

Wesley Tongson's Secluded World of Ink

Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, Ph.D.

Wesley Tongson Ink Artist

Wesley Tongson (1957–2012) took the name “Mountainscape Teacher” (Shandou Laoshi) and, in his later years, signed his paintings as “Mountain Taoist” (Shandou Daoren), by doing so he identified himself with the ancient *wenren hua*, literati, tradition of Chinese scholar-amateur calligraphers and painters that can be traced back as early as the Six Dynasties period (220–581 CE), when the creative use of the brush was first recognized as the critical form of expression by China's educated elite. Since then *shufa*, calligraphy, the art and method of beautiful writing, has been considered the most important form of Chinese aesthetics. This is because the same brush that is used for writing is also used for painting, and it is understood that the strength of the brushed line imparts a sense of the creator. None of this was lost on Wesley Tongson, who in the tradition of an educated young student studied and practiced writing and painting from his earliest years.

Above all else, Tongson was an impassioned artist who wrote and painted every day of his life, ultimately disbanding the use of the brush so that the ink and pigments flowed literally from his hands, fingers and nails. He was following the canon of the *Liu fa*, *Six Elements of Painting*, written by Xie He in the sixth century in his *Guhua pinlu* (*Old Record of the Classifications of Painters*). Xie He's first element requires that brush strokes, whether written or painted, be filled with *qi*, spirit resonance, which means that they should possess a profound sense of vitality; the second element discusses the “Bone Method” which is the way of using the brush, the handle of which is considered an extension of the artist's own hand. Following these ancient canons, Tongson adhered closely to the tenets of classical forms of expression, as both his calligraphy and his paintings convey a deep sense of conviction that can only come from a pure heart.

Ink as an Instrument of Political Dissent

When considering Tongson's art, it is important to recognize the political environment that existed in the second half of the twentieth century. Mainland China was embroiled in Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and Great Britain's one hundred-year lease of Hong Kong was to be terminated in 1997. Chinese identity for those living in Hong Kong was in flux as there was no sense of cultural stability for the foreseeable future. It was this climate of uncertainty that faced Tongson during his formative and most

impressionable years, and it was during this time that he sought comfort in painting his Taoist inspired landscapes and calligraphic Zen aphorisms, as *wenren* artists of earlier times had done before him. The parallels with history are strong. During times of invasion and duress, intellectuals, particularly those who worked at the imperial court, would often choose to take leave of their official duties and escape to remote areas where they could live secluded lives, often choosing to be close to Taoist and Buddhist communities. Tongson's own interest in Taoist mysticism and Zen Buddhism included Christianity; these great religious traditions gave him spiritual support and provided him with insights into the deeper workings of nature bringing him closer to a place of inner peace.

During the Southern Song period (1127–1279 CE) disillusionment with political transgressions led to the rising interest amongst many intellectuals in the meditative Zen (*Chan*) sect of Buddhism; it was a time when the important painters Liang Kai (early 13th century) and Muqi (mid-13th century), broke with the courtly professional styles of painting that used colorful pigments and finely detailed outlines, to develop their own strong, individualistic and expressive brush strokes, by means of pure black ink. They experimented in the unfettered spiritual environments of Buddhist temples and Taoist retreats. A similar situation arose in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with the invasion of China by the Mongols led by Genghis Khan, whose grandson, Kubilai Khan (r. 1260–1294) established the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368 CE).

***I-min*, Left-over Subjects**

During this time of oppression under the Mongols, many Confucian scholars refused to serve at the Khanbalik court out of loyalty to the fallen Song dynasty, they were known as *i-min*, or left-over subjects, many of whom settled in the area around Hangzhou. They were scholars, calligraphers, poets and painters, who rejected not only official service, but also the perceived weak styles of the Southern Song court painters. The Yuan period paintings of Qian Xuan (c. 1235–1300), Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), Huang Gongwang (1269–1354), and Ni Zan (1301–1374), etc. were critiques of the overly refined, colorful professional works of the past, and as such, today in the twenty-first century their spirits and attitudes can be recognized as being thoroughly modern in their dissenting positions. It is in this sense that Tongson, although not overtly political, fits the role of the *i-min*. He was a distinctive and accomplished artist who understood the tenets of traditional ink painting. He also had the courage to paint in the highly intellectual ink styles forbidden during the Cultural Revolution. A case could be made that he had the freedom to do so because he was living in Hong Kong, however, having been trained in both Chinese and Western forms of artistic expression, he joined an older distinctive group of contemporary twentieth century artists who were adhering to the traditional values of ink painting whilst exploring new forms of expression. Artists

