

Greatness won't come solely from imitation

Out of the Box

Tony Chan Fan-cheong is president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. He has spent his life pursuing his dreams relating to teaching and research, and has unique views on education, scientific and technological development, and nurturing the young.



HAD THE OPPORTUNITY to catch a movie on a recent flight, *China's van Gogh*, a China/Netherlands co-production about a painter/craftsman, Zhao Xiaoyong, who made a living drawing replicas of the work of the great Vincent van Gogh, in Shenzhen's Dafen village.

I had visited Dafen a long time ago. Founded by Hong Kong painter/trader Huang Jiang, Dafen is now dubbed the "No 1 village in painting" in China, and generates an annual turnover of US\$65 million (HK\$507 million) selling replicas of famous paintings worldwide.

The visit made me realize the existence of such

a business, and I was tempted back then to order a family portrait but I never did. But China's van Gogh is more than just a documentary. It is moving, but is in no way a "tear-jerker,"

Zhao is originally from Hunan. Impoverished when he arrived in Dafen 20 years ago, he started a family business by making replicas of van Gogh, and has finished over 100,000 copies.

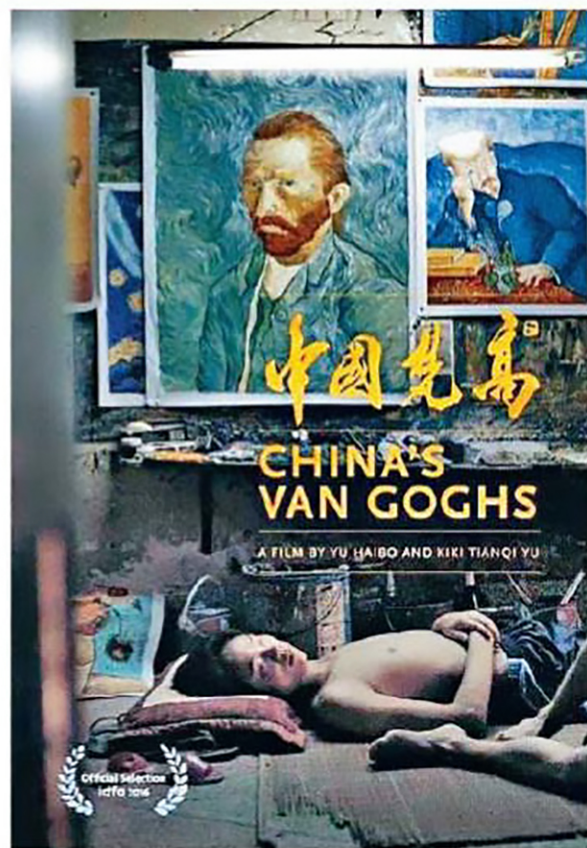
A veteran now, Zhao has developed a passion for Van Gogh and has strict requirements on the quality of his staff's work, but he had never visited the Netherlands before, nor had he seen the real drawing by Van Gogh himself.

Zhao had always want to make the trip, but prohibitive travel expenses put him off and off again.

After a long struggle with convincing his wife, Zhao eventually made the trip.

Upon arriving at Amsterdam, he soon recognized that a few van Gogh replicas on the streets were works of his own.

But he was also dismayed that his replicas were sold at a much higher price compared to what he was paid for them (Zhao sold his replicas at 100 yuan or HK\$580, while in Amsterdam they were being sold at 500 euros or HK\$4,600).



Zhao had an emotional breakdown when he visited the van Gogh museum.

Awed by the beauty of the real work, he questioned his own *raison d'être*: none of his replicas came close to capturing the elements in the originals, and he wondered whether he could continue painting at all knowing that he had none of the originality and creativity of the Dutch master.

Ultimately, Zhao recouped some of his con-

fidence when he went to Provence, France, and drew a painting at the same spot where van Gogh drew his *The Cafe Terrace on the Place du Forum*, to the delight of spectators.

Upon returning to China, Zhao began to produce original work in both Dafen and his home, Hunan. How Zhao would fare in his new quest is anybody's guess, but I am struck by the parallels between Zhao's story and China's recent economic development.

Producing replicas of venerated paintings is a vast business in today's world and, with it, Zhao made his fortune, just as China's rapid growth in the past 20 years was fueled by becoming the "world's factory."

But mimicking others has its limits and, as Zhao realized eventually, he needed originality and creativity to rise to a higher level and to find satisfaction.

Similarly, has China today found its own creative engine to shred the tag of just being the factory of the world?

Gradually, we are seeing some innovative ideas originating from China in the tech and business scene, such as DJI's drones, Tencent's Wechat, and Alibaba's November 11 online sales drive (in which the West has begun to copy).

But when it comes to brand recognition, despite how some may claim that Baidu is the answer to Google and Xiaomi to Apple, we have yet to see a transformative force, ie China's van Gogh.

The quest to true greatness cannot be done solely on imitation. I am looking forward to seeing China's van Gogh in innovation and technology, the sooner the merrier.