty painter-workers at a time, usually in a single space.¹³⁷ Such designations are fluid at the boundaries, and many large firms in Dafen village operate all of these spaces at once: a workshop or a factory firm might also have galleries where they sell their inventory and take in orders. In any of these work places, orders of any size, type or quality can be placed, since scaling up or down, and putting out, can be done by anyone. A successful firm thus simultaneously manages a variety of production processes in a number of spaces in order to fulfill various demands, an issue with longer historical implications explored in Chapter Two.

Trade paintings are priced according to three criteria: size (*chichun* 尺寸), style (*fengge* 风格), and finish (*zhibiliang* 质量).¹³⁸ Within a specialty, there are additional price standards; for example, in portrait and figurative works, the price is dependent on the total number of figures depicted in the painting. When talking about the market's longer term history or outlook, old hands like Huang Jiang talk about the rise and fall of the price of a "2-0-2-4" (*erling erse*), which refers to a 20 by 24 inch painting. Their use of inches (British imperial measurements) for standard pricing is proof of the products' final destination in the United States market; while the growing use of metric

¹³⁶ Galleries are registered as businesses with the local government to whom they pay annual fees, and have a social obligation to join the Dafen Art Industry Artist Association. Although anyone can purchase paintings in a studio, these are not administered as strictly by authorities. In 2009, the local government also began an effort to register outdoor stalls that sold paintings in Dafen village's alleyways.

¹³⁷ In Chapter Two, I examine the historical configuration of these relationships and work processes in three of Dafen's most prominent firms. In Chapter Four, I examine the practices of a small studio.

¹³⁸ According to sociologist Olav Velthuis, size and style are also the two principle factors in determining prices in the New York and Amsterdam contemporary art market. Size was also used in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century French art market, when paintings were priced by franc per point. For Velthuis, by leaving out adjudications of quality, contemporary art dealers claim to be able to maintain some objectivity in their pricing. Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1007), 25-6.

measurements in the 1990s, a clear indication of the globalization of the consumer market.¹³⁹ Finish is a criterion offered at low, medium or high levels, calibrated by drying time and the numbers of "layers" of painting, and sometimes by the quality of materials. Ultimately, however, the relationship between finish and price can never be objectively quantified. The constant interest in standard or fixed prices and rates within the industry (such as John Thomson claimed existed in nineteenth-century Hong Kong) should be seen as approximate—a painter always exaggerates his previous rates and a buyer always exaggerates his negotiation abilities, or sometimes, his munificence to the poor painter.¹⁴⁰ In essence, price fluctuates with what a merchant is able to persuade a buyer to pay, and here, portrayals or demonstrations of artisanality and artistry may serve the seller (whether merchant or painter) well. Thus, in Dafen village, as in so many artistic contexts, the chief engine of effort is not in the manual labor of painting, but rather, in the requirement to produce the fictions of creativity, originality and authenticity that are the true criteria of prices and positions.

Compared with other flexible piecework industries in reform-era South China, trade painting offers the migrant worker a high degree of independence, control, and entrepreneurial opportunity.¹⁴¹ In contrast to Shenzhen's electronics and textile factories where workers are also paid by the piece, or service industries in which massage and beauty therapists are paid by the service, the majority of Dafen trade painters work independently, control their own work time and processes, and may always renegotiate their prices or refuse to take on an order. Dafen's trade painters, if they accumulate enough savings and find enough partners, can also easily open and close galleries, studios, and workshops as needed. They are also not subject to the stringent disciplinary tactics of these other industries. Two of the Dafen trade painters in my study once worked as painters in

¹³⁹ The United States is the only country with the exception of Burma to utilize imperial (v. metric) measurements.

¹⁴⁰ This is evident, for example, in conceptual artists' claims that they have not "exploited" the Dafen painters.

¹⁴¹ See the ethnographic studies of Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Ching Kwan Lee, *Gender and the South China Miracle: Two Worlds of Factory Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

ceramics factories and later moved into trade painting, finding it to be far more attractive. Others have taken up other forms of work and entrepreneurship in hopes of leaving trade painting, but they often find themselves returning to the flexibility and independence that piecework painting production offers. Still others resolutely nurture their fervent idealistic hope to become true, creative, independent, famous, successful artists. Most Dafen trade painters are thus able to manage their work and their play to a high degree, and this entails responding to the demands of entrepreneurship and professional performance.

If trade painting in my argument does constitute a "tradition," it has nonetheless been in a search for origins. The desire to imagine a single creative male as an originator of an industry is certainly not unique to trade painting, but this urge is made all the more pronounced, first, by contemporary trade painters' aspirational need to seek legitimacy in the linear narratives of higher art, and second, by collectors and historians of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canton trade who emphasize the antiquarian value of the earlier period, and would like to keep it separate from contemporary production. In a sense, the entire "canon" of trade painting resides in the living rooms, attics, garages and museums of the West, sold off long before any "cataloguing" could be used to measure the formation of a tradition. This spatial and temporal stretching-out of the producer-consumer relationship across the globe has characterized trade painting for several centuries, evident not only in the distance between the sites of production and consumption, but also in the very moment of encounter in which even the names of the parties are mediated by inadequate transliteration.

Portraiture—that most quintessential of bespoke art—was shared by Guan Zuolin, Spoilum, Gilbert Stuart, Ingres, George Chinnery, Lam Qua, and numerous Hong Kong and Dafen trade painters. It is also shared by the countless trade painters who transfer miniatures on ivory, daguerreotypes, prints and digital files into oil on canvas. A highly technical yet accessible and marketable image-making skill in the West, portraiture has also been privileged as visual culture in

modern China. Portraits invite interpretations of individuality and historical agency, and they register two historical personas through the hand of the artist and the visage of the sitter. Accordingly, although Canton trade portraits were equivalent in price to landscapes or port views and at least as numerous, most twentieth-century art historical attention has been focused on Spoilum, Lam Qua, and Chinnery, portraitists all. For these reasons, "portraiture" tracks the dynamic of anonymous labor against the modernist production of authorial personas. For the canonized Western artists, the labor of workers, printers, middlemen and even sitters are all agglomerated onto the author-function of "the original artist." For Spoilum and Lam Qua (but also the Canton trade painters Ting Qua, Pu Qua, Hing Qua, Akew, Akut, Lee, and etc.), authorship, such as it can be attained within the regime of "export art," remains circumscribed by their indeterminate historical identities.

Portraiture in trade painting (and in high art) moreover survives the advent of photography. Late nineteenth-century Hong Kong painting and photograph studios suggest that there was a fierce competition of cultural status between the hand- and mechanically-produced image, but by the end of the twentieth century, trade painting came to be reinvigorated by photography. Photography served as the technical source of the *gao* from which the globalized painting trade works—in contemporary times the archive of available visibility is nearly entirely photographic. *Likeness* in portraiture survives photographic objectivity as well: the trade portrait made from the photograph is, in Dafen village today, one of the highest-paid specialist skills. The labor that transfers images from hand to machine and back and forth, over and over, confounds in another sense the demand for origins.

In the official narrative of the First Man of Dafen village, the single male portraitist as the origin of trade painting has been abandoned. The new tale delineates a transformation of the trade painter into a "boss," one who invents trade practices instead of mimetic trade pictures. Now multi-skilled and clearly hierarchal, trade painting no longer derives its legitimacy from the mimetic or symbolic practice of portrait painting, in which direct contact with the foreign consumer is recorded

on canvas. In the reform-era, the cultural capital of foreign contact once held by the portraitist is now held by the painter-dealers or bosses who have access to a transnational network of clients and intermediaries, whom the lowliest of outworkers will never meet. This cultural capital is by no means automatic—since his return to mainland China over twenty years ago, Huang Jiang's wife has remained in Hong Kong in order to manage their firm's client networks.¹⁴² The figure of the wife, who in trade painting often functions as the "middleman" for the painter, artist, or boss, is another figure anonymized by the narrative tropes of firsts. The intensification of trade painting's "globalization," in other words, has been enabled by a cast of characters whose invisible labor further extends the distance between the imaginary and unidentifiable producer and the imaginary and unidentifiable consumer.

Between 2006 and 2010, widely circulating amongst trade painters and cultural elites in China was yet another tale of origins for Dafen village's trade painting. In this version, trade painting or "*hanghua*" is widely said to be derived from its near-homonym: "*hanhua*" (韩画) or, "Korean painting." This is because trade painting is said to have been "first" brought to China by the Korean painting bosses who operated factories in Xiamen city in the early 1990s. I first recorded this anecdote in Dafen village in 2006, where it was repeatedly told particularly by those who had worked in Xiamen in the 1990s. In 2008, it was prominently repeated by the Vice-Chairman of the Dafen Art Industry Association on the national television program *Half the Sky* (discussed in Chapter Three). And in 2010, I heard a Beijing-centric version of it told by a professor of art history at the

¹⁴² In 2006, local propaganda officials sponsored the production of a full-length feature film about Dafen village, entitled "The Story of the Oil Painting Village." Completed in 2008, the film was shown at Shenzhen's Cultural Industry Fair but has not yet been distributed. The official synopsis of the film is telling: the protagonist is a Dafen painter-dealer who struggles to build a successful multinational trade painting enterprise. He loses and gains love, fame and wealth, but in the end chooses to marry the poor idealistic young female painter from rural China over the wealthy middle-aged Hong Kong business woman.

Beijing Academy of Fine Arts, who said that it is widely known that "*banghua*" descends from "*banhua*," a legacy of the three Korean factories that operated in Beijing in the 1990s.¹⁴³

The resemblance of "*banghua*" to "*banhua*," even greater in Cantonese intonation, reminds us of the painting trade's ubiquity. While I have argued for a continuous history of a painting trade in South China, ultimately, painting for hire to the specifications of the patron, client or dealer, is by no means only "Chinese" in origin. On the one hand, trade painting is different from many other painting practices (under capitalist conditions) only in so far that it is imagined against a construct of "true" art that is outside commodification and trade. On the other hand, this distinction is made possible by the very practices of trade painting itself: the transnational circuit of images, their anonymous transformation and production, the free use of antecedent representations, and the traffic of art work to distant markets.

¹⁴³ Although further research is required to examine trade painting in Beijing, my preliminary research indicates that at least one of the Korean factories in Beijing was run by a former worker in a Korean-run factory in Xiamen.

Chapter Two

The Great Painting Factory: Assembled Labor from the Canton Trade to Dafen Village

There is now to be a great painting factory, in which, they tell us, they intend to copy any painting, rapidly, cheaply, and indistinguishably from the original, by means of totally mechanical operations such as any child can be employed to perform. If this comes to pass, then of course only the eyes of the common herd will be deceived.

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Kunst Und Handwerk," 1797.¹

Writing in the late eighteenth century and in the midst of an European intellectual milieu that sought to establish a firm distinction between the mechanical and fine arts, Goethe warns in this 1797 essay of a bleak future in which those distinctions would be erased by the forces of industry.² Two decades prior, the "totally mechanical operations" of a wide range of trades, crafts and industries had been dissected and visualized in Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772). Significantly, Alexandre Deleyre's essay describing an 18-step manufacturing process of the pin in the *Encyclopédie*, would be adapted by Adam Smith for the first chapter of the *Wealth of Nations*

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Kunst Und Handwerk," trans. David Britt, in *Kunsttheoretische Schriften und Übersetzung*, 1:19, (1973) 159-162, in ed. Isabelle Frank. *The Theory of Decorative Art: an anthology of European & American writings, 1750-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 152-3.

² For one discussion of the historical emergence of the modern system of fine arts in Europe between 1680 and 1830, see Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). With respect to the growing interest in the mechanical arts in relation, see Frank, "The History of the Theory of Decorative Art," *ibid.*, 1-21.

(1776), laying the foundation for his influential argument that economic progress would be led by finer and finer divisions of labor leading to greater and greater productivity.³ The division of labor, harnessed into new forms of work organization that were already transforming the production of goods in Europe throughout the eighteenth century, took on prominence just as the modern notion of art as a domain independent from the trades emerged.⁴ In this polemical essay (subtly directed at Josiah Wedgwood, a leading ceramics manufacturer of the time),⁵ Goethe addressed the market of luxury consumer goods and sought to distinguish "true art" from the "pretty, elegant, pleasing, ephemeral objects" made by the "purely mechanical artist."⁶ He objected to the rising aristocratic taste for porcelain and print reproductions, and ended his essay with this description of a "great painting factory." Goethe's rhetorical gesture here is to suggest that even paintings could be

³ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), 5th ed. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1904), Vol. 1, Book 1.

⁴ On Marx's model of manufactures (or primitive accumulation) and theories of proto-industrialization, and their relationship to the division of labor in eighteenth-century Britain, see Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures: Industry, Innovation, and Work in Britain, 1700-1820* (Totowa, N.J: Barnes & Noble, 1985). For continued debates on proto-industrialization theory and studies on eighteenth-century Europe, see Sheilagh C Ogilvie, and Markus Cerman, eds. *European Proto-Industrialization: An Introductory Handbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵ Goethe criticizes "the English...with their modern-antique ceramics, their red, black and polychrom [sic] art." That he had in mind Wedgwood's earthenware imitations of Etruscan vases, is suggested by Catriona MacLeod, "Sweetmeats for the Eye: Porcelain Miniatures in Classical Weimar," in *The Enlightened Eye: Goethe and Visual Culture* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 46.

⁶ Goethe, "Kunst Und Handwerk," 151. As Martha Woodmansee has argued, the threat of determination by a market economy in the late-eighteenth century German states was fashioned by German romanticists into a defense of fine art as a "self-sufficient totality." Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market : Rereading the History of Aesthetics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 32-33. Goethe's disgust at the rise of manufacture also calls to mind Simon Schaffer's discussion of the culture of mechanization, in which he argues that the fabrication of automata "ingeniously connected a culture that viewed laborers as machines with one that saw machines as sources of power." Simon Schaffer, "Enlightened Automata," *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 126-165, 135.

reproduced through the mechanistic operations of the factory—implying that the division of labor was itself a process of human mechanization. Such a nightmare would be possible only if consumers allowed themselves to be the uncritical participants in industrialization, a transformation that was, for Goethe, "rushing onward with irresistible force."⁷

Goethe's great painting factory may very well have existed in his time, but in the faraway Chinese port city of Guangzhou, known to Westerners as Canton.⁸ Here, an estimated two to three thousand painters were employed in producing paintings for a seemingly insatiable European and American market.⁹ Although this trade in paintings was minuscule as a percentage of Chinese exports in tea, raw silk and ceramics, its scale and volume would still jar with any conception of paintings as rarities. For example, by the early eighteenth century, watercolor paintings produced in Guangzhou were shipped by merchants to Britain in boxes that each contained as many as 400 individual sheets.¹⁰ When the head of the Dutch East India Company in Guangzhou, Audreas Everardus van Braam Houckgeest, left China in 1795, he brought with him to Philadelphia a

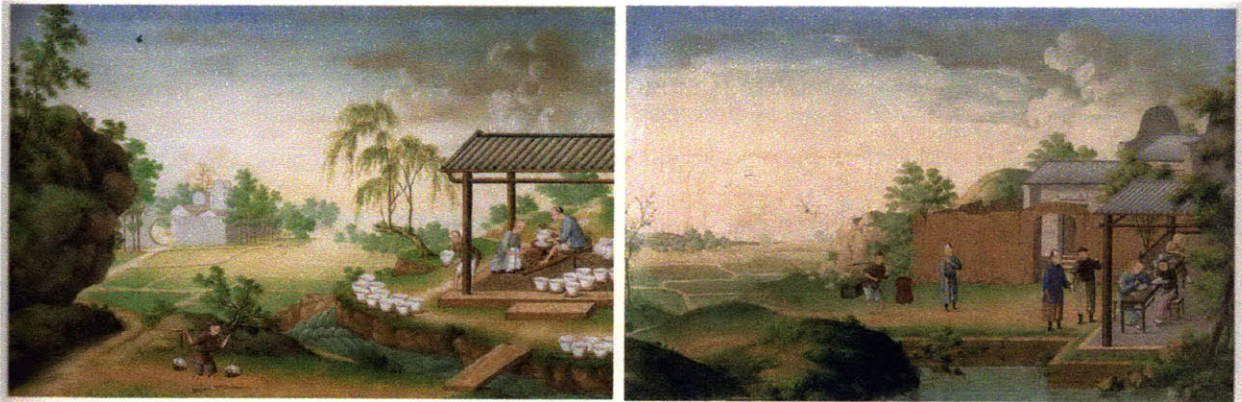
⁷ Goethe, "Kunst Und Handwerk," 153.

⁸ The Canton System was the regulatory trade regime under which the trade paintings I discuss were produced (1686-1842). I refer to this body of work as Canton trade paintings. Further on the history and definition of the Canton system and trade painting, see Chapter One.

⁹ Besides paintings on paper and canvas, as many as 25,000 artisans are estimated to have been engaged in the production of decorative arts, such as painting on ceramics, fans, furniture and lacquerware. The estimate of 2000-3000 painters in Guangzhou by mid-nineteenth century is attributed to the sinologist, missionary and diplomat Samuel Wells Williams, who resided in Canton from 1833-1837, and served as the America *charge d'affaires* to Beijing from 1860-1876. He edited the influential *Chinese Repository* from 1848-1851, and his 1848 (rev. 1871, 1883 and 1907) text on China was widely read. Samuel Wells Williams, *The Middle Kingdom: A Survey of the Geography, Government, Literature, Social Life, Arts, and History of the Chinese Empire and Its Inhabitants*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1848), 173.

¹⁰ Craig Clunas, ed. *Chinese Export Art and Design* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1987), 118-9.

personal collection of over 1800 paintings.¹¹ In 1834, the American Carnes Brothers, known for their sensational New York marketing exhibition of a Chinese woman with bound feet in a Chinese interior decor showcase, would offer 100 painting albums to the public in a single auction.¹² Could such a volume of paintings come from anywhere but a great painting factory, in which the labor of painting was reduced to mere mechanical operation?



Figures 1-2. *Making Basins*, no. 6 from set of 20 on porcelain making and transport, watercolour and ink on Chinese paper, 40 x 60 cm., 1770-1790. Coll. Victoria and Albert Museum E49-1910. *Painting in underglaze blue*, no. 9 from set of 20 on porcelain making and transport, watercolour and ink on Chinese paper, 40 x 60 cm., 1770-1790. Coll. Victoria and Albert Museum E50-1910.

Prominent amongst Canton trade paintings were albums and paintings that depicted the production of silk, ceramics, and tea, the major commodities of the Sino-Western trade. These were

¹¹ Van Braam (1739-1801) arrived in South China 1758 with the Dutch East India Company, travelled back and forth between China and Europe twice, immigrated to the United States, and returned to Guangzhou as head of the Dutch East India factory in 1790-1795. In 1794, he was a member of the Dutch Titsingh 1794 delegation to the Qing court. His collection was sold at auction in 1799. Andreas Everardus Van Braam Houckgeest, *An Authentic Account of the Embassy of the Dutch East-India Company to the Court of the Emperor of China, in the Years 1794 and 1795*, trans. M.L.E. Moreau de Saint-Mery (London: R Philips, 1798).

¹² The Carnes brothers were recorded to have paid twelve dollars for one hundred albums of a dozen paintings each, and auctioned each album for one dollar. John Rogers Haddad, *The Romance of China: Excursions to China in U.S. Culture, 1776-1876* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), ch. 3, 5-9.

primarily gouaches and watercolors sold in the Western market bound in albums in sequences of ten, twelve or thirteen paintings, each depicting a discrete step of production (figures 1-2).

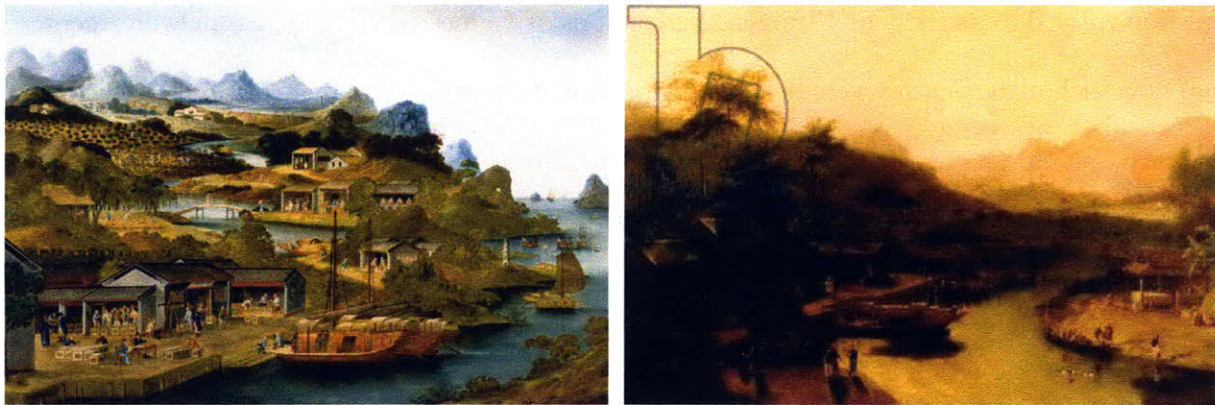


Figure 3. Artist unidentified, *Ten Steps of the Production of Tea*, oil on canvas, 1790-1800. Coll. Peabody Essex Museum.
 Figure 4. William Daniell, *A View in China shewing the process of cultivating the tea plant and preparing the leaves for exportation. 1st, Preparing the soil. 2nd, Watering the young plants. 3rd, Gathering the leaves. 4th, Rolling them. 5th, Crisping them by fire. 6th, Packing them in Chests. 7th, Marking and binding them. 8th, Weighing them. 9th, Registering the weight; and 10th, Shipping them on board the vessels that convey them to the port of Canton:—which several operations mostly performed at the same time of year, and for the London market alone, give employment to about three millions of the Chinese population and to 20,000 tons of English shipping, besides adding millions annually to the revenue of Great Britain*, c. 1810, oil on canvas, 123.2 x 184.9 cm. Coll. Yale Center for British Art (with digital watermark).

The subject was also treated in oil on canvas, painted by both European and Canton artists, in compositions that ordered each discrete step of production into single picturesque landscape views (figures 3-4).¹³ Since neither European nor Chinese painters were likely to have observed the production of tea, silk or ceramics—which took place up-country in Guangdong, Fujian, and other provinces—depictions of the production process in these images drew on a variety of popular sources, such as the Qing editions of the illustrated *Plowing and Weaving* treatises, used in iterative

¹³ As Kee Il Choi Jr. has noted, the separation of tasks remains a critical part of the painting's content even as the stylization of the scene took on romanticist grandeur; for example, one such painting by the British painter William Daniell (1769-1837) is verbosely titled by the artist with each of the ten steps of tea production despite its otherwise picturesque composition. See Choi, "Tea and Design in Chinese Export Painting"; and Kee Il Choi Jr., *The China Trade: Romance and Reality* (Lincoln: DeCordova Museum, 1979).

fashion.¹⁴ Although the form and content of these production albums vary widely, portrayals of certain tasks are consistently reused and recombined across a wide range of works, and they uniformly depicted a sequenced separation of tasks, divided amongst individual workers. These depictions played to a variety of European perceptions of Chinese society, increasingly divergent from how such manufactures were being industrialized in Europe.¹⁵ Whether romantic, idyllic or dystopian, the representation of the manufacture of Chinese goods broken down into the individual steps of their production, well-established as a pictorial and rhetorical tradition, was one way that Europeans sought and organized knowledge of China.¹⁶

The European fascination with the division of labor extended to descriptions of image making itself. As European travel to South China increased in the nineteenth century, many Western travelers, merchants and missionaries would observe painters at work in Guangzhou, viewing the

¹⁴ Use of the Qing editions of the Plowing and Weaving treatises (*Yuzhi Gengzhi tu*) is discussed in Chapter One.

¹⁵ Some depict the steps of production in bucolic scenery, idealizing manufacture in the orderly Confucian society developed by Enlightenment writers. As Craig Clunas has argued, in these images the European customer was buying "his own preconceptions of the mysterious inland provinces as a land of grotesque and fantastic landscapes, inhabited by ingenious and curious people living an idyllic life of harmony with nature..." Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984), 25. For Clunas, this idyllic representation contrasts with the earlier eighteenth-century accounts of the industrialization of Jingdezhen, which European consumers ignored in favor of a more fantastic image. Clunas, 1984, *ibid.*, 28-9. One could also presume that the American and European traders could hardly have objected to the idyllic representation of the manufacture of their products. In other paintings, however, orientalist conventions such as the conspicuous addition of architectural dilapidation are prominent; while still more images depict rows of anonymous tea packers working tirelessly in darkened Guangzhou warehouses.

¹⁶ By the time these paintings were produced in high volume, the technical production of silk, tea and ceramics was already well known in Europe, which was producing its own competing products. Like a European treatise, Canton trade images of commodity production serve to display the knowledge itself, rather than as a set of usable instructions for the viewer to try at home. Thus, I disagree with scholars who treat these images exclusively as factual depictions. See, for example, Jiang Yinghe's and Zhou Xiang's treatment of tea and silk production images in Ming and Liu, eds. *Souvenir From Canton: Chinese Export Paintings From the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Shanghai: Shanghai Publishing House, 2003).

spectacle within the cultural logic which demarcates the fine from the mechanical arts. Many of these writers began their assessment of the arts in China with a remark that the Chinese were incapable of invention, and that they had an unfailing desire to imitate.¹⁷ Other writers would pair this orientalist meta-narrative with the description of the division of labor in painting on both canvas and decorative arts, a process they detailed as a mechanical operation in which the painting or object passed through many hands. In 1842, the curator William Langdon dramatically described the process of painting at the Jingdezhen ceramic factories as a spectacle "terrific and sublime":

The division of labour is carried to its acme. A tea-cup, from the time when it lies embedded in its native quarries, till it comes forth in its perfection from the furnace, passes through more than fifty different hands. The painting alone is divided between a half dozen persons, one of whom sketches the outline of a bird, another of a plant, a third of some other figure, while a fourth fills in the colours.¹⁸

Within a schema that holds the fine arts at the apex of humanistic endeavors, the "great painting factory" stages the extreme antithesis to the Romantic conception of self and authorship. For Romantics like Goethe, as later for social critics like Karl Marx, the factory remains the most compelling site and proof of industrialization's deepest social effects. It is in the division of labor, posed as a technology of dehumanization and alienation, that the separation of manual labor from

¹⁷ For a lengthier survey of this trope, see Jonathan D Spence, *The Chan's Great Continent: China in Western Minds*, (New York: Norton, 1998), 40-56.

¹⁸ William B Langdon, *Ten Thousand Things Relating to China and the Chinese an Epitome of the Genius, Government, History, Literature, Agriculture, Arts, Trade, Manners, Customs, and Social Life of the People of the Celestial Empire: Together With a Synopsis of the Chinese Collection* (London: To be had only at the collection, 1842), 123-4. Langdon was the London curator of Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum. A popular collection of 100,000 objects collected by the American merchant Dunn during his stay in Guangzhou from 1818 to 1831, the museum was open to the public in Philadelphia from 1838 to 1841. In 1842 it was relocated to London, where its first visitor was the young Queen Victoria. Aaron Caplan, "Nathan Dunn's Chinese Museum" (American Philosophical Society, 1986).

the cultivation of the mind are most irrefutably observed. For twentieth-century critics of the "sweatshop," the factory likewise remains the site wherein the traditional craft-like aspects of human labor are transformed into the automatistic motions of the machine.

As I have argued in Chapter One, the contemporary trade painting industry in South China represents a continuation of the historical Canton trade painting industry in many respects.¹⁹ In this chapter, I examine specific Western perceptions of assembly line painting as a distinctly Chinese mode of production, finding in it a mechanistic division of labor that contrasts with the individuality necessary for "art." These Western perceptions would grow increasingly negative over the course of the nineteenth century, as evinced in a 1872 description of Hong Kong painting studios by the British photographer John Thomson. With the disdain of a businessman who happened to be selling a competing product (photographic portraits), Thomson repeated the trope with imperialist *ennui*: "A master hand paints in the head, an inferior the hands, and an apprentice the costume and jewellery, the latter being generally profuse, as it costs nothing."²⁰

There is an interlude of over one hundred years before Westerners would take an interest in trade painting as a Chinese phenomenon again, and by this time, Goethe's "great painting factory" would be superimposed on the image of the Fordist factory and the global sweatshop. From 2006 onwards, headlines from Germany, Boston, and Sydney cried out: "Van Gogh From the Sweatshop," "Chinese Village Paints By Incredible Numbers," "Van Gogh, Gauguin: Cheaper By the Dozen,"

¹⁹ In Chapter One, I address the history of trade painting from the end of the Canton system in 1842 to its reemergence as tourist art in post-WWII Hong Kong. I also argue there that the term "trade painting" (*hanghua* 行画) is apropos to the industry across the two centuries of its practice in South China.

²⁰ John Thomson, "Hong-Kong Photographers," *The British Journal of Photography* 20, no. 656 (29 NOV 1872): 569.

“Workshop of the World, Fine Arts Division.”²¹ The trope has been stretched to encompass all the possible forms of production observable at Dafen village: an Australian journalist writing in 2006 would tell the reader to “take your pick of the Old Masters rolling off the assembly line,” but describe a single Dafen painter as “a one-man assembly line.”²²

This chapter explores, in two parts, the formation and persistence of the Romanticist critique and cultural imaginary of assembled labor in perceptions of South Chinese trade painting. In the first part, I set out the early nineteenth-century accounts of Chinese “assembly line painting” amongst European travel writers, examining how the division of labor in painting took on prominence in the Western imagination of Canton trade painting. In the second part, I evaluate these historical models of manufacture against the practices of labor division, separation of tasks, and hierarchy among contemporary Dafen painters and bosses. Examining two of the largest factory firms in further detail, I explore the continuities of artisanality and artistry introduced in my account of flexible production in Chapter One, and evaluate Dafen bosses’ uses of the “assembly line painting” to claim both artistic and entrepreneurial invention.

Lam Qua's Studio and Assembled Labor in the Canton Trade

Near the foreigners’ warehouses in the port of Canton by the late eighteenth century were an estimated thirty painting workshops on Jingyuan street (also called New China Street) and Tongwen street (also called Old China Street), which many Europeans visited and recorded in their travel

²¹ Martin Paetsch, “China’s Art Factories: Van Gogh From the Sweatshop,” *Spiegel Online* (23 AUG 2006). James Fallows, “Workshop of the World, Fine Arts Division,” *The Atlantic* (19 DEC 2007). Mary Anne Toy, “Van Gogh, Gauguin: Cheaper By the Dozen; Global Village,” *Sydney Morning Herald International* (1 JUN 2006): 20. Evan Osnos, “Chinese Village Paints By Incredible Numbers,” *Chicago Tribune World* (13 FEB 2007).

²² Mary Anne Toy, “Chinese Village Strikes Oil,” *The Age, International* (1 JUL 2006): 19.

accounts.²³ Amongst these accounts, the most prominent in the early nineteenth century describe the studio of the painter known as Lam Qua (b. 1801-02), one of the most documented of oil-on-canvas artists in the Canton trade.²⁴ A key primary source on Lam Qua's operations is a colorful portrayal authored by the French diplomat M. Charles-Hubert Lavollée (b. 1823), describing his visit to Lam Qua's "atelier" in 1843.²⁵ Lavollée was accompanying a British friend, "M. Baxton," for one of three portrait sittings at the studio of Lam Qua. Arriving in Lam Qua's third-floor studio, where the artist was working alone at an easel and before an audience of other visitors, Lavollée describes the accuracy with which Lam Qua captured the likenesses of his foreign and Chinese sitters. After Lavollée's friend Baxton finished posing, Lam Qua gave the visitors a tour of his studio, the second

²³ The figure is given in an extract of an anonymous journal in *The Chinese Repository*, vol. 4 (Elibron Classics, 1835), 292. See also Patrick Conner, *The Hongs of Canton: Western Merchants in South China 1700-1900, as Seen in Chinese Export Paintings* (London: Martyn Gregory, 2009).

²⁴ Carl Crossman's work on the painter "Lam Qua" forms the basis of a growing scholarship on Lam Qua far exceeding that of any other Canton trade painter. Carl L Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade: Paintings, Furnishings and Exotic Curiosities* (Woodbridge, Eng: Antique Collectors' Club, 1991). Recent research is more fully addressed by Patrick Conner, "Lam Qua: Chinese and Western Painter," *Arts of Asia* 2 (1999): 46-64. Lam Qua's medical portraiture for Peter Parker is also examined in Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); and Stephen Rachman, "Memento Morbi: Lam Qua's Paintings, Peter Parker's Patients," *Literature and Medicine* 23, no. 1 (2004): 134-59. On the pidgin trade name "Lam Qua" and the extant research on his Chinese name, see Chapter One.

²⁵ Called "M. La Vollée" in the *Bulletin of the American Art Union*, and thereafter erroneously referred to as "La Vollée" or "de la Vollée" throughout the China trade painting literature to date, the writer M. Charles-Hubert Lavollée was a member of the French colonial mission to China in 1843 under M. de Lagrené that negotiated the Treaty at Whampoa of 1844. Charles Lavollée, *France et Chine* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et. Cie, 1900). He wrote extensively on Sino-French and French-Asian relations, particularly for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The account of his visit to Lam Qua's studio is lightly edited and briefly extended in his published travel account, Charles Lavollée, *Voyage En Chine* (Paris: Just Rouvier, A. Ledoyen, 1853), 356-365.

floor of which Lavollée describes as a workshop made up of twenty young assistants at work.²⁶ He writes:

There is no art in this. It is purely a mechanical operation, in which the system of division of labor is faithfully practiced. One artist makes trees all his life, another figures; this one draws feet and hands, that one houses. Thus each acquired in his line a certain perfection particularly in the finish of details, but none of them is capable of undertaking an entire painting.²⁷

Published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1849, and in English a year later in New York's *Bulletin of the American Art Union*, these two sentences have been widely repeated in the scholarship on the China trade, and form one of the most vivid pictures of Chinese assembly line painting.

Lavollée's description recalls the "mechanical operations" of childlike and dehumanized workers earlier styled by Goethe. However, in Lavollée's account, the division of labor in painting is remarkable not only because of its mindlessness, but also because these workers have, through supposed lifetime specialization, been *conditioned* to be incapable of invention. Lavollée suggests that the painters, so divided by the tasks of painting, are enslaved by this routine mechanization all their lives. There is here a subtle shift away from the moral responsibility of the aristocratic consumer called upon by Goethe, towards a critique of an invisible power behind an industrial system that, in its very perfection, transforms artists into mechanical workers.

²⁶ Lavollée's account differs slightly from C. Toogood Downing account from his visit eight years earlier, which described "eight to ten" assistants at work on Lam Qua's second floor. C. Toogood Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China in 1836-7*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1838). Downing's account of eight to ten assistants is also matched by the secondhand account of Paul-Emile Daurand Forgues, in *La Chine Ouverte (Aventure D'un Fan-Kouei Dans Le Pays De Tsin) Par Old Nick* (Paris: H. Fournier, 1845), 57.

²⁷ Charles Lavollée, "La Peinture en Chine: l'Atelier de Lam Qua," *L'Artiste: Revue de Paris* ser. 5, t. III (June 1849): 65-66, trans. as "Art in China," *Bulletin of the American Art Union*, New York: October 1850, 118-119.

That watercolor, gouache, and perhaps oil, paintings were produced in Guangzhou workshops through a high degree of division of labor, by which each painting was passed through several hands, is widely accepted by scholars of the Canton trade. This view is based primarily on Lavollée's consistently cited passage.²⁸ The focus on Lavollée's description of assembly line painting has, however, caused many historians to overlook his fuller account suggesting an integrated hierarchal organization in Lam Qua's studio through which different types of paintings were produced for different markets. The sentence which completes Lavollée's description of the division of labor, has, for example, regularly been omitted: "Lam Qua may really pass for an artist, his pupils are scarcely workmen."²⁹ Lavollée went on at length to describe how in one part of the studio's second floor, Lam Qua's "favorite pupils" were at work on oil-on-canvas landscape paintings of Canton and Macau; works which were sold at much higher prices than the watercolors.³⁰ After voicing his admiration for Lam Qua's talent as a portraitist, Lavollée narrates, not without some bemusement, his friend Baxton's complaint that Lam Qua's studio continued to produce oil paintings that

²⁸ The first English source to use Lavollée's account is Albert Ten Eyck Gardner, "Cantonese Chinnerys: Portraits of How-qua and Other China Trade Paintings," *Art Quarterly*, vol. 16 (Winter 1953), 317-318. Gardner reproduced the Bulletin of the American Art Union's translation verbatim, referring to Lavollée as "M. La Vollée." This specific passage has since been re-quoted in English in the vast majority of Canton trade painting literature as an explanation of the trade's general process of production. See John Warner, *Tingqua: Paintings From His Studio (Exh. Cat.)* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Museum of Art, 1976), 5; Craig Clunas, *Chinese Export Watercolours* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1984), 81; Carl L Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, 200; Patrick Conner, "The Enigma of Spoilum and the Origins of China Trade Portraiture," *Magazine Antiques* 153, no. 3 (1998): 424; May Bo Ching, and Cheng Cunjie, eds. *Views From the West: Collection of Pith Paper Watercolors Donated By Mr. Ifan Williams to the City of Guangzhou* (Beijing: China Publishing Bureau, 2001), 41-2; Valery M Garrett, *Heaven is High, the Emperor Far Away: Merchants and Mandarins in Old Canton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91; Haddad, *The Romance of China*, 36.

²⁹ "Lam Qua peut, a la rigueur, passer pour un artist. Ses eleves ne sont guere que des ouvriers." Lavollée, "La Peinture en Chine," 66; trans. 119.

³⁰ Lavollée, *ibid.*

inaccurately depicted the placement of the British factory in Canton port scenes, despite Baxton's repeated remonstrations.³¹ Lavollée's account suggests that, in the multifaceted operations of Lam Qua's studio, there was more than a single measure of "invention" and more than a single method of painting production.³²

Lam Qua's third-floor studio, a performative space in which he demonstrated his impressive ability to capture live subjects in portraiture, contrasts with the division of labor European visitors saw on his second-floor. Taking Lavollée's account in its entirety, rather than for that one Goethe-like passage, Lam Qua's artistic identity as an "English Grand Style" portrait painter emerges out of his mastery of an artisanal system. As Stephen Rachman has pointed out:

The desire for reassurance of the superiority of Western artistry and the mentality that produced it easily obscured the flexibility and assimilative power of Lam Qua's art operations. Western visitors continually sought to memorialize themselves in oil, to bring back souvenirs of Canton and the Chinese, and Lam Qua accommodated all of these demands with a surprisingly modern mixture of mass production and personal artistry. His studio was...tailored to the nineteenth-century Occidental mentality, combining factory models of production with the romantic notion of the autonomous individual artist.³³

³¹ The site of the British factory was moved following the Canton fire of 1822. To the apparent annoyance of M. Baxton, Lam Qua continued to produce paintings based upon the older reality.

³² Lam Qua's reputation as a skilled portraitist who portrayed his sitters perhaps too realistically was common amongst foreigners in South China. The American Osmond Tiffany who visited Canton in 1844 wrote in 1849: "The prince of Canton limners is Lamqua, who is celebrated throughout China, and is indeed an excellent painter. He takes portraits in the European style, and his coloring is admirable. His facility in catching a likeness is unrivalled, but wo betid [sic] you if you are ugly, for Lamqua is no flatterer." Osmond Tiffany Jr., *The Canton Chinese, Or the American's Sojourn in the Celestial Empire* (Boston and Cambridge: James Monroe & Co, 1849), 85.

³³ Rachman, "Memento Morbi," 140.

Rachman's argument resonates with the more complete account by Lavollée of Lam Qua's operations as a segregated tripartite workplace, each portion neatly approximating Western models of production: the artisanal workshop where the favored apprentices painted landscapes under Lam Qua's direction, the assembly line "factory" floor where the watercolorists dedicated their whole lives to sub-product specialities, and the artist's studio where the master Lam Qua worked alone. Twentieth-century scholarship has itself compartmentalized these models of manufacture to serve the various departments of art historical inquiry: scholars who emphasize the artisanal or reproduction aspect of Canton trade painting readily repeat the assembly line quotation;³⁴ those eager to flesh out the biography of Lam Qua as an artist rivaling the Englishman George Chinnery emphasize Lam Qua's studio practice.³⁵

Taking into account other nineteenth-century European descriptions of Lam Qua's studio, it is perhaps more accurate to say that the relationships between Lam Qua and the various painters working with him were varied and even conflicting. The British doctor Toogood Downing visited Lam Qua's studio eight years before Lavollée, and wrote an account that is otherwise similar, but he observed no assembly line method amongst the young painters at work on the second floor. Rather, Downing described in meticulous detail a step-by-step process by which watercolor paintings on pith-paper were produced by a single painter. Downing described how one painter alone performed the preparation of the paper with alum coatings, the heating of the colors, the application of outlines and colors, the reverse painting of flesh-colored faces and hands, and the touching up of

³⁴ This extends to many scholars who have demystified many other aspects of European accounts of Canton trade painting. See for example, Kee Il Choi Jr., "Carl Gustav Ekeberg and the Invention of Chinese Export Painting," *The Magazine Antiques* 153, no. 3 (1998): 426; Haddad, *The Romance of China*, 36.

³⁵ As for example, in Patrick Conner, "Lam Qua: Chinese and Western Painter," *Arts of Asia* 2 (March-April 1999): 46-64. Larissa Heinrich, *The Afterlife of Images: Translating the Pathological Body Between China and the West* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

fine detail with two brushes held in one hand.³⁶ Downing was rather more focused on the relative quickness with which experienced painters worked as opposed to more inexperienced ones.³⁷

Still different is the 1845 account of the Parisian journalist and writer Emile Daurand Forgues, who based his description of Lam Qua's studio on a compilation of firsthand accounts, including that of the French artist Auguste Borget, whose travel drawings from his ten-month stay in Canton in 1838 were reproduced as etchings in Forgues' book. Of Lam Qua, Forgues wrote that, "far from the norm, he employed a number of Chinese workers whom he allows to work as they wish and whose work he sells."³⁸ Forgues also mentions that landscape oil painters and painters working on miniatures on ivory worked alongside the watercolorists on the second floor, stating that the former claimed "no sense of superiority" over the latter.³⁹ If true, Forgues' description of a flexible or freelance relationship with some painters differs remarkably from Lavollée's sketch of a strictly hierarchal master-apprentice structure.⁴⁰

For the Europeans who strove to encapsulate the whole of Chinese culture and society through their limited observations of the tiny area at the port of Guangzhou to which they were

³⁶ Downing, *The Fan-Quy in China*, 96-101.

³⁷ Like Lavollée, Downing also emphasized their distinction from "Mister Lamquoi himself" who painted in the studio's "sanctum sanctorum," a space no different from artists who worked at "the other end of the world." Downing, *The Fan-Quy in China*, 112.

³⁸ "...mais, loin de faire école, il a pris tout bonnement à sa solde un certain nombre d'ouvriers chinois qu'il laisse travailler à leur guise, et dont il vend les productions." Forgues, *La Chine Ouverte*, 56-7.

³⁹ "A côté des aquarellistes, et ne réclamant aucune sorte de supériorité sur ces derniers, vous verriez dans la même salle des paysagists a l'huile et des ouvrières en miniatures; ceux-ci travaillent sur ivoire avec un fini désespérant." Forgues, *ibid.*, 59. [Next to the watercolorists, and claiming no sort of superiority over the former, you would see in the same room landscapists working in oil and workers in miniatures; these toil desperately on ivory.]

⁴⁰ Osmand Tiffany describes Lam Qua's workers as "pupils and assistants, copying for foreigners or painting on the bamboo." Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese*.

confined by law, and for whom shopping and conversation in pidgin English constituted the major part of their leisurely contact with the local population, the painting shops of New China Street and the images that they produced must have offered tantalizing glimpses into Chinese culture. Seeing in the paintings themselves glimmers of vaunted Western realism but unable to explain their glaring divergence from Western pictorial conventions, these writers adopted a mode of appreciation that simultaneously reinforced the exoticism and the inferiority of these paintings.⁴¹ In contrast to the high abstraction of literati painting which Europeans had also encountered, the naturalistic but colorful and naive-looking paintings coming out of the shops of Canton appeared as examples of closer Chinese compliance with Western tracks of artistic development.⁴² Yet this compliance also brought invidious comparisons: for example, the lack of foreshortening, shading and chiaroscuro in Canton trade paintings was, for all European writers, sufficient evidence to prove the backwardness of the Chinese.⁴³ China's apparent ability to skillfully reproduce "appearance" but not "reality" reinforced the belief that Chinese painters were, in the elegant words of Forgues, no more than

⁴¹ This is echoed well into the twentieth century. For example, a 1980 publication of the Cultural Institute of Macau would claim that China trade pictures are "a kind of highly sophisticated Naive painting." Cesar Guillen-Nuñez, *Pinturas Da "China Trade"* (Macau: Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical (Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino), 1980), unpagued.

⁴² By limiting his own scope of inquiry to Canton trade paintings as representative of Chinese art in total, Downing, for example, could pronounce that the "defective state" of the art of painting in China was caused by its' rulers' failure to place painters "with the cultivators of the *mind*." Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China*, 109. Downing's imperialistically charged ignorance of Chinese aesthetics displays a remarkable willingness to overlook the accounts of European Jesuits in the Qing court who had grappled with, reported and published on these issues in Europe for two centuries prior.

⁴³ The increasingly negative tone which Europeans took towards China during the nineteenth century, a period of European imperialistic interest, has been widely examined. See, for example, Ming Wilson, and John Cayley, *Europe Studies China: Papers From an International Conference on the History of European Sinology* (London: Han-Shan Tang Books, 1995). Timothy Brook, and Gregory Blue, eds. *China and Historical Capitalism: Genealogies of Sinological Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

"intelligent machines."⁴⁴ Imagining that Canton paintings were produced by the dehumanizing technology of the division of labor was part and parcel of categorizing them as an unknowing art, produced by a mechanistic industry.

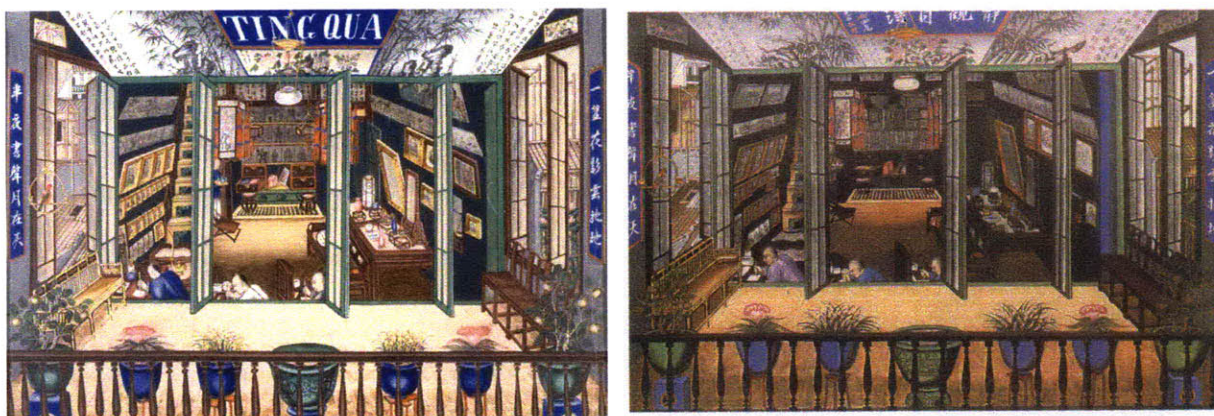
For nineteenth-century European travelers as for consumers, a certain measure of visual truth-value was crucial to the desirability of Canton trade paintings. These images served, in this respect, not simply as a body of seemingly empirical representation, but as a means of communication and translation amongst linguistically limited populations.⁴⁵ As the historian Fan Fa-Ti has pointed out, since images were often the only way for Europeans to describe to the Chinese what it was they were seeking in China, illustrations commissioned by British amateur naturalists and painted by Canton painters served both to produce scientific knowledge about China and to facilitate further accumulation, discovery, and collection of Chinese materials.⁴⁶ Yet, ironically, it was against the very images they had commissioned that Europeans measured their own incomplete knowledge of China

⁴⁴ "Du reste, les uns et les autres sont condamnés à nous être longtemps inférieurs par le principe même qui domine toutes les productions de l'art chinois. Ces intelligentes machines ne conçoivent pas qu'on cherche à représenter l'apparence, mais seulement la réalité des objets. Tout raccourci est pour eux un mensonge, toute ombre portée, une tache inutile." Forgues, *La Chine Ouverte*, 49. [Moreover, all of them are condemned by us to forever be inferior by the principle that dominates all the productions of Chinese art. These intelligent machines cannot conceive that one seeks to represent not so much the appearance, but the very reality, of objects. All foreshortening are to them lies, all shadows, useless stains.]

⁴⁵ Foreign language learning amongst Chinese was prohibited by law and only three to five licensed linguists trained in Portuguese and pidgin English were designated as mediators to the foreign traders. Even then, as interpreters, they were focused on mediation rather than clarity or accuracy in translations. See Paul Arthur Van Dyke, *The Canton Trade: Life and Enterprise on the China Coast, 1700-1845* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 78.

⁴⁶ Fan discusses a handbook of botanical illustrations by Chinese artists owned by Joseph Banks, the foremost British botanist of his day and President of the Royal Society. Banks marked the book with the specimens he desired and gave it to Alexander Duncan in order to collect them in China. The same handbook was used by two British gardeners of the Macartney Embassy and later, William Kerr, Royal Gardner, who resided in Canton and Macau for eight years. Fan, *British Naturalists in Qing China*, 46-7.

itself. This exemplifies a deeper problem of visual culture, which operates simultaneously as a locus of cross-cultural translation and as empirical evidence of cultural differences themselves.



Figures 5-6. Studio of Tingqua (Guan Lianchang, active 1830s-1870s), *Tingqua's Studio*, mid-19th century, Gouche on paper. Coll. Peabody Essex Museum AE85592. Studio of Tingqua (Guan Lianchang, active 1830s-1870s), *Tingqua's Studio*, mid-19th century, Gouche on paper. Coll. Christie, Manson and Woods Ltd., London.

The problem is also historiographic, and can be illustrated by twentieth-century historians' use of one stock image of the Canton painting trade which echo the themes set out by Goethe's great painting factory. The image—which exists in many versions—is a charming and colorful gouache regularly used by scholars as an illustration of the entire Canton trade painting industry.⁴⁷ It is thought to depict the studio of Lam Qua's younger brother, Ting Qua, but sometimes the shop

⁴⁷ The image exists in several versions and sizes in American and British museums, and has been widely reproduced to illustrate the mode of production of the Canton painting trade. For example of the range of its uses as a historical document, see Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, author's collection, ex-coll. Augustine Heard, 1979, fig. 89, p. 105; Crossman, 1991, *ibid.*, pl. 64, priv. coll.; Shijian Huang, and William R Sargent, *Customs and Conditions of Chinese City Streets in 19th Century: 360 Professions in China*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 1999), 7; Thomas N. Layton, "Gifts From the Celestial Kingdom: A Shipwrecked Cargo for Gold Rush California," (2002), 56-60; Garrett, *Heaven is High*, pl 20, coll. Christie, Manson & Woods Ltd., London.

depicted in the painting is named as Lam Qua's (figures 5-6).⁴⁸ Ting Qua (Guan Lianchang 关联昌) operated a separate studio on New China Street that specialized in gouaches and watercolors, and is believed to have been producing these paintings around 1850, which would make them contemporaneous with the publications discussed above.⁴⁹

An exterior view through the second-story windowed balcony of a multistory building, the images depict in the middle ground three male Chinese painters painting at individual work tables beneath the window frames. Their faces are painted in flat profile and sparsely detailed. They are composed in linear perspective but without absolute precision. No known versions of the image are exactly identical: the colors of the workers' clothes differ; in one version, one painter wears spectacles; in another, an opium pipe can be seen on a couch. Hanging on the walls inside the depicted workroom are dozens of framed and unframed paintings, many recognizable as regular subjects of Canton trade paintings.⁵⁰ Arranged by size and by type, there are roughly nine rows of landscapes, port views and portraits in identical sizes, and a handful of single-sized framed works. A woman appears to be bringing tea from the floor below. A narrow staircase leads upstairs, perhaps to a studio above.

In the upper foreground, and taking up a full quarter of the picture plane, is a large sign decorated with Chinese-style painting and calligraphy. In the lower foreground are numerous features of Guangzhou urban life still notable today: potted flowers lining the balcony's balustrade, inviting bamboo and wooden chairs placed in this airy space, a pet bird, and windows that look out

⁴⁸This is because some versions depict a sign for Ting Qua's studio in Chinese or English, while another depicts a sign for Lam Qua in English. Reproduced on cover of *Arts of Asia*, March-April 1999.

⁴⁹The painting is identified as produced by the studio of Ting Qua because the Crossman coll. version is marked "Tinqu" on its reverse.

⁵⁰Crossman identifies in the Peabody Essex version, a row of Chinese ladies, a row of port views of which two are the Praya Grande at Macao viewed from north and south respectively. Crossman, *The Decorative Arts of the China Trade*, 107.

onto the city's dense architecture. In the far background is an arrangement of domestic Cantonese furniture in bamboo and wood. In other words, framing this scene of Western-style trade painters at work are the distinctive markers of everyday life in Guangzhou. Like many Canton trade paintings, these images are rich in detail, and yet they are filled with improbabilities and uncertainty.

Scholars have seen in these Ting Qua studio gouaches many aspects of the nineteenth-century accounts of Lam Qua's studio discussed above. Some see in them an example of assembly line painting: three painters, anonymous, sitting in a row, perhaps dividing up the work of a single painting between them. Others see the paintings hanging on the walls as stock for sale, or even Western models from which the workers are copying.⁵¹ Though lavish in detail and local color, important aspects of the textual accounts are missing. These include the endless "rolls" and "portfolios" of paintings which Lavollée said would take days to view and from which a client might have ordered or bought paintings. Neither is there any indication of the artist supply shop at ground level selling the local and imported inks and papers that Downing described.⁵² Absent too are the oil-on-canvas landscape painters and the miniature painters seen on the second floor.⁵³ And of course, apart from a stairwell leading upstairs to a third floor, there are no other clues of Lam Qua's portrait practice upon which so many European visitors and sitters remarked.

⁵¹ Osmond Tiffany also states that Lam Qua owned a large number of engravings of English paintings, that his studio was decorated with his own copies of English paintings, and that he particularly admired the paintings of Sir Thomas Lawrence. Tiffany, *The Canton Chinese*, 85.

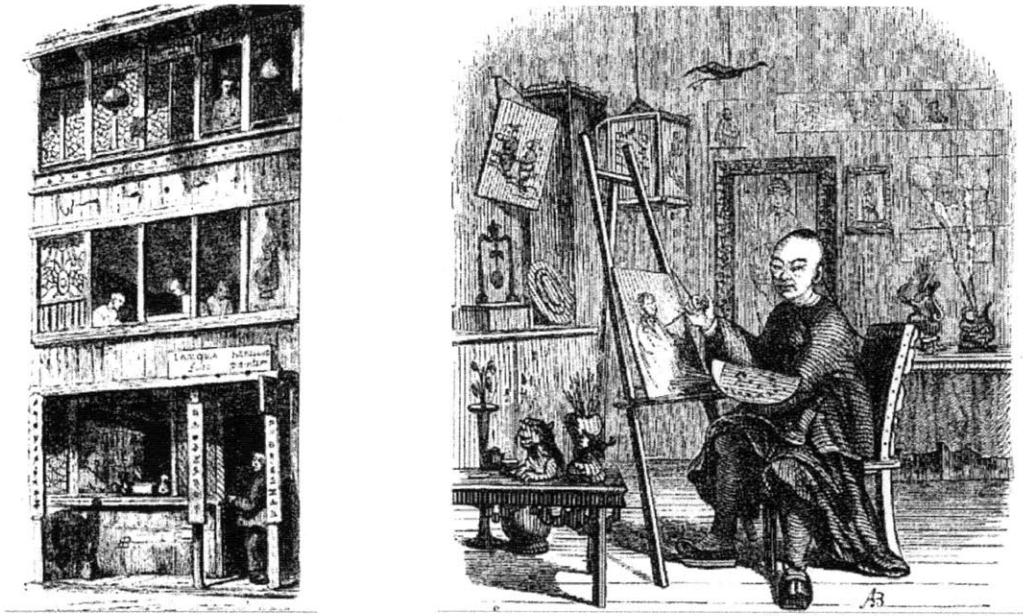
⁵² Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China*, 93.

⁵³ Karina Corrigan has argued that, given the scale of the trade, it is improbable that Canton studio would have only three painters at work. Karina Corrigan, "Chinese Botanical Paintings for the Export Market," *The Magazine Antiques* 165, no. 6 (2004): 99. However, if Guangzhou-era production was similar to Dafen-era production, then through a combination of putting out and workshop production, it would have been very possible for a single studio to produce such volumes of work with only three painters on site at any given time.

Versions of these images have been widely utilized by historians of the China trade as an illustration of the painting industry in Guangzhou. More rarely used as depictions of Lam Qua and his studio are two published engravings, from sketches by the French artist Auguste Borget.⁵⁴ One of the sketches depicts the interior studio of Lam Qua at work at an easel. The other is an exterior view from street level of Lam Qua's three-story building (figures 7-8). Borget, a French academy-trained painter and a friend of Honoré de Balzac, resided for ten months in Canton in 1838, producing sketches and drawings for paintings that were exhibited at the Salon of 1841.⁵⁵ In contrast to the exotic naiveté of the Ting Qua gouache, Borget's drawings and sketches operate within the more familiar conventions of a nineteenth-century French *plein air* realism. His engraved sketch of Lam Qua's building differs remarkably from the Ting Qua gouache in its plain depiction of vernacular wooden architecture. Through the second floor windows we see three men, two possibly in a working posture, but in no particular order or arrangement. On the third floor, a Western buyer appears to be peering out the window.

