

Chinese Fairy Tales 2006

---Preface to Tang Zhigang Personal Works Exhibition

By Ni Youyu

I have the impression that Tang Zhigang always narrows his eyes, with corners of the mouth curling on a smiling face. He can tell rather cold jokes, seeing life as amusement and acting like an old naughty child. In Yunnan, the young artists all politely address him “**Mr. Tang**”. Mr. Tang is not actually old--he is even getting younger and younger. In Tang Zhigang, we can feel kind of natural association between a man and the land of Yunnan.

Just like Arles for Van Gogh, Tahiti for Gauguin, a regional culture is always the important matrix of its artists. From Tang Zhigang’s “smiling” art, we can indistinctly perceive some extremely tenacious and persistent vitality. A piece of beloved land for an artist is everlasting source of his artistic life. A man’s works well reveal his ego; in the similar sense, Tang’s art, seemingly of amusement and relaxation, secretly tells his tendency of not behaving himself. As for him, art is always pursuing to break the established limits and give voice to whatever hard to express. He frequently mentions with a tone of self-ridicules that he has been in the army for half of his life. In a family of soldier dependents with the mother being a jail supervisor, he grew up together with army men and prisoners thus got to know well “those who get punished” as well as “those who punish and educate others”. At the age of seventeen, he was officially enlisted as an army man, starting his long and complex army career over twenty years. He was once a painter in the Propaganda Team and later fought in Vietnam War. Working experience at both grass-root and the upper level enabled him to develop a sober mind towards the capacity of humanity tolerance in this set of bureaucratic system with strict regulations. In certain sense, he was a person who acquainted most with game rules inside the system. However, since the end of the 1980s, he has gradually revealed in his works the fantasy readiness to run against such rules.

From his early works, we could tell that he had already begun consciously searching and revealing humanity in a life under rigid discipline. As artist Mao Xuhui put it, “Tang Zhigang is the first artist who sees army men as ordinary people.” Artist creation in the army had long been realism and theme dominating, featuring rich heroism. In this so-called “classical” way of theme-dominating creation, art tended to deviate from open expression of personal feelings & emotions and finally got lost in fulfilling the politicized and formulated function of propagandizing and civilizing. In its essence, such

creation strayed far away from the nature of art. Tang, immersed in the very field, had much firsthand experience in this “secret pain of expression”. In the mid-1980s, the thought of western modern art, particularly the expressionistic trend, propelled him to start seeking the way to express personal emotions. The *Soldiers’ Soul* series created during this period and such works as *Stream*, *At the Well* etc., already indicated through their colors kind of sadness with a motion of transcendent reality. Till the end of 1980s and the early 90s, he dust off the mystery of heroism and turned to express them as ordinary people, with his better painting techniques and from his unique angles of view, as shown in such works as *Physical Examination*, *Drill*, *Ah* etc. In the meantime, having converted the “classic” ways of painting, he produced several sets of works of similar styles as folk songs in the army camp. His paintings are all full of wit and humor, however trivial or commonplace their contents are, say, the country field for physical examination, soldiers in the camp, brigades that killed pigs to celebrate a festival, or some unnoticeable details in polyclinics. By this time, as what people witnessed, Tang had finally begun to depict with his paintbrush the most common scenario of natural, unconscious care and love. Hence “the Tang Style”, featuring expressionism style achieved through realism diagram of painting methods as well as estrangement from the “grand theme” in military paintings. And serious considerations finally led him to express, in a relaxed and humorous way, the advanced ideas of a new generation of military paintings. This could be seen as a great leap forward and a deepening of counter-empiricism which opened more possibilities for military paintings. It is just from this time that critics accurately summarized Tang’s art as “serious identities in humorous art forms”.

In the 1990s, a time when Chinese contemporary art was in its peak time, Tang widely assimilated western ways of artistic expression. Such assimilation found its most expression in his learning about expressionism painting techniques as well as borrowing ideas from POP art. In the meantime, he started trying some modern methods with diversified materials. In his *Group Photo of the Times*, he wandered around from hand painting to cyberspace and time, well integrating colorful and light handmade background on printing paper or linen with perfect computer processing, and gathered heroes of different times in the same “People’s Studio”. This continued to show his unique “serious sense of humor”. Around this time, Tang Zhigang was transferred to civilian work in Yunnan Art College and initiated his “meeting” series.

