

Cao Yong

In 1962, at the height of the great famine in China, an extraordinarily gifted child was born into hardship in Xinxian, a small town in Henan Province. Cao Yong's family, already struggling to find enough to eat, was suspected of disloyalty to the new government simply because a great-grandparent had once owned land, real estate, and banks, and because a grandparent had been a warlord. During the Cultural Revolution, this background singled the family out for harsh treatment by the Chinese authorities. Cao Yong's family was ostracized, refused residency permits, and even denied food. While other young children of his age started kindergarten, little Cao Yong began working. At age five, he found himself ferrying heavy baskets of gravel at a construction site. One day a rock pit caved in, nearly crushing the tiny boy to death under the rubble. Luckily, he survived.

It was through drawing that Cao Yong found peace and consolation in those difficult years, and at age eleven his talent was recognized. He began studying with the noted artist Yu Ren from Beijing, who worked briefly in Xinxian. The shadow of ostracism followed him even to art classes, but Cao Yong's remarkable persistence challenged him to paint, and to paint better, each day. In order to buy art supplies, he pawned his winter clothes in summer, his summer clothes in winter, and often skipped meals. He painted on any material he could find: scraps of used wrapping paper, newspaper, discarded wooden boards. When his mother brought him a bundle of dirty cloth which she had begged a shop clerk to give to her, Cao Yong burst into tears of joy: at last he had canvas!

Five years later, when Cao Yong was just sixteen, his family sold their only pig so that Cao Yong could afford to take the highly competitive National Entrance Exam of Art Universities. But before he could reach the capital city of Henan where the exam was to be held, his money and documents were stolen--and so was his portfolio. Cao Yong, in desperation, made an impassioned plea to the exam officials that he be allowed to take the exam; when the officials relented, Cao Yong scored the highest marks in five provinces. But it was to no avail; all the universities rejected him because of his family background.

But Cao Yong was not defeated. A year later, he returned to take the exam again; this time a recruiting professor defended him and pressed for his admission to a university. Cao Yong was admitted to Henan University, but only on the condition that he could be expelled from the school for even the slightest misconduct. Again, Cao Yong refused to be discouraged. Although he remained an outcast in the ideology-dominated environment, he excelled in his art classes. Despite constant persecution and several attempts at expulsion, he received his BFA with highest distinction in 1983.

To escape the political pressure and to pursue his love for untainted nature and humanity, Cao Yong, now twenty-one, volunteered to go to Tibet, where he became a professor of art at Tibet University. During his seven years in Tibet, Cao Yong immersed himself in the spare beauty of the isolated highlands, and embraced the distinctive Tibetan culture. With a thirsty spirit which perhaps unconsciously divined a more fulfilling future, the young teacher once trekked hundreds of miles over the Himalayas to the Tibetan border and smuggled himself into neighboring Nepal, just to drink in the air of freedom for a brief moment, before returning to Tibet.

In order to copy the remains of Tibet's ancient wall paintings, Cao Yong visited almost every monastery and temple in the entire region, and produced hundreds of paintings. To study the prehistoric cave paintings of Tibet, Cao Yong, accompanied only by a horse, a dog, and a gun for hunting, lived alone in deserted mountain caves for nearly a year.

Cao Yong's legendary experience in Tibet resulted in a remarkable series of paintings entitled *The Split Layer of Earth: Mount Kailas*. In this series, the artist not only addresses the conflicts between the physical and the spiritual, but also plunges into the deeper layer of sociopolitical and religious struggles in Tibet as well as in our world. In the spring of 1989, Cao Yong held his first one-man show at Beijing Artist Gallery. Over forty intensely emotional paintings shocked the Beijing art circle.

The exhibit was covered by China Daily, Beijing Review, Reuters, Agence France-Presse, The Canada Post, Asahi Shimbun of Japan, and other major international news agencies. Foreign ambassadors and representatives of foreign business

organizations in Beijing attended the opening of the exhibition, and Cao Yong was invited to lecture at the embassies of France, Spain, Mexico, and Bolivia. However, Cao Yong's success alarmed the Chinese authorities. Beijing police arrested him, shut down the gallery, then confiscated and burned seven of Cao Yong's unsold paintings.

But while under escort to the police station, Cao Yong managed to escape. With his fiancée Aya Goda, a Japanese art student, Cao Yong set off on a perilous eight-month journey as a fugitive. On the run through China, the couple was nearly killed in a car accident. Constantly blackmailed by local officials, plagued with serious illnesses, the two had to resort to begging to survive. Finally, in 1989, with the help of the Japanese Embassy, they were married and escaped to Japan.

This journey of tribulation was described by Aya Goda in her book *Escape*. Published in Japan in 1995 by Bungei Shunju Publishing, *Escape* electrified readers and critics, and was awarded the Grand Prize for Non-Fiction from Kodansha Book Publishers, Japan's most prestigious book award. *Escape* has been published in French and Spanish; an English version is scheduled for release in the near future.

In Japan, Cao Yong faced a new challenge: how to survive as an artist in a free-market economy. To continue to paint his Tibet series, as well as to feed himself and his young wife, Cao Yong worked as a gravedigger and took small painting commissions. But soon his artistic skill and versatility attracted much larger commissions to design and paint enormous murals. Within a few years, Cao Yong's murals adorned stylish commercial buildings, high-class department stores, and even ceremonial sites in Tokyo, Kyoto, and many other cities. In 1991, Cao Yong founded his first company, C & G Wall-Painting Productions, and was soon recognized as the nation's most honored muralist. Meanwhile, Cao Yong continued to work passionately on his Tibet paintings, and many of his finest works in the Tibet series were created during this period. His work was exhibited in Tokyo's prominent O Art Museum, Shibuya Gallery, and Gallery Bamboo, as well as in the Yunghan Art Gallery in Taipei, Taiwan. Famous Japanese art critic, Yoshida Yoshie, declared that Cao Yong's work astounded the art world not only because of its outstanding artistic value, but also because of its profound insight and powerful impact on the world in which we live. Moreover, Cao Yong was extolled by the Japanese press as "an artistic genius of our time."

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