of the early twentieth century, including Pan Tianshou (1897–1971), Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), and Lui Shou-kwan (1919–1975), were faced with the demise of the old imperial order that had been sustained by the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and the opening up of China to the rest of the world. It was during this tumultuous time that new innovative forms of aesthetic expression were introduced that inspired them to rethink the position of traditional ink painting. They experimented by using innovative methods and ideas, many of which were influenced by the introduction of colorful western oil painting, yet they never strayed from ink as their principal source of artistic expression. This was also the case with the next generation of younger artists, many of whom lived and studied in the West, including Arnold Chang (b. 1954, New York) a contemporary of Tongson's, and a student of the renowned experimental ink artist C.C. Wang (Chi-Chien Wang) (1907–2003). Chang, like Tongson, faced similar challenges in his efforts to infuse modern (read Western) approaches into his traditional art through collaboration and photography.

Landscapes

Fundamental to studying traditional Chinese painting is the acknowledgment of the hierarchy of subject-matter. Ink paintings of the natural environment follow that of the gods and spiritual beings and is considered the most important form of aesthetic expression. Landscape painting, *shanshui hua*, translates as “mountain and water painting.” The natural world was believed to be the sacred abode of *xian*, Taoist immortals, who inhabit the mountains, hills, rivers, lakes, and islands in the oceans. Tongson painted many landscapes in a variety of styles, most of which were done in the classical vertical format, to be read from the foreground at the bottom, up to the mountains and clouds, the abode of deities, at the top. Some are named by consecutive numbers, such as *Mountain 1* (1995) and *Mountain 2* (2001), or *Landscape 3* (2001), and *Landscape 6* (2003), etc., however, most have distinctive Taoist or Zen titles such as *The Rugged Path* (1997), or the series of *Spiritual Mountains*, in pure ink, including *Spiritual Mountains 3* (2010), or the more colorful *Spiritual Mountains 4* (2011) and *Spiritual Mountains 5* (2012), in which the blue-green and gold colors are highly referential to Tang dynasty (618–906 CE) early landscapes, the most well-known of which is the painting of *Emperor Minghuang Xuanzong's Journey to Shu* (c. early 8th century). Following paths through rocks, over rivers, and up through mountain slopes is a reassuring experience for viewers, however, the heavily-inked rocks and mountains in *Spiritual Mountains 4*, portend a deep sense of anxiety that is even more prevalent in *Spiritual Mountains 8* (2010), in which Tongson dispenses with any color that would have relieved the intensity of his feelings. His black ink landscapes recall those defiantly painted by Li Keran (1907–1989) during the Cultural Revolution. Yet the most intense landscapes are those he painted with his fingers and nails such as *Spiritual Mountains 3* that harken back to the influence of the earlier masters Pan Tianshou and Zhang Daqian, who worked in the spontaneous *pomo*, splashed

ink, style that offered a freedom of expression from the highly controlled *cun*, texture strokes, that form the foundation of traditional ink painting.

