

Searching For The Reality In The Surreal Space of “Journey To The West”

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Let us follow the steps of the artist, Wang Mian and begin with the mythical story from a place far away: *Journey to the West*.

Journey to the West is one of the renowned classical Chinese legends. Its widely-known characters, Sun Wukong, Tripitaka, Monk Pig and Friar Sand form the imaginarieness of the mythical story. They grew up with many of us and have enriched our youth. As a fervent reader, I undoubtedly have read and become familiar with *Journey to the West*. Other than my admiration for the virtue of Monkey King’s fight against the Spider Demoness, I am also infatuated with his mastering in the seventy-two methods of transformations and the ability to fly with the Cloud Somersault over the skyline. He carries us beyond the border of imagination.

As time goes by, along with the social and technical development and the modernization of Taiwanese economy, European and American cartoon characters and computer games have been integrated into our lives. After years of observation, I have noticed that the novels in hand, such as *Journey to the West*, have been replaced by the American *Transformers*. Before we notice, we have allowed icons such as Macdonald, Starbucks and Hollywood films into our daily life. If this is a sign of cultural globalization, then those cultural symbols have exited in a different tone. 25°01'40"N , 121°32'17"E is the coordinate of Taiwan and a point of unison where the Eastern and the Western culture coalesce.

These cultural elements come into our life with the mass visual images and form our conception of globalization. Two dimensional images has condensed the three dimensional live action. In the age of digital image development, the techniques to enhance, eliminate, soften, and move images shape the appearance of the world in a flash of time. The beautiful new world created by the surreal collage of images becomes the center stage of our life. It is a world that seems more genuine than the reality, and thus, the existence of reality becomes the goal that we are now searching for.

The virtual world of globalized culture is the setting of Wang Mian’s works.

Nowadays, from the standard of modernized process to the development structure of capitalist country and the measure of accomplishment in the field of Fine Arts, traditional Eastern culture has gradually lost its place. Perhaps, the plot of *Journey To The West* is still taking place, we are still on a pilgrimage westward. In Wang Mian's solo exhibition *Legend - 25 01'40"N · 121 32'17"E*, "NEW YORK 40°41'2"N · 74°2'22"W" portrays such a picture. This time around, Tripitaka's monk robe is replaced by the Nazi flag; the mystery of the veiled leader gives the work a sense of perplexity. Zhu Bajie, who is portrayed as a cowardly character in the novel, now with a Mohawk and a chain saw, has turned into a street fighter. Friar Sand's luggage is filled with products from IBM, SONY, Nike, and McDonald's. These objects that we normally consider as everyday necessities are Friar Sand's heavy burden suggested by the cangue and lock on his arm. The outcome of modernization is not always black and white; the gray area leaves us many topics of discussion and room for imagination.

Wang Mian is an artist with an acute sensibility about the shifts and changes in the society. On the topic of recent capitalistic modernization and development in China, he has given his especially meticulous observations and opinions. In his eyes, China has taken off its disheveled exterior and has replaced it with varieties of skyscrapers, imported pavement, and modernized factory to form a prosperous sight. All of the above has been conveyed in "The Lost". Yet, in contrast, the characters from *Journey To The West* appears hopeless and confused. They are wondering in a world that seems familiar but strange at the same time, then, they lose their sense of direction in the soulless city like destitute spirits. In the process of modernization, the mistreatment to the nature becomes sanctioned. The idea of determination overpowers destination makes people believe that with accumulated strength, one may conquer the world. For instance, the stunning cloud pattern in "Pwanage!!!" suggests that violence and trouble are being covered up by beautiful façade. In addition, "Surfing" serves as a warning to the audiences; the massive wave is juxtaposed with miniature figures. It suggests that in a time with numerous serious natural disasters, people should re-examine the balance in the relationship between human and nature. In the *Legend - 25 01'40"N · 121 32'17"E* solo exhibition, Wang Mian illustrates the hopeful future, the potential problems, and the contradictions in the modernized *Journey To The West* on the topic of human versus nature, East versus West, desire versus celibacy, and restriction versus freedom. The dialogue between the two opposite forces reflects the contract

and contrast within the modernized legend.

From my point of view, Wang Mian is trying to find the road to reality in this surreal surrounding. He strives to reconstruct the path for Eastern culture in the midst of cultural globalization and to find the treatment for enclosed within the Western cultural icons. Clear muscles structure and vivid gesture have enhanced the portrayal of the Monkey King's agility and dexterity. The character's lively appearance and energetic figure bring hope to the journey and turn the ending into a foreshadowing. The last chapter of the novel suggests that perhaps, everyone has the potential to become a Wukong, as long as one finds one's own identity even in the collision of different culture from different time.

Wang Mian is a very special artist. Last year, I visited his studio in Chungqing which was renovated from a waste yard. A neglected space like Wang's studio gives the artist the comfort and the freedom to travel between reality and the created surreal space through the process of making sculptures. It represents the co-existence and conflicts caused by the integration of culture. This studio gives a sense of nostalgia and shows that Wang takes inspiration from the space. It is a recycled material that records a series of understanding, deliberation, transformation, and recreation, and the same procedure also applies to his search for identity and the meaning of life. This creative approach reminded me of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin who once expressed that in every overlooked corner, between every broken pieces of bricks and tiles, consists of limitless and unexpected representation of human lives. Reality is always there even though it may be in a different space or in a different form. By going back in time, we learn about the present and prepare for a better future.

Ever since I met Wang, I have always admired his professionalism. He is a humble person whose works are emotional but still logical. They reveal Wang's devotion to his country, and at the same time, display his ability to examine and analyze. As a Chinese artist, he is able to remain true to his culture even in the midst of cultural globalization. Even though the environment has changed, he still holds on to the hope that one may find in legends such as *Journey To The West*, just like how the Monkey King breaks through the storm and lead the way to the road of hope for others in "Surfing". In his personal style, Wang Mien redefines the meaning and the aesthetic of *Journey To The West* and rewrites the relationship between art and literature.

What is more important, in the craze of globalization, he has found a way for Eastern culture so that we can walk on our own path, follow our own belief, and create our own fantasy, our own *Journey To The West*. I am very honored to be included as part of this pilgrimage and would like to invite every supporter of Contemporary Art to join us in this adventurous journey on the Cloud Somersault across the sky to find our own Eastern aesthetic.