

1 Zhang Daqian in his living room, Carmel. Photo by Roger Fremier, 1970 © The Estate of Roger Fremier

Driftwood on a Heaving Sea: Zhang Daqian in the Modern West

JOHN SEED

“On July 22 the Stanford community will greet a ‘living Chinese painting’, an old Chinese gentleman with a foot-long gray beard wearing a Chinese robe and shoes and carrying a curved walking stick.”¹

WHEN ZHANG DAQIAN (Chang Dai-chien, 1899–1983) (1) appeared at the campus of Stanford University one summer day in 1967, he presented an exotic figure. Standing just 162.5 cm tall—the same height as Pablo Picasso—and wearing a traditional silk robe, “Professor Zhang” had brought an entourage that included his wife, Madame Xu Wenbo (Hsu Wen-po), the Honorable Che Yin-shou, Consul General of Taiwan, and an interpreter. As an icon of traditional Asian culture and anti-Communism, visiting a campus politically divided by America’s involvement in Vietnam, Zhang’s presence was electric. After an ink painting demonstration at Tresidder Student Union—at which Zhang painted standing up without glasses—the opening reception for Zhang’s exhibition at the Stanford Museum attracted an unexpectedly large crowd of more than 1000 visitors (2, 3, 4).

Born in the final months of the 19th century towards the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Zhang was widely regarded as the last great practitioner of traditional Chinese brush painting. Uncommonly shrewd and adept, he used

his status and skills as an artist to navigate life’s disruptions, overcoming serious setbacks that would have defeated a less resourceful man. Now sixty-eight years old, he suffered from serious eye problems, but had recently made some of the finest paintings of his career. One of the greatest connoisseurs and collectors of his generation, Zhang had studied more ancient Chinese paintings than any other living expert, and the subjects and stylistic nuances of the historic past were alive in his prodigious visual memory.

Describing Zhang Daqian as a “living Chinese painting” offers an apt, but incomplete, image. A few years later, Zhang presented a friend in California with a more precise metaphor, saying that he felt like “driftwood on a heaving sea”. Zhang was indeed a branch from the tree of tradition, carried west and reshaped by the waves of change.

A *Guohua* (Traditionalist) Painter in Exile

When he arrived at the airport to flee China in 1949—carrying fifty of the 276 mural copies he had made in the caves of Dunhuang and a portion of his collection of antique paintings—Zhang was informed by an official that he was carrying too much luggage. After he protested that he was transporting an important collection of paintings that he feared the Communists might destroy, the man relented.



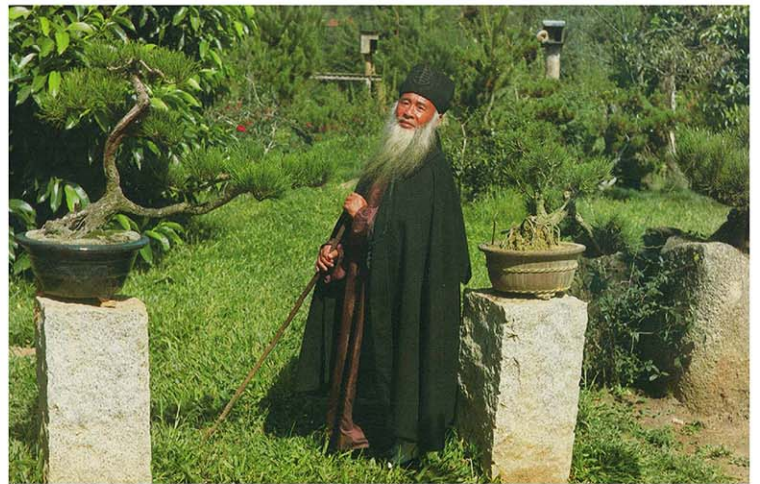
2 Demonstrating at Stanford



3 With Michael Sullivan at Stanford Museum



4 With Khoan Sullivan at Stanford Museum



5 "Garden of Eight Virtues", Brazil

Thirty years later, Zhang recognised the same man on the street in Taipei, invited him home and, in a typical act of generosity, presented him with a painting in gratitude.

Zhang began his exile in Asia, travelling from Taiwan to Hong Kong, and finally to India in the autumn of 1950. After a year in Darjeeling—where he studied Buddhist art and painted beautiful women inspired by movie posters—the artist took stock of his situation, which was, in many respects, dire. Zhang's properties and remaining collection in China had been confiscated and seven of his fifteen living children (two had died as infants) and three of his four wives had to remain there. Leaving China would also mean abandoning his many friends and high social standing. On a return trip to Hong Kong, accompanied by a pet gibbon, who travelled in a half-price airline seat, Zhang reunited with two of his sons and made the difficult decision to leave Asia. To fund his departure, he sold two antique works of art for the sum of US\$10,000. As difficult as the decision must have been to leave, Zhang had always been a restless man who understood the value of travel in an artist's development.

On May 30th, 1952, Zhang dashed off a painting in front of reporters at San Francisco International Airport as he prepared to depart after visiting the Bay Area. A widely circulated Associated Press news item about his visit—which

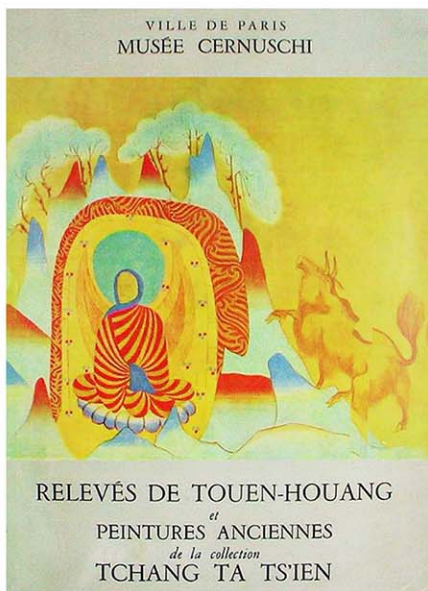
included a photo of Zhang grinning over his spectacles while painting—billed him as an "Oriental Genius" and "China's greatest living master of ancient Chinese classic painting".² Through an interpreter, Zhang explained to the reporters that he was returning to Hong Kong and would then depart to begin "a new life in the Western world".

