

## I. CREATING THE DREAM

When the Zhou Brothers first arrived in the United States in 1986, with dozens of their paintings but only thirty dollars in their pockets, they could not possibly have imagined what they have achieved today. In these eighteen years, they have left their footprints and their artwork in cities all over the world. Their dreams and their faith in creating art together have been successfully realized (fig. 1). A thirty-year collaboration has produced a powerful body of work that crosses the borders of many artistic media (fig. 2). Dozens of exhibitions over these years have documented the evolution in their art and their collaboration.

This essay focuses to a large extent on the first half of the brothers' artistic careers, from their childhood in the remote Guangxi Autonomous Region of China, through the difficult years of the Cultural Revolution, the beginning of their artistic training and work, and, finally, the discovery of their talent by the art world in China. This period is not well represented in the sizable number of previous catalogs published in the West, but it is appropriate to this retrospective celebrating their thirty-year collaboration.

The biographies of the Zhou Brothers may read like a novel filled with unimaginable events happening in exotic locales, the plot driven by humor, amazing adventures, terrible tragedies, and unexpected good fortune. At the center of the story are two very talented and optimistic individuals whose lives have intersected the cataclysmic history of modern China but who have been able to ricochet into an extraordinary artistic trajectory.

The Zhou Brothers, now known in the West as ShanZuo and DaHuang, were born into a well-educated family of the Zhuang ethnic minority in China's western Guangxi Province. Several generations of the Zhou family had been involved in establishing a modern educational system in Wuming, the

remote town that served as the county seat. Wuming, which is populated almost entirely by Zhuang people, is bordered by the Xijiang River and is about fifty kilometers west of Nanning, the provincial capital. In the past, it had claimed status as the hometown of Lu Rongting, who served in the 1930s as the governor of Guangxi and Guangdong.<sup>1</sup>

The family of the Zhou Brothers' maternal grandfather had been scholars and educators for many generations and were thus important members of the educated elite in their area. The grandfather, Wei Hong'en, held important positions in the local educational establishment during a crucial period. He served as director of the Wuming County Educational Bureau, and in 1928 and 1929 he established several schools, including the Wuming No. 1 and No. 2 Normal Schools. He also was the founder of the first coeducational school in Wuming County, the Mingxiuyuan, and the cofounder and first principal of the Mingshan Middle School (now the Wuming Middle School).

Their maternal grandmother, Zhou Jinghua, was also an educator and was the backbone of the family in which the Zhou Brothers grew up. She and her husband had met when Wei Hong'en traveled to her home city of Liuzhou as education inspector for the Guangxi Provincial Department of Education. A well-educated woman herself, having graduated from the Guilin Girls Normal School, she followed her husband back to the smaller town of Wuming after her marriage. There she gave birth to a daughter, Wei Yixing, the mother of the Zhou Brothers.

In 1922, when her daughter was a small child, Zhou Jinghua founded the Wuming Girls School, which followed the progressive ideals of the new culture movement. This social and educational movement had been born on May 4, 1919, following student demonstrations in Beijing. It advocated strengthening China through modern

education and by overthrowing traditional social and cultural conventions. The Wuming Girls School thus established a new curriculum for girls' education that added modern subjects to the traditional female arts. It included language and literature (Chinese), mathematics, music, art, sports, crafts, sewing, and embroidery. Zhou Jinghua was an excellent calligrapher, and in addition to serving as school principal, she taught the girls art and music.

Unfortunately, Wei Hong'en's hope for a son put him in direct conflict with the modern social ideas the new educational system promoted for China. Vainly striving for a male heir, he took a second and eventually a third wife. Although he and Zhou Jinghua maintained a reasonably friendly relationship, she chose not to be part of this regressive family structure. She and her daughter moved into their own dwelling, where they established a family that was physically and economically independent of the extended Wei family. Because Zhou Jinghua frequently traveled to the city to buy books for her students, she soon decided to offer the same service to other citizens of her community. In addition to directing the Wuming Girls School, Zhou Jinghua opened a small bookstore, the Shanshutang. She later expanded the shop, which was located on the highest piece of land in the town, and renamed it as a male scholar might have done, the Jinghua Bookstore. The shop, which supported the family through many difficulties, was destroyed and looted twice, first by bandits and again during World War II by the Japanese army, but both times Zhou Jinghua reopened the store. She eventually took on her widowed sister and her daughter as coworkers.

The Zhou Brothers' mother, Wei Yixing, grew up in an all-female environment with a strong feminist sensibility. Beyond what she learned from her mother, Wei Yixing's experience of discrimination within the family left the child acutely sensitive