



MY FATHER, JIZI

"My Mission is Not Yet Complete"

By Wang Chunchen



The skylight convergence

天光会聚

Ink and watercolor on paper

195x184cm, 2009



Boundless Land

苍莽胜地

Ink and watercolor on paper

184x145cm, 2009

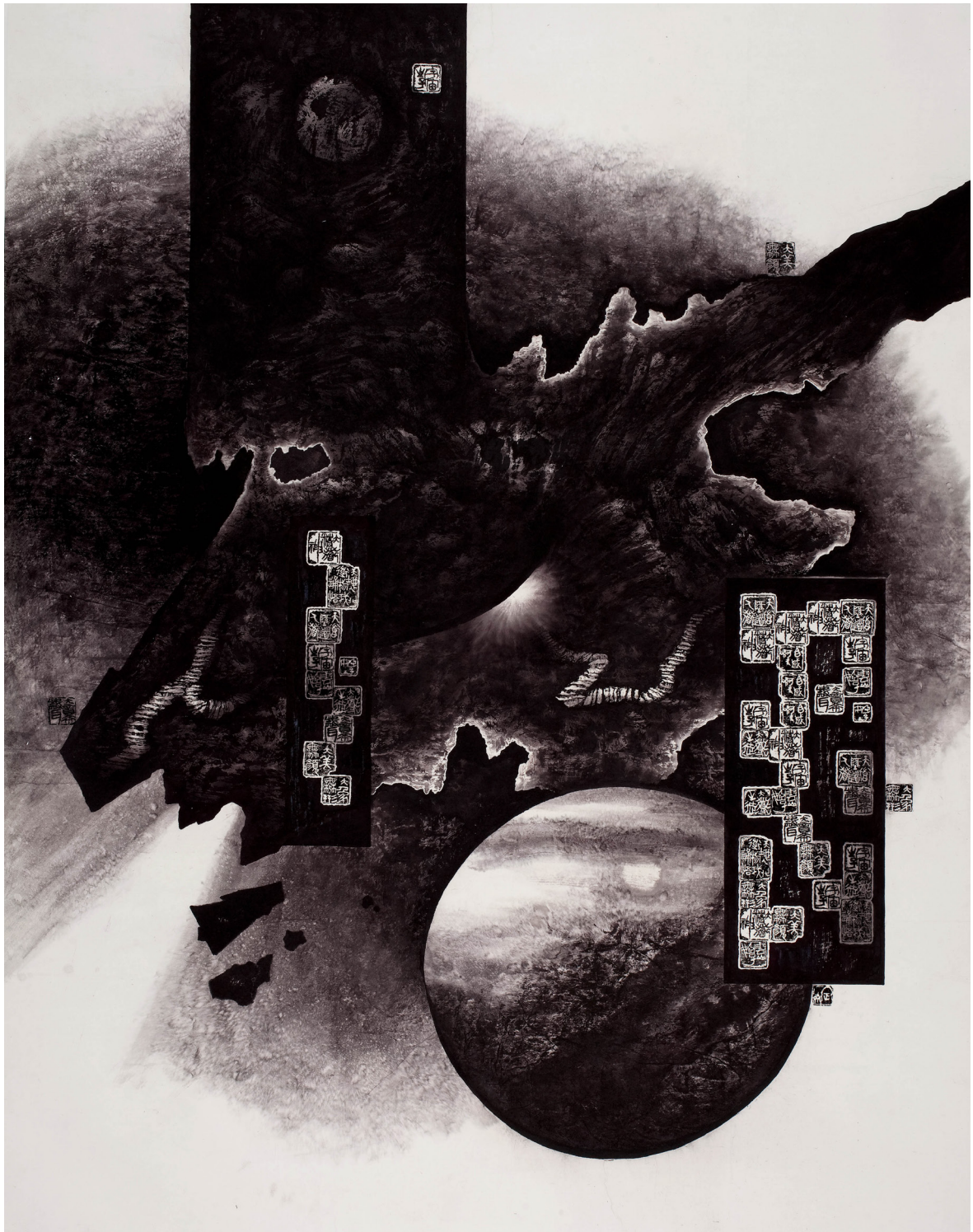


Beginning

有始者

Ink and watercolor on paper

185x145cm, 2011



Future Channel

未来通道

Ink and watercolor on paper

184x145cm, 2010



MY FATHER, JIZI

“My Mission is Not Yet Complete”

By Wang Chunchen

I wrote this essay over the course of a number of days. My father was admitted to Chaoyang Hospital on June 26, and I began writing on the morning of June 29. I continued writing on the airplane on July 5. I wrote at the Yanda Hospital on July 6 and 7, and my father passed away on July 8. I continued writing on July 12 in Xuanhua and on July 19 in Beijing. I wrote in Beijing on July 29, 30, and 31 and on August 1. I wrote this essay at different times, in different places, and in different frames of mind, out of love for my father.

Father's Day had just passed when my father's long-term rheumatoid arthritis flared up again. He was admitted to Chaoyang Hospital to be examined, but they discovered cancer, which had already spread. It was like being hit with a bolt of lightning. On his sickbed, my father said, "There are still so many things I have not done; my mission is not yet complete." I knew that he was talking about his art. In the days after he was admitted to the hospital, scenes of my time with my father floated before my eyes. These memories showed my sadness, and I felt a twinge in my chest.

June 26 was the day that the Minsheng Art Museum opened in Beijing. While my family and I attended my father's sickbed, his Boundless Universe was shown at the exhibition "The Civil Power." In recent years, people have seen and discussed his work, but he had painted for decades, exploring his own paintings and constructing his own artistic ideas and threads. His entire life is actually a cause for reflection. The words "civil power," "father," and "mission" struck me in waves, showing me how important art was to him and how he came to privately explore art.



Infinite Cosmos
天地无垠

Ink and watercolor
on paper

124x248cm, 2009

A Life

My father was born on March 3, 1941. In the Chinese calendar, this is the sixth day of the second lunar month in the eighteenth year of the sexigenary cycle, the year of the Snake. When he was a child he enjoyed painting and reading. When his father, Ji Chongli, was approaching death in 1957, he left his final words on a small piece of paper: "Respect your mother and care for your brother. Do not leave school and study hard." At that time, he was in his second year of middle school, and he dreamed of studying art or literature at university, but he had to leave school before high school because of his social and family background. One of my father's biggest regrets was that he did not continue studying, so he always encouraged his children to study. Learning was the only thing that can be relied upon. Even if you were not permitted to study at school, it was important not to waste time. He left school after middle school, but he studied on his own. He continued to study art, going to painting exhibitions at the Palace Museum. He studied drawing at the cultural center and sketched in areas around Xuanhua. As long as I can remember, my father's painting has never stopped painting.

My father's life could be described as the evolution of a youth who was not permitted to go to school, to a young man who had to make a living, to a middle-aged man who devoted himself to originality, to a "young" old artist continuing to create. In the late 1950s, he and his friend He Zhongyi did odd jobs, but they also learned painting. They heard that it was easy to find work in Baotou, so they went together. When they arrived, they only wanted locals for art jobs, but he heard that Baotou Electrical College was accepting new students. After five years of middle school and three years of high school, he registered for school. The backyard furnace movement at that time needed a lot of professionals and technicians, so the college was admitting additional students. After my father and his friend began their course, they discovered that they did not like and had trouble learning mechanical engineering, so they left the school and returned to Xuanhua, where they continued to work odd jobs and paint in the evening.

In 1960, people were permitted to choose their own livelihoods because of the natural disasters that had befallen China. My father learned to paint portraits, and he and He Zhongyi traveled together painting portraits in the streets. He once went to Taiyuan, but didn't make much money. When he got to Beijing to change trains back to Xuanhua, he only had 1 RMB to his name. My father had his friend wait in the train station, while he used that 1 RMB to find his sister who lived in Liangxiang. Once he entered the house, he asked his sister what she had to eat and asked her to make some. His sister made a bowl of noodles, then an-



other; he ate three bowls. Taking 10 RMB, he returned to Beijing station, where He Zhongyi was hungry and squatting in a corner. They spent 2 RMB getting something to eat, then spent 6 RMB on two tickets back to Xuanhua. Another time, they went to Tangshan to paint calligraphy and painting, and write letters for others. Spring Festival was fast approaching, and they had no money to their names. At the train station, they sold the clothing on their backs for 10 RMB, using 8 RMB to buy train tickets back to Xuanhua and leaving 2 RMB for food. By 1963, the social system had tightened once again, and they could no longer be traveling artisans; they could only go back to working odd jobs in their hometown as porters, blacksmiths, carpenters, and oil workers.

Because of his strong desire to explore and his love for art, my father never abandoned learning or painting despite the difficult circumstances of his life. After work or when they had nothing to do, other people would play cards, the most popular diversion of the time, but my father did not. He used his free time to paint or discuss painting and the state of society with friends who visited.

