JUDGED CREATIVE: A STUDY OF A PARADOX

by

Jianmei Li

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Graduate College

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2017
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This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

_________________________________________  5/1/2017
Hai Ren  
Date  
Professor of East Asian Studies
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

For their help in the preparation of this thesis, I am deeply indebted to many people. First, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Hai Ren, for his encouragement, kindness and patience for leading me into the academic field before I even enrolled in the University of Arizona EAS program. Without his support and encouragement, it would have been impossible for me to reach to this point. After becoming a graduate student in EAS program, Dr. Hai Ren has constantly encouraged me to explore various topics within and outside my direct discipline that are interested to me. I offer my sincere thanks to him for his patience and helpful criticism with my wide range of questions during my study here in EAS department. His ideas and mentoring have inspired my graduate studies and triggered the inquiries that led to this thesis. Dr. Hai Ren’s insight and knowledge have guided me through the whole process of my thesis writing. Without his help, this process would have been far more difficult. He is and will always be a respectful scholar, an insightful mentor, and a role model for me.

I would also like to thank the rest of my committee: Dr. Fabio Lanza and Dr. Scott Gregory. Many thanks to Dr. Fabio Lanza for generously supporting me in getting into the Arizona EAS program and in fully encouraging me to further my studies. His humorous and insightful guidance has always helped me to be confident in myself throughout my studies. Talking with Dr. Fabio Lanza has always been a cheerful and enjoyable experience during my time here.

I am also grateful to Dr. Scott Gregory, who has also kindly and generously helped me in both my graduate studies and in my thesis. I have learned a lot from him including how to interpret with texts accurately and critically, which I feel will be an important skill even long after I have finished my graduate studies. I also thank him for his generously academic suggestions both in my graduate studies and in my pursuit of further academic study.
Special thanks also go to several other scholars. I have cherished Dr. John Olsen’s insights, kindness, and generosity in helping me and guiding me into the world of anthropological studies in archaeology, as he has shown me how fantastic interdisciplinary study can be. I also thank him for his encouragement both in my graduate studies and in pursuing my academic interests. I am also grateful to Dr. Brian Silverstein who helped me enormously in guiding me through the field of cultural anthropological studies. I also thank him for providing insightful suggestions related to my thesis. I also wish to thank Dr. Nathaniel Smith for the guidance he has provided me in anthropological studies and his suggestions and encouragement on my thesis and on my future academic studies; Dr. Noel Pinnington, who patiently gave me constructive suggestions at the beginning of my thesis preparation and who has generously shared with me his knowledge of literature; and Dr. David Pietz, who has provided me a precious opportunity through a year long research assistantship, which has allowed me to have first-hand experience in research, and who has mentored me in how to better deal with the pressures of research.

Additional thanks go to Dr. Albert Welter, Dr. Margaret Camp, and Dr. Dian Li, all of whom initially helped me to enter the graduate program at Arizona’s EAS department. My deep thanks also go to Melody Motes and Frank Whitehead who have always provided me with great support in guiding and ensuring all the many formal procedures required by my studies have been properly fulfilled. My tremendous thanks go to my friends Huichao Wen, Yang Han, Xin Mao, Stephanie and Jamie Ryan, and Hongyi Jia who have always encouraged and supported to me.

I am also deeply indebted to my cousin Chao Liu, a talented scholar and a close friend who has been my role model and my mentor since I was a child. Through all these years, he has selflessly shared with me all his experiences in study, and has unconditionally supported me in my academic pursuits whenever I need help and comfort. He is always the one and will be the one
who constantly praises me and encourages me to achieve a higher education and to pursue my interests.

And Finally, I would like to give special thanks to my husband Brandon, who has accompanied with me along the whole journey through graduate school. He has generously shared with me his own experiences in graduate studies, while patiently encouraging me and constantly reminding me of how much I have wanted this learning experience when I have felt frustrated and lost confidence in myself; while being critical of my ideas when I have sometimes been more enthusiastic than warranted by my evidence, he has also constantly encouraged me when I lost patience or been in too much of a hurry to realize how important the process is. My accomplishment would have been impossible without his constant patience, support, encouragement, care and love.
DEDICATION

For my father Guojie Li and my mother Shufen Zhang, who creatively raised me.

And for my grandfather Jinhua Li, a wise and kind gentleman who passed away while I was studying in US far from home. May his memory be eternal.
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ABSTRACT

Inspired by Michael Foucault’s “technologies of the self” and Jacques Rancière’s idea of the politics of aesthetics, specifically, his concept of “the distribution of the sensible”, this thesis examines two groups of people who actively pursue creativity in China today: first, a group of Chinese youth who seek their identity as creative writers through their participation in the Xin Gainian Zuowen Dasai, or the New Concept Writing Competition, held by Mengya magazine since 1998; second, a group of men and women who are grouped together under the name of “Dafen painters”, who pursue their creative identities as oil painters either for their own artistic dreams or for better lives. Through these two cases, this thesis explores the relationship between creative practices and individuals’ identity formation, and attempts to achieve a better understanding of how the formation of these identities relate to broader desires for creative identity in China’s society today.

This paper argues that an individual’s own desire for creative expression and recognition in fact acts to diminish their ability to engage in truly creative expression, and that the attempts at recognition reconfigure groups to block individuals from finding opportunities to express their creative identities.
Introduction

In 2006, at a press conference held by the European Commissioner for Justice and Home Affairs, Franco Frattini accused China of flagrantly violating intellectual property rights by faking a Ferrari model (Pang, 184). Frattini’s accusation turned out to be false—this particular fake model was actually produced in Thailand—however this incident highlights how China, even in cases lacking conclusive evidence, has never been too far away from a set of assumptions that give it a notorious reputation as a copying nation, lacking creativity (Pang, 185). This reputation does not so much connect China with copying and piracy as it does chain China to a set of perceptions that are applied to various cultural practices in contemporary Chinese society and which sees these practices as resolutely negative.

These perceptions have also been internalized by many within China, for example in the idea of *shanzhai* products, “a popular Chinese term referring to copycat designs of brand-name products” (Pang, 1). In relation to *shanzhai* goods, Chinese discourse is quite straightforward in regarding these products as a “rip off”. The anxiety around these goods tends to revolve around China’s inability to create unique or new items of its own. This feeds into a large anxiety about creativity, or its lack, among Chinese. Rather than admiring China’s capacity for reproduction and copying in unexpected ways, the anxiety surrounding Chinese creativity resonates in these debates, ranging from childhood education to legal history concerns noted by Laikwan Pang surrounding the origins of Chinese concepts of patenting (Pang, 105). To begin to shift these discussions into less anxiety-ridden and unproductive terms, I seek to use two well documented cases involving
creativity in China: the status of migrant painters\(^1\) in Shenzhen’s Dafen Village as creative painters or mindless copyists (Wong, 5) and the debates surrounding the role of standard writing styles in stifling creativity among China’s youth\(^2\) (Zuojia Chuban She, 4). In the former case, the act of copying is seen as resulting from a lack of creativity or the ability to create novelty; in the latter case, similar anxieties about a lack of creativity arises from a perception that youth writing has been constrained into a mechanical or formulaic process aimed at succeeding on standardized tests. By identifying the questions that remain present, but unacknowledged, in these accounts I hope to avoid the anxious question “Can China create?” that so frequently becomes the statement “China is uncreative”.

The questions I find present but unasked center on how might an individual’s own desire for creative expression and recognition act to diminish their ability to engage in truly creative

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\(^1\) The first case study of the Dafen painters is built on Winnie Won Yin Wong’s ethnography *Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014). In her study Wong argues that Dafen’s painters, contrary to media reports, are not copyists or forgers. Given that these painters do not reproduce every detail of the art they recreate and that they use unique methods, Wong views these painters as true artists. In contrast to Wong’s research which focuses on whether these painters should be viewed as artists or not, I focus on the Dafen painters’ creative practices as expressed in their paintings.

\(^2\) The second case study of Chinese youth who participate in the Xin Gainian Writing Competition is built on Marco Fumian’s article “The Temple and the Market: Controversial Positions in the Literary Field with Chinese Characteristics”, on the competition’s initial public announcement as reproduced in the published collections of the award-winning articles *Shoujie Quanguo Xin Gainian Zuowen Dasai Huojiang Zuopinxuan* (Zuojia Chubanshe, 1999. 2 vols) and on the competition’s 2016 announcement “’One Yige’ Bei Di Shijiu Jie Quanguo Xin Gainian Zuowen Dasai Zhengwen Qishi” found on magazine Mengya’s website (http://www.mengya.com/19th-xingainian-announcement/). Marco Fumian’s article focus on the literary field surrounding the competition as it relates to modern Chinese literature, using Pierre Bourdieu’s literary sociology to understand the modern Chinese literature. Fumian argues that this idea helps to move modern Chinese literature away from overly politicized paradigms of literary historiography. In his article Fumian briefly introduces the relationship between the Xin Gainian Writing Competition and its organizer magazine Mengya, and uses one of the winners, Han Han, from the 1st year Xin Gainian Writing Competition as an example. In contrast to Fumian’s focus, this thesis focus on the whole group of participants from an anthropological perspective rather than from the perspective of specific individuals within literary study.
expression and how attempts at recognition reconfigure groups to block potentially creative individuals from finding the opportunity to express themselves. I offer no solutions to the issues the answers to my questions raise. I suggest that such an approach is misguided: the very structures that act potentially enable recognition of creativity in Chinese (and potentially more broadly) at the same time must obstruct the free expression of creativity. This irony is not easily escapable and any solution would only be a temporary one, a conclusion I have come to adopt only after much struggle.