Calligraphic Mantra Characters

Throughout his life, Tongson sought solace in Taoist mysticism, Zen Buddhism and Christian teachings. In nature he felt a deep sense of spirituality as is evidenced by often calling his landscapes “Spiritual Mountains.” This is palpable in a series of paintings he made in the 1990s wherein he adhered to the ritual tradition of writing characters and syllables that would be used in meditation as sacred mantras in Christian and Zen Buddhist practice. The calligraphic character in *The Light* (1992) is boldly written in large grey ragged strokes that impart a sense of energy which make the character seem to float above the green, pink and blue marbled background, however the darkness of the black ink appears to fade in the strength of “The Light of Christ” that can also reference the symbolism of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. In another painting, *God’s Light* (1992), the characters have become illegible; the highly expressive flying white, *feibai*, strokes are dissolving in the intensity of *God’s Light* and appear to be immersed in the pale aqua-colored marbled waters. The grey characters in *Blessed Rain* (1992) are written with a sense of scattered frenzy with *pomo* raindrops falling over and between the lines onto the blue marbled background. Three paintings that have specific Buddhist references are *Ksitigarbha* (1992), *Boundless Compassion* (1993), and *Buddhadharma* (1997), all of which are painted with a chaotic fury, making the characters virtually illegible. The dark palette of *Ksitigarbha* references the *bodhisattva* who lightens the way for all those in hell, he is also the guardian of deceased children. The lines of *Boundless Compassion* appear to spiral with great intensity as they represent the enormity of the work of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* as they seek to save all sentient beings. *Buddhadharma* is written on two boards with the same energized movements witnessed in the other paintings in this series; here the reference is to Bodhi Dharma, a Central Asian Buddhist monk who brought the teachings of the Buddha from India to China in 520 CE, and introduced the meditative sect of Chan, known as Zen in Japan.

Trees and Flowers

Trees and flowers are imbued with significant meanings that remove them from the purely decorative, hence Tongson’s paintings of the *Suihan Sanyou*, “Three Friends of Winter,” that is the pine, plum, and bamboo, convey strong associations with longevity, courage, endurance and loyalty, all of which are based upon Confucian values. Often these three “friends” are painted together to reinforce their meanings; however, Tongson made many large paintings of each individually, therefore, allowing the values of each

to be expressed in its own way. Evergreen pine trees that withstand the bitter cold of winters are enduring symbols of longevity, especially when paired with rocks. In *Pine 2* (2010), Tongson pairs a rather stiff upright pine with a rugged vertical rock; heavily inked pine needles that he made with his nails, provide dense canopies over the rough surfaces of the rock and the tree trunk denoting the tenacity and age of both. *Pine 3* (2011), is a painting of a branch that reaches diagonally across the surface of the paper with its pine needles appearing to explode in star-like bursts. In this pine branch there is a lightness and dynamic quality to the strokes that Tongson made with his nails to define the needles. The whole painting exudes a sense of energy that contrasts with the rigid, static *Pine 2*.

The evergreen bamboo, known for its tensile strength and ability to withstand the rigors of winters represents vitality, endurance and longevity. It bends in strong winds but does not break, thus it symbolizes humility, fidelity and integrity. Painting the stalks and leaves of bamboo provides the foundation for calligraphic brush strokes so is known to all who practice writing and painting. On the two boards of *Bamboo 1* (1993), Tongson captures the tensile strength of the vertical trunks as they are blown in the wind, and one can almost hear their delicate spiky leaves rustling against each other.

Plum blossoms, the third of the “Three Friends of Winter,” are symbols of perseverance and purity; they bloom in the midst of winter on gnarled old trees, with the promise of rebirth and longevity. Tongson painted them in a variety of styles, from the heavily inked dense abstract rendition in *Plum 2* (2004), to the horizontal *Plum 3* (2010), wherein using his nails the strokes virtually fly over the surface of the paper barely touching it, giving the lines a sense of movement as if dancing through the air. It has that same sense of spontaneity and immediacy that can be detected in *Pine 3*. In other paintings of plum blossoms such as *Red Plums Over the Earth* (1993), and *Plum 1* (1993), Tongson introduces a joyful sense of vitality through the auspicious red blossoms that are splashed on in the highly spontaneous *pomo* style, as they alight on the snow-covered, angular branches.