Life at that time was very difficult but simple; non-staple foods had to be bought with coupons every month, and only about 100 grams of meat was provided per resident per month. Vegetables also had to be bought with coupons; particularly when people were trying to buy sweet potatoes and peanuts for Spring Festival, there would be people as far as the eye could see in long, long lines. Material desires trumped all other needs and desires. When the Cultural Revolution was destroying the old world and rooting out the weeds that threatened socialism, education was not a focus; the universities did not accept new students, and young people were sent down to the countryside. In essence, learning did not exist, and society was permeated with the sense that this was the end of an age. There wasn't enough to eat, people patched the patches on their clothing, and they packed sev-



eral generations into small homes. If you talked, you needed to stand away from the door and speak quietly. There was only a small trickle of hearsay about the outside world, which could only be passed by word of mouth among close friends. If you listened to the radio, you might be suspected of having illicit connections to a foreign country or listening to an enemy station. If you wrote a letter, you couldn't discuss the state of the nation, because it wasn't clear if that letter would be read before it reached its recipient. You didn't think too much about what you wore; you wore clothing in cool tones, usually blue or black, in a style that was somewhat Siberian. It wasn't worth discussing ideas at this time, because if they weren't considered feudalist, capitalist, or revisionist, most ideas were considered a weed harmful to socialism. Only the Little Red Book and the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin were seen (even if you didn't read these books, you still needed to pretend you did). That was what life was like, and so in this environment, my father cautiously avoided social conflicts and he hastily distanced himself from those political struggles. He calmly immersed himself in his explorations of painting. In an independent and personal way, he distanced himself from ultra-leftist absurdity, finding real meaning for his life in anonymity. My father stood apart from the confusion of society; he knew that his life needed the support of art, and art became his greatest sustenance. His art came to represent the meaning of his life. When he came to Beijing in 2000, he was already 60 years old. Usually, artists retire to their hometowns at that age, but my father did not. He resolved to come to Beijing with my mother. He first painted in their apartment in Haidian District, then they moved to Shangyuan. In 2006, he moved to the Dongyishi neighborhood in Guanzhuang. In Beijing, my father hoped to explore resonance and turbulence within a larger cultural field.

Xuanhua

Xuanhua is an ancient city with a long history. Fields crisscrossed with footpaths lie outside the city, but the city center is crowded and very few of the old buildings remain. A portion of the broken city wall was rebuilt, but it no longer retains its ancient simplicity. According to legend, the loess hills to the south of Xuanhua were where the mythic Yellow and Flame Emperors struggled for power (now called Zhulu County, because "zhulu" means "striving for power"). It was also called Shanggu Prefecture, one of the 36 prefectures of the Qin period. In the Han and Tang dynasties, it was the key to the border. In the Ming system, the town was a seat of government and a garrison that served to protect the capital. At the end of the Ming dynasty, Li Zicheng entered the capital through this area. During the Republican period, Xuanhua was one of the three cities of Chaha'er Province. At the battle of New Bao'an in 1948, Fu Zuoyi attempted to defend Beijing from this point. Kangxi wrote an inscription about Xuanhua, calling it "the screen for the sacred capital." As a garrison for the northern frontier and a barrier against forces moving south, if Xuanhua and Zhangjiakou fell to the enemy, the capital could not be protected. This ancient city was a strategic point, the site of numerous wars, often traversed by men and horses. In the early 1950s, Zhangjiakou and Xuanhua were merged into Hebei.



At the turn of the twentieth century, the Liuchuan Academy was established, inaugurating the Republican education system. During the Cultural Revolution, a group of students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts were sent to Xuanhua Army Group 4626 for manual labor. They spent several years planting rice as part of the student link-up. There, my father met Peng Peiquan and Li Jinye from the Chinese Painting Department. When Li Jinye left Xuanhua, he gave my father an ink painting of a panda. Students in the Art History and Theory Department such as Wu Hung and Liu Xiaochun also worked here. Hebei Normal University moved out of Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, before moving to Shijiazhuang in the

1980s. Hebei Geo University also moved to Shijiazhuang in the 1980s. Today, there are two military academies in Xuanhua, unrelated to ordinary education in the area. During the Republican period, Xuanhua had a teachers' college that trained many talented people. In the 1990s, it was combined with Zhangbei Teacher's College and Chaigoubao Teacher's College and renamed "Xuanhua Vocational College."

Xuanhua originally had 72 temples, which collapsed or were demolished from the late 1950s to the 1970s. Only the street names remain to remind people of these temples: Ninth Heaven Temple Street, Lü Ancestral Temple Street, Grand Heaven Temple Street, War God Temple Street, Horse King Temple Street, God of Wealth Temple Street, Horse Spirit Temple Street, Laozi Temple Street, Spirit Temple Street, Jade Emperor Temple Street, Temple Base Street, Confucius Temple Lane, Chongshan Temple Street, Tide Nunnery Street, and Wanzihui Street. Two years ago, Shi'en Temple was rebuilt on the foundations of the original temple hall. This piece of land was still available because it had previously been used by the sanitation department.

Xuanhua still has three city buildings: the South Gate, the Drum Tower, and the Bell Tower. During the backyard smelting campaigns of the 1950s, the people demolished the wall for the bricks and used them to build furnaces. When the furnaces were later taken apart, some of the bricks were used to build houses, but the majority were lost. If you passed through a vegetable plot on the east side of Wanzihui Street, where we lived, you reached the eastern city wall. I often climbed the wall, but by that time, there were no bricks, all that was left



Remains of the ancient city wall of Xuanhua

was a loess wall. (Now, there is a new brick wall. There is a space between the two ends that is now used as a vegetable market). The northwest corner of the old city wall is more or less intact because it is a restricted area for the Xuanhua Artillery Academy. That section of the city wall had been incorporated into the Academy's wall, which has not been moved, thereby preserving that part. In the late 1990s, the Beijing-Zhangjiakou Highway was built in Xuanhua, and in the distance, you can still see the most intact part of Xuanhua's old wall.

By the 1970s, the other sections of the wall had largely collapsed because they had not been reinforced with bricks. The left side of the south wall on the South Gate was rebuilt into a sports ground in the 1950s, with the wall used for the bleachers. When I was small, I climbed the buttresses on the city wall. It was seven or eight meters high and very dangerous, but we found handholds and footholds in the bricks, climbing step by step to the playground on the other side. The right side of the wall was also used as the exterior wall for the park when the artificial lake was being built in the People's Park in the 1950s.



In recent years, a lot of places in China have rebuilt their old city walls, and Xuanhua is no exception. They have begun to repair the city wall, but the city full of high-rise buildings contrasts with this stout wall, which now looks like a scar. Your sightlines are obstructed by skyscrapers of steel and concrete. The boundaries of the antique city have been lost. The city boundaries, distant mountains, birds, kitchen smoke, pedestrians, and reminders of history extolled in ancient poetry have been transformed into streets full of car horns, twinkling lights, and shop signs.

The Cultural Revolution

During the Cultural Revolution, different rebel factions wanted my father to join them in their battles in the streets, but he declined. He simply wanted to paint at home, and he found peace studying landscape paintings. At that time, the family lived in a single room, and the table he used for painting was supported by a corner of the room. Later, he bought an old altar table from a demolished temple to use for painting. This room was where the family lived, cooked, and bathed, which was a common living arrangement for ordinary people at that time. With the chaos in the streets, there were occasional home searches. My father was worried, and so he sawed off the animals and the cloud designs from the legs of the altar table. He threw the catalogs and art books he had bought since he began studying painting in the late 1950s into the stove. He even burned all of the exercises and finished artworks that he had made since he began learning.

He did this because he participated in a local art exhibition in Xuanhua in 1964, which was the first time he showed *Inspired by Meng Haoran: Passing an Old Friend's Village*. He had achieved some reputation as a young man named Wang Yunshan (my father's name at that time) who painted landscapes in the local art community, but some people published critical articles in the local papers about the painting, saying it was a restoration of feudalism. A reporter from *Zhangjiakou Daily* saw the criticism and was curious, making a special trip to Xuanhua to see my father because he wanted to see what kind of painting it was. My father was very cautious, and told the reporter that the painting had already been burned. After the reporter left, my father took the work out and burned it. When the Cultural Revolution came, he was afraid that their home would be reported for search and confiscation because of the landscapes he had painted, and so he burned them himself. Thus, there is nothing left of my father's early studies and artworks. It wasn't until 1997, when an old friend reminded him of the incident, that my father repainted the work from memory to commemorate the event.

During the Cultural Revolution, work units began painting murals with portraits of Mao Zedong, but there were very few people who could paint well. If you weren't very good, it was best not to try. In 1968, a relative recommended my father to the Red Flag Commune as a painter of portraits of Chairman Mao for Cultural Revolution marches. In the late fall chill, my father diligently painted through the cold. Because he had a foundation in portrait painting, his portrait of Mao was very vivid, and well-received by the local leaders. Because of this painting, they wanted to continue employing my father. As a result, he was sent to an oil group, where he began to take commissions and paint portraits of Chairman Mao for a

number of work units in Xuanhua. He earned rather a lot of money for the Commune, and so they named him a formal collective worker for the Commune. At that time, there were not enough oil painting supplies to meet demand, and they often could not be purchased. Therefore, my father went to the Tianjin Oil Painting Materials Factory to learn to make pigments, which he made on his own after he returned to Xuanhua.



In the early 1970s, the demand for paintings of Chairman Mao for work units decreased. In winter 1972, my father began experimenting with painting ink-effect works on glass at home. He first ground steel granules on glass. The sound was piercing, but the surface of the glass became coarser. After repeated experiments, he managed to achieve the effect of ink on paper

by painting on abraded glass. The glass need to be abraded, because he could not paint on smooth glass, as the ink and color would move, failing to provide the sense of layering and brushwork. My father went to Beijing and Tianjin to visit the arts and crafts export companies to see if his work could become an export product. In 1973, he also went to the autumn Guangzhou Export Commodities Fair. Because they couldn't find a way to package the fragile glass, the works couldn't be exported, but my father worked to sell them in the domestic market. For a time, they were a popular type of home decoration. Through my father's hard work, he had found a way to make a living from a somewhat specialized handicraft, so that he no longer had to earn money through hard manual labor like he had during the Cultural Revolution. (We still have a glass painting modeled after a work by Qian Songyan at home.) During that time, he continued to paint at home, working on xuan paper. In 1972, Zhangjiakou held the first art and photography exhibition since the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. My father's work, *Drawing Water Uphill*, was widely praised and was chosen to be published on the cover of *Hebei Wenyi* (Hebei Arts, Issue 2, 1973). In the 1970s and 1980s, my father was a relatively well-known painter in Zhangjiakou and Xuanhua. Most people in the Hebei artistic community had heard the name "Wang Yunshan."

