

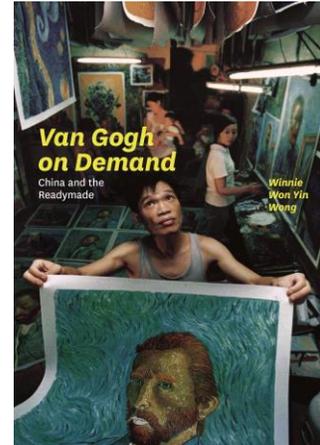
Winnie Won Yin Wong, **Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade**, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013, 302 pp., \$88.91 (hardcover), \$30.22 (paperback), \$16.50 (Kindle).

Reviewed by

Lin Zhang

University of Southern California, USA

Winnie Won Yin Wong's book ***Van Gogh on Demand: China and the Readymade*** is a tour de force that critically engages with some of the core theories in art history and cultural studies, such as creativity, authenticity, authorship, and labor, through the unlikely lens of a "village" (Dafen, a suburb of Buji in South China's Guangdong Province) that specializes in creating reproductions of Western paintings. It also captures, using Dafen as a microcosm of China, the central dilemma and hope of the nation at this particular historical juncture as it aspires to move beyond the "factory of the world" to become a "creative" agent. However, unlike many Western and Chinese scholars and policy makers who take for granted the teleological path from copy to creativity (Keane, 2007), Wong pursues an alternative route by deconstructing creativity/copy and the stereotypical image of China as the nation that "makes and fakes" (Pang, 2012)—cultural tropes that often mask rather than illuminate power inequalities and ongoing transformations.



At the heart of her thesis is the rejection of the "factory imaginary," a cultural myth reinforced by global conceptual artists and the Chinese government alike, in their self-justified efforts to rescue Dafen painters from their presumed "lack of creativity." Not only does she unpack the historical genealogy of the imaginary and the cultural work that it does in spaces of global encounter, she also reveals, adroitly moving between ethnographic stories, retrospective history, and theories, that rather than victims of either Communist authoritarianism or global capitalism, Dafen painters and bosses strategically deploy different forces and actively appropriate widespread cultural myths to construct a mini art world that is not so different from the hierarchical and "free" global art establishment, if not making transparent its problems and hypocrisies.

Wong is uniquely positioned to conduct this research. As a bilingual Chinese American with family connections in Hong Kong and Guangdong, and an art historian affiliated with prestigious American universities (MIT, Harvard, and Berkeley), she possesses a set of linguistic, cultural and social capital that allows her to infiltrate into different social networks and sites of production and consumption. From 2006 to 2010, she interviewed more than 60 painters and bosses in Dafen, apprenticed and worked as an assistant at a Van Gogh specialty workshop, served as an intermediary for global artists and Dafen painters in realizing a number of conceptual art projects, participated in government-sponsored art projects as a consultant, and traveled around the world to meet and talk to retailers and buyers of Dafen paintings. This immersive and multifaceted ethnographic experience is complemented by extensive

archival research. The end product is a historically informed, ethnography-grounded, and powerful counter story that draws on the perspective of the “periphery” to shed new light on the “center.”

Chapter 1 sets up the context and historicizes the myth of the “great painting factory” as rooted in European Romanticism and contemporary Western imagination of China as the “factory of the world.” Wong first traces the history of Dafen trade painting to the 18th and 19th century Canton port trade, the Maoist investment in industrialization and reestablishing trade fairs, and, most recently and directly, the post-1978 formation of the East-Asian subcontracting system that links Chinese coastal production sites to the global consumer market via Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Asian intermediaries. She then depicts the various divisions of labor and workplace organizational practices that characterize the production system in Dafen.

Particularly interesting is her analysis of how the “factory imaginary” is strategically appropriated and circulated by different agents, such as the Dafen artists and bosses, the conceptual artists, and the Western media and consumers, to serve different aspirations and purposes. Whereas in reality, instead of a full-scale industrialization and mechanization, labor practices and relationships in Dafen remain, under most circumstances, small-scale, informal, flexible, precarious, and even idiosyncratic. By doing so, she highlights the agency and resistance on the part of Dafen bosses and painters in self-fashioning and refashioning a system that is not always in their favor. These findings bring her research into dialogue with other studies on labor conditions under the subcontracting system (Pun, 2005; Yan, 2008).