⁵⁴ It can be also distinguished from other known watercolor paintings of Guangzhou shopfronts, one identified by Craig Clunas as potentially of a painting shop, as well as the depictions of single Canton trade painters discussed in Chapter One.

⁵⁵ Borget's diary and other sketches of South China are also reproduced in Auguste Borget, *Sketches of China and the Chinese* (London: Tilt and Bogue, 1842).



Figures 7-8. Auguste Borget, *Sketches of Lam Qua studio, Handsome Face Painter*, engravings, published in Paul-Emile Daurand Forgues, *La Chine Ouverte Par Old Nick* (Paris: H. Fournier, 1845).

Borget's portrait of Lam Qua in his studio, too, de-emphasizes the exotic in favor of the conventional. Depicting a sparsely furnished and darkly lit room, it shows an assortment of strange objects and blurry paintings haphazardly placed around the artist at work on a European's portrait. Using a familiar academic device that invites metaphorical interpretations of mirroring and artistic identity, Borget has composed the drawing as if Lam Qua is painting him as he is drawing Lam Qua.

Borget's portrait of Lam Qua can be distinguished furthermore from Lam Qua's own self-portraits, of which two are known (figures 9-10).⁵⁶ The two compositions are nearly identical except that in the earlier portrait Lam Qua appears younger and without a moustache. Both paintings are in Lam Qua's characteristic portraiture style and composition, a naturalistic likeness with high tonal contrast, against a dark and undetailed background. Notably here, Lam Qua does not portray himself with any of the tools of painting nor in his much visited *atelier*. Indeed, he provides no hints as to the space or means by which he worked. Instead, the two paintings themselves showcase the

⁵⁶ One is securely dated by an inscription to 1853.

two painterly skills most valuable in a practice in which multiples are painted in short order as though they were "originals": close compositional repetition that also showcases rapid and fresh execution.

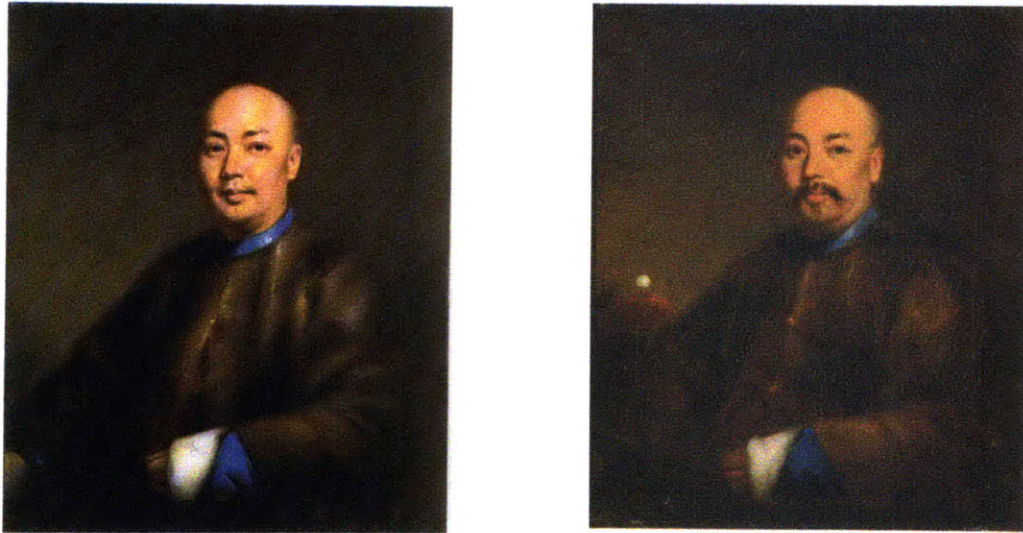


Figure 9. Lam Qua, *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, late 1840s, 27.3 x 23.2 cm. Coll. Peabody Essex Museum. Figure 10. Lam Qua, *Self portrait at the age of 52*, oil on canvas, 30.5 x 24.5 cm., 1853. Inscribed on reverse of frame: 1853年啞呱在广州五十二岁自画像 [The year 1853, Lam Qua in Guangzhou, a self portrait at 52 years]. Coll. Hong Kong Museum of Art AH1972.010.

A powerful narrative—that of the great painting factory—exists for the appealing gouache that purports to depict Ting Qua's studio. This narrative structures the mode of reception for collectors, viewers and historians seeking to piece together the details of this fascinating period of Sino-Western trade. A constructed narrative exists for the Borget drawings too, but it is the far more familiar narrative of an artist in his garret, a bohemian laborer who claims to seek realistic and truthful depiction. This is a European narrative which has its own social formation in nineteenth-century French realism, but to view it in these terms, we would have to abandon the radical distinction that has been posited between the Chinese mode of painting production and the Western one.

The Ting Qua studio gouaches and the Borget engravings of Lam Qua in his portrait studio represent, then, two distinct modes of encountering and understanding the Canton trade painter for the European traveler-consumer. Like Lavollée's written account, they have been treated in the historical record as instances of two separate modes of production: the sketching practice of a European artist and the division of labor in a Chinese painting industry. Yet, although the history, function and source of the Ting Qua studio gouaches remains the subject of speculation,⁵⁷ because they are made by a Chinese hand, they feel rather more like the authentic transmission of historical reality. But, for historians, neither Borget's nor Lam Qua's depictions of Lam Qua "himself" have served as illustrations of the "industry" in the way that Ting Qua's gouache has. Thus the image has often functioned securely—in both content and form—as an empirical illustration of the Canton painting trade, rather than a painting that consciously serves a particular image of Chinese artisanality and manufacture.

Although I suggest that Ting Qua's gouache is questionable as a depiction of the Guangzhou painting trade, to establish this we would need to answer the question: Were eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Canton trade paintings produced in an assembly line manner through a division of labor, and was this the great painting factory of Goethe's time and imagination? However, before we can retrieve the historical modes and means of production of Canton trade painting, a plethora of still more basic facts need to be established. As I have argued in Chapter One, fundamental questions remain as to the very identities of such well-studied artists as "Lam Qua" (perhaps one individual or two), "Spoilum" (perhaps his father or grandfather), and "Ting

⁵⁷ Due to the cutting and rebinding of the paintings over time, it is difficult to know how these paintings were bought, transported, displayed or first entered museum collections. One edge of one of the Peabody Essex Museum's gouache, however, shows it to have been previously bound in an album. 3 SEP 2009.

Qua."⁵⁸ Numerous other social and historical parameters of the trade in the period likewise remain unestablished in the extant scholarship. As a practice evidently influenced by its clients, consumer and patrons, Canton trade painting exemplifies that dictum of the social history of art, that a painting is "the deposit of a social relationship," with the important caveat that this presumed relationship has been nearly exclusively recorded by the consumers.⁵⁹ Left solely with the paintings themselves as an archive of the painters' production, Canton trade paintings thus exemplify the vexed nature of the artistic thing itself as a historical object.⁶⁰

The inconsistencies amongst the nineteenth-century European accounts of Lam Qua's studio raise a number of questions regarding the nature and organization of the Canton trade painting studios. Was there a hierarchy of training within Lam Qua's studio that corresponded to the stylistic hierarchy or price point of export paintings? Did a worker specialize "all his life" in only one minute detail, or did painters learn to paint whole paintings on their own? Did a watercolorist graduate into an oil-on-canvas painter, or was specialization medium-specific? Was there truly "no sense of superiority" among the watercolorists, the landscapists and the miniaturists—although such paintings were quite distinct in market value? Did Lam Qua fashion himself superior to his rivals because portraiture represented a new style and practice of painting altogether?

Other questions about Lam Qua's practice extend toward the social history of the Canton trade. Were Lam Qua's operations "far from the norm" or representative of trade painting as a whole? Were Lam Qua's workers family members or relatives, or were they drawn from skilled or unskilled migrants seeking work in the city? Did such workers also work in the ceramic or furniture

⁵⁸ On their uncertain historical identities, see Chapter One.

⁵⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 1.

⁶⁰ Caroline A Jones, "The Painting in the Attic," in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

painting trades, or did they pursue painting on paper and canvas as a particular professional path? How were women's and children's labor incorporated into painting production? Did a studio produce all its works on its own, or did it put-out to friends, "brothers," and former apprentices? Do the paintings on the walls of the Ting Qua gouache indicate a hierarchy of skill or price, or, instead the work of different studios and painters? Were paintings done only on order, or did painters and studios produce work "on speculation," or perhaps, for art's sake?

Were there, in other words, and as Stephen Rachman suggests, separate and distinct modes of production coinciding with the different types of commodities produced in Lam Qua's studio, and did each form of work organization correspond to a precise cultural value and market price? Or was his self-presentation as a master-artist rather a particular performance on Lam Qua's part, eagerly noted by European clients? For each half year that foreigners were not permitted to reside in Canton, and during which time the trade painters likely served the domestic market, did they reorient their production processes, practices, and performances?

This thicket of questions makes one thing clear: Despite the consistent use of Canton trade paintings as empirical illustrations by historians of China, basic facts regarding the production of these paintings remain completely unknown. Answering such questions would guide us toward an understanding of whether and how European models of manufacture, one in which guilds and artisanal cooperatives give way to putting-out workshops and then the industrial factory system, might intersect with the history of Canton trade painting. More importantly, understanding the production of Canton trade paintings would be necessary to evaluate it against European conceptions of art and artisanality, currently staged by assigning speculative roles of imitation and invention to certain artists, studios and painters. Did the "artist" as an autonomous and individual subject emerge out of an artisanal workshop system in Guangzhou as the European narrative of romantic modernism would suggest, or is there another explanation for Lam Qua's career? In short,

the questions raised by the Canton trade painting illuminate not only the questionable accuracy of European observations of artisanality and artistic subjectivity. They also entail questions of the universality of historical European conceptions of manufacture from which the notion of fine arts emerges as an antithesis.

Dafen Village and Assembled Labor

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Dafen village came to occupy a place in the Western imagination readily comparable to that of Canton trade painting in the nineteenth century. The cultural imaginary of Goethe's great painting factory has been echoed by a multitude of Western journalists who have toured Dafen village. Like nineteenth-century accounts of travel writers who shopped the streets of the Guangzhou port, contemporary reporters have use Dafen village as a fitting explanation for the China that exports the products eagerly purchased by global consumers. The established narrative—that the Chinese have industrialized "art" (making that is, *fake art*)—is echoed with palpable strains of incredulity, disdain, or outrage. By 2007, an American blogger would not have to visit Dafen or China to repeat the trope in perfect detail:

The works described by these glowing words are generally "hand painted" only in the sense that human beings actually handled them. They are not, however, the unique works of a gifted artist. Instead, they are produced in assembly line fashion by low-paid semiskilled workers who have been trained to simulate one element of a work of art: The first worker slathers on a sky with a large house painting brush. He/she then hands the "painting" to the next worker, who has been trained to paint a single cloud. Having performed the assigned duty, this worker then hands the product to the next person in line, who paints a single tree or whatever—and so it goes until you have a simulated piece of original art rolling off the end of the line.⁶¹

⁶¹ Dr. Robert Porter, "Original Oil Paintings!? Buyer Beware," *Survivor Art Gallery*, <http://www.survivorart.com/artknockoffs.html> (accessed FEB 2007).

Such descriptions are then paired with claims of Chinese piracy, exploitation, and disregard for the originality of Western art. Once again, many Westerners have found in South China the perfect instantiation of "assembly line painting," a practice that appears to negate fundamental principles of fine art and Western culture with a distinct Chineseness. Often fusing critiques of the industrial factory system with Eurocentric definitions of modern art, the image of China as a place where the division of labor is used to produce both commodities and "art" alike, continue to evoke romanticist anxieties of a Goethean order.

Now popularly known as the production center specializing in "assembly line painting" (*liushuixian hua* 流水线画), nearly every painter I have interviewed in Dafen village stated that they had worked in or managed an "assembly line" at some point in their careers at Dafen village. This stands in marked contrast to other production centers such as Xiamen, where firms emphasize that their paintings are "painted from beginning to end by a single painter" and where bosses claim to have no knowledge whatsoever of how to run an assembly line. What does "assembly line painting" designate in Dafen village, how is it practiced, and to what extent does it approach or negotiate the Western cultural imaginary of this particular form of "industrialization"?

Contrary to the stark contrasts suggested by these claims, my research in Dafen village and the South Chinese painting trade from 2006 to 2010 finds little to verify the enduring image of trade painting as based on a factory system in which painter-workers separate their tasks into minute steps in assembly line fashion. Neither did I find that the new image of Dafen as an industry specialist in assembly line painting corresponded to distinct differences in production practices "before" and "after" the widely promoted "invention" of assembly line painting by a Dafen firm. As I argue in Chapter One, the first and most famous factory of Dafen village, run by Huang Jiang, was a flexible workshop, operating a larger putting-out system outside the workshop, and not the "great painting

factory" evoked by contemporary journalists and taken up in popular imagination.⁶² In the second part of this chapter, I examine how practices of assembled labor—the division of labor, the separation of tasks, capitalist hierarchy, factory discipline, repetitive tasks, and the use of mechanization—are exploited at various levels and to various ends amongst Dafen painters and bosses, but do not fulfill the Goethean expectation of "assembly line painting" so widely utilized as a production imaginary. In contrast to such claims of "industrial production," I argue that even the practices of the largest Dafen firms are continuous with trade painting practices of the smallest scale in Dafen. Rather, I show that the appropriation of assembled labor serves as the grounds on which their bosses claim an authorial artistic and entrepreneurial identity. Moreover, in contrast to the cultural expectation that the assembly of labor leads to an inevitable mechanization of the human labor, at Dafen village I find just the opposite—that divisions of labor, work hierarchies and ways of separating tasks, lead not to a general deskilling of the work force, but rather, to the skilling of painters and to wider performances of artistic identity.

Shenzhen ArtLover's Assembly Line Factory

In 1992, the painter-worker Wu Ruiqiu (吴瑞球) broke from the factory of Huang Jiang—the place where he had trained and worked since leaving his home village in Chaozhou over ten years before (figure 11).⁶³ Wu has told the story of his break for independence so often that it has taken on legendary dimensions. Young and brash, within a few years Wu found himself with no capital,

⁶² In likening Dafen village's oil painting industry to flexible production, I also concur with the findings of Eugene Cooper on other artisanal communities in Dongyang County in Zhejiang province in the pre- and post-reform eras Eugene Cooper and Jiang Yinhuo, *Artisans and Entrepreneurs of Dongyang County: Economic Reform and Flexible Production in China* (Arnouk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁶³ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

orders, or clients.⁶⁴ He knew, however, of the opportunities offered by the Canton Trade Fair, the semiannual export products fair that is the world's largest and longest-running consumer products trade fair held in Guangzhou.⁶⁵ Carrying a stock of paintings under his arms, Wu embarked for the city two hours away by bus. He arrived at the exposition center only to discover that he ought to have paid and registered for an exhibitor's pass. Refusing to leave defeated, Wu spread his paintings on the sidewalk outside the fair building.⁶⁶ That day, a stranger walked up to him and placed an unbelievable order: 400,000 paintings of forty images to be delivered in fifty days.⁶⁷ According to Wu, the client was the American company Wal-Mart.

According to Wu, Wal-Mart's order was larger and its time frame shorter than any known to have been achieved at Dafen village. In 2008, Wu would boast that, even with an established factory firm now at his disposal, he would not dare attempt such a production run again.⁶⁸ As his story goes, Wu returned to Dafen village, rented a space of two thousand square meters, and hired over two hundred painters, many drawn from his home village and county since Huang Jiang had apparently

⁶⁴ According to Wu this was because Huang Jiang told his clients not to deal with Wu. Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008. According to Shenzhen journalist Wen Youping who authored a history of Dafen village in 2006, Wu had sought a loan of 3000 yuan (400 USD) from Huang Jiang who had refused him. Wen Youping 温友平, *大芬村的崛起 [The Rise of Dafen Village]*, (Shenzhen: Haitian Press, 2006), 18.

⁶⁵ Formerly named the Canton Export Commodities Fair. It was established in the 1957 in order to control foreign commercial transactions and limit the mobility of foreign traders in China. Today, as the German CEO of what is often described as the world's largest trade fair exhibition company explained to me, the Canton Export Commodities Fair remains the world's longest running and most important trade fair for consumer products.

⁶⁶ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

⁶⁷ Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 25. Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

⁶⁸ According to Wu and the dealer Cai Chusheng, in the summer of 2007, Wal-Mart was looking to put out an order of 800,000 paintings in 30 days. Wu and Cai both refused the order and to my knowledge no one at Dafen village took it on. Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008. Cai Chusheng, interview with author, 18 FEB 2008.

forbidden his own painters to work for Wu.⁶⁹ Wu calculated that he had about forty days to produce the paintings, and thus, on average each painter would have to paint about fifty paintings a day.

However, after the first day, Wu found that each painter was producing paintings that were far too individualistic: every painter's version of a given image could easily be discerned from another's. Wal-Mart's order—hundreds and thousands of copies of about forty images—would not be completed in a uniform fashion and Wu would not be able to provide an acceptably standardized product in time. Wu told everyone to stop working. Frustrated, he went to watch television.

Suddenly, he claims, he saw a news report on an electronics assembly line factory. Wu then realized, if a complex electronic product could be produced on an assembly line, why couldn't an oil painting?⁷⁰

As the story goes, Wu then personally set up teams of ten to fifteen painters for each image, mixing the paints himself, and assigning each person a separate task in the line—background, trees, sky, and so on, with a painter-master to manage each team.⁷¹ Canvases were tacked up across a long row of painting stations; the painters moved from one canvas to another in a set sequence. Speed was crucial since the relative wetness of the applied oil paint is important to achieving the right painterly effect. One "master" was assigned to "manage" each team. The paintings came out perfectly—thousands of copies of a single image that each resembled the other sufficiently to fulfill the client's expectations, though Wu could not specify how Wal-Mart's expectations were

⁶⁹ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

⁷⁰ Wu Ruiqiu, interview in *Dafen Art* magazine, 25 May 2009.

⁷¹ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008. In Wen's 2006 account, each of Wu's assembly line teams had 20 painters. Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 25.

communicated to him.⁷² With this process, Wu claims that he was able to consistently take on orders far larger and with faster turnaround times than Huang Jiang's firm, and Wu's Shenzhen Art Lover Culture and Art Development Co. Ltd. grew into Dafen's largest and most powerful enterprise.⁷³ By 2005, the company's annual gross profit was estimated at 20 million yuan and it claimed to be producing 200,000 paintings per year.⁷⁴ Though an impressive statistic, this *annual* production is notably only *half* of the 400,000 paintings for that *single*, fifty-day order from the invention tale.

As an anecdote retold many times to journalists, Wu's tale of invention focuses on a moment of entrepreneurial innovation that celebrates a narrative of industrialization.⁷⁵ In keeping with this role, Wu has become the primary industry spokesmen for Dafen village, and, since 2008, the head of Dafen's Art Industry Association. In this role, Wu emphasizes that "original creation" (*yuanchuang* 原创) is the next logical step for Dafen village's creative industry, and talks inspiringly of his visions

⁷² I pressed Wu to explain how he knew that Wal-Mart would not accept these differences, he claimed, "I just knew." However, Wu's self-defined expectations for standardization was probably not new for the trade in the early 1990s; In working in Huang Jiang's firm for ten years, Wu would have been familiar with orders of several tens of thousands of the same image destined for American retailers, where likely some level of product similarity would have been desired.

⁷³ The firm's Chinese name is *Jijiyuan wenhua yishu fazhan youxian gongsi* 集艺源文化艺术发展有限公司.

⁷⁴ Liu Zhong 刘众 et al., "大芬村借 '外脑' 起飞 [Dafen Village borrows an 'Outsider's Brain' to take off]," *深圳特区报 Shenzhen SEZ News* (15 DEC 2005): A05.

⁷⁵ Since 2005, most Western journalists who have reported on Dafen village have interviewed Wu Ruiqiu. See for example, Clifford Coonan, "Faking it," *South China Morning Post Magazine* (Hong Kong: 25 SEP 2005): 20; Martin Paetsch, "China's Art Factories: Van Gogh From the Sweatshop," *Spiegel Online* (Frankfurt: 23 AUG 2006); Evan Osnos, "Chinese Village Paints By Incredible Numbers," *Chicago Tribune World* (Chicago: 13 FEB 2007); Marc Epstein, "A Dafen, on Peint À La Chaîne," *L'Express* (Paris: 26 APR 2007); "China's Fake Art Market Pinched," *The Globe and Mail, Report on Business* (Toronto: 25 SEP 2008): B11. In Paetsch's interview, Wu is said to envision a future in which paintings would be produced like MacDonald's fast food.

for opening a training school in Dafen village that trains painters not only in painting, but in management and image design (i.e., originality).⁷⁶



11. Yu Haibo, Portrait of Wu Ruiqiu, from *China Dafen Oil Painting Village*, digital photograph, 2005. Courtesy of the artist.

Though riveting, Wu's account of the invention of assembly line painting in Dafen village in 1992 contains a number of embellishments that serve to match expectations of industrialization. Although all published accounts concur that Wu's direct client was Wal-Mart and not a subcontractor, it is improbable that a Wal-Mart employee would be ordering 400,000 paintings from a man on a sidewalk. More likely, and in keeping with standard trade practices, Wu's order was piecemeal passed to him by a subcontractor whose relationship to Wal-Mart he would not have been privy to. When it comes to the actual operations of assembly line painting, other aspects of Wu's account also begin to unravel. Importantly, his account differs in important details from the

⁷⁶ Wu's vision is highlighted in the Shanghai World Expo exhibition of Dafen village, discussed in the conclusion.

recollections of former painter-workers who worked at his factory at the time. Although Wu insisted that the assembly lines he set up were made up of teams of ten to fifteen painters, with a designated and higher-skilled painter acting as a "manager," former assembly line workers that I interviewed did not recall ever painting with a group numbering more than five or six. Nor did they recall the presence of masters or managers overseeing each assembly line. To Wu's claim that he personally mixed the paints for each assembly line team, one former worker expressed surprise and said, "That is simply not true."⁷⁷ Wu's former workers describe the "assembly line painting" in his factory as a practice that matches how "assembly line painting" is practiced widely in Dafen village: in groups of two to six, and with little hierarchy. If these accounts of his former workers are accurate, then Wu's embellishments are interesting in that each serve to mystify the immaterial work of managing the work hierarchy on the one hand, and as the manager of more transcendent skills, such as the work of "palette," on the other.

Did Wu's narrative of assembly line painting create a hierarchy in the assembled artistic labor? By Wu's contemporary accounts, his assembly lines were managed through a clear managerial distinction between "painter-masters" (*huashi* 画师) and "painter-workers" (*huagong* 画工). Yet, when I pressed him on how these distinctions were controlled, he acknowledged that amongst the members of a given team, there was no differentiation of salary. Instead, Wu followed the standard trade practice of paying each worker by the piece, and thus, each member of an assembly line team was paid an equal portion of the rate per piece. As Wu himself explained, "When we're talking such low-skilled work, who would claim to be better at one thing or the other?"⁷⁸ This contradiction

⁷⁷ Anonymous, interview with author, 22 JAN 2009. Indeed, since the paints for such paintings tend to be used straight from the tube, it seems unlikely that a "boss" would take on the task of mixing paints or of setting up the palette. I have also never observed this practice in any assembly line team.

⁷⁸ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

suggests that there was no functional hierarchy of artistic labor or skill—beyond that of the "boss"—in Wu Ruiqiu's assembly line factory. Former workers furthermore objected to the notion that there was a hierarchy at the time, by pointing out that even Wu painted alongside them in the assembly line.

Did Wu's assembly lines have to be overseen and managed—with the sort of disciplinary structures we have come to associate with assembly line production? According to Wu, his factory never maintained any prescribed work hours, nor were there any attempts to enforce work times. Likewise, former workers recalled neither rules nor penalties for arriving late or working too slowly. As one former worker recalled nostalgically, "Back then we had nothing else to do. We'd paint, eat together, then paint together....sleep when we were tired..."⁷⁹ Since piecework was the sole basis of payment, "on time" delivery of the finished product was the primary concern of the boss. And since painters were paid an equal part of only the finished pieces of the team, there was substantial social pressure from within the team to complete the order in time.

The relative freedom with regard to the workers' control of their time at Wu's assembly line factory contrasts with the practices of a contemporaneous painting factory in Xiamen. Lefumen (乐富门) is a firm owned by a Korean boss with family ties to the province of Fujian. The firm opened a large four-story factory in Wushipu (乌石浦) village in 1992, at the same time that Wu established Shenzhen ArtLover in Dafen. Unlike Wu's factory, however, Lefumen required all workers to punch time cards at the factory gate and employed a factory guard to control workers' entry and exit.

⁷⁹ Wu Zhennan, interview with author, 11 FEB 2009.

Although painters were also paid by the piece, they were barred from work if they arrived late.⁸⁰ In addition, Lefumen compelled its workers to purchase Korean-imported oil paints exclusively from the company itself for use in the workers' paintings. One former worker recalls a dramatic day in which all painters were assembled for a scolding from the manager, who was angry that one worker was discovered secretly using cheaper Chinese-made paints for his paintings.⁸¹ Although employing these practices of control over workers' time as well as their source of materials, the Lefumen factory never employed the type of assembled labor used by Wu in Dafen village.⁸²

The partition of a single painting into ever finer divisions of labor and specialization seems to follow the classic logic of mechanization for productivity gains. Yet, although Wu's firm is reputed to be an "assembly line painting" factory, the firm only partitioned and reassembled labor when the orders were so large and urgent that they required it. Without these pressures, it was preferable to continue the standard trade practice of assigning a given order to a single painter, leaving him to deliver all the completed products on time, thereby maintaining the semblance of visual consistency.

Importantly however, Wu's account of assembled labor reveals why it is needed in Dafen trade painting. According to Wu's account, the invention of the "assembly line" was crucial to filling the enormous Wal-Mart order within the time allotted because paintings that were not thus standardized

⁸⁰ Yin Xunzhi recalled being barred from entry whenever he was late during his three-month tenure at Lefumen factory in 1993-4. At another factory in Xiamen run by a former apprentice of Lefumen's boss, Yin Xunzhi and Yang Mo, both former workers, recalled that the manager's buddhist beliefs stipulated that painter-workers eat only vegetarian meals. Yin, who went out to eat meat at lunch hour, eventually argued with the manager over the issue and was fired. Yin Xunzhi, interviews with author, 2008-09. Yang Mo, interview with author, Xiamen, 24 MAR 2009.

⁸¹ The former worker has incorporated the episode into an autobiographical internet romance novel in which the main character burns with nationalist shame while being lectured by the Korean manager. Feng Yun 风云, *爱在残阳如血* [*Love in a Blood Red Sunset*] (2007), available: <http://article.hongxiu.com/a/2007-5-7/2116300.shtml>.

⁸² That is, Lefumen never subdivided a single painting into multiple tasks. J. West Chen and Yang Mo (former workers of Lefumen factory), interviews with author, Xiamen, 24 MAR 2009.

would never have been accepted by his client. The same ten or fifteen painters could paint as many paintings just as quickly, but each painter's work would be different because "every painting is affected by the painter's individual touch," no matter how hard they worked to "copy each other."⁸³ Instead, it was through the division of a single painting into separate tasks repeated in a sequence by numerous painters, that the product could be standardized. That is, precisely because multiple hands touched the canvas did thousands of completed corpus paintings appear to be the work of a single hand.

This explanation of the need for an assembly line process is remarkable—and needs to be distinguished from the romanticist critique of the factory. In order to produce the Wal-Mart product that displays its authenticity as "art" through a single style as seen in the touch of the hand, it was necessary to divide the painting into discrete and separate tasks to be performed by many painters. While standardization of the product has always been a central goal of assembly line production, in the case of hand-painted oil paintings, that uniformity is put to a wholly different effect: it allows the consumer to imagine that stylistic consistency represents the work of a single artist. In other words, in Dafen village, the purpose of assembly line painting was not to remove the human mind in order to mass-produce thousands of paintings, nor for the boss to gain greater managerial control over unskilled workers. Rather, its purpose is to invent, through the division of labor, a collaborative stylistic identity that could pass for an individual style expressed in traces of painterly touch and brushwork.

Assembled labor at Dafen village can therefore be understood as a practice that utilizes certain divisions of labor for a single image only under specific conditions of order size and allotted time—

⁸³ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

but only because the visual authenticity of a single hand is required in the product.⁸⁴ One Dafen painter-dealer and former painter-worker, reminiscing about the heyday of assembly line painting, said, "Back then, there were too many orders and too few painters. Today, there are too many painters and too few orders."⁸⁵ That is, historically in Dafen village, assembling labor was necessary not when labor was cheap, plentiful, unskilled and supplicant, but rather when orders were large and labor somewhat more dear. In both instances, the market demand of the assembled labor is the same: paintings for a single order that stylistically appear to be singular.

Numerous Chinese and Western journalists have credited Wu with "inventing" assembly line painting, for envisioning the "MacDonaldization of art," and he has emerged as Dafen village's de-facto spokesperson. Wu privately acknowledges, of course, that he was not the inventor of "assembly line painting," only the first to employ prevalent practices at a large scale.⁸⁶ As Wu's admission suggests, the assembly line practices he is said to have invented were and continue to be widely and commonly practiced amongst trade painters. In its simplest form, a division of labor takes place when a painter's wife or girlfriend assists him in the preparation of canvases and in executing the under-painting (*dadi* 打底). As economic historian Maxine Berg has pointed out, the incorporation of social hierarchies of gender into work organization provides many economic advantages—such as maintaining trade knowledge within the family, reducing turnover, and

⁸⁴ By extension, I propose that similar questions could be posed to the Canton trade: were there conditions under which assembly line painting might be necessary to fulfill the market demand for *both* quantity and stylistic unity?

⁸⁵ Wu Shennan, interview with author, 11 FEB 2009.

⁸⁶ Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008.

containing recruitment and training costs.⁸⁷ Notably, no female painters I have interviewed in Dafen have been able to appropriate the labor of their husbands or boyfriends in a comparable way, although some have achieved "management" positions as a dealer of their husband's art that would, outside Dafen, often be viewed as superior.

In addition to or in lieu of his wife or girlfriend, a painter may also divide up the layers of a painting between himself and his apprentices. One Dafen painter, Shen Ruixing, has for the past seven years produced between two to ten thousand 6 x 8 inch landscape paintings annually, depicting the four seasons. From 2006 to 2008, he would employ one apprentice at a time to alternate tasks with him (figures 12-13).⁸⁸ In 2008, I observed master and apprentice together execute four paintings at a time in under twenty minutes, painting to rock music. Since apprentices left his employ regularly, Shen trained a new one every six to eight months. When no apprentice was available, Shen simply painted alone, following the same sequence of steps. When asked what factor most crucially determines his speed of production, Shen claimed that it was his mood.

⁸⁷ Berg, 1988, 7-8. Unlike eighteenth-century European examples though, in Dafen painters rarely train their own children or incorporate them into their work organization, because most expect their children to attain a higher level of education than themselves and to do better. If the adult-child labor group in Dafen is rare, the husband-wife labor group is the norm.

⁸⁸ Shen Ruixing (沈瑞兴), interview with author, 15 and 16 JAN 2008.



Figures 12-13. Shen Ruixing and apprentice at beginning and end of assembled labor process for *Autumn* paintings.
From video by author. 15 JAN 2008.

Although assembly line practices are thus prevalent in Dafen village, when it comes to the structures of hierarchy within a given "line," Dafen painters provide a diverse picture. Many assembly line teams shared an equal portion of the pay-per-piece (as in Wu Ruiqiu's factory), yet some assembly line teams were paid according to a hierarchy of skill: background painters get less of a share of each piece than tree painters who get less than animal, cloud, or wave painters.⁸⁹ Likewise, apprentices who worked in assembly line style are paid less than a quarter of the masters' piece-rate per painting.⁹⁰ Wives and girlfriends typically received no wages, though they often controlled the household finances.⁹¹ Attitudes towards the desirability of working in assembly lines also diverge: whereas some painters considered assembly line painting especially hard and tiring work, another would report that he sometimes set up assembly line teams "for fun," when they have a "good group of friends" who want to get a big order off quickly.⁹²

⁸⁹ Zhao Xiaoyong, interview with author, 16 FEB 2008.

⁹⁰ Naturally this varies widely. Further on apprentice-based production, see Chapter Four.

⁹¹ Painters whose sole bank account are held in their wives' or girlfriends' names are common amongst Dafen painters.

⁹² Wu Shennan, interview with author, 11 FEB 2009.

The form of piecework assembly line painting utilized by Wu Ruiqiu was thus widely in use both before and after Wu's large-scale application of it. It enabled anyone who could assemble a few colleagues, family members or apprentices, to take on large orders in a short amount of time, alternating in managerial roles depending on who brought in the order. Virtually every other painter or boss I have interviewed at Dafen village remarked on the simplicity of assembly line painting, and rejected the idea that any special skill is required to conceptualize or manage an assembly line beyond that of understanding a particular painting. Their nonchalance with respect to what is regarded by other professionals as a unique practice is attributable to the fact that assembly line painting is utilized primarily to produce paintings that are widely and consistently ordered, paintings with which most on the line would already be thoroughly familiar. The management of an assembly line would thus be more tacit than explicit. Assembly line paintings is utilized primarily for images that the vast majority of Dafen painters have painted at some point of their careers. Although this includes a wide range of images from landscapes, still-lives, streetscapes, "decorative," "abstract" and "impressionist" paintings, it does not include "classical," "figurative," or "realist" images. As suggested by Wu Ruiqiu's initial explanation, assembly lines are utilized primarily for "low quality" paintings, in which a particularly loose, "spontaneous" and painterly style with fresh brushwork is conspicuously required. That is, it is a technique useful for those styles and compositions that impose less exacting standard for resemblance between paintings; what is crucial is that, as a group, they stylistically resemble the work of a single hand.

The expectation that the division of labor leads to a gradual deskilling of the work force does not hold true in Dafen village, since by taking part in specific tasks in the production process, unskilled painters such as apprentices are trained to paint the whole painting.⁹³ This transfer of tacit

⁹³ For further detail on this training, see Chapter Four.

knowledge has also been common in the case of a wife-painter who might assist her partner in producing thousands of copies of a single *gao* over several years. The wife of one van Gogh specialist began by helping her husband paint backgrounds but eventually made *Sunflowers* her particular specialization and took over the entire production of this product line in the family studio. In 2009, she was known as Dafen's fastest *Sunflowers* painter and could completed one 20 x 24 inch *Sunflowers* painting in under fifty minutes.⁹⁴ In other words, assembly line painting does not necessarily result in the mindlessness of the laborer or restrict the laborer to a lifetime specialization in a sub-product component. On the contrary, individual painters alternate fluidly between acting as "painter-masters" and "painter-workers" on the basis of skill and the source of the order, such that the difference between these roles can become practicably negligible.

Noah Art's Total Assembly Line

In 2004, Huang Ye (黄野), a painter-worker who had also worked for a time in a furniture firm in Shunde, Guangdong province, founded Dafen village's Noah Oil Painting Reproduction & Art Product Company (Noah Art).⁹⁵ Noah Art specializes in "antiqued home decor," which consists primarily of lightly distressed wood products, such as paintings, furniture, screens, jewelry boxes and mirrors, all manufactured by the firm with hand-painted decoration. Founded in 2003 and therefore new on the Dafen scene, the firm has not yet been prominently featured in official governmental

⁹⁴ Fieldnotes and interview with author, 30 DEC 2008.

⁹⁵ The firm *Noya youhua gongye youxian gongsi* 诺亚油画工业有限公司 (literally: Noah Oil Painting Industrial Ltd. Co.) is an international firm with subsidiary firms in Singapore, Taiwan and Japan.

publications, nor in the news media, and thus far operates in relative obscurity.⁹⁶ According to the firm's boss, Huang Ye, Noah Art is a subcontractor supplying, amongst others, the American retailers JC Penny and Target, and many American shoppers would recognize these retailers' products also featured in Noah Art's showrooms. Huang's best and longest-running clients, however, are two French and Italian wholesale decor firms he would not identify. In 2007, Noah Art shipped seven containers of products to the United States. During the economic downturn of 2008-2009, his production increased rapidly, to the envy of his competitors. Headquartered on the eighth floor of the Dafen Trade Building, the company occupied 12,000 square meters of this building for its main offices from 2004 to 2010. From 2005 to 2008, the firm also maintained a second 20,000 square meters manufacturing factory space about an hour away from Dafen village in Longgang district, but in the fall of 2008 Huang moved all his operations to Dafen village, renting several even larger spaces for woodworking, storage, and dormitories for his workers. As of 2009, Noah Art was employing roughly sixty staff members, although it had the capacity to accommodate two hundred or more workers in its dormitory and factories, an expansion for which the firm wanted to be ready.

⁹⁶ My account of Noah Art is based primarily on interviews with Huang Ye (21 FEB 2008, and 30 MAR 2009), an interview with one anonymous former worker (11 FEB 2009), one anonymous current worker (1 APR 2009), and the account of Yu Haibo, a photojournalist who spent months photographing Noah Art factories in 2005-2006. Noah Art promotional brochures 2008; Ren Xiaofeng 任晓峰 and Zhou Zhiquan 周志权, eds. *Special Villagers of Dafen* 大芬村的特殊村民 (Guangzhou 广州市: Lingnan Art Press 岭南美术出版社, 2006).



Figure 14. Yu Haibo, portrait of Huang Ye, from *China Dafen Oil Painting Village*, digital photograph, 2005. Courtesy of the artist. Figure 15. Assembly line painting at Noah Art factory, 7 APR 2009. Photo by author.

In my 2008 and 2009 interviews with Huang Ye, he boasted that his company is the only in Dafen village to have truly turned the "entire process" of art production into an assembly line. In direct contrast with Wu Ruiqiu, Huang Ye argued that "originality" is simply something his company achieves through the division of labor. "Assembly-line-ification" (*liushuixian hua* 流水线化), as he called it, extended to each and every aspect of his company's operations. Marketing research, design, execution, critique, and revision are each the province of a separate person within his company's creative team. The conceptualizer of a painting does not need to execute the actual work, said Huang, because "his time is better utilized elsewhere."⁹⁷ After original conception and copyright registration, both performed by separate individuals in separate departments, a given product design is then separated into a sequence of tasks. Woodworkers, painters, decorators and artists produce the products in an assembly line spread throughout the factory, overseen by a foreman.⁹⁸ Each step in the packaging of products—attaching of stickers, price tags, bubble and plastic wrapping, outfitting in cardboard cases, crating—requires an assembly line. In art-making, according to Huang

⁹⁷ Huang Ye, interview with author, 30 MAR 2009.

⁹⁸ Author's fieldnotes, 30 MAR 2009.

Ye, "the more steps the better."⁹⁹ To prove the importance of the division of labor to his business model, Noah Art invoices detail this division of labor, providing a rate-per-piece of each discrete step. In one 2009 order for packaged and framed paintings, the invoice detailed the price per piece of nine stages of design, production and packaging.¹⁰⁰

Huang Ye's portrayal of his firm amounts to a decorative arts production that has subsumed the exalted "fine" arts within its overall operations. Despite Huang Ye's such grand claims, however, from what I observed, the tasks performed in his sprawling factory's "assembly lines" resemble that of most larger workshops in Dafen village. Paintings are tacked up on the walls in grids, and worked on, one task at a time, by approximately five or six workers. Their tasks range from the simple (background washes) to the complex (flowers, furred animals, etc.). One "artist" who was said by a manager of the team to be at work "designing" was in effect performing the activity of sketching the composition (*qigao*) and adding finishes such as highlights on the paintings. During my visits to the factory, there were indeed as many workers working at computers in the office and packing up products for shipping as there are working on the paintings themselves. For Huang Ye, these activities constitute a "total assembly line;" yet all of these very same practices are employed by Dafen artists working alone, in smaller studios, within families, in Wu Ruiqiu's factory, and so on.

However, Huang Ye's firm can be distinguished from other workshops in Dafen village in one important respect. Huang Ye argues that typical Dafen putting-out rates cannot compete with his factory's lower costs. He claimed, "No matter how you calculate it, my factory can do it faster, cheaper, and better." Huang Ye's efficiencies are possible, he argues, because, unique amongst all the companies and workplaces I have surveyed in the trade, Huang Ye's workers were paid monthly on the basis of a daily wage, with the average worker earning 60 yuan (9 USD) per day in 2008 and

⁹⁹ Huang Ye, interview with author, 21 FEB 2008 and 30 MAR 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Author's fieldnotes, 30 MAR 2009.

2009. This would add up to be comparable with what Dafen trade painters earn on average in a month, assuming that their piecework from month to month was even (approximately 1800 yuan or 300 USD). In addition to a stable monthly salary, Huang's workers could choose to live and eat in the company's dormitory, for which they paid 200 yuan per month (30 USD), which would have been on the lower end of rates for living situations in Dafen village.¹⁰¹

To create a new product, Huang insisted, he must educate his clients and anticipate their needs by presenting them original creations before they have even thought of them, something for which an assembly line of creativity, design, and marketing research is required. Noah Art's higher-level "executives," include a "Top Spokesperson for Art Image," a "Director of Manufacturing," "Development Designer," a "Space Designer and Everyday Life Artist," and a "Head of Sales and Creativity."¹⁰² From this group, according to Huang, "original creation" (*chuangzao* 创造) is produced in assembly line fashion. In the executive team is a marketing researcher, whom Huang said, "...only goes to art exhibitions....because this is the only thing he likes to do."¹⁰³ Huang declined to disclose the salaries of these artist-executives, but indicated that each received bonus payments at the conclusion of a large order (which is in effect another form of flexible remuneration also employed at Dafen village for "painter-masters" who work for others' firms).

Overlaid upon the cold calculation with which Huang describes the production of art in his factory, in which a model of the "total assembly line" (*quan liushuixian* 全流水线) was developed in order to realize a competitive position in the industry, he also fashions himself and his creative team

¹⁰¹ Huang Ye, interview with author, 30 MAR 2009.

¹⁰² Translations of these titles are my own: *Zuijia yishu xingxiang daiyanren* 最佳艺术形象代言人, *chengchan changzhang* 生产厂长, *kafa shejishi* 开发设计师, *kongjian shejishi*, *shenghuo yishujia* 空间设计师, 生活艺术家, *xingxiao&chuangyi zonglin* 营销&创意总监.

¹⁰³ Huang Ye, interview with author, 30 MAR 2009.

romantically as a "family of artists." In the factory's many large spaces, one large room is reserved for himself and his creative "brothers and sisters" to paint at imposingly grand easels. Monumentally sized paintings by Huang and these artists fill the space, where he claims that famous artists from Beijing have come to work as artists-in-residence. Huang's receiving room for guests and clients is furnished with traditional Chinese redwood furniture, where he displays a range of fashionable high-end Chinese "antiques" that he nonetheless reminded me "can all be manufactured through an assembly line."¹⁰⁴ Extremely loquacious, he professed a deep knowledge of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy, and claimed that he practices a certain kind of new-age yoga "only in his mind." Waxing poetic in his evaluation of the United States, a country he has never visited, Huang Ye declared that he knows it very well as a "wasteful society....just look at all the garbage I ship to them every year."¹⁰⁵ Such performances are clearly useful to a boss like Huang to diffuse any hint of "exploitation" in his factory, even as, with evident cynicism, he described both the "assemblification" of the products that he produces and the American market for them. But by my observation, Huang Ye's practices and its effects are less divergent from the widespread practices of assembled labor throughout Dafen's flexible workers and amongst Huang's competitors than he had claim. As with Wu Ruiqiu, more unique and telling than his firm's practices are the explanations he provides for them.

Performing Hierarchy

Does the emergence of these large enterprises in Dafen village over the past two decades demonstrate a progression from, 1) rural workshops to, 2) an urbanized piecework putting-out system to, 3) a quasi-industrial factory? Is there a growing distinction between bosses, managers and

¹⁰⁴ Huang Ye, interview with author, 30 MAR 2009.

¹⁰⁵ Huang Ye, interview with author, 30 MAR 2009.

unskilled workers, and are hierarchies of skill and social capital developed in order for bosses to realize the surplus value from the work of increasingly deskilled laborers? Are Dafen's great painting factories producing painting, "rapidly, cheaply and indistinguishably from the original" by putting painters to "totally mechanical operations such as any child can be employed to perform"?

Whether in its initial formation as Huang Jiang's "factory" in 1989, or as Wu Ruiqiu's "assembly line painting" of the late-1990s, or as Huang Ye's twenty-first-century wage-based "total assembly line," Dafen village's assembly line painting firms have rarely fulfilled Goethe's polemic, nor the expectations for a rational industrialization of art. Although Dafen's workshops do not on the whole resemble the artisanal craft shop often posed as a traditional precursor to modern industrialized forms of mass production, neither do any Dafen factories operate a Fordist industrial assembly line: in which a product moves along a powered line from worker to worker instead of being moved by workers from workstation to workstation, or instead of the workers moving from object to object. Moreover, the technological definition of a factory—as in Andrew Ure's "productive machines impelled by a central power source"¹⁰⁶—is also not strictly met even by a 20,000 square meters factory space in Xiamen that employed over a thousand painters and utilized computers and machines for many tasks (the preparation of wood and painting surfaces, for designing new images, and for digitally printing the underpainting of the paintings themselves) except the central one of hand-painting.¹⁰⁷ Nor, in these factories, have I observed managerial and disciplinary structures such as have been widely reported in other Shenzhen industries. In one Xiamen firm, the boss got lost taking me to one of his "factories" and when we got there, I found that the doors had no locks because the workers came and went as they pleased. Moreover, when the

¹⁰⁶ For an extended discussion of definitions of a factory, see Robertson, Paul L. *Authority and Control in Modern Industry: Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 1999.

¹⁰⁷ Sim Wu (Director of Xiamen Aport Art and Craft Ltd. Co.), interview with author, 26 MAR 2009.

firms' orders were down, the boss permitted his workers to paint inside the firms' factory space orders they got themselves from other bosses. In an industry that produces a "handmade" product, even the largest assembly line factory utilizing a number of machines would hardly measure up to Marx's formulation that "In handcrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him."¹⁰⁸

The debate between the Marxist economist Stephen Marglin and the economic historian David Landes, in their respective essays, "What Do Bosses Do?" (1974) and "What Do Bosses Really Do?" (1984) frames some relevant questions here on the origins and functions of capitalist hierarchy.¹⁰⁹ Marglin's essay turns upon a key historical change in the differentiation between the guild and capitalist division of labor. Wrote Marglin:

...the guild division of labor evolved into the capitalist division of labor, in which the workman's task typically became so specialized and minute that he had no product to sell, or at least none for which there was a wide market, and had therefore to make use of the capitalist as intermediary to integrate his labor with the labor of others and transform the whole into a marketable product.¹¹⁰

In other words, Marglin argued that the capitalist boss utilized the division of labor and separation of tasks as a means of controlling production by making his own role as a capitalist manager indispensable, thereby "dividing and conquering" his workers like "an imperial power in their

¹⁰⁸ Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *Capital; a Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 1: 422.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen A. Marglin, "What Do Bosses Do?—the Origins and Functions of Hierarchy in Capitalist Production," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 6, no. 2 (1974): 60-112. David S. Landes, "What Do Bosses Really Do?," *The Journal of Economic History* 46, no. 3 (1986): 585-623.

¹¹⁰ Marglin, "What Do Bosses Do?," 63-64.

colonies."¹¹¹ Marglin portrays the putting-out system of artisanal craft shops as one that offered the artisan more autonomy.

Critiquing Marglin's utopian image of the putting-out system, David Landes argued that the guild master and the putter-out was already a "boss" in all the senses Marglin attributed to the later stage of capitalism. Landes used his own authoritative work in eighteenth-century German watch manufacture, a classic account of industrialization which Marglin himself used extensively in *Bosses*, to illustrate his objections.¹¹² For Landes, the appropriation of others' labor is a basic activity: a craftsman appropriates the labor of his family and then his apprentices, just as a boss appropriates the labor of factory workers.¹¹³ For Landes, the division of labor is organic, while it is the momentum of technological changes that brings about the modern factory system.¹¹⁴ For Marglin, the basis of the hierarchal division of labor is class, and technological changes are determined by factory organization.

The economic historian Maxine Berg has argued that botg Landes' description of the specialist and Marglin's description of the putter-out suffer from oversimplification.¹¹⁵ Berg points out that in various trades in various areas throughout seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and Europe, "producers passed in and out of independence and outworker status."¹¹⁶ In many of these historical scenarios, who is or is not an "artisan," a "factor," an "independent outworker," and a

¹¹¹ Marglin, "What Do Bosses Do?", 70.

¹¹² David S Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe From 1750 to the Present* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969).

¹¹³ Landes, "What Do Bosses Really Do?," 591-2.

¹¹⁴ Landes, "What Do Bosses Really Do?," 600-5.

¹¹⁵ Maxine Berg, "Will the Real Bosses Please Stand Up: Marglin and Landes on the Origins of Capitalist Hierarchy" (working paper), no. 305 (University of Warwick, Department of Economics, 1988), 11.

¹¹⁶ Berg, "Will the Real Bosses Please Stand Up," 10-12.

"master," varies across industries and fluctuates with economic conditions. Where Marglin and Landes' debate is centered on the causes of the schematic passage from proto-industry to the factory, Berg emphasizes the coexistence of various forms of work organization and social organization in which many aspects of both hierarchy and specialization can belong to different schemes at certain periods and places. Considering Huang Jiang's, Wu Ruiqiu's and Huang Ye's respective firms, and their coexistence with a very diverse and large number of independent painters and smaller studios and workshops, I find Berg's expectations of complex coexistence of forms of work organization within a given industry and area, none of which necessarily or inevitably lead to "industrialization," equally applicable to the painting trade in Dafen village.¹¹⁷

Nonetheless, in Dafen village it is clear that the "boss" (*laoban* 老板) has emerged as a distinctive figure, to be distinguished from the more culturally decorous figures of "masters," "painting-dealers" and "artists." As anthropologist Liu Xinhas argued, the term "boss" in contemporary South China does not only designate an individual's relative economic power, but is also his cultural capital.¹¹⁸ Bosses such Wu Ruiqiu and Huang Ye do not so much oversee an ever increasing division of labor leading to ever-increasing productivity, as they parse relative wages, skills and efficiencies of their outworkers and in-house workers against the (stylistic) demands of their clients. In their factories, ever finer divisions of labor, do not entail a human "mechanization" of

¹¹⁷ Thus I argue that Dafen village thus more closely resembles the historical "industrial districts" of "flexible specialization," based upon nineteenth century models of "mechanized craft production," promoted as an alternative to mass production in 1984 by Piore and Sabel, and discussed in Chapter Four. Michael Piore, and Charles Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 19-48. Also Charles Sabel, and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization," *Past and Present* 108 (1985): 133-76. I am grateful to Matt Amengual, Sebastian Karcher and Andrew Schrank for helping me work through the political economic aspects of my observations at Dafen village.

¹¹⁸ Xin Liu, *The Otherness of Self: A Genealogy of the Self in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 36-44.

tasks than outside these factories, but the image of themselves as managerial overseers does fuel their claims that they hold higher "artistic" skill.¹¹⁹

If industrialization is not an inevitable outcome of divisions of labor, what is significant is that labor in Dafen village fits many aspects of *both* proto-industrialization and post-industrial flexible production. More importantly, contrary to the expectations that assembly line painting leads to increasing mechanization or industrialization, in Dafen village, management of assembly lines are folded into performances and practices of artisanality and artistry. For example, the classical argument that the division of labor would lead to the introduction of machines is inverted in trade painting: one of the most crucial yet higher-skilled tasks of the production process is the initial sketch or outlining of the composition (*qigao* 起稿). In order to increase both efficiency and standardization, many different kinds of tools such as stencils, a pantograph, and transfer paper are used. In 2005, printing from a digital image file directly onto canvas became prevalent in Dafen village. After printing, painters would then paint over the canvas, largely obviating the need to sketch the composition. As of 2009, six shops alone specialize in this printing. Yet, contrary to expectations of increasing mechanization, the digital print is utilized only for one-offs or very small runs and never for assembly line painting. This is because paintings done in assembly line fashion are usually so low in price that digital printing would neither cost effective nor efficient, but also because the number of paintings required is so high that the painters would no longer need the aid, so many times will they have executed the painting. This is also true for paintings that are regular produced by a painter who specialized in it—the *gao* for these painters is so deeply a part of their tacit knowledge

¹¹⁹ Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy, 1815-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

that digital printing would be pointless.¹²⁰ If this kind of tacit knowledge could be thought of as human "mechanization," then we should be clear that it is a condition that would predate the particular machine itself.

While there have been various attempts by entrepreneurial painter-bosses in Dafen village to assemble labor at larger scales for the purpose of realizing larger cost advantages or for taking on higher-volume orders, countervailing concerns consistently destabilize these efforts at appropriation. Forms of both governmental and worker resistance to these hierarchies are organized around the rubric of "art," with "originality" and "creativity" emerging as crucial terms of that discourse. In explaining why he turned his 2,000 square meter factory in which over sixty painters once worked into an underutilized storage space, the Dafen boss Cai Chusheng remarked, "artists are impossible to manage."¹²¹ While the Dafen "outworker" for Huang Jiang's subcontracted K-Mart orders may very well be seen as a flexible pieceworker mass producing for an expanding global market, the idea that he or she is also an "artisan"—controlling his own work tools, processes, space, and time—is crucial both for maintaining that flexibility but also for generating the image of "craft" for the consumer and traders of these handmade products. In other words, the schematic historical expectation for the progression from craft to industrialization is reversed here: flexible production manufactures fine art but also unleashes the tropes of artisanality.

In Dafen village, neither the success of large workshops and factories, nor the prevalent use of assembled labor amongst groups of various sizes, have resulted in a broad deskilling of labor or to

¹²⁰ Zhao Xiaoyong can sketch the outline (*qigao*) for a van Gogh *Sunflowers* in under 13 seconds. Further on other separation of tasks in specialist painting, see Chapter Four. Thus digital printing is used only by painters on paintings which they don't want to take the time to draw the composition.

¹²¹ Cai went on to explain that most of all, a boss never knows when painters want to work: they might wake up in the middle of the night with inspiration and start painting, and sleep in all day. Cai Chusheng, interview with author, 16 FEB 2008.

mechanization of the production process. Contrary to the bleak—and inevitable—future envisioned by Goethe, the “painting factory” has instead led to broad and concerted constructions of artistic originality and creativity. “Assembly lines” have sometimes functioned as a form of non-hierarchical collective production, but they have also allowed the boss to fashion himself and key subordinates into “artists.” Through the division of labor between individuals and the separation of tasks from the repeated process of production, apprentices and students are taught to paint, training them to become independent producers. Painters and bosses alike—whether or not they claim to enjoy working in “assembly line”—have been concerned above all with their own skilling into artists and creative professionals. As Wu Ruiqiu claims: “I produce painting orders in the factory, do art in the studio. Trade painting financially supports original creation. The two are not blurred and do not interfere with each other.”¹²² Wu thus reminds us that it is *the segregation of workspace*, Lam Qua-style, that determines the status and value of the artist and the work of art.

Liu Ding's Performance Installation

It was through the frame of “art” that Chinese assembly line painting reentered the purview of cultural discourse in China and the West. In 2005, the Beijing-based conceptual artist Liu Ding (刘鼎) installed thirteen Dafen painters on a stepped pyramidal platform in a former factory space annexed for the Guangzhou Triennial (figures 16-17). In a four-hour performance marking the opening of the Triennial, Liu Ding had the painters divide into multiple tasks the execution of forty-three copies of a single image. This “performance installation” can be seen alongside other contemporary art practices that explicitly involve hiring Chinese migrant workers for “living installations.” In these creative projects, the appropriation artist, in effect, fashions himself into a

¹²² “我在画厂接订单，在工作室搞艺术，以行画养原创，两者不混淆，不干扰。”Tan Mei 檀梅，“大芬村的示范意义 [The Meaning of the Dafen Model],” *Meishu Bao*, Opinion, (4 MAR 2006): 003.

"boss." Liu Ding was widely accused of "exploitation" by art critics and attempted to defend himself by emphasizing that the painters were paid their "standard wage."¹²³



Figures 16-17. Liu Ding, "Products," performance-installation, *The Second Guangzhou Triennial*, 2005. Images courtesy of the artist.

What constitutes "exploitation" when an artist hires assembly line painters from Dafen village? Is the notion of paying a "standard wage" a sufficient retort? Liu Ding, in fact, could not have controlled what he paid each painter for the 2005 performance, because he was more akin to a putter-out, who subcontracted the Dafen painter Luo Zhijiang (罗志江) to organize and manage the assembly line.¹²⁴ In turn, Liu's funds came from the Guangzhou Triennial which provided him a "project budget," so Liu himself was, like the Dafen painter, an outworker himself.

A native of Guangdong province's Shanmei county, Luo Zhijiang arrived in Shenzhen in 1988 and has been working as an outworker for Huang Jiang since 1992. Luo is a specialist in high-volume landscape painting orders for which he utilizes an assembly line process with the assistance of several apprentices. For seventeen years, he has worked and lived in a small apartment with working and sleeping spaces for himself and two to four live-in apprentices. Their workspace is roughly the

¹²³ Philip Tinari, "Original Copies: The Dafen Oil Painting Village," *Art Forum* October (2007): 344-51.