**Two Instances of Would-Be Creatives**

The two examples of groups actively pursuing creativity in China that I choose to investigate come from widely different social backgrounds. The first is a group of Chinese by definition under thirty years old and seeking certification of their creativity as writers. These Chinese youths are the participants in the *Xin Gainian* Writing Competition introduced in more detail below. The second is a group painters characterized by a much wider range of ages and an interest if not training in oil painting. These men and women are the painters who have settled in the village of Dafen in Shenzhen.

Both cases involve a group of people who play an important role in China’s society. In the case of the writing competition, the Chinese youth involved—whether or not winners—include some of the post-80s generation’s most prominent literary figures—such as Han Han and Guo Jingming—who have become cultural icons. Given their first recognition by a Chinese public was mediated through this competition, the nature of this competition is important to explore. In contrast, the importance of the Dafen painters lies not in their individual prominence but in their ubiquity as members of China’s migrant population. With the increase in social mobility and accessibility of public transportation in China since the late 1970s, many Chinese have sought
opportunities beyond their original homes and come to form an economically and culturally vital
group in China today. The Dafen painters are a small part of this vast group of migrants who seek
to find recognition for their creativity as oil painters while making an economically comfortable
life for themselves in a place far from their original homes. By chance, they have also come to
capture significant international attention for their paintings: as copyists for affordable versions of
the Western canon of artistic masterworks.

While the social backgrounds of these two groups may seem radically different, their quests
for creative recognition have been enabled by the same social changes that have driven so much
of contemporary Chinese history: the turn to a market economy and a reopening to non-Chinese
social contact initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. The first writing competition was organized by
a literary magazine that, prior to the marketization reforms, was supported by the state. The loss
of state financial support led this magazine to promote itself in new ways to a wider reader base in
order to maintain its operations. One method of promotion was the establishment of the writing
competition that consciously positioned itself against the state university entry examinations.
Dafen, as a part of Shenzhen heavily influenced by the establishment of a Special Economic Zone
directly created by Deng Xiaoping’s policies, became China’s center of the trade in oil paintings.
The domestic and international notoriety of this small village has attracted a large number of oil
painters, triggering the development of an entire system of painting and marketing surrounding
their work. Although my two examples are ultimately triggered by the same reforms, they draw
on very different social groups in terms of both age, interest, and education. This suggests that
other processes and movements triggered the reforms may also have some commonalities with
these examples—an inference left for later work to pursue.
Methodology

In order to investigate these two cases, and begin to appreciate their significance to creative practices in contemporary Chinese society, I apply both Michael Foucault’s analysis of “technologies of the self” and Jacques Rancière’s idea of the politics of aesthetics, specifically, his concept of “the distribution of the sensible”.

In his discussion of “Technologies of The Self”, Michael Foucault argues that, “technologies of the self, which permits individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain stated of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault,18). I take this to mean that Foucault’s meaning for the technologies of the self involves a positive and desirable change (“happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”) in individual’s physical and mental existence, which can also be contextualized as a way of individual improvement and advancement. What I also see emphasized in Foucault’s idea of technologies of the self is that this improvement and advancement is realized through “a number of operations” that operate in two directions. An individual can improve and advance himself both internally as through “effect by their own means”, and externally, as “with the help of others”.

Foucault’s idea of the technologies of the self helps us to recognize and understand an individual’s internal and external desire for improvement through social and cultural practices. By viewing the two competitions which I discuss in the following chapters as form of technology of the self, I believe we can more genuinely engage with the role of the participating individual, either a Chinese youth in the writing competition or a painter in the Dafen painting competition, in a way that fully recognizes how they act on and are acted on by others. Through this approach, we can
more closely connect with the participants’ desires for improvement and their difficulty in fulfilling these desires. In addition, since these desires also need a source of external recognition, we can begin to approach the complex power structures that are constructed during these competitions. We find a clear portrait of the organizers’ and the judges’ roles in these two competitions, and see how the organizers’ and judges’ own values, status, and standards reshape the participants. To summarize, I use Foucault’s idea of technologies of the self to help us to understand what form of creativity has been desired, sought, perceived and constructed in the context of young Chinese writers and Dafen painters.

Foucault’s idea can be helpful in understanding the reason why both the Chinese youth are interested in participating in the writing completion and the Dafen painters’ are interested in participating in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition (On-site Oil Painting Copying Competition, which will be introduced in detail in chapter 2) respectively. Individuals from both groups already possess certain social privileges or creative skills: among the Chinese youth group, the majority are educated and have a greater chance of having an official education which will allow them to apply to Chinese universities after graduating from their senior highs schools; among the Dafen painters, their very name means that they have already acquired certain level of painting skill and have found a painting job in Dafen. Despite these privileges and skills, both groups are unsatisfied with their current identities, and both desire to be publicly recognized as creative beings through competition in order to improve their status. This internal desire for improvement and advancement as well as the external desire for public recognition—similar to the Foucault’s analysis of “technologies of the self”—explains their interest in participating in competitions. This leads to a dynamic power structure built around this internal desire for and external recognition of one’s creativity, which will be examined in details in later chapters.
The nature of creativity in contemporary China is not only defined by the actions of individuals as they seek to improve or advance themselves. There are also larger, social level processes involved. In order to move beyond the role of an individual in these two settings and link these settings to a wider social and cultural context in contemporary China, I turn to Jacques Rancière’s idea of “the distribution of the sensible”, specifically, the idea of partition.

In his talk on politics and aesthetics, Jacques Rancière explains that:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. (Rancière,2013-7)

In this statement, Rancière emphasizes that the distribution of the sensible is a system that must precede a society’s ability to perceive or not perceive elements that are present in its communal setting. The importance of this system lies in its ability to shows who and what are allowed to participate in particular elements of the wider community, as well as when, where, and how they may participate. Understanding this system can help us to see what kind of shared and exclusive features circulate within a community and to see what defines the boundary of that community. Simultaneously, these boundaries become gaps which act to separate what a community sees as its inside and outside.
Segregation between insiders and outsiders in a group can be regarded as a partition, and this particular form of partition is also discussed by Rancière’s under his definition of politics and police. Rancière explains that:

I call ‘distribution of the sensible’ a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed. The partition of the sensible is the dividing-up of the world (de monde) and of people (du monde), the nemein upon which the nomoi of the community are founded. This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, as that which separates and excludes; on the other, as that which allows participation.

(Rancière, 2015-44)

The idea of partition in Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” can be useful in allowing us to see how groups are separated from others, an alternate way of describing participation and group formation. Through the process of separation, we see what elements in a particular setting obtain power and authority within a large group, while simultaneously seeing what other types of groups are constructed and reformed through their separation from these more powerful elements. Within the two cases I examine, I find that Rancière’s idea of “the distribution of the sensible” is helpful in understanding the complex, contradiction-filled and conflicted boundaries that are constructed through participation in each competition and how they work to form identities. This allows me to see the communities that participants—either Chinese youth or Dafen painters—desire to access and the actual communities they find themselves in. At the same time Rancière’s ideas allow me to also investigate what kind of communities are given the power and authority to allow these participants to enter into these communities. Most significantly, through the lens of Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible”, I find a useful way to understand that which “separates
and excludes” in the various cultural practices that surround creativity in contemporary Chinese society.

**An Outline for an Investigating**

In order to reach our goal of better understanding cultural practices in contemporary China related to creativity, Chapter 1 first examines the case of a group of Chinese youth and their participation in the *Xin Gainian Zuowen Daisai* a writing competition that began in the late 1990s. Here I provide detailed analysis of the writing competition in order to arrive at an understanding of its nature as a creative activity. I provide a close analysis of the writing contest’s three principles and apply Foucault’s and Rancière’s ideas discussed above in order to obtain a clear sense of how a group of Chinese youths, through their participating in this writing competition, are empowered as creative individuals and at the same time disempowered as they allow themselves to be subjugated to the authority of the competition’s organizers and judges. In addition, in Chapter 1 I also show how a variety of partitions have been constructed that act to define this group of Chinese youths and simultaneously define contemporary Chinese society.

Moving to Chapter 2, I focus on a group of painters located in Shenzhen’s Dafen Village. This group of painters has drawn both Chinese and international attention due to their employment in the international trade of commercially copied art. I show how this attention has shaped understandings of the Dafen painters’ collective identity as copyists or creative workers and how their work is interpreted as either simple copies or something much more complex. I also examine the *Xianchang Youhua Linmo* Competition, a painting contest held by the Dafen local government, as a comparative contrast to the writing competition examined in Chapter 1. I find that through the use of Foucault’s and Rancière’s ideas, we can come to see the complex situation that exists around the recognition of the creative value of the Dafen painters, which extends from their methods of
work to the paintings they create. My analysis focuses on the complexity of this situation and shows how a number of possible causes have led to misunderstanding and misrecognition of the Dafen painters and their work. I also briefly consider how a number of social issues may relate to this misunderstanding and misrecognition.

I conclude briefly by revisiting the key features of the Xin Gainian Writing Competition participants and the Dafen painters. I further suggest that the paradox inherent in the desire to be judged as creative, both individually and as a group, by an existing authority seen as contributing to the stifling of creativity cannot be overcome. This leaves no clear path for the social recognition of creativity within China; a situation that I suggest is unavoidable.
Chapter 1: The New Concept Writing Competition and Its participants

In 2008, the then 24-year-old young Chinese man named Guo Jingming was proclaimed to be one of “the most successful writers in China today” by The New York Times in the article “China’s Pop Fiction”. In this article, Aventurina King, one of the Times’ reporters focusing on Chinese culture and entertainment, reported that Guo was then China’s highest earning author with an income of $1.4 million, and seen as more popular than the internationally recognized prize-winning authors Gao Xingjian and Jiang Rong. In the same article King detailed the career of a then twenty-five-year old writer Han Han—famous for his books sales in the millions and notorious for his status as a dropout race car driver.