My father also made seals, and he often told the story of Qi Baishi and the three hundred stone seals. At home, we had an old edition of Qi Baishi's Oral Autobiography. My father talked about Qi Baishi often, telling his inspirational story. My father's seals primarily employed forms from bronze inscriptions and San-style dishes. My father still liked poetry and literature and, prior to the Cultural Revolution, he had bought numerous collections of poetry featuring Xie Lingyun, Du Fu, and Li Bai, as well as Song poetry and ancient songs. After the Cultural Revolution, there were new editions of New Tang Poetry, Poems of Xin Qiji, Songs of Chu, and a few classic novels, such as the work of Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, and Romain Rolland. He really liked reading these books.

After the Lin Biao incident in the early 1970s, the social environment was more relaxed, and he and a carpenter friend of his, Li Yinqiao, invited a Rightist accountant from the Xuanhua South Pass Commune to our home to teach them English. His name was Xiang Xiang. He was a very scholarly southerner who had studied economics at Waseda University in Japan. (He was rehabilitated after the Gang of Four was arrested, and he went to teach English at the Xuanhua Iron and Steel Company Middle School.) He would come over every day after work to lead them in their studies. He taught them basic sentences, such as "What is this?" and "What is that?" but he also taught them the English for several political slogans. The two of them happily studied every day for a few months, experiencing the joy of learning another language.

At work, my father researched mercury-plated glass and printed soft indelible characters on vests, armbands, and banners. He also wanted to find solutions by reading chemistry books. When I was small, I always wondered why we had books such as Organic Chemistry and Inorganic Chemistry at home. In the late 1970s, Yu Fan borrowed Xieshan Yaofa (Necessary Techniques for Portraying Mountains) by Hokkai Takashima, translated by Fu Baoshi, and gave it to my father to read. My father saw the book as a treasure; he copied the entire text, as well as all of the illustrations, onto xuan paper. My father said that this book dissected ink landscapes, and after reading it, he was able to resolve the differences between actual landscapes and the craggy painting methods of classical model books.



Distant Suns

远空的玄日

Ink and watercolor on paper

184x145cm, 2010

Unchanging Studio and Determined Studio

In the early 1970s, the family moved to another courtyard on the same street and began living in a two-room apartment facing west. My father used the outer room for painting and called it "Unchanging Studio." He wanted to say that painting was not easy for him, but that he would persevere (not changing or giving up), and that he did not do other things in the studio (no business); by the 1990s, he better understood that painting was not easy and required even more persistence, especially after he had abandoned making a living through handicrafts. With my mother's support, he focused on his own exploratory work, so he changed the name of his studio to "Determined Studio," to show that he would follow his new artistic path. He remained unmoved by the trends in the local art community toward more market-oriented careers, perhaps in interior design. My father often said that, even though he had not gone to art school, he did not have a teacher, he never worked in the system, and he had no artistic background, he would not be satisfied with painting traditional paintings, or painting in another person's style. He knew that he wanted to make own art. Because he did not have advantages that other people had, particularly social standing, he relied only on himself and on his own innovation.

In 1973, my father's *Drawing Water Uphill* was published on the cover of *Hebei Huabao* (Hebei Pictorial), which attracted lot of attention in Hebei, but some people wrote anonymous letters complaining that the painter had class background issues. The publication called Red Flag Commune, where my father was working (the later Huangcheng Street office), to investigate. The manager at the time knew my father, and put the publishers at ease, saying, "His family was somewhat better off, but there are absolutely no issues with the man himself. His work is excellent, and he is one of our core workers." In the early 1980s, my father sent a scene of snow and ice on pines and cypresses (*Lofty and Pure*) to the Artists Association for National Art Exhibition consideration. The work was seen as Scar Art; the icicles on the trees were thought to resemble tears, lamenting socialism, so it was naturally rejected. The next year, he sent a painting for the National Art Exhibition; the package returned unopened, showing that it hadn't been considered.

The 1980s and the Dao of Ink Landscapes

The 1980s were the era of intellectual liberation and Reform and Opening. The campaigns against spiritual pollution and bourgeois liberalization took place in the middle of the decade, making the opening process somewhat rocky, but the environment was entirely new. People wanted to learn about new ideas and modern art, and idealism was in the air. Although my father was in Xuanhua, he subscribed to Meishu (Art), Jiangsu Huakan (Jiangsu Art Monthly), Meishu Sichao (The Trend of Art Thought), Zhongguo Meishubao (Fine Arts in China), and other pioneering art magazines of that time. He read every issue very carefully, underlining sentences that inspired him and even copying passages. After the Cultural Revolution ban was lifted on translations of novels and modern Western philosophy, he bought some of these books and read them too. He often discussed the changes in the art world with his friends, such as Yu Fan, who studied painting before moving on to modern Western philosophy. They often discussed the artistic questions related to these changing times. Yu Fan talked about what he had learned from his readings of philosophy, while my father shared his feelings about reading these artistic discussions. The two shared many opinions, but they also debated. My father often said that discussions among friends should flow like water, and sometimes I joined in their chats. My father said that everyone is equal in the eyes of learning; fathers and sons could be friends in discussion.

When Li Xiaoshan published his article "My Opinion in Contemporary Chinese Painting" in Jiangsu Huakan (Jiangsu Art Monthly) in 1985, he said that "Chinese painting has reached the end of its days." Like the stone cast into the pond that triggers thousands of ripples, the article sparked a major debate about Chinese painting, with supporting and opposing camps. It became the art world's next chance to discuss, argue, and debate on a national scale after the questions of formal beauty and abstract beauty had passed. My father deeply appreciated the issues raised in the article, inspiring deeper thinking about painting. He did not want to return to the past, copy someone else's style, or defend a particular mode. He had his own opinions about modern art experiments; he knew that, although he approved of the amazement that these modern experiments caused, his ink paintings could not imitate them. He began to consider his future path, and there was no obvious answer, but he was clear that he needed to begin from his own temperament, from his bold spirit, from his larger context; the more difficult the situation, the bolder the spirit of the work had to be. He believed this was an essential part of Chinese painting. He saw the grand structures of Song and Yuan painting as a frontier that, when combined with modern ideas, could still yield something new. Is it pure brush and ink? No. Is it composition? No. Is it the magnification of a style? Not entirely. Is it the refinement of stylistic vigor? Refinement and vigor are dia-

metrically opposed, so which is it? Can ink be used in Western painting? This didn't fit with his cultural tastes. What was the intrinsic quality of ink painting? What methods of presentation did the ancients fail to uncover? What was their cultural mood when they conceived and executed their paintings? The essence of the painting is not determined by technique; the essence of painting lies in the faithful expression of an idea. The rediscovery of this idea reflects the worldly perspective of people today; it is the realization of an expansive literati spirit. The literati spirit was a fresh idea widely discussed in the 1980s, even if it seems to have faded from memory today. Our present surroundings show that the literati spirit has been almost entirely lost. This spirit is an artistic spirit, full of human empathy and the spirit of the Great Dao. The essence of the universe's abundance is the spirit and expression of the Dao. This was an idea that was inspired by the broad search for cultural roots in the late 1980s. Therefore, the Dao has become a core idea; the Dao has countless interpretations, especially as an abstract philosophical concept. It has even been appropriated by science, as in "the Dao of physics." Beginning with this idea, my father began to consider another level of creation in ink painting, which allowed him to conceive the idea of the Dao of ink landscapes to explore his own ideas of painting and show how landscapes could become part of the Dao of ink and how he might develop a complete understanding of the Dao of ink. For him, the Dao of ink was not a mode of brushwork; it was a cultural philosophy.



Jizi in the 1980s

At this time, he discovered that ancient Chinese books, such as Laozi and Zhuangzi, could provide inspiration. Their inherent meaning could be understood in the context of modern knowledge about the universe and a grand spiritual air. Early in his life, he read Shi Tao's *Thoughts on Painting*, which contains the line: "One stroke is the base of many, the root of all things. The power was given by the gods, but hidden in man," and "Painting is the fundamental law for reconciling all things." These seem like aphorisms related to painting techniques, but when we read them today, the entire text seems to have implications from Chinese philosophy. If we understand them not on a philosophical level, we are cutting down the universal quality of Shi Tao's thinking and we are only left with a technical manual that entirely misses the point of these quotations. After much thought, my father wrote "On the Dao of Ink" in summer 1996 to describe his theory of painting. He felt that Chinese ink painting could be divided into extending tradition, regenerating, and pioneering. He also proposed the compositional methodology of "multi-dimensional perspective." He advocated "the transformation of heaven, earth, and man and the mutual understanding of the Dao, all things, and the self," particularly emphasizing "transformation," and not "oneness," in the hopes of directing an understanding of Eastern philosophy toward the essential questions of Chinese painting. He clearly knew that his own art had to chart a course from regenerating to pioneering. In the 1990s, my father understood and explained his own paintings as the progression from the mountains before your eyes to the mountains in your heart to the mountains in the Dao. In this way, he differentiated between different styles and ways of exploring art. After he came to Beijing, he made further practical strides in the connection and expression of these styles, in the hopes of arriving at a sincere confluence.

