

A Pilgrimage to Authenticity— A Study of *China's Van Goghs*

Siyu CHEN

School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Harbin Institute of Technology
(Shenzhen), Shenzhen, China

Harbin Institute of Technology (Shenzhen), 518055, Shenzhen, China
siyu.chen06@gmail.com

Abstract: This study offers a close reading of *China's Van Goghs*, a documentary that tells the personal story of Zhao Xiaoyong, a painter-worker making his living by replicating masterpieces in a Chinese art village. Taking the cinematic representation of Zhao's pilgrimage as a starting point, this study explores how the meaning of authenticity is negotiated through the interplay between aesthetic value and market value in the global flow of cultural products. Through a cross-disciplinary exchange between film, tourism, urban studies and creative labor studies, this study investigates the on-screen portrayal of places, people and power relations as a means to investigate the spatial, social and political implications of Zhao's journey. Situating the protagonist's quest for authenticity in Shenzhen's transition from a labor-intensive economy to a knowledge-based economy, this study sheds light on the intersection between identity, mobility, and creativity at the time of capitalization, urbanization and globalization.

Keywords: documentary, authenticity, tourism, city, creative industry, China

INTRODUCTION

“Dear Theo, I’m walking toward a place that I thought was very close, but perhaps it is very far away.” Reminiscent of lives of pilgrims who are “always on the move, traveling towards destinations, though they would never arrive” (Lippens, 2000: 104), this excerpt from one of Vincent van Gogh’s letters stands as an epigraph to the documentary *China's Van Goghs*. The debut of directors Haibo Yu and Kiki Tianqi Yu, it attracted considerable media attention when making its world premiere at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)’s Panorama section in 2016. The documentary tells the personal story of a Chinese painter-worker named Zhao Xiaoyong who, after replicating thousands of van Gogh’s paintings over a period of twenty years, develops a deep

affinity with the artist. After years of longing, Zhao finally embarks on his journey to van Gogh's homeland, the Netherlands, as well as the sites in France where van Gogh painted his most famous works.

Zhao's journey is a secular pilgrimage that he feels obligated to take. His intense longing for the journey, which he repeatedly expresses in the documentary, is intricately related to his life as a van Gogh painter in Dafen, China. Located on the outskirts of the megacity of Shenzhen, Dafen is the world's largest center for handmade oil paintings with an annual production of approximately 5 million paintings, a sizeable number of which are copies of Western masterpieces (Bontje, 2014). Home to more than 600 workshops and galleries, this area of four square kilometers hosts more than 8,000 painters, most of whom are low-skilled migrant workers (ibid). Without formal art training, most of these migrant workers start their painting career by acquiring the skill of replicating van Gogh's works. The reason, as Winnie Wong (2014) notes, lies in the repeatable and reproducible formal qualities of van Gogh's rough-hewn, anti-academic, and primitivist "signature style". The production of van Gogh paintings in Dafen is a modernist "craft" by artisanal workers that caters to the market demand for authentic handwork (Wong, 2014:151). However, the labor of such work demands the conventions, performances, and appearances of original art, displayed through the "touch" of Vincent van Gogh's "individual style" (ibid). This dynamic tension between repetitive labor and unique expression leads to the particular place of the van Gogh oeuvre in the trade (ibid), and I further argue that it makes the van Gogh painters' personal struggles for an artistic identity especially acute and poignant. In this sense, the goal of Zhao's journey is not just to see the authentic pieces by van Gogh and the actual sites where van Gogh lived and painted, but by doing so to authenticate his artistic identity.

