



Painting copier Zhou Yongjiu and his apprentices. They were farmers before they came to Dafencun.



## ART IN MASS PRODUCTION IN DAFENCUN

This remotely situated village has emerged into the world economy, but whether it will foster great artists is still unknown. **By Lin Xiaoji**

Subway line 3 in Shenzhen can easily take you directly to the Dafen Station. However, finding Dafencun, the so-called "first village of oil painting in China," is not easy after exiting the station. Its low-rise buildings are buried in the surrounding high-rise residential apartment buildings. Like any other villages inside the city of Shenzhen, Dafen has long been part of the city. After 2011 Summer Universiade, the small villas squeezed into rows have been colorfully painted, lifting the spirits of this formerly disordered village. On the

Coffee Street in the center of the village one can see the plaster statue of Leonardo da Vinci, one of the Italian Renaissance polymaths whose work *Mona Lisa* has been the most popular item in this village that lives by its reproductions of oil paintings. After ten years of development, Dafencun has become the trading center in China for reproductions of oil paintings. Along the narrow, curvy alleys of the village are numerous galleries.

At 11 am, the usually late rising Zhao Xiaoyong rambled to his gallery in Dafencun.

Copies of Van Gogh's works like *Sunflowers* and *Starry Night* are hung around a room less than 10 sq. m in size. Zhao Xiaoyong is from the countryside in Hunan province, and worked in an arts and crafts factory before coming to Dafencun. He never received formal training in painting, nor has he had any opportunity to see Vincent van Gogh's original works. Now, his copies of Van Gogh's works have become the hot items in the souvenir shop next to the Van Gogh Art Museum in the Netherlands. A work by Van Gogh would typi-

SYNDICATION/CALING PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK



Zhao Xiaoyong is an expert in reproducing Van Gogh's works of art. He works out of his own gallery.

cally take an ordinary artist one week to copy, but Zhao took only two hours. In Dafencun, professional copiers like Zhao can be counted in the thousands.

New houses and hotel lobbies in the Netherlands, Europe and even the US are decorated with oil paintings from Dafencun. This remote village has quickly emerged into the world economy through its oil paintings, with up to 60 percent of the reproduction oil paintings in the world originating from Dafencun.

Unlike other art districts in the world, which resist the invasion of commercialism, Dafencun has embraced it from the onset. "Art and market are met, while talent and wealth are exchanged here" is the slogan for Dafencun. Just like Shenzhen, a village surrounded by mulberry fields and fishponds in

the past, Dafencun has been transformed into a modern city. People in this village also believe that commercialization can make Dafencun the cultural base for catching the eyes of the world.

### All Is Changed by the Market

In 2006, Yu Haibo, a photographer from *Shenzhen Economic Daily*, released a series of photos featuring the oil painting reproduction scene in full swing. One of the photos showed Zhao Xiaoyong in a sleeveless garment, getting ready to hang fresh copies of Van Gogh's *Self Portrait*'s. Behind him is a room where the floor and walls are covered with various copies of Van Gogh's works. This set of photos later won second prize in the World Press Photo Contest. This was when business in Dafencun was at its peak; Zhao

and his colleagues were stripped to the waist, working hard at their paintings until 2 am or 3 am while listening to pop music.

Dafencun's relationship with oil paintings can be traced back to Huang Jiang, a painting merchant from Hong Kong. In the 80's, Huang was looking for oil painting workshops in Shenzhen and Guangzhou for his orders from overseas, recruiting students to assist him. He landed in Dafencun as his base for producing, collecting, and exporting oil paintings.

