

The Rise and Fall of Dafen Oil-Painting Village

Words count:1770.

Thirty years ago, similar to most of the normal villages in Shenzhen, Dafen was a small village with less than 300 people. If you have a bird's eye view of this village, you can see nothing but low houses and leisurely pedestrians. It's amazing that this small village was once a world leader in the industry of replica painting. Unfortunately, Dafen was gradually declining in the last several years and it seems that Dafen have to find a new way to live in the changing market-environment (CHINA WATCH, 2016/9/28).

As a miracle based on the reform and opening-up policy, the development of Dafen is hard to believe. How did it come into being?

The business of replica painting derived from Europe. In the 1960s, Europeans began to order replica paintings from Korea. Gradually, replica painting was introduced to Hong Kong, Macao, Singapore and other places. By the mid-1970s, there were about 300 people working in the industry in Hong Kong.

In the 1987, the painting-seller Huang Jiang from Hong Kong built an oil-painting factory in Huangbeiling, Shenzhen, with a cooperator. He is the first man to introduce the low-skilled manufacturing of replica painting to Mainland China. Later, as the theory of New International Division of Labor (NIDL) explains, more and more painting businessmen from Hong Kong came to Fujian, Guangzhou or Shenzhen for the cheap labor and rent (South Reviews,2018 1/18).

However, the surrounding rent rose sharply in just two years. As a result, in 1989,

Huang could not bear the high rent. He decided to do business himself and chose Dafen village as the next station. Huang rented a building and gathered a group of oil-painters. He received orders and originals from the commercial companies in Hong Kong and let his painters to imitate those originals. At that time, commercial painting just began to develop in domestic market. So, Huang met little competition and the orders he received increased fast. The rapid development of Huang's business had attracted many painters to come to Dafen, which laid the foundation of Dafen's "World Oil-painting Factory" (South Reviews, 2018 1/18).

It is said that in the past, Dafen's painters relied on overseas sales heavily. According to the survey of Mike Vader, a world replica painting wholesaler, in the United States market of replica oil painting, China claimed a market share of 60%, 80% of which was contributed by Dafen. Moreover, in the first quarter of 2005, Dafen's sales volume reached over 70 million yuan, making it the largest painting production base in China (China fine arts web, 2005).

The boom of Dafen had several reasons. First, painters in Dafen were very hard-working. To complete as many orders as possible, the painters usually work from daylight to midnight. Moreover, their working environment was also very difficult. Their small rooms were usually full of odor of pigment and turpentine. Some of them even had poisonous chemical component. Living a hard life as they were, many painters in Dafen never gave up. They wanted to earn a living by painting and Dafen was the best platform. The second reason is the policy support from the Shenzhen government. Shenzhen government hosted the first "China (Shenzhen) International

Cultural Industry Fair” in 2004. As we all know, Shenzhen is a city with high-speed economic development. However, Shenzhen is also called “the Desert of Culture”. To change this stereotype, Shenzhen government held this international culture fair. This fair provided a stage for Dafen to build their fame worldwide. After the first “China (Shenzhen) International Cultural Industry Fair”, Dafen not only received more orders, but also became the representative of Shenzhen’s culture industry and had a lot of supporting policies. For example, many painters got Shenzhen household registration, and government provided some excellent painters new apartments with low rent. According to the painters in Dafen, it was the best time in their life as a painter. It seemed that they had found a platform where they could earn a living by painting, which meant that they needed not make a trade-off between “bread” and dream.

However, there is no such thing as an endless meal. In 2008, Dafen's orders from oversea countries decreased rapidly, which made many painters lose their jobs. How did it happen? How did the painters there live after such a severe crisis?

As we all know, a global economic crisis happened in 2008. That economic crisis was so big that even all of the countries in the world were influenced, let alone Dafen.

Influenced by global economic crisis, the economic growth in many cities were sluggish or even reversed. As Zhou Mo, a reporter from China Daily, pointed out that oil paintings are luxury rather than necessity, and the industry of it can be affected by the macroeconomic environment quickly. And the most evident influence was that the painters in Dafen had got less and less orders. Because of the decreasing orders, many painters lost their jobs and left. Moreover, rising competition from other markets, such

as Xiamen, and Vietnam, diverted some market shares from the Dafen village.

Besides, the changing policy of Chinese government also played a significant role in it. “Hotels were once big customers”, said Wei Haihan, a painter in Dafen, “Sometimes an order from a hotel could reach 1 million yuan or more. But now, in Dongguan city, Guangdong province, where a lot of orders came from, a number of hotels have closed following a crackdown on prostitution, and in other cities across the country the economic contraction has slowed the construction of new hotels.”