The two-fold meaning of authenticity that Zhao searches for in his journey fits perfectly into Ning Wang (1999)'s theorization of authenticity in tourism. Arguing the ambiguous valences of the concept of "authenticity", Wang (1999) distinguishes two separate aspects of authenticity in tourism, viz., that of toured objects and that of tourist experiences. While the former refers to the experience of a "real" world (or objective authenticity), the latter can be translated as the experience of a "real" self (or existential authenticity) (Selwyn, 1996). Whereas objective

authenticity is extracted from museum terminology to describe whether objects are genuine, real or original (Sharpley, 2003; Vannini and Williams, 2009), existential authenticity refers to a state of “being” that is to be activated by tourist activities (Wang, 1999). Fraught with tensions between inspiration and disillusionment, assimilation and differentiation, globalization and localization, the two aspects of authenticity emerge, converge and interweave with each other in Zhao’s intricate journey, through which Zhao’s quest for self-discovery and self-realization becomes concrete. The notion of authenticity is also a crucial component of the creative city paradigm. According to Meg Holden (2017:119), the new urban quest is to find oneself by leveraging a home in the city as a kind of city-self authenticity. Such authenticity is sought through the consumption of urban places and cultures in forms of urban creativity, uniqueness, tradition or myth (Zukin, 2010). As a laborer in a cultural industry, Zhao’s search for authenticity is deeply informed by, and intricately related to, his life experience in Shenzhen, a city that aspires to be a global creative city.

The majority of contemporary studies of authenticity in the urban context center on economic issues with a particular focus on heritage (Spina, 2001; Grazian, 2004; 2005; Martínez, 2016). Until recently, there has been a burgeoning scholarship exploring the interplay between identity formation and urban authenticity. Among these efforts to conceptualize urban-related authentication and identification, most explore the process of authentication through the lens of consumption (Wherry, 2006; Zukin, 2008; 2010; Osbaldiston, 2012), yet few touch on how personal authentication intersects with class and labor in an urban setting. As a creative laborer and secular pilgrim, Zhao’s experience traverses the binary of production and consumption through the interlocked lenses of the tourism industry and the creative economy. As films can render place in an investigable form that otherwise may be unacknowledged in everyday practice (Fraser, 2015), the cinematic representation of Zhao’s art pilgrimage serves as a vantage point to explore how the meaning of authenticity is negotiated through the interplay between aesthetic value and market value in the global flow of cultural products. Underpinned by Lefebvre’s proposition that “the investigation of a cultural text is not an end in and of itself, but instead a crucial starting point for a critique of a society” (Fraser, 2015), this study scrutinizes the mutable and multi-

faceted meanings of authenticity by employing an eclectic and disalienating approach. Through a cross-disciplinary exchange between film, tourism, city and creative industry, this study looks into the on-screen portrayal of places, people and power relations as a means to investigate the spatial, social and political implications of Zhao's journey. Situating the protagonist's quest for authenticity in Shenzhen's transition from a labor-intensive economy to a knowledge-based economy, this study sheds light on the intersection between identity, mobility, and creativity at the time of capitalization, urbanization and globalization.

FROM THE COPY TO THE ORIGINAL—A QUEST FOR OBJECTIVE AUTHENTICITY

The opening sequence of the documentary is presented over a fractured collage of images to the haunting tune of a solemn symphony. We catch a glimpse of the hustle and bustle of Dafen village where Zhao's studio is located: an adept hand is depicted drawing on canvases; close-ups of (the replicates of) van Gogh's self-portraits are presented with an emphasis on his eyes; and finally the contemplative face of Zhao, accentuating his watchful eyes comes on the screen. The juxtaposition of van Gogh and Zhao's visages seems to indicate a connection between the two, which is revealed in the following shot when the camera navigates its way into Zhao's studio. In the dim light, a dozen painter-workers toil for long hours, with painting tubes and brushes scattered over palettes. The cramped space is stuffed with oil paintings. While unfinished paintings are stuck on the wall waiting for the next stroke, finished ones are suspended from the low ceiling to dry, all of which are reproductions of van Gogh's works. As the expository captions show, since the founding of Zhao's studio, it has produced more than 100,000 van Gogh copies. Zhao apparently takes pride in what his studio has achieved. When recalling how exhausting it was for him and his fellow painter-workers to work overtime to meet large orders, he adds, "but we also learnt a lot", with a smile on his face. Displaying a large-size replicate that he is working on, he elatedly claims that it is ordered by an old client, a gallery owner from the Netherlands. A long-term cooperation with a client can to a large extent verify Zhao's skills of "copying" in terms of quality and efficiency, which is taken as an advantage of a painter in the trade-painting industry.

Moreover, to have his work exhibited in a foreign gallery implies international recognition of the artistic value of his work.

