

# Preface

## Once More, Painting From Photos

Danqing is an old friend and we maintain a kind of old-fashioned friendship. We have never tried to keep up a routine correspondence or planned a meeting in advance. Instead, we indulge each other with (mock) surprises: "I'm in town and in a great rush. Can I drop by this afternoon?" Such ritualized short notices are a compromise between our old and new lives. Fifteen years ago, when we were both earning our Master's degrees in Beijing's Central Academy of Art, the only way to arrange a visit to a friend's home was to knock on his door. You were led inside; a seat was added to the dinner table; and a pair of chopsticks was put into your hand. Nothing could be more natural. Such convenience (or inconvenience?) disappeared when we acquired our first telephones in America. Voices replaced faces; prolonged arrangements took away the pleasure of real meeting. Somehow we made a silent agreement to keep the primitive "knocking-on-your-door" lifestyle, at the expense of not seeing each other often.

Our relationship is therefore made up of isolated moments, like scattered islets which are never meant to be connected. This tranquil seascape may be disturbed occasionally, as in the present situation when I am asked to write *about* him. My professional self as an art historian instantly comes alive and I am ready to reconstruct and historicize him -- to link those momentary experiences into a biographical narrative and to situate this narrative in a historical drama. (It is almost irresistible to contrast Danqing as a self-taught young painter in the Cultural Revolution and Danqing as a professional artist in a New York studio on 42nd St.!) But I also remember that he once bitterly cursed someone who "earns his bread by reducing artists into a specimen in a historical laboratory." He said this in 1983 in his cockroach-filled Queens apartment, and he was certainly not talking to the cockroaches. I did not take his words seriously, however, largely because they seemed to reiterate an old cliché in the Central Academy: students in studio art always viewed those in art history as failed artists, who did not even know how to hold a brush but felt they could criticize a painting. Only recently, after reading the piece Danqing wrote for this book, am I persuaded that he has a legitimate reason to complain about *some* art historical writing: he is himself an art historian and a good one. I was amazed by how well he understands art and talks about it. He raises important questions about imitation, appropriation, and juxtaposition -- problems which are both essential to him and larger than him. He discloses his passion for copying, and tells us why he paints from photos. He makes me think; and I will write down whatever comes to my mind in this preface. The game is now reversed: he is engaged in logical discourse; I am presenting fragmentary memories .

About "painting from photos," then. This phenomenon has become a primary feature of contemporary Chinese art, at least from the Cultural Revolution. I recall those heated days, The "revolutionary" teachers and students in the Central Academy produced numerous paintings -- portraits of Mao and his wife, images of factory workers, peasants and soldiers, Tiananmen floating in an ocean of red flags which were mostly, if not entirely, based on photos. The problem was not that the artist could not portray real

persons: although the use of life models had been abolished, it would have been legitimate to depict, say, a "model farmer" such as Chen Yonggui or Cuo Fenglian. The problem was about *authentication* and *idealization*. Art during the Cultural Revolution was based on a unique interpretation of authenticity and falsehood. Any portrayal of a real sitter would result from an individual act, and hence be a "false" artistic statement because of its lack of universality. Revolution demanded common truth, testified by the massive quantities of copies of "standard images," authenticated and supplied by the Party in newspapers, magazines, and movies. This further implied that any photographic image in an official publication gained a kind of historical, archival quality. A painting based on such an image would share this quality; and a painter who adopted such an image could worry less about being accused of "damaging the glorious images of our leaders and the people." A photo appropriated and idealized a person (by choosing a special angle and lighting, and by using the editing technique known as *xiuban* -- "repairing a negative"); a painting appropriated and idealized a photo (by adding colors, enlarging, and combining it with other photos in a single pictorial composition). During the Cultural Revolution, therefore, photography and painting constituted the internal mechanisms of a symbolic art and represented degrees of idealization and monumentalization. Consequently, painters began to collect photos -- mostly newspaper clips and plates removed from magazines -- as sources of their art. There were debates about who first discovered specific photos which went on to become popular images in painting.