¹²⁴ Luo Zhijiang, interviews with author, 9 NOV 2008, 17 MAR 2009, 31 MAR 2009.

size of an eight-foot by two-foot hallway in which a row of about six to ten canvases can be pinned up to be worked on in a line. In March 2009, he completed for Huang Jiang an order of 1800 paintings of various sizes in fourteen days, for which he was paid an average of 3 yuan (40 US cents) per painting.¹²⁵

Luo met Liu Ding in 2005 and the two agreed on a single price for which Luo would put together the assembly line team to produce a small run of a painting chosen by Liu. In addition, Liu Ding would pay for the costs of travel and meals for the day trip to Guangzhou (a two-hour drive away), but Luo would be responsible for paying each painter. According to Luo, Liu is a "great bargainer," and the agreed-upon price was so low (180 yuan per person) that most of the painters Luo asked to participate declined. However, thirteen painters did agree to go with Luo to Guangzhou.¹²⁶

Recalling the event to me in 2008, Luo Zhijiang described the 2005 Guangzhou project with Liu Ding as an artists' "activity" (*huodong* 活动), a professional outing for the purpose of artistic collaboration, exchange and interaction with the public. Luo has a reputation in Dafen village as both an assembly line painter and an artists' organizer, and claimed that Liu Ding selected him for his organizational skills. Amongst the many artists' organizations in which Luo has participated, he is the central organizer of the Dafen Art Workers' Association, an artists' association that seeks to be inclusive and non-hierarchical, in contrast to various other artists' associations formed at Dafen village in recent years.¹²⁷ Photographs which Luo still had pinned up on his drawing board depict the event as a pleasurable group outing.

¹²⁵ Luo's prices are the lowest piece-rates I have recorded in Dafen village 2008-09. Luo Zhijiang, interview with author, 31 MAR 2009.

¹²⁶ Luo Zhijiang, interviews with author, 9 NOV 2008, 17 MAR 2009.

¹²⁷ Luo Zhijiang, interview with author, 31 MAR 2009.

Of the performance itself, Luo recalled that it was "very difficult" because this particular group of thirteen painters had never worked together before, and furthermore, they had never before painted this particular image together. In other words, this particular "assembly line" was convened solely for the performance-installation, and the conditions specified by the artist-boss. According to Luo, without sufficient preparation time, completing forty-three copies for the event was far more taxing than most assembly lines the painters had worked in.¹²⁸ Liu had set a four-hour time limit on the performance, and some of the paintings were not finished in time. For the painters, this was unsettling; for Liu, the artist-boss, it made for excellent theatrical effect. Luo paid all the painters and himself an equal share, but at the conclusion of the event, the painters protested over the hardship of having to work under such time constraints, and demanded more money. Although Luo and Liu differed in their recollections of the subsequent negotiations, the painters ultimately received an additional fee.

The tension over payment can be explained by an important aspect of trade painting practices and its confrontation with an institutionalized system of performance art. Since nearly all Dafen painters are paid by piece, the rate which Liu initially agreed upon with Luo was understood as a rate for the total number of paintings required from the team. Even though Liu Ding had not specifically sought any level of "finish" or "quality" in these paintings, Luo and the Dafen painters insisted on focusing on the paintings, rather than their own presence or performance, as "the work" of art. Seeing themselves as makers of paintings that fetch a particular (albeit, very low) price per piece (or "work"), the Dafen painters initially chose not to conceptualize their labor as a performance for which they should be paid either a wage or an honorarium. If they saw at the conclusion of the event itself that something was amiss, it was likely unclear what grounds there

¹²⁸ Luo Zhijiang, interviews with author, 17 MAR 2009.

were to negotiate a "bonus." Where the Dafen painters conceived of themselves as "artists" painting in a live demonstration, Liu Ding's work as a conceptual artist, in which he fashioned himself into a boss, was to install these painters' assembly line practice itself as a performance of a peculiar (but by now familiar) hierarchy—a living instance of Chinese assembly line painting that overturns the romanticist expectations of modern art.

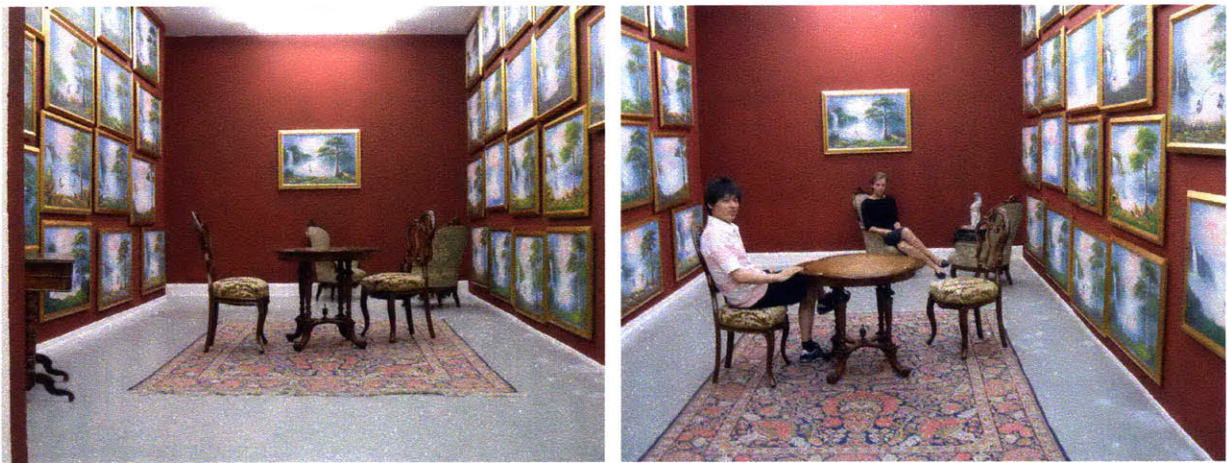


Figure 18. Liu Ding, *Products*, installation view, Lothar Albrecht Gallery, Frankfurt, 2007. Figure 19. Liu Ding and gallerist, in installation view, publicity photo, Lothar Albrecht Gallery, Frankfurt, 2007. Images courtesy of the artist.

Years later, curators, artists and museum administrators who attended the Guangzhou performance recalled feeling extremely troubled by the event, particularly in the way it staged the lowliness of the Dafen painters. In a sense, Liu Ding had put on display the operative hierarchies of the art world—a pyramidal race to the top achieved through the mastery of an assembly line. However, although the work was experienced by these cultural elites as an exploitative "performance," ultimately it was the Dafen painters who accurately anticipated the true status of the "work" that was being produced. In 2007, the work was exhibited again in Frankfurt, Germany, but this time, Liu Ding did not bring the painters to Europe for another performance. Instead he simply hung the forty-three paintings in a generic nineteenth-century European interior at the Lothar

Albrecht gallery (figures 18-19), as a work of installation art. The paintings were bought by a European collector as a complete set, and, in effect, through the intervening authorship of the conceptual artist, as another imagined instance of China trade paintings from the great painting factory of the European imagination.

The procedures of trade painting production at Dafen village, no matter how large its assembly of laborers, is thus far from the "mechanical," "industrial," or "factory" production appropriated to such effect by artist-bosses like Liu Ding, Wu Ruiqiu, or Huang Ye. Like foreign journalists, these artist-bosses are eager to facilitate the impression that Dafen village is an industrial assembly line factory from which they emerge as discerning and creative individuals. As with the depictions of Lam Qua's studio, the image of particular work spaces—"studio," "atelier," "workshop," and "factory"—determines, in the mind of the buyer, the status of the product. A "factory" serves bosses and conceptual artists alike because it produces a clear distinction between their mental labor and their appropriation of others artists' manual labor. There is no Goethean "great painting factory" in Dafen village, only a quantity and quality of production that has been hard to imagine outside of that construct. However, since Goethe, we have imagined the "factory" as a site that stands as the antithesis to, and thereby defines by negation, our understandings of individual freedom and creativity.

Chapter Three

Paint Whatever You Want To Paint: Creativity in Televisual Dafen



Figure 1. Rong Rong, *No.1*, East Village, Beijing, 1994.

China's Bohemia

In 1993, a coterie of performance artists gathered to live and conduct surreptitious performances in a village on the eastern outskirts of Beijing (figure 1). Historically named Dashan village, the artists renamed their new community "北京东村" (*Beijing Dongcun*) or "Beijing East Village."¹ The emergence of this "artists' village" was a pivotal moment in post-Mao Chinese art: the East Village was positioned as the successor to the avant-garde Yuanmingyuan artists' village in the west of Beijing, supplanting the charged nationalistic heritage of that former site with a new transnational

¹ Li Xianting, "Recollections of Beijing 'East Village'" (16 APR 2005). Wu Hung, ed., *Rong Rong's East Village, 1993-1998* (New York, Chicago: Chambers Fine Art, 2003).

orientation orbiting New York's East Village.² In translating and relocating "East Village" to Beijing, the artists thus unequivocally adopted the recognizable guise of an international avant-garde.³

As the performance artists of this new East Village gained wider recognition, they famously provoked constant police obstruction that culminated in the 1994 arrest of two artists on charges of indecency.⁴ For a decade after, artists such as Zhang Huan and Ma Liuming took their antagonistic practices to the cultural centers of the West. Acting as exiled emissaries hampered by state censorship at home, much of their work played to orientalist interpretations that juxtaposed the free West with a totalitarian China. Successful as it was, these performances of oppositional critique did not last long, and the East Village artists were soon transformed from countercultural vagrants into free producers in a global creative market. In 2007, when Zhang Huan returned to Shanghai from New York to establish an art factory with over two hundred employees, he was hailed by the *New York Times* as "China's largest producer of avant-garde art."⁵ The globally replicable narrative of the avant-garde's transformation into the art business of the day seemed to have been successfully

² The Yuanming Yuan or Old Summer Palace is a public park in western Beijing, once an extensive Qing imperial residence plundered and razed by the Anglo-French Expeditionary Force in 1860. Its ruined gardens remain a national symbol of humiliation and modern cultural heritage. Geremie Barme, "Between Ruination and Restoration," *China Heritage Quarterly* 8 (DEC 2006). In 1990, a group of artists began living and working in the park, and, in 1991 they were joined by new graduates of art academies all over China. Open-air exhibitions were held there until 1994. Wu Hung et al., eds. *Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art: 1990-2000* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 486-495.

³ The artists learned of New York's East Village through Beijing-born artist Ai Weiwei, who had moved to New York in 1981 and returned to Beijing in 1993. East Village artists' assertion of a transnational outlook is reflected in the makeup of their audiences and patrons, who were associated with the foreign diplomatic corps stationed in Beijing, and by its location: East Village was located in Chaoyang district behind the Great Wall Restaurant, one of the oldest Western restaurants in Beijing, and a short taxi ride from the international airport. Li Xianting, "Recollections of Beijing 'East Village.'"

⁴ For example see Martina Köppel-Yang, and Norman Bryson, *Semiotic Warfare: A Semiotic Analysis, the Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979-1989*, 1st ed. (Hong Kong: Timezone 8, 2003).

⁵ David Barboza, "Provocateur's Products Roll Off the Assembly Line," *New York Times*, Arts (3 SEP 2007).

realized in a China ascendant. In the contemporary art world, "East Village" no longer needs its Chinese modifier, "Beijing."

In a 1999 interview, Zhang Huan, who claims sole credit for renaming the village, reveals that there was another reason behind the choice. The new identity was to distinguish East Village not from the Yuanmingyuan, but from another area in western Beijing where painting companies were operating. Zhang Huan was working for one such company when he was living in East Village, and when asked to explain his sudden turn from oil painting to performance art, he recounts this earlier experience:

In 1993, I worked for a month at a commercial painting company in Beijing. My job was to make copies of Degas's work from high-quality reproductions. Every day, I spent two or three hours commuting to and from work on the bus. My copies were very good and made a lot of money for the company. But I received a salary of only 250 RMB, less than my expenses for a week. I asked my boss for a raise, but he refused me very rudely, yelling that my copies were not good at all. I was furious but totally at a loss as to what to do, what I did was to punch at the bus on my way home, since I felt better when I was tired. But the other passengers stared at me as if I were crazy. Later that year, I went to Guangzhou, a southern Chinese city, and tried to earn enough money to do a private show. But business wasn't easy for me. I was often cheated. You can't find solutions to such problems in a society that lacks laws. Sometimes I became involved in fights with those who cheated me. I could feel better only after these fights, when the pressure seemed to be released. But these acts are acts of self-torturing. I tend to express this sense of self-torturing to an extreme because I want to make the feeling more strong and real. Each time I finish a performance, I feel a great sense of release of fear.⁶

⁶ Qian Zhijian, "Performing Bodies: Zhang Huan, Ma Liuming, and Performance Art in China," interview, *Art Journal* 58, no. 2 (1999): 44

If we take his anecdote at face-value, the selection of the name “East Village” had as much to do with Zhang's rejection of another field of production—West Beijing trade painting (*hanghua* 行画)—as it did with his looking towards a New-York centered art world. Zhang's transformation from a copyist of Degas paintings in a western Beijing firm to a transnational performance artist in Beijing's East Village thus traces another trope of artistic progress: from painting to performance, from copying the West to appropriating the West, from reproducing the canon to returning to the primal self.

If China's new creativity was grafted onto the narrative of bohemia through the global mobility of its artistic avant-garde, Zhang Huan's earlier biographical history also echoes, in a different sense, the drama of migrant artistic labor in post-Mao China. Before Zhang Huan the performance artist achieved international acclaim and global mobility, Zhang Huan the painter-worker was an internal migrant who plodded from the West to the East of the capital city, and from Beijing in the North to Guangzhou in the South—the historical center of trade painting. In his anecdote, his was an artistic subjectivity embattled by the forces of capital—rampant especially in the rapidly industrializing South. In that respect, Zhang's is a familiar tale of the migrant worker's experience of the Chinese reform-era economy, marked by everyday encounters with quasi-legal authority and uncertain forays into entrepreneurship.⁷ East Village was both the most common kind of migrant worker village in 1990s China, and it was an affected, but globally translatable, bohemia.

⁷ Amongst many studies on internal migration in reform-era China, see Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks Within China's Floating Population* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2001); Carolyn L. Cartier, *Globalizing South China* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001); Helen F. Siu, "Grounding Displacement: Uncivil Urban Spaces in Postreform South China," *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 2 (2007); Liu Kaiming, "Bianyuan Ren: Shenzhen Wailaigong Yanjiu [On the Margins of Society: Migrant Labor in South China]," trans. Zhang Hong, in *The Chinese Economy* 40, no. 3 (2007): 24; Xin Liu, *The Otherness of Self: A Genealogy of the Self in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).

Bohemia is a fiction renewed over and over again in Western industrialized cities, holding within it an avant-gardist trope that generates its own repetition.⁸ This fiction relies on the formation of a marginal artistic community that self-consciously identifies itself as a replacement to former bohemias, and is then reborn as an urban district in which the lives of artists are displayed and consumed. Always-already nostalgic, bohemia paves the way for the next avant-garde. New York's East Village replaced the by-then gentrified New York Soho, just as Beijing's East Village position on the cutting-edge of the Chinese art world was soon replaced by the Song Zhuang artist village, the 798 Dashanzi art district and later, the Caochangdi.⁹ The economic success of these latter artists' villages, now the site of museums, top international galleries, high-end hotels and boutiques—themselves under threat by further development—has spawned what Beijing architecture critic Bert de Muynck called China's "art village industry."¹⁰ De Muynck's pithy phrase puts the paradox of the cultural economy in a nutshell: so quickly is bohemia renewed in contemporary China, we are no longer certain whether a "real" avant-garde is needed to predate its own rebirth.¹¹

⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005). Richard D Lloyd, *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City* (New York: Routledge, 2006). Daniel Hurewitz, *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

⁹ Consider, for example, the legal battle between Song Zhuang artists, curators, and art critics and the peasantry-landholders over property titles in the newly valuable Song Zhuang artist village. Whether it is the land or the artists who have generated the current property values is of central debate, as it was in New York. See Pamela M Lee, *Object to be Destroyed: The Work of Gordon Matta-Clark* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Bert de Muynck, "Artist Villages and Market Engineering," *Urban China* 33 (2008): 34.

¹¹ Indeed, often with perverse consequences. In February 2010, artists who resisted eviction in Zhengyang Artist's Village in eastern Beijing were violently beaten in an overnight raid by gangs hired by developers seeking to redevelop the village. Tania Branigan, "Chinese Studios Demolished and Artists Attacked By Masked Eviction Gangs as Vibrant Cultural Scene is Overrun By Developers," *The Guardian World* (24 FEB 2010). According to some victims' blog posts, the developers are former artists. Black Eye Queen (*Hei Yanjing Xing Zhi* 黑眼睛幸知), <http://blackeyequeen.blog.sohu.com/144899453.html> (accessed FEB 2010).

The transformation of Dafen village into a creative industry represents both a copy and an inversion of the bohemian fiction. Like Beijing's East Village, Shenzhen's Dafen village is a community of migrant artists located on the periphery of a metropolitan Chinese city. Everyday, migrants from throughout China, and some from the West, arrive hoping to reinvent themselves as artists. Like the avant-garde, artists, entrepreneurs and officials in Dafen hope to benefit from the embourgeoisement that has historically followed from modernist artists' success. Yet, as an art village that produces the very type of painting that artists like Zhang Huan so vehemently rejected, Dafen village also stands for the conventional object against which bohemia is forged. In order for Dafen to become an "artists' village" then, the affectations of the avant-garde—those that specifically denies their commercial endgame—must also be renamed, relocated and translated.

In this chapter, I examine the efforts of the Chinese party-state to renew the fiction of bohemia in Dafen village through policy, practice and popular culture. In November 2004, the National Ministry of Culture designated Dafen village a "Model Cultural (Art) Industry Site" (*Wenhua chanye (meishu) shifan jidi* 文化产业 (美术) 示范基地). The intense governmental attention on Dafen stemming from this designation coincided with a national policy interest in cultural and creative industry development, in which the rise of Beijing's Yuanmingyuan, East Village, Song Zhuang, and 798 districts loomed large for Dafen, as precedents and counter-examples.¹² In conjunction with national-, provincial- and municipal-level party-state organs, local officials have also produced an astonishing range of cultural propaganda about Dafen village, which have taken the form of nearly every conceivable medium: exhibitions, festivals, dances, fairs, competitions, novels, movies, and television shows. Almost uniformly, these cultural texts celebrate

¹² Xie Yafei 谢亚飞, "走近南北油画村 [In Oil Painting Villages North and South]," 中国产经新闻报 (20 APR 2006): B05. Wen Youping 温友平, 大芬村的崛起 [*The Rise of Dafen Village*], (Shenzhen: Haitian Press, 2006), 225-231.

the transformation of Dafen village from a marginal rural village into a creative industry model, by appropriating the cultural tropes of the modern avant-garde.

In particular, I focus on two television programs whose productions were sponsored by the Buji street office and Longgang district propaganda organs that immediately oversee and promote Dafen Oil Painting Village. One, a national docudrama about Dafen village's female artists, and the other, a romance melodrama set in Dafen village, are both rife with the popular tropes of avant-gardism—marginality, migrancy, romanticism and self-expression. But these tropes are also retooled to define "originality" in the context of Dafen village's trade painting and its policy importance within a model creative industry. In their national and often universal rhetoric, these two television programs speak of a larger socio-politico-commercial imaginary in which Dafen's creative industry and "originality" itself play an ambitious new global role.

"Shenzhen Has An Artists' Village"

Shenzhen, the Special Economic Zone established in 1979 on the border of Hong Kong, represents in Chinese history the utopian forefront of China's Deng-era liberalization and the nation's opening up to the global market economy. As discussed in the previous chapters, numerous oil painting workshops and firms had been operating in Shenzhen's Buji and Dafen since the mid-1980s, but they garnered the attention of local officials only when Dafen was described as an "artists' village" in a 1997 Guangzhou newspaper article.¹³ Such was the perception of Shenzhen as an artistic backwater that the matter-of-fact claim, "Shenzhen has an artists' village," was sufficient for a newspaper headline.

¹³ "Shenzhen has an artists' village (深圳有个画家村)" headlines the first newspaper article to mention the oil painting industry at Dafen village (Guangzhou: 羊城晚报, 1997).



Figures 2-4. Public sculptures and signage added to the gates of Dafen village in 2005. Photos from 2006.

According to published interviews, it was from this point on that the local Buji street office and Longgang district administrations began making large-scale infrastructural redevelopment projects in Dafen village.¹⁴ Consistent with urbanization efforts throughout the city of Shenzhen, these took the form of administrative urbanization of formerly rural villages, land-use transfers, rezoning, and commercial and residential property development in which the interests of local officials, village leaders, entrepreneurs and investors were closely intertwined. Dafen village has been physically transformed in the past decade from a urban migrant's squatter community into an artists' village decorated with art-themed monuments and outdoor cafes (figures 2-4).¹⁵ Over a formerly open sewage canal, a Dafen Art Museum was built in 2007 (figure 5).¹⁶ The village's open-air market

¹⁴ It was through this article that officials such as Ren Xiaofeng learned of the painting production at Dafen village. Li Lingxiu 李玲修, *大芬传奇 [Legends of Dafen]*, (Hong Kong: 亚洲出版社, 2006). Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 37.

¹⁵ Southeast University Architecture Design & Research Institute Shenzhen Branch, "The Environmental Renovation of Dafen Oil Painting Village," *Landscape Architecture* 4 (2006): 66-67.

¹⁶ Urbanus, "Dafen Art Museum, Shenzhen, China, 2007," *Shijie jianzhu* 08 (2007): 38-43. Urbanus Architecture and Design, *村城城村 [Village/City, City/Village]* (Beijing: 中国电力出版社 China Electric Power Publishers, 2006).

was renovated into a mall of galleries and residences; the village square has been repeatedly repaved and redecorated with outdoor sculpture, murals, and gates (figure 6). Dafen village is now one of a handful of cultural tourism sites in the city of Shenzhen and has even been used as a set location for Chinese movies.

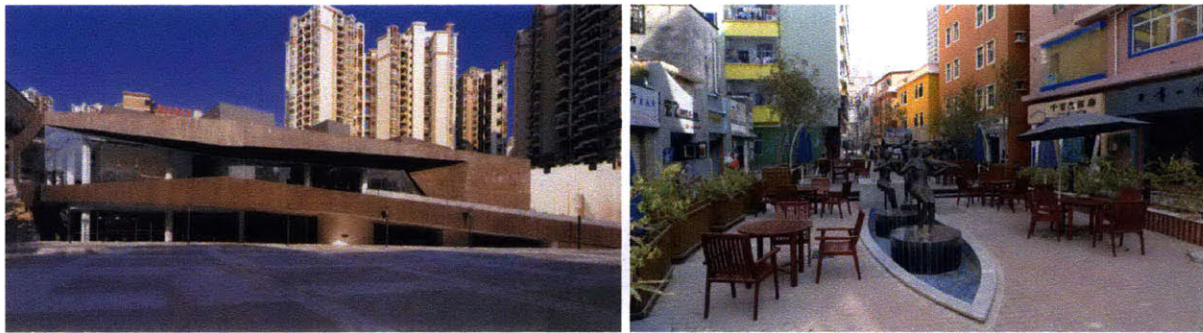


Figure 5. Urbanus, Dafen Art Museum, completed in 2007. Photo by author, 2008. Figure 6. Dafen village square redeveloped with outdoor cafe, sculptures, and souvenir stalls, completed Spring 2008. Photo by author, 2008.

Alongside these infrastructural projects, local officials—led by Buji's propaganda department chief Shen Shuren, and later, Ren Xiaofeng—also established cultural policies to attract "original artists" to Dafen village, or to encourage Dafen painters to become "creative" and "original" themselves. This included fostering the formation of artist's associations, providing funding for artists' travel sketching and painting activities, establishing "creative training centers" outside Dafen for the use of Dafen artists, subsidizing housing for officially designated "original artists," holding exhibitions of original art, and championing the establishment of an auction house in Dafen. To coordinate these activities as well as those of Dafen's many commercial firms, in 2005 the Buji street office established a state-led enterprise named the "Dafen Oil Painting Village." The name is a purposeful replacement for the "Dafen village" and makes plain the local party-state's intertwined political and commercial stakes in Dafen's creative industry. The Dafen Oil Painting Village Management Office, a governmental enterprise operating out of the Dafen Art Museum, oversees

"market regulation," "human resource management," "tourism development" and "marketing."¹⁷ In an extension of the early reform-period development strategy in which rural townships and villages such as Dafen turned themselves into village enterprises (IVEs), here the local party-state has re-appropriated the village as a commercial enterprise in the course of transforming it administratively into an urban "artists' village." Local officials repeatedly emphasized that, after the implementation of creative industry policies and their propaganda work, Dafen village's annual gross revenue increased from 80 million yuan in 2003 to 300 million yuan in 2006.¹⁸



Figures 7-8. Opening ceremonies and 1100 Painters event of the 2004 International Cultural Industry Fair, Dafen village. Image from Shiyang Zeng, *Speak of Painting, Think of Buji: News Photography Record*, 2005.

The intensifying political, administrative and commercial interest in Dafen village on the part of multiple levels of Chinese governments reflected the growing policy interest in cultural industries over the 1990s, an effort which culminated in the formal inclusion of a "cultural industries" policy in

¹⁷ Until 2009, the Management Office did not have an official budget structure or leader. (大芬油画村管理办公室). Wen Youping, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 41; 216-218. 大芬油画村管理办公室工作职责 [Dafen Management Office Work Responsibilities]. 2008. URL: <http://www.cndafen.com>, copyright 2008 (accessed Feb 2009).

¹⁸ Yi Quan 易全, "大芬油画村: 美国行画市场最大提供者 [Dafen Oil Painting Village: US Trade Painting Market is Largest Supporter]," 国际商报, A02 (14 MAY 2007): 1-4.

the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001-2005).¹⁹ In 2002, President Jiang Zemin, addressing the Sixteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, described cultural industry (*wenhua chanye* 文化产业) as "an important avenue to enriching socialist culture in the market economy," sparking off intensified policy-making interest in cultural industries development.²⁰ Soon after, a Cultural Industry division within the National Ministry of Culture was established. The city of Shenzhen inaugurated the annual China International Cultural Industry Fair in 2004, and Dafen village was selected as the fair's sole satellite location (figures 7-8). In connection with the 2004 fair, officials at the highest levels of the Chinese propaganda system, including the de-facto Propaganda Chief Li Changchun, Minister of Propaganda and Secretary of the CCP Central Committee Secretariat Liu Yunshan, and Minister of Culture Sun Jiazheng, visited Dafen village on a six-day inspection tour.²¹ Their approving words have been widely quoted in official publications.²²

¹⁹ Michael Keane, *Created in China: The Great New Leap Forward* (London: Routledge, 2007), 81.

²⁰ "In developing cultural undertakings and industry, it is imperative to meet the requirements of developing advanced culture and always place social effects in the first place. The state supports and protects public cultural undertakings and encourages them to enhance their vigor for self-development...Developing the cultural industry is an important avenue to enriching socialist culture in the market economy and to meeting the spiritual and cultural needs of the people. It is essential to improve policies toward the cultural industry, support its development and enhance its overall strength and competitiveness." Jiang Zemin, "Report to the Sixteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China," 15 NOV 2002, trans. Xinhua News Agency, available: <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/49007.htm> (accessed: May 2008).

²¹ Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 143-147.

²² He Xiaopei 何小培, "深圳: 给文化造个大海 [Shenzhen: Creating a Great Market for Culture]," in 大芬油画村, 中国文化产业奇迹 [*Dafen Oil Painting Village, China's Cultural Industry Miracle*], ed. He Xiaopei 何小培 (广州: 花城出版社, 2006), 7. Also Bi Guoxue 毕国学, "在大芬村倾听大家的声音 [Listening to Everyone's Voices At Dafen Village]," 深圳商报 *Shenzhen Economic Daily* 文化广场 (24 MAY 2006): C07. Su Xiaofang, "Dafen Village Oil Painting: Singing the Tune of the Industrialization of Art."

These national leaders were soon followed by officials at all levels of administration throughout China, each visiting to learn how to create cultural industry districts in their own cities.²³ Although the pattern of policy-making on the basis of successful "models" is not unique to Dafen village nor the oil painting industry, the particular political attention on trade painting as a form of "cultural industry" speaks to the a larger narrative of creativity that matured with the remaking of Dafen village as a national model. Assessing Dafen in 2006, the National Ministry of Culture's official daily, *Zhongguo Wenhua Bao* (*China Culture Newspaper* 中国文化报), would spell out the six major lessons to be taken from Dafen village's success: their precise definition of the art product industry, multifaceted investment mechanisms, coordination of market factors, good governance, niche specialization and innovation mechanisms, and the targeting of a global market.²⁴ This six point analysis echoed that of an earlier article by another culture journalist, who emphasized that cultural

²³ Reports on journalists' and local leaders' visits to Dafen village to learn from the model are particularly plentiful following each Dafen village Cultural Industry Fair. Li Luyuan 李鲁愿, "探访"中国油画第一村" [Exploring "China's First Oil Painting Village"]," 郑洲日报, 文娱新闻 (24 MAY 2006): 008; Li Nanling 李南岭 et al., "画商扎堆'油画第一村' [Painting Dealers Cash in on 'First Oil Painting Village]," 西部时报 [*Xibu Times*] 人文 (30 MAY 2006): 009; Wang Jun 王俊, "黑龙江省作协副主, 哈尔滨市作协主席阿成: 大芬油画村能孕育大作品 [Heilongjiang Province Writer's Association Vice President, Harbin City Writer's Association President, A Cheng: 'Dafen Oil Painting Village Can Nurture Great Works'," *Shenzhen SEZ News* (26 SEP 2006): A08.

²⁴ Su Xiaofang 苏晓芳, "大芬村油画 唱上艺术的产业化之歌 [Dafen Village Oil Painting: Singing the Tune of the Industrialization of Art]," 中国文化报 [*China Culture News*] (25 DEC 2006): 006.

industry development was precisely the duty of the party-state in "pushing forward the construction of spiritual civilization."²⁵

Creative industries scholar Michael Keane has argued that Chinese academic and policy discussions on cultural industries turned between 2004 and 2006 towards a wholesale adoption of the term "creativity" (*chuangyi* 创意) and "creative industries" (*chuangyi chanye* 创意产业) in dialogue with a global discourse. Keane recounts how the term *chuangyi*, incorporating the morphemes *chuang* (to initiate or create) and *yi* (meaning, concept), was a fresh term imported from Hong Kong Cantonese, but was resonant with the mainland agenda of "innovation" (*chuangxin* 创新).²⁶ This had a definitive impact on the Eleventh Five Year Plan (2006-2010):²⁷ In 2006, the term "creative industry" appeared for the first time in a national Chinese policy document,²⁸ and by 2006, the cities of Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing had each developed creative economy policies and

²⁵ "发展文化产业是必须发挥党委政府的作用。发展文化产业就是建设先进文化，就是推进精神文明建设，其本身就是政府的一项职责，党委政府必须承担文化事业产业发展的责任，应当有文化自觉和文化自信。要制定战略，明确定位，把握好介入领域和扶持尺度，有所为有所不为，既不“越位”，也不“错位”和“缺位”。要通过制定政策，提供服务，加强对文化发展方向，总量，机构，和质量的宏观调控，做好引导，扶持和服务。" [Developing cultural industry requires the involvement of the party-state's functions. Developing cultural industry is precisely constructing advanced culture, is precisely the pushing forward of the construction of spiritual civilization. It is in itself a duty of the government, thus the party-state must undertake the responsibility of developing cultural enterprise industries, it ought to have a cultural self-consciousness and cultural self-confidence. The party-state should formulate a strategy, determine a clear orientation, firmly grasp its territorial intervention, and the scale of its support, do some things and not others, strengthen the direction of cultural development, macro-economically regulate its total output, organization and quality, do well in guidance, support, and service.] Yu Bo 余波, "中外闻名的深圳“大芬油画村”，”文化时报 [*Culture Times*] (27 JUL 2006): A04.

²⁶ Keane, *Created in China*, 80-81.

²⁷ Keane, *Created in China*, 80.

²⁸ "国家“十一五”时期文化发展规划纲要," (Beijing: Xinhua, 2006).

urban plans of their own.²⁹ Soon, in 2007, Shenzhen's Urban Planning and Land Resources Commission would build an art museum in Dafen village, the largest village-level museum in China. In President Hu Jintao's address to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2007, he identified "creative power" (*chuangzao li* 创造力) as a factor in global competition, national cohesion, and the "soft power" of the nation.³⁰

In the post-industrial nations, distinguishing the term "creative industry" from its predecessor "cultural industry" has been the subject of extensive discussion in recent scholarship.³¹ As the terms were taken up by many states in the first decade of the twenty-first century, creative industry policies represented an attempt by European governments to conceptualize the global cultural market while de-subsidizing cultural production. Taking their lead from the "Cool Britannia" national re-branding strategy that the Blair government initiated in 2000, creative industries policies attempted to reorganize artistic, design, entertainment, and educational enterprises operating outside traditional state-funded cultural institutions.³² "Creative" industries policies therefore brought disparate,

²⁹ The Hong Kong Center for Cultural Policy Research, which published the *Hong Kong Creative Industries Baseline Study* (2003), has subsequently extended its analysis to the Pearl River Delta's creative industries. In this, Dafen Village is identified as a key example. See *Study on the Relationship Between Hong Kong's Cultural & Creative Industries and the Pearl River Delta*, 2006, available: http://www.cpu.gov.hk/english/research_reports.htm (accessed JAN 2008).

³⁰ "In the present era, culture has become a more and more important source of national cohesion and *creativity* and a factor of growing significance in the competition in overall national strength, and the Chinese people have an increasingly ardent desire for a richer cultural life. We must keep to the orientation of advanced socialist culture, bring about a new upsurge in socialist cultural development, stimulate the *cultural creativity* of the whole nation, and enhance culture as part of the soft power of our country to better guarantee the people's basic cultural rights and interests, enrich the cultural life in Chinese society and inspire the enthusiasm of the people for progress." (Emphasis added.) Hu Jintao, "Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China," trans. Xinhua News Agency, 15 OCT 2007, available: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2007-10/16/content_6177688.htm (accessed May 2008).

³¹ Stuart Cunningham, "From Cultural to Creative Industries: Theory, Industry, and Policy Implications," *Media Information Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 102 (2002): 54-65.

³² For an extensive study of the marketization of the arts sector in the reform period, see Richard Curt Kraus, *The Party and the Arty in China: The New Politics of Culture*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

flexible, and often transnational activities into state purview. Such policies were typically modeled on a "creative chain" in which "creation" is the starting point of a value chain that produces "culture goods and services."³³ Crucial to this production chain is "creativity," which is presumed to underscore all forms of cultural production, and over which municipalities and nations therefore compete. As George Yúdice has argued, an international division of labor drives the theoretical and practical separation of "creativity" from "culture" in creative industries policy.³⁴ With the globalization of the "creative chain," creativity needs be re-conceptualized as a higher-value economic input to be put to use by the state. The replacement of the term "cultural" by "creative" is significant to note a crucial shift in the emergence of political purview over "creativity," and the expectation for it to serve as an economic input.

In November 2004, the National Ministry of Culture designated Dafen village a Model Cultural (Art) Industry Site (*wenhua chanye (meishu) shifan jidi* 文化产业(美术)示范基地).³⁵ In April 2005, it was designated a "Copyright Promotion Model Site" by the Guangdong and Shenzhen

³³ Peter Higgs, and Stuart Cunningham, "Creative Industries Mapping: Where Have We Come From and Where Are We Going?," *Creative Industries Journal* 1, no. 1 (2008): 10.

³⁴ George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16-21

³⁵ Dafen village is preeminent amongst various art-producing urban districts that have been awarded this honor. In 2004, three other model cultural industry statuses were designated, two are areas that produce handmade oil paintings like Dafen village, and the third is an antiques and crafts market. Dafen's model status was renewed in 2006. "珠港携手移植深圳大芬村产业模式 [Zhuhai and Hong Kong Jointly Transplant Shenzhen Dafen Village's Industry Model]," 中国文化报 [*China Culture News*] 文化经营 Culture Management (19 MAR 2007): 02. Bi Guoxue 毕国学 *et al.*, "第二批 "文化(美术)产业示范基地" 命名授牌仪式在深举行: 大芬村再添 "金字招牌" [The Second "Culture (Art) Industry Model Base" Award Ceremony Held in Shenzhen: Dafen Village Receives "Gold Plaque" Again]," 深圳商报 *Shenzhen Economic Daily*, 新闻聚集 (24 FEB 2006): A06. See also Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 141.

Copyright Departments.³⁶ Serving as an instructional example to other Chinese cities, this model status is conspicuously maintained and reiterated through publicity, cultural production, and official visits. Urban redevelopment projects, festivals, and television alike serve representational, policy-making and implementation functions. The effort culminated in 2010 at the Shanghai World Exposition, in an exhibition showcasing Dafen village as a "frontier for Chinese dreams."³⁷

Televsual propaganda and publicity made about Dafen village and nationally distributed, is part of the large representational function of these policy initiatives, as well as a new production enterprise of local propaganda organizations.³⁸ In its efforts to re-imagine a fictional Dafen village in which creative industry policies are successfully and properly realized, televsual Dafen thus lays bare a multilevel party-state effort to envision a new Chinese producing and consuming subjectivity defined by its innate and limitless creativity. It also seeks to elevate the low social status of Dafen painters alongside the cultural avant-garde of Beijing and Shanghai. The conceptual maneuvers required to regain the cultural high ground from Beijing's bourgeois bohemians is the new challenge that has been taken up in televsual Dafen.

³⁶ Bi Guoxue 毕国学 et al., "省市有关部门共同推动实施版权兴业工程: 大芬油画村成为版权兴业示范基地 [Provincial and Municipal Departments Jointly Push Implementation of Copyright Promotion Work: Dafen Oil Painting Village Becomes Copyright Promotion Model Base]," 深圳商报 *Shenzhen Economic Daily* (23 APR 2005). Zhang Tongying 张同英, "广东版权兴业拯救了油画村 [Guangdong Copyright Education Work Rescues Oil Painting Village]," 中国新闻出版报, 特别报道 (24 MAY 2007): 010. Explaining the award, the author of this article, who is also the head of the Guangdong Copyright Department, cites the success of Shenzhen Copyright Department in intellectual property rights education, the establishment of an original art registry, and infringement inspections at Dafen village. That same year in November, Shenzhen city's Cultural Institution Reform and Development Office (深圳市文化体制改革和发展办公室) also named Dafen village a Model Cultural Industry.

³⁷ This exhibition is discussed in the Conclusion.

³⁸ As of 1995, provincial level propaganda departments were charged by the Central Propaganda Department with producing film, television, fiction, and other cultural materials. According to Brady, this has expanded government propaganda activities particularly in TV entertainment but also provided propaganda departments with profit opportunities. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship*, 115.

Paradise Or Trap

In 2008, the Central China Television women's issues daily television program, *Half the Sky* (*Ban bian tian* 半边天) produced a five-part documentary series entitled "The Story of Dafen Village."³⁹

Broadcast on the nation's flagship channel, Central China Television 1 (CCTV-1), from September 1-5, 2008, the series introduced the critical social issues raised by Dafen village with a dialectical opening:

As long you come here, you can pick up a paintbrush.

As long you can pick up a paintbrush, you can create your fortune.

Is Dafen village a paradise or a trap? On which side do you stand?⁴⁰

Half the Sky used interviews and reenactments to explore this question through the lives of three women: Fu Xiaolan, a young, disabled painter-worker who found true love in Dafen village and became an original artist; Yang Lixin, a 64-year-old former art editor who, after retirement, moved to Dafen village with her husband in order to realize her lifelong dream of becoming an artist; and Zhu Hong, the wife of an original artist who now manages Dafen village's highest-end art gallery.

³⁹ The title refers to the Mao-era slogan that "women hold up half the sky." The program has been on air since January 1995. First noted for its focus on women's rights and gender equality, the show began in 2003 to alter its focus away from women's issues towards social and psychological issues in femininity, social relationships, love, family and work.

⁴⁰ "只要来到这里，就能拿起画笔。只能拿起画笔，就能创造财富。大芬村是成就梦想的天堂，还是吞噬陷阱?" "大芬村的故事 [The Story of Dafen Village]", 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], opening sequence, Beijing: CCTV-1, 1 SEPT 2008.

The documentary begins by providing a definition of trade painting by showing a Mona Lisa painted by "our very own peasants" in Dafen village.⁴¹ The host explains that Dafen village serves a low- and middle-end consumer market, for "us commoners" who are too intimidated by the high prices and expertise required to buy art in an urban gallery. "Original paintings have schools, styles and techniques," explains the host, but "regular people" want "the kind of painting that looks like it's just for fun."⁴² After providing this "common sense"—but in fact, consumerist—definition of trade painting, the documentary then provides a production-side definition through a collage of interview clips with Dafen painters, artists, dealers, translators and clients. Their opinions are summed up in the words of Li Yi (李仪), introduced as Dafen village's "first" original artist (*yuanchuang huajia* 原创画家).⁴³ He disdainfully condemns trade painting as "mechanically copied, mass produced, with nothing of the painter's thoughts on the canvas."⁴⁴ Situated between the host's consumerist definition and the original artist's production definition, is the central dilemma presented by trade painting. On the one hand, it offers to "popularize" or "democratize" high art to the mass consumer. On the other hand, it threatens to reduce the painter to an alienated laborer.

Half the Sky explores this dilemma first in the story of Fu Xiaolian (付晓兰).⁴⁵ Fu, born in Shanmei county in Guangdong province, was disabled at the age of six in a house fire. She lost her left hand and was left with only two workable fingers on her right hand; as a child, her disability

⁴¹ "大芬村的故事 [The Story of Dafen Village]", 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], part 1, Beijing: CCTV-1, 1 SEPT 2008. Video available: <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1220431316815938> (accessed June 2009). Abridged transcript available: <http://blog.cctv.com/html/21/806221-146180.html> (accessed June 2009).

⁴² "创作有流派有风格有技法" 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], part 1.

⁴³ Li Yi is a former student of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, and arrived in Dafen village in 2001. He is considered the "first" original artist at Dafen village.

⁴⁴ "机械地临摹, 批量地生产, 画面没有画画人的思想的东西." 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], part 1.

⁴⁵ 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], parts 1 and 2, video available: <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1220431568042647> (accessed June 2009).

forced her to avoid other children and she sought solace in drawing. After high school, she found a rural trade painting studio near her hometown, where the tuition fee to learn oil painting was 2000 yuan, which she could not pay.⁴⁶ The painter-master (*huashi* 画师) instead allowed her to stay as an apprentice, paying her five yuan per painting.

In 2001, Fu followed a friend to Shenzhen city hoping to find work and soon heard about Dafen village. She found a boss there who asked her to demonstrate her painting skills on the spot. She passed the test, and with an advance from the boss, rented a leaky apartment under a staircase with no windows. For two years, like many painter-workers at Dafen village, she struggled to survive, moving from apartment to apartment, asking bosses for painting orders to make enough to pay rent. In the documentary, Fu Xiaolan is shown reenacting these scenes of hardship (figure 9).



Figure 9-10. Fu Xiaolan, reenacting her circumstances, Fu Xiaolan and Tan Mingjian, "The Story of Dafen Village," *Half the Sky*, part 1-2, CCTV-1, 1-2 SEP 2008.

But here, Fu Xiaolan's story departs markedly from the expected experience of painter-workers at Dafen village. One day in 2003, while filling an order of Van Gogh paintings, she was introduced to Tan Mingjian (潘明健), a male painter who is disabled with only one arm, but

⁴⁶ On rural painting studios and urban migration to Dafen village, see Chapter One.

graduated from the respected Guilin Academy of Fine Arts. According to the documentary, Tan came to Dafen village immediately after graduation, and with his higher skill set was able to settle into stable work. Tan tells the interviewer that when he met Fu Xiaolan and saw that she was working with only two fingers, he was left speechless with pity. He began giving her painting orders of his own, secretly fixing them up when she wasn't looking. So they began to help each other "with all the little things in life," and fell in love (figure 10).

In 2007, Fu and Tan married, and as "a gift to themselves" decided to paint an original painting of themselves to commemorate their wedding (figure 11). In their *Half the Sky* interviews, the two talk about the creative decisions they jointly made together in order to compose the painting. It depicts Fu Xiaolan at work before an easel, and Tan Mingjian leaning just behind her offering his assistance.

Tan soon encouraged his wife to give up trade painting and to turn her focus to original painting. Fu began to take lessons in foundational skills from Dafen artists. With the local government's funding and support, she passed the professionalization examination that awarded her with urban household registration (*hukou* 户口) in Shenzhen. Creative painting was difficult at first, because, according to Fu, painting on order had caused her "to lose feeling." Nevertheless, she persevered and eventually sold one of her original landscape paintings for 3,000 yuan (400 USD). On camera, Fu stated that she was uncertain about the meaning of this success—she wondered whether the buyer had bought the painting for the painting itself or whether he or she simply pitied the handicap of the artist. But the narrator confidently tells us, in the happy conclusion to the episode: Fu Xiaolan, arriving in Dafen village with only her love of art, has finally realized "her own creative dream." (Figure 12)



Figures 11-12. Fu Xiaolan and Tan Mingjian, marriage painting, and Fu Xiaolan who has "realized her own creative dream," from "The Story of Dafen Village," *Half the Sky*, part 2, CCTV-1, 2 SEP 2008.

As an unskilled worker with a disability of the hands, Fu Xiaolan is presented as a migrant worker who would inevitably face hardship at Dafen village. But by using the extreme case of the *hand*-disabled painter to represent all struggling migrant workers, the documentary easily avoids examining the actual conditions in which Dafen painters work. Her difficulties are explained away as a tragedy of fate, and not a function of the economy. We are not told, for example, how her husband maintains the "stable" volume of orders that enables him to support his wife's quest to become a creative artist, or why she could never succeed as a commercially viable trade painter.

The presentation of Fu's life initially follows in the official formula of perseverance and self-improvement common in Chinese female migrant worker (*dagongmei* 打工妹) literature in the 1980s and 1990s. However, whereas these earlier female migrant workers' narratives consciously rejected romance and marriage in favor of self-reliance,⁴⁷ or later focused on their sexual agency as single and mobile young women,⁴⁸ Fu's story is presented as a tale of love leading to companionate marriage and to permanent settlement in the urban workplace. Although self-reliance and self-

⁴⁷ Eric Florence, "Migrant Workers in the Pearl River Delta: Discourse and Narratives About Work as Sites of Struggle," *Critical Asian Studies* 39, no. 1 (2007): 121-50.

⁴⁸ Pun Ngai, "Becoming Dagongmei (Working Girls): The Politics of Identity and Difference in Reform China," *The China Journal* 42 (1999): 1-18.

training brought Fu to the point of acquiring the basic skills of a painter, her self-realization as a creative artist and as a wife contrasts directly with an earlier official figuration of the migrant worker. The creation of an original art market, subsidies for artistic training, and the opportunity to obtain urban household registration is presented as a social benefit of Dafen village provided by the state to disadvantaged migrant workers such as Fu.

As the profile on Fu suggests, the *Half the Sky* documentary constructs a strict distinction between "painter-workers" and "original artists." This dichotomy is taken up in the profile of the second woman featured, Yang Lixin (杨丽新), an elderly female original artist.⁴⁹ The two episodes devoted to Yang begin by retelling the youthful romance of Yang and her husband Huang Tiecheng (黄铁城), who met as painting students at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in the 1960s (figure 13). They were fervent and passionate art students, but in a vague critique of the pre-reform era, the narrator reminds us that "it was an age when such dreams were impossible."⁵⁰ After graduation, Yang and her husband worked as art editors for Liaoning's provincial periodicals. After retiring in their 60s with a generous pension (it is implied) and two grown sons—one living in Shenzhen—to support them, Yang and Huang decided to realize their lifelong dreams to become artists and moved to Dafen village (figure 14).

⁴⁹ Yang was personally asked by Buji propaganda department officials to participate in the documentary series, she feels, because she is one of very few female painters in Dafen village with advanced culture (*wenhua* 文化) and quality (*suzhi* 素质). Yang Lixin and Huang, interview with author, 17 MAR 2009. For a discussion of population *suzhi*, civilization (*wenming* 文明), and culture (*wenhua* 文化) in contemporary Chinese state discourse, Ann Anagnost, "The Corporeal Politics of Quality (Suzhi)," *Public Culture* 16, no. 2 (2004): 189-208.

⁵⁰ 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], part 3, Beijing: CCTV-1, 3 SEPT 2008. Video available: <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1220431812457730> (accessed June 2009).



Figure 13 and 14. Yang Lixin and Huang Tiechang, in 1969. Yang and Huang, realizing their lifelong dream as classmates, lovers, and artists, in 2008, from "The Story of Dafen Village," *Half the Sky*, part 3, CCTV-1, 3 SEP 2008.

The elderly couple first opened up a gallery to sell their original work. When their first painting was sold, Yang cried because it was "like losing a child," but Huang was ecstatic; he is shown reiterating the official slogan of Dafen village: "Art and the market meet here!" But later, they were asked by a Hong Kong painter-dealer to repaint their own paintings in multiples and to sell them at a lower price.⁵¹ A rift grew between husband and wife over this issue: Huang wanted to capitulate to the market, but Yang proved uncompromising. She considered "copying ourselves" a form of commodification entirely divorced from her creative being. The two eventually closed their gallery to work exclusively at home—for emotional rather than commercial reasons, the documentary implies. With their academic background, Yang and Huang obtained government-subsidized housing as original artists at the government-run "Original Artists' Creation Base," began to sell their works

⁵¹ According to the documentary, Hong Kong and foreign painting bosses offered to purchase his original paintings not for the "original" price, but for a slightly lower price, as long as he was willing to produce several copies of the work. Huang thought it would be great to both sell his work and to "copy himself."

through the Dafen Yihai Auction House,⁵² and to exhibit them at the Dafen Art Museum. Yang humbly tells the camera that she and her husband have no desire to become wealthy or famous; they wish only to sell enough of their work to buy just enough materials to continue painting. The two were amongst a group of twenty-six artists sponsored by the local government to re-trek the Long March, painting and sketching from the landscape along the way (figure 15).⁵³ In a touching scene, the documentary shows photographs of the elderly couple hiking in Yunnan province. They reenact a day when, somewhere beyond Lijiang and Shangri-La, they discover a mountain view of incomparable beauty. They have truly arrived in paradise, the narrator concludes.

Yang Lixin is held up as an ideal "original artist" in the documentary. She is portrayed as uncompromising, whimsical, outspoken, and full of passion. Her painting style is said to express her feminine and expressive nature. She insists on pursuing only her individualistic vision, and never agreed to paint commercial orders or to copy her own paintings. She even refused to sell one of her paintings to a Hong Kong dealer (figure 16). Her husband is presented as far more conflicted, someone for whom the lure of commercial success is too strong. He suffers from the desire for recognition from the market and is wracked by self-doubt. In contrast, Yang declares: "I will paint

⁵² The Yihai 艺海 Auction House consigns paintings from Dafen, Shenzhen, regional and national artists, and runs approximately 2-4 auctions per year in Dafen village. Base prices are set by the artists. Many set it at 0 yuan, although bidding starts at 200 yuan (30 USD). Yihai offers the artist 90% of the sales price, receives the remaining 10% as commission, and charges the buyer an additional 10% fee. Unsold paintings as well as others by the same artists are offered for sale year round in Yihai's gallery. Owned and managed by He Ke 贺克, the Yihai company used to be run as all other Dafen companies, by the principle of "orders, copying, retail 订单临摹销售," until 2004. As of 2009, however, He Ke readily accepts orders in the usual practice. Yihai exhibition catalogues, 2004-2009. He Ke, interviews with author, 3 JAN 2009, 22 FEB 2009.

⁵³ In the reform-era, re-trekking the Long March, or visiting historic sites along the historic route, has emerged as a popular way of re-engaging with the history of the Chinese Communist Party. The practice has been engaged in by many artists including Judy Chicago, and since 2005, institutionalized in the respected Beijing-based art organization and gallery, The Long March Space. Further on Long March art, see the author's "Xiao Xiong: Enter and Exit," *Thresholds* 34 (Cambridge: MIT, Fall 2007).

whatever I happen to want to paint today. At whatever level I feel like painting it at. Some people might think that this painting is not finished, but I might feel that it is. If they want to buy it, fine; if they don't, that's fine too."⁵⁴



Figures 15-16. Photo of Huang Tiecheng in “paradise,” on Long March sketching trip. Yang Lixin, with a painting she has refused to sell, from “The Story of Dafen Village,” *Half the Sky*, part 4, CCTV-1, 4 SEP 2008.

Through these gendered constructions, the documentary thus firmly establishes the strict boundaries between “original painting” and “trade painting.” They are presented as distinct artistic practices serving different markets, but more importantly, through the life stories of Fu and Yang, originality becomes a program of self-realization for the female worker. In keeping with the socio-political tact of *Half the Sky*, here it is women, not men, who are showcased as artist-geniuses. As for the men, Fu’s husband’s aspirations are left entirely unmentioned, and Yang’s husband’s struggle for market recognition is turned into a crude foil for Yang’s creative persona—a distinction that the

⁵⁴ 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], part 3.

couple found upsetting after the airing of the documentary.⁵⁵ Grafted onto this bohemian drama then, is the use of love and marriage to transform the female migrant worker into both wives *and* creative agents. If Dafen village is a trap, it can be turned into paradise through the bohemian tropes of free art and free love.

The transformations of Fu's and Yang's lives culminated in the final profile in the documentary, in which we are told a perfect tale of romantic love in the profile of the most commercially successful couple in Dafen village.⁵⁶ This would be Zhu Hong (朱红), co-owner with her husband Chen Qiuzhi (陈求之) of Sunrise Mountain Collector Art Gallery, which the host tells us is the most elite gallery in Dafen village.⁵⁷

Zhu Hong, the daughter of a well-to-do family, fell in love at first sight on a misty, rainy day with an impoverished ink painter. Zhu married this poor painter, recounting with sweet devotion how, on their wedding day, he was unable to afford even a new pair of trousers or a haircut. Out of pity, Zhu's father later purchased an apartment for them, but Chen was so devastated by this emasculation that he ran away from home with his entire personal inheritance of 600 yuan, and 20 eggs. A few months later, Zhu, unable to bear separation from her beloved, surprises Chen at his doorstep in Dafen village, declaring her undying love. When she arrived, they were so poor that they slept on a balcony drenched in rain, but, amazingly, somehow, the two somehow eventually built an

⁵⁵ Yang and Huang, interview with the author, 17 MAR 2009. The final episode of the documentary suggests that the rift between the two grew so great that Huang rents a different studio space to work in order for the two of them to work separately. In an interview with the author, the two explained that Huang had only worked for a few weeks in a temporary studio space because they were in the process of moving from one home to another. They stated that they were offered an implicit apology from the documentarists for mis-portraying their relationship.

⁵⁶ 半边天 [*Half the Sky*], parts 4-5, 4-5 SEPT 2008. Videos available at: <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1220608380533710> and <http://space.tv.cctv.com/video/VIDE1220518499812101> (accessed June 2009).

⁵⁷ For further discussion on Sunrise Mountain Collector Gallery (*Taiyangshan shoucangji hualang* 太阳山收藏级画廊), signatures and other marketing devices at Dafen village, see Chapter Four.

art enterprise with 150 contract artists and twelve franchise galleries across China. The documentary emphasizes that Zhu—who had neither training nor interest in the painting trade—patiently and gracefully navigates the cutthroat business, and becomes the force behind their business's astonishing success (figure 17). The documentary ends with a dreamy scene of Zhu and Chen walking along the shore of a beautiful lake at sunset. In her uncontainable passion, Zhu stands on a dock and yells across the lake, "Husband! Husband!" (*laogong* 老公) just to hear it echo back (figure 18).



Figures 17-18. Zhu Hong: "Nowadays I understand." Zhu Hong: "Husband!" from "The Story of Dafen Village," *Half the Sky*, part 5, CCTV-1, 5 SEP 2008.

If *Half the Sky* attempts to elicit viewers' sympathy for painter-workers like Fu Xiaolan who encounter a heartless capitalist system that makes survival barely possible, the sentimental love story of Zhu and Chen serves to smooth over the profit- and efficiency-seeking rationale of that same system. The documentarists present the success of Sunrise Mountain Gallery as nearly accidental, as

though it were a byproduct of Zhu's passionate love for Chen. Love, not greed, becomes the explanation for their commercial and artistic success.⁵⁸

Half the Sky repeatedly emphasizes that the three women profiled represent three different classes and age groups at Dafen village—a young painter-worker, a middle-aged dealer and an elderly original artist—implying that the evolution from worker to entrepreneur and then to artist is as natural as a human life cycle. Yet, by ending its overall narrative in dramatic fashion with the story of Zhu Hong, the middle-aged wife-dealer, the series also reminds the viewer that Dafen village (and the cultural industry itself) remains in a period of entrepreneurial growth and opportunity.⁵⁹ This subtext was apparently not lost on its viewers; after the airing of the documentary, so many strangers called Yang Lixin and her husband Huang Tiecheng offering to start business partnerships with them that the two turned off their mobile phones and retreated to their home village for six months.⁶⁰

While the percentage of female migrant workers who make up Shenzhen's temporary labor force has been estimated at 70-90%, in Dafen village migrant painters are predominantly male.⁶¹ As an exception to the exception, Dafen village offers a convenient way to delve into the larger social issue of gendered labor while ignoring the realities on the ground. Through *Half the Sky's* particular construction of a feminized Dafen village, the romanticist stereotype of the unfettered and mobile

⁵⁸ The portrayal of Zhu Hong's centrality in the business's success can be contrasted with the profile on Sunrise Mountain Collector Gallery by Shenzhen journalist Wen Youping, which focuses on Chen's central role as well as the couple's business acumen, luck and timing: Wen Youping 温友平, 大芬村的崛起 [*The Rise of Dafen Village*] (Shenzhen: Haitian Press, 2006), 165-174.

⁵⁹ Echoing what Wang Hui has described as the politics of "constant transition" in contemporary China.

⁶⁰ Amazingly, Yang and Huang found out that most of the callers got their phone numbers from a scene in the documentary. Shot in front of the now closed door of their former gallery, a sticker advertisement with their phone number on it still left on the wall was visible in the background.

⁶¹ Ngai, *Made in China*, 40. I am grateful to Mary Ann O'Donnell for noting this distinct trait of Dafen village.

male artist is transformed into an attainable goal for that most symbolic of political subjects—the female migrant worker. Here, they are shown passionately working to rediscover themselves as creative agents in a new economy. Moreover, this transformation of the migrant-worker into artist-wife takes place in the artist village refigured as a governmentally ordered creative industry. The larger issue (how their painter-husbands support them, or how women's labor is incorporated into trade painting), is ignored in favor of this seemingly progressive exploration of gender equality.