Zhao indeed seems to take his occupation as a van Gogh painter seriously and is enthusiastic about it. We see him in the documentary holding an iPad to display an original while supervising an apprentice, buying books and DVDs to learn van Gogh's brushwork, organizing screenings of a biographical film about van Gogh, and, on more than one occasion, expressing his wish to go to the Netherlands to see the originals and pay homage to his beloved artist. However, his wife objected to his plans because the travel would be quite expensive for a migrant family. Disheartened and frustrated, Zhao stays up painting, smoking, and contemplating a dream he once had with tears brimming in his eyes:

One night, I knocked on a door. Van Gogh appeared, and my paintings are identical to his. He asked me: "Xiaoyong, what do you feel when painting my work?" I replied: "I almost enter your world now." At that moment, I reached my hand out. He suddenly disappeared. I woke up immediately. Ah, it was only a dream. I couldn't sleep anymore...and sat on the bed for a whole night. Van Gogh was all over my mind.

The illusionary question that van Gogh poses in Zhao's dream is indicative of Zhao's motivation to see the van Gogh originals. Art can be understood as the objectification of "the feelings [that] flow out of and are connected with the perceiving" (Lonergan, 1997:365). To the spectators of artwork, these feelings in turn "translate into an appreciation for the value of creativity, and into the power of authenticity as a deeply meaningful aesthetic experience" (Vannini and Williams, 2007:7). Since the authenticity of the supposed significance of an artwork is based on its origin (Ratnayake and Hapugoda, 2017), visiting the originals and the original sites is expected to be epiphanic as it facilitates the recuperation of the work's feelings (Benjamin, 1986; Hansen, 2008). In this sense, Zhao's longing for the journey stems from his search for objective authenticity as a way to "enter van Gogh's world" and, as he tells his wife, "to get some inspirations and try my best to paint like him".

Zhao's strong desire finally sets him off on the journey despite his wife's reluctance. The moment he lands at the Netherlands, cheerful and melodious background music starts. On the way from the airport to the downtown, the camera skims across the coastline, windmills, and canals

before cutting to Zhao's face. Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, Zhao enthusiastically takes photos along the way. Zhao's excitement, however, vanishes the moment he sees his paintings hanging outside of a tiny souvenir stall near the Van Gogh Museum. Zhao walks into the stall to find the paintings that he thought would have been sold to a high-class gallery owner. Displayed together with souvenir t-shirts and fridge magnets, these paintings are sold at prices more than ten times as much as what he had been paid. Overwhelmed by his disappointment, Zhao smokes in silence outside the stall.

Zhao's frustration is related to the sudden revelation of his position in the hierarchy of the global trade painting industry. Accounting for approximately 60% of the world's oil paintings, most of the paintings produced in Dafen are sold either to wholesalers throughout the world or via the internet through numerous intermediaries. Operated based on far-flung distribution and flexible production (Wong, 2014), the trade painting industry features opaque prices and extensive informational asymmetries. Such practices can be understood as part of the process of globalization during which uneven and often unequal relations are engendered. According to Richard Rosecrance (1999, cited in Wong, 2014), the world is divided into what he calls the "head" nations and the "body" nations. Whereas the head nations are responsible for creating and consuming, the body nations offer manual labour. Zhao's lack of knowledge about the retail prices and end consumers of his paintings, as is shown in the film, reflects the economic and informational inequalities that painter-workers suffer from in the global artwork circuit. While the prices of Dafen paintings rise tenfold in Europe, many painters, as Zhao tells the owner of the souvenir stall, have left Dafen due to not receiving sufficient payment to be able to sustain their lives there. The intricate global distribution chain of trade painting also enables the easy fabrication of origin stories in which the signature plays a crucial part. For some consumers of art, the signature of a painting, as a basic guarantee of authenticity, individuality and originality, matters more than the formal elements of the image itself (Wong, 2014). To cater to the end consumers, Dafen paintings are thus signed (or not signed) according to the wishes of the client (*ibid*). As Wong (2014) acutely observes, the Dafen signatures are signed by any number of possible people in any number of possible names; in many cases the names on the paintings are disconnected from

the laborers that went into producing them. The awkward relationship between the anonymous labor of Dafen painters and the authorship of their paintings is reflected in the documentary—while Zhao gives a parent signature on his son's homework without a second thought, he hesitates when his daughter seeks advice from him on how to sign a newly-finished van Gogh painting. With the connotations of fake, forgery and plagiarism, the contrived authorship renders the Dafen paintings lightweight productions, which further pushes these paintings away from being “true art”.