A Memory of China in South America

Zhang initially settled for a year in Mendoza, Argentina, staying on a large property surrounded by pines, cypresses, cherry and willow trees. After visa problems made it difficult for him to remain there, he made another visit to the US in 1953, painting Niagara Falls while in New York State. After exhibiting his work in Taiwan and donating twelve major works to the City of Paris, Zhang moved to Brazil where he established a home and studio on a thirty-acre tract of land in Mogi, near São Paulo. For nearly two decades this Brazilian estate—the "Garden of Eight

¹"Noted Chinese Artist Here", *The San Francisco Examiner*, February 12th, 1958.

²Associated Press, "Oriental Genius", *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 31st, 1952.



6 Musée Cernuschi exhibition catalogue, 1956



7 Visit with Picasso in Nice, 1956



8 Dr Kuo You-shou

Virtues”—would serve as his base of operations (5). Over time, it included rustic Chinese-style buildings, a five-acre “Pond of Eight Virtues”, a grave for used brushes, a collection of expensive Japanese bonsai and fantastic rocks gathered from across the world. Wearing a long robe and hat, made to order by a movie industry costume designer, and accompanied by gibbons, Zhang reinvented himself as an incarnation of Su Shi (1037–1101), also known as Dongpo, the Song dynasty (960–1279) artist, poet and gourmet. The “Garden of Eight Virtues” was the setting for a masquerade, a marketing device and an act of resistance. China had changed, but Zhang’s idealised fantasy of it—which he conjured and made real in Brazil—had not. He held the principle of “*fugu*”, or returning to the past, as the foundation of his personal creativity.³

An Audacious Debut in Paris

Energised by his new surroundings, Zhang published in 1955 a four-volume set of books documenting his *Dafeng tang* (Great Wind Hall) collection, and travelled to Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan. 1956 proved to be his breakthrough year, establishing Zhang as an international figure on a par with European modern masters. During June and July 1956, Zhang’s art was featured in a critically acclaimed exhibition at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Thirty of Zhang’s works were presented in one hall—representing the East—while a retrospective of the recently deceased Henri Matisse (1869–1954), in another hall, represented the West.

Two miles away at the Musée Cernuschi, a concurrent exhibition, “Relevés (manuscripts) by Touen-Houang and Antique Pictures from the collection of Zhang Daqian” included examples of Zhang’s Dunhuang mural copies and works from the Great Wind Hall collection (6). As the exhibition title attests, all of the works on view were presented to the public as ancient originals. The following year, a painting from the exhibition, *Horses and Grooms*, attributed to Han Gan (706–783), the Tang dynasty (618–907) master, was sold by Zhang to the museum for US\$80,000, then the highest price ever paid for a Chinese painting. A group

of experts backed Vadime Elisséeff, the museum’s director, in asserting that the scroll was ancient so that government funds could be obtained. More than fifty years later—after much examination and discussion—Eric Lefebvre, the museum’s curator, finally acknowledged in correspondence that the painting is “no longer believed to be antique”.⁴

Perhaps coincidentally, when Zhang, his wife and an interpreter showed up at Pablo Picasso’s villa in Nice (7) that summer, Picasso, who had seen his work in Paris, showed Zhang his own “copies”, bringing out private notebooks containing still-life studies done in the manner of Zhang’s friend, Qi Baishi (1863–1957). Zhang, a discerning observer, politely informed Picasso that he had not grasped the essential rhythm of Qi’s brushwork or properly imitated its tonal variety.⁵

An Influential Friend

In Paris, Zhang stayed at the home of Dr Kuo You-shou (1900–1977), a close friend who had become his agent in Europe (8). A French-educated bon vivant, who held a doctorate in Education from the Sorbonne, Dr Kuo had bonded with the artist years before when they met in Chongqing during the Japanese invasion. After serving the government of Chiang Kai-shek in China, Dr Kuo was sent to Paris where he served as a high-ranking UNESCO official and also later as the Republic of China’s cultural attaché. He also soon found ways to use his network of social and cultural connections to bolster Zhang’s career. Together with his friend, Chou Lin (1915–1970), the founder of the Association of Chinese Arts in France, Dr Kuo devised Zhang’s meeting with Picasso and used his diplomatic passport to help smuggle at least one of Zhang’s antique paintings into the United States to be sold to a museum.

Improvement of the Masters

In the summer of 1957, an eye capillary rupture damaged Zhang’s vision, leaving him unable to paint for six months and creating practical concerns. Providing for his family—and for an entourage of students, visitors and hangers-on—

required a constant stream of cash. To pay for his life in Brazil, Zhang chased commissions, marketed his original paintings and gradually sold off works from his Great Wind Hall collection.

Zhang's profound knowledge of classical Chinese painting had paradoxically equipped him with the skills needed to become a masterful forger. A new generation of Western curators and collectors, anxious to acquire legendary and previously inaccessible Chinese antiques, would be tested, educated and often embarrassed by Zhang's contrivances. As Jan Stuart and Shen Fu recounted in a 1991 essay: "By creating 'ancient' paintings that matched the verbal descriptions recorded in catalogues of lost paintings, Zhang was able to paint forgeries that collectors had been yearning to 'discover'."⁶

In 1957, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston bought a fake Guan Tong (circa 906–960) landscape for US\$40,000 and then paid US\$28,000 for another Zhang forgery in 1958. The works had been carefully contextualised. A member of China's royal family—a former neighbour of Zhang in Shanghai—had added calligraphic colophons (inscriptions) to bolster their provenance. In late 1957, the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC paid US\$50,000 for a Song dynasty painting attributed to Li Gonglin (1049–1106): it had, in fact, been produced by Zhang.