As such *Half the Sky* offers only a very partial answer to the question it initially raises, namely, how are Dafen's painter-workers to avoid the trap of alienated, commercial labor, and instead invent both themselves and creative products for the world market? How can the transition from migrant worker to creative artist really be made? Here, the antithetical relation constructed between originality and commercialism provides a framework for an unsatisfying and tautological answer. The documentary explains over and over that, unlike trade paintings, original paintings "have something of the painter's self in them." Thus, Yang Lixin paints still lifes of cut flowers in vases in a pale and cool palette, which expresses her femininity, as the boss of the Dafen Yihai Auction House tells the viewer. Even though Yang paints only this single subject, and even if her paintings appear to be remarkably repetitive, they are "original" and not "commercial" paintings because of the irrefutable claim that they have "something" of Yang Lixin in them. Obviously, even Yang Lixin cannot say what that "something" might be. Alienation is thus constructed as inherent in the trade painter's work, and absolutely absent in the creative artist's (rather repetitive) labor.

The almost-sacralized connection drawn between the original painting and the artistic self works to decouple originality from all other forms of artistic judgment—esthetic and stylistic concerns, relationships to artistic tradition, matters of taste, and political or social content—even as it values above all the artist's "creativity." This definition of art rejects expert hierarchies of evaluation and makes possible a form of popular reception centered on the artist's subjectivity. At

the conclusion of the profile on Fu Xiaolan, a relationship psychologist is asked to evaluate Fu and Tan's marriage painting, and he concludes from the painting that Fu and Tan will have a happy and equal marriage. A stock figure of the television program, the psychologist is nonetheless an apt personality to replace the art critic. Bypassing criterion of taste, the psychologist demonstrates a mode of consumption in which the viewer's appreciation need only resonate with the painter's biography. He aims not to instruct the viewer in discerning whether a given painting is "good," but simply how to see the painter's life and personality through it. As potential consumers, we need not discern whether a painting is artistic, but we do have a means of recognizing its purpose—the creative self-expression of the artist.

This construction of creativity serves two important functions. First, it counters the picture of Dafen village as a sweatshop filled with exploited and anonymous laborers infringing upon "true" artists' copyrights. Second, it instructs both the producer and consumer in self-realization as creative individuals. As cultural studies scholar Pang Lai-Kwan has argued, in order for the creative economy to produce a subjective consuming mode, "the creative worker is mythologized as the source of these transient but priceless ideas, and the consumer buys freedom and self-realization from the producer via the commodity."⁶² Creativity thus operates as the central criteria for both consumer and producer, who become interlocked as intertwined subjects. The migrant painter refashions herself into a creative persona who produces for the sole purpose of personal expression, as a consumer does in consuming. Painters and buyers alike share the same romance, the same desire for creative expression.

⁶² Laikwan Pang, "The Labor Factor in the Creative Economy: A Marxist Reading," *Social Text* 99 (2009), 58.



Figure 19. Little Snow and Xie Weiqiang, with Dafen paintings in the backdrop. *Painted Fate*, 2008.

Paint Whatever You Want To Paint, Love Whomever You Want To Love

Painted Fate (*Hua zhi yuan* 画之缘) is a twenty-episode television drama jointly produced by local state and party organs in conjunction with media organizations in Guangzhou and Shanghai.⁶³ Production began in 2006 and the first episode was screened at the Dafen Art Museum during the 2008 Cultural Industry Fair. Pamphlets were distributed to Dafen painters and bosses during the fair to attend the free screening, encouraging them to "get hooked."⁶⁴ In 2008, the series aired on Guangdong province's Pearl River Television station, often seen throughout China.⁶⁵ The full episodes have been made available online and have been viewed by a modest audience by Chinese

⁶³ Namely, the Shenzhen Longgang District Party Committee, Longgang District Party Government, the Shenzhen Buji Street Administration Work Committee, Shanghai Taoyuan Culture Dissemination Ltd., and Guangdong Television Station. It was directed by Zhang Zhongyi (张中一) and produced by Chi Huaqiong (池华琼) and Chen Yiheng (陈逸恒). Yu Xue, untitled, *Shenzhen Economics Paper*, New Media, 18 May 2005, unpagged.

⁶⁴ Yu Xue, *Shenzhen Economics Paper*, unpagged.

⁶⁵ For example, I first saw the series on television at a hotel in Lijiang in Yunnan province.

internet standards—most episodes had less than 3000 views as of 2009. Significantly, however, the melodrama enjoyed virtually no audience within Dafen village itself.⁶⁶

Despite its rather quiet failure, *Painted Fate* is nonetheless interesting for the reach of its ambitions. It was promoted by local officials as a "Chinese Da Vinci Code," and as a re-creation of the history and development of Dafen village.⁶⁷ Since producers intended it only for domestic consumption, they did not specify an English title for the series and never marketed it outside of China.⁶⁸ The title uses a romantic trope in popular fiction, film and television: *yuan* (缘), meaning destiny or fate,⁶⁹ and hints at how, through art, a pair of painter-workers will struggle to realize their creative destiny and fulfill their ill-fated romantic love (figure 19).

Operating within the formulae of official art, the melodrama conspicuously incorporates into its plot promotional speeches for the local industry, efficient and compassionate health and police services, demonstrations in correct legal and consumer behavior, and, above all, instruction in the appreciation and creation of original art. Throughout the melodrama, numerous characters recite Dafen's official slogans and profit statistics in lengthy monologues that are taken verbatim from texts produced and used by the Buji Propaganda Department. When the characters encounter conflicts, they are given instructional speeches by figures of authority who explain the basics of

⁶⁶ Only one in approximately 50 persons I have interviewed in Dafen village have ever seen more than a few minutes of the twenty-hour long program. Most cite its preposterous and unrealistic portrayal of Dafen village.

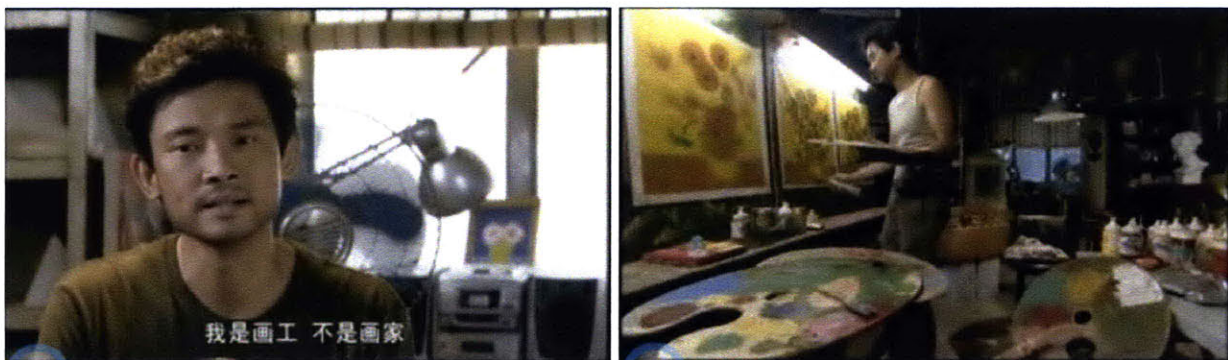
⁶⁷ Yu Xue, *Shenzhen Economics Paper*, unpagged.

⁶⁸ The Chinese propaganda system separates propagandizing for foreign and overseas Chinese consumption from propaganda for internal consumption. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 12.

⁶⁹ The notion of fate or destiny would be a closer equivalent to "*yuanfen* 缘分" in modern Chinese popular culture. It is a popular theme of friendships and love relationships in television melodramas, romances and period dramas, where star-crossed lovers are forever telling each other that they have "*yuan*" but no "*fen*"—fated to fall in love but not fated, because of birth or status, to be together—a concept that we could apply to Romeo and Juliet, for example. *Painted Fate* is my own, rather free, translation.

contract law, auction law, marketing, criminal investigation, and so on. Painters are consistently reminded of their legal and moral responsibility to deliver their products "in quantity, in quality, and on time."⁷⁰ The drama begins, for example, with a preposterous scenario. Our hero the painter-worker delivers nineteen instead of twenty Van Gogh paintings to his boss, which is only a tiny part of an order of hundreds of thousands of paintings put out to many firms employing many factories of workers. This single missing painting is said to render the entire "contract" between the big boss and his client "null," resulting in catastrophic losses for the big boss. The big boss lectures the little boss on the principle of legal contracts, who then reiterates the same to our hero, the painter-worker, who is soon fired from his job.

These pedagogical lessons targeted at both workers and potential investors extend to the melodrama's discourse on original art and the creative industry. In the drama, numerous teachers instruct the receptive young female heroine on originality, creativity and true art. While the melodrama thus resembles socialist realist portrayals of everyday life, *Painted Fate* also makes a complex (if incomplete and self-contradictory) attempt to harmonize socialist tropes of artistic idealism with the economic logic of Dafen village's art industry.



Figures 20-21. Xie Weiqiang: "I'm a painter-worker, not an artist." Xie working on a Van Gogh order, *Painted Fate*, 2008.

⁷⁰ "按时按质按量." 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 1.

The melodrama's main character is Little Snow (小雪), a beautiful, innocent, but college-educated young woman, who is always dressed in white. She arrives at "Nanfen" (南芬) or "Southern Fen" Oil Painting Village, to search for her birth father.⁷¹ But, swindled out of all her money, she is forced to share an apartment with a handsome and equally naive, but good-natured, young man named Xie Weiqiang (谢伟强), which literally means "thankful, heroic and strong." Xie is a van Gogh painter, working for a large painting firm, but aspires to be a "true artist" (figures 20-21). The two characters thereby embark on a dual quest to together become original artists and to realize their romance in conjugal love.⁷² The series' title narration, voiced over a lilting pop song, features a line that sums up the melodrama's central themes of love and art. It is taken from a climatic line uttered by a character in the drama, a dying female migrant worker who tells the painters: "Paint whatever you want to paint, love whomever you want to love!" The *Half the Sky* meta-narrative is fully dramatized in this life triangle of *Painted Fate*, wherein the female migrant worker—a self-sacrificing, honest and unsophisticated rural woman—tragically dies but gives way to the aspiring female artist who has dreams, romances, self-assuredness and higher aspirations.⁷³

⁷¹ Little Snow was told by her adoptive father that her birth father is a painter from whom she was separated as a toddler. Little Snow learns from the local police chief that the best way to find her father is for her to paint a painting of him "using all her heart," so that the police chief can show the painting to a psychic detective who would be able to locate her father for her. Thus she embarks on a quest to become a "true artist."

⁷² The love scenes take the form of Xie and Little Snow feeding soup to each other, celebrating birthdays together, nursing each other to health, and reading Foucault on the couch together.

⁷³ The opposition between Little Snow and the dying female migrant worker character, Yang Na, is heightened by the quasi-love triangle of Little Snow, Yang Na, and Xie Weiqiang (in which Xie's love for Little Snow was never in doubt). Yang Na arrives in Nanfen village with a baby, claiming that Xie Weiqiang is the father. Begging him to recognize his paternity, she asks Xie Weiqiang to paint a painting of her and their son, as beautiful as his painting of Little Snow. Many tear-soaked episodes later, we learn that Yang Na had, not entirely willingly, had sexual intercourse with Xie Weiqiang's friend, who was impersonating a drunken Xie. In the subplot, the tragic mix-up is eventually solved but Yang Na dies from cancer, despite Xie and Little Snow's heroic efforts to raise money for her surgery. Xie and Little Snow, adopted orphans themselves, then adopt her baby.



Figure 22-23. Master Yu: "Commercial painting is not true painting." *Painted Fate*, 2008.

While Xie Weiqiang heroically strives alone outdoors, in his studio and against dealers, we follow our heroine Little Snow through the tribulations of learning to be a creative artist. In an early scene visually overtaken by a plaster cast of the head of Michelangelo's *David*, the passionate female original artist, Master Yu, paces the studio floor and lectures Little Snow (figures 22-23):

Trade painting is not true painting. That is only a type of mechanical manufacture, an industrial, mass, assembly line production....That is not originality, and certainly is not art. Art must have thought and inspiration. It is the resulting traces of the creator's heart! It is the explosion of emotion! It is one of a kind, it can never be copied and never repeated. Only in this way, can it be called true painting, can it be called true art. Do you understand? Trade painting is missing a fundamental thing, and that is inspiration. It is but oil paint thrown together in a pile, it certainly doesn't have any life to speak of!...Trade painting is but a skill. Skill can be learned, but thought can never be imitated!⁷⁴

⁷⁴ 余老师：“行画不是真正的绘画。那只是机械的生产，是批量的流水作业....这不是创作，更不是艺术！艺术呢是要有理想，有灵魂！是创作者心灵的流露，那是感情的迸发，那是独一无二不可复制不可重复的。只有这样呀，才称得上是真正的绘画，才称得上是真正的艺术。你明白吗小雪？行画里缺少最根本的东西，那就是灵魂。他只不过是一堆色彩的堆砌，根本就没有什么生命可言。”小雪：“那行画里就没有好画吗？”余老师：“画得再好那只是技法而已。技法可以练，可是思想呢，思想是不能模仿的！这个就是行画和原创画的最大区别。” Full: Little Snow: "So aren't there any good paintings amongst trade paintings?" Yu: "No matter how well it is painted, it will be but just a type of skill. Skill can be taught, but thought (思想), thought can never be imitated. This is the great difference between trade painting and original painting." 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 8.

Following this lesson Little Snow then is lectured by Manager An, who provides Little Snow with a classic trope from literati painting. He explains to Little Snow the correct process to creating a true work of art: "Painting depends on the heart (*xin* 心). Paint with heart and then the painting will have spirit. Only when the heart moves, does the spirit move. Only when the spirit moves, should the eye and the hand move."⁷⁵ Manager An goes on to transform the four classical Chinese terms for copying *lin*, *mo*, *fang*, *zao* into a new and strictly ordered sequence: 1) *mo*, 2) *fang*, 3) *chuang*, 4) *zao* (一模, 二仿, 三创, 四造), which we could translate as, "first imitate, second appropriate, third create, fourth, innovate."⁷⁶ (Figures 24-25)



Figures 24-25. Manager An: "To learn to paint, first imitate, second appropriate, third create, fourth innovate." *Painted Fate*, 2008.

Finally, Little Snow asks the rebellious and uncompromising original artist Ma Xiaofeng to be her teacher. He is presented as a chauvinistic male genius, declaring that *as a woman* Master Yu (also his former lover and model) would never be able to teach Little Snow the advanced secrets of creativity (figure 26-27). Eventually, of course, he falls in love with the Little Snow too, and expresses this by painting a masterpiece: a painting of Little Snow as an angel. Meanwhile, the hero

⁷⁵ "心动则神动, 神动则眼动手动." 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 12.

⁷⁶ The character Manager An gives this sequence when giving the heroine Little Snow a lesson in creativity. 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 12.

Xie Weiqiang continues to struggle to find his self-confidence to paint "his own" paintings, and is fortified by Little Snow's steadfast belief in true art. Transforming all the instruction she has been given into a spirited aphorism, Little Snow tells Xie over and over: "Just paint with your heart!"⁷⁷ Our heroine's resolute utterance is remarkable for its reduction of the various traditionalist and modernist principles into a single notion of creative desire. Xie Weiqiang achieves this only when he also completes a painting of his beloved Little Snow. True art and true love become equivalents.



Figure 26-27. True art: Left: Master Yu modeling for her lover Ma Xiaofeng; Right: Ma Xiaofeng's original painting. *Painted Fate*, 2008.

As in *Half the Sky*, *Painted Fate* consistently reiterates the claim that creativity comes from within the individual artist's self, that it is an internal resource found in every person, and that a painting is "original" so long as it has something of the painter in it. However, *Painted Fate* raises the stakes dramatically higher, by highlighting in its plot not only original paintings of the beloved, but also masterpiece paintings with higher social ideals. Each of these are paintings on the subject of fatherhood and motherhood that function as overt allegories of the nation-state.

⁷⁷ "Yongxin de hua" (用心得画) translates both into "paint with your heart" and "persevere with painting."



Figure 28-29. Little Snow looking at *Father*. Little Snow: "Heavens! This painting looks too much like my own father..."
Painted Fate, 2008.

One of the most examined paintings in the melodrama is a photorealist portrait belonging to Xie Weiqiang of a wrinkled old man (figure 28). When offered it by Little Snow, Manager An is astounded by its "rare emotional force," and buys it from her for an exorbitant amount. Xie is devastated, because the portrait is an iconic universal archetype of fatherhood and thus, in his mind, represents his adoptive father, a poor and hardworking stone breaker. For Xie, the painting is priceless, and ought never to have been sold. Of course, Manager An is a very enlightened dealer, and returns the painting to them. Xie and Little Snow then weep before the canvas, in memory of their own adoptive fathers (figure 29).

The painting, and the characters' response to it, is an unveiled reference to Luo Zhongli's celebrated 1980 painting, *Father* (figure 30), a monumentally scaled photorealist frontal close-up of an old peasant. Luo's painting and the fictional Dafen *Father* differ only in size and in the figure's costume, beard, and headdress. When Luo's painting was exhibited in 1981, art critics noted that Luo had employed the format of Mao's official Tian'anmen portrait for a painting of an anonymous peasant. Art historian Eugene Wang has shown how Luo's monumental painting of an anonymous old laborer, painted four years after the death of Mao, was taken up as a paternal icon in the

collective psychology of the post-Mao era.⁷⁸ Viewers of Luo's *Father* wept before his canvas as Xie and Little Snow do before their Dafen canvas, summoning forth a nationalism that replaces devotion to Mao with a far more universalist filial love for hardworking fathers and anonymous peasants everywhere.



Figure 30. Luo Zhongli, *Father*, oil on canvas, 1987.

The paternalistic nationalism embodied in the universal figure of the peasant-worker is made more explicit in a scene of *Painted Fate* set in France. In it, Mr. Jiang's French-aculturated daughter, Little Frost (*Xiao Shuang* 小霜), asks her father whether her grandfather, who copied the cave murals of Dunhuang, was a "great artist." Jiang explains that his father was "just an anonymous peasant," so Little Frost asks, "Then why do you hang his painting in the center of the wall, and put your

⁷⁸ The painting was initially named *My Father* by the artist, but it was renamed by the jury of the National Youth Art Exhibition as *Father*. Eugene Y. Wang, "Anxiety of Portraiture: Quest for/ Questioning Ancestral Icons in Post-Mao China," in *Politics, Ideology, and Literary Discourse in Modern China*, ed. Kang Liu, and Xiaobing Tang (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 250, 245.

paintings by Picasso and Miro off to the side?" Jiang gravely explains, "Because without father there is no I, and without me there is no you. Looking at this painting makes me think of father...and of China!"⁷⁹ There is indeed no need to ask whether the Picasso and Miro paintings on Boss Jiang's wall are "originals" or "copies," or whether Xie's *Father* painting is an "appropriation" of Luo Zhongli's *Father*, because, if we accept the notion that art appreciation as simply a matter of discerning the painter's love of his subject, there is no need to distinguish the first instance of an image from a later one.

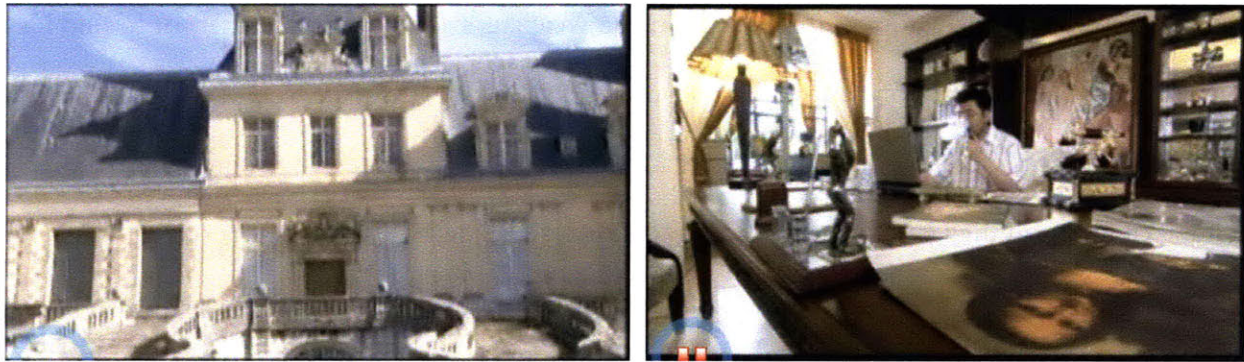
In both scenes, the conscious leveling of Western masterpieces with images of ancient and modern Chinese paternal icons explicitly situates these very personalized mini-masterpieces (or "trade paintings") within a national canon.⁸⁰ The "popularization" of world art enabled by the art industry of copying is crucial in the move made here. The fictional Dafen *Father* painting is an obvious but not exact imitation of Luo Zhongli's *Father*, but it is precisely the type of painting which Dafen village produces in great quantities each year: near-copies with decorative variations, but on a smaller, standardized and portable scale.⁸¹ Although there is no need to fetishize the original canvas, the logic of the image's canonical meaning remains at work. Artist-made originals and anonymously produced copies become, one and all, instances of true creativity in the art of a socialist civilization. In a later episode, Xie, standing on a replica Great Wall of China in a theme park outside of Dafen

⁷⁹ 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 3.

⁸⁰ Note that "western" masterpieces are Sinicized here. As the national Xinhua news agency reports Li Min, head of the Longgang District Government, saying: "When he was working on his Mona Lisa 500 years ago, Da Vinci could never have dreamt that a bronze statue of him would be erected in Dafen Village, which has become famous throughout the world with its oil painting industry." [NEED CIT]

⁸¹ Indeed, in 2004, copies Luo's *Father* painting was reported to be hung in galleries throughout Dafen, on sale for about 1000 yuan. Bi Guoxue 毕国学, "深圳大芬油画村的拓荒者 [Pioneer of Shenzhen's Dafen Village]," 深圳商报 *Shenzhen Economic Daily* (24 JUN 2004). Liu Jishan 刘继善, "深圳大芬村靠卖“画”名扬天下 [Shenzhen's Dafen Village Sells "Paintings" to Repute Around the World]," 中国消费者报 文体观点 (19 NOV 2004): A04.

village, reflectively tells Little Snow that all the great works of Chinese art—the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army, and the Dunhuang murals—were made by anonymous artists and artisans. Xie reflects that, in the greater scheme of history, hierarchal distinctions between "painter-workers" and "painter-masters" are meaningless. By this statement, a Dafen trade painting is symbolically equated with the grandiose projects of painting (or transferring) *in situ* at a national heritage site like Dunhuang.



Figures 31-32. Mr. Jiang, at work in his office in Paris. *Painted Fate*, 2008.

The wealthiest and most powerful character of the melodrama, Boss Jiang, melds the elitist and popularizing tensions of art in a single worldview. A Chinese expatriate, CEO of the French company *Euro-Asia Bridge* (*Ou Ya Qiao* 欧亚桥), and a world-famous art collector and dealer, Boss Jiang is so renowned that he apparently lives and works in Paris inside the *Grand Palais*, in a home office resplendent with bourgeois furnishings, surrounded by great works of copied paintings such as a scaled-down *Demoiselles d'Avignon* and an enlarged *Mona Lisa* (figures 31-32). He is a patriotic Chinese citizen who has gone abroad to establish a successful multinational enterprise, and has access to the West's knowledge, networks, and behaviors. He is never seen without the two markers of cultural expertise: a tobacco pipe and a magnifying glass. An idealized international painter-dealer, Jiang represents an amalgamation of supranational business, knowledge work, and leftist populism,

yet in his cultural politics, he is also an anti-elitist booster of the anonymous craftsman, a popularizer of great art, and a humanist who interprets the world's cultural heritage.

When Jiang "finally assents" to take his daughter to visit China, her "ancestral homeland" (*zǔguo* 祖国), he explains to her his three goals for the trip: First, he intends to increase his company's share of the emerging Chinese cultural industry; Second, he hopes to find talented Chinese artists and to "popularize" their art to the world; Third, he has to realize a secret personal dream—presumably, either to thank the anonymous stone-breaker who once saved his father's life in Dunhuang (this will neatly turn out to have been Xie Weiqiang's adoptive grandfather) or to find his long lost daughter (this will of course turn out to be Little Snow).⁸² As if he were reciting a foreign direct investment brochure, Boss Jiang enumerates to Little Frost statistics on the growth of the cultural economy in the United States, Japan, and Korea since the 1970s, and boasts of the great business opportunities in China's cultural economy. He tells Little Frost how advantageous it would be to invest in Dafen village, incorporate an enterprise and build a large factory there. To discover Chinese artists, Jiang instructs his right-hand man, Manager An, to place advertisements on television and radio inviting artists to submit their work for an exhibition that Jiang is organizing at "the Centre de Pompidou, the MoMA and the Belgium National Museum."⁸³ A Chinese news anchor is then seen on television making Jiang's announcement, and painters line up with rolls of paintings at his manager's office. Doing away with the elitism of the institutionalized art system, the multinational painter-dealer empowers anyone to apply. Jiang summarizes the benefits of China's creative policy in one sentence (figure 33): "A spiritual civilization and a cultured economy brings a dual profit."⁸⁴

⁸² 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 14.

⁸³ 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 11.

⁸⁴ 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 15.



Figure 33. "A spiritual civilization and a cultured economy brings a dual profit." Boss Jiang lectures to Little Frost, *Painted Fate*, 2008. Figure 34. "But is there such a thing as absolute freedom?" *Painted Fate*, 2008

At the climax of the melodrama, Boss Jiang holds a meeting with the original artist Ma Xiaofeng in order to convince him to sell his prized painting, *Angel*. When the artist protests that his painting is a "true work of art," "without price" (*wu jia* 无价), meant solely for exhibition and not for sale, Boss Jiang lectures Ma on the inevitable commodification of all works of art, and upbraids Ma for his romantic naiveté (figure 34):

There are no artists today whose work is priceless. Every year I go to Sotheby's and Christie's auctions. Every famous artist has paintings sold there. Isn't Xu Beihong a greater artist than you? His *Feng Chen San Xia* was sold in Hong Kong for 6,645,000 Hong Kong dollars, establishing the auction price record for a Chinese oil painting. Zhao Wuji is a better artist than you, right? His *San Lian Ping* sold for 7,550,000 Hong Kong dollars. Zhang Daqian is a greater artist than you, right?... These are all the greatest artists of China! And let's talk about foreign artists. Rubens' *Massacre of the Innocents* sold for 49,500,000 British pounds! And what about the consummate fine art master Picasso's *Boy with a Pipe*, it sold for 100,416,000 American dollars! It is the most expensive painting in the world! These are all the world's great masters! How can you compare yourself with them? These artists' prices reflect their reputation. And you? You say your paintings are without price? That is like saying they aren't even worth a penny! That is why you can only hide in a dark corner painting paintings that can never be sold.... Can you succeed by your talent? You have to grasp opportunity, find a discoverer of talent who will

appreciate your work!... You should rejoice at meeting me, but the important thing, the important thing, is that you have to understand, you have to comprehend, why I must do what I do. Now will you sell?⁸⁵

Of course, Ma can only wholeheartedly respond, "I'll sell!"

The romantic anti-commercialism of Ma is a routine stereotype of the modern artist, but in *Painted Fate*, this stereotype had been assiduously built up as the highest ideal over fifteen episodes until Boss Jiang completely undoes it in this spit-ridden tirade, delivered as he pokes at the air with the end of his pipe. Prior to this moment, the romanticist definition of "originality" had been constructed into the antithesis of Dafen village's "trade painting"; now, the audience witnesses the drama's most commanding cultural savant reassert the *a priori* power of the market to make an artist great and to render his paintings suited for mass-production and commodification.

There is also nothing new to the claim that an artist is nothing without the market. In that, Boss Jiang nearly paraphrases word for word Pierre Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*:

At the moment when [artists] argue, with Flaubert, that a work of art...is beyond appraisal, has no commercial value, 'cannot be paid for,' that it is without price, that is to say, foreign to the

⁸⁵ 江: "我觉得你这个观点阿...或多或少的是有一些浅薄跟无知...你自以为是艺术家你自比凡高?现在世界上哪一个艺术家无价呀。我每年都要参加世界上最大的苏士比跟佳士德的拍卖会, 拍卖的都是世界名家的作品。哪。徐悲鸿比你牛吧?他的风尘三侠在香港创下了664.5万港币的中国油画拍卖记录。赵无极比你牛吧?他的三联屏售价是755万港币。张大千比你牛吧。他的泼彩朱荷屏拍出了2000万港币的高价。这都是中国的大师阿。我们再说外国的。鲁本斯的对无辜者的屠杀售价是4950万英镑!再说美术巨匠毕加索的拿烟斗的男孩是以1亿416万美元售出的。是迄今为止世界上卖出最贵的一副画。这可都是中外的艺术大师啊。那么,你跟他们比起来,是不是小巫见大巫阿?那么这些艺术大师们这个价也就是大师身价的反映。可你呢?(笑着)你的艺术无价!那只能说你的艺术一钱不值。所以你只能呆在不见阳光的角落里去画那些永远都没有人去买的画。现在我问你。你的画卖不卖?...你持才自傲就能成功啊?错了。你大错特错了。我告诉你。你关键是要把握住机会,找到欣赏你的伯乐...你庆幸了是遇见了我,但是关键的关键是你明白,你要懂得,我为什么这样做!现在我问你。你的画卖不卖?画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 15.

ordinary logic of the ordinary economy, they discover that it is effectively without commercial value, that it has no market."⁸⁶

However, in the context of *Painted Fate*, the "ordinary economy" that Jiang represents is not just the traditional art market of collectors, dealers and auction houses. Rather, as *Painted Fate* has educated the viewer, the owner of a painting also owns its copyright, and has the right to reproduce, "popularize" and "commodify" it.⁸⁷ Thus, in the creative industry context of Dafen village, the "art market" refers to the global market for high volume trade paintings, and Jiang is not just a collector-dealer but also a boss. When Ma sells Jiang his painting, he is not only selling his ownership of the painting to a collector, but also selling to him the legal right to have the image limitlessly re-painted for sale. This is, after all, the whole point of "creative industry": the reproduction of intellectual properties for their popularization-commodification.⁸⁸

The legalistic conflation of the traditional art market with the trade painting market is immediately followed up in Jiang and Ma's dialogue. As soon as Ma agrees to sell his painting, Jiang

⁸⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 81.

⁸⁷ 深圳市知识产权局 [Shenzhen City Department of Intellectual Property], "深圳市大芬油画村美术作品版权交易法律指导 [Shenzhen City Dafen Oil Painting Village Guide to the Copyright Law of Works of Art]," (7 AUG 2007). That local officials presume that dealers (*huashang* 画商) own paintings with copyright, and not artists, is evident in the policy of the Dafen Management Office that asks dealers, not artists, to register for copyright protection with the office.

⁸⁸ Jin Yuanpu 金元浦, Professor of Humanities at People's University: "创意，创新和原创是文化产业发展的一条基本原理。没有了原创，没有了最新创意，也就没有知识产权，而文化创意就是知识经济或者知识产权的方式来发展的产业。要想使大芬油画村品牌增价，就需要在这方面做出更大的努力。" [Creativity, creative innovation, and original creation are the fundamental principles of cultural industry development. Without original creation, without the newest creativity, there would be no intellectual property, and cultural innovation requires the knowledge economy and intellectual property rights as means of developing the industry. To increase the value of the Dafen Oil Painting Village brand, we must put in greater efforts in this area.] Quoted in Wang Bo 王波, "油画村的'彩色产业'" [The 'Multicolor Industry' of the Oil Painting Village], 中国新闻出版报 世博会特刊 (2007): 008. See also Zhang Yan 张焱, "知识产权助力文化产业走向世界 [Intellectual Property Rights Assists Cultural Industries to Go Out Into the World]," 中国知识产权报 (2007).

asks Ma to become one of his company's "contracted artists"—legally binding the artist to produce original paintings for the company to reproduce and market.⁸⁹ When Ma weakly replies that he cherishes his independence, Jiang again starts to lecture:

"But is there such a thing as absolute freedom? Answer me. Is there? No, there isn't. If Chen Yifei hadn't signed with the Hammers Gallery, the Hammers Gallery would never have given his Two Bridges painting to Deng Xiaoping. Only because Ting Shao Kuang signed with the famous American company, Segal Fine Arts Company, did the Segal company wholesale out his reproductions to countless international galleries....and only then did he become a world famous Chinese artist."⁹⁰

To understand the significance of Boss Jiang's two examples here, we need to recognize that, again, two very different commercial relationships are being conflated into one. Hammer Galleries (*Haimo hualang* 海默画廊) is the New York art gallery founded in 1928 by the collector and Occidental Petroleum magnate Armand Hammer. In 1981, Hammer had purchased the painting *Two Bridges* by Chinese artist Chen Yifei (陈逸飞 1946-2005), and personally presented it as a gift to Deng Xiaoping (figure 35). Meanwhile, Hammer Galleries purchased a number of paintings by Chen and held an exhibition of them at the New York gallery.⁹¹ The relationship of Chen Yifei and the

⁸⁹ Further on formal and informal arrangements between Dafen painters and bosses for the "original" market, including "contracted artists (*qianyue huajia* 签约画家)" see Chapter Four.

⁹⁰ 江: "但是世界上有绝对的自由吗? 回答我。有吗? 没有。陈逸飞如果不是跟海默画廊签约, 海默就不会把他的双桥送给邓小平。他有可能就不会成功。还有。丁绍光。由于和美国著名的西格尔公司签约了, 所以西格尔公司才向全球数千家的画廊批发了丁绍光的复制品, 使丁绍光成为全球闻名中国画家。" 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], episode 15.

⁹¹ I am grateful to Jane Debevoise for identifying the gallery.

Hammer Galleries is thus a relationship between an artist and a commercial gallery, albeit one founded by a collector with global commercial interests.⁹²

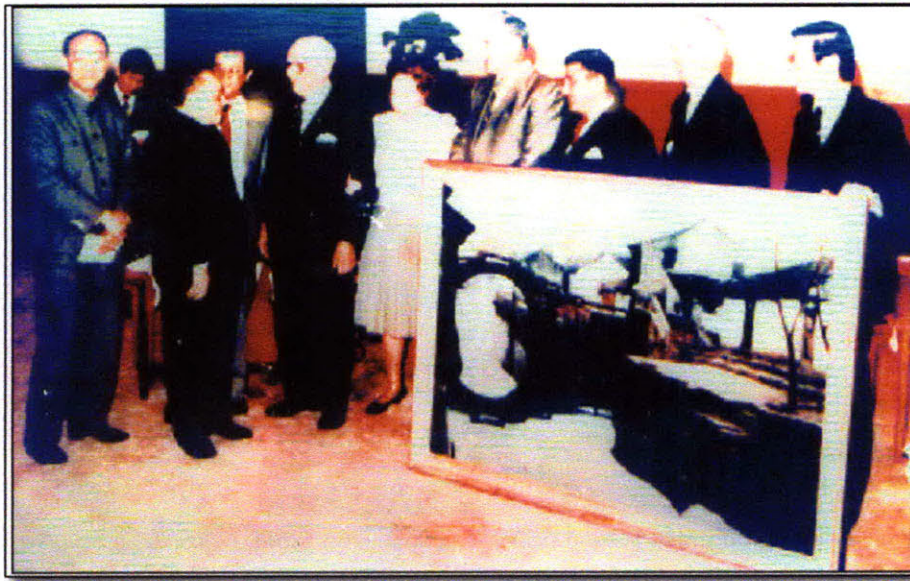


Figure 35. Armand Hammer presenting Chen Yifei's *Two Bridges* to Deng Xiaoping, 1981.

On the other hand, Ting Shao Kuang's (or Ding Shaoguang 丁绍光, b. 1939) contract was with Segal Fine Arts company. In 1981, the virtually unknown Ting signed an agreement with the also virtually unknown Los Angeles art publisher, Ron Segal, through which approximately fifty to one hundred paintings by Ting per year were to be published as serigraph prints by printmaking studios in San Francisco.⁹³ For over ten years, Segal Fine Arts produced 200 to 500 editions of each Ting painting. The prints sold exceedingly well in the American and Japanese markets of the 1980s, propelling Ting to international fame and fortune on an extraordinary scale. The original paintings

⁹² Hammer Galleries mounted a solo exhibition of Chen Yifei's work in 1981. Armand Hammer purchased *Two Bridges* from that exhibition. Presumably Chen Yifei had also signed an agreement with the Hammer Galleries to represent him in the United States in an artist-gallery relationship. However, my query to representatives of Hammer Galleries on this matter remain unanswered.

⁹³ Ron Segal, interview with author, 22 MAY 2009.

by Ting were also sold by Segal Fine Arts, but as its founder and principal owner Ron Segal states, the original paintings were simply "wonderful byproducts" of the main business of creating, marketing and distributing the prints.⁹⁴



Figure 36. Ding Shaoguang, *Aurora*, hand signed serigraph, Artist Proof, 12/65, Segal Fine Art, 1992.

When consumption is constructed as an exercise of consummation with the artist's own desire for self-expression, commercial success can only further legitimize an artist. Ting Shao Kuang is an academically trained Chinese painter whose work has been placed with the "Yunnan School"—a Han Chinese 1970s style of modernist abstraction and primitivism known for its soft erotic depictions of minority women in Yunnan province (figure 36).⁹⁵ Following his completion of a mural for the Yunnan Room of the National People's Congress on Tiananmen Square in 1981, Ting immediately left China for Los Angeles.⁹⁶ Through Segal Fine Arts, Ting's prints and paintings were

⁹⁴ Ron Segal, interview with author, 22 MAY 2009.

⁹⁵ Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 392-394. Joan Lebold Cohen, *Yunnan School: A Renaissance in Chinese Painting* (Minneapolis, Minn: Fingerhut Group Publishers, 1988). Dru C Gladney, *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 70-75. I am grateful to Joan Cohen for her thoughts on Ting.

⁹⁶ Once in the United States, Ting sought political asylum status (which he was denied), arguing that he faced censorship and persecution in China.

featured in over a thousand exhibitions in the 1980s, the majority of which were exhibitions Ting's prints held in Japan's elite department store art galleries.⁹⁷ The culmination of Ting's commercial success came in 1992, when the National Museum of Chinese History in Tian'anmen Square held a retrospective show of his prints, the first solo show of any artist in that museum's history.⁹⁸ Ting then served as an "official artist" of the United Nations from 1993 to 1997, further popularizing his images of ethnicity and woman on official UN stamps and stationary, most famously, for Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

Both Ting Shao Kuang's and Chen Yifei's paintings have been widely reproduced in Dafen village and are amongst the most popular paintings in the domestic Chinese market.⁹⁹ But far more than Luo Zhongli or Chen Yifei, Ting Shao Kuang's career bursts with the bonafides of a Chinese "world artist," underpinned by his success in the Japanese and American consumer art markets, his official status with the United Nations, and his approved exhibition in the National Museum of Chinese History. Ting is not only a popular painter of multiethnic China, he lived in a mansion next door to Michael Jackson in Beverly Hills.¹⁰⁰ The Chinese patriarchal nationalism re-imagined as a popular globalism through the commodification of Ting Shao Kuang's paintings thus epitomizes the official ambition for Dafen village's creative industry. Furthermore, the history of legal and

⁹⁷ Ron Segal, interview with author, 14 MAY 2009. On the Japanese department store art exhibition, see Brian Moeran, "The Birth of the Japanese Department Store," in *Asian Department Stores*, ed. Kerrie L Macpherson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), 160.

⁹⁸ "丁绍光丝网印版画作品展 [Ting Shao Kuang Silkscreen Print Works Exhibition]" Beijing and Shanghai, 1992. According to Ting, he was constantly running out of original paintings for exhibition since they were always selling too quickly to collectors or promised in contracts. Thus, to his own disappointment, the exhibition featured prints of his work and not the original paintings. Xie Rong 谢荣, and Ding Li 丁黎, 丁绍光: 心灵的微笑 [*Ting Shao Kuang: Smile From the Heart*] (Shanghai: 上海人民出版社, 1999), 189.

⁹⁹ In contrast Dafen dealers say they are seldom sold to foreigners.

¹⁰⁰ Purchased in 1995, Ting's 2.25 acres property was designed as a "French Chateau" and was listed for sale in 2001 at 18.8 million USD.

authorized reproductions of Ting's work and its immense commercial success sets him apart as a key artist for the creative industry narrative of *Painted Fate*.

In order to make Ting Shao Kuang into the perfect creative industry precedent for Dafen, *Painted Fate* must make one final leap of logic. This is to equate the limited edition serigraph prints of Ting Shao Kuang's paintings, made by printing presses, with Dafen village's oil-on-canvas reproductions hand-painted by anonymous (but aspiring) painter-workers. As *Painted Fate* tells us through the stories of Xie Weiqiang and Little Snow, the anonymous painter-worker individualistically strives to work on his or her "own paintings" in order to create original works of art. These are the products of his own mind, heart, and labor, rendered as his own natural property and therefore inalienable from his ownership. And yet, to fulfill the socialist demand of its popularization and simultaneously the recognition of the market economy, *Painted Fate* also tells us that the original artist must also (legally) commodify that work of art. This process of commodity transformation holds within it the contradictory belief that artistic creativity is the pure expression of a true self, and that a creative industry can commodify this singular achievement as a universal value.



Figure 37. Little Snow: "Love is not a trade painting...." *Painted Fate*, 2008.

After Ma capitulates to Boss Jiang, sells *Angel* and signs a contract, he presents his newfound riches to Little Snow. He is dressed now in a business suit, lives in a government-subsidized modernist villa, and drives a new sports car. But completely undaunted by his transformation, Little Snow dramatically rejects him. In one of the drama's few tearless scenes, Little Snow stoically explains to Ma that *her* true beloved, Xie Weiqiang, would never sell *his* painting of her, because, she exclaims: "Love isn't a trade painting, it cannot be copied a thousand times over!"¹⁰¹ (Figure 37) True, original and authentic, "love" and "art" are easily faked, inauthentically reproduced, or thwarted by the market economy. It is a complex subtlety that, as Little Snow proclaims, must be negotiated at the individual level of subjectivity.

Nevertheless, this complexity does not preclude a happy ending for the heroes of the creative industry. In the obligatory meting out of just rewards and repaired birthrights, at the conclusion of the drama, Xie Weiqiang and Little Snow adopt the baby of the dead female migrant worker, Master Yu marries a Russian painter-dealer boss who purchases Ma Xiaofeng's nude painting of her (thus the painting of the beloved is transferred to the true lover), Xie Weiqiang is heartily thanked by Boss Jiang for the deeds of his anonymous stone-breaker father, and Little Snow is reunited with her birth father, Boss Jiang, who takes her to Paris with him to study art.

Dual Profit

That art belongs to culture in the Arnoldian sense and that culture belongs to the people in a socialist sense, and that an ideal society must somehow resolve the inherent paradox produced by

¹⁰¹ "爱情不是行画, 可以复制成千上万份!" 画之缘 [*Painted Fate*], (Guangdong TV, 2008), episode 18. In this the scriptwriter seems to be channeling Goethe, who criticizes the work of the mechanical artist: "For his thousandth work is like his first; and ultimately it exists a thousand times over." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. "Kunst Und Handwerk," trans. David Britt, in *Kunsttheoretische Schriften und Uebersetzung*, 1:19, (1973) 159-162, in ed. Isabelle Frank. *The Theory of Decorative Art: an anthology of European & American writings, 1750-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 151.

these interrelated meanings of "culture," is not new.¹⁰² Attentive to the deadening effect of politicization on bourgeois artistic culture, Mao Zedong had acknowledged the elitist and populist strains of modern art and formulated a distinction between "revolutionary romanticism" and "revolutionary realism," terms that can be seen as markers of the nuanced and alternating boundaries of artistic production during the tumultuous Maoist era.¹⁰³ Although works of official art produced in socialist countries are often dismissed by the broad brush of "socialist realism," even in this most authoritative form, Maoist ideology made conceptual space for both the authentically popular and the originally elevated.

The same dilemma holds true for "propaganda," which portrays things as-they-could-be while constantly holding onto things as-they-are as a vexed and troubled referent, often to the ends of nonsensicality.¹⁰⁴ In that sense, post-Mao Chinese "propaganda" often resembles the "publicity" texts of "capitalist realism,"¹⁰⁵ a connection pointedly acknowledged in 1998 when the Central Propaganda Department officially changed its English-language name to the "Central Publicity

¹⁰² Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1932). Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

¹⁰³ Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics*, 254-255.

¹⁰⁴ Eugene Y. Wang, "The Winking Owl: Visual Effect and Its Art Historical Thick Description," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 3 (2000): 435-73.

¹⁰⁵ The phrase was ironically used in the 1960s by a group of German artists including Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke to describe their work in relation to Pop Art. Dietmar Elger, *Gerhard Richter: A Life in Painting*, trans. Elizabeth M. Solaro (University of Chicago, 2009), 57. It was later used to describe American advertising in the 1980s. Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Department."¹⁰⁶ Televisual Dafen thus dramatizes the contradictory position of a propaganda-publicity enterprise that must forego the utopian socialist legacy of the avant-garde, while holding onto the romantic fiction of bohemia as a narrative for urbanization and industrialization. This is an open-ended and technocratic assemblage in which a multitude of contradictory voices needs to be accommodated.¹⁰⁷ Thus, it lauds the self-realizing potentials of creativity for the Dafen painter, while contradictorily putting forth a legal-economic apparatus for the commodification and popularization of their "creative" works.

If it is a Romanticist narrative of decommodification that enables the former migrant and abject trade painter Zhang Huan to reinvent himself as an international performance artist of East Village, then it is a newly assembled narrative of romantic re-commodification that has been reworked in televisual Dafen. This new fiction does away with the utopianism of critique, and avoids agonizing over the sociopolitical function of "transgressive" artists, but it does not do away with the immediate task at hand: to promote the creativity of the Chinese people as both producing and consuming subjects. In order to reorient Dafen village as a creative industry, the material labor of painting must be transformed into the free and immaterial labor of creative art, just as social relationships need to be sublimated through the free agency of love.

Critiquing the "apparatus of seeing and presenting," constructed by the Italian neo-Marxists Hardt and Negri, Timothy Brennan has argued that the theoretical apparatus expressed in *Empire* represents a remarkable "yoking together of Marxism, counterculturalism, and liberal business

¹⁰⁶ Brady argues that this coincided with the department's adoption of some Western methodologies in public relations, advertising, mass communication and political communication. Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 71-73.

¹⁰⁷ In this, I see a direct analogy between the Chinese Communist Party's post-Mao propaganda and Bruno Latour's "Compositionist Manifesto." Bruno Latour, "Can Nature be Recomposed? A Few Issues in Cosmopolitics" (Paper presented at the HTC Forum, Cambridge: MIT, 22 FEB 2010).

wisdom."¹⁰⁸ *Painted Fate's* Boss Jiang gives some indication as to how such a new post-socialist persona might be put to use. Brennan describes a slippage in Hardt and Negri's feverish language in which "...the terms of political economy mutate from structure to feeling, from employment to being, from workplace to environment."¹⁰⁹ In remarkably similar fashion, *Painted Fate* likewise transforms oil paintings into original art, work into true love, industry into bohemia, and bohemia into creative industry. In this new fiction, it is not just postindustrial real estate that needs to be marketed with an artistic heritage. Already nostalgic, it does not matter whether bohemia was ever really there. Rather, in the far more dynamic situation of the post-socialist economy, producer and consumer subjectivities need to be invented anew as if they possess both an already-historical hegemonic status and a revolutionary future.

Whereas socialism once asked for a subsuming of individual desires for a class consciousness in order to realize a revolutionary telos, Dafen propaganda constructs very different historical agent. It proposes that, through creative desire, the "soft power" of the Chinese socialist nation can be realized through popularization-commodification of individual expression for the global market.¹¹⁰ Individual creativity is the vehicle of this soft power, in which every instance of the creative work can hold the "self" of the artist in it, just as it can hold the potential for its re-commodification.

The official slogan of Dafen Oil Painting Village would dub it the place "where art and the market meet, where talent and wealth transform each other."¹¹¹ The vagueness of this slogan is

¹⁰⁸ Timothy Brennan, "The Empire's New Clothes," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 2 (2003): 362.

¹⁰⁹ Brennan, "The Empire's New Clothes," 349.

¹¹⁰ China's stakes in the global competition of "soft power" is emphasized by John Howkins, a British business strategist and policy consultant to the Chinese central government, which anointed him the model-like title of "Father of the Creative Economy." John Howkins, "Creative China, Managerial Innovation, Global Brands: Interview With John Howkins," *Urban China* 33 (NOV 2008).

¹¹¹ 艺术与市场在这里对接，才华与财富在这里转换 is seen on Dafen propaganda materials as well as on the murals and gates of Dafen village built after 2005.

calculated to smooth over a meeting of old ideological contradictions under a new politics. Ren Xiaofeng, head of the Buji Propaganda Department since 1999, who coined the slogan, makes this clear:¹¹²

We must adapt to social demands, market demands, in order to objectify our culture and ideological values into a product. Just like Japanese anime, American Hollywood films....they are all transformed out of ideological values, things we never thought of before. Our nation has a lot of cultural achievements that just haven't been transformed yet. So we must take our cultural heritage and, using new and modern forms...painting, drama, cinema, animation, whatever...create new products.¹¹³

What Ren envisions in this statement is a creative commodity, made in Dafen village, that can propagandize a new ideology of individual creativity to the world market. In the creative industry's ability to "transform" existing cultural property (heritage) into intellectual properties (new products), we need no institutional buffers such as museums, academies, or art critics to insulate the artistic avant-garde's idealism. On the contrary, we want artists to answer *both* social and market demands, to produce new art products that will materialize the soft power of the socialist market economy. To realize this seamless interweaving of revolutionary romanticism and capitalist realism, *Half the Sky*

¹¹² Le Lingxiu, *Legends of Dafen Village*, 266. Wen, *The Rise of Dafen Village*, 132-134.

¹¹³ "一定要走市場化的道路。所以我們必須適應現在的社會需求，市場需求，怎麼樣把我們的文化，意識形態裏的東西物化成一個產品。比如說，日本的動漫，美國好萊塢的電影。他們都是把意識形態，我們沒有想到的東西轉換出來。我們國家有好多文化的積澱就是沒有轉變。所以必須把我們的文化遺產用新的形勢，用畫也好，用戲劇也好，用電影用動漫也好，用現代化的形勢把它創造成產品。" Ren Xiaofeng, radio interview with Wang Xin 汪鑫, "藝術與市場對接, 才華與財富轉換"——中國油畫第一村的發展之路 [Art and the Market Exchange, Talent and Wealth Transform Each Other: The Path of China's Number One Oil Painting Village]" 中国之路 [China's Road] transcript: <http://big5.cri.cn/gate/big5/gb.cri.cn/1321/2007/11/30/1766@1861692.htm> (30 NOV 2007).

and *Painted Fate* put forth televisual fictions in which romanticism and romantic love both underlie a bohemia *sans avant-garde*, a tangibly present prospect that requires no utopian future.

Chapter Four

Step 18: Sign "Vincent": The Craft of Signature Authorship



Figures 1-8. Zhao Xiaoyong and Winnie Wong, eight states of two van Gogh *Sunflowers*, oil on canvas, 20 x 24", 28 OCT-6 NOV 2008. Photos by author.

How to Paint Van Gogh's Sunflowers

1. Tack a blank canvas of the required size onto the drawing board.
2. Tape down a one-inch border around the canvas with masking tape. This leaves the necessary space to stretch the canvas onto stretcher bars later.
3. Tack up another *Sunflower* painting from the shop for reference.

4. *Mix quick-drying medium into the titanium white. This reduces the painting's overall drying time.*
5. *Prepare the palette with lemon yellow, medium yellow, medium orange, rose, brown, forest green, cerulean blue and titanium white.*
6. *Using leftover dirty paint anywhere in the yellow-to-red spectrum, sketch out the overall composition. Start with assigning the location of the vase's opening, the edge of the table, and then outline the shape of the vase. Draw six ovals with smaller inner circles where the six round sunflower blossoms should be. Mark out the ovals of the other flower blossoms, and the dried leaves near the vase.*
7. *Paint the first layer of the background: Using a 1/4" brush, mix together 2 parts titanium white and one part lemon yellow. Make sure not to mix the two pigments together too much, and to leave traces of pure pigment in the mixture. Load this onto the brush. In a "井"-character pattern (that is, two horizontal lines followed by two vertical lines), fill in the background. Work lightly. Do not pull too hard or the effect of each thick brushstroke will be lost. Be sure that each brushstroke is visible. Be light and at ease. Do not grip the brush tightly. Remember to keep loading pure pigment onto the brush.*
8. *After the whole background is filled in, use a 1/8" brush to paint over the whole background again with the same two pigments and the "井"-character pattern, this time, loading more paint onto the brush with every stroke. Make it brighter in the center, darker at the edges of the painting.*
9. *Repeat the same two-layer process with the table. This time use equal amounts of lemon yellow and medium yellow on the 1/4" brush. Instead of using the "井"-character pattern, use longer horizontal strokes. Add in a few green strokes for depth.*
10. *Paint the upper part of the vase using medium yellow and medium orange, mixing in some brown and rose where needed. Paint the lower part with lemon yellow, medium yellow, and white. Remember to paint the vase as a rounded volume.*
11. *With the same brush, pick up amounts of light yellow and medium yellow, fill in the large blossoms in very short strokes, turning each stroke towards the center of the blossom. Add darker yellows as necessary to round out the volume of the blossoms.*
12. *Taking a palette knife, pick up equal amounts of two yellow pigments with the back tip of the knife. Dab or dot the paint in a circular pattern with light strokes pulling outward from the center of each blossom. Progressively adding dark yellow, medium orange, and brown in order to round out each blossom. Work lightly and don't scrape into the wet paint.*
13. *With the 1/8" brush, paint in the blossom petals in profile.*

14. Using a third 1/8" brush, load with dark green pigment and draw each leaf. Make it look natural, like a leaf.
15. Using the same brush, fill in the center of each flower with three strokes of green, brown and a dab of cerulean blue.
16. Using the same brush, but adding a trace of lemon yellow, paint in the stems.
17. Using the palette knife, dab white highlights on the vase, drag yellow highlights onto the green leaves, dab white highlights on buds. Using the 1/8" brush with dark dirty paint on it, use the dirty paint on the palette and mix in dark green to get an off-black, then outline some of the vase, table, some leaves and some blossoms.
18. Sign "Vincent."
19. Hang to dry.
20. Repeat.

Craft—the mode of production of the artisan—is an imagined skill of repetitive making used to distinguish one form of idealized labor from another, usually dominant, mode of production. Among the characteristics associated with craft are repetition, tradition, discipline, and the focus on achieving a predefined end product. These can take on either positive or negative connotations depending on whether craft is being juxtaposed against industrial mass production or modern art. Viewed against modern art, craft is utilitarian, commercial, routine, technical, codified, and rule-bound; viewed against industrial mass production, craft is handmade, spontaneous, collaborative, uncodifiable, free, and authentic.

The above set of instructions for *Sunflowers* was constructed from the verbal directions and demonstrations given to myself over several weeks in 2008 by Zhao Xiaoyong (赵小勇), a van Gogh specialist in Dafen village. Although the series of steps Zhao taught contains within it simple tasks that any elementary student could take on—such as the "井"-pattern background, it also contains within it crucial applications of tacit knowledge—such as the preliminary sketch of the composition

(*qigao* 起稿), or the freehand painting of the green leaves and flower petals.¹ An apprentice would by no means be required to have mastered each task consecutively or completely before working in a workshop. For the apprentice works next to the teacher, who corrects each task, adding a few strokes or completely doing the whole task where necessary. The order of some tasks is malleable, but a relatively set sequence facilitates production in a workshop that repetitively produces the same products; Any apprentice, former apprentice or family member who is familiar with the steps can sit down at a work station and continue work on any unfinished canvas.

The methods used by Dafen village's van Gogh painters to produce *Sunflowers* in oil on canvas are repeatable for as many paintings as are required, at any size ordered, and also apply to each of the different versions of the *Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers* series painted by Vincent van Gogh (梵高 1853-1890) in Arles between 1888 and 1889. In craft, the first work is like the last work. Yet, these trade painters' methods also change over time and vary from painter to painter. For the dabbing of the large sunflower blossoms, some painters use the back of a pointed palette knife and others a brush—a technical distinction that clearly distinguishes one person's product from another. While Zhao was not using yellow ochre oil paint from the tube in 2008, his former apprentice was using it liberally. In the past, when prices were higher for *Sunflowers* and therefore more time was applied to each painting, painters typically painted it in at least two layers, allowing one layer to dry before painting the second. As seen in Zhao's instructions, the two-layer process has been adapted into a timesaving wet on wet or *alla prima* process. Even so, a standard size 20 x 24" *Sunflowers* painting takes master and apprentice together about two to three hours to paint but over one week to dry sufficiently that it can be delivered to the boss. If a client puts in an order to be shipped to Europe in five weeks, this leaves the painter with only two to three weeks to get the paintings done. When an order calls for hundreds of paintings, certain specialist, teachable, and repeatable techniques are

¹ Zhao always drafted the preliminary drawing for my *Sunflower* paintings, which he could do in under three minutes. Author's fieldnotes, and author's video documentation, 28 OCT, 30 OCT, 6 NOV 2008.

required.