Zhao's disappointment is also caused by the fact that his paintings are displayed in a souvenir shop instead of an art gallery. As a literal and conceptual space that shapes both artistic practice and audience response, galleries are a crucial part of the corporate cultures of high art (Siedell, 2008). Together with art schools, museums, audiences and art journals, etc., galleries constitute an “art world” that renders “an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art” (Danto, 1964:580). While George Dickie (1974:34) probably exaggerates art's institutional nature by claiming that the status of art is conferred by people acting on behalf of the artworld, the constitutive role of galleries in the possibility of art is well-acknowledged (Mcfee, 2015). In this sense, the discovery of his paintings in a Dutch souvenir stall instead of an art gallery leads Zhao to realize that his van Gogh paintings in the Netherlands are appreciated and purchased as “native crafts made in the artist's homeland” for their romantic tinge rather than artistic values and statuses.

A visit to the Van Gogh Museum makes Zhao even more disillusioned. At the spacious and immaculate exhibition hall, we see Zhao stand in front of van Gogh's originals, staring at the paintings. The repeated close-up of his intent eyes recalls Benjamin's theorization of the gaze. According to Benjamin (1968:188), a gaze “carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. When this expectation is met...there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent...to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.” By “aura” Benjamin refers to a quality which produces “a unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (1968: 224). The aura evokes awe and respect by endowing the object with a special quality that is irreducible to its physical and material reality and creates a psychological inapproachability (Leslie, 2000; Huber and Seita, 2012). It is

the authenticity of the piece of art, according to Benjamin (1968), that can bring forth the aura of an artwork that even a perfect forgery will fail to achieve. In opposition to Benjamin's claim that the aura of art decays in the age of mechanical reproduction, Michael Camille (1990) argues that the reproduction of an image may actually reinforce the aura of reification, just like how prevalent photographs add to the glamour of a film star instead of subtracting from it. In the film, Zhao's encounter with the originals by van Gogh aligns with the latter's view, which is reflected in his emotional recollection of the exhibition when he is back in Dafen:

When we walked into the museum, there were many security guards. All of them were armed with submachine guns. The moment the glass door opened, we could see a van Gogh painting right in front of us. I was so excited that I ran towards it right away. Someone said, "Zhao, look here!" I turned and discovered a whole wall of paintings that I had copied...I looked at the "Sunflower" for at least ten minutes. Wow! It's so... (ellipsis), I was so excited that I could not utter a single word...

As is implied in Zhao's account above, the aura of the authentic art pieces creates the sense of a ritual, which is amplified by the deployment of security and the arrangement of the museum space. Zhao is apparently overwhelmed by the formidable air of the originals—after visiting the Van Gogh Museum, we see him squatting motionless in the museum square in the dimmed light with a drooping head, occasionally wiping tears from his face. "All the van Gogh paintings that I have copied in the past twenty years are not as valuable as a single piece in [the] Van Gogh Museum," comments Zhao the next day, "I could not fall asleep last night, I've been thinking what to paint when I am back in China."

While the psychological inapproachability evoked by the aura of the van Gogh originals rouses Zhao to the painful realization that he can never "paint like van Gogh", in the documentary his fellow painter shows him one way to attain authenticity. After returning to Dafen, Zhao pays a visit to another Dafen painter, Zhou Youngjiu. Having succeeded in his earlier attempt to paint and sell some originals, Zhou has been encouraging his apprentices to join him in making originals. Appreciating a sunflower painting on which Zhou has made some variations through his inventive use of a palette knife, Zhao comments: "It is not the way we used to paint for orders, since the market has endowed us with more freedom now, making originals is our best way out." Zhao's remark offers a glimpse into