Aside from the two writers’ youth, King noted one other commonality between these two men: both had first drawn China’s literary attention to themselves while still in high school through their victory in the same national essay contest: Mengya magazine’s Xin Gainian Zouwen Dasai, or the New Concept Writing Competition. While King spends little time investigating the role of this competition in the biographies of Guo and Han, a more careful consideration of this contest begins to reveal an interesting system standing behind these larger than life personalities. Han’s literary career began by taking first place in the 1st instance of this competition while Guo, somewhat remarkably, took first place in both the 3rd and 4th years of the competition (Huang, 2014). The attraction of literary minded Chinese to this contest and the success of the contest’s former competitors has been important in shaping contemporary Chinese literary culture—and is one of the ways in which creativity is defined in China today. This attraction and importance demands that we examine the Xin Gainian Zouwen Competition and
its participants in closer detail if we are to understand creativity in China at the turn of the millennium.

_Xin Gainian Zuowen Dasai_, or the New Concept Writing Competition, is a nationwide Chinese writing competition organized by the youth literary magazine _Mengya_, a monthly publication targeting Chinese junior high and senior high student. Since the first call for submissions in December 1998 (Zuojia chubanshe, A: 9), over the last nineteen years this writing competition has worked with many nationally recognized scholars, professional writers, and senior editors who have acted as the contest’s judges. During the same time, a total of fourteen key-level Chinese universities have lent their formal support to the competition. Before I begin to analyze the competition’s significance, there are two further facts necessary to understand its emergence. First, the magazine _Mengya_ intentionally promoted this competition as a means to draw attention to itself to attract investment and readership (Fumian, 137). Second, the competition was also developed to address concerns about the writing section of the _gaokao_, China’s national exam for university entry. These concerns saw the _gaokao_ as promoting a clichéd and stifling form of writing that destroyed creativity among Chinese youth (Fumian, 137).

Before we move into the analysis of this contest, a brief introduction of the _gaokao_ may be helpful in understanding the full implications of the writing competition. The _gaokao_, short for _Putong Gaodeng Xuexiao Zhaosheng Quanguo Tongyi Kaoshi_ (best translated as “National College Entrance Exam in China”), is an test not only of a student’s ability in standard Chinese, but also in English and mathematics, which are taken as part of the common core subjects for China’s higher education (Zhang, xx). Additional subjects may be required depending on the year and location in which a student takes the _gaokao_, however these three subjects are present on all
versions of the examination (Zhang, 8). The variations in the examination documented by Zhang Yu research on gaokao reforms in China also demonstrate it is important to understand that the gaokao system is in constant development and variable on a regional level rather than being a truly uniform testing system.

With this in mind, we return to the Xin Gainian Competition and note that it is mainly designed to act as a foil to the writing portion of Chinese subject section of the gaokao. While the writing portion makes up only a part of the Chinese subject section, it receives much more attention due to its weight in calculating the score for the Chinese subject test. As the writing section of the gaokao is disproportionately important and as the enthusiasm for achieving a high score in this section is quite high among students, a score-driven formulaic or mechanical way of writing has been viewed by many critics as a by-product of the gaokao. Xin Gainian Competition has been portrayed as a response to the gaokao and why it has chosen to cast the gaokao in a way that sees the examination as stifling creativity among Chinese youth and as overly rigid while ignoring the variations that characterize the Chinese writing section of the gaokao in time and space.

The emergence of the New Concept Writing Contest represents a moment in which Chinese literary culture made an intentional choice to try to reshape itself through China’s youth. Through examining this writing competition, I argue that while the Chinese youth who participate in this competition seek to empower themselves by developing creative value, they in fact have been cultivated and shaped in accordance with the standards and preferences of this competition and its judges through their participation in this competition. This occurs through the participants’ willing subjugation to the authority of expertise of the competition’s organizers and judges, as well as the participants’ acceptance of the judges’ tastes and understanding of creativity. This leads us to look at the competition in a different way. We see, first, that it is not so much the youths’ creative value
that is recognized through writing, but instead the competition’s organizers’ and judges’ authority, in effect constraining and shaping the organizers, judges, and their associated social institutions while building a regime of power among the participants--the Chinese youth. Second, rather than creating an open platform for all Chinese youth to be freely recognized as creative individuals, the competition creates exclusions and restraints around who has the authority to decide what constitutes creativity, and restraints on who can be recognized as a creative being. Finally, we find that the meaning of creativity within contemporary Chinese society remains unclear.

**Three Principles of the Competition**

In order to understand the significance of creativity for Chinese youth in their negotiation of identity, we must first closely examine the *Xin Gainian* writing competition’s own explanation of the writing style it seeks to cultivate. This explanation is key because it not only shows what kind of creativity is valued by this competition’s organizers, but also provides us with an understanding of the kind of empowerment granted to the contest’s winners.

First, we must take a close look at the three principles the competition’s takes as fundamental, which have remained unchanged since the its first year to the present (my translation follows each line):

新思维：创造性、发散性思维，打破旧观念、旧规范的束缚、打破僵化保守、

无拘无束

*Xin Siwei* (“new thought”): creative and divergent thinking, which can break conventional ideas and constrains of older rules, and break through ossification and conservatism, unconstrained
新表达：不受题材、体裁限制，使用属于自己的充满个性的语言，反对套话，反对千人一面、众口一词

*Xin Biaoda* ("new expression"): a new expression that resist the constrains of themes, subjects, or genres, using individualized language, against formulaic language and cliché

真体验：真实、真切、真诚、真挚地关注、感受、体察生活

*Zhen Tiyan* ("genuine experience"): truly, vividly, genuinely and sincerely pay close attention to, feel, experience and observe life.

A closer look at these three principles is necessary. Both the initial 1998 writing competition public announcement and its most recent incarnation in 2016 maintain that the contest promotes a style of writing based on three principles: first *Xin Siwei* ("new thought"), second *Xin Biaoda* ("new expression"), and finally *Zhen Tiyan* ("genuine experience"). A fuller explanation of these principles can be found through a rough translation of the contest’s promotional material. The first principle, “new thought” is explained as the contest’s emphasis on creative and divergent thinking. This thinking should break conventional ideas and the constraints of older rules, which are glossed as representing ossification and conservatism. The second principle, “new expression” is explained as meaning that no requirements are placed on theme, subject, or genre while also promoting new ways of writing that avoid formulaic prose. The final principle of “genuine experience”, emphasizing being true to life, is less clear than the others and places an emphasis on both vivid expression and observation of contemporary life (Zuojia Chubanshe, A: 8).
We can see several key features in this explanation of the competition’s three principles. The traits that are emphasized here clearly show that the creativity valued by this competition is based in newness, in novelty, seen as having the power to break the constraints of older rules and challenge conventional ideas. This emphasis leads to a simple, clear division between positive and negative features: creativity, newness, divergent thinking, and novelty are positive and valued; conventional ideas, older rules, conservatism, and formulaic prose are negative and worthless. The emphasis on the positive features in the three principles suggests that the act of participation can be considered as a transformation of the individual from a being constrained by the negative traits to one embracing the positive. Through this transformation, Chinese youth who win are recognized as creative individuals with these positive traits, and are empowered by them.

However, there is also ambiguity in these three principles, leaving space for both participants, organizers, and judges to negotiate this regime of power. Though emphasizing creativity and novelty, these principles do not and cannot provide an unambiguous definition of what is new and creative writing. Nor do these principles provide an unambiguous definition of what writing is old and formulaic. This ambiguity may seem to provide a constraint-free space for participants to express their own understanding of creative writing. However, given that the organizers and judges use their own tastes and understanding of creativity to decide who wins, this ambiguity in fact provides more space for them to practice their authority over the participants. This calls for a closer examination of the relationship between the participating Chinese youth and their elders organizing and judging them.

Shaping and Constraining
The participants in the *Xin Gainian* competition can be considered as seeking recognition of their expertise through the recognition of their creative value. Michael Foucault’s idea\(^3\) offers a way to examine this search for recognition. The process of seeking recognition of one’s expertise through participation is not a one-time-only opportunity. The *Xin Gainian* competition’s rules explicitly allow participants to enter competition in successive years so long as they are either under 30 years old or a junior or senior high student. The allowance of sequential participation indicates an assumption underlying this contest: individual creativeness as represented through writing is not an inborn, unchangeable fact of nature but is instead a set of skills that can be acquired and improved through practice. Participants are thus encouraged to train and modify themselves to better accord with the competition’s principles by entering the competition multiple times. This implies that participants may eventually acquire both the skills and the attitudes of creativity cultivated by the contest. I interpret the allowance of sequential participation in the competition as an instance of Foucault’s technology of the self, which also implies modes of training and modification of individuals in the sense of acquiring both skills and attitudes. This technology of the self used by participants in this competition promises to eventually allow these Chinese youth to become creative individuals, and therefore have their expertise recognized.

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\(^3\) Foucault’s technology of the self theorizes that individuals use both outward and inward directed actions or thoughts to change their physical and mental existence—a change that the individuals involved would recognize as positive or desirable and representing improvement. In referring to the *Xin Gainian* competition as a technology of the self, I mean that participants are seeking to both become and be recognized as creative beings through the act of writing and undergoing judgment in this writing competition. Remembering our earlier discussion of what kind of transformation the competition’s principles seek to provide to its participants, we see that participants improve themselves by changing from individuals constrained by negative traits to ones who possess positive creative traits. These principles portray participation in the competition as an opportunity for Chinese youth to empower themselves by becoming creative individuals.
However, the recognition of expertise promised through participation in fact leads to the restraint of participants’ own expertise. This begins by first constraining participants in terms of age and academic experience. According to the competition announcement in 1998, in the first round of the competition participants’ articles were graded in three different groups based on their academic year or age (for those Chinese youth who were neither in junior high nor senior high). Group A was composed of final year students in senior high, Group B was made up of any student not yet in the last one to two years of senior high, and Group C contained any Chinese younger than 30 and not in the first two groups (Zuojia Chubanshe, A: i). The idea of grouping implies that individuals’ creativeness is not only gradable but also something that should be graded according to a combination of both biological age and academic experience. This way of grading, though introduced for reasons of fairness, seems to build a kind of hierarchy in which differences in one’s creativeness are based on seniority. A second point of interest appears in the relation between the definition of Chinese youth and the Chinese school system. There is a clear emphasis in this way of grouping that revolves around the Chinese school system—an individual’s relation to this system is taken as a self-evident way of labeling these groups. Through participation in this competition, an individual’s identity becomes more strongly tied and modified by biological age, his or her affiliation with the Chinese school system and the length of academic experience. As a result, each participant’s age and academic identity are used as constraints to qualify their creativity and their sense of self to shape them.