When Zhao Xiaoyong arrived in Dafencun in 1997, it was still a remote village with no storefronts, situated outside of Shenzhen. The painting copiers lived on the upper level of the buildings, with six people crowded in one room, living on orders from Hong Kong for oil painting copies. With no professional





1 Western oil paintings are the most popular works in Dafencun. 2 When completed, they take pictures and post them on the internet. 3 Wu Ruiqiu is the owner of the largest art studio. 4 They continue work on the street.

training in painting, Zhao Xiaoyong quickly realized that to have a foothold in the village, he should not paint everything but build up his own specialty. "When I spotted Van Gogh's work, I immediately wanted to copy his paintings. If I do it well, I will earn money." Zhao then focused on copying Van Gogh's paintings, particularly the twelve most famous of them. He built his reputation in Dafencun. Buyers of Van Gogh's copies usually look for him. Zhao has also trained many apprentices.

In the first development stage in Dafencun, most of the painting copiers were like Zhao, peasants with no professional training. Painting is repeated work for them. For Zhao Xiaoyong, it takes only three months to train up someone with no basic skills: photocopying

## *An oil painting created after months and years by an artist has become an industrial process in Dafencun.*

the working paper first, then dividing the copying process into strict steps, and using the photocopies to practice repeatedly until he masters the skills.

After Dafencun gained fame, orders from overseas grew. Peasant-turned-painting copier, Wu Ruiqiu thought of applying mass pro-

duction techniques to create more oil paintings: Each copier needs to be responsible for just one part, which can lead to improved productivity. An oil painting created after months versus years by an artist has become an industrial process in Dafencun.

During the financial crisis in 2008, the real estate bubble burst in Europe and the US; no more walls needed to be decorated with oil paintings, which led to a drastic decline in the export business in Dafencun. Other challenges in Dafencun included an increase in rents, which forced many painting copiers to move out. At the same time, companies in Putian in Fujian Province and Yiwu in Zhejiang Province also introduced sizable assembly line production, erecting large factories. Despite its size



One of the thousands of reproductions of Van Gogh's Sunflowers sits on a Dafencun street.

and efficiency, Dafencun was hardly competitive. Orders came in less and less after 2008 with basically no more orders from the US. "Now we rely on our old customers we acquired before," said Zhao Xiaoyong, smoking a cigarette and looking forlorn.

Wu Ruiqiu, owner of Ji Yi Yuan Oil Painting Company, the largest in Dafencun, started to develop new markets when faced with this crisis. He believes that Dafencun needs to transform itself, shifting from copying paintings to "industrializing original creativity."

Artists are invited to create works whose copyrights are then purchased, followed by massive reproduction by painting copiers. These reproductions are ultimately sold in the general mass market. Oil paintings reproduced from originally created works now takes up half of the sales volume of Ji Yi Yuan.

Wu hid no secrets when talking about linking commerce with art. In his eyes, all artists

***Oil paintings reproduced from  
originally created  
works now takes up half of  
the sales volume of  
Ji Yi Yuan.***

---

in China are crossing their log bridge, hoping to get famous through their own works, which is not the normal way. "Competing in an exhibition to win a silver prize, then being happy for a day, leaving the prize in your room: all this would not help the artist, as it is pure indulgence in self-admiration." He believes that, instead, artists should create according to market needs, not only feeding themselves in the process but also seeing

their works entering thousands of homes.

Chinese artists price their works highly. Little known artists struggle to make sales. Wu thinks that they would benefit by authorizing him to reproduce their original works on a massive scale. If RMB 10 yuan for one reproduced painting is given to a painter, 100,000 yuan should be given for 10,000 reproductions. This would provide more opportunities to Chinese artists. However, the condition is that artists cannot be selfish and must be market oriented.

"For Chinese artists, pure art can be understood whereas pure commerce is considered poor taste. There needs to be a consensus on what Dafencun is meant to be. The biggest asset that Dafencun has is to collect information globally and understand what other people want or admire. Everyone is joined here in Dafencun meeting the needs of both the refined and the popular tastes." Through par-





ticipating in trade shows and interacting with customers, Wu Ruiqiu understood the different tastes for oil paintings in different regions of the world. For instance, paintings measuring 2 x 3 m will not sell well in Hong Kong, whereas images of naked women should not be exported to the Middle East.