These sales—as well as others that Zhang sold to dealers who, in turn, sold them to museums—have generated a legacy of curatorial revisionism and scholarly dispute that has persisted into the 21st century. When challenged, Zhang, who saw himself as making *fuzhipin* (複製品, or precise reproductions) that in Chinese culture are considered equal to the originals, was far from contrite. "I am not a forger", he explained to William Kiang, a Taiwanese official based in São Paulo, "I improved it actually. It is my painting." He also offered Kiang a prediction: "One hundred years from now, maybe you'll think my painting is better than the original."⁷

Becoming Modern

It is often said that modernism in art was the creation of exiles: leaving the familiar behind and coming into contact with new cultures is one of the essential experiences of modern life. As he travelled and exhibited in Europe, Asia and the United States in the late 1950s, Zhang was exposed to the dynamic art and culture of the Modern West. He also must have heard the criticism that was so often levelled at Chinese art: that it was static and unchanged. Seeing modern art—including abstract art—in major cities, including New York, Paris and Tokyo, brought out Zhang's



9 Working on a giant lotus



10 Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien, 1899–1983), *Lotus in the Wind*, signed Yuanweng, dated 1961, inscribed with two seals of the artist, ink on paper, hanging scroll, 179.1 x 96.5 cm. Private collection (formerly MOMA)

³Stuart, Jan, and Shen C.Y. Fu, *Challenging the Past—The Paintings of Chang Dai-chien*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991.

⁴Cahill, James, "Chang Ta'chien's Forgeries", July 2008, www.jamescahill.info, January 1st, 2019, <http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-jamescahill/chang-ta-chiens-forgeries/211-chang-ta-chiens-forgeries>.

⁵Strassberg, Richard, *Master of Tradition: The Art of Chang Tai-ch'ien*, Pasadena: Pacific Asia Museum, 1983.

⁶Stuart, Jan, and Shen C.Y. Fu, *Challenging the Past—The Paintings of Chang Dai-chien*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991.

⁷Pomfret, John, "The Master Forger", *The Washington Post*, January 17th, 1999.



11 Avery Brundage shows a pre-Tang dynasty bronze statuette to Richard Rheem, President of the De Young Museum, 1963

competitive side. “They (modern artists from the West) are beating us”, he once told a friend.⁸

In May 1961, Zhang’s work was again featured at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris: the exhibition was titled “Les Lotus Geants: Grandes Compositions de Zhang Daqian (Giant Lotus: Large Scale Compositions by Zhang Daqian)”. Inspired by the lotus pond at Kairakuen Garden in Yokohama, Zhang had created broad, flowing imagery on paper, including one grand composition that measured nearly 4 metres high and 6 metres wide (9). In an artistic dialogue across time, that responded both to the “individualist” literati painters of China’s past and Monet’s water lily murals at L’Orangerie in Paris, Zhang had found a new way of working that would culminate in his “splashed ink” style.

While in Paris, Zhang stayed with Dr Kuo, who understood the importance of changing the public perception of his friend’s work. In a bold move, Dr Kuo offered *Lotus in the Wind*, a painting Zhang had brought in his luggage from Japan, to the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York (10). Put on display in December 1961, Zhang was praised in MOMA’s annual bulletin for infusing “a modern freedom and vigor into the classical Chinese art of brush and ink painting”.⁹

A Centre for Asian Art

The M.H. de Young Memorial Museum (de Young), a museum in Golden Gate Park that had featured a Japanese Tea Garden since its opening in 1894, became a world class showcase for Asian art when Avery Brundage, the prodigious collector, agreed to donate his huge collection of Oriental art to the City of San Francisco (11).

Brundage was hesitant to collect ancient Chinese paintings due to the issues of provenance. He did purchase some works by living artists, including seven scrolls by Huang Junbi (1898–1991) (12), a traditionalist who was the head of the Art Department of Taiwan’s Normal University and



12 Huang Junbi standing in front of the Chinese Art Gallery, San Francisco



13 Huang Leisheng, founder of the East Wind Art Studio

toured the US several times in the 1950s, and a collaborative scroll Zhang made with his protégé, Fang Zhaolin, in the autumn of 1958, titled *Mushroom and Orchid*.

In May 1962—three years after the Brundage gift was announced—a blockbuster exhibition of Chinese art brought massive attention to the de Young Museum. Over 253 objects, transported by US Navy ships under heavy security, were included in “Chinese Art Treasures”, a travelling show from Taiwan that included works from China’s former Imperial collections. It was a spectacular exhibition, eventually seen by over 700,000 visitors across the US, that stimulated new interest in Asian art and culture.

Prior to the opening of the new Asian art wing at the de Young, two new art galleries appeared in San Francisco’s Chinatown. In 1960, Huang Leisheng (1928–2011) (13) opened East Wind Art Studio, which was followed five years later by the Chinese Art Gallery, founded by Zhang’s friend, Lim Tsing Ai (1914–2002). Colleges and universities were hiring new professors of Asian Art, included James Cahill at UC Berkeley in 1965 and Michael Sullivan at Stanford in 1966, each of whom would play key roles in Zhang’s career in California.

Travel, Friendship and Betrayal

During the 1960s, Zhang exhibited his work in cities across the world, including Paris, Brussels, Athens, Madrid, Geneva, São Paulo, Taipei, Hong Kong, Penang and London. Taking advantage of the ease of transatlantic flight, Zhang’s travels included numerous stops in the Bay Area visiting old friends and making new ones. “Mr Zhang was outgoing, spirited, energetic, generous, and a man of wit and fine humour”, recalled Fu Shen, who met Zhang in New Haven in the 1950s: “He was everybody’s friend.”¹⁰

During a 1956 visit to Berkeley, Zhang reconnected with Hou Beiren (born 1917), a journalist and painter whom he first met in Hong Kong a decade earlier. Hou had come to the US in 1953 where he and his wife worked briefly for Zhang Shuqi (1901–1957)—a Chinese born painter who had settled in the Bay Area—before a string of successful exhibitions provided funds for them to settle in Los Altos in 1961 and build an “Old Apricot Villa”, surrounded by Chinese-style gardens

There were reunions with other friends, including the gallery owner, Lim Tsching-Ai. Once, when Lim was short of funds, Zhang raised US\$900 by creating and selling a painting on the spot as friends watched. The painting carries the following inscription:

“After being separated for more than ten years, I met my old friend again in San Francisco. We held hands and were delighted. Tsching-Ai’s hair actually turned younger while I have become an old man with white hair.”

