

## **SESIN JONG: A Chinese Soul, Chinese Art, a Man of the World**

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A man and a woman locked in tearful embrace, reunited after a string of misfortunes; the melancholy affected me too, silent tears and all. This was a scene from the 1950's American classic, "An Affair to Remember." The sweet, sad melody of its theme song, "Our Love Affair" played as the film drew to a close.

But this was not the first time I had heard this song. Only a few days earlier, I was at Dr. Sesin Jong's residence, when, at the spur of the moment, he began playing the tune. As he was playing, Mrs. Jong told me about the movie, all the while looking at her husband with kind, loving eyes. It seemed a storyline I could not miss, and tried as I did, I ended up wallowing in my sadness with the film at home. I must thank Dr. and Mrs. Sesin Jong, for not letting this classic pass me unnoticed.

It was in March 2003 that I first encountered Dr. Jong. We would often run into one another at a number of activities organized by Mr. Guo Chenfeng. He was always affable impressing his listeners with his ample intelligence. I had always hoped to interview him. Yet when the opportunity did eventually arise, I was on tenterhooks. As a painter and collector famous on both sides of the Pacific, Dr. Jong had been through countless interviews. He was, in fact one of ten Chinese-Americans featured in Mr. Hu Sisheng's "Wonderful Lives". So right at the start of this interview for "New Ideas", Dr. Jong said, "They write the same things about me over and over: ample girth, fond of drinks and good company. I think people must have gotten tired of these stories by now." He hoped that I would ask him more about his art, while also avoiding showering excess praises. He was confident that his works would do most of the talking.

I am at best an amateur as far as painting and calligraphy are concerned, so I would have no hope of speaking with Dr. Jong on equal terms. His immense knowledge of the Tang and Song poetry and verses would also put me to shame. My sole asset was a willingness to listen, and listen I did. Even with my constraints in terms of time and space, I hope that what I have to say will not disappoint Dr. Jong too much.

### **A Knowledgeable Man with a Unique Personality**

Born in Indonesia to a family with roots in Guangdong, I was truly surprised that Dr. Jong had had so many opportunities to interact with Chinese culture, and that it left such a strong impression upon him. When asked about this, Dr. Jong replied,

“Have you ever been in love? Have you ever liked someone so much that you would see them even at midnight?” Dr. Jong looked delighted when I nodded in agreement. “You will always find time to do something you like. Say you like golf; you’ll be willing to wake up even at 5 o’clock in the morning just to play. You sing until you drop if you like karaoke. I like Chinese traditional culture, so it’s only natural that I didn’t miss any chance I have to learn.”

Despite having attended a Chinese school in Indonesia, Dr. Jong actually started to really get involved with Chinese art when he was studying medicine in Japan. He would often accompany his friends to antique shops, and his interest deepened over the years. New York, where Dr. Jong worked after graduation, provided fertile ground for his interests, and the auction houses were his frequent haunts. “A college graduate should have the capacity for self-learning; it is a mark of a successful education. Otherwise his education is suspect. In principle he can always learn from books or through other methods, if it is something he really likes.”

Starting from 1979, Dr. Jong organized monthly gatherings at his residence. Friends would converge there to indulge in the lofty subjects of poetry and painting. Nor would the de facto headquarters of New York’s artists reject the good things in life; good food and good wine were standard fare. Their discussions, if one could call them that were unscripted and wide-ranging. At times the participants would crowd around a large round table in the studio and draw to their hearts’ content. In his self-deprecating way, Dr. Jong “admitted” he had learned much during these sessions.

As he had no formal art school education and no official teacher, Dr. Jong’s paintings adhere to no particular school. In his own words, his paintings are “neither here nor there, they are my own random paintings.”

The renowned New York art critic, Yi Shou-hon once said, “Many people are engaged in artistic endeavors, but there is only one person who has left me with a lasting impression. Even without his signature, you know straight away which paintings are his: that person is Sesein Jong. The unique thing about his paintings is you can tell they are his wherever they are.”

In slightly over a decade, Dr. Jong has held nearly ten personal exhibits in New York, Moscow’s Oriental Arts Museum, the Shanghai Arts Museum, the Liu Haisu Arts Museum, the Nanjing Museum, Taipei’s Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Museum, etc. He had also taken part in more than twenty joint-exhibits all over the world. According to Shanghai’s resident art critic Mr. Xie Chun-yan, who holds Dr. Jong in high esteem, “Such prolific output not only demonstrates his diligence, it is also evidence of his tenacity in the art of painting and calligraphy. Such tenacity is no doubt derived from his cultural identity; despite being based in New York which is a bastion of Western art, and having traveled the world, he has decided to identify

himself with traditional Chinese art. His appetite for the good things also allowed him to assimilate the strong points of Western and modern art, creating a unique style of painting and calligraphy.”