the changing climate of the Dafen oil painting industry. The global financial crisis in 2008 gave a heavy blow to Dafen's oil painting business, which used to rely mainly on overseas sales. The softening domestic economic growth has led to a further plummeting of the number of Dafen customers, resulting in spiraling sales (Zhou, 2016). The falling demand, both domestically and internationally, has forced the Dafen painting industry to make changes to adapt to the new environment, and the key to its survival is to establish a lasting, original presence on the global art map. The shift from making copies to creating originals in Dafen is the epitome of Shenzhen in its transition from "a world factory" to a global creative city. The past thirty years of reform and opening up have led to Shenzhen's exponential rate of economic growth and rapid pace of integration with the world. However, its economic miracle is built on labor-intensive processing and manufacturing that largely rely on foreign technology and investment. With increasing pressure on resources and the environment, Shenzhen is faced with the challenge of maintaining a sustainable economy. Moreover, the lack of cultural and industrial innovations has led to the proliferation of copying, counterfeiting and piracy activities, invoking Shenzhen as "a capital of copiers" in various popular imaginings—regional, national and international (Wallis and Qiu, 2012). Driven by a desire to maintain its economic growth and gain international recognition, the Shenzhen government in recent years has undertaken the role of being a forerunner in China's transformation from "made in China" to "created in China" by formulating policies to strengthen its creative industries (Bontje, Keane and Zhao, 2012). Deemed as an important landmark of the creative industries in Shenzhen, Dafen has gained intense government attention and promotion. The favorable government policies, coupled with the rising market demands for originals, has triggered Dafen painters' latent desire for creating their own paintings (Chen, 2021). As Zhao excitedly envisions at the end of the film, "One day Zhou uses his style to paint, then no one can beat him, maybe it just takes 50 years, or even one hundred years, for people to appreciate his paintings." Previously engaged in copying the Western masterpieces, Zhao's burgeoning interest in making originals is allegorical of Shenzhen's attempt to authenticate its status as a global city through the promotion of creative industries.

FROM A PAINTER-WORKER TO AN ARTIST—A QUEST FOR EXISTENTIAL AUTHENTICITY

Before Zhao's departure for Europe, he goes back to his hometown, a remote village in Hu Nan Province, for his visa application. The familiar sights of the humble dwellings, where his uncle and grandmother still live, revives his memories, resulting in an unexpected emotional outburst. "I only finished my primary school", he cries, moaning for the fact that he had to quit his study due to poverty.

Zhao is one of the painters who are, as Wong puts, "rejected by the academy" because their families could not afford their schooling. In fact, Zhao's life trajectory is representative of the earliest group of rural-born and uneducated migrants to Dafen. With barely any training in painting or drawing, they moved to Dafen in the early 1990s and worked for large painting firms after an apprenticeship period. Their painting career started at a time when Dafen's export market had rapidly expanded. Due to the scarcity of painters, they worked furiously to meet the large orders. In small and humble studios, they had nothing to do but paint, eat and sleep. As Wong notes, it was an artistic bohemian lifestyle these migrants never imagined possible as peasants. For many of them, the toil paid off to some extent—after a few years, they were able to accumulate enough savings to settle down in Dafen, secure orders, recruit apprentices, set up their own firms and become "masters". Taking pride in their arduous past, they often recall that period nostalgically. As a part of the widely promoted "Shenzhen Spirit", the ethos of "hard work" had a profound influence on how this earlier generation of Shenzhen migrants came to attribute their uplifting biographies in Shenzhen to their diligence and perseverance. In the documentary, when painters discuss parenting at a party, Zhou tells the others that he has forced his son to take an ill-paid summer job (14 hours for 70 RMB). "It is different from our age", said Zhou, "We have to push them to the bottom of the society to experience the hardship", which wins unanimous appreciation by the other painters.