This shaping or constraining is furthered when participants are evaluated by the authority represented by the expertise of the organizers and the judges. In the Xin Gainian competition, participants acquire their attitudes and skills in creativity in part by first submitting their work and by extension an aspect of themselves to the writing competition and by accepting evaluations from
judges. In this act, they recognize the authority of the judges drawn from socially sanctioned individuals: scholars and experts from key-level universities, professional writers who from literature associations authorized by the state, and senior editors from influential publishers. This act of recognition validates both their judges and themselves, individual participants can only be recognized as creative (or not) by exposing themselves in writing to the competition’s criteria. These individuals attain a state of creativeness only through the result of judges’ evaluation and recognition. As Foucault explains, while the technology of self is a way of knowing and caring about the self, it does not involve only lone individuals left to change themselves through their own actions. Instead, it also relies on other’s help, on external recognition. However, this recognition—competition’s organizers and judges’ recognition—also acts to shape and constrain the participants by subjecting them to the authority represented by the expertise of the competition’s organizers and judges.

**Separation and Exclusion through Participation**

Having used Foucault’s idea\(^4\) to see how participants negotiate their identities while engaged in a process of both empowerment and disempowerment. We now turn to the way in which the process of the participation also acts to demarcate a community. Here, I turn to Jacques Rancière’s idea\(^5\) to help build a link between the dynamics of this writing competition and a wider view of contemporary Chinese society. Rancière sees the distribution of the sensible as a system that must precede a society’s ability to perceive or not perceive elements that are in its communal setting. What I find key in Rancière’s idea of the distribution of the sensible is partition, in the sense of what “separates and excludes”. Through this idea of partition, we can see how groups are

\(^4\) Michael Foucault’s analysis of “technologies of the self”

\(^5\) Jacques Rancière’s idea of “the distribution of the sensible”
separated out from others, and what kind of group are given power and authority. Linking back to the writing competition, Rancière’s idea provides a view of the various groups of people in this competition and their relation to Chinese society.

By dividing participants into age and education groups, the competition imposes a hierarchy around creativity. Given its focus on attracting a readership of junior and senior high students, the organizers at Mengya have clearly sought to cultivate this competition for its direct consumers. By requiring that all participants to be “Chinese youth”, “younger than 30”, or students from junior high or senior high, Mengya also inadvertently creates a new classification for who can be seen as potentially creative among the Chinese public. Mid- or later life self re-invention is tacitly excluded. Through allowing only certain groups of people to participate in this the Xin Gainian competition, the organizers of competition have created both a hierarchy and reinforced certain social privileges.

In addition to these visible requirements, there are some indirect requirements implied within the contest that lead to another separation based on financial capacity. The Xin Gainian competition has two rounds, with the announcement of each competition and the application form for the first round being published in Mengya magazine or a selection of other newspapers. This limits who is aware of the contest to a more select group than all Chinese under thirty. Anyone who is beyond the age of thirty is denied the opportunity of participating this contest and competing for public recognition of their creative writing skill. Participants must then mail their articles with the application forms back to the magazine publisher before the deadline. If participants’ articles are judged creative enough to enter the second round, they will then receive a notice of the selection of their essay which requires that they physically go to Shanghai to participate the second round, in-site competition. This is explained as a way to minimize the potential for entries being
ghostwritten in the first round. Although the organizers of the contest offer reimbursement for a portion of participants travel costs, money for travel is not offered beforehand. This immediately imposes a second requirement on contestants even before the second round has begun: they must be capable of affording the cost of travel to Shanghai and any living expenses they will have while in the city.

The importance of this second requirement appears clearly in a report on the first competition written by the journalist Shen Jialu from the newspaper *Xinmin Zhoukan*. According to Shen, when the competition was announced a teacher native to Shanghai but working in Shenzhen immediately sought to organize more than seventy students to participate in the competition. Out of these seventy, seven students were eventually selected to come to Shanghai to participate but out of these seven, two students were unable to come due to “financial reasons” (*Zuowen Chubanshe*, A: 23). Although this anecdote may be exaggerated, it does show there are real concerns that students who come from the region around Shanghai, or who have the financial resources to afford to buy the magazines and cover travel expenses, have a better chance of being recognized as creative youth. As a result, it is the Chinese youth who can afford to participate in the competition who have a chance to be recognized as creative individuals.

Separation and exclusion can be seen in terms of regional differences, causing misrecognition of creativity on both individual and city levels. This can be seen by examining the result of the first competition. For the first rank, fourteen out of the twenty winners were from Shanghai, and four more were from Shanghai’s two neighboring provinces. For the second rank, nearly 75% came from Shanghai and an additional 11% from its neighboring two provinces. Among additional recognized contestants, almost 51% were from Shanghai while additional 18% came from the two provinces adjoining Shanghai (*Zuojia Chubanshe*, B: 473-84). Based on this
result, it is clear that participants from Shanghai were over represented and that a naïve reading of the results would see Shanghai as the center of Chinese creativity. This seems to coincide with the frequent perception within China that Shanghai and the neighboring metropolitan areas represent the center of modern life and innovation in contemporary China.

The Xin Gainian competition has never been portrayed as a purely Shanghai or regional writing competition; it has consistently presented itself and has been seen as a national writing competition. Given the competition’s results, failure to recognize the influence of geographical location, financial capacity and differing information access of other regions would easily lead to the Shanghai region being seen as the sole cradle of creative talent in China. This preconception and the potential biasing effects hidden in the contest’s unofficial requirements blocks the recognition of creativity among youth from other cities. As the youth of a city can easily be taken as representing the cultural and social environment of their city, and as their performance tends to be associated with the city in which they live, this failure to recognize creativity among other cities’ youth based on this competition can lead to a more general failure to recognize creativity outside of the Shanghai region.

Furthermore, an additional exclusion may be present in the style of participants’ essays. The essays are submitted to the judges at both stages in way where the participants are not identified, so the dominance of the Shanghai region cannot easily be attributed to simple hometown bias. Instead it suggests a particular, regionally-focused style or set of literary concerns shared by people who have received education or been strongly influenced by Shanghai that resonates with both the judges’ choices and the participants’ writings. For those outside of the Shanghai literary scene, acquaintance with these concerns or regional features of writing is likely to be minimal—
setting up a very particular authority of expertise and a standard of taste, which determines and constrains whose work can be seen and allowed to further influence Chinese literature.

Separation also constructs an exclusive group composed by the competition’s organizers and judges, and the social organizations they represent. In the Xin Gainian competition, organizers and judges are given the authority to determine the form of writing that will be recognized as creative, constructing an authority of expertise that the Chinese public will adopt as their own for defining creativity. This authority cannot be seen as something simply externally imposed as the public must accept those judging as individuals who should be permitted to judge. The judges’ decisions simultaneously act to certify themselves as possessing the taste and expertise to act as judges and to certify the work they judge. This double certification is backed to some degree by each organizer’s and judge’s role in larger social organizations.

For example, in the judgement of the first competition in 1999, Shen Jialu reports that the first-round judges were Mengya magazine editors, thus drawing on the recognition of the magazine among Chinese youth, two professional writers and professors from Fudan University and East China Normal University—instiutions with significant national profiles that official supported the contest. Five other universities with national and international reputations, like Peking University and Nankai University, further provided widely recognizable authority to the contest’s judges (Zuojia Chubanshe, A: 9). The prominence of these individuals and institutions illustrates how the contest has been interrelated to pre-existing social authority while generating authority for the writing and contestants that are recognized—a process implicit in the maintenance of the distribution of the sensible as discussed by Rancière.

The prominence placed on this competition by existing social institutions, especially by nationally known universities, and its contrast to the gaokao suggests a tension within Chinese
society around the integration of youth into existing social forms. The organizers of the contest believe that the modern Chinese education system has changed lively Chinese writing into a set of mechanical drills (Zuojia Chubanshe, A: 3). This is an expression of the tension that surrounds the current education system, and the attempt to substitute the contest for the gaokao for entry into certain high level universities (Zuojia Chubanshe, A: 9) is an attempt at challenging this system. The shift to only giving contest winners priority consideration of their university applications (Mengya.com, accessed 2017) suggests this challenge is being integrated into the existing social form. This process of challenge and demarcation recalls Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible—here showing that an attempt to redraw this distribution cannot easily be carried out. The effects of this challenge remain unclear, after nearly two decades of negotiation between this new method of selection and the old.

Conclusion

To conclude, through the lens of the distribution of the sensible, I have shown how the partition of what is and is not creativity on the individual and city levels has been built. A separation--based on participants’ financial and regional differences--influences whether participants can or cannot be considered as creative individuals. This directly raises a question on the nature of the creativity promoted by the competition.