Compared with French or Chinese academic painting techniques, the methods of Dafen's trade painters are unorthodox: They paint on unprimed and unstretched canvas tacked and taped onto a flat, stiff and unangled board. To keep shipping costs low and storage minimal, painters stretch the painted canvas onto stretcher bars only if required (and paid for) by the client. They rarely use linseed oil or turpentine to thin or thicken the oil pigments, but do use noxious solutions designed to reduce the oil pigments's drying time. Correction is a feature of training, not a process of self-criticism or re-thinking on canvas. Yet, Zhao and other van Gogh painters also utilize the language of anti-academic practices in their instructions with great frequency; they repeatedly advise their apprentices to "stop looking at the model (*gao* 稿)," to paint freely, loosely, and spontaneously, and to simply aim for a "good painting."² As in art, the first is only like the first: unique. During a two-day quality control visit to Zhao's shop in 2008, Zhao's biggest client of 2008-2009, a retailer in Amsterdam, repeatedly emphasized that he sought from the trade painters only "good paintings" with "good color" and "good quality," and did not once raise the issue of the closeness of the trade paintings to the original.³ If trade painting is "copying" *in toto*, it is astonishing how seldom the terms or practices of copying are employed by either its producers or merchants.

The making of a van Gogh trade painting is therefore a function of the modernist markers of originality associated with van Gogh's roughhewn, anti-academic, and primitivist "signature style": tactile brushwork, free use of color, visual sensation, expressive gesture, the heightening of the decorative pictorial surface. Each and all are repeatable and reproducible formal qualities that can be performed by anyone. Despite having no formal education in art history, Dafen village's van Gogh painters have ascertained that these formal qualities are precisely what their buyers and bosses

² Zhao's most oft-repeated terms to describe how to paint well were to be "*qingsong*" (轻松: light, relaxed, carefree) and "*zizai*" (自在: unrestrained, free, be yourself). Author's fieldnotes, 25 OCT, 28 OCT, 2 NOV 2008, 13 FEB 2009.

³ Author's fieldnotes, 25 NOV 2008.

demand. Working from what they know to be inadequate, flat photographic reproductions found in catalogues, art books, and digital files, competing Dafen's van Gogh painters debate over who among them paints most thickly and generously (because it uses up more paint), in order to satisfy the consumer's demand. Unlike a forgery, the van Gogh trade painting is judged neither within the trade nor by its consumers for its closeness to the originals being copied, but rather, for its closeness to modernist artistic values summarized in the masterpieces of Vincent van Gogh.

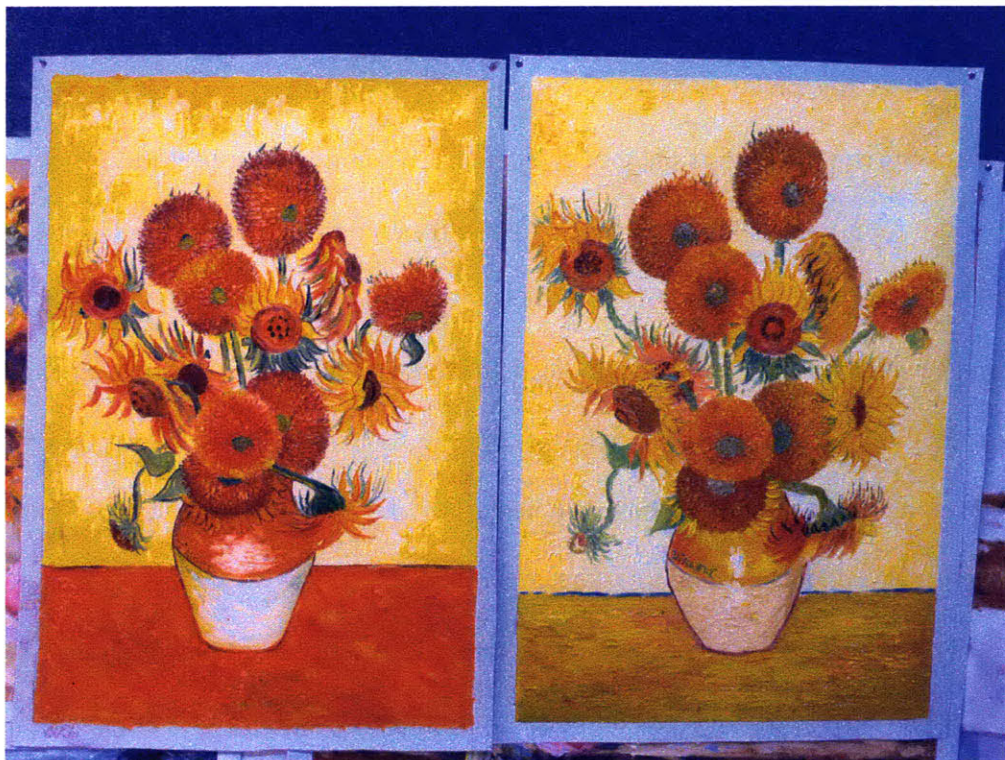


Figure 9. Left: *Sunflowers* by Zhao Xiaoyong and apprentice, oil on unprimed canvas, 20 x 24", 2009. Right: *Sunflowers* by an outworker of Zhao's, oil on unprimed canvas, 20 x 24", 2009. Photo by author, 13 FEB 2009.

In this chapter, I focus on van Gogh painters in Dafen village and, in particular, the small enterprise of Zhao Xiaoyong, to examine how craft and artisanality in trade painting are constructed against other practices like the official "originality" discussed in Chapter Three or the "assembly line painting" discussed in Chapter Two. I focus on van Gogh trade painting because, by the 1980s, it had become the foundational skill for the majority of rural migrants who arrived in the city with no

formal training in art. After mastering van Gogh painting, trade painters then trained *backwards* in the history of art towards higher-paid specialities, moving first to Impressionism, then towards figurative or academic painting. Although there are over a dozen specialities in Dafen village, each with their own dynamics of economic and aesthetic values, like all trade painting practices, van Gogh painting is highly repetitive but is not strictly "copying." The paintings are produced in high volume yet each painting is evaluated as though it were unique. It is relatively low-skilled but judged by its expressiveness. As such, the van Gogh oeuvre holds a prominent and particular place both in the art historical discourse of originality in modernism, and in the contemporary discourse of skill in trade painting.

Modernist dilemmas with seriality, variation, and reproduction, are inherent in van Gogh trade painting, which negotiates the uniqueness of the artist's *hand* with the requirement to render it repeatable. Occupying a definition somewhere between artistic "homage" and "pastiche," or between "*linmo*" (临摹) and "*mofang*" (模仿),⁴ the van Gogh trade painting specialty intersects with important aspects of craft—authenticity, handwork and repeatable rigor—but also with the Romantic and anti-academic strain of modernist painting—touch, self-expression and spontaneity. The production of van Gogh paintings in Dafen thus lays bare a "craft" of modernism, serving a particular market demand for authentic handwork, and thereby producing a certain kind of flexible artisanal worker. The labor of painting a van Gogh, however, is grounded in another set of modernist crafts: the conventions, performances and appearances of originality, displayed through the "touch" of Vincent van Gogh's "individual style." This dynamic tension between repetitive labor and unique expression is most intriguingly played out in the last step of creating a trade painting: the signing of signatures. Signatures—the painted text that conventionally binds the writer of that name in an authorial relation to the consumer and viewers of the painting, demonstrates quite literally the importance of

⁴ And even approaching what Chinese art historian Joan Stanley-Baker has called the "posthumous work." Joan Stanley-Baker, "Repainting Wang Meng: Problems in Accretion," *Artibus Asiae* 50, no. 3/4 (1990): 161-231.

"handiwork" in the author-function of originality and the "signature style."



Figure 10. "Seelong" or artist unknown, *Sunflowers*, oil on canvas, 20 x 24", c. 2008. Author's collection.

In 2008, at a wholesaler's warehouse in Long Island City, New York, I purchased a van Gogh *Sunflowers* signed "Vincent" on its vase *and* with another name on the lower right hand corner: "Seelong" (figure 10).⁵ The practices of trade painting reveal that there is no more reason to presume that the painter of this painting is "Seelong" than there is to presume that it is "Vincent." And yet, the very possibility that it could have been painted by a painter named "Seelong" fuels our

⁵ Incidentally, there is a small town outside of Johor, Malaysia named "Seelong," "Seelong Science and Technology" is a company in Shenzhen that produces GPS systems, and there are two publicly searchable profile pages for persons named "Seelong Tan" on Facebook. The proprietor of the Long Island City warehouse declined to answer questions regarding the specific origins of this particular painting. However, he explained that his stock was primarily from China and Brazil. Author's fieldnotes, 19 JUN 2008, Long Island City, NY. Based on my connoisseurship of trade paintings, I venture to guess that this painting was not produced in mainland China.

desire for a signature, which the boss or wholesaler can satisfy by signing it thus.⁶ What does it mean to buy, sell, or make a van Gogh painting signed with the name of another, unknown, person? What of originality is being individualized and universalized, and what kind of craft of authorship is being repeated?

The Van Gogh Trade

Zhao Xiaoyong, born in 1975 in a rural village in Hunan province, arrived in Shenzhen in 1989. Like most migrant workers, Zhao floated between a number of jobs and factories, at one point sleeping in an open field for over a month. Eventually, he found work as an enamel painter at a ceramics factory that produced decorated vases. He met his wife there and once recalled to me how much "fun" it had been to work in a factory compared to being the independent producer he is today. I asked Zhao why he left and he responded, "That goes without saying! One can't work all one's life in a factory."⁷

In 1995, Zhao moved to Buji town and apprenticed with a van Gogh painter Zhang Zhengjing (张正京), who charged him 1600 yuan (US\$ 230) for the training.⁸ While an apprentice, Zhao was paid piecework rates by his teacher relative to the tasks of painting that he could accomplish. Like most apprentices, Zhao's relationship with his teacher involved a constant negotiation of Zhao's painting ability and earning power: in order for an apprentice like Zhao to become independent from his teacher, he had to be able to paint well enough to earn a subsistence living, which the teacher largely determined by giving the apprentice piecework from his own orders. For Zhao, it

⁶ Colleagues in the History, Theory, and Criticism program at MIT might be interested to know that the warehouse had one stack of paintings, of widely varying subject matter and style, each signed either "Mark" or "David."

⁷ Author's fieldnotes, 3 DEC 2008.

⁸ Teachers or masters charge a different amount for training. I have recorded ranges from zero to 5000 yuan. Many refuse to take on any students or apprentices at all, citing the trouble. Others have apprentices living with them as assistants in their work.

took over one year before he was able to earn enough from his teacher's piecework to become independent.⁹ During that year, he would borrow ten yuan almost everyday from his teacher for food and cigarettes—accumulating a small debt that further slowed his path towards independence. According to Zhao, even after he left his teacher's employ, for at least two years he was not able to land any orders; he could only produce paintings on speculation and carry them from boss to boss to sell. He would often take his paintings to Lohu Commercial City, the mall in Shenzhen steps from the Hong Kong border. He remembers that in 1996 and 1997 he could sometimes sell a van Gogh painting for as much as 180 yuan, though he saw that the sticker prices on them in the galleries were as high as 5000 yuan; and he guessed that they would sell there for about 2000 yuan.

Once in 1996, while trying to sell his work at Lohu Commercial City, he met a Hong Kong painter-dealer, whose firm was called Kopo Art Co. Ltd. This dealer looked at his paintings but did not buy any, nor did he give Zhao an order. Two years later in 1998, Zhao met this painter-dealer again. By then, he was living and working in a four-story walkup building in Buji, the town next to Dafen, just outside the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone where many trade painters had started living and working. On the second, third and fourth floors of this building lived van Gogh painters. As Zhao recounts it: the ones on the second floor were too expensive, the ones on the third floor were too low-quality, and on the fourth floor lived Zhao and his wife, whose price and quality were just right. As Zhao's wife Zhong Zaocun (钟早春) recounts it, however, the dealer chose them because they painted the vases of their *Sunflowers* perpendicularly righted on the table, unlike the other van Gogh painters who painted the vase off-kilter following the original source image. This, Zhao's wife remembers the dealer explaining, made their *Sunflowers* more marketable.¹⁰

⁹ An apprentice therefore "fails" if he or she cannot become proficient enough to fill his teacher's orders on his own. For example, an apprentice of hyper-realist painter Wang Xuehong, never attained the level (by Wang's estimation) to become independent after three years of painting under Wang. He therefore chose to return to his home village where he hoped to earn a living teaching others to paint. Wang Xuehong, interview with author, 3 DEC 2008.

¹⁰ Zhong Zaocun, interview with author, 1 JUN 2010.

Whatever his reasons, that day the Hong Kong painter-dealer ordered an assortment of roughly twenty paintings from Zhao, two or three of each *gao*, though Zhao no longer remembers what they were. A few weeks later, he brought an image and asked Zhao to produce three samples (*yangban* 样板)—that is, three different versions from which the dealer could comment on to determine the look of his future orders. Zhao painted these, and, clearly satisfied with them, the painter-dealer asked Zhao how many he could do in a month. Counting on the assistance of his wife, Zhao answered three hundred. So the dealer ordered three hundred paintings, and their decade-long relationship began. In a little over one year, Zhao estimates that he had produced over 5000 of these paintings, although again, he no longer remembers which van Gogh painting it was.¹¹



Figure Series 2. Yu Haibo, *Dafen Oil Painting Village*, 2005. C-prints from digital photographs.

The orders from the Hong Kong painter-dealer remained steady for years, and Zhao and his wife eventually moved to Dafen village, where they rented an apartment as well as a larger workshop space just outside Dafen village to produce, store, and dry the paintings. Zhao's wife was from a rural village in Jiangxi province, and like many wives and apprentices of Dafen painters, she learned

¹¹ Zhao Xiaoyong, interview with author, 21 MAR 2009. Although this may seem an astonishing fact, in my experience few painters can recall which precise image they were painting at any given time, let alone over ten years ago. I have often shown painters photographs of painting that they painted one year ago, to which they would remark, "That was a long time ago." Xiao Keman, interview with author, 1 APR 2009. Peng Bide, interview with author, 19 MAR 2009.

to paint by assisting her husband with painting tasks until she could complete several paintings on her own, which he would often correct. As their orders grew, they asked her younger brother Zhong Shengcun (钟胜春) to come to apprentice and live with them. Zhao's mother also came from Hunan province to look after their baby daughter. At another point, Zhao's younger brother came to work as his apprentice. Together with his wife, brother-in-law, his brother and sometimes one or two other apprentices, Zhao's studio would produce, every five or six weeks, 700 to 1000 of either *Starry Night*, *Cafe Terrace*, *Sunflowers* or *Self-Portrait*. Often the orders would exceed one thousand paintings of each *gao*. It was hard work, but they knew other van Gogh painters were working at that rate too. Like most Dafen painters, Zhao and his family understood from the Hong Kong dealer that their paintings were being re-exported to the United States, so they could only surmise that Americans had a bottomless love for van Gogh. Continually amazed by the volume of their own orders and those of the painters around them, they imagined that Americans would hang one oil painting on each wall and replace them every season along with their furniture. In 2005, during a particularly busy time, the Shenzhen photojournalist Yu Haibo came to their workshop and spent a month photographing the extended family at work. Yu later won a World Press Photo award for his series on Dafen village. Yu's striking photograph of Zhao hanging up a *Self-Portrait*, and another of Zhao and his brother-in-law taking a nap on the floor beneath *Dr. Gachet* were published in magazines and newspapers around the world (figures 11-12).¹²

Around 2007, Zhao and his wife purchased a two-bedroom apartment in a residential development overlooking Dafen village. They also opened "Impressionist Gallery" (*Yinxiang huailang* 印象画廊) at No. 5 Laowei. Zhao's one-room space, like the majority of those located in the rear part of Dafen village, are not registered as commercial galleries and function as combined places of

¹² For further discussion on Yu Haibo's photographs, see Chapter Five.

production and sale—a "shop" in the sense of a small workshop.¹³ Zhao's wife paints at home at a workstation set up in the living room, while Zhao paints in the shop at a workstation next to his computer and desk. The current source for van Gogh images that Zhao owns and refers to primarily is a 2008 edition of Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov's catalogue, *Van Gogh in Provence and Auvers*, which includes 300 reproductions of van Gogh's late works at Arles and St. Remy.¹⁴ Between 2007 and 2010, Zhao's was the only shop in Dafen village that exclusively sold van Gogh paintings, though such paintings were widely available in other galleries and Zhao also stocked a few Monets. At some point, Zhao had branched out into Monet paintings as well, but he predominantly produces van Goghs, preferring it to Impressionism because it does not require the extra step of mixing paint.¹⁵ Many foreign journalists, television reporters, artists and at least one art historian, have visited his gallery and asked him to appear on camera.¹⁶ Once an interior designer bought his used drawing boards off the wall, apparently to use in a fashion boutique's window display.¹⁷

Zhao sometimes takes on a single student at a time when he feels like it, but unlike his former teacher and most painters in Dafen village, Zhao does not charge them a fee either to learn or for

¹³ Because they are ostensibly spaces of production rather than of sale, the painters who run these "studios" or "workshops" do not have to register or pay fees as commercial entities with the government.

¹⁴ Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, and Vincent van Gogh, *Van Gogh in Provence and Auvers* (New York: Rizzoli/Universe International, 2008).

¹⁵ Zhao Xiaoyong, interview with author, 16 FEB 2008.

¹⁶ By Zhao's count, aside from Yu Haibo's documentary series, he has been photographed by a French documentary photographer, appeared on Japanese television and has been interviewed by numerous journalists and researchers. For the Shanghai World Expo Dafen village exhibition discussed in the Conclusion, Zhao and his wife were interviewed at length by many reporters, including the videographer for the exhibition, Mou Sen. One profile of him appeared in the prominent political newspaper, *Nanfang Weekend*. Zhu Youhe 朱又可, "大芬丽莎: 过了河还摸石头 [Dafen Lisa: Still Feeling For Stones After Crossing the River]," *Nanfang Weekend* (Guangzhou), 12 MAY 2010.

¹⁷ On the use of an artist's studio splatters (specifically those of Jackson Pollock) as backdrop for fashion display, see Thomas Crow, "Fashioning the New York School," in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 39-48.

the use of his materials. He asks them to sit next to him and paint all day, every day, producing work for the shop. After having met and interviewed Zhao several times in the winter of 2007-2008, when I returned to Dafen village in the fall of 2008, I asked Zhao if I could learn to paint from him.¹⁸ Remembering that I was an art history student, Zhao asked me to confirm that I already knew "how to paint." Only when I explained that I knew how to paint but not how to paint a van Gogh, did he agree to take me on as a student, stating that he no longer had the patience to take on completely unskilled apprentices. On my first day Zhao asked whether I would be producing the paintings as "gifts" for friends back home, implicitly asking whether I planned to produce work for the shop, and therefore, function more as an apprentice. When I answered that I would be making paintings "for fun," he thereafter called my paintings "products not for sale" (*feimai pin* 非卖品), which in Dafen village widely refers to student paintings that are too poor to be sold, and also works that the painter chooses on a whim to keep. Although I did not produce paintings for sale in the shop, after several days I began to assist Zhao in a number of shop tasks such as writing emails, producing Excel spreadsheets for orders and invoices, communicating with his clients in Cantonese or English, and selling paintings to customers. Zhao initially introduced me to other trade painters as "a friend from

¹⁸ I first met Zhao through Wang Xiaofei, the wife of his now-independent brother-in-law.

Hong Kong who just loves van Gogh,"¹⁹ but later called me "someone who paints at my place" and referred to the days I didn't come to paint, as my "days off." Thus, although I never formally worked as a painting apprentice of Zhao's, my experience in his shop developed into a mixture of leisure studentship and office work under his direction.

According to Zhao Xiaoyong, the van Gogh trade paintings that are most often ordered are *Cafe Terrace* (1888), *Sunflowers* (1889), *Starry Night* (1889) and *Self-Portrait with Easel* (1888). These are the four paintings he thus considers necessary to complete an apprentice's training. Zhao's apprentices are usually able to paint independently (if at all) after about six months to a year, and if they are good at one or another *gao* he will put out orders to them afterwards. Zhao puts out to approximately eight to ten outworkers, including his younger brother and his brother-in-law, who both continue to work and live in their own homes in Dafen. The wife of Zhao's brother-in-law, Wang Xiaofei, sells her husband's paintings at an outdoor stall at the front of the village, and though the two families cooperate often on orders, they maintain separate clients, accounts and stock,

¹⁹ There are several implications in this designation: Since van Gogh painting is the training of the least educated of rural migrants, in the Dafen context, it makes little sense to be a leisure student of van Gogh painting. Being from Hong Kong gives a person access to the major market of Dafen painters, hence it makes even less sense for a Hong Kong person to be learning to paint the lowliest of the trade skills. Furthermore, since Zhao often said that it was tiresome for him to explain to others that my parents (whom he had met) were from Hong Kong but that I was born in Canada and living in the United States, he opted for the shorthand of referring to me as someone from Hong Kong. Although Zhao understood that my motives for learning to paint was only one part of my research—I often took afternoon breaks to do interviews around the village which Zhao and I would talk about, and Zhao would often ask how my work in the rest of the village was progressing, for Zhao the quickest explanation of my studentship to others was that I was largely motivated by my "love" of painting and of van Gogh. Though I was the first "leisure student" of Zhao's, his interpretation of my motivations likely influenced the "training" he gave me, as well as the arguments I make here. To mitigate some of the complications inherent in this methodology, I also interviewed other van Gogh painters, Zhao's former apprentices, and teacher.

making them often implicit competitors.²⁰

When training an apprentice, Zhao tells them to refer to a completed painting from the shop more often than he tells them to look at the printed image of the van Gogh work. Dafen's trained van Gogh painters hardly ever look at any source image when they are painting, because the *gao* is treated only as a most general reference for the production of each new painting, whose execution requires the tacit knowledge that Zhao would often refer to as "ease (*qingsong* 轻松)" and "naturalness (*ziran* 自然)."²¹ While instructing me, Zhao would repeatedly explain: "When you look at the *gao* too often, the painting won't have the flavor of your individuality (*geren de weidao* 个人的味道)."²² Zhao's teacher, who visited the shop daily and often gave me pointers, would also exhort me not to look at the *gao*.

For paintings he seldom painted, Zhao still rarely looked at the model after the initial composition of the painting had been laid out. After completing several *Sunflowers* and *Starry Nights* in Zhao's workshop, I brought a postcard of an obscure van Gogh painting said to be in a private Japanese collection, *Still Life With Books* (1887), and asked to be taught to paint it. Zhao had no

²⁰ Amongst Dafen painters this situation is not uncommon. The painter-dealer Cai Chusheng and his wife, each have two siblings in Dafen village, all of whom they brought out from their home village and trained to become painter-dealers. Each sibling maintains separate galleries in Dafen village selling similar inventory, and regularly spend time in each others' galleries. Cai's wife shared with me stories of minor irritations between the families, but told me that on the whole, these were rare.

²¹ This is also true for other genres or specialties of trade painting (with perhaps the exception of photorealist portrait painting). For example painters often insist that the smaller the *gao* they are given to work from, the better. This seems also to have been true in the Canton trade period. As the nineteenth-century visitor to Lam Qua's studio Toogood Downing wrote in 1838: "Rarely after this is it necessary for the Chinese artist to look at his copy; the perfection of the work then depends entirely upon his own taste. Some, who are very experienced, are able to finish it altogether without any assistance after the outline is taken, but in general they refer to their model occasionally." C. Toogood Downing, *The Fan-Qui in China in 1836-7*, vol. 2 (London: Henry Colburn, 1838), 99.

²² Author's fieldnotes, 13 FEB 2009. Other translations could be, "your individual flavor," "the sense of your individuality."

memory of ever painting this painting before and other van Gogh trade painters who saw my postcard questioned whether it was in fact a van Gogh. Over the course of several days in which I worked on that painting, Zhao corrected it many times, and although he was not familiar with the particular van Gogh work *per se*, he rarely looked at the postcard from which I thought I was copying.²³ In a sense, Zhao was teaching me to take the postcard image as a *gao* upon which we would paint in the signature van Gogh style in which Zhao specialized. Zhao's understanding of that style, however, was only partially discerned through visual attention to the printed postcard.

One morning immediately upon my arrival, Zhao animatedly told me that the day previous, he had decided to paint *Sheep-Shearers (after Millet)* (1889) from his "mind"—pointing at his head—even though he had only painted it once before many years ago. He told me that, after having the image digitally printed onto the canvas so faintly that few colors could be discerned, he decided not to look at the referent image even once and instead "guessed" what colors van Gogh might have used.²⁴ Zhao's version was considerably more colorful than the van Gogh original we later looked up online, and he proudly asked many painters what they thought of his painting. Trade painting in the style of van Gogh, in other words, does not preclude either routinization of the *gao* or invention of its finished formal qualities.

Between 2008 and 2009, Zhao's main clients included the Hong Kong boss of Kopo Art Co., a Japanese client who visited about every three months, an ethnic-Chinese client in Malaysia who ordered by email, and a Dutch client in Amsterdam whose orders began in the spring of 2008. Like most outworkers, Zhao knew little of the scale, scope or location of his client's firms, nor does he consider it good client relations practice to ask. He took orders in his studio and puts out orders as necessary to other van Gogh painters in Dafen, taking only a 5-10% cut, which was very low

²³ For example, while making these corrections, Zhao would explain that "Books have to be [painted] like this," "They have to have volume," "This is how perspective works," etc. Author's fieldnotes, 13 FEB 2009.

²⁴ Author's fieldnotes, 13 FEB 2009.

compared to the mark-up that a larger gallery-owning painter dealer would be able to generate. Zhao's wholesale prices were also not very high compared with other Dafen van Gogh painters, and he personally painted only the larger, higher-priced paintings, while regularly fixing up the paintings of his outworkers. In the fall of 2008, a period when orders had declined somewhat, Zhao sublet about half the space of his workshop to another painter named Ye Xinle (叶新乐), an ocean waves and impressionistic flower painter who used the space to work and dry his paintings.

During my time painting there, a typical day in Zhao's "Impressionist Gallery" took on a distinct (and leisurely) pattern: Zhao would open the shop every morning around 11:00am. He would first answer some email from clients, chat on QQ and MSN, and then play some online video games. His nine-year-old daughter would bring his lunch from home during her lunch break from primary school. After lunch, he would begin painting, alongside a student (such as myself) if he was training one. Throughout the day, he'd be interrupted by visitors, customers, clients picking up orders or painters dropping off paintings. Sometimes painters with no orders would come by to look for work, or maybe ask for a cigarette. Sometimes his sister-in-law would run in with a painting that needed to be touched up because a customer at her stall requested an alteration to the canvas. Ye Xinle, Zhao's subletter, would arrive in the afternoon around 2:00pm (usually after a heavy night of drinking) and start or finish a large ocean wave or flower painting. Around 3:30pm, Zhao's former teacher would stop by after picking up his son from kindergarten, chat for a while. Later, Zhao's mother would stop by with his three-year old son around 4:00pm and let the two play awhile. Around 5:30 or 6:00, Zhao would close the shop and head home for dinner. He would return to the shop around 7:00 and paint until midnight. His wife, meanwhile, would have cooked their meals, watched the children in the evening, and painted throughout the day at home.²⁵

Freed of distractions from shop visitors, the late evenings are the most productive time in Dafen's shops. Giant rolls of canvas are unfurled on the pavement and cut in the street. Works in

²⁵ By May 2010, Zhao's wife Zhang Zaocun had begun painting next to her husband in the shop during the days.

progress are hung from clotheslines, on balconies, in stairwells and alleys. Everyone seems to be painting something or searching for someone to paint something. Artists from elsewhere who visit Dafen village find it either exhilaratingly productive and community oriented, or disillusioning in its matter-of-fact commercialism. For Dafen painters, the polar dichotomies of artistic commercialism and creative independence surface in every moment of the day. During my time painting in Zhao's studio, the topics of conversation painters would most often bring up were whether they enjoyed or disliked painting, what else they might do, what life might be like overseas, whether women should be painters, how to prevent their children from wanting to become artists, what prices other paintings had recently sold for in Dafen village.

Between 2008 and 2009 Zhao received several orders for van Gogh paintings that each numbered over 1200 paintings, to be completed in under seven or eight weeks. He always put out portions of the orders to the van Gogh painters in his network, and continued to paint daily as usual himself. Although Zhao had in the past used assembly line methods for his orders, between 2008 and 2009 he did not do so because, he said, the work was too hard and it was "not worth it."²⁶ Moreover, on a daily basis, rather than laying out several paintings in a grid and proceeding from canvas to canvas, Zhao always worked on one painting at a time from beginning to end even when he had to complete dozens of paintings per order, because, he said, this gave him "a greater sense of satisfaction."²⁷ However, Zhao has held onto his lease on the larger workshop space, and presumably could reassemble an in-house assembly line made up of extended family members and apprentices without great difficulty. In other words, flexible production allows a painter like Zhao to choose how and when to appropriate his own labor, the labor of his family, apprentices, and a network of associates.

²⁶ Author's fieldnotes, 27 NOV 2008.

²⁷ Author's fieldnotes, 27 NOV 2008.

When there were no orders, Zhao painted stock to sell.²⁸ Once, during a lull in our conversation, he suddenly exclaimed, "Sometimes if I don't paint for a few days, I *really* miss it!" In February 2009, his Dutch client requested a life-size full-length portrait of van Gogh that would combine a *Self-Portrait* and *Pair of Shoes* (1886), telling Zhao to be "a little creative with it."²⁹ After a few preparatory sketches (figure 14), Zhao painted a large painting composed from a number of additional van Gogh Arles-period paintings including *Harvest* (1888) and *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon* (1888). Those who visited the shop would ask about the composition and its price. Zhao told one customer that the price would be higher than usual since the painting had "a little bit of creativity" (*chuangyi* 创意) in it.³⁰ Yin Xunzhi (尹训志), a figurative painter, jokingly titled the painting *Van Gogh Goes To Work* (figure 13). Yin, not a van Gogh specialist himself, likely was not familiar with the painting, *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon*, also titled *The Painter Goes To Work*, in which van Gogh portrayed a faceless painter—presumably himself—walking the twenty kilometres northeast of Arles to Tarascon to paint.³¹ In giving the painting any title at all, Yin was praising Zhao's creativity. After hearing Yin's proposed title, Qin Shaobin (秦晓斌), a Ding Shaoguang painter, remarked, "Do you think van Gogh knows what a hero he is? How many Chinese painters his paintings are feeding today?"³² Qin, in other words, pointedly identified Zhao's portrait of van Gogh with working class ethics, the nobility of which Qin suggests was realized in Dafen painters' creative labor.

²⁸ Because he has a shop. Many other trade painters often complain of having nothing to do if they have no orders. Others return to their rural homes until there are enough orders to merit working in Dafen.

²⁹ Author's fieldnotes, 2 FEB 2009.

³⁰ Although Zhao has made other "variations" on van Gogh paintings, this was the first time that I had seen Zhao use a preparatory sketch, and it was the first time I heard him use creativity as a basis for the price of one of his paintings.

³¹ *The Painter on the Road to Tarascon* is sometimes titled *The Artist On His Way To Work*. Vincent van Gogh describes his treks to Tarascon in several 1888 letters to his brother Theo van Gogh.

³² Author's fieldnotes, 11 FEB 2009

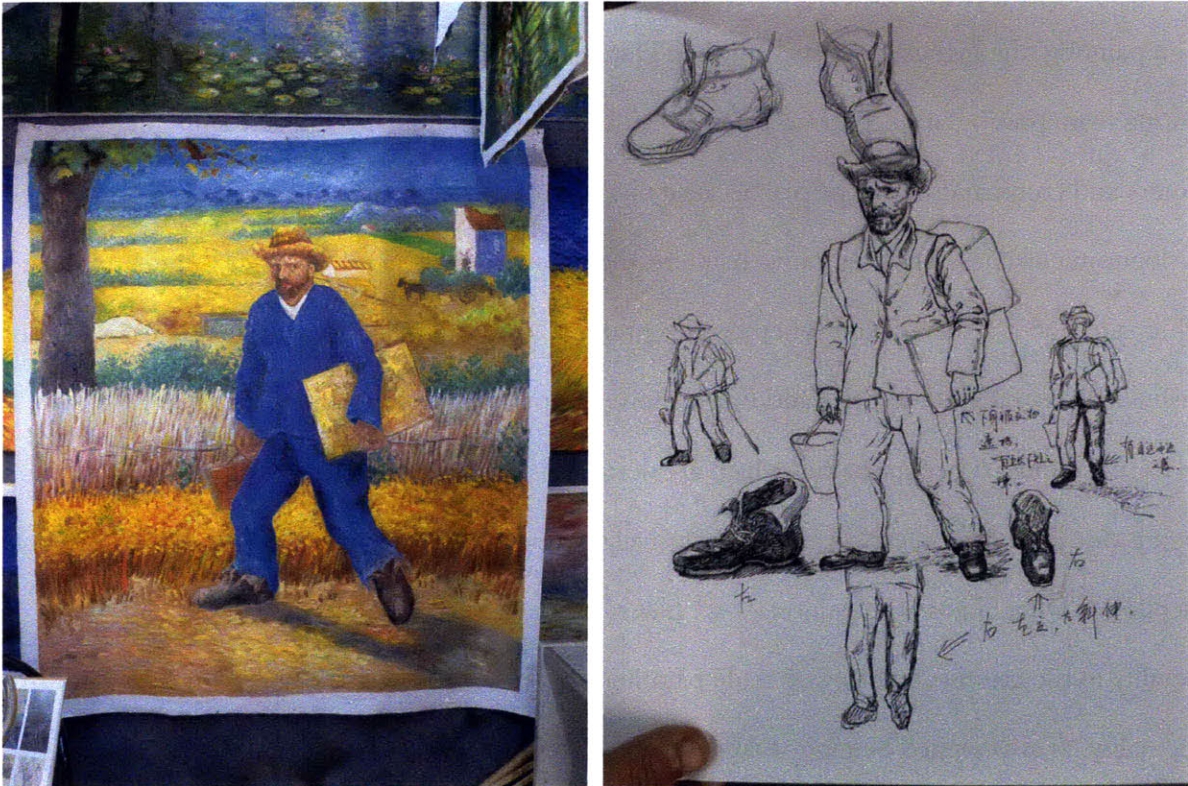


Figure 13. Zhao Xiaoyong, *Van Gogh Goes to Work*, oil on unprimed canvas, approx. 6 x 6 ft., 2009. Figure 14. Zhao Xiaoyong, preparatory sketch for *Van Gogh Goes To Work*, pencil and pen on paper, approx. 8" x 10", 2009. Photos by author.

In the contemporary South Chinese painting trade, the van Gogh painter is considered the lowest-skilled in the trade; and their works fetch amongst the lowest price per piece. Like Zhao, most unskilled rural migrants who arrived in Dafen village in the past two decades began by learning van Gogh painting. If they mastered it, they would immediately move onto Monet and Impressionist painting, and then to a higher price-per-piece specialities, for example, landscape painting, figurative

painting, or abstract painting.³³ In direct contrast to the thick, loose and color-expressive style of van Gogh painting, the highest-paid specialties in Dafen village are hyperrealist painting and portraiture painting from photographs. Portrait painters can claim to be still higher skilled than figurative painters and command higher prices, because they face the more difficult consumer demand for physiognomic likeness. Like figurative painters, they charge by the number of faces that appear in each image, and ask their clients whether they prefer a licked clean surface or one that carries visible brushwork—a gradation in price and finish van Gogh painters are not able to command.

Unlike most other specialties which are defined by styles, techniques, or subject matter, van Gogh is one of the very few specialties exclusively defined by an author-name. One other prominent exception is Ding Shaoguang painting—a Chinese-American painter and printmaker whose centrality in the creative industry of trade painting is discussed in Chapter Three. To the extent that "originality" is also treated by many Dafen painters as one of many specialties, one could argue that, like the van Gogh and Ding Shaoguang specialties, it is a specialty defined by a single artist's oeuvre, except that it is now the painter's "own" oeuvre. This definition of originality as a speciality would decouple its skill from the name of the artist who specializes it. Similarly, other artists considered canonical by art historians are parsed as mere skills in the Dafen hierarchy: Leonardo da Vinci paintings are painted by "classical" or "figurative" painters—depending on whether a figure appears in them or not, and a specialist in either of these categories would also paint a David or a

³³ At the training center run by Huang Jiang's firm, after completing the foundational skills course, trainees could choose from the following professional specialties (likely in order of approximate popularity): landscape painting (风景画), decorative painting (装饰画), abstract painting (抽象画), figurative painting (人物画), streetscapes (街景), Mediterranean sea (地中海), still life 静物, floral (花卉), waves (海浪), beaches (沙滩), palette knife junk boats (刀笔帆), Hong Kong scenes (港景). 黄江油画艺术培训中心学生入学需知课程 [*Huang Jiang Oil Painting Art Training Center Information for Entering Students*], undated. The specialties taught at Huang Jiang's training center reflects his firm's clientele and Huang's own background. Training centers in Dafen that boast academically trained teachers, offer other specialties including impressionism (印象派), classical painting (古典画 which includes both renaissance and neoclassical painting), portraiture, or "academic school" (学院派 which refers to French beaux-arts painting).

Bougereau, depending on the subject. Cezannes and Pollocks are painted by abstract painters, who may also paint "abstract decorative" paintings of the kind often sold as "contemporary art" in furniture stores. Such an end-market designation, like the canonical status of these signature author-names, is also irrelevant to the professional ranking or skill in Dafen village.

Many trade painters hold a combination of skills that can change appreciably over time: A few steps away from Zhao's studio, one painter specialized in Ding Shaoguang, Yunnan School and Gustav Klimt paintings. Just behind Zhao's studio worked a painter of African street and village scenes, soccer stars, and London streetscapes, but he declared that he made a stylistic turn every two years.³⁴ Zhao's studio-mate Ye Xinle had been painting large ocean wave paintings—late French academic paintings of waves crashing on rocks (figure 15)—for about five years, but he had also been doing impressionistic flower paintings for nearly a decade.³⁵ Ye's ocean wave specialty was the envy of many painters in Zhao's circle. In 2008, his wave paintings fetched between 800 to 1800 yuan per piece (compared with 25 to 180 yuan for Zhao's van Goghs), and yet Ye could complete such a painting in only about four to six hours, spread out over two days. At any given time, Ye had a stack of about forty or fifty *gao*—photographs prints from digital files—which he kept in a tidy pile on a shelf in his custom-made workstation. I never saw him refer to one except to talk with clients or to sketch out his composition. Despite his considerable skill, Ye repeatedly refused to take orders of paintings that, even if close to his style, included a figure—insisting that he was not a figurative painter. Ye had also painted some original paintings on order by a client in 2008. For the most part, selecting an optimal specialty is about finding a balance between skill, stable market demand, price

³⁴ Author's fieldnotes, 3 FEB 2009.

³⁵ His impressionistic flower paintings were not from the French Impressionists oeuvre—which Ye called "Southern City painting" (*Nancheng hua* 南城画). Zhao explained to me that this appellation was one way that many trade painters referred to Impressionist paintings like Monet's, because of a rural studio in Nancheng, Jiangsu province that used to produce many them. Ye Xinle and Zhao Xiaoyong, author's fieldnotes, 28 OCT 2008.

and of course, personal preference.³⁶ Zhao's reasons for remaining a van Gogh painter are numerous, but he has often talked about how difficult, risky, and time consuming it is to make a change when one is good at something that brings a stable source of income.



Figure 15. Ye Xinle, workstation with ocean waves painting, in studio of Zhao Xiaoyong, 17 FEB 2009.

Between 2008 and 2010, Dafen bosses I interviewed estimated that there were at most twenty painters in Dafen village who specialized solely in the production of van Gogh paintings. Van Gogh painters whom I interviewed, meanwhile, would each insist that only five or six of them were any good. Yet there remains no shortage of young migrants seeking to apprentice themselves upon their

³⁶ Ye left in the spring of 2009 to become the original artist officially appointed to run a Dafen-sponsored creative art *plein-air* painting center in his hometown. This was the second Dafen-sponsored creative art and plein-air painting center set up in a rural southern area, and their stated purpose was to foster local tourism and to give original Dafen painters a place to paint from the landscape. Many painters came around to talk over Ye's puzzling decision to leave Dafen village since he had one of the most optimal specialities known amongst them. In Zhao's studio, Ye was replaced by one of his close friends, another painter who painted impressionistic flower paintings.

arrival in Dafen. In 2008, Zhao trained one twenty-three year old, Shi Jinghu (石经虎) who had just arrived from Shenyang province and showed up at Zhao's shop. Shi already had several years of painting training in an academy-related atelier, where he had focused on abstract painting.³⁷ Within a few weeks of painting under Zhao, it was evident that he could already paint van Gogh, Cezanne and other post-Impressionist artists' works with an impressive ease and confidence. But, Zhao explained that Shi still needed to learn how to "commercialize" (*shangyehua* 商业化) his style. By this Zhao explained that, like myself, Shi was too focused on looking at the *gao* and needed to adjust to the trade painting market by thickening his brushwork, brightening his colors and painting with greater "naturalness." Shi's girlfriend also trained with Zhao for six months after Shi. She produced excellent miniature (4 x 6") *Sunflowers* paintings, which Zhao would display in his gallery for sale. However, the market for small paintings, no matter how high in quality, is never strong. One of Zhao's foreign clients explained that retailers avoid stocking miniature paintings because when customers see that an image exists as a smaller, cheaper painting, they will be satisfied to buy that instead of a larger version, which has a far higher profit margin for the merchant.³⁸

Van Gogh trade painters have been seen as the lowliest of trade painters even though the paintings are in fact neither the lowest-priced per piece nor the easiest paintings to paint in any absolute sense.³⁹ Their low professional status is the result of a number of historical factors. When rural migrants like Zhao began seeking work in the trade painting industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was the moment of record-setting auction prices of van Gogh works. In 1987, *Still life with Fifteen Sunflowers* (1890) was purchased by Yasuo Goto, head of Japan's Yasuda Fire and Marine Insurance Company, for US\$39.9 million. At the time, it was the highest auction price ever paid for a

³⁷ Zhao Xiaoyong and Shi Jinghu, interview with author, 13 FEB 2009.

³⁸ Author's fieldnotes, 25 NOV 2008.

³⁹ "Assembly line painting" such as landscapes can be far lower priced per piece and faster to learn.

work of art⁴⁰ In 1990, Ryoei Saito purchased van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890) for \$82.5 million in 1990; in inflation-adjusted American dollar value it remains the highest auction price ever paid for a painting.⁴¹ These widely publicized auction prices had an interesting effect on trade painting in China: the popularity and recognizability of van Gogh works seems to have increased the market demand for trade painting versions of them to such a degree that, throughout the same period, many unskilled Chinese trade painters learned to paint them, thereby driving the prices and status steadily down. Although Zhao remembers selling a 20 x 24" *Sunflowers* for 180 yuan in 1996, by 2009, he was selling such canvases to retail customers for only 50 yuan (US \$7) per canvas, which, as trade painters like to point out, was probably closer to what van Gogh personally received for his works, than what they were now "really" worth.⁴²

The gulf between these two categories of value was noted by the classical economist David Ricardo, who, in the very opening of *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (1817), set a particular type of goods—"objects of desire"—outside his labor theory of value:

There are some commodities, the value of which is determined by their scarcity alone. No labour can increase the quantity of such goods, and therefore their value cannot be lowered by an increased supply...Their value is wholly independent of the quantity of labour

⁴⁰ It was quickly surpassed only a few months later when the Australian magnate Alan Bond purchased van Gogh's *Irises* (1889) for over US\$50 million. This price was questioned after it was revealed that the auction house (Sotheby's) provided Bond with the credit for 50% of the purchase price.

⁴¹ At the close of the decade, in 1998, van Gogh's *Self-Portrait Without Beard* (1889) sold at auction for \$71.5 million. "Daily Chart: Art Prices: Unaffordable Art," *The Economist* (4 FEB 2010). The location and ownership of the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* is currently unknown. See Cynthia Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet: The Story of a Van Gogh Masterpiece: Modernism, Money, Politics, Collectors, Dealers, Taste, Greed, and Loss* (New York: Viking, 1998).

⁴² The *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* was sold by Theo van Gogh's widow Johanna to the dealer Ambrois Vollard for roughly 225 francs; Vollard was selling it to Alice Ruben for 300 francs (equivalent in 1995 US dollars to \$1000). Saltzman, *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, 79-81.

originally necessary to produce them, and varies with the varying wealth and inclinations of those who are desirous to possess them.⁴³

By Ricardo's definition, Dafen village can never "reproduce" an original van Gogh painting, no matter what quantity of labor is put to such a task. The van Gogh trade painter cannot through his work alone "diminish" the scarcity of the original van Gogh painting, no matter how perfect the copy or how many were produced. Yet, since trade paintings as commodities are not in that rare category bracketed by Ricardo, the increased supply of labor did of course lower their value—even though the demand for them was a function of the original's very public value. Thus some Dafen trade painters and bosses would define "original" paintings by only one criteria: their limitlessly increasing price (*tianjia* 天价).⁴⁴ Importantly, in the Dafen context, this "limitless price" is not the same as a work that is "without price" (*wujia* 无价), which is distinguished in turn from a work that is not-for-sale (*feimaipin* 非卖品). These more nuanced distinctions reveal that the English phrase, "a priceless work of art," conflates within it several categories of value.

In his study of modern art in American museum culture, literary theorist Philip Fisher (1991) argues that "the price of a modern work does not directly reflect workmanship, time, labor, size, cost of materials, or skill. Rather the price is a complex speculation on the work's future as a 'past.'"⁴⁵ Fisher goes on to call the price of a work of art a "wager," on the "priceless, permanent

⁴³ David Ricardo. *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (London: John Murray, Albemarle-Street, 1817; 3rd ed. 1821) Ch. 1, section 1, line 1.5.

⁴⁴ 周敏 Zhou Min, "中国油画第一村如何升级? [How Can China's Model Oil Painting Village Ascend?]," 羊城晚报 *Yangcheng wanbao*, (22 NOV 2004).

⁴⁵ "The 'price' of a contemporary painting is a function of a prediction of its future, and for this future value to be determined, criticism must move closer and closer to a historicization of the present, determining on the spot what the historical place of new objects might eventually be even as they are produced. Without this speculative, prophetic act of criticism, the object has, as a commodity, no value....The initial price is in effect a wager that in a reasonable period of time the object will be priceless, permanent and guaranteed..." Philip Fisher, *Making and Effacing Art: Modern American Art in a Culture of Museums* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 28.

and guaranteed" value of the artwork when it eventually comes to rest in its future state in the museum. Of course, the myth of Vincent van Gogh is founded on an exceptional case of that wager gone wild. The price of a trade painting—as paid by the putter-out to the painter—does reflect workmanship, time, labor, size, cost of materials and skill, but these prices are also a negative function of the "pricelessness" of the van Gogh signature style.

Craft

Art is also distinguished from handicraft: the first is called liberal, the second can also be called remunerative art. The first is regarded as if it could turn out purposively (be successful) only as play, i.e., an occupation that is agreeable in itself; the second is regarded as labor, i.e., an occupation that is disagreeable (burdensome) in itself and is attractive only because of its effect (e.g., the remuneration), and hence as something that can be compulsorily imposed....But it is not inadvisable to recall that in all liberal arts there is nevertheless required something compulsory, or as it is called, a mechanism, without which the spirit, which must be free in the art and which alone animates the work, would have no body at all and would entirely evaporate (e.g., in the art of poetry, correctness and richness of diction as well as prosody and meter), since many modern teachers believe that they can best promote a liberal art if they remove all compulsion from it and transform it from labor into mere play.

-Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), trans. P. Guyer⁴⁶

In his account of the formation of the "modern system of the arts,"⁴⁷ cultural historian Larry Shiner describes a process in Europe beginning with the Enlightenment, by which certain characteristics—repetition, tradition, skill, function—are associated with craft and excised from the

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer, and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 183.

⁴⁷ Shiner draws on Paul Oskar Kristeller in naming the "modern system of the arts" as a historical object. Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (OCT 1951): 496-527. Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part II," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 4 (OCT 1952): 17-46.

elite conception of "fine" art, and then from "art" altogether.⁴⁸ This polarity of art and craft is expressed in Kant's aesthetic theory, which in turn is built upon another set of distinctions separating the free from the paid, the sensual from the aesthetic, purpose from purposelessness, and interested judgement from disinterested contemplation.⁴⁹ As seen in the passage that Shiner identifies as most pertinent,⁵⁰ however, Kant also hedged the strict distinction between "free" and "compulsory" labor by nonetheless insisting on formal "mechanisms" in art, such as prosody and meter in poetry. For Kant, even in the free arts, some restraint is required to prevent the work of free art from devolving into mere play.⁵¹

The Kantian dichotomy of art and craft is thus complicated by the internal contradiction that art needs to be circumscribed by craft-like practices and signification. But over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, "handicraft"—once more closely associated with

⁴⁸ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

⁴⁹ For an extended discussion of the eighteenth-century book market, literature and "the momentous shift from the instrumentalist theory of art to the modern theory of art as an autonomous object that is to be contemplated disinterestedly," see Martha Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 32.

⁵⁰ Shiner refers to the J. Meredith translation: "Art is further distinguished from handicraft. The first is called free, the other may be called industrial art. We look on the former as something which could only prove final (be a success) as play, i.e., an occupation which is agreeable on its own account; but on the second as labour, i.e., a business, which on its own account is disagreeable (drudgery), and is only attractive by means of what it results in (e.g., the pay), and which is consequently capable of being a compulsory imposition...It is not amiss, however, to remind the reader of this: that in all free arts something of a compulsory character is still required, or, as it is called, a mechanism, without which the soul, which in art must be free, and which alone gives life to the work, would be bodyless and evanescent (e.g., in the poetic art there must be correctness and wealth of language, likewise prosody and metre). For not a few leaders of a newer school believe that the best way to promote a free art is to sweep away all restraint and convert it from labour into mere play." Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), SS43.3.

⁵¹ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), SS43.3. In another passage: "Every art presupposes rules by means of which in the first instance a product, if it be represented as artistic, is represented as possible." Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.H. Bernard, para. 47.

"manufacture"—would come to acquire a meaning opposite from that of "industrial art," until the handmade object would come to resemble the pre-modern "artifact." Writing in 1951, Adorno put the Kantian art-craft distinction in these new terms:

Every work of art has its irresolvable contradiction in the 'purposefulness without purpose' by which Kant defined the aesthetic; in the fact that it is an apotheosis of making, of the nature-ruling capacity that, as a second creation, postulates itself as absolute, purpose-free, existing in itself, whereas after all the act of making, indeed the very glorification of the artefact, is itself inseparable from the rational purposefulness from which art seeks to break away...art as akin to production cannot escape the question 'what for?' which it aims to negate. The closer the mode of production of artefacts comes to material mass-production, the more naively it provokes that fatal question...⁵²

As Adorno anticipates, a van Gogh trade painting, "produced by the rational purposefulness from which art seeks to break away," points to the irresolvable tension in the Kantian definition of free art. As "artifacts" or "handicrafts" that in their primitivism approach material mass production, these van Gogh trade paintings likewise provoke the fatal question, not of what distinguishes art from craft or industry, but of what art is for. The critical force of the question is powerful because it is put "naively," as Dafen painters ask it: why is there such a demand for their van Gogh paintings?

In European critiques of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrialism, handicraft begins to take on prominence as a form of idealized labor existing prior to industrial or commercial corruption. In Goethe's forewarnings, for example, pre-industrial craft production was positioned as "authentic" and "true," and took on all the positive aspects of labor in opposition to the negative aspects of the coming industrialization.⁵³ For a reformist like William Morris, medieval craft-based

⁵² Theodor W Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (1951), trans. E F N Jephcott (1974) (London: Verso, 2005), 225-226.

⁵³ For example, in the essay by Goethe discussed in Chapter Two. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Art and Handicraft (Kunst Und Handwerk)," *Kunsttheoretische Schriften und Uebersetzungen* 1 (1973): 159-62.

economies possessed an aura of authenticity, wholeness, integrity, community, purity, self-expression and anti-commodification that was far more romantic than what could have existed in pre-industrial Europe.⁵⁴ As a critique of the modern project, craft is an intellectual projection onto the non-modern past; it is always "revived" and never invented.

The Marxist labor theory of value has been critical to the long-standing rhetorical effect of craft. As the feminist anthropologist Marilyn Strathern argued in 1988, the internal European critique of capitalism conceived of alienation as a separation of a person from his or her work, presupposing that the "intrinsic possession of one's own activity (work) means it has value in the first instance for the self (and thus may we also speak of it as labor)."⁵⁵ This craft ideal of unalienated labor is encapsulated in the broad assertion, made by cultural anthropologist David Graeber in 2001, that: "For a Marxist, labor is, or should be, a matter of self-expression: the ideal is that of a fine craftsman, or even more, an artist, whose work is both an expression of her inner being, and a contribution to society as a whole."⁵⁶ In Graeber's statement, craft approaches art, which indeed is projected as its ideal. This revolutionary realization of labor idealized through a merging of the sociality of *making* itself at the apex of art connects artistic movements from

⁵⁴ William Morris, "The Collected Works of William Morris: Signs of Change. Lectures on Socialism," XXIII (1910-1915), 175-177.

⁵⁵ Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems With Women and Problems With Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 142.

⁵⁶ David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 40. Drawing on the work of Stephen Gaukroger, Graeber argues that in Marx's early writings, the Romanticist principles of self-expression of an individual's species-essence through "activity" is the ideal form of labor against which all alienation is measured. Gaukroger has traced the Romanticism in Marx's pre-1844 conception of labor to the influences of Saint-Simon and Schiller, and in particular argues for the resemblance between Marx's fourfold classification of alienation and Schiller's four stages of labour in the *Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). For Gaukroger, this is a problematic component of Marx's conception of socialism, especially since Marx rejects a return to craft-based forms of production and rejects the Romanticist principle that artistic production is distinct category of production, free from alienation. Stephen Gaukroger, "Romanticism and Decommmodification: Marx's Conception of Socialism," *Economy and Society* 15 (1986): 305-306.

Courbet to Fluxus. In the 1960s Chinese Cultural Revolution, it would take the form of radical subject reversals, by replacing, for example, professional and bourgeois "free" artists with amateur peasants, soldiers and workers in the institutions of high art.

Modern art can thus be considered as a form of art production that emerges out of a dichotomization and re-dichotomization of craft, but with the implicit tracking of both art's and craft's removal from industrial mass production. Arthur Danto argued in 1993 that, since Plato and Socrates, the artist, the craftsman, and the philosopher "form an eternal triangle in conceptual politics."⁵⁷ The relationship of craft, art and philosophy revolves around a set of dichotomous aesthetic distinctions: mental and physical labor, *poesis* and *tekne*, form and content, function and ornament. In contrast with industry, craft and art thus form a dyad, linked to one another at opposite ends of a spectrum of aesthetic "work."

Where "industry" celebrated mechanization and the machine-made object ("Untouched by Human Hands" was a widely used early twentieth century advertising slogan),⁵⁸ critics of industrialism would invoke craft and the handmade object to challenge its ideological claims, just as modern artists would by turns reject, embrace, challenge, and appropriate mechanical reproduction. While for anti-industrialists craft becomes an authentic and self-expressive form of labor, it is precisely through the rejection of craft characteristics that modern art is made to be itself expressive: freed from tradition, technique and utility. The British philosopher R.G. Collingwood, in *Principles of Art* (1938), defined craft as an end-product produced for an end-market, whereas the work of creative art is defined as something that cannot be predetermined and that arises *ex nihilo*

⁵⁷ Arthur C. Danto, "Fine Art and the Functional Object," *Glass* 51 (Spring 1993): 27.

⁵⁸ The slogan was used for bottled Coca-Cola (1915), Scott's Porage Oats (after 1914), Bond's Bread, Q-Tips (circa 1950), Chock Full O'Nuts restaurants. Mary Abbott, *Family Affairs: A History of the Family in 20th Century England* (London: Routledge, 2003), 23. Heinrich Eduard Jacob, *Six Thousand Years of Bread: Its Holy and Unholy History* (New York: Skyhorse Pub, 2007), 356.

out of neither plan, skill nor parts.⁵⁹ Whereas for Clement Greenberg, machine production was a defining characteristic of "kitsch," the modernist theory of an autonomous art writ large also required the shedding away of craft's naive and corruptible sociality.

Where industrialization in the late twentieth century grew to seem hegemonic and global, and the universalist claims of free modernist art was criticized for its chauvinism, craft—with its legacy of an alternate, pre-modern and original authenticity—was once again revived. Post-WWII proponents of the American Studio Craft Movement reemphasized the movement's European roots in the "beauty" of work and "truth" in materials, but also began to emphasize craft's femininity, ethnicity, pluralism, aboriginality and marginality, against the dominance of post-WWII American painting, which had been constructed as male, white and universal. Such polemics in turn unabashedly universalize craft's claim to authenticity in confrontation with a hegemonic "modern art."⁶⁰ Critics of globalization defended pre-industrial or traditional crafts in both Western and non-Western contexts, and sought to challenge the regimes of ownership and abstraction as commodity value but without overturning either the cultural value of "art" or the authenticity of "craft."⁶¹ The cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1995) has argued that tourist art, like "the display of the

⁵⁹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (1938) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 16-28.

⁶⁰ Consider the world-cultural framework of an exhibition which proposes that painting is solely "Western" and all other media, authentic and global: Marcia Manhart, et al., *The Eloquent Object: The Evolution of American Art in Craft Media Since 1945* (Seattle: Philbrook Museum of Art, 1987). There is also the equally problematic critique of such a claim on the basis of taste: Derek Guthrie, "The Eloquent Object' Gagged By Kitsch," *The New Art Examiner* 16 (1988): 26-29.