Under this circumstance, the painters in Dafen couldn’t afford the rent of gallery, and thus they created a new working environment called “Painting Alley”. Painters put bars on the wall of alleys to hang their works, and then used canvas or steel rolling shutter door to cover them. In some painting alleys, painters even added a ceiling above the alley and installed electric fans. Generally, there were five or six painters working in a small painting alley. One had to side their body several times to walk through the alley. In addition to the rough working environment, painters also suffered the pungent odor and tremendous pressure to earn a living for their families (The Paper, 2017/10/23).

To get out of its plight, Dafen village must make a change. At the same time, the market requirement had also changed. “Orders from the domestic market began to rise considerably from 2010, when we were still struggling to recover from the global financial crisis”, said Zhang Minxin, who has lived in Dafen for 12 years. To adapt to the change, the painters focused their attention on the domestic market, and now about half of sales are made in China. Moreover, People now have higher demands

for art, which requires painters to create original works (CHINA WATCH,2016/9/28).

In this case, Dafen village had to increase the percentage of original paintings works in their total products. Moreover, the government had also promoted the restructuring of Dafen painting industry. Dafen's main market was changed from oversea to domestic market gradually. In addition, government had made some new policies to encourage painters to create their own masterpiece. Such as building new galleries for painters to show their original works. They believed that original paintings are not only the promotion of industrial development but also exported culture.

It is well known that Shenzhen was once the center of low-end electronic components production and processing. However, nowadays Shenzhen has been the center of high-technology industry. There are lots of high-technology companies located in Shenzhen, such as Tencent and Huawei. Therefore, it will not be surprising if Dafen gain the success of transformation in the future. Being viewed as one of the most famous name-cards of Shenzhen's cultural industry, the story of Dafen was chosen to be the main theme of the Shenzhen Pavilion in the Best Urban Practices Zone of the 2010 Shanghai Expo. Dafen was named “the most beautiful urban village in Shenzhen”, a model of “integration of urban and rural development”, “showcases how culture development can flourish in an outlying area” (Southern Daily, 20-07-2011), and fundamentally a “representative of the rapid development of Shenzhen” (China Daily, 2010). In the 26th Shenzhen Summer Universiade of 2011, Dafen's story likewise was used to showcase the city's advancement in the "new

economy" (J. Wang & S.M Li, 2017).

We cannot deny that some painters came to Dafen just for making a living and they had no interest in painting at all. However, after asking some painters in Dafen, we found that a lot of painters had expected to become an outstanding painter since their childhoods. They could have chosen other jobs which might bring more money. But after a tradeoff been done, they thought that being a painter in Dafen was optimal.

Still, we do not tend to believe that the original-work-oriented direction has been a success in Dafen. Sun Ting, coauthor of this essay, was told by a painter in Dafen in 2018 that it was the common case in Dafen that original works were unable to be sold. More often than not, painters would spend much time on a piece of original work. Yet, there was no guarantee of repayment and some painters could only return to producing replicas.

The painting industry is different from the technology industry. Whether Shenzhen government can create new miracle in the background that regionalism become increasingly powerful and globalization is gradually rejected still needs to be proved by time.

Distribution:

Sun Ting gave the framework and most references of the essay. Besides, he wrote some parts of the essay, reviewed and corrected the first draft. Xu Tianyuan selected appropriate material and wrote most parts of the essay. He finished it originally.

References

- Chen Lili.(2018). Shenzhen dafen: the cruelty and beauty of an art village. South Reviews.<https://www.nfcmag.com/article/7799.html>
- China Fine Arts Web.(2004) 90% of Dafen village's oil paintings are sold overseas.Retrieved from <http://www.ms.net.cn/ms/Article/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=17792>
- J. Wang & S.M Li (2017) State territorialization, neoliberal governmentality: the remaking of Dafen oil painting village, Shenzhen, China, Urban Geography, 38:5, 708-728, DOI: 10.1080/02723638.2016.1139409
- Southern Daily. (20-07-2011). Famous for painting, the most beautiful villages. <http://shoucang.hexun.com.tw/2011-07-20/131602449.html>.
- The Paper.(23-10-2017). Van Gogh on the wall: five hundred oil painters in dafen village, shenzhen. Retrieved from <http://collection.sina.com.cn/yjjj/2017-10-23/doc-ifymzqpq3557740.shtml>
- Zhou Mo.(28-09-2016). The artistic hub of Dafen has been painted into a corner. ChinaWatch.<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/china-watch/business/dafen-has-been-painted-into-a-corner/>