But hard work alone is not enough for one to survive and thrive in this city. As Zhou reckons in his talk, his son has taken Dafen as their home, although they are "not treated as urban citizens". The fact that urban citizens and rural citizens are treated differently has a lot to do with China's household registration (Hukou) system. Historically, the Hukou has

determined one's legitimate place of residence and work, but its constraints on mobility between rural and urban areas have loosened during the post-Mao era. Moving to a city can enhance the economic survival of rural residents, however, due to the lack of a corresponding restructuring of welfare benefits and property rights, the Hukou continues to determine a Chinese citizen's access to education, formal employment, property acquisition, medical care, police protection and more (Wong, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2016). This discordant system, which in practice protects urban privilege, is arguably the most prevalent exclusionary practice affecting China's social structure (Ciupak and Stich, 2012). In the process of Chinese urbanization, many rural peasants have left their homes to work in cities without appropriate Hukou. According to Wong (2014), most of Dafen village's painters belong to this massive and unsanctioned population. Under the Hukou system, this social group is excluded by the legal order only to be more effectively included in the economic life of the city which, termed as "an exclusive inclusion" (Wong, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2016), renders precarious the status of these Dafen painters and their relation to the city. Among the very few channels available for rural peasants to achieve an urban status, education, which Zhao poignantly lacks, is a primary source.

The lack of education not only prevents the Dafen painter-workers from claiming their urban citizenship, but further puts them at a disadvantage in the development of the creative industry in Dafen. Since Dafen Village became a model cultural industry in 2004, officials at all levels have begun to focus on promoting its "originality" and "creativity". A lot of efforts by the local government have been made to attract original artists to move to Dafen, including offering studio space, sponsoring painting trips, organizing their exhibitions and commissioning them to paint for government spaces, etc. (Wong, 2014). The government support that aims at propagandizing the definition, value, and official legitimacy of "originality" exhibits a clear preference for artists with academic credentials. In official discourses, these original artists are portrayed as bohemians who are persistent in their artistic pursuit to express their own hearts and minds, caring nothing for the inauthenticity and reproduction that the market demands (ibid). Trained to paint speedily and repetitively to meet the orders, the trade painters stand in an awkward relationship to these graduates of art academies who are taught to paint slowly,

meticulously and originally (Pang, 2014), which leads to the marginalization of painter-workers in the government promotion of creativity and originality in Dafen.

Dafen painter-workers' struggle for social and professional identity is a constant reminder of their lack of academic training and their failure in the art world. Resonant with the hardship that van Gogh went through and his non- or even anti-academic approach, many Dafen trade painters strongly identify with this great painter, making him a particularly iconic figure, especially among van Gogh painters. We find in this film the full expression of the painters' collective admiration during the screening of van Gogh's biographical film where he is introduced as "the most respected artist in the Dafen circle". Deeply touched by the turbulent life story of van Gogh, all in the audience watch the film with tears in their eyes. Resonant with the cinematic depiction of the artist's plight and struggle, these painters particularly laud van Gogh for his unique and individualistic style. "He works only to express himself, he paints from his heart", they comment, "that's why he is so great!" The mythologized persona of van Gogh is part of a historically constructed discourse of "true art" as coming from talented and rebellious individuals; on this account, art is the expression of their innermost feelings. Created out of singular personal visions without any commercial concerns, these pieces of art possess ineffable authenticity and speak of the unique and individual persona of the artists (Wong 2016). While such rhetoric of "true art" has been widely criticized, it apparently retains its currency in van Gogh trade painting, where paintings are judged not for their resemblance to the originals but their closeness to modernist artistic values (Wong, 2014). Working as painters to secure a modest livelihood, van Gogh painters in Dafen cannot escape from the toils of the market. The awareness that they work in a way contrary to the modernist myths of art and artists leads to the romantic anxiety of industrialization and commodification. In the documentary, this is reflected in the discussion between Zhao and his travelling companion (thereafter referred to as TC) after meeting the client in Amsterdam and bargaining the price with him.

Zhao: We paint for making a living, to support our lives.

TC: Van Gogh also wanted to support his own life, he just failed to do so. Didn't he paint to make a living? He wanted to sell his paintings so much... One's spirit has a long-lasting effect, whereas material can only bring about short-term gratification. What makes you paint for so long? It is your spirit that makes you persist. Not the materials.

Zhao: Van Gogh is incomparable to us. He was pursuing the highest of art, he was living for art, and he worked for art throughout his life.