During the same period when Zhang was enjoying new and renewed friendships in California, troubling events were taking place in China. The Cultural Revolution, which began in 1966, led to Zhang’s family facing persecution and some of his works being destroyed. In April the same year, Dr Kuo was also arrested in Paris for espionage. Dr Kuo had apparently been passing information to Beijing for years, and in doing so, had betrayed the trust of his



14 Painting with Cheng Yet-por, Carmel, 1967



15 Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien, 1899–1983), *Summer on California Mountain (Yosemite)*, signed and inscribed with three seals of the artist, dated autumn, *dingwei* year, 1967, ink and colour on paper, scroll, mounted and framed, 115 x 65.5 cm

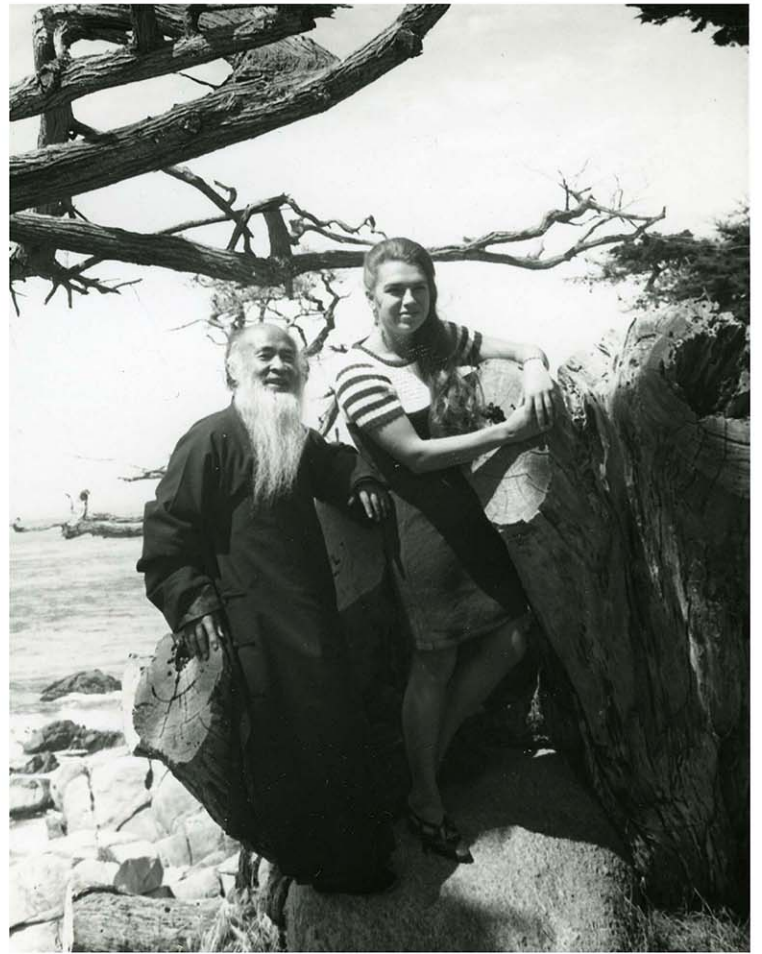
⁸Shu, Jianhua, *120 Moments of Chang Dai-Chien in California*, San Jose: Asian Art Center of Silicon Valley, 2019.

⁹MOMA, “New Acquisitions”, *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, December 1962.

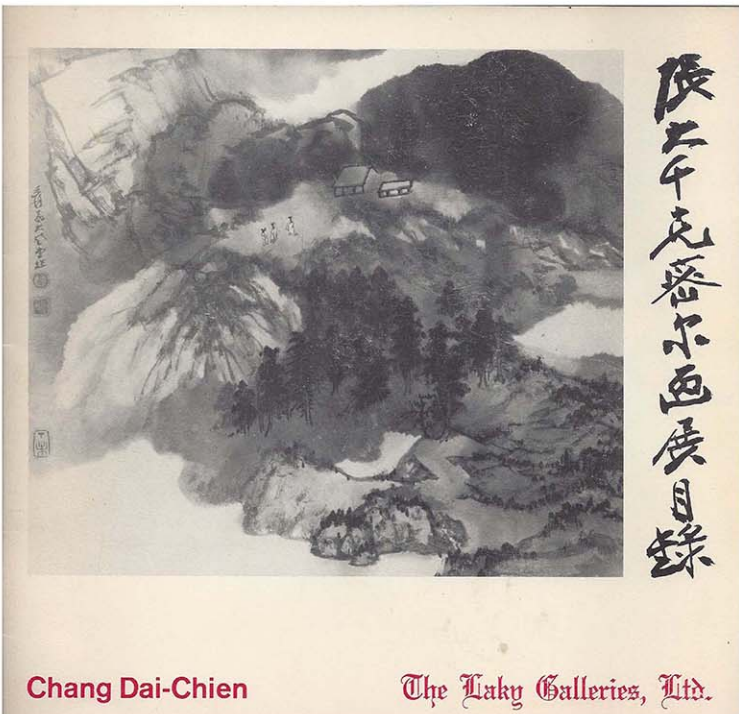
¹⁰Linda Lear Center Connecticut College, *Landscape Paintings: Chang Dai-chien*, January 18th, 2019, <http://collections.conncoll.edu/chu/cg06.html>.