Lotus, the sacred Buddhist flower that connotes spiritual purity, was a particularly important image for Tongson. His paintings of this beautiful flower are intense and dark. *Lotus 1* (2002) is an exercise in stark contrasts between the white petals of the flower and a leaf that drapes down like a skirt, against the intense solid black background. *Lotus 2* (2010) is a vertical painting in which black lotuses are barely visible against the dark grey wash. In both these works there is a premonition of foreboding. This darkness is taken further in *Lotus 3* (2011) where the whole surface of the paper is filled with seemingly chaotic black ink brush strokes. Any sense of spiritual enlightenment seems to have dissipated. Even in the towering vertical painting of *Lotus 4* (1995), the flower has passed its prime. It seems that the spiritual awakening that Tongson sought from Zen Buddhism is beyond his reach.

Calligraphy and Ink

Tongson expressed himself in distinctive and personal ways through his control of ink, whether with a brush, his hands, fingers or nails. He excelled in different styles of calligraphy as can be seen in his large character work *Calligraphy 4* (2011), which is done with his fingers, wherein he writes the characters in a boldly splattered ink *lishu*, clerical script, that have the energy of a written Zen aphorism. *Calligraphy 2* (2009), on the other hand is also written with his fingers in the *lishu* style, however each character is clearly formed with softly defined and rounded edges giving it a more formal essence. In *Calligraphy 3* (2009) each character adheres to an invisible rectangular shape, that is also evident in his preceding works. In this calligraphy he has executed it with a certain lightness and delicacy that is punctuated by heavier areas and splattered dots in his distinctly recognizable style.

Two outstanding examples of Tongson's Zen calligraphy are Buddhist in nature: *Everyone can see the omnipotence of the Buddha, His clear vision radiates from his inner self* (2011); and *With the prevalence of ink, arrogance subsides. We can observe the teachings of Buddha, whose wisdom is all-encompassing* (2011). In both of these large works Tongson displays an almost lyrical sense of movement that can be traced down the vertical lines that are punctuated with alternating areas of dense black ink and delicate, swift *feibai* strokes. The message of the Buddha's teachings further adds to the intensity of these powerful calligraphies.

Perhaps Tongson's most distinctive calligraphy can be seen in *Of Old, The Dragon Conquered All and the Phoenix Calmed the Spirit* (1995). It is a strongly Taoist work written in the *caoshu*, cursive script, that exudes tremendous energy. Following each stroke becomes a visual dance for the viewer, wherein heavily inked areas abruptly twist and turn into flying white, *feibai*, strokes, and the finest, most delicate lines are as slender as silken threads. The result is an extraordinarily cohesive and compelling work of aesthetic achievement that captures the essence of the complementary powers of the dragon and the phoenix.

Tongson was the consummate ink artist. Limiting himself mostly to traditional literati themes, he experimented with different forms of painting from highly linear and calligraphic to colorful intense washes. He was inventive in his methods of painting yet stayed true to his commitment to ink as his ultimate form of aesthetic and spiritual expression. His paintings are defined by his commitment to the expressive potential of ink in the true spirit of Zen.

Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker

Mary-Ann Milford-Lutzker, Professor of Asian Art History, holds the Carver Chair in East Asian Studies, at Mills College. She received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. Her courses cover the ancient, classical and contemporary histories of the art of India, China, Japan and the Himalayas. The focus of her research is on the contemporary art of Asia, and on Asian American artists that resulted in her curating the first exhibition of contemporary Indian Art to be held in the United States. In support of her work she has received many grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Smithsonian Institute, and American Institute for Indian Studies (AIIS). She has also curated exhibitions on the arts of India, China, Japan, Korea and Indonesia.

She has served on the Board of Directors of the College Art Association (CAA), 2005–2010; and on the Board of Directors of ASIANetwork, 2006–2009; she has also served on the Board of Directors of the American Council for Southern Asian Art (ACSAA), and the Society for the Art and Cultural Heritage of India (SACHI); she serves on the Advisory Committee for the Society for Asian Art of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco; and is on the Commission for Asian Contemporary Art, San Francisco. She currently serves on the CAA Art History Fellowship Committee. In 1995 she served as an NGO Delegate to the United Nations Fourth International Conference on Women, in Beijing, China.