In his early series of *Adult Meetings*, we observe representatives from various parties straighten their clothes and sit properly at the rostrum, raising their hands and applauding in unanimous. However, under the seeming seriousness in order, we may perceive each harboring an ulterior object in his mind. The fact that army representatives frequently appear in Tang’s pictures

definitely indicates his lasting army complex. It seems that Tang has been in search of certain formal sense of contemporary art and his unique personal contexts from such "meetings". As Tang himself said, "To attend meetings is a major part of my routine life. I am an army man. I joined the army in 1976 and have been serving in the propaganda department of the troop ever since, in charge of meeting arrangement. When I was young, the only thing I enjoyed is to imitate adults who attend meetings. In 1998, I was transferred to civilian work in Yunnan Art College, where I started attending meetings as an audience instead of speaking at those meetings. Actually to be among the meeting audience is very close to the mass life." However, this was merely a lead-in. The year 1998 finally witnessed the birth of the simple, artless and jolly "children". In certain sense, this was an extremely important shift in Tang's style. How did it come that he painted "children at meetings"? According to him, it once happened that when he painted adults at meetings, someone would associate figures in his pictures with men **in his life** one by one. Now that the style of this set was exaggerative, he chose to paint "children" without further ado. Again, it had something to do with his experience of tutoring children in art courses. In certain sense, *Child Meetings* is a kind of metaphor. In *Adult Meetings*, the criticism towards the formulated and formalized society seems rather open and blunt. On the contrary, in *Child Meetings*, Tang Zhigang has skillfully eliminated the conflicts and upgraded his sense of humor. In his works, the children are all dressed in military uniform or Sun yat-sen's uniform, with toy cars, balls and doggies scattered around. The conflict is greatly highlighted through the arrangement of the pictures, creating rather amusing and absurd effect. Children in his pictures are all artless and jolly: they are laughing, yawning or grubbing their noses; they are merrily flourishing or pretending to run deep. This is exactly an exaggerated version of the scenes at adult meetings. Mr. Tang is so mischievous that he is deliberately amusing us. We simply cannot help bursting into laughter, not for fun but for understanding what is on his mind.

However, Tang is never content with being an artist that amuses others. In the past ten years' efforts in child-based creation, he has been in continuous pursuit of changes and breakthroughs. In his latest series of *Chinese Fairy Tales*, we come across new surprises and possibilities. In his latest works, Tang Zhigang put the children to arenas in a ridiculous way. This is a new situation: the little children are either hanging high above the flying rings, or standing high on the springboard, looking down nervously---the fear or mental pressure that only adult may face in real life are misplaced onto children. According to Tang, people have been trying to exceed their ego and challenge their ultimate limits throughout the history; yet as they break new records one by one, they are creating more and more pressure for themselves. Therefore, seen from certain aspect, arenas are actually filled with fear that people feel when they meet their ultimate limits. Meanwhile, arenas see too much

pressure of competition among all competitors. It is then obvious that, compared with the previous "meeting" series, *Chinese Fairy Tales* has refrained itself from the theme of politics-human relations and turned to another that is closer to the life itself and mankind psychos.

Anybody who acquaints with Tang Zhigang may obviously observe that he has been improving himself over the past decade both in painting techniques and in mental thoughts. From the early *Child Meetings* to the recent *Chinese Fairy Tales*, the painting techniques he employs are getting increasingly simplified, well in accordance with the spirit of "simplifying pictures with bold outlines" and "vivid expression outweighing picture designs" in traditional Chinese freehand brushwork. But in color arrangement, he is using increasingly brighter colors, creating stronger sense of being modern and international. Now, Tang Zhigang is nearly fifty years old. As a contemporary artist who has experienced a lot in his life, Tang has more and more obviously shown his unique focus of view and his broad mind of bemoaning the universe and pitying fate of humankind. He is much concerned with incidents happening around him. He has figured out the general state of mind of modern people as well as the anxiety and mental pressure overspreading in the present times. And finally, through his traditional figures of lively and jolly children, Tang successfully eliminates such grief and sadness. This is where his wisdom lies. With western painting techniques, Tang is telling a Chinese fairy tale. The so-called *Chinese Fairy Tales* here is by no means a book for children, but an implicit reflection of mental pressure, anxiety and sense of crisis that widely exist in the adult world. With his fairy tales farther from amusing and his expressions more and more implicit, Mr. Tang has gradually got closer to the spiritual essence, consciously or unconsciously. Thanks to the sublimation of his personal savvy and improvement of his emotional state, he is creating better and better works. Tang Zhigang in his fifties has set a cheerful example for the establishment and improvement of Chinese contemporary art system in this new era.