As discussed earlier, the three principles of the competition are ambiguous, meaning that the determination of what kind of writing is or is not creative largely depends on the authority of expertise possessed by the organizers and the judges. As a result, the concept of creativity promoted by this competition is not truly only certifying the participants through their actions in a technology of the self, but really shaping and constraining them while establishing the authority of expertise held by the organizers and judges as they define and determine creativity through
their own tastes and understandings. The power and authority of the organizers and judges, supported by the organizations they represent. Consequently, this competition can be seen as not only the search for the recognition of their creativity among the participants, but also the exploitation of these participants by pre-existing social authorities. The actual meaning of the creativity is left untouched in this process.

The fate of the New Concept Writing Competition remains uncertain, however its use as a technology of the self, in Foucault’s sense, remains clear. The individual participants undergo this sequence of judgements and self-development, sometimes over the course of several years, in order to modify themselves to obtain a state of certified creativity. At the same time, the choice of who may or may not participate, the conditions under which they participate and who may judge them mark social boundaries of what is visible and invisible in contemporary Chinese society—a distribution of the sensible in Rancière’s sense. This distribution remains un-finalized and disputed, an ongoing transition within Chinese society’s dispute over what is creativity and what is social desirable.

On March 29th, 2017, Mengya magazine’s website posted the announcement of its 20th annual National New Concept Writing Competition. Aside from a minor change to part of competition titled to “Xin Yuehui’ Bei”, or “New Reading Club Cup” in honor of this year’s sponsor (Xin Yuehui, or the SHKP Reading Club, a part of the Sun Hung Kai Properties corporation), the other aspects of the competition, including its three principles, remain the same. The Xin Gainian Writing Competition, having now run for twenty years, can no longer be considered new. In many ways, this writing competition has yet to clarify what is meant by creativity beyond the ambiguous concepts of newness and novelty. However, it may not be surprising that both in the Chinese intellectual world at large and in the intellectual world of other
societies, the process of pursuing creativity is always ambiguous and the definition of creativity itself is always contested and imprecise. For a different perspective on creativity as undertaken in a different medium, we turn now to a group of creative copyists: the painters of Shenzhen’s Dafen Village. In this community only a decade older than the Xin Gainian competition, we find a mix of international and domestic perplexity in part driven by yet another contest.
In 2008 at the Hexiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, China, the artist Leung Mee Ping’s installation piece “Made in Hong Kong” was first displayed to public (Pang, 214). Leung’s installation contained an interesting series of paintings, each of which presented identical content but painted at different sizes by Leung and an anonymous group of Dafen painting village painters collectively (Pang, 213), a group of painters notorious for their use as copyists in the reproduction of European masterworks. As part of the installation, Leung also required that the purchase of a single piece of artwork from the group of paintings would have a higher price than the purchase of a pair from the group (Pang, 217). Leung’s rule acted to highlight the point that while a single painting could be considered to be a piece of fine art, “the paired paintings are knockoffs” (Pang, 217).

Simply looking at these paintings with identical content but varied sizes may allow the viewer to be able to evaluate the paintings’ contents and their painters’ techniques. However, to fully appreciate them, the viewer must understand the contexts surrounding them. Without considering the identity of the painters who created these works of art and the social context under which these works of art were first painted and then chosen for inclusion in the installation, the viewer would fail to understand the irony that Leung chose to create through this installation by incorporating the Dafen painters’ work. If the viewer failed to appreciate the wider context of these paintings--their creation by copyists—and simply viewed these paired paintings as ordinary works similar to those displayed in any gallery or museum, the viewer would fail to understand the broader meaning of the incorporation of the Dafen painters’ paintings into Leung’s installation.
Leung’s installation provides an introduction to the focus for this chapter: the Dafen painters and their context. Similar to the Chinese youth discussed in the previous chapter and their desire to become creative individuals through participation in a writing competition, the Dafen painters are another group who seek to receive recognition publicly through the development of a form of creative act. In contrast to the socially accepted path to creative status taken by the youth participating in the Xin Gainian competition, the Dafen painters are faced with great difficulties in being recognized as creative individuals through their work. Rather than being seen as creative individuals who create aesthetically pleasing paintings, the Dafen painters’ creative acts are widely seen as the actions of mere copyists or a kind of painting-industrial workers who only acts to reproduce the world’s most familiar, recognizable preexisting images created from either well-known artists’ master pieces or images of celebrities (Li, 738).

This chapter seeks to move beyond the understanding promoted by some media and conceptual artists that view the village of Dafen as nothing more than a sweatshop and the Dafen painters as a group of migrant workers laboring on a factory assembly line. To do so, this chapter first examines the complex structure of the Dafen painters’ world, along with the difficulty encountered by Dafen painters’ as they try to be recognized as painters who practice creative acts. Throughout this examination, I once again first utilize the work of Michel Foucault⁶ in order to see how this process of becoming a “Dafen painter” and these painters’ participation in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Dasai (On-site Oil Painting Copying Competition) have been used to reshape the identity of these men and women. I then utilize Jacques Rancière’s idea⁷ to see what shapes these Chinese painter’s creative value and their creative practice.

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⁶ Michael Foucault’s analysis of “technologies of the self”
⁷ Jacques Rancière’s idea of “the distribution of the sensible”
The Dafen Oil Painting Village

An understanding of the Dafen painters and their creative practice of painting cannot be obtained without first placing these painters and their issues in a larger social and cultural context. First, we must consider Dafen’s position within Shenzhen City (neighboring but not within the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone) and Shenzhen’s location within China. As a place bordering Hong Kong, Shenzhen was selected as the location for one of the first special economic zones (SEZ) in China as a signature piece of Deng Xiaoping’s opening and reform policy (Wong, 2,6).

As the site of an important SEZ, Shenzhen has attracted and continues to attract many migrant workers and rural youth who seek to find better work opportunities than are available in their home regions. This places marks the Dafen painters as only a small subset of migrant workers who have settled in Shenzhen in recent decades. Turning to Dafen’s relationship with Shenzhen, we must first note that Dafen is a small village located outside of but near the Shenzhen SEZ and that it is only a twenty-minute drive from the Hong Kong border (Li et al., 158). Dafen’s position in relation to the Shenzhen SEZ and Hong Kong has been interpreted as had a profound influence on its fate: it is not so close to the SEZ that it became an “unruly derelict factory premises and dumping grounds of industrial wastes” (Li et al., 158), and it is not so far from Hong Kong that it would not benefit from the SEZ’s border relationship. This position means that Dafen has been exposed to the social mobility promoted by Shenzhen and the international trade opportunities brought by Hong Kong. Such an opportunity was embodied in the Hong Kong painting trader choice to establish his studio in Dafen in 1989. This and subsequent establishments has led to Dafen rapidly becoming an internationally known oil painting trade center (Li et al., 158), making Dafen today an art center with more than sixty large oil painting companies and more than 1,200 smaller scale art studios that are staffed by more than 8,000 working people (congye renyuan, 从业人员) within
the village and more than 20,000 people involved from beyond the village’s boundaries in the surrounding area (www. Cndafen.com).

Since 2004, Dafen has been officially as the “Dafen Oil Painting Village” and has further granted official recognition by being designated as a “National Model Base of Cultural Industry” by Chinese government (Li Vivian, 729). These honors were promoted by the presence of a large number of painting companies and studies within the village and these designations have in turn further promoted the development of new companies and studios within Dafen and the surrounding area. These rapidly growing painting companies and studios have incorporated large numbers of migrant workers who characteristically lack formal art education. The painters’ lack of formal education has led to a heated debate over whether Dafen painters are true artists or just peasant-workers, and consequently, there has also arisen much debate over the status of the Dafen painters’ work as pieces of art.

The Dafen Painter

As Winnie Won Yin Wong discusses in her ethnographic research Van Gogh On Demand: China and the Readymade, Dafen painters are actually very different from media depictions of them as migrant workers who work in a sweatshop. As noted above in Dafen, many painters are migrants from other rural areas in China. The majority of these painters have not had any formal art education. Most of these men and women have learned their skills onsite, either from other migrant painters working in the same painting studios or through the process of finishing the paintings themselves (Wong, 2014). These untrained migrant painters have frequently worked as apprentices for their masters (the senior and experienced migrant painters) or bosses, learning painting skills through practice and informal training from older painters. Wong’s research shows that the model of these painters’ working practice is nothing like the model in factory or the
assembly line of the Industrial Age, but instead similar to the model of work in the traditional art studio recorded throughout the world.

In addition to the majority of previously untrained painters, there are two other significant groups of painters in Dafen, both of whom have had a certain degree of art education or training prior to coming to Dafen. The first group of these trained Dafen painters are those who have been trained and educated within the programs of formal art academies. Much of this group is made up by young Chinese art academy graduates (Li et al, 161), and a smaller subset of this group is made up of senior painters\(^8\) who graduated from an art academy and who have worked in art related fields in addition to their work in work in Dafen. The second group of painters in Dafen with prior training are those who disagree with the painting techniques taught in the art academies, and thus reject academic education or training as a matter of principle. These painters came to Dafen in order to find an alternative way of becoming an artist (Wong, 100).

Despite the differences in training, experience and other characteristics that exist between these three groups, Wong’s research finds that members of all three groups desire to be recognized as artists rather than regarded as simply copy workers. This desire cannot be not satisfied only through internal, self-recognition or the acclaim by the ordinary public, but also requires external recognition that can only be provided by a select group. This group is composed of people who are already regarded as artists, the art academies, and of those local authorities who can offer certification as representatives of the state. In this way, the Dafen painters’ desires are similar to the desire for external recognition that attracted my focus in my earlier analysis of the Xin Gainiann

writing competition participants, however in this case external recognition is somewhat more difficult to attract at a group level.

