

## Yu Chunming's Paintings of Chinese houses

Siliang Yang

Since the beginning of civilization, humans have built houses for shelter and protection. Unlike architecture that is both beautiful and useful, a house is usually not constructed for aesthetic purposes, but for the most basic human needs: safety, convenience, comfort and survival. Indeed, the house is so common that few people would associate it with art. Yu Chunming, however, has been making his art exclusively out of ordinary Chinese houses.

Now living in San Jose, California, Yu Chunming has been painting Chinese houses since 1983, right after he graduated from the national China Art Academy in Hangzhou, one of the top art institutes in the country. His keen interest in what he calls “folk houses” was intensified, if not inspired, by their diversity and fragility. China, a land about the size of the United States, is shared by 56 nationalities; each builds its houses in a distinctive local style. Some nationalities, such as the Han nationality, which accounts for 92% of the Chinese population, build different styles from place to place. The houses that Yu painted are mostly old, some well over 1000 years of age, and in danger of disappearing any day. “Some of the houses I saw and painted several years ago are no longer there. It is sad to see a structure hundreds of years old gone so soon,” he said emotionally. So his mission is to capture as many of these old structures in his art as he can before they disappear. He is running against time.

It goes without saying that one needs to see the houses in order to paint them. That means traveling, a lot. Many of the ancient houses are in remote areas inaccessible by car, so he often had to reach his subjects on foot. He calmly recounted many of the adventurous “incidents” on the road, including diseases and car accidents that almost took his life, not to mention the open air camping without a tent. It is hard to imagine that a man of his fragile build has such a strong determination and sense of commitment. His results are impressive. Over the past 18 years, he made over 3,000 sketches and 400 paintings of dwellings scattered over various parts of China. One only needs to look at some of these works to realize the number of places he had visited,<sup>1</sup> from Xinjiang to Yunnan, from Beijing to Fujian, and from Zhejiang to Sichuan. It is the equivalent of traveling from Alaska to Texas, from New York to Florida, and from the Carolinas to Utah, with road conditions in no way comparable. All the journeys were financed by his own meager salary as lecturer in a Chinese engineering college, and that of his very supportive wife, and later, by the earnings from the family’s design and decoration company. It does not take much intelligence to conclude that the family now has little savings.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the works were published in his album Selected Works of Chinese Folk Houses, (Nanchang, 1991). Some others were made into post cards in 1999.

It takes more than travel and mere observation to turn the houses into art. Chinese residences are in a wide variety of forms and shapes that reflect different social, economic, political, religious and geographical conditions of the different inhabitants. It requires a true understanding of the cultures and traditions of the dwellers in order to capture the essence of the buildings. Reading and research are essential. Luckily, Yu is also talented in literature. The artist Yu Chunming is the author of three books on Chinese folk houses. Skimming through the books, one can see immediately that he has a genuine understanding and love of the various kinds of houses he painted.

We learn from these books how the houses in the paintings reflect different cultures, as well as the climate and the availability of resources such as land and materials. The Tong people of Guangxi, for example, built their wooden houses in a consistent though mysterious style in accordance with their strong sense of national unity and collectiveness. The Miao people, who had left the Southeast coasts over two thousand years ago and had merged well with the locals and lost much of their own identity, built different styles of houses with different materials, from bamboos to timber to stones, sometimes with roofs covered with straw- thatch and reeds. The Hakka people of Fujian and Guangzhou Provinces live close to the sea, and were often harassed by bandits and pirates, as well as frequent armed conflicts with the locals, so they built their residences in circled blockhouses with tall and thick walls. The Buyi regions in Guizhou Province used to be an ocean billions of years ago, and their mountains produce many stones and little timber, so the Buyi built their houses entirely of stones, including stone walls and stone tiles, resulting in houses that “seem to have grown out of the land”. People on the Yellow Plateau in the Northwest are even closer to nature: they built their dwellings out of naturally formed caves because they had no other building material available. The Uygurs in Xinjiang live in a dry area and had to build their shelters with sun-dried bricks and clays. People living in the water land in Zhejiang Province, on the other hand, built their houses on or close to water, stretching them high into the sky, so that they won't take up much of the precious land. Out of these available materials and space, people built their houses, and also their dreams, their wishes, their concern for their own lives and that of their descendents; these plain constructions, together with the dreams, were to pass down from generation to generation. Though their styles are vastly different, Yu found that these houses have one thing in common: their closeness to nature. “Some of them,” he observed, “look just as much a part of the land as do the birds' nests, and the ants' hills, or the bees' honeycombs. And these man-made structures are so in harmony with God-created nature, a harmony achieved through time, and an important aspect of the beauty of the houses. ”

Yu approached his subjects with great respect; he was even humbled by these age-old constructions and the rich historical messages they carry. “ I often paced up and down a stone-paved street,” he said, “ Every moss-covered stone and sod, every mottled piece of wood seems to be whispering about their history, about the rise and fall of a culture... In the remote countryside, or the culturally distinctive minority stockade village, the well-preserved building compounds hundreds of years old lead me back to a distant past down a historical and cultural corridor, and they reveal a kind of beauty that penetrates time and space, a beauty that is deeply rooted in the great land.... I would sit

quietly under the roofs, listening to the dialogue between my soul and the old houses, feeling the harmony between nature and these old buildings, and enjoying the harmonious singing of nature and man.”

The folk houses were never built for the sake of art. Yet, Yu’s use of lines, color, light and form, and his oil, watercolor, lacquer, acrylic, or ink, elevated them to the level of art – he uses whatever media he feels appropriate in order to capture the spirit of the buildings and to bestow them with a sense of dignity they deserve. (His task is not to display the appearance of the houses; that can be better achieved through photography). Like any other true artist, Yu has his own style and his desire for creativity, but he is careful not to let it alter the true images of his subjects. The purpose of his art is to create a tangible record of some ordinary fellow humans’ residences and dreams that would otherwise have disappeared without anyone ever noticing them.

Yu’s main subject is the house, but occasionally, he offers us a glimpse into the life of the inhabitants—after all, the house is the center of family activities, a place for gathering, eating, entertaining, and worshipping. So we see the meditating old Uygur man and the boy peering in, the horse rider in a snowy winter night, the lonely walker on the narrow lane between shabby timbers, a woman bearing a jar of water walking home, another woman getting water out of a storage jar.... These people and their ancestors have unintentionally provided inspiration to artist Yu Chunming, who in turn provided unusual joy, even enlightenment, to people who care to look at his paintings made out of these most ordinary structures in the world.

Note:

Siliang Yang received both his M.A and Ph. D in art history from the University of Kansas. Prior to coming to the U.S, he lived in Hangzhou and worked as an editor for the New Arts Magazine, and as an English lecturer at Zhejiang University.