Beginning with *The Mustard Seed Garden of Painting* in the late 1950s, my father explored the profound meaning of the paintings in the Palace Museum. He liked the bold quality of northern Chinese painting, which had its own stylistic traits that gradually developed from ancient times to the 1970s. This is intellectually linked to the new landscape style in China that had developed since the 1950s, and he was influenced by the landscape painters of those years. However, he finally became dissatisfied with a brushwork-oriented style, because he always felt that he could never attain the effect that he desired. At that time, he liked the pure snow scenes in which "snow floats for ten thousand miles in the northern lands," so he began to experiment with painting techniques in this area. He adopted the "leaving the void" method from ancient Chinese snowscapes, but he lacked the ability to depict snow covering mountains and rivers, so he made decades of experiments with stylistic techniques (the 1970s to the present). He finally created a set of techniques for depicting the crags of snow and ice, which he called sloping, weaving, choppy, honey-combed, and skeletal strokes. Instead of alum, he placed ink, flower blue, and a mix of dark

colors directly on paper to depict the geographical textures of snow and the structures of rocks, creating an entire set of techniques for painting snowy landscapes. When my father showed at the China Art Expo in the 1990s, an editor from the Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House was very interested and wanted him to write a technical manual, but he thought that his ideas still needed time to mature, so he declined. In the last few years, he often said that he wanted to write it, but he never managed to find the time (one of the missions that he had not completed). In May of this year, when he was filmed for the China Education TV program "Artistic Paradise," he said that he planned to paint a scroll of a Tibetan snowscape (this wish was always flawed).



Star Secret

星云天机

Ink and watercolor
on paper

183.5x146cm, 2013



Jizi in the 1990s

The Pseudonym "Jizi"

After my father proposed the three types of painting in the early 1990s, he came to believe that snowy mountains were not pioneering. This determination was also due in part to the active impulse to artistic creation brought about by the new artistic ideas that flowed into China in the 1980s, even though any explorations he made on the edges (Xuanhua) of a cultural center (Beijing) would not be well-known, and some people may not even think that these marginal areas could have new art. My father did not have these misgivings; he was only considering what he wanted to do, wholeheartedly devoting himself to an exploration of his own art. This was not entirely a fantasy nor was it a whim. He saw the decades of work he had invested and the decades of faith he had held. After reading books and magazines and talking with Jun Da, he believed that he had the opportunity and the ability. Even if his name was unknown to most people, it was important that he did it. In the late 1980s, he even gave himself a pseudonym: "Jizi." Why? Because there were several painters named Wang Yunshan at that time, and they were all landscape painters. They were from Guangxi and Hong Kong, and there was another painter from Hebei with the same name. My father keenly realized that this was not helping his artistic efforts. Because they all had the same name, it was difficult to tell who was the one and only Wang Yunshan.

The name "Jizi" also had other meanings; there were several associations behind my father's pseudonym. First, the ancestors of all Chinese people, the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor, were supposedly surnamed Ji. The Chinese people are known as the "sons of the Flame Emperor and the Yellow Emperor," so the Chinese are the "sons of Ji" or "Jizi." Second, my father's original family name was Ji. It was simply that he changed his name to Wang after my grandmother remarried. He chose this name in honor of his ancestors, because the name also means "son of the Ji family." Third, the ancients often used the character "zi" to mean "sir" or "scholar," such as Confucius (Kongzi) and Zhuangzi, so the name can mean simply "Sir Ji" and indicate a man who enjoys learning. My father always had his own ideas, from the new name he gave his studio to the new name he gave himself to the names he gave each of his works. His independent mentality was borne of decades of lived struggle and independent thought.

Two or Three Things from the 1980s

There were several art events in the 1980s that had a significant impact on my father, serving key references for him. In the early 1980s, an exhibition of the work of Sichuan painter Chen Zizhuang was held in Beijing. People were amazed because he was a Chinese artist not known for socialist realism. He protected the freedom and innocence from traditional Chinese painting through a simple cultural mood, showing the brilliance of human qualities, which was worlds away from the grand, fake, and soulless works of the Cultural Revolution. This represented a nearly-forgotten cultural sentiment that arose in the intellectual liberation of the 1980s. My father saw his exhibition and bought the catalog, touched by the integrity of Chen's human art.

The second important event was an exhibition for Huang Qiuyuan. Many people saw Huang Qiuyuan as a shield against a mode of young art influenced by Western modernism, but more often, people discovered that he was a concrete manifestation of the tradition from which we had gradually departed. He was not influenced by the Cultural Revolution themes that were popular in painting at that time. He was simply a member of staff at a bank, but in his spare time, he freely engaged with landscape painting. He did not fear being seen as an anachronism, and because he was not part of the artistic system, he did not become enmeshed in the political turmoil; as a result, he managed to preserve the spiritual freedom of Chinese painting. Before 1949, Huang Qiuyuan had the chance to exhibit his paintings, but after 1949, he disappeared from the public eye because he distanced himself from the politics of the art world. Before his death in 1975, he diligently researched the various schools of ancient painting, grasping secrets of the medium known only to true experts. He blended the best of paintings from a range of historical eras into his own work, presenting the richness of China's painted treasures. It is said that Li Keran saw the exhibition and was amazed, wanting to trade one of his works for one of Huang Qiuyuan's, because he saw something that his work didn't have. Xue Yongnian from the Central Academy of Fine Arts also wrote a moving essay on the exhibition because Huang Qiuyuan's son had originally taken his late father's work to Xue for an appraisal, but Xue declined because he thought they were part of a trick by itinerant artisans. It was only after the exhibition opening caused a sensation that he made the trip to the National Art Museum of China to see the works. Upon viewing the show, he was overcome with regret at seeing how good the paintings were. This also shows that it was not easy for an unknown painter to be recognized, noticed, and appreciated. Even the studious Xue Yongnian overlooked an unofficial painter in the beginning. Evidently, many unknown artists were overlooked or never truly seen because they were not part of the system. (Xue's recounting of this whole story also reminds us not

to overlook true artists.)

My father saw these two exhibitions. He bought the catalogs and read them carefully. When he spoke of these shows with his friends, they discussed this in depth. He liked their art, but he also truly appreciated that they lived among the people, and braved isolation for their art. Wasn't this precisely what he was experiencing?

At that time, Liu Kuo-sung's work was introduced to China, and my father saw the exhibition of his work in Beijing. He read a book of interviews with Liu Kuo-sung very closely. My father saw the possibilities of modern Chinese ink, but he did not entirely approve of the rubbing techniques Liu used, because he felt that this was not the root of painting. In the 1980s, Jia Youfu's solo exhibition was also presented at the National Art Museum of China. My father really admired the exhibition, believing that Jia had created his own school by magnifying Gong Xian's irregular painting technique, without losing the thread of artistic innovation.

My father liked works that were bold and grand; he wasn't really interested in gloomy, dispirited things, believing that they did not represent the great realms and great structures of Chinese painting. My father often said that small details can be interesting, but they can cause you to lose sight of true painting. There are three grades of painting: high, medium, and low, and it's all about which you choose.

In February 1989, my father went to see "China/Avant-Garde" at the National Art Museum of China, and he profoundly appreciated the conflicts in Chinese art and the enormity of the change. He approved of the pursuit of artistic change and that they struck against conservatism and rigidity. The exhibition once again pushed my father to think deeply about his own path, because his art came from the Chinese painting tradition. Li Xiaoshan's declaration that "Chinese painting has reached the end of its days" confused a lot of painters, but Li's views on the abuses of painting were similar to my father's own; the Chinese painting world at that time was certainly not without its problems. If a painter couldn't learn from experience and only studied the superficial qualities of painting, then he had missed the point and didn't understand true art. One cannot pursue true art through a hobby, and my father particularly objected to amusing ink painting games, because he thought they were performances, not paintings. What is true Chinese painting? This is a big question, which has dominated the twentieth century and is still being discussed by Chinese artists today. Naturally, my father's life was devoted to exploring his own art, but when he found a form that he believed to be his own, it was an art that belonged to China. The answer to this question came from the creativity of his practice, instead of some theoretical foundation. When my father talked about art with his close friend Yu Fan, they had two different start-

ing points. One talked about art through a conscious intuition and an understanding of the body and mind, while the other explained art through logical, conceptual theories, and so they clashed with and complemented one another.

In 1996, my father participated in the China Art Expo. At the time, the Expo was a big event, because a lot of artists didn't have many chances to show their work. The Expo provided a platform. My father hoped to have other people see his work, because he knew that people outside the art system were seldom included in the National Art Exhibition or other shows. 1996 was the first time that my father's Dao of ink landscapes were exhibited in Beijing, and they were very different from more traditional paintings. Several people came to see them, and some people said that his work represented the changing times. A Japanese lady came to see the show and, pointing to the painting, she wrote the characters for "moving" on a piece of paper. Several professors from the Central Academy of Fine Arts attended that Expo. Shao Dazhen also visited my father's booth and had his picture taken. At that time, my father and I lived in Zuojiazhuang, which I remember vividly. Despite this, my father knew that this was just the beginning; he had not even come close to the end of his explorations, because finding something new was far from easy and becoming recognized was far from easy. Both would require time.



*Corn Crystals of
the Cosmos*

清明四海天

Ink and watercolor
on paper

145x185cm, 2011

Father and I

When I was young, I imitated my father in everything he did. For example, when he carved a seal, I would go find a stone and copy the stamp that my father had already drawn on paper. I would make a rubbing on the seal, then use a knife to carve it. When I was small, I carved several seals, and I made a small album of seal impressions on xuan paper. My father never actually taught me to paint; it was simply that, as I grew up, I copied whatever my father did. One time, he borrowed a picture of a rooster and brought it home. I saw it and imitated it. My father was very surprised. He told me that it was good and saved my painting, though I have no idea where it is now. When I was in primary school, I drew a children's story. "When I Grow Up I Still Want to Learn from Lei Feng" was published in Zhangjiakou Daily. This was a project that my father directed. There was a carving knife at home, and I watched my father make woodcuts. I imitated his carving using a piece of plywood I found.