16 The Laky Family: Gyöngy, Les and Zyta, 1960.
Photo courtesy of Gyöngy Laky



18 With Gyöngy Laky, Carmel. Photo courtesy of Gyöngy Laky



17 Chang Dai-chien exhibition catalogue, Laky Gallery, 1967

many friends and colleagues in Taiwan. After a failed suicide attempt in a French jail, he was released from custody and managed to board a train to Bern, Switzerland. A few days later, he landed in Beijing, becoming the highest-ranking official of Chiang Kai-shek's government to defect. With Kuo's departure, Zhang lost one of his closest friends and—perhaps more importantly—the promoter who had done more than anyone else to advance his career in the West.

The Allure of Travel

In January 1967, Zhang visited San Francisco and also spent a week in the coastal town of Carmel. In April, he returned again, visiting the de Young Museum, Cheng Yet-por's Chinese Art Gallery in Carmel (14) and Lin Qingni's China Art Gallery in Chinatown.

In mid-July, he began an extended stay in California,

spending nearly four months in a bungalow at the Dolores Lodge in Carmel—a stunningly beautiful coastal town known as an Artist's Colony—which was owned by Thomas and Joan Chew. The Chews, whose daughter Frances later ran Carmel's China Art Center, were collectors, who acquired both classical paintings from Zhang and also examples of his own work. Although Zhang had shown in a group exhibition in San Francisco in 1966, his art was still known only to a small circle of Chinese expatriates and American scholars. His 1967 demonstration and exhibition at Stanford—which served as a kind of debut—were soon followed by a one-man exhibition at the Laky Gallery, operated by Les Laky, a Hungarian art dealer, and his Polish wife, Zyta, a classically trained artist who had studied at the Budapest Royal Academy (15–19).

Splashed Ink and Shitao

Zhang Daqian's first exhibition at the Laky Gallery was quite different from the survey exhibition at Stanford, which focused on Zhang's traditional works. His increasingly bold "splashed ink" landscape paintings, which have their roots in both Chinese and Western art, featured aqueous pools of mineral pigments that often reveal only a few vestigial glimpses of form. The "splashed ink" paintings were, in some sense, a response to the artist's fading eyesight, but were also rooted in his memories of China and his nostalgic longing for his home and past. The metaphorical suggestions of this style, which evoke rupture and flow, are rooted in the Daoist idea of the mysterious life force called Qi.



19 Zhang Daqian, Gyöngy Laky and Xu Wenbo.
Photo courtesy of Gyöngy Laky



20 Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien, 1899–1983),
Snow Storm—Switzerland, signed Yuanweng,
dated *yi si*, 1965, the tenth lunar month, inscribed
with two seals of the artist, splashed colour on
gold cardboard, framed, 43.7 x 59 cm

The Laky Gallery exhibition featured some of the artist's most abstract paintings: vaporous “splashed ink” compositions inspired by a recent trip to Switzerland. The catalogue essay was written by Basil Gray of the British Museum since James Cahill, who had written the essay for Zhang's New York exhibition in 1963, did not care for this recent work. Calling Zhang “by no means conformist”, Gray argued that the artist's “mastery of calligraphy and pictorial brushwork enables him to develop new and more powerful effects”.

Two works shown at the Laky Gallery in 1967—*Snow Storm—Switzerland* (20) and *Early Snow*—had been painted during a trip that Zhang had taken in 1965 with his old friends, C.C. Wang and Dr Kuo. The vestigial traces of mountains, lakes and meadows—framed by melting washes of paint that suggest flow and transformation—describe a landscape that is also a mindscape infused with memories. In the mountains of Europe, Zhang saw lakes that reminded

him of beautiful women and impressive vistas that conjured up memories of the “divine places” of Wang Meng's (1308–1385) paintings. In these sensuous paintings, Zhang is both remembering China and letting go of it, as he makes peace with the uncertainties and adventures of his journey in the West. The “splashed ink” style, with its veils and curtains, also creates a mood of intrigue and secrecy.

Near the end of his four-month stay in California, Zhang attended a barbecue at the home of Professor Tao Pung-fi. When Tao mentioned that there was an exhibition of works by Shitao (1642–1707) on view at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Zhang suggested they should immediately get on a plane and go to see it. While walking through the exhibition, Zhang schooled anyone who would listen in the intricacies of Shitao's style, and also pointed out the works that he claimed to have done himself: “I did that! And that!” Marshall Wu, a retired professor who had known Zhang since the 1960s later observed: “You never really knew if he was serious or kidding.”¹¹

Carmel-by-the-Sea

A change in US immigration regulations enabled Zhang to plan his move to the United States. In Brazil, plans to build a hydroelectric plant on the Jundiá River, which eventually would inundate Zhang's estate in 1983, were also a factor. By late 1968, Zhang moved into a modest rented home in Carmel that he dubbed *Keyi Zhu* (barely habitable). Carmel seemed remote to some of Zhang's friends—who had suggested he live in Atherton, near Stanford University—but he preferred the scenery of the more remote coast. He once told his son, Paul: “If you live at a place where it is easy for people to come and visit, too much of your time would be taken for entertaining visitors. You can hardly focus and concentrate on your painting.” This need for privacy had been the reason Zhang had painted in ancient caves and Daoist temples.