Chapter 2 centers on the issue of “skill” and deconstructs the various dichotomies (conceptual artist versus copyist, artistic authenticity versus alienated labor, and so forth) that authorize the imagination of Dafen, if not China, as an inferior copyist of Western art and culture. The chapter uses the Amsterdam-based video artist Sascha Pohle’s 2009 project as a lead to explore the assumptions of Dafen painters’ lack of creativity—a problematic notion held by both the global artists and the Chinese government. Instead, Wong demonstrates through ethnographic anecdotes that Dafen painters, depending on their positioning within this hierarchical community, “hold divergent claims on creativity” (p. 29). The performativity and management of artistic personae and the struggles between the academy and the market turn out to be not so different from what the global contemporary artists have to grapple with. Making an analogy between Dafen and the Chinese nation at this particular historical conjuncture, Wong takes issue with the linear narrative of copying-to-creativity that pitches the creative West against the copyist China and designates “upskilling” as the way out for China. Instead, she places power and history at the center of Dafen, or for that matter, China’s contemporary dilemma in nation-building.

Chapter 3 focuses on the trope of bohemia, and nicely blends policy and history with a close reading of media/cultural texts in unpacking the Chinese government’s shifting propaganda discourses. At the core of Wong’s analysis is how the Dafen local government strategically taps into the art historical tropes of bohemia, marginality and originality and the “socialist legacy of avant-garde utopianism,” and adapts them to the Chinese migrant workers’ experience of mobility, labor, and entrepreneurship in justifying a contemporary official project of “urbanization and industrialization through culture” (p. 143). Having first set up the history of Dafen as a “model bohemia,” the author takes up two pieces of TV propaganda materials produced in collaboration with the local government, exploring how the seemingly

contradictory pursuits of profit, nationalism, and avant-gardism and authenticity are reconciled through melodramatic storytelling and united in the tale of the “Chinese dream: the self-realization of workers through creative labor” (ibid).

Chapter 4 engages with key historical questions of artistry and authorship by examining a Van Gogh specialty workshop run by Zhao Xiaoyong in Dafen and the transnational sales network of Van Gogh paintings. Three months’ participant observation as a trade painting apprentice and an assistant to Zhao opened Wong’s eyes to the unique ethic of signatures and the code of craft practices among Dafen painters. The labor of handwork and constructed anonymity fuel different consumer imagination transnationally while “producing a particular kind of artisanal worker” among Dafen artists (p. 30). Although Wong tried to juxtapose theoretical analysis with vivid ethnographic details, it is still one of the more theory-ridden and arcane chapters in the book.

In contrast, chapter 5 achieves a better balance between theory and empirical accounts and explores issues of conceptualism, universal creativity and unequal power relationships in global art production. By tracing the representation of Dafen through a series of conceptual and photojournalist projects initiated by elite Chinese or Western artists that appropriated the labor of Dafen painters, Wong reveals the dilemma of Dafen artists as caught between “the faith in universalist creativity, and the postmodernist critique of authorship” (p. 31). The fact that she is actively involved in the execution and sometimes conceptualization process of these projects distinguishes her analysis from the majority of existing art historical accounts. Wong’s embeddedness in the web of cross-cultural exchanges that often remain opaque to most researchers provides a unique perspective and a rare advantage.

Although the main target audiences of the book are art researchers and practitioners, it speaks to many other readers. Scholars who are interested in cultural industries, space and urbanization, labor and workplace culture would find it relevant and stimulating. Post-colonial theorists in general and China studies scholars in particular would not want to miss such a deep and well-informed treatment of globalization, post-socialist culture, and contemporary China. However, for people who are not familiar with art theories, the book can appear jargonistic and difficult to grasp—some chapters more so than others. It is also better at myth busting and critical deconstruction than offering practical strategies for both Dafen’s peasant-worker artists and China in terms of changing their disadvantaged position in the contemporary global division of labor. Overall, Winnie Won Yin Wong’s *Van Gogh on Demand* offers an intriguing account of a crucial but often neglected link in the transnational flow of art, commodities, labor, and ideas. It is original, thorough, and compelling.

References

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