Examining the Dafen Painters through Foucault’s Technologies of the Self

Both the choice to work as a Dafen painter and to participate in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition can be analyzed through Foucault’s analysis of the technologies of the self. First, I take the process through which a newly arrived Dafen painter learns their skills in a master-apprentice working relationship. This process allows Dafen painters to improve their creative practice in painting by learning from more experienced painters and by completing orders on a day to day basis. Second, I examine the ways in which participation in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition offers a way for the Dafen painters to convert the improvements they receive from their training into public and official recognition. This recognition is valuable to the awarded painters in more than just an emotional or psychic sense: they also have the opportunity to improve their concrete social status by changing their residency status from “migrant” to Shenzhen resident.

Through participation in a master-apprentice model of training used to transmit the skills necessary to create oil paintings, Dafen painters seek to increase their opportunities to become painters capable of making a living through their creative acts of painting. At the same time and on another level, this model of training also acts as a process of self-improvement and self-advancement through others’ help, fulfilling one of the roles of a technology of the self as identified by Foucault. The master-apprentice model of training is explored in detail in Wong’s research, which shows that this relationship between Dafen’s experienced painters and neophyte painters is very similar to the guild structure that bound earlier European master artists and their apprentices. In many art studios in Dafen, the neophyte painters learn and practice their painting skills through painting portions of an ordered painting over and over again. The experienced Dafen
painters may provide certain corrections to the neophytes’ work at this stage, but when the neophyte painters become more capable they are allowed to paint larger portions of paintings on their own and eventually even entire paintings are assigned to the neophyte painters.

Beyond this model of training, the way in which Dafen painters treat a gao (literally translated as draft but with the extended meaning here of a digitized version of the original image) also shows a method of obtaining and improving themselves through the creative act of painting. In her book, Wong describes her experience with Zhao Xiaoyong, both as friend and as Zhao’s apprentice, providing a first-hand account of the complex relationship between Dafen painters’ creative act through painting and their gao. As Wong shows, rather than simply copying these drafts, Dafen painters create their own art work by drawing freely while avoiding looking at these drafts as much as possible. Rather than rigorously and painstakingly scrutinizing the source images’ “consistency, sequence of brushstrokes, and sequence of figures and pigments applied” (Li, 734) in order to create their paintings Dafen painters paint “by only referring to the image of the original once in a while” (Li 734). This painting style of loosely referring to the gao in fact free Dafen painters from the constrains of the original source images, helping the Dafen painters to add to and polish their work with their own individualized characteristics. This again recalls a sense of the self-improvement found in Foucault’s idea9.

Wong’s observations of Zhao Xiaoyong’s free style of painting when using a gao can serve as a good example of how a Dafen painter’s individualized approach is realized in a painting. Instead of carefully mimicking each brushstroke and imitating the color used in the gao, like many other Dafen painters Zhao prefers to paint freely and tends not to look at the original draft. It is

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9 Michael Foucault’s analysis of “technologies of the self”
important to note that Zhao’s practice is not unusual and in fact represents a common approach among Dafen’s painters. According to Wong, Zhao’s use of this approach represents a link in a tradition of painting which was taught to him by an earlier Dafen painter and which he now teaches to his own apprentices. Zhao Xiaoyong and other Dafen painters see the use of this type of free style painting as a way of creating more individual, good paintings instead of a series of manufactured, identical copies of the gao. Through this method of painting, an aesthetic expression is pursued which makes each painting a unique artistic work. While the resulting works’ content is largely indistinguishable from the gao, they cannot be seen as simply mechanical copies. It is this incorporation of personalized painting features that leads to the Dafen painters’ desire to further improve their creative talents. In this process, the gao acts as a stimulus to self-improvement, suggesting it may also represent an element of a technology of the self.

Dafen painters’ effort to improve and advance themselves can also been seen in the flexible and creative styles that they adopt in their paintings—characteristics which are also used in competition among the painters to attempt to make their works more appealing to buyers. These styles emerge in how the gao is used. In order to finish painting a work based on a gao, Dafen painters must frequently translate the original images portrayed in the gao into a new media based on buyers’ customization requests. In this process of translating the image—from small, digitized initial gao the painters receive into much larger, variable oil paintings—Dafen painters must rescale the image while also actively changing more fundamental elements of the image like the brightness of colors or the width of strokes in the initial painting (Li, 734). The changes the Dafen painters sometimes perform can even extend to the configuration of the original images—an exercise in creative composition.
It is through this process of translation that Dafen painters cultivate and improve themselves through clear creative acts of painting. These acts are demonstrated in Wong’s study of Zhao Xiaoyong, who is regarded as a Van Gogh specialist in Dafen village. Zhao’s standard work is creating new variations on Van Gogh’s painting *Sunflowers*, a painting which depicts a vase filled with these flowers. Rather than follow the style typical of other Dafen *Sunflowers* painters who paint “the vase off-kilter” (similar to Van Gogh’s original version), Zhao chooses to distinguish his work by painting the vase of the *Sunflowers* “perpendicularly righted on the table” (Wong, 153). This change to the composition of painting, a personal creative choice to reconfigure *Sunflowers*, has brought notable financial benefits to Zhao in addition to acting as an expression of his own artistic self. The stylistic change has brought Zhao around twenty new painting orders and deepened his business relationship with a Hong Kong dealer who prefers Zhao’s style of *Sunflowers* over more exact copies of the original (Wong, 153).

Dafen painters’ choice to participate in the On-site Oil Painting Copying Competition (*Xianchang Youhua Linmo Dasai*) also can be viewed as an additional way of improving their creative value and seeking public recognition of their creativity. Through attending the competition, participating painters can obtain a better opportunity to be publically recognized as talented (and valuable) painters both within and beyond their community. This has real benefits to the migrant painters as the contest also provides an opportunity to improve their social and legal status from that of insecure migrants to more secure legal residents of Shenzhen.

Participation in the *Xianchang Youhua Linmo* Competition is a way of obtaining external recognition for abilities the Dafen painters have cultivated to improve themselves. A closer examination of the 2004’s *Xianchang Youhua Linmo* Competition as portrayed in Wong’s study helps us to better understand this way that Dafen painters pursue self-improvement. 2004 marked
the start of the first Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition, which was held in Dafen Village by local officials (Wong, 1). Over the three and a half hours taken up by this competition, 110 painters attempted to recreate a painted copy of the Russian Artist Ilya Repin’s portrait of the 19th century Russian art critic Vladimir Stasov. As Wong notes, the choice of the competition’s theme is quite interesting given its socialist undertone being chosen by a jury of Shenzhen artists in a nominally postsocialist age (Wong, 4)—an interesting potential statement of identity we leave aside for now. At the end of the three and a half hour contest, ten out of the 110 participated painters were awarded both cash prize and the chance to change their non-local household registration (hukou) to a local Shenzhen urban household registration (Wong, 1), providing access to Shenzhen services and status that would otherwise be denied to them.

It is worth noting a point of similarity between the Xin Gainian Competition and Dafen’s Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition: both contests allow participants to enter the respective competitions in successive years. As with the writing contest, the possibility of continuous participation marks a recognition and expectation that the participants’ skills not a given quality and are capable of being acquired or improved through continuous years of practice. There are notable differences between the two contests however.

Through participating in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition, both Dafen painters and painters from other areas are provided with significant opportunities very different from those offered to winners of the Xin Gainian Competition. These opportunities include both the chance to be publicly recognized talented painters and the chance to obtain official residency in Shenzhen. Participation in the contest over consecutive years is allowed and, as long as participants can physically participate in the competition, painters are encouraged to train and modify themselves in order to better pursue both opportunities. Obtaining the public recognition can be regarded as
an effort to improve oneself “with the help of others” in the sense of Foucault’s technologies of the self. Winning public (or others’, in Foucault’s sense) recognition while also obtaining Shenzhen residency enables the winning painters to improve both their mental and physical existence. In this way, participating the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition can be considered as a way of self-improvement and self-advancement. Here, the technology of the self used by participants through this competition eventually allow these relatively marginal painters to become recognized as a kind of talented individual, and furthermore encourages them to become empowered and improved their creative value.

Participation in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition, while providing for the Dafen painters’ need for external recognition also acts to reshape and reconstruct their identities and even their unique creative values. Dafen painters are drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds—ranging from migrants without any formal art training to experienced painters who have either consciously rejected or unwillingly rejected by formal art academies—and the process of contest preparation may act to homogenize this diversity and reduce it to a single type of painter: a type conditioned by contest judgment to the standards of the style of formal art academy training. We see evidence of this in Wong’s examination of the annual competition in Dafen where, in order to win the competition, Dafen painters must take sketching and art history exams in addition to their paintings—requirements typical of the art academies. This way of evaluation Dafen painters substitutes their actual abilities as painters for their performance in a more academic evaluation system. Furthermore, this competition, following on Wong’s discussion of efforts to recruit painters for Dafen, creates a contradiction in that the same local government that works to promote Dafen painters as creative artists who do not require a formal, academic education comes to require the evaluation of these painters through formal, academic standards. Following the rules of the
The rewarding of talented painters with a Shenzhen household residency, also acts to shape the identity of the participating painters by binding them to the local region and to constrain the uncertainty status characteristic of Dafen painters. The Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition captures the Dafen painters’ desire to get an authority’s recognition for an improved mental and physical existence and redirects this desire to accord with the local government’s desire to create a strong regional tie binding talented and valuable painters to the village while creating a kind of brand name for the “Dafen painter”. The opportunity to gain Shenzhen residency through the competition does not really bestow creative value on the participating painters so much as it acts as an economic enticement that not coincidently discourages winners from leaving the Dafen area.

The greater the desire among Dafen painters for that their creative acts of painting be certified by an authority, the stronger the regional tie the local government can construct between these painters and the village of Dafen. The creation of a new brand name, the “Dafen painter”, by the local authorities by means of this competition also acts to impose a new, unified identity upon the diverse training and perspectives that are represented by Dafen’s painters. With this in mind, we see that although the competition open to anyone regardless of their origin, the local Dafen government, as the organizer of the competition, has very clear understanding of where the winning painters should end up: in Dafen. This contest also seeks to construct a new, uniform regional label that can be branded on the participating painters. Thus, rather than simply helping participants to increase their individual creative values through development and recognition of
their skill in painting, this competition seeks to reshape and constrain their identity into a shared regional one.