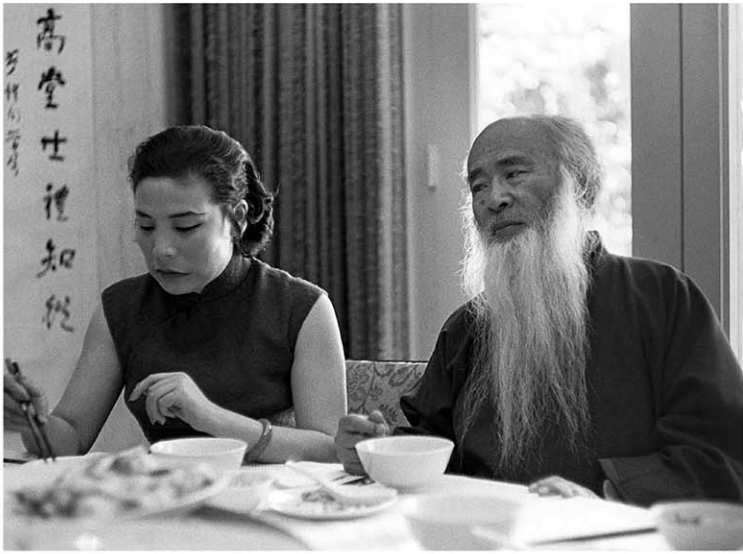
Carmel-by-the-Sea, a town of pines and cottages located on the Monterey peninsula, had been an artist's colony since the early 20th century. When Judith Eisner of the *Carmel Pine Cone* newspaper visited Zhang—who was still recovering from eye surgery the previous year—at *Keyi Zhu* in May 1970, she found him surrounded by friends and family, with his 1963 painting, *Viewing the Waterfall*, hanging nearby (21–25). “His (Zhang's) face radiates peace, happiness and serenity”,¹² Eisner observed. Through his former student, Fang Zhaolin (1914–2006), who served as an interpreter, Zhang explained that he found Carmel and its pines “even more beautiful than the trees in his favourite Chinese province”.

A Living Monument

On November 20th, 1972, the *San Francisco Examiner* published photos of Zhang at the elaborate reception for his fifty-year retrospective at the de Young Museum's Center of Asian Art and Culture. Described as “one of old China's

¹¹ Barboza, David, Graham Bowley and Amanda Cox, “Forging an Art Market in China”, *Taipei Times*, November 2nd, 2013.

¹² Eisner, Judith, “Chang Dai-chien: Perhaps Greatest Living Exponent of Traditional Chinese Art”, *Carmel Pine Cone*, May 28th, 1970.



21 Xu Wenbo and Zhang Daqian enjoying a meal with their family, Carmel. Photo by Roger Fremier, 1970 © The Estate of Roger Fremier



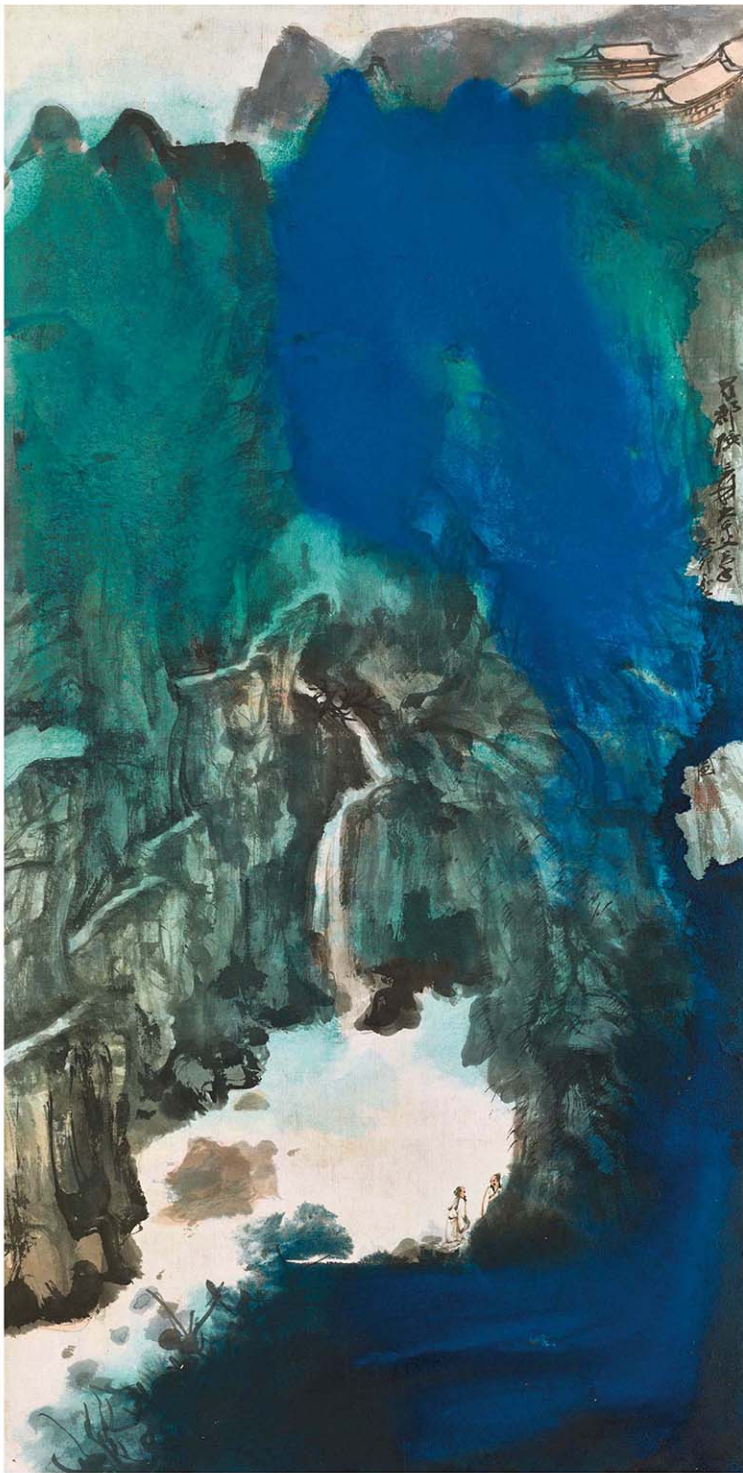
23 Fang Zhaolin with *Viewing the Waterfall*. Photo by Roger Fremier, 1970 © The Estate of Roger Fremier