⁶¹ Indeed, sometimes the two are combined in a postmodern cultural legitimization. "Aboriginal painting is not an idea. It is a material and social practice that brings into realization not simply the creativity of an artist (the fundamental property protected in copyright) but an image that has a distinctive history and is generative of social relationships." Fred Myers, "Ontologies of the Image and Economies of Exchange," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 1 (2004): 8. "...the question of 'authenticity' remains a critical component of the legitimization of Indigenous art. In this respect, Aboriginal art shares with Western fine art something like the 'art for art's sake' idealism that positions the field of art production against the profit orientation or utilitarian aim of other fields." Myers, *ibid.*, 13. See also Fred R Myers, ed. *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe, N.M: School of American Research Press, 2001).

tools and artifacts of the Other in highbrow modernist domestic interiors,” represents a “diversion” of commodities from “specified paths,” a diversion that, for Appadurai, is a “sign of creativity or crisis.”⁶² Appadurai’s neutral characterization is possible because the duality he describes is foundational within the intellectual and political legacy of art/craft. In a post-industrial context, anything that was hand-produced, unsellable or produced in a community—regardless of where or how it was made—had the potential to be idealized as craft (that approaches the cultural “legitimacy” of art), mobilized by an ideology of authenticity, handwork, and primitivism.⁶³ “Kitsch” would draw into its cultural orbit the handmade, nostalgic, sentimental, homespun, imperfect, and roughhewn, regardless of whether it is made by hand or machine.

Craft is thus a social phenomenon that can encompass art, or its historical materialist challenge; Modern art can encompass within it the ideals of craft, but can also be posed as its antithesis. The contemporary traveler, tourist and consumer today navigates between craft as the object of romantic yearning for pre-industrial authenticity and as the industrial production of “kitsch.” His or her desire for the authentic and anti-modern is satisfied by craft products that threaten to morph into kitsch only after they are brought home. The category “tourist art” serves to belittle the consumption choices of an undiscerning Western buyer who in fact exercises a long critical legacy that champions the universality of authentic and aesthetic work. The consumer yearns to discern the labor behind the formal aspects of the product, and vacillates between positions of the discerning expert and the romantic ethnographer. Faced with the unknowability of the work

⁶² Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 28.

⁶³ The notion of a fake aboriginal or primitive art is an attempt to adjudicate both political critiques of modernism and industrialization while holding onto an authentic belief in primitive work. The “expert” vs. “primitive” system of interpretations is precisely the distinction between Arthur Danto’s fable of the Basket People and the Pot People, and, Dennis Dutton’s counter-fable of the Jungle People and Tourist People. Arthur C. Danto, “Artifact and Art,” in *Art/Artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, ed. S. Vogel (New York: Center for African Art, 1988). Denis Dutton, “Tribal Art and Artifact,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51 (1993): 13-21.

behind the product and yet deeply desiring its authenticity, the collector summons irony as the only tasteful recourse.

Craft, then, has become a sort of postmodern ethic of authentic labor, invoked as an aesthetic challenge to the mechanization of modernity, but also surprisingly, in step with post-Fordist deindustrialization in the West and the globalization of cultural production. If tourism sutures alienated work to leisure, so the crafted souvenir sutures leisure back to authentic (aesthetic) work. This anti-modern, anti-industrial logic also works to expand craft production in the industrializing country, where, since the 1980s, craft-like characteristics have been reapplied to a new model of "flexible" production. In their influential work *The Second Industrial Divide* (1984), political economists Michael Piore and Charles Sabel argued that craft characteristics like specialization, small production runs, and small-scale firms were more advantageous and even inevitable in adapting to globalization.⁶⁴ Drawing from historical models like the nineteenth century Lyons silk industry, and contemporary models like post-WWII Japanese firms, they argued that these industries utilized social organizations and governmental regulation to favor "communities" over independent firms, to support specialized skill and knowledge, and to foster workers' control of time and work process.⁶⁵ Finding in these models both technological adaptability and the ability to survive wide fluctuations in global market demands, Piore and Sabel advocated craft-like forms of work organization and regulation in post-Fordist "flexible specialization."⁶⁶ Once again craft was being revived as a model for a new form of ideal production.

⁶⁴ Michael J. Piore, and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

⁶⁵ Charles F. Sabel, and Jonathan Zeitlin, "Historical Alternatives to Mass Production: Politics, Markets and Technology in Nineteenth-Century Industrialization," *Past and Present* 108 (Aug 1985): 133-76.

⁶⁶ For one review of alternate views of global flexible production ("bloody Taylorism") see Alain Lipietz, "The Post-Fordist World: Labour Relations, International Hierarchy and Global Ecology," *Review of International Political Economy* 4, no. 1 (January 1997): 1-41.

As theorists like Piore and Sabel were describing this new model of production, the post-WWII Hong Kong painting trade moved to rural and urban South China in the 1980s, and rapidly and intensively scaled up. As I have argued in Chapter One the structure of this painting trade has been characterized by the very flexible production practices championed by theorists who idealized craft: intensive labor, single product concentration, light mechanization, subcontracting, and piecework. In other words, such practices do not eradicate the artisanal. Rather, they are inspired by it.

Concurrent with these economic theories, postmodernist cultural theorists and anthropologists were also finding positive effects in the emerging regime of flexible production, seeing in it a desirable transformation of cultural hierarchies in a new postmodern global condition.⁶⁷ Theoretical arguments for an expansive, non-hierarchical, rural-urban and local-global expansion of creativity found their expression in creative industry policies, which, as discussed in Chapter Three, have been taken up in Chinese national and municipal policies. Local officials in China seized upon the application of creative industry policy to the painting trade of Dafen village. Flexible production thus simultaneously unleashed the craftiness of production and its creativity.

Just as Dafen painters produce the "sidewalk art" of landscape paintings of Mont Blanc and Parisian streets sold to tourists as souvenirs, it is no accident that China currently produces many products sold as "native crafts" around the world.⁶⁸ This "deception" enabled by the middleman is is

⁶⁷ Garcia Canclini: "With the artistic and the artisanal being included in mass processes of message circulation, their sources of appropriation of images and forms and their channels of distribution and audiences tend to coincide." Nestor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1995 (1st ed. 1989), 173. Creative industry policies, likewise, embrace flexibility and combine the "high" and "low" or the artisanal and artistic into a single mode of production. Hence, Dafen village thus leaps from flexible craft specialization to creative industry, to conceptual art.

⁶⁸ In this sense, Dafen village follows in a much larger pattern of flexible production in reform-era China. Eugene Cooper, and Jiang Yinhuo, *Artisans and Entrepreneurs of Dongyang County: Economic Reform and Flexible Production in China* (Arno: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

founded on the idealization of craft as a universal form of authentic labor. In my estimation, the full aesthetic dimensions of craft are at the root of this broad cultural move: Oil painting—which had long been practiced in South China—is first rendered "not art" by virtue of its craft-like aspects: repetition, bespoken commission, and market orientation. Meanwhile the "craft" of painting (*pace* Kant), is subsumed under the rule-bound nature of "free art," making oil painting only a craft of a very particular kind. Modernism appropriated some aspects of "craft": condensing its truth-to-materials, ethics of work, and primitivism in the singular form of authorial "touch." The canonical place of van Gogh's late paintings within the master narrative of modernism places central importance on the artist's hand, one that loosened paint from slavish depiction and loaded the surface with tactile strokes we can connect to the historical person of Vincent van Gogh.

Since van Gogh is constructed as both the apotheosis of individual style in modern art and as the worker's hero of the visibly tactile hand, Dafen Van Gogh trade paintings are thus at the center of this long-standing set of modern issues. The surface of a van Gogh painting announces its authenticity as a work of the human hand, and this indexical attribute—another "sign of Vincent"—is of central appeal to the consumer as it is of special concern to the art historian. Shoppers who enter Zhao Xiaoyong's shop immediately gravitate to a large and thickly painted *Starry Night* he hung prominently near the entrance.⁶⁹ Many of these shoppers reach out their hands and pass their fingers over the entire surface of the painting, marveling at its plasticity. Other shoppers often remark that "oil paintings are supposed to be lumpy"; condensed within this demand is a multifaceted critical legacy of modernism and craft, expressed in the consumer desire for authentic labor.

Another Dafen consumer I interviewed exemplified this mode of consumption. An Argentinian-Italian Managerial Advisor working in a multinational investment firm, this individual had formerly lived in Malaysia and while there assembled a large collection of trade paintings based

⁶⁹ Between 2006 and 2009 Zhao sold several of these, so I am referring here to a number of *Starry Nights*.

on his personal encounters with Malaysian trade painters. In 2006, while living in Luxembourg, he saw an article in *The Economist* about Dafen village, clipped it and left it in his desk drawer for several years.⁷⁰ Finally, a business trip to Shenzhen in 2008 gave him the opportunity to visit Dafen village. I met this consumer in the shop of Zhao Xiaoyong, where he looked at a very large version of *Crows in the Wheatfield*, but did not buy it because, he said, he already had one in his "collection." He explained that in buying any painting he sought the "soul" of the artist and the "artistic hand," irrespective of the fact that others might consider them "cheap" or "copied" paintings.⁷¹

The desire for hand-painted versions of oil paintings—that are otherwise widely available in any number of mechanically reproduced forms—gives rise to the contemporary market for Dafen paintings. Mechanical reproduction, imagined always in perfection without any hands, cannot reproduce the "hand" of van Gogh-like modern genius.⁷² These paradoxically intertwined desires are evident in the full spectrum of Dafen consumers: One purchases a Dafen painting not knowing where it is "really" from, but can believe that is painted by a local artist wherever on the globe the consumer happens to be. Another travels all the way to Dafen village to "make a connection" with a painter, and buys an authentic object from the artisan himself. For the former, not knowing that a trade painting is made in China is a crucial illusion, sustaining the localist critique of global production, in which China is a "sweatshop." For this reason, even Hong Kong sellers—located less than an hour from Dafen village—will insist that *all* their paintings are "made in Hong Kong." For the consumer who comes to buy at Dafen specifically, encountering the maker in his location is crucial because it confirms that an imagined China is the authentic site of the "tradition of copying," and appreciation of this is a critique of both modern art and industry.

⁷⁰ "China's Art Business: Painting By Numbers," *The Economist* Business (8 JUN 2006).

⁷¹ Anonymous, interview with author, 27 NOV 2008.

⁷² Of course, it is questionable whether any technique of mechanical reproduction is truly "hands free." It is also notable how many print technologies require the supplement of the hand, either in the physical production or in the marketing, discussed below.

Modern artistic genius, for which Vincent van Gogh serves as archetype, universalizes the sign of "handwork" as the signifier of art. This universalization can turn the hierarchies of West-East, art-craft, original-copy, on their heads, and the operation occurs irrespective of the perceived cultural capital of the consumers in question. One spring day in 2009, spotting *Starry Night* from outside, a group of young college-educated professionals from Taiwan, Canada and the Philippines, rushed into Zhao's shop excitedly wondering why the painting looked so familiar.⁷³ Yet, on the same day, a group of male Chinese renovation contractors sauntered in, admired the same paintings on the walls, and discussed the psychological character of Vincent van Gogh's late masterpieces.⁷⁴ In these instances, the putatively original-loving craft-fooled Western tourist could not identify the original referent they desired, while the putatively uncultured working men would substitute Zhao Xiaoyong's hand for the identifiable Vincent hand. A van Gogh trade painting can be appreciated for the marks of modern authorship, whether the "hand" or its "original painting" is recognized, valued, or interpreted as van Gogh's or not.

If handcraft signals the will to human creativity against the industrial *and* announces the utopian commitment to unalienated work, while its discipline restrains art from devolution into "mere play," it remains nevertheless at risk of being subsumed by the mechanical aspects of handcraft's characteristic repetitions and traditions. The artisan's workshop is the site of both romantic individual "touch" and its potential automatism. When and where, as a form of craft, does the enterprise of Zhao Xiaoyong cross over (or back) into that of modern art and when into industry?

To prove their slavery to craft rather than engagement with free art, Dafen painters are often

⁷³ These professionals turned out to be English teachers in their twenties working in Shenzhen. They were surprised when I later told them that most of the paintings in the shop were "Van Gogh paintings." One then remembered having recently watched a television show about van Gogh. Another eventually bought that large painting to hang in his Shenzhen apartment. Author's fieldnotes, 8 FEB 2009.

⁷⁴ Author's fieldnotes, 8 FEB 2009.

asked by journalists, ethnographers, tourists, and potential buyers, if they have ever "seen" the original painting from which they are "copying." By this question, they are asked whether they recognize that they work within the context of modern art's embrace of mechanical reproduction (copying via the supplement of the photograph, but still in homage to the original; or, mere play re-envisioned as free art through Warholian appropriation of the machine), or whether, they remain within the orbit of mere craft or tradition. It is presumed that the craftsman who has *only* known a photograph but *never* known the original can neither ironically copy it nor faithfully appropriate it transformatively.

In 2009, one van Gogh painter who specialized in *Sunflowers* primarily, demonstrated her *Sunflowers* technique to me, the German artist Sascha Pohle, and Shenzhen interpreter Lisa Liu. We were introduced to her by Qin Shaobin as foreigners who had come to learn about Dafen. While she was at work on her *Sunflowers*, I asked whether or not she wanted to see the original van Gogh painting. She turned to me with a wide smile, and asked, "You have one?"⁷⁵ I interpreted her question as a naive response from someone who had mistaken all foreigners for potential owners of *the original*, but just a few months later, another Dafen van Gogh painter used the same response and inverted its implications entirely. I was sitting with Zhong Shengcun, Zhao's brother-in-law and former apprentice, watching him demonstrate his *Sunflowers* technique. I asked whether *he* wanted to see the original painting. Scoffing at the naivete of my question, he retorted mockingly, "You have one?"⁷⁶

Indeed, the question so crucial to the re-categorization of the artisan into the artist is one founded on an empty supremacy, because the van Gogh painter does not need access to "the original" to create the work that satisfies the desire of his market. He perhaps only needs a *gao*. The superiority inherent in the question might also be turned around: what is it that those who have seen

⁷⁵ Author's fieldnotes, 30 DEC 2008.

⁷⁶ Author's fieldnotes, 17 FEB 2008.

"the original" actually have? Zhong points out that we who believe we have access to "the original" assume we somehow possess something of that original (something more than the *gao* we took with our cameras or bought in the museum shop) by having gone to the museum to pay homage to it. Benjamin's aura is finally dissolved by our own desire for the handmade copy.

Just as Dafen painters are constantly interrogated about their relationship to original artists or original paintings, so the museum must always defend its relationship to the copy. Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, which sells printed ink-on-canvas reproductions (likely *giclée* prints) of van Gogh paintings, provides the consumer with this advertising text accompanying an original-sized replica *Sunflowers*.⁷⁷

It seemed a dream, but this replica makes it possible: a painting by Vincent van Gogh on the living room wall, and almost indistinguishable from the real thing. Life-size, reproduced on the finest quality canvas with inks guaranteed to retain their colour for 100 years. Especial care has been taken to ensure that the replica matches the original in colour and detail as closely as possible. Van Gogh painted this version of his Sunflowers in January 1889, as a gift for his artist friend Paul Gauguin. It is a study in yellow, to which Gauguin responded: 'That ... that is ... the flower'. This amazing reproduction is delivered rolled-up, affordable and safe, just as van Gogh sent his own canvases to Paris. Upon receipt the canvas should be framed by a framemaker.⁷⁸

Though this marketing text evokes the qualities of handcraft at every turn, the precise means of the replica's production is never named. "Especial care," inks that last "100 years," "a framemaker," and a "gift," evoke the ethics of craft that ensure the reproduction's relation to the original. Though never named, the figure of the artisan thus infuses the museum store's marketing language, which

⁷⁷ The Van Gogh Museum's Online Store is operated by an affiliate Museum Shop that also operates the shop of the Rijksmuseum and a physical Museum Shop located between the two museum.

⁷⁸ Van Gogh Museum Shop, Online Store, "1:1 Sunflowers reproduction," Amsterdam. URL: <http://www.vangoghmuseumshop.com/ProductDetail.htm?productId=9261> (accessed April 15 2008).

must establish a price for its museum store copies relative to the originals the museum holds, authenticates, and guarantees. Of course, the guarantee was never containable in the first place: just steps from Amsterdam's Museum Shop, Rijksmuseum and Van Gogh Museum, the museum goer can buy handmade van Gogh paintings (though he or she would not know are shipped directly from the shop of Zhao Xiaoyong). The unruly figure of the artisan, as Arindam Dutta argues, "emerges precisely at the point where imperial capital finds itself thwarted by non-modern forms of labor."⁷⁹

The museum store's marketing text echoes the author function of the canonical artist in order to sell its mechanical reproductions. The van Gogh hand, perhaps replicated by an unnamed machine but perhaps by the spirit of van Gogh, is diffused into a museum replica claiming to be "indistinguishable from the real thing." But in the museum's defense of the original's *unique* hand, neither the text nor the museum store can cross over into selling the Chinese hand-painted painting bought by museum goers and museum store shoppers just steps outside. In other words, the repeatability in the museum store must be announced (for museum store profits are "used for new acquisitions") through the ethics of craft; but those ethics cannot cross the aesthetic boundaries of the *very repeatable* original hand.⁸⁰

Signatures

The signature on a painting is a small bit of written text, layered last onto a painted surface made up of other painted brushstrokes. Of course, it is not just a bit of written text. That text is a name, and not only is it a name, but the name as signed by the hand of the signer to whom that signature refers. Hence, the signature of a painting purportedly announces a stated intentionality on the part

⁷⁹ Arindam Dutta, *Bureaucracy of Beauty: Design in the Age of Its Global Reproducibility* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15.

⁸⁰ "By purchasing at the van Gogh Museum Online Shop, you directly support the van Gogh Museum collection: all profits are used for new acquisitions"—presumably, of original, hand-painted, works of art. See van Gogh Museum Shop, Online Store, "Your Shopping Cart," Amsterdam. URL: <http://www.vangoghmuseumshop.com/basket.htm> (accessed April 16 2008).

of the maker and a tacit agreement between the signer and the viewer. Within a certain regime of value, the signature is a basic guarantee of authenticity, individuality and originality of a painting.⁸¹ In his 1970s epistolary debate with analytic philosopher John Searle in the journal *Glyph* (1972-1977) on John L. Austin's speech act theory, Jacques Derrida questions where the source of this guarantee lies.⁸²

Derrida brings the issue to humorous crisis by declaring in the essay "Signature Event Context" (1972) that his "signature" is not a speech act, but that by convention, he must sign his signature to that statement.⁸³ Searle, in "Reiterating the Differences," (1977) argues that Derrida has mistaken oral utterances with written language, that he has confused iterability with the permanence of the text, and maintains that "a meaningful sentence is just a standing possibility of the corresponding (intentional) speech act."⁸⁴ Without explicit reference to Derrida's non-signature signature, Searle concludes that iterability—"the repeated use of the same word type"—is not in conflict with intentionality as Derrida supposes, but rather that it is "the necessary presupposition of the forms which that intentionality takes."⁸⁵ In his reply to Searle in "Limited Inc a b c..." (1977), Derrida refutes Searle's claims by exhaustively pointing out the numerous social demands and

⁸¹ That signatures express the artist's hidden self is the basis of art historian John Wilmerding's analysis of signatures in American paintings. Wilmerding ascribes meaning to the works on the basis of the precise location of the signatures on the canvas. John Wilmerding, *Signs of the Artist: Signatures and Self-Expression in American Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁸² Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," (1972), trans. S. Weber and J. Mehlman (1977), in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-23.

⁸³ Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 21.

⁸⁴ John R. Searle, "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph* 1 (1977): 202

⁸⁵ Searle, "Reiterating the Differences," 208. "The iterability of linguistic forms facilitates and is a necessary condition of the particular forms of intentionality that are characteristic of speech acts." Searle, *ibid.*, 208.

desires that impinge upon the construction of the supposedly pure speech act.⁸⁶ Instead of intentional speech acts (like promises and shopping lists), there are only anonymous "societies" of "limited liability."⁸⁷ Instead of granting Searle his signature, Derrida insultingly dubs him "*Sarl*" or a *Société à responsabilité limitée*.

To begin the discussion in the Dafen context, we must put aside the constructed Anglo-Euro-American legal construct that every person has his or her "own" signature. In the Western context, the signature is ostensibly a single name, expressed in Roman letters, universally legible, conveyed with a single, purely reproducible (by the owner of the signature) yet inimitable (by others), style of signing that name. Nicknames, trade names and Chinese naming conventions—in which a single individual acquires a number of formal and informal names used in different relational, linguistic and cultural contexts—already complicate the presumed singularity of that construction. The difficulty, discussed in Chapter One, that historians have in assigning a single historical identity to the signatures "Spoilum" or "Lam Qua," for example, exemplify those complications.⁸⁸ For Dafen trade painters—who are Chinese painters from many provinces of Mainland China producing paintings for re-export through the legal-commercial context of Anglo-Cantonese Hong Kong for global markets ending primarily with the Euro-American consumer—similar problems are clearly in play.

Dafen painters are clearly closer to Derrida, trapped, like "*Sarl*" in a limited liability relationship with the purveyors of, for example, the sign: "Vincent." But to say that a signature is not a speech act is akin to the declaration, "This is not art." For some consumers of art, trade paintings and other art-related products, signatures, certificates, marks, and seals, matter. Often, these marks

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c...", (1977), trans. S. Weber (1977), in *Limited Inc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 29-110.

⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c...", 35-36, 75-77.

⁸⁸ See especially Chapter One, footnote 8.

can matter more than the formal elements of the image on the canvas itself. To those who are sure in their knowledge that a Dafen painting is "not art," the consumer's desire for those extraneous written marks—his "logocentricism," in Derrida's terms—only demonstrates that he is unschooled in visual discernment or deeply insecure about his own aesthetic taste. The unknowing consumer requires the security of the seemingly legitimizing mark, such as a signature, which at minimum seems to say, "This is art." Consumers certainly demand other guarantees of that declaration—such as the impressiveness of the frame, the reputation of the dealer, the location of the gallery, a stamped and framed certificate, the country of origin of the work, the opinion of expert advisors, and so on and so forth—but the prevalence of these guarantees in markets both high and low suggests that "authorship" of the work of art is made up of many added values, generated out of various contextual relations.

In the workshop of Zhao Xiaoyong, the signing of "Vincent" on the vase of a *Sunflowers* painting is one of several repeatable tasks in the process of painting, performed by either master or apprentice. Habitually, "Vincent" is signed on the vase regardless of whether it appears in the original *gao*, and therefore the trade painting is not a painting that is being forged, but rather, a signature that is being iterated. To follow Derrida, the signature-event which inscribes the nonpresence of Vincent van Gogh in the repeatable, iterable, imitable signature-form of "Vincent" is always-already a singularity divided. When we completed my first *Sunflowers*, Zhao said, "OK, now the signature." Fixated on originality (the pure speech act), I protested, "But the original was not signed!" Thereafter Zhao signed none of my *Sunflowers*, including one he had made me as a gift, presuming signaturelessness to be my default preference.

Dafen paintings are thus signed (or not signed) according to the wishes of the client. The signing itself might be done by the painter, the boss who ordered the painting, or the wholesaler. The signatures that painters and bosses in Dafen village have been asked to provide include the original artists' names and their own names. Sometimes, however, they are asked not to sign any

name, and other times, they are asked to sign any name at all. Ye Xinle recalled that once, when he was working in a painting workshop, an order for hundreds of paintings came in with the client requesting a "different signature on every painting."⁸⁹ To the annoyance of the painters, the client did not specify what those names might be, and so the painters had to invent hundreds of them. Then there was a Japanese client, said Ye Xinle, who used to order at least one hundred paintings each time. Yet this client would demand that "every signature look the same!"⁹⁰ To their great irritation, the painters had to start using transfer paper just to get the look of the signatures right.

When no signatures are asked of the Dafen painters, they presume that someone will later sign it with the name of the artist under whose name the work will be sold. When asked to sign their own names, Dafen painters are almost always asked to do so in *pinyin* romanization, a version of their name they would never sign (or write) in any other context. These names are thus sometimes "misspelled" or unreadable to anyone.⁹¹ One Xiamen landscape painter, working since the 1980s, told me that he was advised by a client that his *pinyin* name had little meaning in English, and thus he began to sign his paintings "Dominic," a *nom de plume* he has adopted for all of his trade paintings made over the past two decades.⁹² Thus, while the requested signature is a formal element like any other aspect of the painting that the client might request, it can also cross over into a more conventional sense of an actual identifiable "name"—although that identity might be constructed only within a given signature-context (that of art=signed).

⁸⁹ Author's fieldnotes, 24 NOV 2008.

⁹⁰ Author's fieldnotes, 24 NOV 2008.

⁹¹ If *pinyin* is as "a type of Chinese" to non-Chinese readers because it approximates the sound of Mandarin, to non-English readers *pinyin* is also a "a type of English" because it approximates the look of English.

⁹² He estimates that there are tens of thousands of paintings by him in the world signed with his trade name "Dominic." Zhang told me that he understood that in the West, there was no difference between "trade painting" and "originality" as there is in China. He felt that the only difference in the West was that of price, and hence, he understood "Dominic" to be quite famous in the West. Zhang Jishi (张及时), interview with author, 25 MAR 2009.

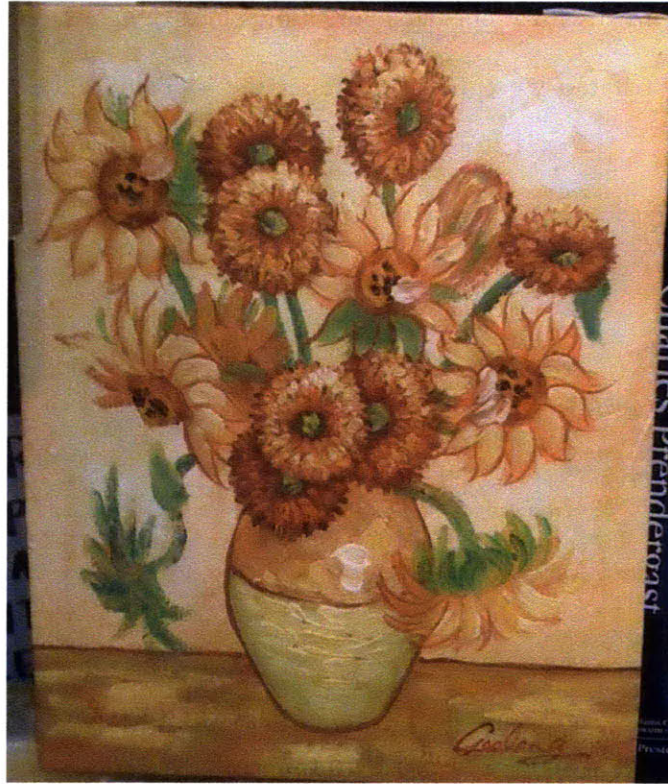


Figure 16. "Seelong" or artist unknown, *Sunflowers*, oil on canvas, approx. 12 x 18", c. 2008

To desire a *Sunflowers* trade painting signed "Vincent," known to refer to an "original" by Vincent van Gogh in a museum, one negotiates several myths of originality: that individuals have single names, that there is a single signature-form to that name, that the hand that signed it painted the painting, that the painting is signed by the artist to whom the signature refers, that the signer of that signature makes a promise anticipating his future nonpresence from the signed painting. To desire a *Sunflowers* signed *both* "Vincent" and "Seelong," is to entertain the simulacrum of van Gogh and still to desire the signature of Seelong—who is perhaps the *real* painter. It is then only one step further to desire a *Sunflowers* signed with "Seelong" and not with "Vincent"—a craft object whose signature authorship announces itself as a high art painting. In 2008, I chanced upon such a painting offered for sale (\$25) in a bookstore in Cambridge, MA: a *Sunflowers* signed (only) "Seelong" (figure

16).⁹³ Instead of a single artist with a repeatable intention, we have here Derrida's society of limited liability: all the van Gogh painters who produce that iterable "signature": "Seelong."

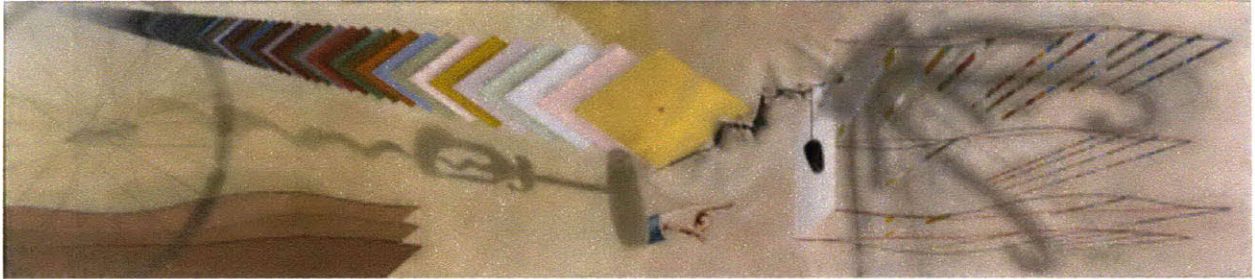
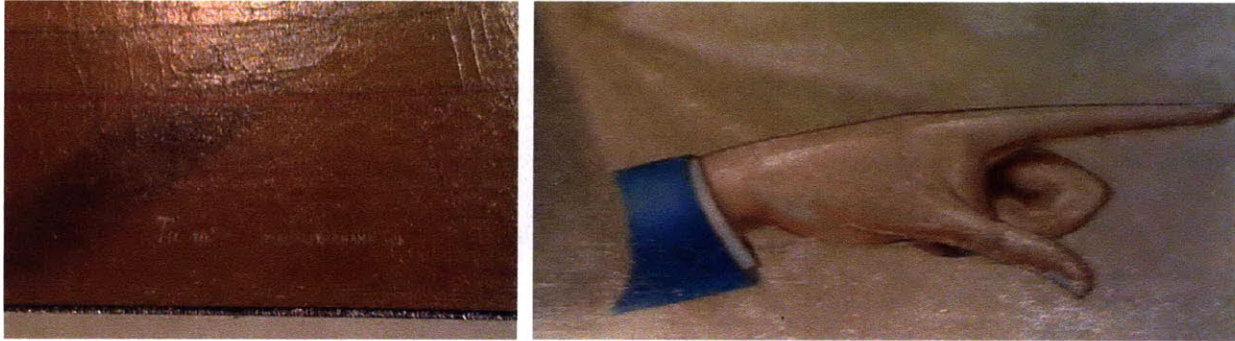


Figure 17. Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, oil on canvas, with bottle brush, three safety pins, and one bolt, 1918, 27 1/2 x 119 5/16 in. Coll. Yale University Gallery, New Haven, Gift from the Estate of Katherine S. Dreier, 1953.6.4. ©2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp.

In the history of modern art, there is a prominent painting with two signatures on it. This is Marcel Duchamp's "last painting": *Tu m'*, which contains a signature of "A. Klang" signed in the center of the painting in pencil, and another signature, in the lower left corner in white paint, "*Tu m'* MARCEL DUCHAMP 1918" (figure 17). *Tu m'* is a commissioned painting made to measure, planned for a spot over the bookshelf of Duchamp's patron Katherine Dreier, and therefore by its dimensions alone we are reminded of its existence as a bespoke commodity. According to Duchamp's narrative of the work, "A. Klang" was a commercial sign painter whom Duchamp had hired to paint, in the center of the painting, a hand with a pointed forefinger. Klang's signature, found next to the hand's white shirt cuff, is handwritten in pencil, ready for erasure (figure 19). It contrasts formally with Duchamp's signature, which uses white paint on red and all capital letters to declare the title, artist's name and date (figure 18). By paying another painter to paint a hand whose forefinger points at the vanishing point of a canvas—upon which are cast the shadows of Duchamp's other readymades, *Tu m'* separates the conceptual work of art from the labor of the

⁹³ The proprietor of Rodney's Bookstore in Central Square explained that he had gotten a few dozen paintings—mostly Van Goghs—from a Brazilian dealer who lived in Arlington and formerly used to import paintings, possibly from Brazil. Author's fieldnotes, 29 JUL 2008.

painting, dividing these between two (presumably) separate individuals, guaranteed by their two separate signatures.



Figures 18-19. Details, Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, 1918. Photos by author.

Importantly, the "hand" that signifies "handcraft" is not Duchamp's, but it is procured by him. As art historian John Roberts has observed, "...at no point in looking at the picture is handcraft ever identified with the maker of the picture, but neither is the hand ever absent from the picture's making."⁹⁴ Duchamp's hiring of a commercial painter for *Tu m'* is crucial to his rhetoric by which skill (handcraft) is separated from art (conceptual). "Dumb as a painter" is another Duchamp aphorism—a dig also at his patron, Drier, a painter herself. In turn, the boss's payment for Duchamp's artistic skill, subcontracted to and supplemented by Klang's painting skill, provides the frame wherein Klang can be figured as a premodern artisan and the butt of a postmodernist pun: a "sign" painter who signs his signature on the canvas.

Duchamp's double-signed painting of 1918 sets a precedent for the "nested authorship" of contemporary art projects made in Dafen village, in which Dafen painters are hired to "craft" paintings, and sometimes, asked to sign them. Although I discuss these works individually and in greater detail in other chapters, here, it is useful to consider the signatures of these Dafen "readymades." Notably, it is possible to conceive of Dafen paintings made for contemporary

⁹⁴ John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London; New York: Verso, 2007), 76.

conceptual artists as "readymades" only in so far as the handmade object is lumped together with the industrially produced commodity, via the aesthetic vector of "kitsch."

Conceptual artists who made the hiring of painting labor the explicit narrative of their works *à la Duchamp* have generally requested signatures from the Dafen painters. Following contemporary art practice, they ask for these signatures to be signed on the back of the canvas. Berlin-based artist Christian Jankowski (whose 2007-08 project *China Painters* is discussed in Chapter Five) issued certificates through his New York gallery along with the signed painting, seemingly to certify authoritatively that the painting as "a Jankowski." To become "a Jankowski," the Dafen painter's signature is required because the project is founded upon Jankowski having effected a creative collaboration with the hired Dafen painters, hence both signature and certificate are necessary to construct the signing individual's nested authorship. The Dafen signature, however, did not necessarily guarantee what Jankowski might have hoped. Unbeknownst to Jankowski, Yin Xunzhi, who was hired to paint two paintings in the Jankowski project, painted another two that Jankowski had ordered from Yin's girlfriend and Yin's apprentice. Understanding that Jankowski desired a certain sense of "individuality" in each painting, Yin's girlfriend and apprentice signed "their own" paintings.

Since buyers or viewers of Jankowski work are not concerned with the signature of one Dafen painter over another—that is, since individual Dafen author-figures (as yet) have no exchange value in this context—the signatures requested by the conceptual artist seem as contrived as any signature requested from any other boss, or as the signatures signed by wholesalers in their warehouses. That is, despite the specificity of the name and its signing, as with A. Klang, it is a signature of constructed anonymity that makes possible the society of limited liability authorship constructed by the conceptual artist.

What is the ethic of signatures among the Dafen artists? Although acting within the "limited liability" construct, they are imaginatively elsewhere. To Yin Xunzhi, who separates his "own original

work" (free art) from his paintings made for hire (craft), it makes no sense to sign his "own name" on a trade canvas he crafted, even if requested by a commissioner. A German amateur photographer visited Dafen village in 2008 to find an artist in who would produce paintings of his photographs. The German, unable to paint himself, deeply admired Dafen painters as artists; he had come all the way from Frankfurt to meet them and he therefore requested their signatures on the completed paintings.⁹⁵ But Yin Xunzhi, who produced some of these paintings, objected to this request. Yin pointed out that these "works" are photographs by the client himself, so he offered instead to sign the German client's name.⁹⁶

Unlike the earnest German photographer, the contemporary conceptualist navigates Duchampian terrain in interactions with Dafen artists, but whether this aesthetic can be seen as an ethic must be questioned in each instance. Beijing artist Liu Ding, for a project entitled *Store* (2009)—a follow up to his 2005 assembly line performance-installation discussed in Chapter Two—requested no signatures from the Dafen painter he worked with, Luo Zhijiang, but signed the back of each paintings himself (with the name of Liu Ding). Liu Ding also provides to his buyers photographic documentation of this activity as proof of his artistic act of appropriation. Liu Ding rejects the notion that Dafen painters are artists, and has polemically called them his "machines," hence there is no need for the Dafen painter to sign his signature.⁹⁷ Likewise, artists who are not explicitly acting in the Duchampian mode of labor appropriation, but have ordered paintings by Dafen painters to use in installation art, as stand-alone paintings or as props in photography (as in Michael Wolf's *China Copy Artist* project discussed in Chapter Five) also request no signatures. The

⁹⁵ Author's fieldnotes, 31 OCT 2008.

⁹⁶ On Yin Xunzhi's changing claims of originality with respect to his work for artists outside Dafen, see Chapter Five and Conclusion.

⁹⁷ Liu Ding's *Store* is an online store that offers unfinished paintings begun by Dafen painters. The painting series or product line is entitled *Take Home and Make Real the Priceless in Your Heart*. See <http://www.liudingstore.com/TAKEHOME.html> (accessed MAY 2010)

divergent (and even opposing) uses of signatures on Dafen paintings made for artists recalls art historian Martha Buskirk's discussion of the use of the contract in Minimalist and Conceptual art works; Buskirk argues that an identical legal-rhetorical construction of author-function underlies both movements' otherwise distinct formal and philosophical challenges to authorship.⁹⁸

Knowledge of all these potential artistic strategies does not prevent an artist who collaborates with Dafen painters from holding onto the fiction of the signature as a pure speech act. In 2008, Hong Kong artist Liang Yiwoo, for a project entitled “女 × 工” (*Woman × Work*), for an exhibition opening on International Women's Day, ordered thirty paintings of the same image from thirty, mostly female, Dafen painters—in an attempt to emphasize the individuality of their touch. When making each order, Liang specifically asked each Dafen painter to paint each painting herself and to sign the back of the canvas, telling each painter that this request indicated her respect towards them as the artists of the work.⁹⁹ However, Liang's hope for the signature to represent an authentic artistic subject and intentional responsibility for the painting on the part of the painter was often thwarted. In one instance, Liang hired a female artist named Sun Yun to paint and sign one of the paintings. Sun Yun did so but then openly acknowledged that it was not the only “Liang” painting she had done: another painter in Dafen had come to her asking her to paint the one that Liang had hired him to paint. Sun Yun painted that one first (for a lower price than what Liang paid her of course—since, as a Dafen insider, this other painter had negotiated a lower price than Liang had paid either of them), and the other painter (of course) signed it. Then Sun Yun painted and signed the one that Liang had hired her to paint. Sun Yun told me she could not see why this would run counter to Liang's desires, since as Sun put it, “This is what we do everyday...”¹⁰⁰ In another instance, Mei Hongmei, whom Liang had asked to paint one painting and to find another female

⁹⁸ Martha Buskirk, *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

⁹⁹ Author's fieldnotes, 5 DEC 2009.

¹⁰⁰ Author's fieldnotes, 3 FEB 2009.

artist to paint another, ended up asking her husband to paint the second one, and since they were at a loss for women's names, he signed it with their nine-year-old daughter's name.¹⁰¹ In yet another instance from 2010, John G. Gonzalez, an art student at the Museum of Fine Arts School of Boston, ordered over two dozen self-portraits by Dafen painters over the course of one year, hoping that through this rare client request, the painters would complete these orders self-reflexively. Ordering online halfway around the world, Gonzalez obviously could only presume that the "self-portraits" were painted by the artist him- or her- "self." Thus, although Gonzalez made no specific signature requests, he was delighted to find that one of paintings was signed and dated in the lower right hand corner. But the signature reads "自画像" or, "Self-portrait."¹⁰²

We might say that Dafen village has produced its own taxonomy of signatures—which are separated from the name of the hand that does the signing, from the name of the hand that does the painting, and from the author-function of the work.¹⁰³ In Derrida's terms, Dafen produces for various signature-contexts, each separated from the signature-event. Besides a signature that can appear on the "original," such as "Vincent" on *Sunflowers* (we can call them *yuangao* (原稿) or "original source image" signatures), and besides their "own" names, Dafen village further parses Derrida's "Limited Inc." by offering a variety of incorporated signatures: company signatures, contracted signatures, ghost signatures, and fake signatures. Each of these are utilized in the practices of the Dafen firm Sun Mountain Collector Gallery (*Taiyang Shan shoucang ji hualang* 太阳山收藏级画廊).

¹⁰¹ Author's fieldnotes, 11 FEB 2009.

¹⁰² Author's fieldnotes, 10 MAY 2010.

¹⁰³ Nelson Goodman distinguished "autographic" from "allographic" originality, notably assigning painting an "autographic" status and music an "allographic" one. Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art; an Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968). Kirk Pillow argued that Sol LeWitt's wall drawings made painting allographic, since it removed the mind and the hand of the artist from the conception and making of the work of art. Kirk Pillow, "Did Goodman's Distinction Survive LeWitt?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 365-79. In Dafen village, painting is clearly "allographic," but here I argue that even "the autograph" is allographic.

In 2008, the Sun Mountain Gallery—whose two bosses appear in the CCTV documentary discussed in Chapter Three—mounted a large exhibition of the company's works at the Dafen Art Museum. The exhibition, entitled "The Eastern Area Has Great Beauty" (*Dongbu you da mei* 东部有大美), included over one hundred oil paintings of the eastern region of the local Longgang district landscape by seven named Chinese painters.¹⁰⁴ As with Sun Mountain's overall practice, the exhibition especially featured the works of its boss, Chen Qiuzhi, whose signature appeared on about thirty of the one hundred paintings. Roughly another third of the paintings bore the signatures of one of the other six named painters. The last group of paintings was signed, in a red sunset-like hue, with the company signature: "太阳山" (or Sun Mountain). Wall labels next to these paintings identified the works only by the company name and logo, and the title and size of the work.¹⁰⁵

Contracting artists is a business practice that Sun Mountain prominently advertises, claiming to employ over one hundred and fifty.¹⁰⁶ The firm does not share the names or contact information of these "contracted artists" (*qianyue huajia* 签约画家), but two painters whom I have interviewed told me that they were amongst the group. They explained that they had signed annual contracts agreeing to produce a set number of paintings per month at a set price, and that the contract also stipulated that they would not paint Sun Mountain's images for any other client.¹⁰⁷ These contracted artists are well aware that they are acting as ghost painters for the firm's boss, and that their paintings

¹⁰⁴ The subject matter, and the very large scale of many of the paintings, clearly indicates that the exhibition was aimed at party state apparatus and culture industry. The exhibition was later mounted again in the Shenzhen City Hall.

¹⁰⁵ Author's fieldnotes, 16 OCT 2008.

¹⁰⁶ Many other painters (who are not Sun Mountain's contracted artists) doubt that the firm has actually contracted one hundred artists, pointing out that the relationship between any putter-out and a painter is something like a "contract" already. Indeed other artists at Dafen village who are advertised as "contracted artists" with other firms have privately acknowledged that they never actually signed any contract, nor do they have any specific terms of agreement with those firms.

¹⁰⁷ On control of the *gao* see Chapter One.

would be signed by his name or with the company signature. Neither saw in this any ethical dilemma, since in Dafen it is a habitual practice. One of these contracted artists employed these signature practices in reverse to his own work: despite the fact the paints his paintings alone, he signs his name on only those paintings he is proud of, and signs the name of his "studio" when he is less than satisfied with his own work.

One of these Sun Mountain contracted artists, whose works did not appear in the exhibition under any name, fervently argued that all the paintings in the exhibition signed with names other than the boss Chen Qiuzhi's were "fake signatures." That is, he argued that those paintings signed by specific names corresponded to no actual painter's name or known pseudonym, nor are the works collected under a given signature produced by a single painter. In other words, he claimed that the signatures each invented a nonexistent author-persona. Since Sun Mountain would never allow a potential buyer to be in touch with the contracted artist (to avoid cutting themselves out of the transaction), whether or not they are single individuals, fake names, or pseudonyms is not easily verified. Put in other terms, these "fake signatures" simply make up a product line secondary to (and lower in cost than) paintings signed by the artist-boss, Chen Qiuzhi, whose conceptual labor presumably nests the limited liability of the firm's many hands.

The usual problem of art historical identification is put outside the reach of connoisseurship not only by the complicated use of these "limited liability" signatures, but because all one hundred paintings were of a single genre, and related subject matter and style—equivalent in art historical terms to a stylistic "school." Since the firm does not readily release images of their paintings so that I might reproduce them here to prove the point, readers will have to take my word that a sophisticated firm like Sun Mountain would not dilute the brand of their firm's product lines by selling works of an incoherent visual range.

If deceptive to some, the signature practices of Sun Mountain Gallery nevertheless need not be hidden by the firm's bosses. During a group visit to the Sun Mountain Gallery by myself and

foreign buyers, we asked to purchase a particular painting shown in the exhibition. After identifying the painting in question by its title, I asked Zhu Hong, the wife of Chen Qiuzhi and the firm's co-owner and manager, whether the painting had been painted by her husband, the artist Chen Qiuzhi. Zhu disarmed us by asking us, in return, if the painting in question was signed by Chen. She further explained without any discomfort that the paintings are "by whomever they are signed."¹⁰⁸ In other words, Zhu was openly acknowledging that "painted by" did not mean "signed by," but also laid bare the fact that it is the signing name that the buyer buys, and the painting-hand that the contracting-firm procures. As Duchamp-Derrida have shown, the anonymity of the nested author is immaterial to the nested authorship of the reigning signature under the aegis of Limited Inc.

In Dafen village, we thus have a range of functions for signatures, whether made for, or consumed by, a regular customer or a conceptual artist. Signatures imply a range of declarations of authorship, associated with the painter or artist (whether invented or real, original or copyist, nested or incorporating). In nearly all cases discussed here, the Dafen signature is entirely distinct from the labor that goes into painting the painting, though that is precisely what the signature is conventionally presumed to guarantee. Although some clients often take much trouble to construct the specificity, authenticity, and intentionality behind their Dafen signatures, Dafen painters' persistent disregard for the inviolate meaning of "the signature" and its relationship to "the hand" of the artist point to the perfectly separable market functions of those conventions.

Similar positions are apparent in the debate between Derrida and Searle. Searle defends the idea of a pure speech act (equivalent to a signature by a painter claiming the work is a creative work of art authored by him, painted, signed, and handed over to the consumer), whereas Derrida argues that neither the work, nor creativity, nor art, nor authorship can be securely sourced in the "individual himself." Likewise, there are two kinds of consumers, one who wants a pure speech act (*à la* Searle, the artist Liang, and the German amateur photographer), and one who wants its

¹⁰⁸ Author's fieldnotes, 31 OCT 2008.

boundlessly embedded contextual history (*à la* Derrida, Liu Ding, and Christian Jankowski). Dafen village is happy to accommodate both, and a firm like Sun Mountain provides sophisticated gradations of them for our delectation.

In sum: A signature is personal, necessary to authenticate a transaction (made instrumental by trade). A signature is legal, a guarantee to the buyer against deception, fraud, and forgery (although all are always possible). A signature is written, and hence legible to those for whom this form of speech act seems more transmissible into the future than other mere brushstrokes. A Dafen signature, being signed by any possible number of people in any number of possible names, in a context in which signatures have only marginal value, and often are produced in nearly nonsensical transcriptions, exposes these venerable institutions of art as no more than a thin veneer of convention.

Appellations like "fake art," "black market," "forgery," and "counterfeit art" are used to describe Dafen village in the Western journalism. They are founded upon a highly affected if multifaceted legal-cultural expectation of "true" art: that which is signed, framed, hand-painted, and guaranteed. Dafen practices appear to "deconstruct" this complex shrine of authorial intention at every level of "craft." If this is a deception, it is a far grander ("craftier") deception in its totality than what can be achieved at any given moment or in any given task by any single individual, in the painting or signing of trade paintings. All the guarantees of "signature authorship," from the signature style of touch to the autograph itself, are dissimulated by the diffusion of signature authorship to multiple hands.¹⁰⁹

By the time Zhao Xiaoyong's paintings are sold in Amsterdam near the Vincent van Gogh Museum, consumers are probably aware that these oil paintings displayed on racks in multiples and priced at 60 euros, are not likely to be the painting we have just seen inside the museum. The iterated signature "Vincent" and the craft of his brush strokes beckons the consumer with a conundrum—

¹⁰⁹ Like Wu Ruiqiu's explanation for "assembly line painting" discussed in Chapter Two.

we can imagine a hand, a name, and an author-function behind that painting, but we also surmise that this "source" will remain unknowable. To be sure, there are cultural fictions (reinforced by the merchant) that fire our imagination. And we are free—with limited liability—to invent a fiction that could convince someone else that our 60 euros *Sunflowers* is a priceless work of art.

Chapter Five

Framed Authors: Photography, Conceptual Art and the Dafen Readymade

Conceptualism in the Global Frame

The historicization of conceptual art under way within art history delineates an artistic movement engaged with the particular political, economic and social conditions of the European and American 1960s and 1970s.¹ Yet this definition forecloses the possibility of a global conceptual art, a broader group of artistic practices sharing transnational historical conditions. Sketching out such an alternate history, the New York exhibition *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin*, forwarded a less Euro-American view of conceptualism.² Looking at industrialized countries between 1950s-1980s, the exhibition argued for conceptual art practices as variously situated responses to globalizing capitalism, imagining a "multicentered map with various points of origin in which local events are crucial determinants."³ The world history narrative that undergirded *Global Conceptualism* was that of Eric

¹ See for example Jon Bird and Michael Newman, *Rewriting Conceptual Art* (London: Reaktion, 1999), and, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999).

² *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s* was organized by the Queens Museum of Art, New York, in 1999, and travelled to the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and the Miami Art Museum, Miami (2000). The exhibition was curated by Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver and Rachel Weiss, in collaboration with eleven curators representing each of the nations or regions covered by the exhibition.

³ Luis Camnitzer, et al., "Foreword," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s-1980s*, ed. Luis Camnitzer, et al. (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), VII.

Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (1994).⁴ Following Hobsbawm, the curators proposed that the crisis of capitalism in the late 1950s and the failure of socialist movements in the mid-1970s formed the two global contexts for conceptual art practices.

Overseeing the Chinese portion of the exhibition, curator Gao Minglu sought to interweave the political stances of conceptual artists in "Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," a regional grouping which either neutralizes contested nationalist claims or implies a "Greater China" polity.⁵ Gao's selection of art works shared strong formal attributes associated with conceptual art—the dematerialization of the object, institutional critique, ephemeral performance, linguistic play, and amateur photographic documentation. But Gao's historical narrative, set within the exhibition's broad sweep, reveal that the real parameters of the debate as to whether conceptual art's formal attributes can be marshaled in the service of one political family across the globe, depends, as Thierry de Duve argues in *Kant After Duchamp* (1996), on the historian's conviction about creativity and the historical horizons of its universality.

For De Duve, conceptualism's continued and ongoing power relies on a reading of Kant after Marcel Duchamp; the claim, shared by German Romanticism and Fluxus alike, that "everyone

⁴ Hobsbawm's text is cited throughout Stephan Bann's introduction to the catalogue (Stephen Bann, "Introduction," in Camnitzer, *Global Conceptualism*, 1-14). Jane Farver explained that the text was regularly used as a reference by the head curators throughout the planning of the exhibition (Jane Farver, guest lecturer for "Conceptual Art as Movement and Method," seminar taught by Martha Buskirk, MIT, Cambridge, OCT 2005).

⁵ In the time period covered by Gao's selections and essay, Mainland China transitioned from a post-imperial capitalist republic to a socialist republic to its reform-era "socialist market-economy"; Taiwan's single-party capitalist republic was replaced with a democratic republic still under negotiation as a "nation" in the world system; and Hong Kong's "laissez-fair" entrepôt market economy has been overseen as a British colony and now as a "special administrative region" of the PRC. To encompass, from any single leftist position, conceptual artists' critiques of capitalism or the capitalist state from all of these places, coded by undefined parameters of Chineseness, is hence extremely difficult. See Gao Minglu, "Conceptual Art with Anticonceptual Attitude: Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong," in Camnitzer, *Global Conceptualism*, 127-142.

is an artist," leads to the corollary, that anyone can perform the Kantian judgment of aesthetics.⁶ The transition from romanticism to modernity is enabled by a conflation of the artist's "genius" and the viewer's "taste" into everyone's "creativity." Modern, individualist, and above all universal, creativity is, for De Duve, a utopian trope that is the only remaining "emancipatory fundamental belief" of the 1960s.⁷ For those in the art world whose political commitments formed in the Sixties have been "shattered by subsequent events," the only solution is to remain ethically obliged to the notion of universal creativity.⁸ Formulating a deliberate tautology, De Duve argues that common sense is that which is "ethically obliged"; and in our post-'68 times, this is precisely the faculty of judgment, what Kant called *sensus communis*, or, common sense.⁹

The head curators of *Global Conceptualism* shared in De Duve's melancholic historical assumptions. Given their conception of world history as socialist struggle, the global conceptualist zeitgeist becomes a critique of capitalism *sine qua non*. Yet of course, the People's Republic of China—where the relationship of revolutionary zeitgeist and capitalism is hardly straightforward, does not fit so easily into such a frame.¹⁰ If the Western Sixties are the source of De Duve's ethical obligations to universal creativity, then it is through the Chinese intellectual historian Wang Hui's suggestion of a "Chinese Sixties," that we might reconsider the necessity of this Kantian common sense. Wang Hui characterizes the short twentieth century (1911-1989) not by the final victory of capital-

⁶ Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996): 290-292, and 319-320.

⁷ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 288. To emphasize that this obligation is a generational nostalgia, De Duve's narrative is punctuated by a refrain: "Those were the days my friend." De Duve, *ibid.*, 284, 300.

⁸ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 288-289.

⁹ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 310.

¹⁰ Consider, amongst many other critiques, Liu Xiaobo, "That Holy Word, 'Revolution,'" in *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China: Learning From 1989*, ed. Jeffrey N Wasserstrom, and Elizabeth J Perry (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

ism against socialism *à la* Hobsbawm, but rather by global depoliticization.¹¹ For Wang, capitalism emerges in the contemporary period as a globalized ideological hegemony because the market and state are absorbed into a sphere of neutralization.¹² In his formulation, commercial mechanisms (to which we might assign art) are ideological because they appeal to the *common senses*—that is, they appeal to the “ordinariness and sensory needs which turn people into consumers.”¹³ Wang's picture of globally depoliticized consumption stands apposite to that of De Duve's reading of Kant after Duchamp, reminding us that the counterweight to universal creativity is the lingering romantic horror at the automatization of every modern individual.

The drama between creativity and automatism plays out in the scene set by Dafen village, the global production center for handmade oil paintings located in Shenzhen, China. It plays out especially in works of contemporary photojournalism, documentary photography, and conceptualist art by Chinese and Western artists that I explore in this chapter. In evaluating the fissures between the photographic and conceptualist engagements with Dafen village's painters, I show how the ethical schema underlying universal creativity is problematically re-staged as a representational trope of Chinese artisanality. I also examine how, as the narrative of universal creativity extends its cosmopolitan reach into Dafen village, the demonstration of creativity in the Duchampian mode requires the very erasure of modern properties of authorship and the means by which it is procured. The inscription of the Dafen painter and the Dafen readymade into a globalist narrative of universal creativity is thus founded upon intricate hierarchies and geographies of capital and culture. In the

¹¹ Wang Hui, "Depoliticized Politics, Multiple Components of Hegemony and the Eclipse of the Sixties," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7:4 (2006): 685. At the time of submission of this thesis, Wang Hui had been publicly and controversially accused of plagiarism, however, my understanding of the accusations is that they do not pertain to the text cited here.

¹² Wang Hui, "Depoliticized Politics....", 694-5.

¹³ Wang Hui, "Depoliticized Politics....", 697.

process by which both artworks and non-artworks are re-situated into a global frame, I account, here, for the aesthetic, economic and ethical reach of "creativity."

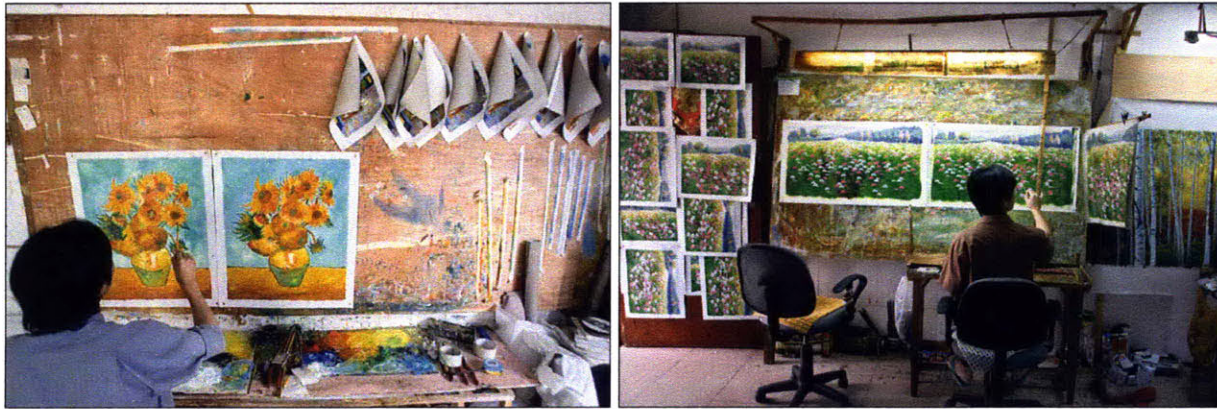


Figure Series 1. Chang K. Lee, for *New York Times*, 2005. Digital photographs. From: Keith Bradsher, "Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!" *The New York Times* (15 JUL 2005).

Automaton Artisans

In the newspapers and magazines of Western Europe and the United States, news reports of Dafen village began appearing in 2005, each offering breathless accounts of Chinese artisans who could paint dozens of van Goghs per day. One such American example is the *New York Times* story in 2005 by Keith Bradsher, the *Times*' Hong Kong bureau chief. The article describes the plight of low-paid Chinese painters painting "original Chinese copies" of "real Western art!"¹⁴ The photographs accompanying the article, taken by Korean-American photojournalist Chang W. Lee, rely on visual tropes common to Western press photographs of factory work in post-Mao China (figure series 1).¹⁵ They are images of faceless workers in meager circumstances, doggedly churning out the products

¹⁴ Keith Bradsher. "Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!" in *The New York Times*, 15 JUL 2005.