For a time, my father painted works on the theme of "learning from Daqing in industry" for the factory's propaganda team, so there were oil paints at home. I was closely reading The Shanghai Workers Catalog and copied a painting of a factory floor from the book in oils. Although it was incomplete, it was something I tried in primary school, though I have no idea where it is now. My father knew I liked to paint, but he just let me paint what I wanted, and he never forced me to paint anything specific. It was only when I reached middle school that he clearly told me not to study painting. He said that if I wanted to study painting, I could, but only if I attended the Central Academy of Fine Arts and found a professional art job. Otherwise, he said that I wouldn't make enough to make ends meet. However, the Central Academy of Fine Arts was very difficult to get into, because only a few people nationwide were accepted into every major. He wanted me study a major that would lead to a job, and it was a good thing that I liked learning English. I was curious about how people learned foreign languages, so I tried to learn English with the TV program Learn With Me. In the courtyard where we lived, one of the families had a small black and white television, and every evening at 6:30, I would learn with that television. Early in middle school, the local bookstore received some reprinted English textbooks, with stories and grammar, but because they were reprints of originals, there was not a word of Chinese in the books. I bought them, and even when I didn't understand, I persisted, looking up the words and scribbling them down. Perhaps my fascination with learning English was related to my father's earlier forays into the language. My father later said that he had forgotten the few questions he had managed to learn.

In middle school, I remembered my father's advice; I did my homework and did not en-

tain notions of applying for an art major, but I did do the drawing and lettering on the blackboard for the classroom once a week. During calisthenics, the other students would go to the playground to do their exercises, but I would stand on a bench and draw on the blackboard. I did this until I graduated high school. When I arrived at university and no longer had the pressure of college entrance exams, my interest in art, aesthetics, and philosophy surged. I took aesthetics and modern art appreciation courses as electives, and I even skipped English class to attend some of the lectures.

Back then, I spent a lot of time with some classmates from the Philosophy Department. I had a classmate who researched the dialectics of nature; he gave me his books when he saw that I was interested. I later heard that he left to support the border areas. I also participated in the school literary organization, the Dawn Bell Society, writing an introduction to the American poet Allen Ginsberg. After graduation, I wanted to pursue my master's degree under Li Zehou. I wrote him a long letter, but he replied saying that he wasn't accepting new students. I didn't take any further exams, and I was assigned to Xuanhua's excavator factory as a translator. I didn't understand the mechanical procedures and terms from the factory and I wasn't really interested in the work, but I forced myself to do it. Every week I had to go to Beijing to pick up or drop off American experts at the airport. I bought books at the bookstore when I could, and sometimes I went to a museum to see an exhibition. Like Jia Youfu's solo exhibition earlier that year, I went with my father to see the solo show for Li Bo'an in 1998. As we were viewing the show, my father shared his opinions and analyses. In the years I was working in Xuanhua, I would participate in conversations with my father and his friends after I returned home from work. They talked about all kinds of things, ranging from an article to a major event. I wasn't really interested in the job I was assigned after college, so I transferred. I taught at a university, then I left to work in Beijing, but it never occurred to me to do something related to art. My father was very worried that I was constantly switching jobs. He knew that I loved to read and that I didn't really understand much else. He knew that I wasn't suited to wandering in society, but he also didn't know what I wanted to do, which worried him.

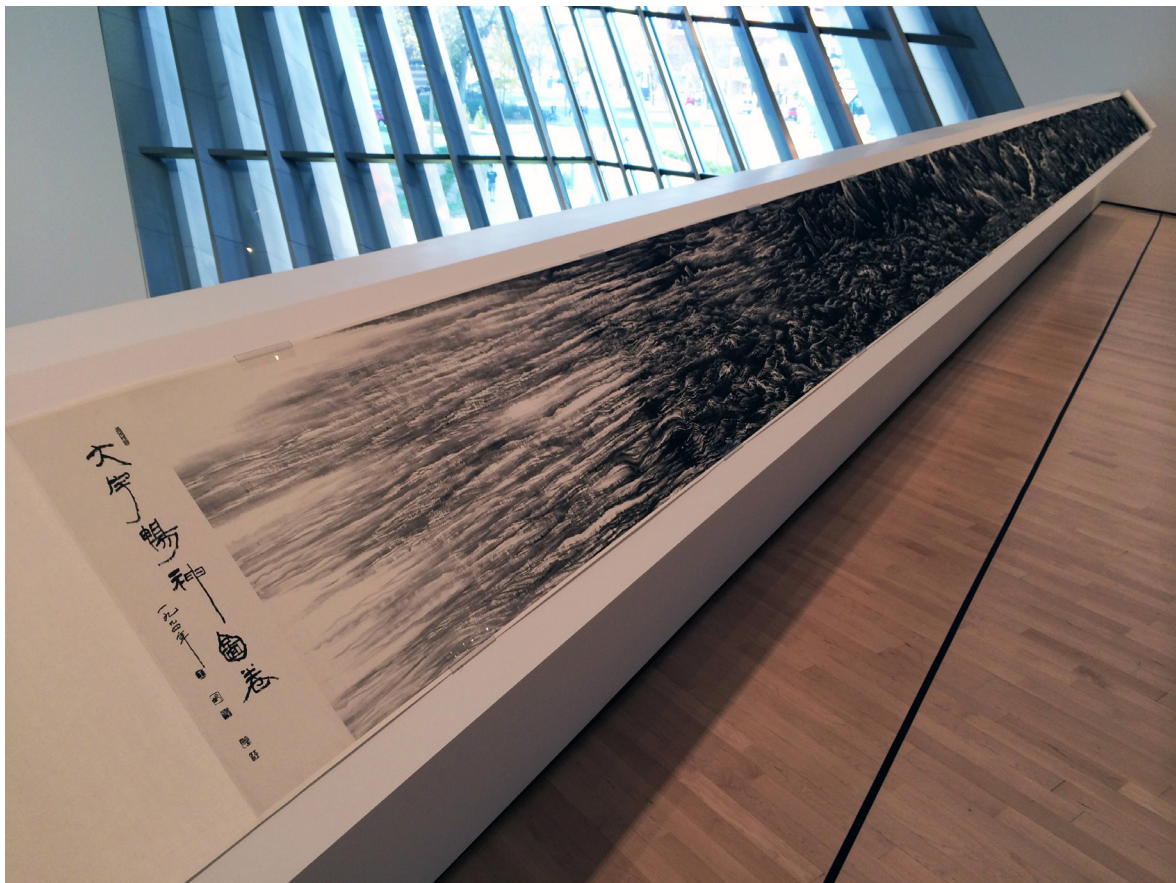
Spirit Flowing in the Vast Universe

As I remember, there were many periods to my father's work. I have my impressions, but I was also present. When I was first learning to paint, I was a child sitting on a bench. When I was in primary school, I watched my father paint landscapes in ink and develop his glass paintings with ink-like effects. I even ground some of the granules into the glass myself. The sound was awful, but after the grinding was over, I got to play around with it. When my father was experimenting with snowy landscapes, he tried a range of methods, including alum. I saw his way of presenting snow gradually take shape. Later, when my father no longer used alum, he applied a combination of various techniques, and even explained the methods behind these experiments. Since he proposed the Dao of ink landscapes, my father, his friends, and I have talked about the fact that his early Dao of ink works are entirely different from his more recent ones. However, looking back on it now, the gradual evolution in the intervening period is very clear, presenting a slow course of change.

In 1994, he painted his 35-meter *Spirit Flowing in the Vast Universe* in Tangshan. He put together three office desks and used them as a temporary painting table; I watched him paint the piece, seemingly in one fluid motion. Because the painting was too long, we had to borrow a reading room at the university library. We waited until the library was closed and no one was around, then we spread the work out on the floor and stood on the tables to see the entirety of the painting. I felt the atmosphere of the ink covering the paper and the undulating rhythm of the lines. I was moved, and my father understood the weight and meaning of this painting. I also knew that we weren't able to exhibit the work, but I felt that this was a foundation from which my father could advance. He even planned a new, even longer scroll to express some of his new ideas. Because *Spirit Flowing in the Vast Universe* was too long, there was no way to show it to people. In particular, before it was mounted, unrolling the painting and rolling it back up again took immense physical effort. My father always felt that the painting's beginning and end lacked a header and a footer, so he added a total of five meters of painting to the beginning and end in 2006 and 2009, making *Spirit Flowing in the Vast Universe* a total of 40 meters.

How to show people such a long painting became an interesting question. Initially, we had to take photographs, develop them, then glue them together into an overlapping image that was more than one meter in length. Even then, you didn't really appreciate how big the original was. In the late 1990s, digitally-printed advertisements were introduced, and I had a print shop make 6 prints that were 6 or 7 meters long. They were much larger than the photographs, but many of the details and the aura of the ink were not visible. The ad-

vantage was that the prints gave an impression of the larger scroll, and I showed it to some classmates in 2006. After we had access to a gigapixel scanner in 2012, I made a full scan, creating a huge 10 terabyte file. This was the only way to create a good image of the work that fully captured the details and effects of the original. We printed it on a scroll that was 19 meters long, which allowed us to conveniently show it to people and give us the opportunity to exhibit the original. In this way, we could show the work to both Chinese and foreign experts without any loss of fidelity or detail. When people learned of this print, they became even more excited about seeing the original. However, the appropriate opportunity and venue have not yet presented themselves. I'm also excited to see the original work exhibited, because I want to have the chance to fully and completely examine all the details of this massive painting.