22 Fang Zhaolin interpreting for Zhang Daqian. Photo by Roger Fremier, 1970 © The Estate of Roger Fremier



24 Painting a lotus with family members and Fang Zhaolin. Photo by Roger Fremier, 1970 © The Estate of Roger Fremier



25 Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien, 1899–1983), *Viewing the Waterfall*, signed and inscribed with one seal of the artist, dated twelfth month, *guimao* year, 1963, ink and colour on paper, scroll, mounted on wooden board and framed, 134 x 68 cm

living monuments” and its “oldest living master painter”, Zhang was presented as being a kind of priceless relic, not unlike the precious jades that had been moved to create room for his exhibition. The *Examiner* also translated and published the biography and statement that Zhang had authored in the form of a monumental scroll. Self-deprecating and conversational in its tone, it opens by calling Xu Beihong’s frequently quoted assertion—that Zhang was “the greatest painter of the last 500 years”—“embarrassing”. After a series of breezy biographical anecdotes, Zhang offers a personal perspective—and raises some questions—about his true relationship with modernity:

“At the age of sixty I suddenly suffered from the effects of failing eyesight. To make a virtue of necessity, I began to paint in frugal strokes and bold sweeps since my blurred vision was no longer compatible with elaborate brushwork. His obligatory change of style, however, was lauded by the world of art at large as a path-finding experiment in the abstract. Was it really new and original, I wonder?”¹³

In his review of the show, titled “Ancient to Modern, a Grand Tour” (26), Alfred Frankenstein, the *Examiner*’s critic, begins by listing the traditional Asian subjects, which included one work from each year of the artist’s life, beginning in 1928: “mountainous landscapes, self portraits, birds, bamboo, animal gods, willowy ladies, lotus flowers, beggars, and sprigs of pear blossoms abound”. He then goes on to point out the “richness of allusion” in Zhang’s work before 1960—a subtle dig at the artist’s traditionalism—before offering a striking judgment: “Zhang Daqian’s work came into his own only when he shook the weight of the ancient dynasties he had carried for so long on his own shoulders and painted his incredible landscapes and lotus blossom scrolls of recent years.”¹⁴

The distance between the *Examiner*’s public characterisation of Zhang (as a living monument) and its critic’s judgment (he became a true master when he became modern) offers a hint of the confusion that surrounded his presence and status in the West. Zhang was versatile and exotic to the point that the accepted categories and hierarchies seemed impossible to impose. Asking American critics to evaluate Zhang was like presenting them with an artist who could paint like Raphael one day and Rothko the next: the range of his capabilities was simply too broad to reconcile. Perhaps for this reason, not a single museum in the United States was willing to accept Zhang’s retrospective as a travelling show. What one enthusiastic critic had called “the greatest exhibition in Chinese history” would be seen only in San Francisco.¹⁵

A “Hut in the Sticks”, 1971–1979

In September 1971, Zhang paid US\$75,000 for a home in Pebble Beach, just off Monterey’s scenic 17-Mile Drive, naming it *Huanbi An* (Hut in the Sticks). The spacious one-storey home had a garden rimmed by Monterey pines and enough room for the addition of a large studio. Anxious to develop the garden quickly, Zhang annoyed his neighbours by asking if he could purchase and transplant their grown trees into his garden, explaining that he was “too old to wait for trees to grow from seedlings”. The finished garden—which included a gazebo, plum trees, boulders, a fish pond, bonsai and tree burls—served as both a retreat and a setting in which Zhang could greet and mingle with visitors.

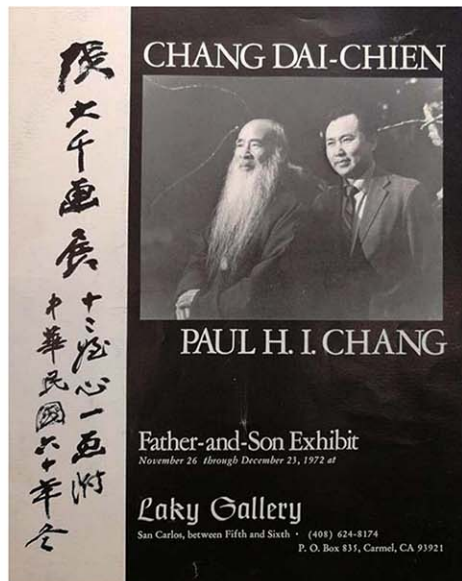
¹³Strassberg, Richard, *Master of Tradition: The Art of Chang Tai-ch’ien*, Pacific Asia Museum, 1983

¹⁴Frankenstein, Alfred, “Ancient to Modern: A Grand Tour”, *San Francisco Examiner*, December 3rd, 1972.

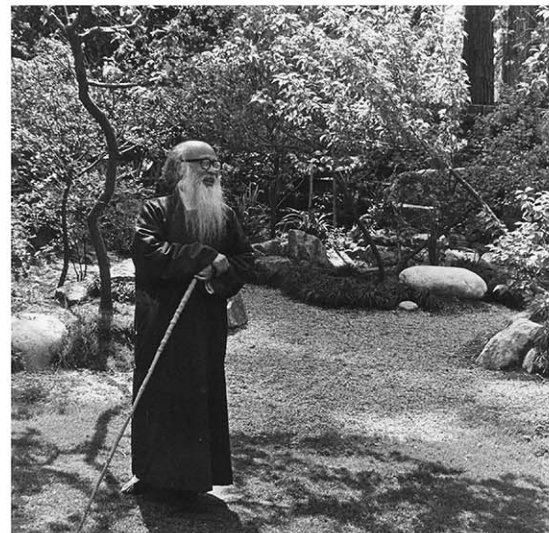
¹⁵D’Argence, Yvon, “Letters to the Editor”, *Arts of Asia*, May–June 1994.