¹⁵ The photographs published in the *Times* were taken by staff photographer Chang W. Lee. According to Bradsher, Lee is a photographer who once worked as a trade painter in New Jersey (Keith Bradsher, email exchange with author, 3 APR 2008).

of mass culture. Vernacular details of their household-enterprises, as seen in a photograph showing laundry drying on a line alongside two copies of van Gogh's *Cafe Terrace By Night*, make up an ethnographic picture of the humble artisan painting the world's great works. Here, the imitative painting is figured for the American-situated reader as a mockery of the West's canons, of its histories and its institutions of taste. The photographs allude to the nativists' mimetic desire in the face of neoliberal transformation, and sit safely within a leftist critique of cultural globalization and third-world commodity production. That the subaltern laborer lives and creates within a Western past is an image at once delightful and liberal. The *Times* photographs thus hint at postmodern synchrony while assuaging fears of China's rise as an economic and cultural power through concern for its cultural workers denied the rights of invention.



Figure Series 2. Yu Haibo, *Dafen Oil Painting Village*, 2005. C-prints from digital photographs.

Contemporaneous to the *New York Times* images, another series of photographs were published in 2005, this time from the *Shenzhen Economic Daily* (深圳商报) (figure series 2).¹⁶ Taken by Shenzhen photojournalist and artist, Yu Haibo (余海波), these photographs resulted from a documentary project over the course of eight months, depicting Chinese migrant laborers reproducing canonical works of Western art including Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and *Last Supper*, Van Gogh's *Self-portraits*, *Sunflowers* and the *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*. Three of the twelve photographs were taken in the workshop and living space of van Gogh painter Zhao Xiaoyong (赵小勇).¹⁷ In these pictures, Yu is careful to frame the visual symmetry between the faces and bodies of the migrant workers against the van Gogh self-portraits; the workers are remade in his image, as they are laboriously remaking him. Here, the bemusement of *the New York Times* narrative is replaced with sincere sympathy for the conditions endured by the ethnic others who enter culture and capital through the already, and overly, Westernized West.¹⁸

¹⁶ Initiated as a project outside his work as chief photojournalist for the *Shenzhen Economic Daily* in 2005, nine of Yu's photographs were later published by the *Shenzhen Economic Daily* alongside an article by Yu. Yu Haibo, "大芬村—八千画师双重实现 [Dafen Village—the Double Achievements of 8000 Painters]," in *Shenzhen Economic Daily*, B04, 31 OCT 2005. After Yu received the 2006 World Press Photo award, the photographs were widely published in Chinese and European press, and in art and photojournalism periodicals.

¹⁷ The order that Zhao was filling at the time of the Yu photograph in 2005 was an order of twelve hundred van Gogh paintings in one month, for Kopo Art Co. Ltd., a Hong Kong export company, primarily intended for the US market. Hence it was necessary to enlist the assistance of several of his apprentices and family members, including Zhong Shengchun, his brother-in-law, pictured napping on the floor. Zhao Xiaoyong, interview with author, 17 FEB 2008; Wang Xiaofei, interview with author, 29 DEC 2007; Zhong Shengchun, interview with author, 17 FEB 2009. Further on the enterprise of Zhao Xiaoyong, see Chapter Four.

¹⁸ The occidentalizing primitivism of Yu's photographs are characteristic of what literary and film critic Rey Chow has diagnosed as an elite response in twentieth-century Chinese culture, caught between first-world imperialism and third-world nationalism. Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 22-23.

Yu's documentary aesthetic and his presentation of sweatshop globalization speak of a conjunction of formal beauty and the laboring body that characterize documentary photography's grand traditions, earning Yu a World Press Photo award in 2006. In reviewing Yu's full series of photographs and unprinted negatives against the twelve photographs he released to the World Press Photo (a Dutch organization) and hence worldwide, two central decisions are evident. First, Yu chose to circulate globally only those photographs in which canonical works of Western art function as meta-pictures. This selection was made in order to emphasize, in his words, "the complexities of cultural difference."¹⁹ Second, the selections share a formal pattern of strong framing, giving deep space to the subject matter but also unfocused hints of outer spaces, keying the viewer to the layering of pictures-within-pictures made possible by the subject matter. Perhaps self-consciously mitigating the heavy-handed selection and framing of his material, all of Yu's Dafen photographs are printed uncropped. In that sense, the photographs aim for truth-telling even as the truth is framed in self-consciously reflexive terms.

Taken together, the rhetoric of the New York Times and Shenzhen Economic Daily photographic series juxtaposes the high cultural value of the canonic work of art against the "mechanical reproduction" effected through devalued human labor. Where Walter Benjamin had heralded the potential of mass agency unleashed by the machine from the cult of aura, the photojournalistic representations of hand-painting at Dafen village tell of the very opposite: that the cult of aura locks hand-labour into the dehumanizing condition of reproducing "art" as if it was just any other commodity. The photographers speak to post-'68 leftist commitments by revealing how the expectations of universal creativity have been debased through automaton-like mass-production. The disjointed

¹⁹ Yu Haibo, interview with author, 19 FEB 2008. Yu's larger series has more recently been published in Yu Haibo, *生活在改革開放的中國深圳 Living in China's Shenzhen: A City Under Reform and Opening-Up* (Beijing: 中國攝影出版社 China Photographic Publishing House, 2007).

poignancy that Dafen painters, as oil painters, are supposed to be "artists" on the modernist register, is effected through the presence of the *great* work of art and to the indices of universal creativity they represent.





Figure Series 3. Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art*, or *China Copy Artist*, various titles, 2006. Lambda process c-prints from digital photographs.

Creative Artisans

In the photojournalistic representation of the China that "makes and fakes,"²⁰ creativity is precisely that which is lost to the copyist figured as automaton. Since copies of canonical paintings practically litter the Dafen village-scape, to photograph Dafen is immediately to conjure a picture-within-a-picture that points at Dafen painters' alienation as automaton artisans. Yet this sinicized photographic index of the canon also invokes the theoretical, economic and aesthetic histories of art, summoning layers of imitation, innovation and appropriation that are not so easily parsed. Turned on its art historical head, Dafen becomes a "giant readymade," prepped for interrogation in the conceptualist vein. This is precisely the mode of representation that Chinese and Western conceptual artists have taken, traveling to Dafen village to probe Dafen painters' ready-to-hire, made-to-order existence. In their projects, oil painting, inherited by the modern *as* art, is re-staged in the condition provoked by the readymade: as a profession "emptied of all *métier*," as if it were art.²¹

²⁰ See Laikwan Pang, *Cultural Control and Globalization in Asia: Copyright, Piracy, and Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²¹ De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, 290.

Operating in the Duchampian mode, conceptual artists working in Dafen village offer a particular kind of twenty-first-century riposte to the problem of skill and commodification. In 2006, the Hong Kong-based, German-trained, American photographer Michael Wolf released on the internet a series of over fifty photographs taken at Dafen village (figure series 3).²² Wolf is a twenty-year veteran of photojournalism, first studying at the University of California, Berkeley but formally trained at the University of Essen, Germany in the seventies under Otto Steinert, founder of the German postwar Fotoform movement. Moving to Hong Kong in 1995, Wolf worked as the staff photographer for *Stern Magazine* until 2003. Although his work has appeared prominently in book form and in art exhibition venues since then,²³ he continues to work as a photojournalist—contributing in 2008, for example, to an article on Taipei in the *New York Times Magazine*.²⁴

Wolf's large-scale documentary photographic projects in China are each themed by an exclusive focus on objects of everyday life in vernacular settings. Often, as in the series on *Bastard Chairs* and another on *Bicycle Seats*, such objects are portrayed in abused, misused, or makeshift condition. In another series, Wolf documents "everyday" uses of cramped spaces such as back doors or 100 x 100 meter apartment interiors in Hong Kong's Shep Kip Mei (石硤尾) public housing estate. Although much of Wolf's documentary work is set in Hong Kong, which has long been noted for its extreme high-density urban forms, the photographer does not document particular local, regional or

²² My account is based upon thirty-five photographs published on the artist's website as "China Copy Artists," and the twenty-two photographs exhibited at Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, 3 May-30 June 2007, as "Real Fake Art."

²³ Solo exhibitions of Wolf's photography have been held in galleries, museums and biennials in Hong Kong, Switzerland, Daegu, Shanghai, Cologne, San Francisco, and other cities. His documentary photography is featured in three publications: Harald Mass, *China im Wandel (China in Transition)* (Frederking & Thaler: Munich 2001); Michael Wolf, *Sitting in China* (Steidl: Goettingen, Germany 2002); Kenneth Baker and Douglas Young, *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door* (Thames & Hudson: New York 2005).

²⁴ Douglas McGray, "Last Days of Taipei," *New York Times Magazine* (2008): 126-34.

economic differences in his projects, choosing to have them stand for "China." Many of his documentary series contain dozens of images, and in their grand seriality, appealingly detail the impoverishment and brokenness underlying China's contemporary economic development.

The Dafen village project continues Wolf's focus on everyday objects and architectural settings, but this is combined with a systematic use of individual portraiture. Unlike most photojournalistic portrayals of Dafen painters, Wolf's images focus not on masses of unidentified laborers, but rather seem to enumerate with precision a world of individual specialities and skills. Described by Wolf as "portraits," nearly all of these photographs depict a single individual holding a painting while standing in an alleyway in Dafen village, evoking the German pictorial tradition of Auguste Sander.²⁵ In his near-unflinching adherence to this single compositional form, Wolf presents the viewer with a presumptive logic: that each of these photographed painters specializes in copying these strikingly contemporary works of art for a vast market. Unlike previous documentary photographers that have placed the reproduction of Mona Lisas and Van Goghs in a pre-industrial workshop setting, Wolf's seemingly endless parade of Dafen painters copying Friedlander photographs, Neo Rausch oil paintings, Richter's post-photographic paintings, and so on, suddenly place Dafen village in the *shared* contemporary time of the postmodern West. The more up-to-date and recondite the painting reproduced in Wolf's photographs, the more Dafen village seems to speak of the anachronisms of contemporary China.

By staging formal contrasts between the postmodern painting-in-the-picture and the everyday setting of Dafen village, the photographs furthermore shroud the depicted copyist in mystery. They raise likely questions about the identities, status, and training, of these "forgers," "copyists," or "appropriators." Illicit reproduction here is magnified through documentary seriality; the greater the

²⁵ Michael Wolf, email exchange with author, 4 FEB 2008.

number of Wolf's photographs, the more the notion of a whole village of Chinese copyists appears fascinating and surreal.

Kenneth Baker, art reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, has noted the "formal intelligence and acuity of observation" in Wolf's previous work, aspects of which are clear here again in the compositional dialogue Wolf creates between the high-value canonical work and the exotic banality of its Chinese setting.²⁶ As Baker suggests, Wolf's work exhibits a "longing for objectivity," even if his dramatic use of framing devices suggests that much has been edited.²⁷ This longing is also clear in Wolf's unrelenting use of a realist style with an embedded ethnographic structure, one that readily permits the registration of incidental variation.

Operating in a quasi-archival mode, each of Wolf's exhibited photographs are coded by a number, by the name of the canonical western painter copied, and by the price of the reproduced painting. When exhibited, the photographs are given titles such as #11, *Ed Ruscha, \$7.-*, or, #7, *Francis Bacon, \$102*, with currency adjustments made as required by the location of the exhibiting venue. These titles thus share in the caption logic of photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia's *Hustlers* series (1990-1992). DiCorcia's staged photographs were taken in an area of Hollywood said to be frequented by male prostitutes, and the photographs are each titled by the name of the subject, his age, his place of birth, and the price DiCorcia paid each man to appear in his photographs—*Brent Booth, 21 years old, Des Moines, Iowa, \$30; Christian Valentino, 23 years old, Ontario, California; \$25*.²⁸ As photocaptions, the titles work within the amalgamation of potential truth and potential fiction that charac-

²⁶ Kenneth Baker, "Introduction," in Michael Wolf, *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door*, (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 11.

²⁷ Baker, "Introduction," 8.

²⁸ Peter Galassi, "Photography is a Foreign Language," in Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Contemporaries, a Photography Series* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 50.

terizes DiCorcia's work; as Peter Galassi has written, "the titles evoke both the factual reporting of the newspaper caption and the uninflected notations of Conceptual art."²⁹ In this way, DiCorcia's titles seem to report the social position of his subjects, offering tantalizing facts to ground the implied fictions of these theatrically staged photographs.

Like DiCorcia's titles, Wolf's titles for the Dafen series emphasize notation and pricing. However, in Wolf's case the exchange value recorded is not the price for the "hustler" standing in the photograph, but rather, the market price of the painting for sale. Unlike DiCorcia, Wolf's interest is not in revealing the relationship between photographer and sitter as an economic exchange. Wolf's titles instead work to reveal the price of the labor behind it. Of course, in both artists' series, the term left un-noted is the far more expensive price for the photographer's photograph.

To borrow Barthes' phenomenological language, the "time" of the Wolf photographs is both the evidential nature of the "*that-has-been*," but also the consuming future of the "*that-which-you-can-buy*."³⁰ In that sense, the expectations for truth-value weighs heavier on Wolf's photographs than with DiCorcia's "hustlers"—whose identities are largely unverifiable. In Wolf's images, the name of the Western painter is matched against the canonical image reproduced and verified by the camera. Through Francis Bacon, Lee Friedlander, Gerhard Richter, and so on, we know we are grounded in a certain reality: the canon as shopping catalogue.

And yet, although Wolf's titles do index certain historical specificities, this accumulation of individual facts pointedly stops at naming the *painters* who are portrayed. Although the price for their labor is precisely reported, the identity of the copyist-painter, whose name, age, and place of birth, remain unknown. As a dutiful historian seeking to redress such a gap in knowledge, in February 2008, I requested from Michael Wolf contact information for the individuals who appeared in his

²⁹ Galassi, "Photography is a Foreign Language," 50.

³⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 95-96.

photographs. The photographer stated that he had lost all contact with the painters he had photographed. According to Wolf, he has completely lost interest in Dafen village because all its interesting buildings had been torn down and replaced by "generic" and "boring" ones. Wolf could only confirm that, of those who appeared in his photographs, "some...are the painters themselves and some are people who work at the galleries."³¹

Exhibited in 2007 at San Francisco's Robert Koch gallery, where the photographs are sold in editions of nine, the gallery's press release described the work as a series that "uncovers the odd and subtle interplay between capitalism and the Chinese tradition of developing artistic skill by copying the works of master artists."³² The gallery's statement sums up a new narrative of Dafen village, standing for the China that makes and fakes. Mimicry of the West, ignited by capital, can be localized through an essentialist call to Chinese "tradition." Here, the universality of creativity is found in contemporary China as well, though in timelessly inscrutable fashion. The complexities of Wolf's authorship, like that of the Dafen painters he portrays, thrive on the inscrutability fuelled by its global distribution.

³¹ Michael Wolf, email exchange with author, 2 FEB 2008. This claim also matches that given by Robert Koch's gallery description of the series on Art Net: "His series explores the effects of mass production (the fastest workers can produce 30 paintings a day) with photographs of the artist or "entrepreneur" in the market environment. Each image conveys the fabric of our new global economy, which democratizes art and enables each and every one of us to own a Hopper." Available:

http://www.artnet.com/usernet/awc/awc_thumbnail.asp?aid=424750622&gid=424750622&works_of_art=1&cid=111749 (accessed MAR 2008).

³² Robert Koch Gallery, press release for "Michael Wolf" 3 MAY-30 JUN 2007. Available:

http://www.kochgallery.com/exhibitions/pr_MWO07.html (accessed March 2008)



Figure Series 4. Christian Jankowski, *The China Painters*, 2007, installation shots. Images courtesy of the artist and Maccarone Gallery, New York.

Ready-for-Hire, Made-to-Order

Concurrent with state-supported journalistic attention on Dafen village, contemporary artists from China and the West have also taken up Dafen village as source, subject, and readymade factory.

"Contemporary" (that is, cosmopolitan) frameworks for consuming works of art carry with them the rhetoric of "appropriation," which by definition renders the transfer of property in itself an aesthetically meaningful act. In Dafen village, painting for elite artists to sign their names after the

paintings are delivered has been common practice for nearly twenty years.³³ Thus, from one point of view, conceptual artists are simply late-entry clients with new sales tactics and access to new markets.

In 2007, German-born, Berlin- and New York-based conceptual artist Christian Jankowski travelled to Dafen Village after reading about it in a Hong Kong newspaper.³⁴ Learning of a new state-run Dafen Museum of Art then under construction, Jankowski toured the construction site and photographed its unfinished interior. Then, aided by Shenzhen interpreter Lisa Liu (刘峥), and later by Hong Kong curator Christina Li (李绮敏), he conducted a broad survey of the galleries at Dafen village. They conversed with painters and dealers, trying to ascertain their self-perception as creative artists, and asked each an ultimate question: If you had the choice, what work of art would you most like to see exhibited in the new Dafen Museum of Art?³⁵ Based on their answers, Jankowski asked the painters or dealers to compose paintings that place their answers to the question within the photographs of the museum interiors taken by Jankowski. The paintings thus illusionistically depict the Dafen painters' paintings hanging inside the walls of the museum while it was under construction. Seventeen paintings were ultimately ordered and nine shown at Jankowski's *Super Classical* solo exhibition for March 2007 opening of the new Maccarone gallery space in New York (figure series 4). Though each painting is signed on the back by the Dafen painter, each is also issued with a certificate authenticating it as a Jankowski work.

Jankowski's *China Painters* broaches the question of authorship by the numerous framing devices that allow each of the multiple authors within the series to appear in nested form. First, there is the frame of the referenced image, the source painting reproduced by the Dafen painter. Second, there is the painted frame of the museum-under-construction which gives breathing space to the

³³ Further on signatures, see Chapter Four.

³⁴ Christian Jankowski, email exchange with author, 19 FEB 2008, and interviews with author, 25-28 FEB 2008.

³⁵ Lisa Liu, interviews with author, 4 and 25-28 FEB 2008.

ongoing local redefinition of "art" spurred by the establishment of the new museum. Third, there is the framework of the New York installation, in which Jankowski is the author of a series of paintings. As assisted readymades, each painting is securely fastened within a triple frame—seriality, the museum institution, and the cosmopolitan gallery system—that holds in check the fading localism of a singular expression.

In the New York exhibition's framework, the figure of the artisan is imagined as a single anonymous category for Dafen village's painters. Maccarone Gallery's press release for the Jankowski exhibition quotes Wu Ruiqiu (吴瑞球) through a newspaper article in *Der Spiegel* without naming him, stating: "An artisan recently told Spiegel Online he 'wants to get into the business of oil paintings the way McDonald's got into the business of fast food.'"³⁶ As the quoted article fully details, Wu is the founder, owner and general manager of Shenzhen ArtLover, the largest company in Dafen Village and therefore one of Dafen's ad-hoc spokespersons. He is furthermore the self-proclaimed inventor of assembly line painting and a man who has not painted in over fifteen years. Despite *Der Spiegel's* description of Wu as a "businessman," the gallery's text opts instead to refer to him as an "artisan." It then adopts the affecting tone of sympathy for the imagined sweatshop laborer, claiming that Jankowski's project allowed Dafen painters to take on "a challenge to generate an original painting for the first time."³⁷ Hyperbole might be expected of an art gallery, but the notion that it is first through Jankowski that a Dafen painter learns of the "challenge" of originality is a fallacy that relies on replacing the figure of the capitalist with that of the artisan. The artisanal trans-

³⁶ Maccarone Gallery, "Christian Jankowski: Super Classical," press release, 24 FEB 2007, quoting Martin Paetsch, "China's Art Factories: Van Gogh From the Sweatshop, *Spiegel Online* (2006). Paetsch invents a myth of his own here: Wu Ruiqiu is not "dreaming" of assembly lines, but rather has been utilizing assembly-line methods since 1992, when his company completed an order of 400,000 paintings in 30 days for Wal-Mart. Wu Ruiqiu, interview with author, 22 FEB 2008. Further on assembly line production, see Chapter Two.

³⁷ Maccarone Gallery, "Christian Jankowski: Super Classical."

formation from automaton to creative agent is, in other words, carefully framed by the intervening authorship of the cosmopolitan conceptual artist.³⁸

The production of Jankowski's *China Painters* is enabled by China's globalizing economy and by the global turn in contemporary art. Supported by biennial culture and cosmopolitan art markets, Jankowski's practice is in step with the expansion of contemporary art into authentically localized, but transnationally-readable, situations. In that sense, *China Painters* further complicates the hierarchal frames introduced in *Tu m'* by juxtaposing the transnational mobility of Jankowski against the regulated mobility of the Dafen painter.

Of those with whom Jankowski worked in 2006, two individuals' situations speaks to the complexity of professional legitimation in contemporary Dafen village. Li Tianning (李天宁) is a retired high school art teacher and theatre set painter from Jiangxi province. He moved to Dafen village to begin a second career as a "traditional" (*guohua* 国画) painter, having graduated from the National Traditional Painting Academy in 2006. He decided to begin a career in traditional painting because of its "high collector value," and his main goal is to become a recognized artist and to find collectors for his work. He relies very much on commissions for his income; but like Jankowski, he is too versed in modernist artistic practice to make categorical distinctions between "original creations" and "commercial orders" in his own oeuvre. He counts amongst his patrons, ex-officials, party members, and overseas Chinese clients in Europe and Taiwan. His paintings hang in the Longgang District Party Cadre School, and he is very proud of joining the new Dafen Art Calligraphy

³⁸ Under this rubric, accusing the conceptualist of "exploiting" the Dafen painters would necessarily entail portraying them again, as automaton artisans. As the critic E.K. Clark, reviewing the Maccarone exhibition for *New York Arts Magazine*, claims: "It is unlikely that artisans in this Chinese village would have been, suddenly, struck by a post-modernist, appropriationist thunderbolt." E. K. Clark, "Death of the Artist," *NY Arts Magazine*, Feature (2007).

Association formed by a party member in Dafen village.³⁹ Although he and his wife enjoy living in Dafen village, he speaks disparagingly of mass-production commercial painting in Dafen village, especially high-volume ink painting which he suspects are machine-printed. Yet, he told me, he promised the retired party cadre and patron that he would "persist" and help elevate Dafen village into a "true" creative and artistic center.⁴⁰

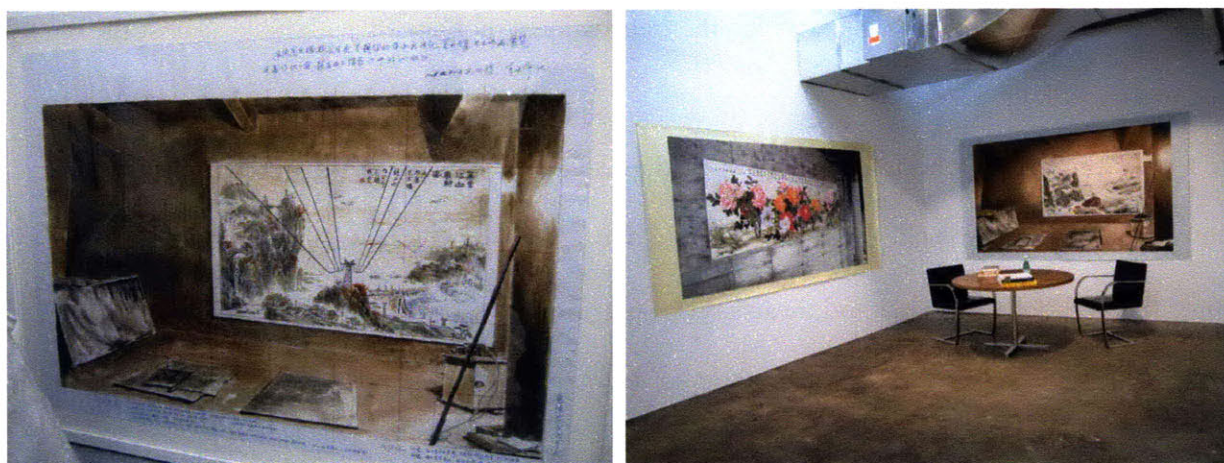


Figure Series 5. Left: Li Tianning, preparatory sketch for Jankowski, 2006, courtesy Para/Site Art Space, Hong Kong. Right: Jankowski, *China Painters*, 2006, installation shot showing Li Tianning's painting on right, courtesy Maccarone Gallery, New York.

Li found Jankowski's order extremely "unacceptable" at first (figure series 5). According to him, Jankowski had asked him to make a painting of what traditional Chinese painting would look like in 500 years. Jankowski, on his part, had decided to commission a painting from Li because Li had said that he would paint something that would represent the "inner landscape of the museum director"—who has yet to be appointed to the Dafen Museum of Art. Li stayed up all night thinking through the commission and planning a sketch for Jankowski. Finally, he decided upon a landscape overflowing with modern transportation and communication technology. Li composed the painting

³⁹ Further on local governmental and party-organ involvement in Dafen village, see Chapter Two.

⁴⁰ Li Tianning, interviews with author, 4 and 22 FEB 2008.

as a traditional landscape painting and, in it, placed an electric tower with receding power lines at the center of the pictorial space as a direct appropriation of the linear perspectival picture plane. Li thought this would be fitting because he understood that Jankowski was trying to effect a certain kind of "east-west dialogue" with his project. For his part, Jankowski thought that the power lines symbolized "communication" and was confused, since they were not telephone lines, but, went along with it.⁴¹

These (mis)understandings are not meanings lost in translation but can rather be explained by the role of Lisa Liu, who served Jankowski as an interpreter and administrator. With no Chinese language skills, Jankowski's practice in China is heavily reliant on interpreters such as Liu. Precisely because she had no professional experience as a translator, nor any training in visual art, her social role cannot be underestimated. As Spivak explains in an analogy using the *Médecins Sans Frontières*:

[The doctors]...cannot be involved in the repetitive work of primary health care, which requires changes in the habit of what seems normal living: permanent operation of an altered normality. They cannot learn all the local languages, dialects, and idioms of the places where they provide help. They use local interpreters. It is as if, in the field of class-formation through education, colonialism and the attendant territorial imperialism had combined two imperatives—clinic and primary health care—by training the interpreters themselves into imperfect yet creative imitations of doctors.⁴²

Like interpreters who become, in Spivak's terms, "(pseudo)doctors," Liu served as a (pseudo)artist in Jankowski's project. After apprehending Jankowski's objectives she quickly realized that Jankowski's method and manner were at odds with usual commercial practice at Dafen village. The discursive gap between Jankowski and Li Tianning is not a time gap—the one named by the transition from

⁴¹ Li Tianning, interviews with author, 4 and 22 FEB 2008; Christian Jankowski, interview with author, 25 FEB 2008.

⁴² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Blackwell Pub, 2008), 15.

modernity to postmodernity. Rather, it is a market gap, a gap between a client and a service-provider. Jankowski asks, "What would *you* like to paint?" But the Dafen painter-dealer responds by asking, "No, what would *you* like painted?" For a Dafen painter meeting a potential new client for the first time, strategic business practice means claiming to the client that they can paint "anything." Jankowski was seeking the very opposite—for the painter to reveal a single definitive answer that might very well lead him to choose or refuse the Dafen painter's services.⁴³

In the terms of the translation theorist Naoki Sakai, we have here a refusal of the position of the *addressee* on the part of both Jankowski and the Dafen painter.⁴⁴ The "untranslatable" here is originality-as-commodity, and the translator's sociality compels her to occupy the role of "artist"—refused by both Jankowski and the Dafen painter—herself. Here, Jankowski acts as if he were a businessman, Liu as if she were an artist, the painters and dealers as if they were artisans. This is not to say that the painters or dealers whom Jankowski consulted had no "true" or "original" answers to his question, only that, as in the practice of the *Médecins Sans Frontières*, the interpreter is in fact asked to manage a state of "altered normality."

When translating Jankowski's demands, Liu therefore found it useful to strategically hold off certain answers and responses, to selectively translate, and to add a number of persuasive comments

⁴³ For example, consider an interview in which I served as an interpreter for Jankowski and Wang Xuehong. By attempting to translate each question and answer directly to the two parties, the result was an utter failure to produce a transaction: "What would you put in the museum if you could?" "No single painting would suffice." "OK, then how many paintings would you require?" "At least ten." "OK what would these ten paintings consist of?" "Whatever required to demonstrate the quality of my work." "What would you consider to be quality work suitable for the museum?" "Of ten paintings, perhaps only six would be satisfactory." And so on, until the interview was concluded with no resolution. Wang Xuehong, interview with author, Jankowski and Lisa Liu, 26 FEB 2008.

⁴⁴ Naoki Sakai, "Translation," *Theory, Culture and Society* (2006): 75.

on the side.⁴⁵ The two stories behind Li's painting for Jankowski (whether it was about traditional painting five hundred years in the future or the inner landscape of the nonexistent museum director) can be explained by different moments of a conversation that Liu held off and used at different points in time in order to ensure that the collaboration went smoothly. Reflecting upon the interaction one year later with myself and Liu, Li Tianning stressed how pleased he was with the final work, on which he had "toiled for three days and nights." When asked whether he considers the final painting his or Jankowski's, he smilingly said, "One should say that he issued the exam question, and I wrote the paper."⁴⁶

Such interactions enabled Jankowski and Liu to delve deeply into the custom-ordering process at Dafen village and the ironies of demanding creativity-to-order. Often times, Jankowski's requests were refused by painters who considered it not worthwhile to paint an original painting on the price-scale of an ordered painting. As one painter answered, "Art is about inspiration. I can't respond to your question just now."⁴⁷ At other times, Jankowski would take on the majority of the compositional decisions, while soliciting any present interpreters, assistants, onlookers, for their input.⁴⁸ As interpreter, Liu persuasively facilitated communication between two modes of commercial practice, and, in course, made it possible for Jankowski's expectation of "creativity" to coincide

⁴⁵ This included, for example, telling the painters that Jankowski might return to order much larger quantities of their paintings if his exhibition was successful. Liu, interview with author, 29 JAN 2008. Also discussed by Christina Li, curator at Para/Site Art Space in Hong Kong, who also participated in the later stages of the 2006 project with Jankowski. Christina Li, interviews with author, 23 JAN and 12 FEB 2008, Hong Kong.

⁴⁶ Note again, as in Sakai's terms, the elusive positionality of the interpreter who is also given no role by Li. Li Tianning, interview with author, 4 FEB 2008.

⁴⁷ Unidentified painter at San Hua Fang gallery, interview with author and Jankowski, 25 FEB 2008.

⁴⁸ By the time Jankowski had returned for this second visit, he had had his assistant in Berlin create mock-ups of potential paintings that he could use as discussion aids with painters and dealers. However, these quickly became the *gao* from which paintings were ordered.

with the commercial transaction he required to produce an assisted "readymade." Contrary to the Maccarone press release then, the conceptual content of *China Painters* lies not so much in the invitation of a postmodern conceptual artist to patronize a third-world artisan with the offer of originality, but rather, in the logistical, linguistic, and aesthetic mediation of expectation and demand required to produce such a narrative.

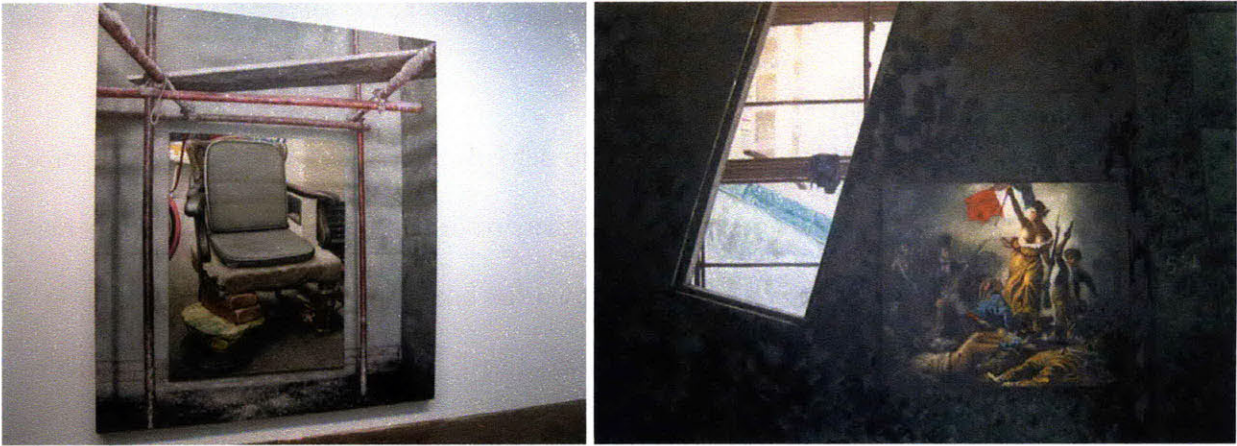


Figure Series 6. Yin Xunzhi for Christian Jankowski, *China Painters*, 2006. Images courtesy of the artist and Maccarone Gallery, New York.

Dafen After Conceptualism

Of all the painters who participated in Jankowski's project, it would be Yin Xunzhi (尹训志) whose contribution has been most noted.⁴⁹ As Jankowski told me, Yin is the only painter he met in Dafen village who engaged with him as "an artist."⁵⁰ At their first meeting in 2006, Yin surprised the Jankowski team by the incredible range of paintings he could copy with ease. In his studio they found paintings copied after Chuck Close, Jasper Johns, Becher and Becher, Gerhard Richter, Loretta Lux,

⁴⁹ Although Yin Xunzhi goes by the nickname "Big Beard" or "Long Beard" as an artistic personae, at Dafen Village, there are at least three artists who use the same nickname, hence I will use his given name here.

⁵⁰ Christian Jankowski, interviews with author, 25-28 FEB 2008.

Neo Rausch, On Kawara, and so on—paintings which they had not seen anywhere else in Dafen.⁵¹ Yin's versatility would have everyone who worked alongside Jankowski raving about the talented "Crazy Man."

Yin is a veteran of the Chinese commercial painting industry, and is a painter with great artistic ambition. Born in 1968 in the northern city of Qiqihar, Yin attended a fine arts high school in Heilongjiang province. In the early 1990s, he visited Beijing's then-illegal avant-garde artist village in the Yuanmingyuan. He found the lives of artists there too extreme and impoverished, seeing in them a bohemian cliché. After hearing of Korean-owned commercial painting companies operating in Beijing, Yin went to take the company's examination but in the middle of it, heard of even better opportunities in Xiamen, Fujian province, from the other exam-takers. Without even finishing the first exam, Yin travelled there with just a backpack. It was, he remembers, the furthest south he had ever been in China.⁵²

After eight years working as a commercial painter in Xiamen, Yin moved again to Dafen village in 2000, "dreaming," he says, "the artist dream."⁵³ Yin opened up a gallery with some friends and, like most artists in Dafen village, receives painting orders from other Dafen companies and directly from clients who visit his gallery. He currently shares a gallery space with a multidisciplinary team that consists of an abstract painter, a sculptor, and a graphic designer. But Yin constantly plans to leave Dafen for Beijing or Shanghai in order to become a "true artist." Although he has always actively pursued his own creative work, he has torn up all of his original paintings because he's never

⁵¹ Christina Li, interviews with author, 24 JAN and 12 FEB 2008, Hong Kong, and Christian Jankowski, interviews with author, 25-28 FEB 2008.

⁵² Yin Xunzhi, interview with author, 9 FEB 2008. Further on the history of trade painting in Shenzhen, Xiamen and Beijing, see Chapter Four.

⁵³ Yin, interview with author, 9 FEB 2008.

been fully satisfied with a single one. Thus, Yin says, he is not a true artist, because he has no works.⁵⁴

Jankowski's team found Yin Xunzhi and ordered two paintings from him—one based on Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* and a second based on a photograph of a broken chair they found in his computer files (figure series 6). Understanding it to be Yin's "original" (原创) work, Jankowski's team ordered a painting based upon this image.⁵⁵ Yin also planned and painted two other paintings that Jankowski had ordered from Yin's apprentice and girlfriend, but, surmising that individuality was important to Jankowski's project, did not completely reveal his hand in the other two paintings to Jankowski.⁵⁶

⁵⁴At current writing, Yin Xunzhi is engaged in the creation of 40-50 original paintings intended for a non-Dafen exhibition audience. Yin does not show these paintings to regular clients at Dafen village and has refused to sell them until a solo exhibition and a published monograph of his work has been produced. According to Yin, until then, the paintings would sell for too low a price. The planning of these paintings includes a number of sketches and several artist statements. Yin Xunzhi and Christian Jankowski, interview with author, 25 FEB 2008.

⁵⁵ Between my first interview with Yin Xunzhi in February 2008, and a later, on-camera interview we recorded in March 2009, he has given several different versions of his interactions with Jankowski and his interpreters on the matter of the Big Chair painting.

⁵⁶ Although Jankowski expressed surprise when I told him of Yin's role in the two paintings "by" Yin's girlfriend and student, the truth could not have been entirely concealed by Yin, since the possibility of Yin's actual role both paintings was known to both Lisa Liu and Christina Li. Li, interviews with author, 24 JAN 2008, Hong Kong. This is another example of the important role of interpreters enabling the willed ignorance of the artist-artisan relationship.



Figure Series 7. Left: Yin Xunzhi, in Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art, #91, Friedlander, E10-*, 2006. Right: Yin Xunzhi, in Michael Wolf, *China Copy Artist*, 2006.

When I met Yin Xunzhi in order to interview him about the Jankowski project, I recognized him and his friends as individuals who appear in more than one Michael Wolf photograph (figure series 7). Indeed, Yin Xunzhi claimed that the vast majority of paintings that appear in Wolf's photographs were painted by Yin himself, all for a single client who selected each image and supplied the source. This client was, of course, Michael Wolf.⁵⁷ Prior to Wolf, no other clients had ever ordered these paintings, and by and large they cannot be found in Dafen village.

⁵⁷ Yin Xunzhi, interviews with author, February 4, 9, and 12, 2008. Yin's account of his participation in the Wolf photographs is corroborated by others who posed for the photographs, and by one of Wolf's interpreters. Yin's role as painter of nearly all the paintings is also corroborated by photographs taken by Yin's other clients, including photojournalist Chris Roblowski and Christian Jankowski in 2006-07. Their photographs show Yin's studio space with numerous paintings that appear in the Wolf photographs. In February 2008, a Durer copy and a Chuck Close copy from the Wolf photographs were also hanging in Yin's gallery. Paintings that appear in the Wolf series that are not painted by Yin Xunzhi are those commonly found in Dafen village, including, for example, the *Mona Lisa*, *Sunflowers*, and other genre paintings of unidentified source. According to Yin, the paintings he painted can be identified as those on stretched canvas unframed.

According to Yin, over the course of nearly two years, whenever Yin finished one of these paintings, Wolf or an interpreter would come to Dafen village to collect it and organize a photo shoot.⁵⁸ Many vernacular details, for example the vegetables hanging on the window bars of #83, *Gerhard Richter, \$38.-*, are props purchased in the village stores and arranged in a predesigned setting. Each of the individuals in the photographs are friends of Yin's who were asked to volunteer to pose, but none are the painters of the paintings with which they posed. Neither the sitters nor Yin Xunzhi were aware that the photographs were taken with the intention of exhibiting them as documentary photography. Wolf's documentary aesthetic is produced, then, not through "acute observation," but rather by elaborate planning, foresight and compositional staging.

If practiced as photojournalism, Wolf's directorial procedure might well be considered unethical, but as an artistic practice, it raises deeper questions about the globalist practice of "documentary photography" that can also be viewed in the register of conceptual art documents.⁵⁹ The differences between Yin's and Wolf's accounts speak to the various registers of viewing and making in which the photographs function. For example, contrary to Wolf's assertion, not only have none of the buildings in his photographs been torn down, but rather, as of March 2008, each stood within a

⁵⁸ Wolf has not responded to my questions as to what purposes he may have put to the canvases themselves, and to my knowledge they have never been publicly exhibited.

⁵⁹ The photography critic A. D. Coleman treats press photography, photojournalism and documentary photography as separate modes of publication and reception. As Coleman argues, most journalistic photographs are received by the viewer as press photographs: single images, edited, coded and captioned beyond the photographer's control or input, and published with text also without his/her control. For most practicing photojournalists, their work is primarily seen in one of these two formats, circulated as press photography or published and exhibited as documentary photography. In Coleman's scheme, documentary photography, always serial, is the working and distribution format in which the photographer's personal vision is most strongly deployed. Coleman's assessment, however, does not take into account the aesthetic registers in which many photographs are seen, exhibited and sold, as in the case of Wolf's Dafen photographs. See A. D. Coleman, "Documentary, Photojournalism, and Press Photography Now," in *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 36-39.

few hundred meters of Yin's gallery. Proud of his close involvement in the project, at our first meeting, Yin arranged the study prints of the Wolf photographs that I had been carrying with me, and took me on a reprisal tour of the village. At each site, he posed for a photograph, holding the copy of the Wolf photograph as evidence we had found the correct site (figure series 8). Seeing in me a potential customer, Yin remarked more than once that I could also order paintings from him and make some new photographs *à la* Wolf.⁶⁰ Seeing in him a potential artist, I was wondering whether or not Yin was reenacting a work of performance art.



⁶⁰ Yin Xunzhi, interview with author, 4 FEB 2008.



Figure Series 8. Left: Chen Xiaolu and others in, Michael Wolf, *Real Fake Art*, 2006. Right: Yin Xunzhi at Dafen Village, 4 FEB 2008, photos by Winnie Wong.

Although Michael Wolf has not responded to any of my questions regarding Yin Xunzhi, Yin speaks admiringly of his friend and client Michael Wolf, noting that several original paintings he is currently working on are inspired by a photograph by Michael Wolf of a broken chair. The photograph is published in Michael Wolf's *Sitting in China*, and is the singular image described in an anecdote introducing the entire publication (figure 9).⁶¹ Of course, this is the "Big Chair" image that also appears as an "original" painting in Jankowski's *China Painters* (figure 10).⁶²

⁶¹ Wolf's anecdote describes how his discovery and photographing of the chair in Beijing instigated in Chinese bystanders a feeling of patriotic "shame." According to Wolf's text, he was told that the chair was later destroyed by Beijing police because of the shame it aroused in that a foreigner had used it to represent China. See Michael Wolf, *Sitting in China* (Goettingen: Steidl 2002), introductory text: front inset, photograph: 88.

⁶² Christina Li, who received an edition of this painting by Yin/Jankowski from Jankowski as a gift for her participation in the project, joked with me of her disappointment to find out that her painting, which she had believed to be a representative of a "true" Dafen "original," was revealed to be "just" a "Wolf" "photograph." Li, interview with author, 12 FEB 2008, Hong Kong.

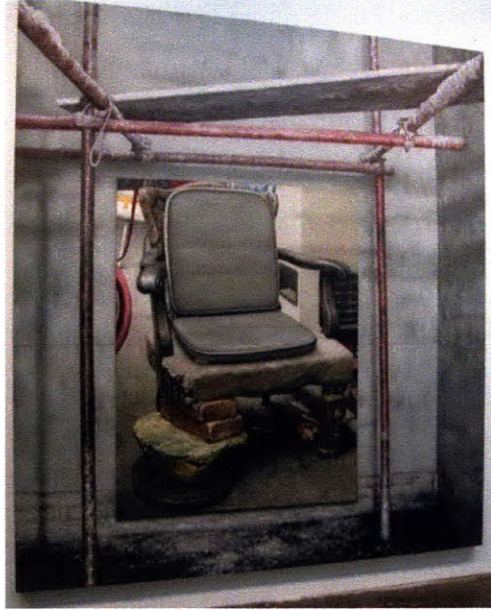


Figure 9. Michael Wolf, from *Siting in China*, no. 88, 2002. Figure 10. Yin Xunzhi for Christian Jankowski, *China Painters*, 2006.

Readymade Agents

Critiques of conceptual projects that use Dafen village as a source of readymade paintings tend to either charge them for exploitation, or praise them for their engagement with global capitalism.⁶³ I would submit that these responses are already foreshadowed by journalistic representations that decontextualize histories of production into images of either industrial sweatshops or romantic workshops. Wolf's project, because it *is* staged photography that masquerades as documentary photography, highlights a new set of problems enabled by the use of Dafen village as an open and global source of readymade paintings.

To quote journalist Malcolm Gladwell quoting legal scholar Lawrence Lessig, in a 2004 story on the literary travels of intellectual properties:

⁶³ For example, see Philip Tinari, "Original Copies: The Dafen Oil Painting Village." *Art Forum*, October (2007): 346-50. The third "critical" reaction is often against the "quality" of the paintings themselves.

Creative property, Lessig reminds us, has many lives—the newspaper arrives at our door, it becomes part of the archive of human knowledge, then it wraps fish. And, by the time ideas pass into their third and fourth lives, we lose track of where they came from, and we lose control of where they are going. The final dishonesty of the plagiarism fundamentalists is to encourage us to pretend that these chains of influence and evolution do not exist....⁶⁴

Like Gladwell, many contemporary U.S. authors have tired of battles of copyright in which only professional egos are hurt, with no great harm done to a more universal sense of "expression" or "creativity."⁶⁵ History does lose track of many chains of influence, and poststructuralist arguments seem to absolve art historians, trained to track such chains, from doing the "detective work" that once served to construct myths of originality and tradition. However, the permissive and generous sentiment expressed by Gladwell coincides with the globalization of artistic production. The erasure of Yin Xunzhi's role in Michael Wolf's photographs, and Michael Wolf's role in Yin's paintings, demonstrates how images can be produced, circulated and consumed with the desire to believe that the transfer of "creative property" between authors is an evidentiary concern already *passé*. As Kenneth Baker has written of another Wolf photograph, "Were Wolf to tell us that he had contrived this arrangement rather than happened upon it, we would probably not believe him."⁶⁶

In other words, the ethical difficulty here is not that Wolf contrived the erasure of authorship from his photographs; the problem is that, in the postmodernist context in which his photographs are received, this erasure is presumed natural and even necessary. For example, surveying

⁶⁴ Malcolm Gladwell, "Something Borrowed," *The New Yorker* 80, no. 36 (2004): 40.

⁶⁵ The case Gladwell discusses is one in which he is a victim of alleged plagiarism. This quote summarizes Gladwell's reasoning for forgiving the alleged plagiarizer, who convinced him it was unintentional and that a forgotten trail of influence had led to the similarities between her text and his.

⁶⁶ Kenneth Baker, "Introduction," in *Hong Kong: Front Door/Back Door*, ed. Michael Wolf (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005) 10.

contemporary artists' renewed interest in documentary photography, the contemporary film scholar Mark Nash has affirmed the importance of documenting artists' interference, involvement and manipulation of social realities. Praising these artists for their use of "fiction" in the real, Nash argues that such directorial practices enable artists to ask questions of "truth" and "reality" by taking up "real" political positions and social roles.⁶⁷ Should such praise for blurring fiction with reality extend to Wolf's "artist-photojournalist" strategies, in which behind-the-scenes manipulation is concealed? Who can say when the line between "fiction" and "reality" has been crossed, when "truth" is already staged as performance? And yet, if the boundaries of fiction and reality are not policed, can there be a politics of the "real" such as Nash hopes for?

Wolf's project claims to investigate the Dafen oil painting industry but conceals the participation of two shadow artists behind the work—himself as patron, set designer and props master, and Yin as painter extraordinaire. For Yu Haibo, the Shenzhen artist-photojournalist sympathetic to the underprivileged conditions of Dafen Village's painters and their potential victimization by Sino-Western intellectual property law enforcement, Wolf's quasi-journalistic production can be likened to a "crime": one that "frames" innocent Dafen painters as committers of copyright infringement, and circulates that claim in the most sophisticated of art markets.⁶⁸

"Appropriation," in Wolf's Dafen photographs, is thus literally indexed as a direct transfer of authorship through the transfer of ownership. As Yin Xunzhi told me, he certainly cannot prevent

⁶⁷ Mark Nash, "Reality in the Age of Aesthetics," *Frieze* 114 (2008).

⁶⁸ Yu Haibo, interview with author, 24 FEB 2008. Generally speaking, copyright law places no burden on the consumer of copyright infringements, and, in that sense, shares in the Adornian construction of the consuming subject as a victim of capital. Under both US and Chinese copyright law, Yin Xunzhi is certainly at risk for copyright infringement, but the role of Michael Wolf is more complex. Following the U.S. Supreme Court's *MGM v. Grokster* decision (2005), it is possible that Wolf's role could be construed not as a "consumer" but as an "aider and abetter" of Yin's paintings. Yin's or Wolf's paintings and photographs furthermore raise questions of fair or transformative use under U.S. Copyright Law.

Wolf from taking photographs of paintings that belong to Wolf himself.⁶⁹ And yet, to whom do these series of images within images "belong"? Wolf's selection of works for Yin—to be photographed by Wolf—consist of numerous canonical twentieth-century works by such photographers as Lee Freidlander, Becher and Becher, Loretta Lux, and William Eggleston, as well as paintings conspicuously sourced from photographs, such as the works of Gerhard Richter. In that sense, Wolf's selection could be interpreted as a critique of painting's cannibalization of photography in twentieth-century art. Since photography is canonized only through the intervening authorship of the oil painter, by debasing the authorship of the painter through the hiring of Yin Xunzhi as a mere laborer, Wolf's project also points at the contingently institutionalized creativity of the photographer.⁷⁰ Wolf's self-erasure from these multiple acts of art historical "appropriation," and his uneasy relationship with the status of painting as art, reveal how the photojournalist remains bound to a problematic truth-telling function.

In this convoluted game of hidden and exposed appropriations, what is perhaps most unexpected is the ease with which the authorship of Yin Xunzhi is both denied under the guise of conceptual art and at once made central as content and subject matter under the guise of documentary photography. Wolf makes formal play out of what Rosalind Krauss called "the look of non-art," but does so as a documentarian of the non-West's painterly artiness.⁷¹ The erasure of journalistic information across global transfers of knowledge, power and capital might seem quaint in the so-called

⁶⁹ Yin Xunzhi and Chen Xiaolu, interviews with author, 29 FEB and 1 MAR 2008.

⁷⁰ This reading is furthermore complicated by Wolf's own experimentation with post-photographic painting. Wolf has ordered several of his Dafen photographs to be painted by Yin Xunzhi in their entirety. Yin Xunzhi, interview with author, 4 FEB 2008. Yin has documented several of these paintings in photographs of his own. These paintings-of-photographs-of-paintings-of-photographs, however, are not exhibited as part of Wolf's oeuvre, and he has not acknowledged their existence in any public form.

⁷¹ Rosalind E Krauss, "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (1999): 295.

information age, but Wolf's project demonstrates how it can be a cosmopolitan operation laden with the power of aestheticization over distance. My own photographs of Yin Xunzhi reprising his expert knowledge of the Wolf photographs and his "native" relationship with the village can be read as "evidence" of Wolf's "exploitation" of Yin. On the other hand, in the model of an intellectual performance by an artist-scholar such as Walid Ra'ad, these photographs could similarly be presented as a work of collaborative conceptual art between myself and Yin.⁷²

The "frame up" that the art-photographer Wolf conceives is thus different in one important sense from the photographic and painterly framings enacted by the photojournalist Yu Haibo and conceptual artist Christian Jankowski. This I see in Wolf's use of portraiture which both Yu and Jankowski avoid. Allan Sekula has most aptly traced the moral function behind the portrait photograph:

...photography welded the honorific and repressive functions together. Every portrait implicitly took its place within a social and moral hierarchy. The private moment of sentimental individuation...was shadowed by two other public looks: a look up, at one's "betters," and a look down, at one's "inferiors."⁷³

Wielding at once the "honorific" and the "repressive" functions of portrait photograph, the "truth" behind Wolf's "documentary" photographs overturns the policing power of the crime photograph by combining in one image *both* the duplicity of the legal image and the duplicity of the criminal-

⁷² As suggested by respondents to an earlier version of this paper at "Contested Spatialities," Harvard University, May 2-3 2008.

⁷³ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 10

artistic voice behind it.⁷⁴ The conceptualist content of Wolf's act—the fabrication of “evidence,” the ruse of staging an “investigation,” the effacing of the “mastermind”—cannot be registered either by the documentary photograph nor by the legal regime of intellectual property. But it could have been granted as “true art” through the aesthetic regime of conceptualism—a regime to which Wolf never explicitly claims obeisance.

To what extent, then, is Wolf's directorial mode any less ethical than Jankowski knowingly re-authoring his name over that of a painting unknowingly sourced from a Wolf photograph, as he in effect does with the Big Chair painting for *China Painters*? Or, Yin Xunzhi knowingly painting a Wolf photograph as a nested work of “original” art within a series of works “by” Jankowski? Each of these claims *could* be made less objectionable through a construction of intentionality, which in turn cannot easily be discerned from the performance of the artistic persona. Yet by condemning Wolf and praising Jankowski for their ethics of collaboration with Yin, we would risk confining ourselves to the role of legal advisors in authorship's limited liability structure, demanding “fair” contracts that would pre-register artistic subjectivity in a legal regime. I would submit instead that, in both cases, the forms of modern artistic production privileged as original—if sometimes serial, multiple, referential and editioned—are carefully set apart from the forms of reproduction that are rendered authored but anonymous. Reproduction matters, precisely as a stage upon which originality can be re-authored as global, investigative, and contextual.

⁷⁴ “.....a new instrumental potential in photography: a silence that silences. The protean oral ‘texts’ of the criminal and pauper yield to a ‘mute testimony’ that ‘takes down’ (that diminishes in credibility, that transcribes) and unmask the disguises, the alibis, the excuses and multiple biographies of those who find or place themselves on the wrong side of the law. This battle between the presumed denotative univocality of the legal image and the multiplicity and presumed duplicity of the criminal voice is played out during the remainder of the nineteenth century. In the source of this battle a new object is defined—the criminal body—and as a result, a more extensive ‘social body’ is invented.” Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” 6.

Hence, let us not disavow that together with Wolf, Jankowski, Yu, and I also create a new archive of the Dafen forger, thereby re-inscribing a "social body" of quasi-criminality. To quote Sekula again:

...to the extent that bourgeois order depends upon the systematic defense of social relations based on private property, to the extent that the legal basis of the self lies in the model of property rights, in what has been termed "possessive individualism," every proper portrait has its lurking, objectifying inverse in the files of the police.⁷⁵

If it is indeed our contemporary ethical obligation (*à la* De Duve) to universalize the self so overdetermined by creative expression, and so buttressed by the owning of that expressed property, then we are forced to recognize the erasure of Yin Xunzhi's authorship behind Wolf's and Jankowski's projects, even as we are compelled to thrust him onto the postmodern market as a performing, anti-author. Collapsed in Wolf's project are not just the operations of the portraits of the National Gallery (a.k.a. the canon) and that of the police files, but the bourgeois order of the work of art itself and its relationship to that other social body: the creative and/or automaton artisan. In other words, the crime is already found in the narrative that drives the archive itself; consistently represented as laborers of reproduction, Dafen's painters can hardly enter that privileged stage of original production in the globalizing frame. "Framed" with authors and yet author-less, the Dafen readymade, nonetheless, enters the global fray.

⁷⁵ Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," 7.

Conclusion

Dafen Village and the Labor of Appropriation



Figure 1. Painters at work on the *Dafen Lisa* in plaza of Dafen Art Museum, 28 JAN 2010. Image courtesy of Urbanus.

On May 1, 2010, Dafen village's now annual International Cultural Industry Fair opened in conjunction with a much grander event: China's first World Exposition staged in Shanghai. An affair of all-consuming interest in a nation that regarded it as the ultimate proof of its global relevance, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo was tamely themed "Better City, Better Life," and was an extravagantly innocuous showcase of the social benefits of urbanization. In addition to the traditional national brand-building pavilions familiar from past expositions, the periphery of the immense Shanghai Expo site featured an "Urban Best Practices Area," in which over seventy

Chinese and foreign cities mounted mini-pavilion displays of their municipality's successful implementation of urban policy and development projects. After a lengthy application process in which six other proposals from the city were rejected, the Shenzhen Municipal Government finally won approval to illustrate the "regeneration" of Dafen Oil Painting Village in a Shenzhen case pavilion.¹ The multimillion project (calculated in US dollars) was proposed and organized by Shenzhen's Municipal Commission of Urban Planning and Land Resources, and curated by Urbanus Architecture and Design firm, the Shenzhen developers and designers, respectively, of the Dafen Art Museum.

The Expo Dafen exhibition was officially titled "Shenzhen, Frontier for China Dreams" (*Shenzhen, Zhongguo mengxiang shiyanchang* 深圳, 中国梦想试验场).² It featured the official narrative of Dafen village retold as a microcosm of Shenzhen's miracle thirty-year urbanization: A former rural village that, through good government, now offers the conditions for persevering migrant workers to realize their creative dreams. This Dafen narrative, honed since 2004 in multicolored propaganda sponsored by the local Buji Street Office and Longgang District propaganda departments for national distribution, was merged for the Exposition into the celebratory history of Shenzhen as the migrant worker's land of economic and cultural opportunity

¹ The proposal "Dafen Village, the Regeneration of an Urban Village in Shenzhen," was officially proposed by Zhou Hongmei, Director of the Urban Planning Commission. The proposal process was led by Wang Yang, Secretary of the CPC Guangdong Provincial Committee, Liu Yupu, Secretary of the CPC Shenzhen Municipal Committee, and Tang Jie, Vice-Mayor of Shenzhen. The rejected proposals were "Miraculous Shenzhen, Capital of Vitality," "New CBD Shenzhen: Humanity, Vitality and Sustainability," "Luohu Checkpoint Area," and "Basic Ecological Control Line: A New Way to Ecological City," "City of Design—Creativity of a Young City," "Refill the Urban Residual with Pocket Parks—Cityscape in Shenzhen" and "Mission Hills Engraving Base." Meng Yan, and Zhou Hongmei, *Expo 2010 Shanghai Urban Best Practices Area Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, trans. Zhang Ying (Shenzhen: Shenzhen Municipal Government 2010), 4-5.

² A more literal translation of the Chinese would have been "experimentation grounds" instead of "frontier," however the can-do cultural "frontier" language has always been common in official descriptions of Shenzhen.

in reform-era China. Dafen village is presented as the city of Shenzhen writ small, its history built from individual narratives that renew Shenzhen's utopian relevance to the nation.