Spirit Flowing in the Vast Universe

The No. 2 Factory and the Central Academy of Fine Arts

In the 1990s, my father continued creating and exploring at his home in Xuanhua. In autumn 1998, my friend from Xuanhua, Meng Xianglong, was pursuing advanced studies in oil painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. My father and I went to see him at the studio he rented in Jiuxianqiao. At the time, a private individual had built a two-story concrete building on the old site of the Daqing Temple; it was surrounded by garbage piles and grave sites. The Fourth Ring Road had not yet been built. The place was close to Wanhong West Street, the site of CAFA's transitional location in the No. 2 Factory, so Meng Xianglong and a few other advanced students and master's students rented there. The area became an artist's village; no one knew about the 798 yet, as there were only a few artists there at the time, including a few sculpture professors from the academy who had rented some of the old factory spaces. After we visited his studio, Xianglong took us to the site to have a look around, and when we were eating dinner, he asked me, "Chunchen, why haven't you come to CAFA to study?" "Who, me?" I had never considered studying at CAFA. I had just arrived in Beijing to work at a web company for an entrepreneurial society. I hadn't given the slightest thought to studying at the Academy, and I had long ago put aside the whole idea of studying art. I said that I couldn't paint, so what was I supposed to study? Xianglong continued, saying that I'd loved art since I was young; he said that my language skills were good, and that I had stayed in touch with art, so I could study art history or theory. Because he had already been studying at CAFA for a year, he knew what was happening. When I heard this, I said that I could do theory. He told me that the Academy had a teaching assistants' course in theory. I was interested, and I had him ask around about the course for me. Xianglong found a brochure for the teaching assistants' program in contemporary art; I registered and was accepted. I was pleasantly surprised, and if I'm being honest, I was fulfilling my dream of studying at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. I would come to know that magical institution. I attended the course purely to experience CAFA. I had no intention of getting a degree, as I was still working at that company.

After the term began, I attended classes for the contemporary art teaching assistants' program, led by Zhang Gan. I had 20 classmates; when we first gathered for class and everyone asked where people were from and what they had previously done, pretty much everyone had been painting or teaching, or their previous institution had been engaged in art. I was the only one. I said I studied English, and people looked at me strangely. They thought that the guy studying foreign languages had just come along for fun, and was certainly not going to be involved in art.

At the end of 1999, Zhang Gan resigned and went to Artrade, which was surprising news in the art community, because CAFA had never had anyone quit. Most people simply transferred. With the head of the program gone, Ren Luoshi, then head of the Art History and Theory Department, asked Yi Ying to take over. When I came to the Academy, I, like Meng Xianglong, rented a room in that concrete building near Daqing Temple. In the first term of the program, I attended class often, but by the second term, I was attending less because I had so much else to do. One time, when we had a meal together, Professor Yi had forgotten that I was part of the program. Students in the teaching assistants' program could apply for a master's degree. All you had to do was pass an English test and write a thesis, but Professor Yi had to be your adviser. After I passed my English exam and I could apply for the degree, I sought out Professor Yi. It was 2001. His office was a very narrow room filled with books and magazines in the main building of the No. 2 Factory. Professor Yi sat in front of the only desk that could fit in the space. When he heard why I had come, he asked me what I wanted to write about. I had no idea. I had previously Googled the word art, and the first thing that popped up was Danto's essay "What is Art?" I read it and found it very interesting, so I tried to find out who this Danto was. I discovered that he had published numerous books, and he was a retired Columbia University professor, a philosopher, and a columnist for *The Nation*. I went to the National Library to check, and they had four of his books. In the reading room for the Art History and Theory Department, I found yet another: *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. (The Chinese edition of the book published by the Jiangsu People's Publishing House had not yet come out.) I thought that I might want to write about this, and so I talked to Professor Yi. He told me that Danto was first a philosopher. It was very complicated, but his work was not strictly art theory. When he saw that I wanted to write on Danto, he said, "Well, let's do this. Study with me for another two years, then you can write about him." I agreed. I checked Amazon for his books, and I entrusted a friend of mine in the United States to buy them and send them to me. I participated in Professor Yi's graduate discussion course, and from 2001 to early 2003, I came to class, organized my reading notes about Danto, and prepared to write.

2000

In 2000, my father came to Beijing and lived in a house that my sister had rented in Shangdi in Haidian District. There were two bedrooms. My father and mother lived in the south-facing room, which my father also used as a studio. My sister lived in the north-facing room. When I had finished at the Academy, I no longer had to live in Jiuxianqiao, and in the fall, I moved to live with my parents. I slept in the living room, and put away the sofa bed in the morning. At the time, I was teaching English at Tsinghua University, and the Fifth Ring Road didn't yet exist; outside of class, I read Danto's books. I was reading Danto's *After the End of Art*, when I hit upon the idea of translating the book. (Of course, this wouldn't happen until 2006.) My father's painting desk was two old computer desks pushed together. In autumn 2001, my sister went to work in Shenzhen and we had to move six months later. My father said that he did not want to return to Xuanhua. I said that I had heard that there was an artists' village in Shangyuan, which had only been in existence for a few years. It was smaller than Songzhuang, and there weren't as many people. It was in the Changping District of Beijing, which was actually closer to Xuanhua. In summer 2002, my father and I went there and saw what it was like. It was very quiet. Because we didn't know anyone there, when we saw a farmer's courtyard with a sign advertising space for rent, we went in and asked. The little courtyard seemed great. The only person who lived there was an old man who asked for 300 RMB, which I thought was fine and decided to take it. I found a moving company to move my father's painting implements, books, a metal bookcase, and clothing to Shangyuan, and he settled down there with my mother. He rented the two northern rooms, one for living and cooking, and one for painting. A single bed was placed in a corner, and when I visited, I would sometimes sleep there for a night.

Shangyuan



My father lived in Shangyuan from summer 2002 until 2006. (He returned to Xuanhua a number of times between 2003 and 2005 because he was ill). Here, my father painted, read, and thought. I visited from time to time before I moved to Zhuhai in early 2003. In fact, it wasn't terribly convenient that my father and mother lived in Shangyuan. Although food could easily

be bought in the village, leaving to see an exhibition was rather difficult unless my sister drove them over. Most people kept their gates closed and worked on their own. They didn't interact much, but occasionally you would find a few of the neighboring painters, such as Li Xiangming, gathered together to chat. A number of very active artists lived there, including Wang Huaxiang, Li Tianyuan, Shen Weiguang, and Feng Jiali. There were also several retired CAFA professors, such as Qian Shaowu, Tian Shixin, and Sun Jiabo, in the village. Lü Pinchang also lived there; he was building a house but had never occupied it. Daozi rented a courtyard and lived in the west room. The middle of the courtyard was empty, and he may have been growing vegetables. When the open exhibitions were held, you could see him sitting at the door reading a book. Ma Baozhong lived there back then and had his own courtyard where he had rigged a structure that he used to hang his paintings. He later moved Songzhuang. These men were all noted painters or CAFA professors. Some young people had also moved in, rushing to live in a village with other artists. There was an atmosphere, and from 2000 to 2006, it was rather popular. Unlike the 798 Art District, Feijiacun, Yihaodi, and Heiqiao, which are closer to Beijing, Shangyuan was a place of pure rural tranquility. You didn't often hear of art events happening in Shangyuan at that time, because the exhibitions and other events were concentrated in places like the nascent 798.

In the four years that my father lived in Shangyuan, I went to two open studio exhibitions. The first was October 2002 (This was the first for me, but actually the second for the area, because the first took place in 2000), and I remember Li Xiaowei bringing two friends to the

open exhibition and the courtyard where my father lived. I was there at the time. Gong Jisui sat with Li, who introduced Gong as an expert from the United States. Gong Jisui sat in the low old sofa in the room, flipping through a photo album of my father's work. His discussion of art was comprised of one explanation or comment after another, each of them developing the next, which left a deep impression on me. I didn't know Gong and it would be many years before I would find Li Xiaowei. (It seems that Professor Gong has forgotten this; we're now both teachers at CAFA and we speak now and again.) Wang Huaxiang came to my father's studio to see the works on view and left a signature. Zou Yuejin and several of his colleagues also came and took a group photo there. I didn't know anyone else who came. Back then, everyone just wanted to see the recently-arrived old man's paintings; they were simply curious.

The second open exhibition I attended took place in June 2006. By that time, my father had already moved to the Dongyishi neighborhood near Guanzhuang in Chaoyang District, but he had not yet given up his Shangyuan courtyard. He lived there for another month specifically for this exhibition, another chance to show people his work. I was working on my dissertation, and I arranged for a few of my fellow students to view my father's paintings in Shangyuan, including Wu Liji, Deng Feng, Liu Yan, Yu Runsheng, Liu Libin, Liu Wenjiong, and Taiwanese doctoral candidate Liu Wen-lung. Because everyone was studying art and art history, we discussed my father's work a lot. I had the most discussion with Liu Wen-lung because he was studying landscape painting at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He particularly liked and praised my father's work, and he made some direct comparisons to other members of



the Chinese painting world. When Sina was reporting on the open exhibitions, they chose a few artists' works, including a piece from my father's *Harmony Between Heaven and Earth* series. Li Xiangming edited *Beijing Zhaobei (Beijing Looking North*, Sichuan Fine Arts Publishing House), recording the artists of Shangyuan, including my father. They were simply part of the passing mists.

Plastics Factory No. 3

In 2002, when my father moved to Shangyuan, I moved from Shangdi to Plastics Factory No. 3 in Nangao, because it wasn't that far from the Academy. The factory was not profitable, so the office building was rented out to artists who had moved to Beijing. Many painters studying at the Academy and artists who had moved north lived here. The building had four floors. The first and second floors were still offices, but the third and fourth floors were rented out. Li Yong A, one of my classmates, lived there, so he helped me to find a north-facing room on the east side of the fourth floor that someone had just left. There was a desk, a single bed, and a cupboard. I moved my books and other things over. It was easy to get to the Academy, because the bus stopped right in front of the building. Li Yong A was putting together some articles for *Oriental Art*, but the magazine was still being edited in Henan at the time. It was only later that Antaeus Group brought it over and gave the magazine its current style. I submitted my father's work to a magazine for the first time because Li was looking for content. Covering two pages, I wrote a short piece under the name "Ji-achen," entitled "Wandering between Heaven and Earth," as an explanation. Artists came to Beijing in search of opportunity, hoping to gain a wider audience for their works. Everyone thought that there would be more artistic opportunities in Beijing, and they were all following their dreams. Beijing has a lot of space, a lot of connections, a lot of information, and a lot of legends. During that time, artists began coming to Beijing in greater numbers. It seemed that there were a few artists living in every corner of the city, the majority of whom were very young.