26 Zhang Daqian, Yvon D'Argence, Paul Chang and Xu Wenbo at Zhang Daqian's retrospective in San Francisco, 1972



27 Father and son exhibition, 1972



28 Scholar in his garden, Pebble Beach. Photo by Roy Shigley, courtesy of Carol Bardoff

Now in his mid-seventies, Zhang, spent his final years in California, playing the role of a cultural grandee. He attended countless museum openings and special events and often appeared in photos taken for Bay Area newspapers. It was a time of generosity, as Zhang gave away countless paintings (often lotuses), which annoyed his dealers who preferred to see his works sold. He promoted the work of his loyal son, Paul, holding joint shows with him in 1972 and 1973 (27). Groups of students—from San Francisco State, UC Berkeley and Stanford—visited Zhang at his home where they marvelled at the surroundings and treated him as a guru. Sometimes Zhang would demonstrate painting while a group of silent onlookers surrounded his large rectangular desk. When the weather was good, he would lean on his stick in the shade and pose for photos: a scholar in his garden, screened from the cares of the world by a cultivated harem of nature (28).

However, Zhang's blissful existence in Carmel was disturbed in 1973 when Sherman Lee, the Director of the Cleveland Museum, warned Thomas Hoving, the Director of The Metropolitan Museum, that the museum's newly acquired scroll, *Travellers in a Wintry Forest*, attributed to Li Cheng (919–967), was not antique.¹⁶ Since the painting had been acquired through the art historian, Wen Fong (1930–2018), who had purchased it from Zhang, the issue of forgery was again being discussed in museum circles. In 1978, James Cahill's assertion, that another Met acquisition, *The Riverbank*, was also a forgery created by Zhang Daqian, went public in a *New York Times* article laying out the questions raised since The Met's US\$2.5 million acquisition of twenty-five "highly important" Chinese paintings in 1973. These controversies divided experts and changed the public perception of Zhang and his work. In the view of Yvon D'Argence, Zhang's friend and supporter, Western critics—focused on the issues of copying and forgery—became "bogged down on secondary issues and grossly underestimated the master's stature and influence."¹⁷

Returning "Home"

While visiting Taiwan in January 1976, Zhang was convinced by friends that a magnificent home should be built

for him in Taipei, near the National Palace Museum; and construction began in 1977. "He was homesick", explained his granddaughter, Xiao Daiwen. "He thought it was time for him to return 'home' after decades of drifting life."¹⁸ After a final California sojourn in early 1977, Zhang returned to Taipei. In increasingly frail health, but very much in demand, Zhang soon found himself overwhelmed by well-wishers. He wrote to a friend in California: "Taiwan is really too hot, and those seeking my painting are too numerous." A planned return visit to California in 1981 to reunite with Xinrui, his daughter who had travelled from China, was cancelled on his doctor's orders.

Zhang Daqian died in 1983 after completing his majestic 10-metre wide *Panorama of Mount Lu* (29). Some observers believe that this work, shown at the National Palace Museum, Taipei before the artist's death, remains unfinished. The late James Cahill thought it was an overly ambitious project that Zhang should never have attempted. Zhang had never visited Mount Lu, so the painting is, in some respects, an imaginative creation. "The *Panorama of Mount Lu*", notes art historian Mark Johnson, "strongly reflects aspects of the granite cliffs and timberline of Yosemite and the Sierra range, which the artist visited on many occasions and might be in part related to the California landscape he absorbed".¹⁹ In this final vista, the East and West have co-mingled to form a half-remembered world, shrouded in mists of blue and green.

Seen as a summation—or perhaps a kind of self-portrait—the *Panorama of Mount Lu* can serve as a reminder of the virtuosity and ambiguity of the artist's personal universe. Zhang Daqian was an artistic genius (30), whose work and life continue to challenge our assumptions and expectations.

¹⁶Hess, John, "Can the Met Escape King Tut's Curse?", *New York Magazine*, November 13th, 1978.

¹⁷D'Argence, Yvon, "Letters to the Editor", *Arts of Asia*, May–June 1994.

¹⁸Xiao, Daiwen, e-mail interview with author, January 1st, 2019.

¹⁹Johnson, Mark, "A California Reintroduction", Ba Tong and Mark Johnson, *Chang Dai-chien in California*, San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 1999.



29 Zhang Daqian (Chang Dai-chien, 1899–1983), *Panorama of Mount Lu*, 1983, ink and colour on paper, hand scroll, 178.5 x 994.6 cm. Collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Gift of Zhang Daqian and his family

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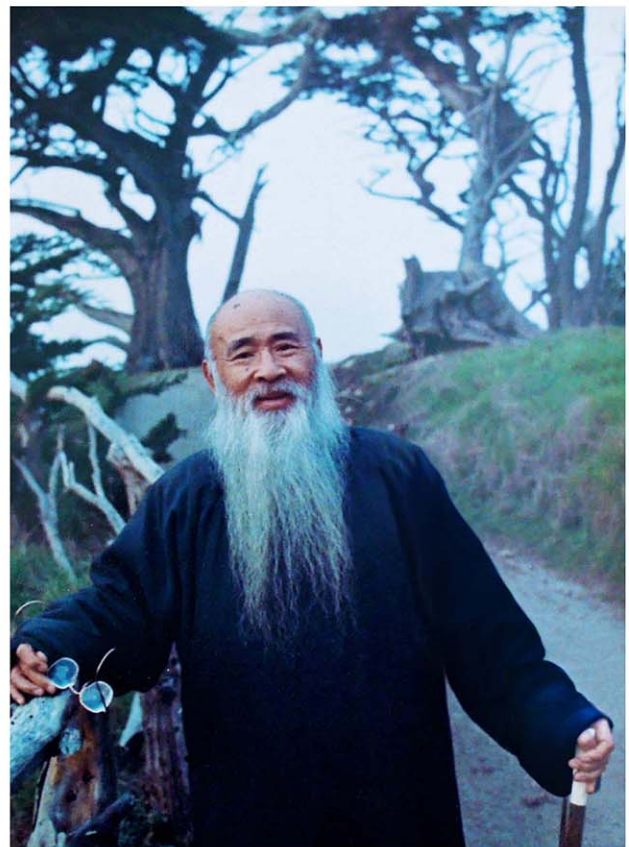
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30 Walking at Point Lobos. Photo courtesy of Xiao Daiwen

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