I also try to remember when my artist friends began to take photos *themselves* -- a seemingly insignificant change which, in retrospective, signified a crucial shift in artistic production during the Cultural Revolution. It happened when the whole Central Academy was sent to an army camp near Inner Mongolia -- all intellectuals and artists had to be re-educated because they were the product of a bourgeois educational system. The first two years of camp life consisted of long hours of hard labor and endless political study. But this re-education program gradually lost its intensity toward the third and fourth years. Signs of relaxation included an increasing interest in sports and more people were allowed to go on excursion outside the camp on holidays and weekends. Most amazingly, art reemerged, first indicated by copying popular stage photos of Model Operas in oil or watercolor. Although such copies hardly reflected any creative spirit, making them became a favorite pastime because these were, after all, pictures. The army unit decided to have an art exhibition of its own revolutionary history. Students were assigned various topics, and they subsequently found their models in magazines and pictorials, and transformed them into paintings. Then, suddenly there was a feverish campaign to acquire personal photographic equipment. A major discovery was that many old factory workers in that border region owned foreign cameras. These were the people who went to help their socialist brothers in the People's Republic of Mongolia in the 50s; their salaries were high but there was nothing to buy; among the few available items in Ulan Bator's stores were East German cameras. Excited, teams of students made various weekend expeditions to hunt down these lost treasures. Word got around and the price skyrocketed; but every penny was willingly spent on a camera or enlarger. (Some students handmade their enlargers.) Photography became a shared passion, transcending the old departmental divisions between oil painting, sculpture, and art history. Photography permitted a taste of artistic freedom: unlike painting, which had to be a serious public enterprise, making pictures could be trivial and private. After so many years of copying photos produced by the authorities, it was more than gratifying to be able to control the camera oneself, and it was absolutely mesmerizing to watch one's chosen

images emerging in dim red light deep into the night. (A darkroom was still beyond anyone's wildest fantasy; printing picture had to take place at night.) Most of these photos were personal snapshots. No one claimed they were art; but making them meant making art.

I do not know whether Danqing was ever interested in personal photography, and have never asked him if he had a camera when he went to Tibet in the 1970s. I did see in his studio snapshots of ordinary Tibetans dressed in rugged fur clothes, but these could have been made by other people. My connecting such casual snapshots with his famous 1980 Tibetan Series – his graduation work from the Central Academy – must not be understood in a technical sense. I do not mean that a set of photographs had actually served as the basis for the oil paintings. Rather, there was a perfect symmetry between the Tibetan Series; and those revolutionary propaganda paintings, a symmetry best revealed by their associations with different photographic images. In short, if a propaganda painting had to idealize an already idealized photographic representation of the “revolutionary people,” Danqing’s Tibetan paintings were deliberately akin to a random collection of anonymous, informal snapshots. That these paintings were immediately embraced by the post Cultural Revolution generation as “genuine realistic depictions of Tibetan people” was largely due to this symmetry, which made his works purposeful and comprehensible. On the other hand, the symmetry itself means that the Tibetan Series shared the basic logic and mode of artistic production as socialist realist art; the major difference lay in their different “stuff materials.” In other words, the Tibetan series was still based on the principles of *authentication* (concerning what is real or realistic) and *idealization* (concerning what is good or evil). But what were authenticated and idealized had changed: no longer “standard images” of leaders and the revolutionary people, here were monumentalized “genre scenes”: men hanging out on a dirty Lhasa street, half-naked mothers feeding children against a ruined wall, or a young couple on their way to town. Danqing was perhaps the first post-Cultural Revolution artist to successfully transform “snapshots” (or “snapshot” imagery) into a public art form. At the same time, I believe, he had also committed himself to a long search for the meaning of “painting from photos.”

When I invited Danqing to show his works at Harvard in 1984, he had entered a new and difficult phase in this search. All the Tibetan images he sent to Harvard were duplicated from his previous works or new paintings based on available photos. The show was a success, but Danqing was more than sarcastic towards these “copies.” I suggested that he should probably abandon Tibetans and their photos altogether, and find a new painting subject in American life. I even took him to some old Boston bars, hoping that their dark interior would stir up his painterly imagination. I was wrong, of course, not only because I, like many people, mistook his “realist” label for his real self, but also because I failed to detect his profound interest in “painting from photos,” an interest that verged on an obsession. Danqing probably did not recognize this either in 1984: he still could not stand up to claim his right to copy pictures and magazines, and he was clearly suffering from an inferiority complex induced by the popular condemnation of “painting from photos.” Only later did I realize that he is never interested in “reality” or, at best, is only interested in a “filtered” reality through photo-graphic and pictorial images. I also realized that, to him, “painting from photos” is not a convenient means of image making, but an artistic process that demands serious understanding and justification.

I realized this because of his new paintings published in this book. These works and his "self statement" are not apologetic at all; he could in fact have titled the whole series, confidently and proudly, "Painting from Photos."

What do we find here? The 1989 massacre of pro-democratic students in Tiananmen Square must have re-connected Danqing to the Chinese scene. But he was mature enough to know that this connection was established by media. Media *is* reality; images constitute a visual world. Images make him laugh and cry, love and hate. Images connect with images, logically or arbitrarily, on the street and in his mind. Images produce images, through copying and appropriation. If fifteen years ago Danqing once believed that his Tibetan paintings represented real people, now he is depicting neither heroic Chinese students nor ecstatic Spanish dancers, but images that have made him laugh and cry, love and hate, images that are connected to one another only in his mind. There are deliberate fragmentation and unexpected linkages. These piecemeal yet interconnected images have become *his* reality.

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