Presenting Shenzhen as proof of the glittering success of the "opening up and reform" policy is a well-established metonymy. Celebration of the city of Shenzhen can be equated with de-facto celebration of Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader whose (author-)name overwrote the creation of Shenzhen in 1978, the policy of the Special Economic Zones, and the reaffirmation and strengthening of that policy in 1992. For the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of Shenzhen in 2008, the formerly rural villages that underwrote the "miracle" of Shenzhen were asked to inscribe their local identities into that larger history of transformation. Shenzhen-based anthropologist Mary Ann O'Donnell documented a number of such productions—from dramatic theatre to murals—made by villages' cultural organizations to commemorate their local communities' place in the thirty-year history of Shenzhen.³ Thus, although in administrative terms all of Shenzhen's two hundred villages had been effectively absorbed under urban governance by 2006, they remain at the core of the city's official mythology. In 2008, Dafen Oil Painting Village's Management Office had answered the call by commissioning twenty-six original artists in Dafen to paint a series of twenty-six original oil paintings portraying twenty-six moments in the history of Shenzhen, beginning and ending with paintings that depicted Dafen village, first as a farming village, and last as a creative industry. For the Shanghai Expo of 2010, the challenge was to turn this narrative strategy around once again, and to open up Dafen village as a metonym for a new national frontier space, where creativity could be staged as a "Chinese dream."

Shenzhen is much more than just a materialized city to the Chinese people. It is also a hometown of the Chinese spirit, a frontier for their dreams. It is a dream, first and foremost, of the whole nation....The Shenzhen pavilion used the regeneration of Dafen village....[It] tells a story about how people as the ultimate

³ Mary Ann O'Donnell, *Shenzhen Fieldnotes*, 2008.

driver of all the miracles created over the past thirty years, have shaped the drastic changes of this young city. It is a story about people, their dreams and creativity, as well as the culture, spirit and vision of this city....

— Meng Yan, "Shenzhen, Frontier for China Dreams," (2010)⁴

For the curators, the high-flying rhetoric of a national exhibition about Dafen village had a particular utility and relevance. Urbanus, the Shenzhen-based architecture firm established in 1999 and China's leading urban design firm, is headed by three New York-registered architects, all graduates of Tsinghua University and Miami University in Ohio. Principal Meng Yan (孟岩) was the chief curator of the Expo's Dafen exhibition and also the lead designer of the Dafen Art Museum, which remains the firm's most prominent cultural project. Urbanus' design for the Dafen Art Museum was selected from a 2005 internal process held by the Shenzhen Urban Planning and Land Resources Commission (whose headquarters are also designed by Urbanus), headed by Vice Director of its Department of Urban and Architectural Design, Zhou Hongmei (周红玫). Prominent in Shenzhen as the head of several international urban design culture events, Zhou was also the official proposer of the Dafen exhibition for the Shenzhen Case Pavilion.⁵ In numerous interviews and published texts, Zhou and Meng have stressed that, unique amongst Shenzhen's urban villages, Dafen is the only that has not been demolished and redeveloped, and it therefore serves as an exemplar of successful urban adaptive reuse in Chinese cities—an urban design and

⁴ Meng Yan, "Shenzhen, Frontier for China Dreams," trans. Zhang Ying, in *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 33-34.

⁵ *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 24. Zhou also heads the Shenzhen/Hong Kong Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism and Architecture, an event that has been held in Shenzhen since 2005. Its three invited chief curators to date were each prominent Chinese architects or designers: Yung-Ho Chang, Ou Ning, and Ma Qingyun.

planning service of which Urbanus is the leading proponent and provider in China.⁶ The historical agent of Dafen village's impressive "regeneration," however, is never explicitly named as Urbanus' design work nor the Urban Planning Commission's policies or decisions; it is instead repeatedly explained by Dafen village's own "creativity."



Figures 2-3. Dafen painters at work on *Dafen Lisa*, 28 JAN 2010. Courtesy of Urbanus and Shenzhen News.

In 2010, the annual Dafen Copying Competition held for the International Cultural Industry Fair was thus overshadowed by another event, held in preparation for the larger Shanghai Expo. On January 28, Urbanus gathered five hundred painters in the plaza of the Dafen Art Museum. Two digital images—primarily monochrome rectangular panels—were provided to each painter, who was instructed to render them in oil on canvas (figures 2-3). They were also asked to sign the lower right corner of their finished canvases, and on the back, to write down their age, place of origin, and a statement of their personal dreams. The painters were told that their finished canvases would be assembled into a giant image to be revealed only at the Expo site. Perhaps to no one's surprise, the

⁶ Meng Yan, "Shenzhen, Frontier for China Dreams," in *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 33-34. Meng also repeatedly emphasized this point to participants and visitors in the Dafen Art Museum exhibition discussed below during the installation and opening of the exhibition. In ongoing lectures and exhibitions of their work, Urbanus also presents images of Dafen village (without identifying it), as an example of urban villages in Shenzhen. For example in, Liu Xiaodu, "Urbanus," Department of Architecture Lecture Series *Housing*, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 18 FEB 2010.

reassembled painting was the *Mona Lisa*, cropped of its background, turned sideways, and enlarged to gargantuan proportions. The "*Dafen Lisa*"—as it was dubbed by the curators (thus reiterating the favorite "Da Vinci-Dafen" pun of Dafen officials)—was installed horizontally along the 43 x 7 meter exterior facade of the Shenzhen Expo pavilion (figures 4-5).⁷ Parts of the assemblage were interspersed with flashing digital video screens playing documentary footage of bulldozers opening land for the development of the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. With the backs of the painted canvases hidden from view, visitors were invited to "discover" the "secret dreams" of Dafen painters inside the pavilion space.⁸

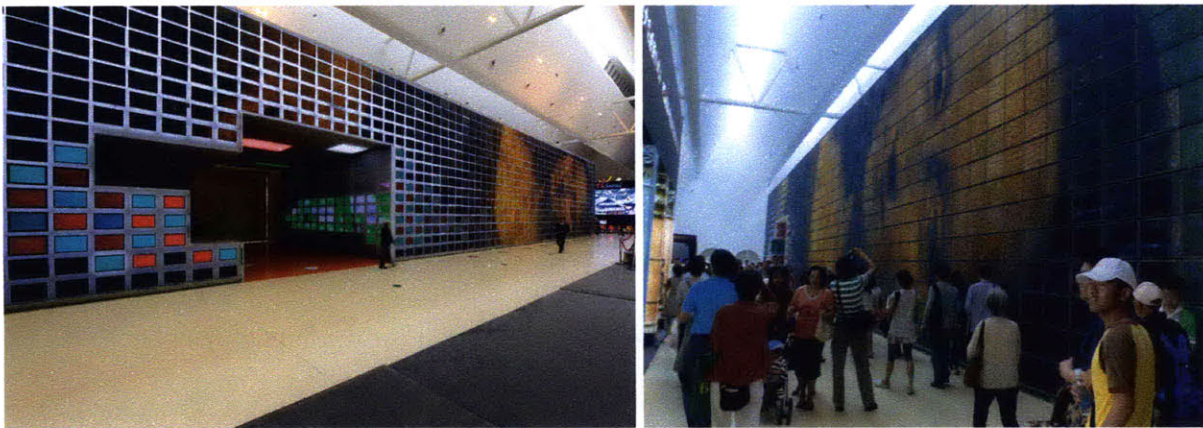


Figure 4. *Dafen Lisa*, as installed on exterior of Shenzhen Case Pavilion, Shanghai World Expo. Photo courtesy of Urbanus. Figure 5. *Dafen Lisa* with visitors, 7 JUN 2010, photo by author.

The *Dafen Lisa* takes up several themes and strategies repeated in the many artistic representations of Dafen village examined in this study. Assembled labor, a world cultural visual inheritance, the individuality of handwork, and the authorial trace of the signature, are all put towards the construction of a hand-painted thing that attempts to encapsulate a creative industry fueled by anonymous painters. The conceit that the five hundred painters, assembled like cogs in a great painting machine, could not know (or guess) the final outcome image, was a device necessary

⁷ The Shenzhen Case Pavilion was a freestanding display structure located inside the UBPA Central Zone C building.

⁸ Meng, *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 53.

to stage a separation between the managerial design knowledge that assigned the image, and the manual labor that merely painted it.⁹ The conceit was turned around again inside the pavilion, where visitors were putatively asked to uncover intimate knowledge of the Dafen painters's secret ambitions—secrets that the painters were asked to provide for public revelation. Such affective efforts at transparency depend entirely on the naive—even eager—obedience of the Dafen painter, and they share a great deal with the universal empathy that cosmopolitan artists have also sought in appropriating Dafen painters' labor in conceptual art.

The presentation of Dafen village at the Shanghai World Expo made thorough use of the artistic strategies spawned from post-Duchamp modes of authorship. The curators designated the *Dafen Lisa* a "conceptual painting + video installation," thus securing the notion that, in the context of Dafen village, painting can no longer be presumed to be "conceptual."¹⁰ On the contrary, it now always requires a conceptual enframing. However, the curators of the *Dafen Lisa* reassembled the signs of authorship into a visual event that did not seek to forward a claim of singular artistic authorship. Instead, announcing that the project amounted to a rejection of the Duchampian mode of ironic appropriation, the curators professed: "Unlike Marcel Duchamp in the early twentieth century who satirically added a moustache on the smiling face, here in Dafen village, it [sic] is neither an individual artist's experimentation, nor a mere copy of a classic, it is a collaborative creation—a conceptual art piece involving more than 500 Dafen painters."¹¹ In other words, the tool of appropriation was repurposed by the curators to evacuate authorship from a work of non-art (a *Mona Lisa* reproduction, parceled out), in favor of a new claim of "collaborative" creativity. Here,

⁹ Of course, the organizers never really managed to "hide" the knowledge from the painters, since the term "Dafen Lisa" was already being used by various staff. Also, after the conclusion of the painting event, the paintings were also assembled in the outdoor plaza for a photograph.

¹⁰ Meng, *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, trans. Zhang Ying, 50.

¹¹ Meng, *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 51.

appropriation is used to deliver a generic creation from which no individual artist emerges, even as "creativity" as an ideology of individuality was everywhere celebrated in this theatre.

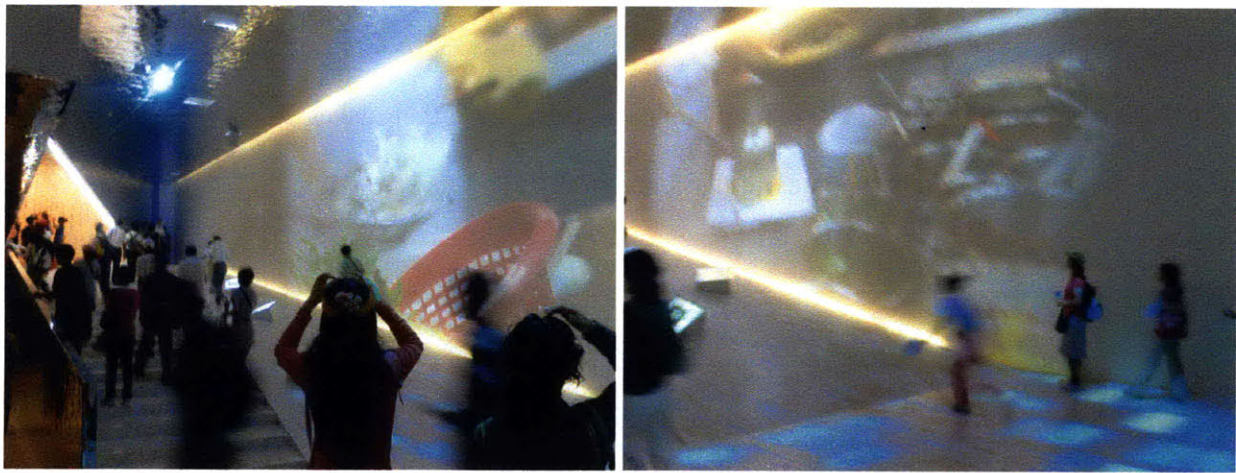
The unnamed, grand author of this elaborate nesting of anonymously collaborative authorship is, of course, the party-state, whose presumed voice validates such statements through the sprawling bureaucratic and professional subcontracts that produce an affair as large as the World Expo.¹² In evacuating all authorship from their display, the curators implied that the omnipresent author of the exhibition was "China," whose anonymized "people's" dreams were being brought to the surface. That is, in addition to operating as cosmopolitan savants in an international sphere, the curators also made sure to supplicate their utterances to "the state," which was posed as the ultimate appropriator.

Thus the rest of the Dafen exhibition at the Shanghai Expo marshaled Chinese cultural elites to make representations of Dafen creativity, while minimizing their author function. The exhibition included, for example, a short animation made by Beijing designer Lei Lei (雷磊), documentary videos directed and shot by the Beijing theatre director Mou Sen (牟森), a set of serial illustrations drawn by Guangzhou-based artist Chen Tong (陈同), and a deluxe-edition exhibition publication put together by *Urban China* journal editor-in-chief by Jiang Jun (姜珺).¹³ These figures are well recognized as independent and even "avant-garde" producers in their respective fields, though here they act as quasi-official agents. The presentation of their works in the Expo Dafen

¹² For example, the Shenzhen Case Pavilion's official organizational group consisted of a sponsor (Shenzhen Municipal Government), coordinator (the Urban Planning commission), co-organizer (Shenzhen Longgang District), chief-curator (Urbanus), activity co-organizer (China Merchants Property Development), and supporters (China Construction Steel Structure Corporation and Artron Enterprises), in addition to numerous media partners, corporate sponsors, curatorial members, and consultants. Several additional responsibility teams, party committees, and project offices were also created to oversee and realize the project.

¹³ In addition to these individuals whose works are featured in the pavilion, the Shenzhen Expo case pavilion involved dozens of architects, artists, designers, theatre and performing artists, in its planning and production.

exhibition, however, avoided identifying them as individuals artists through conventions like plaques or labels.¹⁴ Instead, the pavilion was visually and sonically awash with the faces and voices of Dafen workers announcing their "truest dreams." The narrative theatre culminated in "the abyss of a dream"—a great room shimmering with water-like light projections, and a giant projection showing Shenzheners—from doctors and surgeons to cooks and factory workers—at work on a normal Shenzhen day (figures 6-7).¹⁵



Figures 6-7. "Shenzhen, Frontier for China Dreams," urban theatre, Shenzhen Case Pavilion, Shanghai World Expo, 2010. Photos by author, 7 JUN 2010.

Lining up Dafen's painters, who are rural migrants living without social welfare or legitimacy in the city, with Shenzhen's white collar professionals amplified the politics of the exhibition. The video projection of the final room gestured towards the longstanding inequities of rural and urban citizenship, and recently renewed proposals within policy circles to abolish or reform the household

¹⁴ Some were named but neither pictured nor profiled (as the organizers are) in the Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook, which was not made available to the visiting public.

¹⁵ Meng, *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 66.

registration system.¹⁶ Since the migrant population cannot be formally acknowledged, in a city like Shenzhen where the illicit population has been estimated to be several times that of the legitimate population, basic tasks of urban governance, from population and (un)employment counts to the provision of public services, have always been sensitive and intractable issues. Of this final film, the videographer Mou Sen wrote: "The theme of this film is Shenzhen in action and who keeps this city running [sic]. Working is beautiful, working is glorious, and working people are sacred and venerable. This is the power of the city and the dignity of the city."¹⁷ Straightforwardly celebratory as Mou's statement might sound, in the context of an "urban best practices" policy display, it reads verily as a call for the administrative legitimation of the migrant population that makes up the vast majority of contemporary urban workers (and nearly all of Dafen's).

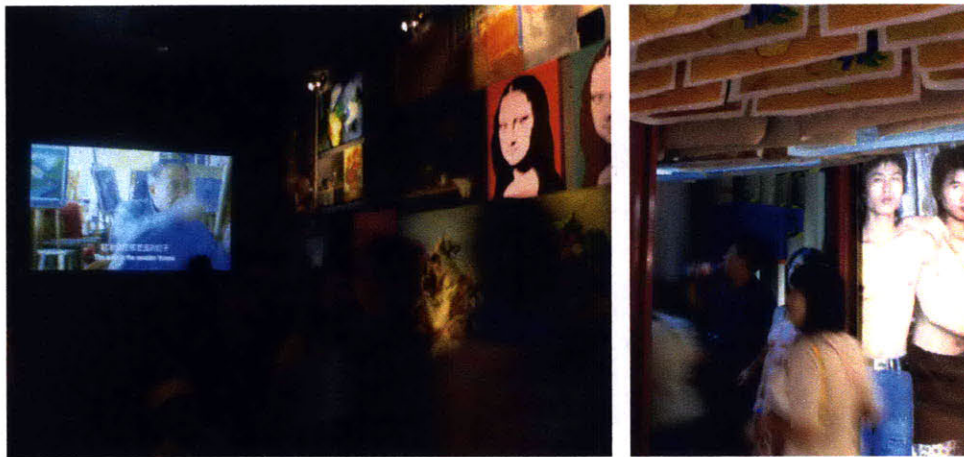


Figure 8. "Made in Dafen," (left) oil painting workshop and video installation with interviews with Huang Jiang and Wu Ruiqiu. Figure 9. "Dafen Painters." photography light box and oil painting articles, Shenzhen Case Pavilion, Shanghai World Expo, 2010. Photos by author, 7 JUN 2010.

¹⁶ For example, on March 1, 2010, exactly two months before the opening of the World Expo, and just before the meeting of the National People's Congress, thirteen Chinese newspapers prominently published coordinated editorials calling for an end to the household registration system.

¹⁷ 影片主题是深圳在做。谁使这座城市运转。工作是美丽的，劳动是光荣的，工作和劳动中的人是神圣的。这是一种城市力量和一份城市尊严。" Mou Sen, "Exhibit Number 13.2 'Shenzhen Faces' City Documentary," trans. Z.

Ying, in Meng, *Shenzhen Case Pavilion Guidebook*, 67.

Throughout the pavilion, Mou Sen's video projections were enhanced with physical paintings and tools from Dafen village, which were displayed as artifacts in spaces that evoked Dafen's studios, galleries and workshops. These simulated rooms were arrayed in a multilevel layout that recalled the ramps, stairs and rooftop gardens of Urbanus' Dafen Art Museum. In one darkened room, a long interview with Huang Jiang, the "First Man" of Dafen, was projected on a wall across from a parallel interview with Wu Ruiqiu, Huang's former apprentice and the "inventor" of assembly line painting (figure 8). As they have both consistently iterated in their capacities as Dafen spokesmen, Huang recalls in minute detail his "invention" of the oil painting industry in China, while Wu speaks passionately about "originality" as the next entrepreneurial step in Dafen village's development. Next to these videos hung an assortment of unlabeled masterpiece-copy paintings gathered from Dafen shops.¹⁸ In the next room, van Gogh canvases (direct from the shop of van Gogh painter Zhao Xiaoyong) were hung as though drying from the rafters. This cramped space, piled high with painting tubes and wooden stretchers, was wallpapered with a life-sized photograph of factory painters confronting the viewer with their gaze (figure 9). The print was taken from a group portrait of painter-workers by Shenzhen photojournalist Yu Haibo, photographed at the Noah Art factory in 2006. Although the Noah Art factory and the workshop of Zhao Xiaoyong are distinct places of production operating at significantly different scales, here they are joined together through the portrait of "the" painter-worker, in an attempt to evoke in the visitor the overall sense of "hard work." Finally, at the top level of the pavilion, about two dozen unlabeled original paintings by unnamed Dafen artists were hung inside an enclosed box that visitors could peer into through

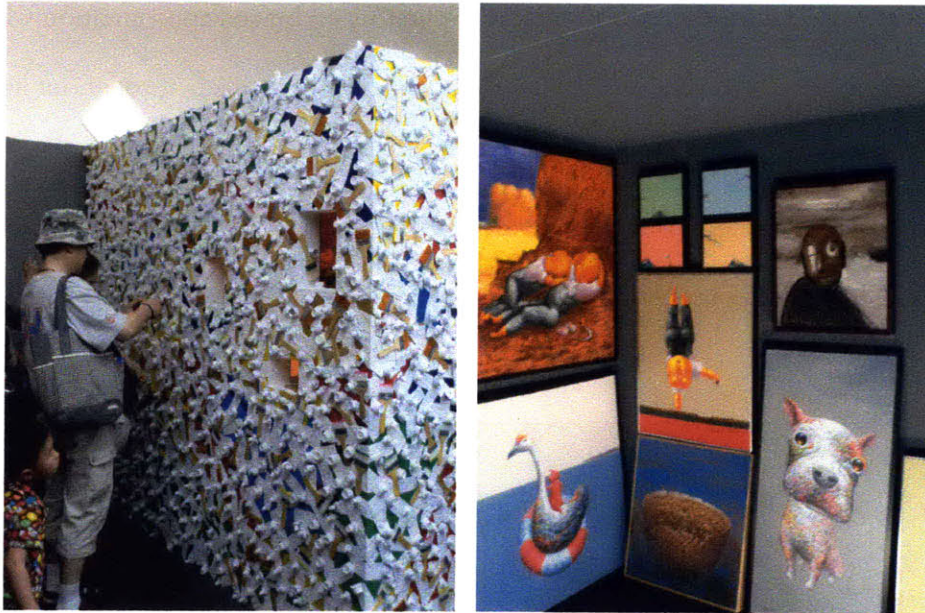
¹⁸ This included a mixed media rendition of Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, made for me as product sample by Mei Hongmei in 2008.

small rectangular openings,¹⁹ while an audio loop of Dafen voices announcing their "secret dreams" played from loudspeakers (figures 10-11).

Through this directed narrative of simulated rooms, the curators of Expo Dafen reprise two significant framings of the trade painting industry discussed in this study. The first is that of "factory production," and the second is that of the party-state's cultural production of "creativity." As this exhibition makes manifest, the two are conjoined, each necessary for the production of the other. Simply put, only after manual labor is established as separate from mental labor in painting can "creativity" be advanced. In Dafen village, the cultural imaginary of "the factory" was prevalently used to describe a flexible putting-out system to suggest a more impressive—or nightmarish—Fordist-style "industrialization" than actually existed. Although trade painting has been practiced much the same way for decades (if not two centuries) prior to these ministrations, those outside the trade were quick to equate its practices to the "factory" or "industrial" production of painting, and in response, devote themselves to fostering the "creativity" of its "alienated" workers. This characterization secured the role first of the party-state and then cosmopolitan artists as saviors, joined together by a shared sense of self-championing liberal humanism. Stunningly, the total arc of this narrative of rescue spanned the short period of six years. The endeavor was declared *fait accompli* by the time of the Expo, even though, little of it had had any effect on the labor practices of trade painting. Dafen's painters, artists, and bosses have instead filled the "orders" of conceptual artists and the party-state much as they have filled the orders of any other "boss"—all the while struggling with definitions and practices of "true art" much as these very same "facilitators" have. This study has sought to show that the extreme disjuncture between, on the one hand, labor and trade practice at Dafen village and, on the other, readymade notions of aesthetic work, authorship, and artistry, are consistently reprised (and continually surprising) because they are

¹⁹ Given the curators' mention of Duchamp, this display arrangement may have been a reference to Duchamp's *Etant Donnes*.

the result of deeply held intellectual presumptions about the separation between "true" art and the market, "free" art and "commercial" labor.



Figures 10-11. "Regeneration Box," exterior and interior of rooftop model box with original paintings, Shenzhen Case Pavilion, Shanghai World Expo, 2010. Photos by author, 7 JUN 2010.

These contradictions were keenly felt in the Expo Dafen exhibition, which had first to lament and glorify the laboriousness of Dafen labor, then render respectable the working painters' creative dreams, all without provoking the laughable futility of their "original" art. There was also the secondary agenda of promoting the village's urban transformation under the reign of the architect's and planner's hand, surrendered, of course, to the party-state. The architect-planner-curators' solution was supple: while simulating a museum of art—specifically the Dafen museum they designed and built in 2007—they consistently bypassed the conventional exhibitionary devices that would either mark out the individual artistic authorship of their own collaborators or frame the Dafen artist's paintings too readily as "original art." After hiding the "final image" of the *Dafen Lisa* from Dafen painters in order to announce them as mere manual laborers, when these same Dafen painters had produced their own "final images" and thereby claimed to be "creative artists," the

curators displayed them, with neither identification nor acknowledgement of authorship, in a darkened box viewable only through tiny openings. This architectural screen, served to highlight the filtering function of "design" knowledge, but without reprising the author-making function of art-institutional practice. In short, the architect-planner-curators embraced appropriation without irony from the outset with the *Dafen Lisa*, used Dafen "readymades" as artifacts throughout its display, and everywhere appropriated the forms of contemporary art without ever claiming to make any. In so doing, they could stage a political theatre of Dafen village finally freed from the burdens of originality, and in effect, offer up Dafen village as though it were a museum of art without artists.



Figure 12. "The Dream Box" interior of rooftop model box with video projection of Dafen painters' "truest dreams."
 Figure 13. "Dafen Art Museum," interior of rooftop model box with models and multimedia light effects, Shenzhen Case Pavilion, Shanghai World Expo, 2010. Photos by author, 7 JUN 2010.

To wit, the "secret dreams" of the Dafen painters that were being celebrated by the exhibition turned out, in the vast majority of cases, to be a desire to be recognized as artists. Some of the statements written on the backs of the Dafen Lisa canvases were, "To paint my own paintings for the world to enjoy and love," "I wish to become an outstanding artist, to travel the world!" and

“To be referred to by others as *that famous* female artist!”²⁰ As I have also found, Dafen painters might measure that recognition by a variety of means—some by professional and social stature, some by exhibition and travel opportunity, some by the market value of their works—but their desire to claim that professional status is widespread and consistent. Notably, this is a status which the curators of the Expo exhibition chose not to confer onto Dafen painters, even as they sought to celebrate the party-state's ability to aid migrant workers in the realization of their creative dreams and desires.

As a result, the effort to promote the Dafen painter in the guise of the dreaming-and-persevering worker, while denying them this realization at every turn, serves pointedly to reify their endless striving. The patience of the Chinese migrant worker—nurtured now by his or her “creative dreams”—is projected to be infinite.²¹ In a period of economic downturn, the endurance of China's migrant workers is indeed an important barometer of the health of the Chinese (and global) economy. The politico-commercial frame that encompasses the official project of Dafen's creative industry unfolds—as an endeavor infused with the sense of permanent transition that buttresses the Chinese reform era.

For the purpose of my study however, a narrower question remains: can the status of “artist” be bestowed on Dafen painters through the discourse and practice of postmodernist appropriation that

²⁰ Dafen Lisa paintings C21, E20 and E35. I am grateful to Zhang Yun of Urbanus for providing me photographs of the backs of several canvases.

²¹ In this respect, the effect of the Expo Dafen exhibition shares much in common with the tone of Cai Guoqiang's “Peasant Da Vincis” exhibition, an inaugural exhibition of the newly built Shanghai Rock Bund Art Museum also held in conjunction with the Shanghai Expo. Although Cai's framing of the “peasant Da Vincis” (rural-born Chinese who, with little expertise, are attempting to build airplanes, helicopters, robots, aircraft carriers and UFOs) might be read as an ironic critique of Chinese progress, it can also simultaneously be read as a celebration of the rural peasants' and migrants' futile but ever-persevering creativity.

is dominant in the contemporary art world in both China and the West? The Expo Dafen curators were certainly aware of this problem, and they addressed it by inviting me to organize an art exhibition for the Dafen Art Museum to be held in conjunction with the Expo events. Although I ultimately limited my involvement to the capacity of a curatorial consultant, my initial exhibition proposal—to return conceptual art projects to the Dafen museum for exhibition alongside Dafen painters' works—was partially realized at the Dafen Art Museum in May 2010.²²

The exhibition that was mounted was entitled "*Duiliu* 对流," suggesting a circulation of opposing values and literally translated into English as "*Convection*." It was co-curated by the Munich-trained, Shenzhen-based conceptual artist Teng Fei (滕斐), and the Sichuan-trained, Shenzhen-based conceptual artist Yang Yong (杨勇). If artists as authors were conspicuously absent from the Expo Dafen pavilion, the *Convection* exhibition was fraught with them. The curators brought to Dafen an impressive lineup of contemporary Chinese and foreign artists with lengthy international curriculum vitae, including such widely exhibited contemporary artists as Chen Tong, He Yun Chang, Christian Jankowski, Daniel Knorr, Song Dong, Xu Tan and Yin Xiuzhen. Their installation, video, sculptural, performance, and conceptual works were installed in the expansive galleries on the main level of the Dafen Art Museum. Downstairs, in the decidedly less well-appointed galleries of the lower-level, the oil paintings of local Dafen artists were hung. The "convection" that the curators sought thus was

²² With Christian Jankowski, I first proposed such an exhibition to the Dafen Management Office in February 2008. Most works in our proposal were deemed "unacceptable" by Liang Jian, temporary art director for the Dafen Management Office. I also discussed the possibility of a Dafen exhibition with Meng Yan in January 2009. For the Expo-related exhibition, I submitted an exhibition proposal to Urbanus that was titled "Added Value" in English but rendered as "回家" or "Return Home" in Chinese by Meng Yan. The proposal was accepted, circulated and discussed amongst the Expo curatorial team. However, we agreed to alter my role to that of a curatorial consultant without compensation. After Teng Fei was selected as one of the curators, Teng and I had several curatorial discussions and I served as one of the contacts for five of the artists I had initially proposed who were ultimately included in the exhibition: Sascha Pohle, Cameron Gray, Christian Jankowski, Matthias Meinharter+Nikolaus Gansterer, and Leung Mee Ping. I was also present during the installation and opening of the exhibition and assisted in various capacities.

preset in this high-global and low-local hierarchy, itself adduced from a disaggregation of the conceptual from the painterly. Thematically, the "international art" exhibition upstairs featured works with a range of aesthetic approaches to authorship, skill, originality, and imitation—many parts of which had been "made in" Dafen village by Dafen painters. Taken together, the exhibition brought to the fore the complex terrain that Dafen's aspiring artists must negotiate.

Curator Teng Fei is a Guangzhou-born painter and conceptual artist who graduated from the oil painting department of the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1985. From 1989, Teng studied at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, remaining in Munich where he worked "as a free artist" (*zìyóu huàjiā* 自由画家)—in his words—until his return to Shenzhen in 2006, where he currently co-owns the well-respected independent or "underground" music bar, Yidutang. Teng's own art work explores painting skill and reproduction, and thus, since his return to Shenzhen, he has been a self-professed admirer of Dafen village's artists. For a year prior to the exhibition planning, Teng was at work on a series of very large, highly photorealistic images of banal subjects (like flowers), each painted in a single sitting.²³ With this work, Teng suggests that an "unthinking" form of skilled painting labor constitutes a kind of "conceptual art."

Teng repeatedly expressed his intention that the *Convection* exhibition be "warm," by which he meant that it would be inclusive. He thus invited the Dafen Artists's Association, the Dafen Art Industry Association, and the Dafen Management Office to organize artists to participate. Over the course of two months, Teng also paid numerous studio visits to Dafen artists who were not members of these organizations and invited over thirty such artists. Significantly, the exhibition was thus the first at the Dafen museum in which artists who had no official standing were exhibited, and there was no segregation of "official" or "independent" artists within the galleries where their

²³ Teng Fei, interview with author, 3 JUN 2010.

paintings were hung. With the exception of two works discussed below, all Dafen artists who participated exhibited paintings.

By one measure, the efforts of the local party-state's effort to attract "original artists" to Dafen village and to "transform" Dafen into an "artists's village" had recently culminated in the establishment of the Dafen Artists's Association (*Dafen meishujia xiehui* 大芬美术家协会) in the spring of 2009. Although other officially recognized professional associations had been previously formed in Dafen—most notably the Dafen Art Industry Association which was established in 2006 and has been concurrently headed by Dafen bosses Huang Jiang and Wu Ruiqiu—the establishment of the Dafen Artist's Association was significant in that it formally recognized Dafen artists and incorporated them into the professional art administration structure overseen by the national culture and propaganda ministries. Membership requires academic qualifications as well as an active exhibition record, and there are currently only thirteen members in Dafen. Since the Dafen Management Office officially recognizes 8000 registered painters in Dafen village, membership is indeed a rare distinction. In the official sense, Dafen village can now be said to have "real artists."

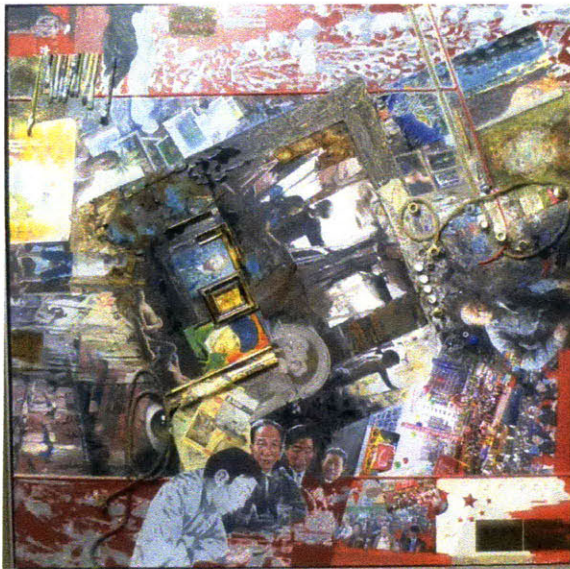


Figure 14. Jiang Qingbei, *The Story of Dafen Village*, oil on canvas with applied newspaper, magazines, photographs, wooden frames, brass plaques, string, canvas, paint brushes, paint tubes, approx. 3 x 3 m., 2009. Figure 15. Jiang Qingbei, *The Story of Dafen Village*, detail, 2009.

The Chair of the Dafen Artists's Association, Jiang Qingbei (蒋庆北), was thus one of the most prominent Dafen artist who participated in the *Convection* exhibition. Jiang, a graduate of Lu Xun Art Academy, who also studied at the Repin Art Academy in St. Petersburg and with Claude Yvel in Paris, came to Dafen village in 2003 at the urging of then-chief of Buji propaganda Shen Shuren (沈树人). As one of the biggest individual beneficiaries of local government support for original artists, Jiang spoke glowingly of these policies in an interview, but also stressed that Dafen village was made up of "small artists, small bosses, small painters, small officials," and that claims to the contrary are simply exaggerations.²⁴ Jiang put this characterization of Dafen village in a 2009 collage entitled, "The Story of Dafen Village," which he exhibited in *Convection* (figure 14). The collage utilized Jiang's own collection of newspaper articles and photographs about Dafen village (once again, Shenzhen photojournalist Yu Haibo's photographs of van Gogh painter Zhao Xiaoyong, Huang Jiang, and Noah Art factory workers featured prominently), organized into multiple zones and composed as if it could be viewed from multiple perspectives. According to Jiang, "How you see Dafen village depends on where you stand." Thus in one corner, he grouped references to assembly line painting—of which he remarked to me, "We [original artists] have no idea how to do that!" In another, he agglomerated references to life painting and travel sketching, including a miniature version of a landscape painting of his own, but affixed upside down. In another corner, he pasted modified photographs of Dafen village's annual culture industry festivals. In the lower right corner where he signed the work, Jiang nested his signature within a red and white rendition of the Chinese national flag, on which he had also embedded miniaturized versions of the official plaques naming Dafen Oil Painting Village a "Culture Industry Model Base," that were awarded by the National Ministry of Culture (figure 15). Though we might have presumed that an officially

²⁴ Jiang Qingbei, interview with author, 1 JUN 2010.

recognized agent of the culture bureaucracy would consider such honors sacrosanct, Jiang had these miniature replicas machined in a shop down the street. Thus, even as he praises the efforts of particular party-state policies and leaders, Jiang nevertheless sought to exhibit his skepticism of the overall Dafen project.



Figure 16. Li Tieying, *Bird's Nest*, oil on canvas, 2009.

Perhaps most humble of all the artists who participated in the Expo Dafen exhibition was an aspirant "Dafen" artist, Li Tieying (李铁映), Vice Chairman of the 10th Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (2003-) and a member of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee (1985-2002), who exhibited an oil painting entitled *Bird's Nest* (figure 16).²⁵ According to the curator Teng Fei, Li had briefly studied oil painting under Teng during a visit to Shenzhen, and when Teng asked him to participate in the exhibition, Li asked to be exhibited in no special place of honor, because he wanted his first exhibited work of art to be hung alongside those of the painters of Dafen village.²⁶ This gesture quietly but unmistakably echoes the political power of the "below"

²⁵ China Vitae, "Li Tieying," <http://www.chinavitae.com/biography/Li_Tieying|710> (accessed JUN 2010). The Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress is considered second in political rank in the nation. The Standing Committee has about 150 members and 12 Vice-Chairmen.

²⁶ Teng Fei, interview with author, 31 MAY 2010.

introduced in the Expo Dafen exhibition: the (constructed) conferral of cultural legitimacy upon the generically figured lowly Dafen painter (whose “unfree” work would certainly never be exhibited) is the rhetorical power available through art.

Li's painting was thus exhibited alongside "local" paintings by Dafen's official and independent painters in the lower-level galleries of the Museum, while the "international" contemporary art exhibition was installed in the galleries above. Upstairs, the conceptual artists treated the affected “local/global” artistic hierarchy with a range of approaches. The exhibition opened with a work by Shanghai movie star Geng Le (耿乐), also a 1994 graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Entitled *500 Easels*, Geng's work called for the five hundred easels Dafen painters had used for the painting of the *Dafen Lisa* (also the easels used for the annual Dafen Copying Competition) to be dismantled piece by piece. Each wooden component of the five hundred easels was then manually assembled into a perfectly regular floorboard spanning the entire area which visitors to the exhibition were compelled to walk over in order to enter the exhibition (figure 17-18). Several workers were hired by the curators to painstakingly construct the installation over the course of several days. Upon seeing it after his much anticipated arrival during the exhibition opening, the artist Geng Le expressed his satisfaction to the assembled media. While a celebrity-artist's ceremonial appearance—calculated to take credit for the conceptual work anonymously made—is simply a ritual of the author function, in this instance, the performance of celebrity over anonymous labor played up a specific critique of Dafen village: Geng's delegated dismantling of the "easel art" to which Dafen village so desperately aspires, and his literal relegation of the tools of painting to the museum floor on which he stood, combined to level an unmistakable invective at the association of Dafen's painting production with contemporary art.



Figure 17. Geng Le, *500 Easels*, 500 wooden easels, as installed at Dafen Art Museum, 2010. Figure 18. detail.

The availability of low-cost labor and customized production has made the "aesthetics of administration"—to use the phrase of art historian Benjamin Buchloh—possible in Dafen village, but it is certainly not uncommon elsewhere. Chinese artist-run studios notably include the Beijing, Shanghai and New York enterprises of Ai Weiwei, Zhang Huan and Cai Guoqiang respectively, but their reported profits pale in comparison to Damien Hirst's studios in Gloucestershire, England, or Takashi Murakami's in Tokyo. For contemporary artists who do not command their own permanent "factories," the workforce that enables the execution of their art is often diffused across curatorial and exhibition workers. By not functioning as a boss, the artist is also freed to have little to no knowledge of the production behind his or her work. Thus, "I had them made for me" is often only an admission of a habitual mode of artistic production, not an authorial statement of appropriation.

This condition was common among many works in the *Convection* exhibition that used local workers in their installation or execution, though it was quite immaterial to the form, content or posture of these works whether that labor was sourced in Dafen village. Beijing-based artist Yin Xiuzhen (尹秀珍) had luggage wheels and handles removed from rolling suitcases and reattached to styrofoam packing materials; nearly one hundred of these styrofoam suitcases then filled a room in a large grid. Hung Chih-Peng (彭弘智) arranged for a room to be hung with six very large hanging

wooden panels on which were pasted spray-painted images of Chinatown gates from around the world—a reference to Chinese migrant labor. Xiao Yu (萧昱) had sculptures made of barbed wire to evoke a landscape painting, and Fu Jie (傅洁) had two thousand of balloons printed with "Dafen Contemporary Art" blown up to fill a room. These installations—both requiring and formally showcasing intensive labor—may well have employed Dafen painters in their production, but they could easily have been interchanged with any other hired hands. In Dafen terms, the labor which Dafen painters contributed to these works of installation art can simply be likened to the many paintings that they have painted for other artists (real or invented) who order from them.

"Appropriation," established as a commonplace artistic practice producing works that specifically announce the intensiveness of labor, can simultaneously unmark that labor as a production tool. Installation art thus shares its author-making strategy with Dafen's "signed" and "hand-painted" art products: Though it is acknowledged that the-hand-that-makes and the-hand-that-signs might well belong to different persons, the authenticity of labor (craft) nevertheless defines the expressive range of the medium.

Beijing-based artist Song Dong pursued this connection between appropriated labor in installation art and appropriated *art* labor in conceptual art still further, while still finding a means to avoid any engagement with Dafen painters. Fresh from his first solo show in the United States, held at the MoMA, Song's project for the *Convection* exhibition was entitled *100 Years of History*. In it, Song paired a century of images from Chinese and world history with images of canonical Chinese and Western art works from the same year (figures 19-20). Song downloaded the lowest resolution images he could find on the internet, digitally altered them into black and white images, and had these enlarged and printed onto stretched canvas.²⁷ These poor-quality and color-denuded printed canvases were then chronologically arranged around the largest gallery of the museum. Song then

²⁷ Song Dong, interview with author, 27 MAY 2009.

invited one hundred Shenzhen children—but no Dafen painters—to paint over these one hundred printed canvases. The artist thus juxtaposed the unknowingness of the children's labor with the knowing selections he had made in order to construct this synchronic history. At the same time, by foregoing painterly skill altogether in the execution of his project, Song could thereby bypass the question of Dafen's relevance to contemporary art and avoid any aesthetic issues raised by the availability of skilled painting labor at the site of the exhibition.



Figure 19-20. Song Dong, *100 Years of History*, paintings "1962" and "1974," oil on canvas paintings from series of 100, 2010.

The discomfort with Dafen production implicit in Song Dong's stance was shared by other Chinese contemporary artists—many of whom had probably done trade paintings in their youth or while students in the fine arts academies. These artists chose to see in Dafen village's contemporary condition no special artistic value or question at all, and made this clear by constructing their authorial distance from it, even as they agreed to exhibit there. Taiwan-trained, New York-based media and performance artist Augustine Tzen, who exhibited a five-channel video work entitled *Half-Face Society in Convection*, explained to me that he had no interest in even "walking through" Dafen village, since he himself had done trade paintings when he was a university art student in

Taipei in the 1960s. Tzen suggested that his role in the exhibition was to show Dafen painters what real art—that truly "comes from nothing" and from the artist himself—would look like.²⁸

Such strategies for avoiding Dafen production were sometimes as tortuous as the attempts to directly engage with it. In the *Convection* exhibition, such engagements included a number of works by conceptual artists who had conducted projects in Dafen village and had made the "creativity" of Dafen painters an explicit and integral component of the work. The exhibition of these works in Dafen village—one important site of their production and, in some cases, of a stated creative collaboration—provoked strong reactions from some of the Dafen painters who participated in them. Viewing them finally as finished works of conceptual art, the Dafen viewers were troubled, delighted, confused, proud, or, in some instances, completely uninterested. In each case, renewed interactions with these works and between Dafen and visiting artists instigated still more intricate questions of authorship.



Figure 21. Matthias Meinharter and Nikolaus Gansterer, *Chinese Whispers*, ten oil on canvas paintings, 2008, as installed at Dafen Art Museum. Figure 22. Gu Feng, *Untitled*, three photographs and one oil on board sketch, as installed at Dafen Art Museum, 2010.

²⁸ Augustine Tzen, interview with author, 27 and 29 MAY 2009.

Vienna-based conceptual artists Matthias Meinharter and Nikolaus Gansterer showed a series of ten paintings, entitled *Chinese Whispers*, painted in 2008 by nine Dafen painters (figure 21). The series began with a still image from the film *Frida* of Selma Hayek as Frida Kahlo posing as though at work before a self-portrait, which Meinharter and Gansterer had had painted by Dafen painter Xiang Fang. Meinharter and Gansterer then mimicked the movie still by photographing Xiang Fang at work on the Frida painting, and then gave this photograph to another Dafen painter to paint, whom they then photographed to give the picture to another painter, and so on and so forth, thereby executing the Western children's game sometimes called "Chinese Whispers" (though more often is less exotically called "telephone," "telegram," or "gossip"). In the gallery downstairs, Dafen artist Gu Feng, boss of Non-Formula Art as well as a Vice-Chairman of the Dafen Artist's Association, exhibited a series of works that seemed to invert Meinharter and Gansterer's "game." Gu exhibited four interrelated images: a small photograph of painters posed as though at work inside his firm's workshop; a small painted sketch of this photograph; a larger print of another photograph of painters posed inside the same workshop; and finally, an even larger photograph of Gu himself at work on a still larger painting of this second photograph (figure 22). In this final photograph, Gu is standing before yet another one-to-one print of the photograph-being-painted, making it appear as though he is standing inside the photographed space of his own workshop, and as though he were one of his firms' painter-workers and not its artist-boss. Whereas the photographs-of-painters-at-work-painting-other-painters-at-work in Meinharter-Gansterer's game were translated into *paintings*, Gu Feng exhibited a series of photographic depictions of painters-at-work in which the ultimate painting-to-be-materialized-by-Gu-himself *never* appears. More endless than the repetitiveness of labor revealed in contemporary art, is the dizzying game of artists turning

the contextual tables on each other.²⁹ In this instance, however, for Meinharter-Gansterer and Gu to engage as "equals," it is notable that Meinharter-Gansterer had to *commission* paintings while Gu had to avoid exhibiting one.

Christian Jankowski's *China Painters*, discussed in Chapter Five, was also shown at this exhibition in an unexpected articulation of its initial proposition. In 2007, recall that Jankowski had toured and photographed the construction site of the Dafen Museum of Art and had asked Dafen painters to paint an imagined vision of their own painting hanging on an unfinished museum wall. By exhibiting the finished paintings in the now-finished Dafen Museum, the idealistic proposition of the work was realized: the museum has been built and the painters's "paintings" are on its walls. Looking at the Jankowski-labeled and Jankowski-designed work, painter after painter described to me their paintings hanging on the wall as a completion of their vision, ignoring entirely each paintings's "background" and conceptual framing, which they consistently dismissed as "merely the client's request." The framing device that Jankowski provided with his conceptualism was, in these moments, finally made moot; by Dafen's terms, Jankowski had indeed become the client-boss-art dealer (like the fictional Boss Jiang from the Dafen television series *Painted Fate*) who is merely a passing intermediary, a transitional phase in the Dafen painter's ascension to the art historical museum wall.

²⁹ Gu and Meinharter had met in 2008 when Meinharter was visiting Dafen village for this project. After the opening of the *Convection* exhibition, the two artists and I met to discuss the two projects, raising still further issues to be examined elsewhere.



Figure 23. Christian Jankowski, "Chair," from *China Painters*, oil on canvas, (painted by Yin Xunzhi), 2007, as installed at Maccarone Gallery. Figure 24. Yin Xunzhi, *Big Chair*, oil on canvas, 2 x 2.5 m., 2008.

In one case, this seemingly ironic interpretation of the situation was quite literal: Yin Xunzhì, the Dafen painter whose complicated engagement with Jankowski's project has been discussed in Chapter Five, had also, in the intervening years, painted his own series of appropriations of Jankowski's *China Painters*. One of these paintings can also be seen as an over-appropriation of the Jankowski framework: It is a painting based on the Yin-painted-Jankowski-original, itself based on the Michael Wolf photograph *Broken Chair* which Yin had presented to Jankowski as his own "original" (figure 23). In Yin's new "post-conceptualist" work, the chair at the center of the earlier appropriations has been fitted into the embrace of a man's hairy arms (perhaps Yin's himself, or the unseen appropriating author's), extending into Jankowski's conceptual "frame" of nested authorship (figure 24). In case the art historian were to doubt Yin's access to the postmodernist canon, affixed to the broken chair is a painted reference to Warhol's *Marilyn*, making it clear that Yin too, has connected the Jankowski-ordered composition to Warhol's *Electric Chair* series. Curator Teng Fei had Yin's painting exhibited in the highest position in the central stairwell

connecting the first and second floors of the *Convection* exhibition. Thus Yin's appropriation of Jankowski's conceptual labor was quite literally displayed as a transitional phase in Yin's career, between the exhibition's construct of the "local" and the "global."

The disjunctures between the two valances of appropriation—that which encompasses labor within an aesthetic or cultural frame of postmodern authorship, and that which does not seek that frame—is the space in which Dafen village's aspiring artists labor towards "true art." They do so, however, with and against the "contemporary art" that "free" "original" "cosmopolitan" and "international" artists also produce. Many Dafen artists are indeed less transnationally mobile and more formally skilled than other artists, but in my research I have found little to support the presumption that Dafen artists are special figures of alienation, mechanization or piracy. If alienation, repetitive labor, and borrowing from source images hold true for Dafen's painters, then I have found the same to be equally true of artists outside the putatively bizarre context of Dafen village.

In Dafen production, "true art" defined as art "made by oneself" is thwarted at two important junctures: first, by the procedures of trade painting which disaggregate and potentially distribute, among many different people: the image source (*gao*), the background painting, the painting, the correcting, the stretching, the framing, the signing, and the selling. Second, it is thwarted by the anonymity of Dafen painters whose historical identity is meaningless or rendered meaningless by the social hierarchy of artistic production. Since the value of individual authorship is putatively supposed to have been debunked by "the death of the author," it is, presumably, through the ethical application of the mantra "everybody is creative" that the professional hierarchies of art will be revealed as merely an art-world game of privilege.

Since 2004, the local and municipal party-state has been propagandizing the "self" of this "everybody" in one political form: that of the migrant worker striving to realize his or her individual

creativity. Conceptualist artists who came to Dafen village seeking to release Dafen painters' creativity thus only unknowingly followed in the exuberant journalistic portrayals fostered by this local propaganda agenda. The pretension of the appropriation of labor, as inaugurated by Duchamp's *Tu m'* for art history and then reworked by the party-state appropriation of Dafen creativity or in a work of Dafenian conceptual art, is that it depends on the *unknowing* acquiescence of the hired painter. Sometimes this acquiescence is purchased through economic power, sometimes it is secured through official means. The diabolical thing about this extravagant production of creative subjects is that creativity such as it is imagined that Dafen painters are lacking can never be recognized in the utopian terms that it is sought—once Dafen painters demonstrate their knowingness of "art," the question of the market returns.

In a capitalist context, in the simplest terms, the remarkable thing about artists is that they seem to labor for free—their payments are deferred and filtered by the "art world" of dealers, curators and academies, so that they can be "truly" creative. In contemporary China, where free labor is practically unimaginable, the remarkable thing about the painters of Dafen village is that they still desire to engage in this paradoxically "priceless" labor. For the producers of art, as for art historians, this situation is at once eminently simple and confoundingly complex. If a work of art is defined solely by being the result of free (unrewarded, uncommissioned, and therefore unconstrained) labor, what is or is not art can be easily determined. But at Dafen village, this "art" would include the "not-for-sale" apprentice's training exercise, the work rejected by a conceptualist client, original paintings made after government-sponsored sketching trips, the propaganda-event painting, and an artist's "own" painting done on speculation. Dafen painters remind us that creativity is a technology of the self that the market has long trained us to perform.

But if a work of art is determined by the social field of its production, then the professional, institutional, exhibitionary, and discursive apparatuses of art that screen the role of the market and

distance the artist from it are the very mechanisms that Dafen village conspicuously lacks. In that respect, the local and national party-state's support of artists' associations, art auctions, festivals, propaganda television, museum exhibitions and promotional events like the Shanghai Expo exhibition, can all be seen as part of a larger endeavor to create these social determinants of art in Dafen village. Yet no appropriating conceptualist artists have engaged with these local or state-supported apparatuses, whose proclamations of "originality" were too embarrassing even for the Expo Dafen's curators. Moreover, their existence has been conspicuously absent in the hundreds of foreign journalistic accounts of Dafen village. In "forgetting" these official apparatuses, contemporary artists and consumers who buy paintings from Dafen workshops in the guise of the postmodern readymade fail to acknowledge the social field of art production—precisely in order to imagine a direct encounter with anonymous free labor in the form of "appropriation." The irony, in other words, is circumscribed by its own naive machinations: On the one hand, appropriation is the critical apparatus postmodernists have created in order to challenge the notion of "free art"; on the other hand, Dafen reveals it as utterly beholden to that ideology.

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Personal Names

Cai Chusheng	蔡楚升
Chen Qiuzhi	陈求之
Chen Yifei	陈逸飞
Choi Fun Yeung	蔡奋杨
Ding Shaoguang (Ting Shao-kuang)	丁绍光
Fu Xiaolan	付晓兰
Guan Qiaochang (Kwan Hiu Chin)	關喬昌
Guan Zuolin (Kwan Jok Lam)	關作霖
Guan Lianchang (Ting Qua)	关联昌
Huang Jiang (Wong Kong)	黄江
Huang Tong	黄通
Huang Ye	黄野
Huang Tiecheng	黄铁城
Lam Qua	琳呱
Leung Mee-ping	梁美萍
Li, Christina	李绮敏
Li Tianning	李天宁
Li Yi	李义
Liang Yiwoo	梁以瑚
Liu Ding	刘鼎
Liu, Lisa	刘崢
Luo Zhijiang	罗志江
Meng Yan	孟岩
Mou Sen	牟森
Qin Feng	秦风
Qin Shaobin	秦晓斌
Ren Xiaofeng	任晓峰
Shen Shuren	沈树人
Tan Mingjian	潘明健
Wang Xuehong	王学红
Wu Ruiqiu	吴瑞球
Yang Lixin	杨丽新
Ye Xinle	叶新乐
Yin Xunzhi	尹训志
Yu Haibo	余海波
Zhang Huan	張洄
Zhang Chao	张越
Zhang Jianbin	张建斌
Zhao Xiaoyong	赵小勇
Zhong Shengchun	钟胜春
Zhou Hongmei	周红玫
Zhu Hong	朱红

Place, Company and Office Names

ArtLover Culture and Art Development Co. Ltd. *	集艺源文化艺术发展有限公司
Beijing East Village	北京东村
Buji Street Office	布吉街道办事处
Dafen Oil Painting Village Management Office	大芬油画村管理办公室
Dafen Artist's Association	大芬美术家协会
Dafen Art Industry Association	大芬美术产业协会
Guangzhou Wende Street	广州文德路
Hammers Gallery *	海默公司
Impressionist Gallery *	印象画廊
Longgang District	龙岗区
Lohu (Lowu) Commercial City*	罗湖商业城
Noah Oil Painting Reproduction & Art Product Co., Ltd. *	诺亚油画工业有限公司
One Way Street Original Oil Painting Studio	单行道原创油画室
Segal Fine Arts Co. *	西格尔艺术公司
Yihai Art Auction Co., Ltd. *	艺海艺术品拍卖有限公司
Sunrise Mountain Collector Art Gallery	太阳山收藏级画廊
Urbanus Architecture and Design *	都市实践
Xiamen Wushipu Oil Painting Village	厦门乌石浦油画村

*English name as provided by company or office

Terms

abstract painting	<i>chouxixiang hua</i> 抽象画
academic school	<i>xueyuan pai</i> 学院派
art worker	<i>yishu gongzuoyuan</i> 艺术工作人员
artist	<i>huajia</i> 画家
assembly line	<i>liushuixian</i> 流水线
beaches	<i>shatan</i> 沙滩
boss	<i>laoban</i> 老板
classical painting	<i>gudian hua</i> 古典画
contracted artist	<i>qianyue huajia</i> 签约画家
copying	<i>linmo</i> 临摹
cultural industry, culture industry	<i>wenhua chanye</i> 文化产业
to create	<i>chuangzuo</i> 创作, <i>chuangzao</i> 创造
creative industries	<i>chuangyi chanye</i> 创意产业
creativity	<i>chuangyi</i> 创意
decorative painting	<i>zhuangshi hua</i> 装饰画
export painting	<i>waixiaohua</i> 外销画
female migrant worker	<i>dagongmei</i> 打工妹
figurative painting	<i>renwu hua</i> 人物画
floral	<i>huadiao</i> 花卉
free artist	<i>ziyou huajia</i> 自由画家
Hong Kong scenes	<i>gangjing</i> 港景
household registration	<i>hukou</i> 户口
Impressionism	<i>yingxiang pai</i> 印象派
landscape painting	<i>fengjing hua</i> 风景画
life painting, <i>plein-air</i> painting, travel sketching	<i>xiesheng</i> 写生

limitless price
Mediterranean sea
Model Cultural (Art) Industry Site
National painting
oil painting
originality
original artist
original creation
original source image
order
palette knife junk boats
painter-apprentice
painter-dealer
painter-master
painter-worker
painting factory
painting gallery
painting studio
painting workshop
Paris streetscapes
put out
product sample
product not-for-sale
professional artist
to sketch, to compose
source image, copy, edition
still life
student
streetscapes
teacher
Thirteen Merchants
trade painting
to under-paint, to prime
urban village
waves
Western painting
without price
work

tianjia 天价
dizhong hai 地中海
Wenhua chanye (meishu) shifan jidi 文化产业 (美术)示范基地
guohua 国画
youbhua 油画
yuanchuang 原创
yuanchuang huajia 原创画家
chuangzuo 创作, *chuangzao* 创造
yuangao 原稿
dingdan 订单
daobi fan 刀笔帆
huatu 画徒
huashang 画商
huashi 画师
huagong 画工
huachang 画厂
hualang 画廊
huashi 画室
huafang 画坊
bali jiejing 巴黎街景
xiadan 下单
yangban 样板
feimaipin 非卖品
zhiye huajia 职业画家
qigao 起稿
gao 稿
jingwu 静物
xuesheng 学生
jiejing 街景
laoshi 老师
Shisang hang 十三行
hanghua 行画
dadi 打底
cheng zhong cun 城中村
hailang 海浪
xihua 西画
wujia 无价
dagong 打工

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