Zheng qi, a friend, says Dr. Jong really knows how to enjoy life. According to him, “His printings have an air of grandness about them, because of his wide experience and knowledge. His paintings are mostly from the U.S., U.K., and Japan, and are incredibly bright. Nobody uses colors quite the way he does, in large patches and all. He is also skilled in creating contrast as well as harmony between dense lines and swathes of black ink. He is especially good at expressing light and colors, whether he was painting the night, dawn, dusk, or hills and mountains. This is closely connected with his use of foreign color materials. What is interesting is that his expressions of color are still done in Chinese style. The use of foreign materials does not change the ink brush or the themes of his paintings. His cultural roots are deeply embedded in China.”

Having traveled the world, China’s scenery remains Dr. Jong’s greatest love. No matter that he lives far away in the United States, he has been to China’s Huangshan eight times. Just as a famous poem describing Lucian says, “Mountains and ranges in whatever way you see, they appear different from near and from afar.” In any season, Huangshan never ceases to fascinate Dr. Jong. Every nook and cranny becomes material for his paintings. Taishan, Jiuzhaigou, Zhangjiajie and Wuyi also have a feel that is all their own. Indeed, China’s vast natural heritage complements Dr. Jong’s love for nature, as well as enriches his artistic works.

Mr. Yi Shou-hon was known to have said: “In my opinion, Sesein’s landscape paintings have brought out the best in him. This is most prominent in those full-bodied, heavily made-up pieces. He does not appear to carry any traditional baggage. Hence, with inspiration as his only guide, he does not need to adhere to any strict format or style. The mountains and the sky in his paintings are neither plain nor elusive. Instead, the daring use of flush and heavy crimson and orange, as well as deep-sea blue, sometimes occupying up to two-thirds of his pictures, has accentuated the artistic impact. At first, they appear abrupt and bizarre. Only upon further absorption does the full fragrance come through... The most wonderful aspect is the little figurines he has inserted, sometimes barely discernibly, in the landscape. They are either purposefully engaging in one activity or another or are seen lounging casually, perhaps for over-indulgence or for some other reason. Perhaps this is an expression of the painter’s desire to seek friends to do likewise.”

### **Talent, Learning and Diligence**

Throughout our conversation, Dr. Jong repeatedly stressed the importance of

building up a solid foundation, the key to which is diligence. To him, the development of a good foundation through diligence and skills is likely to lead one to success. One must be diligent, as there are no shortcuts. With a good foundation, and hard work, there is nothing to fear. Obviously talent also plays a part in success; it is not as if anyone can be a Bada-Shanren, or a Shi Tao. Art is therefore talent, learning and diligence, all of which are essential for any good artist.

As Dr. Jong always seems a jovial and affable person, I ventured to ask: “Does he not have any worries?” In response, he asked me instead, “What need is there to be unhappy?” I offered my perspective rather lamely, saying that we often encounter disappointments in our lives. To this, he related an incident: When he was in New York, there was a TV station that wanted to interview him. Its theme was “The Sweetness and Toil of the Chinese.” Dr. Jong refused to be interviewed on such a topic. In his opinion, he had had no lack of material comfort during his early years. Even his late night studies in Japan and long work hours in New York had resulted in considerable returns. The hours he had spent studying and practicing painting and calligraphy were no doubt arduous, but they were not in vain. As such, he could not take that as a “chore”.

There was a Tang poet known to have spared no effort in perfecting his craft. Since Dr. Jong became enchanted with painting, he too was oblivious to “daily chores.” His tenacity was legendary; at times he would leap from his bed in the middle of the night, inspired, and write furiously. Initially mimicking past masters, he eventually progressed to expressing his own ideas at will. His unique style immediately caught the public’s attention, a result of the perfect combination of diligence, talent, and learning.

Chung K’uei the ghost catcher, Beijing opera characters, couplets, and seal calligraphy, all form part of the great body of Chinese cultural tradition. Dr. Jong studied them all carefully, finally expressing them in his own artistic language. This has brought great diversity in the themes of his paintings. I cannot help but to quote Mr. Xie Chun-yen’s already famous dicta on Dr. Jong: “It’s as if Sesin is a man of many faces. Look at his latest publication; the doctor painter is suddenly transformed into Chung K’uei the Scholar offering his respects to the elderly, or simply roaming the night, or waving his sword in an unlikely dance, or playing the seven-string lute to a cow, no less. He then becomes the celebrated poet in a drunken state, writing about the peony, or singing in the rain. The lonely monk wondering in the mountains and meditating about the moon is next, followed by a woodcutter untroubled by Huangshan’s precarious peaks. Finally he becomes a crazed and drunken scholar, before re-emerging as a kind scholar concerned only for his people. His incredible range is matched by an incredible insight that combines both the ancient and the

modern.”

### **Confidence in a Glorious Future for Chinese art**

To Dr. Jong, Chinese culture is, like the cool winds on the river and the clear moon in the hills, inexhaustible. Thus he is interested in anything that touches upon the essence of this culture. There are some things that are indeed extremely difficult to overcome but he did not succumb to such challenges. “There is so much treasure in Chinese culture; we cannot hope to even scratch the surface in our own short lives, let alone destroy it. Chinese culture, literature, calligraphy, martial arts, music and opera are all intricately linked. The whole thing has not been built in one or two days. It is a collection of wisdom that has progressed over thousands of years! There is no way to deny Chinese culture!