At that time, Li Yong A was running around Songzhuang and the other art districts visiting and interviewing the artists. Later, he edited a book entitled *Qianwan Bie Dang Yishujia (Absolutely Don't Become an Artist)*. I gave him a few of the ideas for the blurb on the back cover. He also went to Shangyuan to visit my father, and the book contains a page on that. Li Yong A stayed in Beijing a few more years and then went home to Zhengzhou to teach somewhere. Like the title of his book said: "absolutely don't become an artist." Meng Xianglong painted in Songzhuang after finishing at the Academy in 1999, but by 2003, he could no longer stay alone in Songzhuang because his house in Xuanhua was about to be demolished and his children were applying to college. He moved back to Xuanhua and continued his work there. In 2008, he returned to Songzhuang to do a solo show.

The people who lived at Plastics Factory No. 3 scattered. Some went elsewhere in the country, some returned home, and some continued to flit around Beijing. Most of my classmates in the teaching assistants' course went back to their previous employers, because

they were simply receiving advanced training for their work. Some were studying to increase their status, and once they had finished the course, they left. Some wanted to stay in Beijing; they settled there and pursued their dreams. For example, Gong Yunlin came from Shanxi to Beijing. She found her husband and became an editor at *Rong Bao Zhai*, doing interviews and laying out the magazine. She also published one of my father's paintings. Later, she completely left the art world and concentrated on the public sculpture business she had with her husband. She particularly liked my father's paintings, and so she actively shared his works with others. After Spring Festival 2003, I also left Plastics Factory No. 3. I shipped my things, primarily books (including all my materials on Danto and his books in English), to Zhuhai, because I thought I would be able to settle there.



From Spirituality to Form
以神写形

Ink and watercolor
on paper

184x145cm, 2010

Zhuhai Campus

After Spring Festival 2003, Beijing Normal University established a branch in Zhuhai. During the planning, a friend that was involved in establishing this branch campus invited me to come along. At the time, I was writing about Danto. I wasn't thinking about the career I wanted to pursue; I was simply interested. Helping to set up the campus in Zhuhai was just another job, so I went. I prepared for the new campus and began fall admissions while I wrote about Danto. After Spring Festival, Guangdong announced the occurrence of a contagious disease, and everyone took isatis root as a preventative measure. In April and May, it became apparent that the disease was more serious, and had become SARS. People were scared, and the disease worsened the more it spread. Many people were infected and the illness caused national panic. I finished my thesis in May, and I went to Beijing to submit my thesis to my evaluators, one of whom was Zhang Gan. (He left Artrade for the School of Art and Design at Tsinghua University, and was working on Guanghua Road.) It wasn't until I returned to Zhuhai that I learned that the thesis defenses for the year had been cancelled because Beijing had been sealed. People could leave, but no one could enter to stop the spread of SARS. All theses only needed the opinion of the evaluators in order to pass. My thesis was evaluated, I passed, and I heard it was rather well-received. Thus, I received my master's degree from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, but it had no practical use at my job in Zhuhai. I had never worked in art before.

In December 2003, I received a call from Professor Yi, telling me that he had begun to advise Ph.D. candidates, and he asked me if I wanted to do my doctorate with him. Naturally, I was happy to do a Ph.D. and I had always liked studying art, but studying art history was even more of a dream. I told my colleagues in Zhuhai about wanting to apply to do my doctorate, and they asked why I was bothering. Business, economics, and management were hotter and had more prospects. However, I was not interested in these areas; I still had art flowing through my veins. A spark had been rekindled. I wrote a doctoral application letter, partially in classical Chinese, to explain my attitude to my Zhuhai friends. I wrote:

...I am returning once again to the halls of the academy to study the art of evaluating pictures and paintings and to learn to evaluate principles and arguments, for no other reason than to satisfy my lifelong interest. In this world, with a new place and hard work, an image of the real world can be built! Some have said that the arts are not stable, practical, or useful. In modern times, the winds have changed, and the arts in our nation have evolved, so these admonishments do not tell the whole story. People have never agreed due to the changes over the last

hundred years. How can the arts be unimportant? The arts are common to all under heaven.

...After a conversation with my teacher, who wondered why I had not pursued the arts on a professional level and filled my days with learning. A day without learning is a day lost. In honing your craft, the lesser road will not suffice. For a career to be improved, a path must be followed. Life has a path, and seeking to avoid that path is unwise. Today I have only one pursuit: the energetic elevation of my chosen profession, which is the fulfillment of my ambitions. Honestly, I have been encouraged by learning something of the many aspects of art that await me.

The written word is a poor vehicle for my thoughts, as they cannot express everything I feel. I am committed to pursuing my doctorate. I am sure that your institution will rise to prominence and I will work to study the ideas of the classics. I hope we can encourage each other in our future endeavors! (February 22, 2004)

On April 22, 2004, I traveled from Zhuhai to Beijing to study for my exam. When I arrived at the academy, I asked Professor Yi out for a meal. He said that he was too busy and that I should begin revising for the exam. I rented a room in a shared apartment in Huajiadi Building 6. Every day after breakfast, I would begin to read. At noon I would go downstairs to buy some food to make for lunch. After a nap, I would continue studying until dinner. After eating, I would study until I fell asleep. I lived that way in that shared apartment for 24 days until I took my exam and left Beijing. The day before I left, I wanted to sit and have a meal with Professor Yi, but he didn't have time and told me to head home. I went to Beijing, took my test, and left. I only saw Professor Yi twice in his office. After the results were released in June, I called the admissions office and they told me that I had been accepted as a doctoral candidate. I was so happy, and I knew that my life would truly be linked to art. I didn't know or think too much about what I would do later. When I returned from Zhuhai, I went to school to get my acceptance letter, then I traveled to Xuanhua to tell my recuperating father. As he held the acceptance letter in his hands, tears rolled down his face. He knew that I had gone in circles a long time before returning to art. I had found my home, and this pursuit was also a dream of his. He had always wanted to study art there. When he was young, his family background meant that he did not have this chance. He said that I should be thankful to be living in this time, otherwise I would not have had this opportunity.

My Father's Illness

When my father was young, he supported himself doing heavy manual labor at the Xuanhua Cement Plant in 1964. In place of proper masks, they used pieces of burlap sacks. When he returned home to shower, his nose was full of dust. He made only 1.52 RMB per day, and because of his work, he developed a duodenal ulcer and needed surgery. After three months, he was fired as a day laborer. In 1966, he worked at the Xuanhua Steel Mill. He learned forging from Master You and had to swing a large sledgehammer, which was very hard work. He ate millet every day. He needed to eat three bowls at every meal, because if he didn't eat that much, he wouldn't have the energy to do such hard labor. However, eating that much millet can impede digestion. Over time, when combined with overwork, my father contracted chronic hepatitis; he had to recover at home, and he was also fired from that job. His condition gradually improved, but could not be completely cured. It lingered and fifty years later, it would cause deeper problems. In the 1970s, he had neurodermitis. He itched from head to toe, and he took all kinds of Chinese and Western medicine, but his condition did not improve for a long time. Later, he went to Chicheng County where there was a mountain spring called "the first spring under heaven." The hot spring was boiling, and when you first enter the pool, it feels hotter than 42 degrees. Most people don't dare get in the pool, but my father took the waters to cure his skin condition, and after a few months, it did improve. However, in 2003, my father went to Fujian, and stayed there for more than a month. Perhaps because of the humidity, he developed rheumatoid arthritis, a very serious form of nervous rheumatism. He had pain in every joint in his body. By the end of 2004, he was completely bed-ridden. He could not live by himself, because he was nearly paralyzed. He tried many different treatments, such as bee stings and medication, both Chinese and Western.

After a range of treatments and a lot of rest, my father's nervous rheumatism suddenly improved in April and May 2005; all he needed to control it was some rheumatism medication from Hong Kong. The doctors he visited said it was almost a miracle, because people with severe rheumatoid arthritis often cannot move their hands or feet. I was already working on my doctoral dissertation at the Central Academy of Fine Arts when I learned that my father was recuperating at home. They hadn't told me many of the details because they didn't want to worry me. Because I didn't know how serious it was, I told my mother when we talked on the phone that I was certain my father's condition would improve because he would not want to put down his brush; it was certainly his strength of will that allowed him to begin painting again.

Return to Beijing

In summer 2005, my father returned to Beijing after his rheumatism improved, and he began living in the Dongyishi neighborhood near Guanzhuang. He built a three-meter-long painting desk and began new creative experiments in Beijing. In the years that followed, he painted many exploratory paintings, one group after another. My father often painted works in groups, as a series; he first painted drafts, organizing the structure and placement of the brushstrokes. Because his paintings were large, the paper could not be completely unfurled. He needed to have a smaller draft ready first, in order to master the larger structure. Sometimes, friends would ask how he painted works this large, and thought that he laid them out on the floor or hung them on the wall; they also thought that his studio must be very large to view the works, especially that painting 6.6 meters high, which they thought could only be done in a large space. My father painted it in the 15 square-meter living room that he was using as a studio. He rolled up the paper as he painted, but he had a fully-formed image in his mind, so there was continuity between the rolled part of the work and the section he was still painting. Naturally, the finished painting couldn't be hung in the living room. It was taken to be lined, then it was photographed. By looking at the pictures, you could get a sense of the painting overall. My father once said that, after he finished a painting, his mind was empty. He didn't remember the painting. Even when we took out the pictures, he would look at them and ask if he had painted that kind of picture before. Every time my father prepared to paint, the images had to be different. He never painted dozens of works using one structure or one type of imagery. He never duplicated his paintings.