On the other side of Dafencun is the largest gallery of Ji Yi Yuan. There are various types of abstract paintings, several of which were created by Wu himself. The layout and color coordination have been carefully done, mainly to create a visual impact. In Wu's point of view, in addition to the sale of a few high-end works to collectors, there should be artistic merchandise, commercial art and commercial merchandise. "Artistic merchandise includes works by Chen Yifei which ordinary people can understand and the experts can also accept. Commercial art means that it has already been defined; for instance, if you ask me to paint the Yellow River, I can paint one for you. After that comes commercial merchandise, which is purely for decoration."

### The Future of Artists

On the fifth floor of a six-floor building in Dafencun, there are various oil paintings. This is the office for Shenzhen Dafen Art Auction Limited Company, the only auction house in the village. General manager He Ke was one of the earliest painting copiers, but he did not go down the same path as other copiers who eventually opened their own galleries. He believes that, although Dafencun started out copying oil paintings, it can also gather real artists whose art works will eventually be accepted by the market through auctions. He Ke had no previous experience running an auction house.

But in Dafencun, courage always finds its place and he believes that the market is the best school. "A person who spends four years in an art school does not create as many works as we do in one year in the village. Many art professors who came here said that our painting copiers paint much better than their students." Dafencun taught him how to

use the paintbrushes. He also believes that it can help him learn how to run an auction house well, with Dafencun characteristics, of course.

When he first auctioned oil paintings, He Ke did not set base prices highly in order to attract customers. Some paintings were sold for only a few hundred yuan after only one bid. This used to produce complaints from many artists. But his view is that the market is fair. When hundreds of paintings are auctioned at a time, the best of course will stand out with higher auction prices. Those who first participated in He's auctions were buyers

***While commercialization  
offers more options for artists  
who have no income, they  
are also being tested for their  
dedication to the art.***

from Southeast Asia who knew He from when he ran his own gallery. Later on, his customer base grew, but only gradually.

Different from the big domestic auction houses that only auction works by famous artists, He Ke promotes new faces in the industry. Works by these artists would not be seen in other channels unless the artists have been discovered by gallery agents. Dafen Art Auction Company has become the new platform for artists who want to be discovered by the rest of the world.

Artist, Deng Junren moved his studio to the top floor of the same building where He Ke has his auction company. Some of his works have been auctioned by He Ke. "The final goal of painting is to exhibit. In Shenzhen, Dafencun is the most obvious place and participating in an auction is part of the process of exhibiting. Paintings will lose their value if they stay in storage." He believes that He Ke's auction house is the only exhibition channel for the artwork of many artists. However, he

also admits that participants in auctions in Dafencun have room for improving their knowledge of art.

Although some art works have been auctioned by He Ke for up to several hundred thousand yuan, most are sold for between 5,000 and 50,000 yuan. When auction prices were stagnant or when an atmosphere of honest professional exchange went missing, many artists chose to leave Dafencun, particularly after they had already established a name for themselves.

In Deng Junren's oil painting studio, works created over the past few years since he came to Dafencun are displayed. He painted realistically in the early days, but recently he has produced some experimental works for which he sees no market in Dafencun because many people don't understand them, still favoring realistic pieces. He was attracted to Dafencun three years ago by the circle of artists who live there. Many classmates from art schools create their work here. It is also easier to host art exhibitions in Dafen Art Museum than elsewhere. Regardless, Deng Junren knows that he will leave Dafencun some day.

While commercialization offers more options for artists who have no income in Dafencun, they are also being tested for their dedication to the pursuit of art. Commercialization once brought success to painting copiers who had no wealth or possessions of their own, turning them into beneficiaries of the industrialization of art. However, whether this will foster the growth of great artists here is still unknown.

In the evening, He Ke accompanied us to the entrance of the village. Standing there is a concrete statue of someone holding a paintbrush. Along the side of the road, someone was singing nostalgically. No one can imagine that, ten years ago, this was only a village inside Shenzhen, sheltering evil things. "One day, this will grow into a true art district," He Ke muttered feelingly. He bid farewell to us at the end and disappeared in the small alleys of Dafencun.