The first thing about Chinese painting is the paper. The rice paper used in Chinese painting is carefully chosen according to its ability to absorb water and ink; different types of rice papers have varying absorption rates. The next most important equipment is the ink brush, with equal care given to their selection. The price for an ink brush ranges from the ridiculously expensive to the incredibly cheap. In one of his trips to Huangshan, Dr. Jong paid over RMB4000 for an ink brush, an investment that he deemed worthwhile, as its feel was truly remarkable. Seals are also important to Chinese painting, especially in relation to inscriptions in a particular hand. The ink stone is another indispensable item in Chinese painting, and has created an entire unique branch of studies. Having finished a painting, the next step is its title, which calls for sure-handed calligraphy. Then there is the text itself; the accompanying text or poem has to be consistent with the painting’s theme. All of these are unique to the Chinese and their paintings, each endowed with the wisdom of past generations. Chinese painting can only be appreciated in this manner. Similarly, Beijing Opera does not merely concern itself with battles and duels; the sweet melodies and voices during the “largo” section are equally appealing.

Dr. Jong feels that there can be a certain degree of creativity in Chinese painting. For example, you could create paintings without an ink brush. However, such works could not represent the essence of Chinese painting. Dr. Jong has always upheld the basics of Chinese painting, thinking as he does that its cultural implications are unchangeable. He modestly claims that he has yet to fully understand Chinese culture. One example was when he discussed rhyming in poetry with his friends. Most of the famous verses over the course of Chinese history, including those of Mao Zedong, are fastidious- to a fault- about rhyme; this accounts for their enduring charm. As an example, he recited two famous lines from Yu Dafu and He Daozhou: “Whipped a horse in drunken rage; will my feeling burden the lovely maid” and “Countless trees

and blossoms matched by countless stupors; a full moon night seen only by a handful.”

Chinese painting is inseparable from traditional Chinese culture; Chinese poetry and calligraphy go hand in hand with it, like the blood flowing within the Chinese, which is always that of the Chinese. For Chinese painting to be cut off from its roots and made part of Western art is mere foolishness. Local dishes will always taste best in their place of origin.

To Dr. Jong, the study of Western science does not in any way contradict Chinese traditional culture: each person has his/her place in the scheme of things. Even Yang Zhenning, the Nobel laureate, attends art exhibitions, just as he frequents antique shops in New York.

### **Artistic Life in Shanghai**

Born in Indonesia, educated in Japan, with experience working in New York and an American passport, Dr. Jong moved to Shanghai just over two years ago. He has always considered himself a Chinese, an identity of which he is especially proud. He says very conceivable convenience is available in China. Dr. Jong prefers the traditional Chinese robe; whenever I saw him he looked casual and comfortable in it. He will not change into a suit and tie unless it is absolutely necessary. The best silk and linen materials can be found in China, allowing his wife to frequent the tailors, a luxury not available in the United States. Food is an even bigger issue in China, with the hotpot and Sichuan dishes in Chengdu, Chaozhou food in Shenzhen, Anhui dishes in Beijing. Dr. Jong has an uncanny ability to describe food in such a way that it leaves everyone listening hungry. In terms of transportation, Dr. Jong finds it most convenient to take taxis in Shanghai.

Dr. Jong considers Shanghai a modern metropolis, with a real human feel to it. It draws the best talents from all over the world, giving it the potential to be a center of Eastern art's renaissance. Many of his friends from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Europe and America are living in Shanghai, along with a number of close friends in artistic circles, such as Guo Cheng-feng, Xie Chun-yan, Tang Yun, He Ping-nan, Shan Guo-lin, and Ding Yi-yuan. As long as all proceeds according to his plans, Dr. Jong will likely reside in Shanghai for quite a while.

In the words of a close friend of Dr. Jong's, Mr. Yi Shou-hon, Shanghai has been jumping with activities since Dr. Jong's arrival, in contrast to “the Chinese art circle in New York, which has lost its imaginative buzz.”

There is a scholarly air about Dr. Jong's residence on Zhenning Road. At one corner of the enormous living room is a rectangular study table on which sit ink brushes and ink stones. Books are piled everywhere, making the table seem

considerably smaller than it really is. Next to the table is a grand piano. One can easily imagine the artistic inspiration that Dr. Jong and his friends can gain from this site. No doubt the ancient partition screen next to the piano has witnessed countless rounds of laughter during those many gatherings.

Dr. Jon has previously published three volumes of his paintings. The draft of the fourth volume lies on his study table.

According to Mr. Yi Shou-hon, Dr. Jong is a thoroughly interesting character who creates interesting paintings. He has a poem that should accurately describe Dr. Jong, albeit in a light-hearted manner:

“The Untutored One (nickname bestowed by Mr. Dong Xinbin, referring to his lack of formal training) seeks nothing else but fun.

He belongs to no school, yet he brings much joy through his tool

The sea stirs the turtle’s passion, but I must confess a lack of rhyme or reason.

Alas, when will our beer bellies meet, with the lotus at our feet?

(Refers to the Lotus Peak, Huangshan.)”