Despite his traveling companion's comforting words, Zhao persists in, and is vexed by, the dichotomy of free expression as an artist's privilege and copying as market-purposed. Juxtaposed against van Gogh's romantic strain of self-expression and spontaneity, Zhao's labor, like that of other van Gogh painters in Dafen, is utilitarian, commercial, routine, technical, codified, and rule-bound (Wong, 2014). Governed by instrumental rationality rather than the creative energies of artists, their work is included in the calculating industrial system and framed in terms of uniform generic formats. The centrality of repetition and commodification as well as the focus on achieving a predefined end product in van Gogh trade painting entail the discipline of labor, which necessitates the self-control of bodily drives and impulses (Wang, 1999). As opposed to naturalness, sentiments and feelings, the rational, constraining and monotonous routine results in not only the differentiation between craft and "true art" in the artistic hierarchy (Goethe 1789), but also the laborers' sense of existential inauthenticity (Giddens, 1990: 98; Wang, 1999). In the Dafen context where the painters' citizenship remains unsanctioned and artistic identity unrecognized, the feeling of a loss of a "real self" is further intensified.

According to Wang (1999), tourism is an effective way to resist inauthenticity stemming from the dominant institutions of their everyday lives. He further argues that tourism, as a simpler, freer, more spontaneous, more authentic, or less serious, less utilitarian, and more romantic lifestyle, enables the search of authentic selves with the aid of activities or toured objects (Wang, 1999). In the film, Zhao and his traveling companions go through a van Gogh-themed tour by visiting the Van Gogh Museum, wandering around the hospital where van Gogh once stayed and holding a memorial ceremony at van Gogh's grave. The film reaches its summit when Zhao's tour group arrives at the location where van Gogh executed the masterpiece *Café Terrace at Night*. "Now I know why the sky in this painting is so blue", Zhao exclaims in excitement, "he

“painted it at dusk when the sky is just like what we see at this moment!” The sight of the original site fuelled Zhao’s impulse to paint. Watched by a crowd, Zhao finishes a painting of Café Terrace at Night on the spot. Panning over the curious passers-by, the camera again focuses on his leaning shoulder, intent eyes and deft hand. Seemingly a familiar scene, his body behaves differently this time. When copying the Café Terrace at Night in Dafen, Zhao’s body is an object of self-control and self-constraint; in contrast, painting on the set of the Café Terrace makes the body a “differential field”, to borrow Lefebvre’s (1991: 384) words, that breaks out of the temporal and spatial restraints developed in response to labor, to the division of labor, to the localizing of work in the global flow of cultural products. By entering an intensified state of spontaneity, inspiration and emotion, the body as a “body-subject” or the “feeling-subject” (Seamon, 1979, cited in Wang) achieves authenticity in the existential sense. The sense of authenticity induced by bodily feeling is even amplified under the influence of alcohol. Later on, after drinking at a party, Zhao strolls through the alley of Arle with his traveling partners, raving:

Now it is not me who is walking. I have turned into van Gogh all of [a] sudden. It feels so good and I really want to paint. I instantly paint “the Café”. All the people ask for more. OK, I finish another van Gogh painting within half an hour. [All the people are amazed, and they would tell me] “Don’t go back to China, stay here. Don’t go back, stay here”.

As if providing a hint of the evanescence of Zhao’s fantasy, the camera quickly cuts to the next scene as we catch Zhao having a severe hangover, vomiting in his hotel room. As Wang (1999) points out, bodily sources of an authentic self can only be explored for a relatively short period, and can only be realized as peak experiences during a journey. He further contends that such bodily feeling of authenticity serves to restore the order of everyday life after the journey (Wang, 1999). In the film, the transition that Zhao has undergone verifies Wang’s claim. After coming back to Dafen, the confidence and creative impulses that he has had in that drunk night seem to disappear. At a dinner party with his fellow painters, Zhao discloses the great pressure he was faced with during his trip to Europe. “After all, we are only painter-workers. It is indeed very difficult to turn a painter-worker into a painter, and then to whatever..., ” he says, without