This use of external recognition to attempt redefine the way Dafen see both themselves and are seen by others opens up the opportunity to view the Dafen painters and their works through Rancière’s idea of the distribution of the sensible, of a boundary that “separates and excludes”. Through this idea of partition, we can see how the group of Dafen painters are separated out from other artists, like early modern European artists and contemporary Japanese animators. The partitions which separate these groups act to define the Dafen painters’ creative acts of painting in a way that invites the interpretation of their work as a kind of mechanical copying, and this interpretation shapes Dafen painter’s creative identity in important ways.

**Viewing Dafen painters through Rancière’s Distribution of the Sensible**

Inspired by Rancière’s idea of the distribution of the sensible, in the *Xianchang Youhua Linmo* Competition, we immediately find a separation between formal art academy training and informal styles of training. This separation acts to construct a privileged status for the style developed during formal academy training. This is quite different from the *Xin Gainian* writing contest we examined previously where the standards for judgement and explicitly preferences aimed to valorize a range of styles and differentiate the contest from the formal academic standards of the *Gaokao* exam. The attempt to pull participants into the style promoted by formal art academy training requires closer consideration.

As Wong’s research shows, the rules of the *Xianchang Youhua Linmo* Competition require participants to take both sketching and art history exams—which are normally elements of the art academy evaluation system—in addition to examination of their skills as painters. This choice to
follow the formal art academy form of evaluation tends to benefit participants who have already had exposure to similar training experiences (either formally at an academy or through less formal instruction by academy-trained instructors) and may make this subset of participants more likely to be chosen as winners. Given that the majority of Dafen painters are those who have never received formal art training or who have consciously chosen to refuse formal art training in an academy, the largest group of Dafen painters (though talented and valuable) is at a disadvantage compared to those with formal academy training. Consequently, formally trained painters have an advantage over their peers to be selected by this contest and thus become influential in Dafen and Chinese painting field in general. Moreover, these painters have a better opportunity to access to social services from Shenzhen as well through the contest’s offer of Shenzhen residency. In this way, the competition becomes a way of cultivating a dominant academy style of painting rather than genuinely discovering new talents. Examining this through Rancière’s idea of partition, an authority of expertise based on a dominant academy style has been established and used to constrain Dafen painters, determining whose painting can be seen, be allowed public recognition, and be provided the opportunity to further influence Chinese oil painting.

Furthermore, as the winners of the *Xianchang Youhua Linmo* Competition have better opportunities to obtain the household registration issued by the Shenzhen government, a regional segregation is also constructed. As Wong’s observation on the competition above have shown, a painter with formal art academy training is more likely to wins the competition and thus more likely to obtain official residency in Shenzhen. Considering the requirements and difficulties associated with changing household registration in China, this better opportunity means that contest winners have are severed from their former hometown and re-attached to the Shenzhen municipality in a way that makes it unlikely they will seek residency outside of Shenzhen later in
their lives. We see from this that the contest also acts to accumulate and retain the talented artists of the art academy style within Dafen.

Although through this process Dafen may become reconfigured as a cradle of officially recognized, talented painters, at the same time a regional segregation of painting talent (and potential style) is constructed as well. From the perspective of the painters, given that household registration is connected with a wide range of social services, painters who are willingly to live in Dafen over the course of their lifetime are likely to see this competition as an excellent opportunity to access to social protections rather than regional tie that will limit their mobility. Their willingly participation acts to segregate and restrain them in the long term in ways that may not necessarily be desirable. Here, with Rancière’s idea of “the distribution of the sensible” we can see that the Xianchang Youhua Limo Competition may in fact constructing a regional segregation of between talented painters, despite being officially open to any painter. This leads to a dangerous and problematic possibility that creative individuals with painting skills cannot have their creativity fully recognized in Dafen, which may either lead these Dafen painters being unable to fully express their creative identities, or lead Dafen to eventually fail in attracting and maintaining an influx of creative talents.

In addition, economic pressures may be leading to a decrease in the diversity of types of Dafen painters, as these pressures favor a specific type of Dafen painter who has the resources to can create a massive numbers of paintings within short period of time. These pressures are produced by the rapid growth in the real estate market of Dafen and its surrounding areas, as well as by the declining sales price of the Dafen painters’ paintings. Rent in Dafen has grown from one point five RMB/month/m² in 1989 to thirty-three RMB/month/m² in 2008, with a rapid increase beginning after 2004 when rent was at four RMB/month/m² (Li et al., 161). The price of each painting has
not grown at the same growing pace, and in fact has declined. Prior to the global financial crisis of 2008, a painting produced by Dafen’s painters could sell for a price of US$12-13, but after the crisis similar paintings only sold for US$3-5 (Li et al., 161). Burdened by both rapid increases in the cost of rent and a decrease in profits since the financial crisis in 2008 (Li et al., 161), Dafen painters have been increasingly forced to live in poor living environments—including structures referred to as “hands-shaking buildings”\(^\text{10}\) due to the closely packed construction—and have been inconvenienced with subsidized flats (Li et al., 161). Due to the severity of the situation, Dafen painters have been forced to work increasingly long hours in order to meet even their most basic needs for living. Consequently, only those painters who have been able to create a greater number of paintings within increasingly short amounts of time have survived in this harsh situation.

Painters who have been talented and creative in other ways of specialized, though slower, painting become more likely to fail economically in Dafen and be forced to leave. Although fast and efficient painting does not necessarily mean a technique is less creative, the diversity in both specialization and range of painting skills among Dafen painters has inevitably decreased. We can see how another partition has been constructed in Dafen: in order for painters in Dafen to survive, they must work overtime and at an overload in order to fulfill their basic living needs. This has led to their creative painting skills to be controlled and constrained to painting styles and orders that promise the fastest profits; this means that those painters who cannot afford living space in Dafen lose the chance to contribute to and be recognized as part of the Dafen painter identity, even though they may possess a high degree of skill and creativity.

\(^{10}\) “Hands-shaking buildings” refers to the situation that occurs when buildings are construct too close together, suggesting that a resident from one building can reach out from his or her own room and shake hands with another resident from the opposite building.
Beyond these financial considerations, the international perception of Dafen painters and their work also act to construct a problematic separation related to their status. Due to both a misunderstanding of the relationship between Dafen painters’ and their gao—in effect more of source material than a strict template—and a misunderstanding of the Dafen painters’ master-apprentice model of training and work, Dafen painters’ identities are widely perceived by many both within and outside of China as nothing more than copyists and migrant workers working at an assembling line. This perception, or more accurately preconception, of Dafen painters and their practice is very problematic as it acts to deny Dafen painters’ creative practice, and separates them somewhat arbitrarily from the similar historic tradition that characterized early modern European artists and their apprentices, which was not dissimilar to Dafen painters’ own working model.

Several ironic titles from major print media highlights the attitude that Dafen painters’ works are mere copies. For example, the *New York Times* declares “Own Original Chinese Copies of Real Western Art!”, while Germany’s *Der Spiegel*’s takes a decidedly less humorous tone by writing of “Van Gogh from the Sweatshop”. The more specialized and higher brow *Artform International* takes a consciously more ironic approach in Philip Tinari’s article “Original Copies”, contrasting with the decidedly plain title the *Vancouver Sun* chose to portray Dafen: “The Master Art Copyists of Dafen” (Li, 730). Despite some differences in word choice, all these examples ignore the difference that exists between Dafen painters’ practice of painting and mechanic copying. The sardonic tone frequently employed in these titles and the prominence of the word copy in these titles acts to separate the creative practice of the Dafen painters from a creative acts undertaken by other groups. The use of the words copy and copyist is readily confused with the concept of forgery, which “involves technical or mechanical reproduction of existing work carried out with the intention of achieving the same effects as the model” (Li, 732). However as we have
already seen in the case of Zhao’s rendering of *Sunflowers* Dafen painters’ creative practice extends beyond the intention to achieve the same effect as a model; this practice is far from simple forgery. Equating Dafen painters directly with the practice of copyists equating their paintings with simple copies leads these media voices to promote a confused understanding of the Dafen painters and their work, while problematically separating the Dafen painters and their paintings from other groups of painters and their works that are traditionally seen as artistic.

This problematic understanding of the Dafen painters and their paintings fails to recognize the creative value possessed by both the Dafen painters and their work. This lack of recognition may lead to a form of exploitation through objectifying both Dafen painters themselves and their artwork. An example of this attitude can be seen in an art project entitled “The Benjamin Project” that was undertaken between 2007 and 2009 (Wong, 11). An artist duo named Empfangshalle and Thomas Adebahr hired Dafen painters to reproduce the German-language text of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in thirty-eight pieces of oil paintings (Wong, 11). Although the two conceptual artists asked the Dafen painters they hired to sign each their names on the back of the paintings, it is difficult to associate this with an act of artistic recognition. Instead, these signatures are treated in a way that is more easily interpreted as an act of objectification marking these paintings as readymades—an approach that treats the actual workers who create the art work as no different from other artistic instruments like paint, brush, film, or cloth—in serving the duo’s own artistic design and purpose. The employment of the Dafen painters as in effect living elements within the art project was evident at the exhibitions opening in 2010. At the opening of the exhibit in Shenzhen, the two artists invited roughly 40 Dafen painters to attend in the exhibition site in Shenzhen in 2010, Empfangshalle and Adebahr hiring criteria were clearly revealed: the two artists had intentional chosen roughly twenty
pairs of identical twins (Wong, 11) as a form of ornamentation to participate in the exhibition, making their conscious objectification of the Dafen painters and of their work obvious.

