

## EPILOGUE:

### THE DONG QICHANG PROJECT OF SHANG YANG

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Shang Yang has always been an artist of our respect. Either in the 1980's when contemporary Chinese art had just taken off, or the present since we've weathered the winter after its prosperity, an artist we jokingly call "the old post-80's generation" who's followed his own path without any distractions. "Old" obviously refers to his elderly physical age; "post-80's generation", besides exclaiming on his admirable energy, it would be his sense of responsibility of being a "contemporary artist" – the critical spirit of confronting reality and the creative consciousness that transcends the pre-existing framework. Usually, the latter quality is often difficult to notice among the successful, although Shang Yang seems to have realized his breakthroughs by challenging himself, especially if it is his first solo exhibition after more than half a century of making art, in a time when the ecosystem for contemporary art is dire and confidence waned, to show his new series of work, making most of those working or interested in this field feel deeply touched – as long as one's artistic dialogue is truthful and genuine, the outside environment would not affect its strength in waking people's souls.

The "Dong Qichang Project" is Shang Yang's well-grounded work after many years of studies. After the series the "Yellow Earth" and "Great Landscape", it consolidates and profoundly expresses the various classic topics on "relationships" in the development in Chinese society or world civilization at large – the East and West, tradition and modernity, nature and men, art and reality – all of which are his own annotations. Dong Qichang is considered one of the most significant figures in Chinese traditional art, who had established art theories that consolidates cultural contents of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, condensing the Eastern mentality on the wisdom of existence and inner feelings; whereas "project" is a practical noun with characteristics of Western logics.

It includes varying approaches to balance different relationships and complexity – a basis for rational development of the contemporary. The juxtaposition of the two seems rather unexpected, although the quality displayed is precisely the true portrayal of modern society. In other words, the traditional

sense of clearly defined and comprehensive bilateral relations are gradually disappearing, and are replaced with the multilayer distant, dislocated, overlapped and differentiated or even fragmented, or contradictory circumstances. People's existence in these new relationships is becoming ambiguous and inhibited. Therefore, how far away is "Dong Qichang" from the "project"? And how should one face the new changes of the aforementioned relations? Searching for that answer becomes our new hope and expectation.

Even though sensible artists can always detect the "issue" sooner or able to see its truth than others; however, they do not necessarily offer an appropriate solution. Shang Yang believes, "The job of the artist is to express his feelings, a feeling that gathers into a kind of thinking, which should be involved with cultural issues of society, allowing it to become a public choice." Therefore, in my view, the "Dong Qichang Project" is his unfinished topic work, while it reminds the viewer to actively participate and reflect, he continues to experiment while searching for the issues.

The first impression of these works, traces of the discursive brushstrokes and the complexity of textures in Eastern painting were largely gotten rid of, joined with, or even covered by photographic images, digital production and mechanical reproduction. The classic scattered points and long focus was purposefully cut into three parts, collaged or even damaged by modern symbols, moreover the classical triangle composition has been dramatically flipped over or has been intervened by sharp and rigid lines or geometric forms. As a result, the harmonious environment is flooded with unrest, fragments, disorder, entanglement, destruction and wantonness, where emotions of elegance and idealism as well as one's spiritual world suddenly becomes inconsolable, distraught, fearful and uncertain. Time and space are fragmented and flattened entirely. Just as our era where beliefs are absent, consumption overpowers – nothing seems meaningful. Shang Yang has hit the nail on the head.

Yet, if we reflect carefully, a stronger force is cultivating. These different directions and degrees seem to be forming another self-sufficient imagery. Humans' irrespective acts of overriding on nature can seem rather playful, especially the awkward collage of photography and drawing of mountains can also be solemn, the sporadic intervention of large dots, thick lined squares, numbers or even roman letters inserts positive and dynamic elements in such outlandish environment. Even though it might not be the intention of the artist, perhaps there are certain traces found in his Statement, "It is impossible, or even odd to return to Chinese traditional culture with our knowledge today... We enjoy modern civilization, yet are saddened by what has been destroyed, because it can no longer be restored... the

two should not be contradictory."

Indeed, I agree with such cultural view. Either, East and West, tradition and modern, or nature and men, art and reality, or other relationships, they are in fact technical ways people use to organize our lives. The understanding and implementation in every period, region or group of people are similar. The American sociologist on culture, Edward Shils' study on the internal relationship between modern life and traditional culture further explains this issue, "Even we admit that every generation modifies the beliefs and modes of behavior passed on from our predecessors, meanwhile, most of the beliefs have carried on, and are still followed, perhaps certain modes of behavior were pursued, remains unchanged now. Moreover, these beliefs and modes co-exist with their derivatives in the present." In his opinion, firstly, traditional culture can no longer adapt to modern life; secondly, traditional culture is largely grounded; thirdly, even though modern life has inherited from traditional culture, but has not copied it precisely, but has been modified and developed; and lastly, modern life is creating new culture. Thus, it is a mutually inclusive state of being. Therefore, an artist has seriously pointed out that the tradition we ardently hoped to revive has in fact never existed. It is only with the pass of time that provoked a wave of emotions, or the traditionalist's false impression of protecting their ideology... Perhaps such statement is somewhat extreme, yet it makes one ponder.

And so on and so forth, there are similar or unique complex implications in other relationships. Therefore, researchers in various fields today should not be restricted to choosing which is better, greater or more advanced from the bilateral relations, but to view it as an ever changing organic body, focusing and reflecting on the most effective approach to adapt to all components, thus to ameliorate the time and quality of human existence.

The sacred duty of those true poets, thinkers and artists in the contemporary world is to call on people's conscience of the world, and to protect the spiritual world of humanity with their unique approach. The Beijing Center for the Arts wishes to work hard towards this goal with sincere, determined, serious, and professional artists. No matter they're artists who dare to confront the reality straightforward, or who explore the expression of traditions, they should be able to raise meaningful questions towards the social reality.