the heart to even utter the word “artist”. “In my opinion, painter-workers, painters and artists are just concepts”, one fellow painter-worker quickly responds, “the classification itself is not that important, what is important is how you position yourself, what you do, and how you express yourself to make others recognize you.” Winning cheers and applause, the fellow painter-worker continues, “If van Gogh had followed the teaching of the art academy, there would not have been such a great artist like van Gogh, and there would not have been Zhao Xiaoyong”. Uplifting and comforting as it sounds, his words, however, stand on shaky ground. The era in which one can become an artist without much aid from the professional, institutional, exhibitionary and discursive apparatuses has long gone. The social field of the production of art, including the recognition by art academies, plays a very important role in conferring the status of “art” to a piece of work, yet these very mechanisms are what Dafen village conspicuously lacks (Wong, 2014). The plethora of competing terms precisely speaks to Dafen painters’ plight in their struggle for legitimacy and recognition (ibid).

CONCLUSION

Responding to the rigorous academic debates over the meaning of authenticity, Regina Bendix (1997) and Jillian M. Rickly-Boyd (2012) argue that the crucial questions to be answered are not “what is authenticity”, but “who needs authenticity and why?”, “how has authenticity been used?”, and “what does authenticity do?”

A close reading of *China’s van Goghs* sheds light on the questions above by situating them in the context of Shenzhen. In parallel with the shift towards a post-industrial society, urbanites’ craving for authentic lives has led to an increasing value put upon authenticity in cities around the world (Zukin, 2010). As China’s first contemporary instant city, Shenzhen has risen from wilderness to full urban status after 30 years of neck-breaking growth. Contrasted with “ordinary cities” where “custom and tradition reinforced the staid pattern of life” (Barth, 1975), the constant change of instant cities leads scholars to call into question the notion of urban authenticity. “Can an instant city ever feel like the real thing?” as Nicolai Ouroussoff (2008: 72) asks, “Built at phenomenal speeds, these generic or instant cities, as they have been called, have no recognizable center, no

single identity. It is sometimes hard to think of them as cities at all....” The sense of urban inauthenticity is further exacerbated in the city of Shenzhen, whose industrial heritage is overshadowed by its *Shanzhai* culture, the culture of the counterfeiting of well-known, particularly foreign, products or brands. In this sense, to claim authenticity becomes a means for the city of Shenzhen to realize its ambitions to be a “global city” by remaking Shenzhen into a city of creativity. While Dafen is zealously promoted as a model site of creative industries in Shenzhen, the Dafen painters are, however, neglected, marginalized and excluded from the government’s sponsorship programs for original painters. The unsanctioned citizenship, unrecognized artistic identity and the feeling of a loss of a “real self” propel Dafen painters to search for authenticity so as to claim their cultural right in the making of a creative Shenzhen. As a result, Zhao’s journey becomes a pilgrimage to authenticity by transcending the fabricated, alienated, uniform and debased, reflecting the complex, contested and mutually informing dynamics between urban authenticity and individual authenticity.

A tool for Shenzhen to claim its global status in the world, and for individuals to claim their citizenship in a creative Shenzhen, authenticity nevertheless is difficult to attain. Similar to a pilgrimage, authenticity is an unfolding process, or in Zukin (2010)’s words, “a gradual buildup of everyday experience.” And it can only become a potent tool if it is redefined as a cultural right to make a permanent home in the city for all people to live, work and dream (Zukin, 2008). Up to now, due to the global market logic, cultural hegemony and uneven distribution of social resources, Zhao’s pursuit of artistic identity and Dafen’s aspiration of becoming a global art centre remain unfulfilled. Echoing the beginning of the documentary, the closing sequence again cuts back and forth between the eyes on van Gogh’s self-portraits and the eyes of Zhao, which is reminiscent of Benjamin’s theory that the visual exchange of gazes gives birth to the experience of the aura. “A unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (Benjamin, 1968: 224); the aura is the destination of Dafen painter-workers’ pilgrimages to authenticity, though they will never arrive.

Acknowledgements. This work is supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (HIT.HSS.202144), European Research Council Consolidator Grant ChinaCreative 616882, Shenzhen Research Institute of High-Quality Development and New Structure, Shenzhen High-Level Talent Grant and Shenzhen Municipal Public Culture Project “Cultural Soft Power of Global Cities”.

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