Returning now to the sarcastic titles found in the international press, let’s focus on Der Spiegel’s “Van Gogh from the Sweatshop” for a further example of partitioning Dafen’s painters from the mainstream of artists. This partition is immediately evident: the term sweatshop implies that Dafen painters are to be seen as factory workers who operate in the context of an assembly line and not as creative painters. By misinterpreting the collaborative labor relationship that exists among Dafen painters when they are called upon to complete large numbers of orders as a kind mindless labor of replaceable workers on a factory assembly line, a perception that Dafen painters as creativity-free factory workers is promoted that disparages Dafen painters’ artwork. This perception fails to recognize the diversity that exists in terms of creativity, and fails to acknowledge that the Dafen painters’ creative practice, as found both the master-apprentice model and collaborative work model, is quite similar to creative practices found elsewhere in the world. For example, both forms of the Dafen painters’ working models share a number of similarities with their contemporary Japanese counterparts—the collaborative creators of Japanese anime—who are widely recognized engaged in creative, artistic work.

In his book *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan’s Media Success Story*, Ian Condry shows that models of work discussed above in relation to Dafen painters can also be found among a group usually seen as quite creative. In Condry’s detailed investigation of the process of Japanese anime creation, we are shown that rather than having a single artist complete the whole act of anime creation on his or her own, Japanese anime creation is heavily depends on the collaborative work that occurs among various illustrators and designers employed by a studio. In many cases—and similar to the work model that exists between the experienced Dafen painters
and more neophyte painters—some of the participants in an anime project are assigned to draw only one particular portion of the whole work over and over again; in certain cases, they are tasked simply with repetitiously drawing only single images with no variation. Moreover, due to the size of each work of anime and to the time constraints each must be completed within, some Japanese anime studios need to hire artists from other countries to work as subcontractors to execute entire sections of the full anime to complete the film on time. This practice of subcontracting can be interpreted as being similar to the situation in Dafen where, as neophyte painters become more capable, the experience painters may choose to give the neophytes increased responsibility for finishing increasingly larger areas of a painting. In a sense, the experienced Dafen painter and the neophyte are analogues to the Japanese anime contractor and subcontractor. However, while there is no doubt that Japanese anime products are widely considered to be the result of an act of creativity rather than an act of copying, there is widespread doubt about the creativity of the Dafen analogue. Although the significant use of models appears in both cases and neither case can be seen as the product of one or a small number of artists, the end products of Japanese anime studios are seen as creative products or art, while the end products of Dafen painters are seen as uncreative and identify their makers as a combination of copyists and factory workers.

From the comparison between Dafen painters’ model of work and that of contemporary Japanese anime artists, we see that Dafen painters’ creative practice in painting is largely denied and ignored despite the similarities the Dafen model shares with its contemporary Japanese counterpart. The recognition of Dafen painters as migrant workers equates these creative painters to mindless workers in an assembly line in a sweatshop or factory, and the low social status depicted in the image of mindless workers in a factory pulls the Dafen painters even further away from the image of the creative anime makers. The misrecognition of the Dafen painters practice
seen in this comparison leads to further segregation of Dafen painters and their work from other art forms’ public recognition as creative practices.

**Conclusion**

Through the examination of the social and cultural conditions that have led to the emergence of Dafen as a village internationally known for oil painting, I have described a complex and dynamic world of Dafen painters. These painters—no matter if they have been trained in an art academy, have rejected academic art, or have been trained separately from academic art entirely—are all labeled grouped casually into the category of “Dafen painters”. Under this label, they are portrayed either as nothing more than migrant workers working in a factory assembly line within sweatshops, or as copyists who mindlessly and mechanically forge European artists’ masterpieces.

By more genuinely engaging with the Dafen painters method of work and their painting styles, we find a very different image of Dafen painters and their paintings. Rather than mindlessly scrutinizing the original masterpieces in detail or determinedly copying all the contents from an original masterpiece with the intention of recreating the initial image identically, Dafen painters work from their *gao* with individual variations on theme and in distinctive styles. In addition, we find that the way Dafen painters learn to produce their paintings and that the power structures that exist between experienced painters and neophyte painters are in some ways similar to the guild structures that bound earlier European master artists and their apprentices—an environment associated with very different connotations than a factory assembly line. When faced with large number of orders, the Dafen painters’ collaborate relationships with other Dafen painters can also be seen as very similar to those relationships found in the Japanese anime making. Despite these similarities with their early European and contemporary Japanese counterparts who are widely regarded as creative artists, Dafen painters and their paintings are not recognized as creative
individuals and products of a creative practice respectively. The boundary separating Dafen painters and their counterpart appears here to be an example of Rancière’s distribution of the sensible, an example where a boundary prevents recognition of a group as creative workers despite their similarities to others performing similar work.

The constant effort that Dafen painters exert to improving and advance themselves through the creative, individual practices of paintings and through participation in the Xianchang Youhua Linmo Competition (reminiscent of a technology of the self as described by Foucault), Dafen painters and their paintings is left unrecognized as creative by much of the public. If we fail to recognize the creativity that can be found in both Dafen painters’ identities and their paintings, we are only able to see these painters as copyists who simply mimic famous artists’ style of painting. This failure of recognition leaves us unable to truly appreciate the significance of the meaning of Dafen painter’s paintings; instead we allow ourselves to only be able to see their works as variously sized copies and instead of feeling appreciation for the Dafen painters talent we can at best only feel a sense of absurdity or irony at their incorporation into the works of other artists like Leung Mee Ping’s installation art “Made in Hong Kong” in Shenzhen’s Hexiangning Art Museum or Empfangshalle and Thomas Adebahr’s exhibit “The Benjamin Project” with its sets of twins.
Conclusion

Having examined both the case of the Chinese youth participating in the *Xin Gainian* Writing Competition and the case of Dafen’s painters, I have shown that individuals’ internal desires for improvement and advancement subjects them to the authority and judgment of groups that are seen as providing these individuals with recognition of their creativity. Chinese youth participating in the writing competition are subject to the judgement of senior writers and university professors who appear to impose a preference for a regional, Shanghai-centered style. Dafen painters, in an effort to gain recognition from the local government along with a chance to obtain official Shenzhen residency, similarly submit themselves to the standards of art academy examination. In both cases, these groups may in fact reject these standards—most evidently among the Dafen painters who explicitly reject art academy education, but potentially also among the Chinese youth over high school age but under age thirty who may otherwise have not attended formal higher education. Despite this rejection, both are subject to the authority of expertise.

Partitioning, exercised through the choice of who is allowed to participate in these certifying activities and through who is selected for recognition as creative, also is an important process in both cases. In the case of the writing competition, partitioning most obviously occurs through the age criteria—implying a rapid loss of creativity on ones thirtieth birthday—and educational requirements, a not insignificant concern in China. However, there are also implicit criteria: first financial capacity as participants are only reimbursed for their travel, not provided with the resources to travel ahead of time; second the availability of information regarding the contest; and third a clear preference for styles of writing associated with the Shanghai region—most likely due to Shanghai association with the print industry and its writing populations.
familiarity with popular new styles of writing. In the case of Dafen, partition is exercised along through an artistic and an economic pair of lines. Artistically, the styles of the art academy and the knowledge base provided through academy classes is test in the local government’s painting competition that is used to recognize and incorporate painters into the Dafen official community. Economically, the rapidly increasing costs of living and simulations decrease in the price of Dafen’s main painting export has placed a pressure on Dafen painters to adopt only those skills and styles that will allow them to rapidly complete large orders of paintings.

As the desire for recognition is an internal motivation among both groups I have examined, and as this desire requires that they submit themselves to the regime of already recognized authorities, neither group should truly be considered to be freely creative. Both groups are subject to an outside power at all times. There is a suggestion in some of Wong’s descriptions of Dafen that in the past at least some subsets of painters (those who lacked or reject art academy education) could find ways to express their own unique and individual creativity—assuming they could find a buyer—but this time seems to have passed as economic competition and official ways of incorporation have increased steadily. At no time would such a possibility have been open to the Xin Gainian Writing Competition participants as the formulation of the contest has always guaranteed they will be judged by authorities in professional writing or academia.

This means that there can be no solution to Chinese quests to obtain a true form of creativity. The desire to be judged creative by an existing authority who is readily acknowledged as lacking creativity is an obvious paradox. This is best illustrated by the Xin Gainian Writing Contest, where representatives of the same institutions that are seen as stifling youth creativity (academia and professional writing) though the gaokao are the same people who judge the participants writing. We are left with the paradoxical position that so long as China’s would be creative talents seek to
be seen by *Chinese* as creative, they will fail. And should a criteria of outside judgment be found, an equally complicated paradox would arise: how can judgement of non-Chinese certify a kind of truly “Chinese” creativity? This last paradox should not be dismissed as inherently nationalistic; it is more a question that arises in any culture that seeks to create an identity for itself or contribute in a unique way to a shared global culture. Anything else would in itself be a form of copying once again.

**Future Inquiries**

During my preparation of this thesis, I found that the idea that “China is uncreative” is connected to a perception that traditional or pre-modern ways of education and testing in China were unique in their focus on repetition. This way of learning has been interpreted as discouraging creativity and innovation. I question both the perception that these ways of education can be so clearly classified in this way and if these earlier forms of education were truly and inevitably discouragements of creativity. I have also found that the idea of “copying” lacks clarity and is overly simple. The act of using pre-existing art or ideas is not always simply copying and is not always opposed to creativity. The use of repetition of an image or the appropriation of others’ work is common in creative work of any kind (the reuse of plotlines from existing work by Shakespeare for example) and these uses are often difficult to distinguish from simple copying. The lack of clarity between these three concepts blocks genuine engagement with the cultural practices I have discussed in this thesis. I intend to further examine these ideas in my future work.
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