In the years after he returned from Beijing, my father's paintings became even more energetic. Every so often, he would present a new series of paintings, and I was surprised every time. I saw that my father's work finally began to show an internal cohesion; the method was springing from within him. As if he were practicing a dance, he followed his spirit. I would get very excited every time I saw a new work painted by my father. In these years, my father was busy leading a full life. He had my mother to take care of him, so that he could quietly paint, read, and take notes. Every morning after breakfast he would begin to paint. He would take his afternoon nap, then continue painting, perhaps stopping to read. In the evening, he watched TV to relax. He maintained the spiritual purity of his thought and work, and reading always filled him with ideas. He read books on classical philosophy, history, and politics, as well as magazines, not simply because he felt he had to, but because he loved to. My father often said that he would get bored if he couldn't read. It was only by reading that he could understand the darkness and the truth of history and politics. My father was not some-



one who studied technical issues every day and he was not someone who saw painting as a career. People long ago had advised him that he should paint a few traditional line paintings that he could sell to make a living. However, my father knew that the thinking and emotion that goes into that type of work is different. If he was always putting brush to paper to create these kinds of works, he would certainly become confused. It's like someone who teaches art then

finds it difficult to return to a creative mode. We very seldom hear of those who teach art classes and excel in their personal projects. This is simply a product of the artistic temperament, and my father was very clear on this point: he could never compromise on artistic quality. Thankfully, my mother and sister were there to look after him. Although my father did not have a job or a pension, he did have the support of the entire family, so he could create without worrying. We were just being good children, and when I think back to the years my father spent in Beijing after his unfortunate illness, I find some slight comfort. My father passed away so suddenly. He was admitted to Chaoyang Hospital on June 26 and his tests revealed that he had a late stage of cancer. One week later, on July 2, he was transferred to Yanda Hospital. There was a change every day, and the speed was surprising. One week after that, on the morning of July 8, my father left us. Before he went, tears trickled from the corners of his eyes, but his mind was still clear. When my father was moved to Yanda Hospital on July 2, he could still mumble a few words. He said he was not content, that his mission was not yet complete. He repeatedly exhorted me and my mother, to "continue on, continue on, continue on." He said it many times. My father fully understood what was happening, but his lips could not speak it and his hand could not write it. This is the most painful thing about death. The tear that my father shed in the final second of his life has many meanings for me.

The First Exhibition and the Ink of Dao and Dharma

In 2009, China Space in the 798 Art District saw pictures of my father's work. They really liked it and wanted to do an exhibition for the old man. This was his first solo exhibition since coming to Beijing. He presented 28 pieces, and this was the first time I could fully appreciate these works in a large space. My impressions of the show were entirely different from my previous thoughts. My father liked painting large pictures because that was the only way to release the energy within him. He pursued large brushstrokes that made the voids seem like strokes and the strokes seem like voids; he created an atmosphere and an energy. There were no detailed embellishments, as this did not match his personality or his ideas. I invited several Beijing art critics, theorists, and artists to the exhibition. Yi Ying, Yin Shuangxi, Gao Jianping, Zhu Qingsheng, Freda Murck, Gao Congyi, Tan Ping, Weng Yunpeng, Duan Lian, Gao Ling, Yang Jianguo, Yang Weimin, He Guiyan, and Liu Libin all came to the opening. After the opening, I also arranged for Gao Minglu, Zou Yuejin, Peng Feng, Huang Du, Xia Jifeng, and David Carrier to come to the exhibition.



Prof. Freda Murck and Prof. Gao Jianping

That was June 27. The weather was very hot, and the space didn't have air conditioning. Everyone had rivulets of sweat trickling down their backs, but everyone was happy to talk and see the exhibition. About the exhibition, Yin Shuangxi said, "We're researching Chinese contemporary art. How are there any artists that we didn't know? How could we not have known Jizi's work?" I joked that it was the darkness under the lamp. There hadn't been an opportunity to show people, so it hadn't happened until today. This shows that, in China today, there are many, many unknown but pure artists engaged in their own, independent artistic practices and explorations, often for decades. We do not know them because they cannot be found. We do not know them because we do not actively and keenly seek to know them. Whether an artist can be known and truly understood has become an important topic in sociology. Modern art history is full of these sad stories, which is lamentable. Is art and contemporary art in China really related to Art? Looking at our surroundings and our environment, it's not surprising that we want to discuss a human mode of art. This is certainly a political and ideological issue, and it is more necessary now than it has been in any other time or place. All that those of us who love art can do is allow human art to recover its human qualities, returning true art to its historical coordinates. Everything surrounded by commotion and bright lights will gradually be eliminated over time, and increasing numbers of people who embrace the principles of art will sift through and discover work by those who shine with a human light.

After this exhibition, my father became even more prolific, creating many large and impressive pieces; my father poured his heart and soul into painting. He said that every time he finished a painting, his body and mind were exhausted, like he was about to collapse; his mind was a total blank. The ten years after he returned to Beijing in 2006 were his most productive decade; it was the decade in which his art achieved cohesion and the decade in which he devoted his mind and body to his artistic explorations. When his rheumatism was very severe in 2004, medicine told us that he no longer had the option of living a normal life. But my father experienced a miracle, extending his artistic life by ten years. We are very sad that my father departed so suddenly, but looking back, my father's artistic life blossomed during those ten years. He used impossible energy in the appropriate way, spending the last month of his life painting three more large paintings, originally prepared for an exhibition at the end of the year. My father devoted his life's energies to art, even to the last moment.



The Dimension of Tao of Ink

墨道之维

Ink and watercolor on paper

184x145cm, 2010

A poem that my father wrote in 1998 shows his artistic aspirations, including a metaphor:

*On a twisted tree several feet high,
Buds emerge despite gales of wind and lashings of rain.
There is a world in the verdant, shady greenery,
Alone and free in the heaven beyond the heavens.*

In May and June of this year, my father wrote:

*My life of artistic pursuits has been an exploration,
And in my old age I have found calm.
Whether I achieved fame and fortune,
My art stirred people's hearts.
At the age of seventy-five, I have nothing.
Exploring art year after year,
In old age, you learn that fame and fortune are thin,
How can you possess the mist that passes before your eyes?*

He had so many regrets. After my father was admitted to the hospital, I found these two poems on his desk, and they made me very sad.

Of course, in the last ten years of his life, my father became known and discussed by the artistic and academic communities in China and abroad. He left his mark in the values and artistic meanings he created. When I began writing this essay, I felt my father's art and spirit extending, drifting on a vast plain; like a star cutting a vast arc on the horizon, he shines and thrives in that distance place.

Forever My Father



In my father, I saw many artistic intersections and ways of examining various phenomena in contemporary society and art. My love for my father transcends the affection felt for family members and the influence that his example has had on me. I increasingly see my father as a universal spiritual symbol or power; the purity that he maintained his entire life is an example for me. His honesty and compassion were so respected and admired. He endured numerous hardships, yet he did not complain about his suffering. He was as kind as a child, and his compassion transcends his art.

Though I call him my father, he could also be the father of humanity in the universal sense. I came to fully understand his meaning and value this summer. He set a level for goodness in human ethics and he was a measure of character. After he became to represent these universal values, the brilliance of all humanity can shine and art can be revealed as a human value. Art is an ethical symbol of human existence; it can ever be degraded, and degraded art is inevitably a symptom of the degradation of humanity. Is there really so little false art in China today? The complexity of contemporary art cannot be summed up in a word, but



The Road of Eternity

永恒之路

Ink and watercolor on paper

184x145cm, 2010

isn't "false art" a pretty good start? If we do not have a minimum of human judgment, then art is just a false and degraded thing, and as serious critics and researchers, we should feel that we have betrayed our professional integrity and values. People can have one thousand or ten thousand reasons in the chaotic world in which we live, but will we allow the last ray of light in human nature to be destroyed?

The history of art allows us to see the history of human struggle and advancement. The shift from modern art to contemporary art is a spiritual history of humanity observing human nature and recovering humanity; is its transcendental power limited to art alone? Art is a transcendental concept, a test that humans are continually defending and betraying. If we live in a world of degradation and falseness and become accustomed to false art, we will inevitably come to fear and reject true, human art. Art, as a spiritual symbol, will inevitably encounter pollution and distortion, but if we see nothing when standing before human art, this is a moment of sorrow for our times.

Art is not at all important in the grand scheme of history or the temporal dimension of life; life is most important. With life, we can attain the highest realm of all. We give our lives for art, but essentially, the spirit of art represents life, and in the experience and fusion of this symbolism, we perceive and obtain life. We can only see life in this kind of art, and it is only in this way that we know we are alive and human. If not for this, won't the deviousness of false art damage our health like polluted air? In the realm of life and humanity, we see the last possible place for art to reside. Within human love, we appreciate and perceive our true spirits.

Art is not eternal, but the spirit of art is. We are not real, but our humanity is.

Father is a name that last forever. It is the highest form of respect and our reason for continuing with life.

My father, Jizi, will live forever through his art, and in his eternal paradise, he will no longer speak of worldly art, but be returned to eternal humanity.

Written on August 1, 2015, 23:49



Nebula Series No.4

太仆法相系列四

Ink and watercolor on paper

184x145cm, 2011



Eternal Flowing

永恒的流动

Ink and watercolor on paper

182.5x145cm, 2013



Heavenly Song

天歌

Ink and watercolor on paper

185x145cm, 2011

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