



Zhang Daqian and His Art: A Literature Review of Scholarly Investigations into Zhang Daqian's Art in Relation to Chinese Art Consumption and Commercialization

Rong (Nikki) Yang

California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), Long Beach, CA 90840, USA.

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***Corresponding author:** Rong (Nikki) Yang, California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), Long Beach, CA 90840, USA.

Abstract

This review adopts a thematic analysis approach to examine peer-reviewed articles, monographs, and case studies published between 2019 and 2024, focusing on Zhang Daqian's artistic practices and their impact on the global art market. The selected sources offer a thorough exploration of key issues related to his work, including the reception of his art across cultures, the commercialization of Chinese art in Hong Kong, and the debates about artistic authenticity and replication. Hong Kong, a significant nexus for émigré artists and collectors in the mid-20th century, plays a vital role in understanding how Chinese art was promoted and consumed worldwide. The review also delves into the influence of intermediaries, such as art dealers, collectors, and auction houses, in shaping Zhang Daqian's international reputation and establishing his place in the global art market. These intermediaries not only facilitated the distribution of his works but also played a key role in constructing the narrative of his artistic legacy. Furthermore, this review seeks to offer a nuanced perspective on the complexities of originality and replication in the context of the global art market, highlighting how Zhang's work navigated cultural boundaries while fueling ongoing discussions about authenticity in contemporary art.

Keywords

Zhang Daqian; commercialization of Chinese art; global art market; Dunhuang mural aesthetics; splashed-ink painting; cross-cultural art reception; artistic authenticity; intermediaries in art trade; socio-economic dynamics; interdisciplinary framework

Expanded Discussion

Zhang Daqian's artistic journey is emblematic of the broader shifts in Chinese art during the 20th century, as it transitioned from a predominantly local and traditional practice to a globally recognized and commercially viable phenomenon. His early training in classical Chinese painting and calligraphy provided him with a deep understanding of traditional techniques, which he later reinterpreted through his innovative splashed-ink paintings. These works, characterized by their bold use of color and abstract forms, drew parallels with Western Abstract Expressionism, enabling Zhang to bridge cultural divides and appeal to international audiences (Wu, H., 2023). At the same time, his reverence for classical Chinese art, particularly the Dunhuang murals, ensured that his works remained rooted in

cultural heritage. This dual approach not only revitalized traditional Chinese aesthetics but also positioned Zhang as a key figure in the globalization of Chinese art.

The commercialization of Zhang's art was significantly influenced by the socio-political context of the mid-20th century. Following the Chinese Civil War and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, many artists and intellectuals migrated to Hong Kong, which became a vibrant center for the trade and promotion of Chinese art. Zhang's relocation to Hong Kong in the 1950s marked a turning point in his career, as he gained access to a network of émigré artists, dealers, and collectors who facilitated his entry into global markets. Intermediaries like Liu Shaolv played a crucial role in promoting Zhang's work to Western audiences, often emphasizing its fusion of Eastern and Western aesthetics. This strategic marketing helped Zhang achieve unprecedented commercial success, but it also sparked debates about the commodification of art and the tension between cultural authenticity and market demands (Hua, S., 2021).

One of the most contentious aspects of Zhang's legacy is his replication practices, which involved creating copies of classical Chinese paintings. While these works were celebrated in China as a testament to Zhang's mastery of traditional techniques, they challenged Western notions of artistic originality and authenticity. Scholars like Menton (2014) have argued that Zhang's replications blurred the boundaries between art and craft, raising questions about the value of originality in a globalized art market. These debates highlight the cultural differences in how art is perceived and valued, underscoring the need for a more nuanced understanding of artistic practices across different contexts.

In conclusion, Zhang Daqian's art exemplifies the complex interplay between cultural preservation and global market forces. His ability to navigate these tensions, while maintaining a balance between tradition and innovation, has left an indelible mark on the global art world. By examining his legacy through an interdisciplinary lens, this review aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-economic dynamics that shape the globalization of art. Future research should continue to explore these themes, particularly in light of the growing influence of Chinese art in contemporary global markets.

1. Research Background

Zhang Daqian's art exemplifies the dynamic interplay between cultural preservation and global market forces, making him one of the most renowned Chinese painters of the 20th century. Born in 1899 in Sichuan Province, China, Zhang began his artistic training under the guidance of his family, who were deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. His early exposure to classical Chinese painting and calligraphy laid the foundation for his later innovations, earning him the title of "Picasso of the East." Following the 1940s, as Chinese art gained increasing international recognition, Hong Kong emerged as a pivotal hub for its commercialization, driven by émigré artists, art dealers, and a growing collector base. This period marked a significant shift in the global reception of Chinese art, with Zhang Daqian at the forefront of this transformation (Chang Qingli & Xie Jingyi, 2024).

Scholars have extensively debated Zhang's dual identity as both a traditionalist and an innovator. His Dunhuang-inspired works reinterpreted classical Chinese motifs, revitalizing traditional aesthetics, while his later splashed-ink paintings resonated with the principles of Western Abstract Expressionism, fostering cross-cultural dialogue. However, Zhang's commercial success also sparked controversies, particularly regarding his replication practices, which challenged Western notions of artistic originality and authenticity. This literature review synthesizes existing scholarship to explore how Zhang's art navigated these cultural and economic tensions, ultimately shaping both artistic discourse and global market trends. By analyzing investigations that focus specifically on elements within Zhang Daqian's artwork, this review aims to understand the impact of his works on wider Chinese art consumption and commercialization in the Western world. Key topics include contemporary Chinese artwork, art consumerism, art commercialization, and cross-cultural art, supported by notions such as socio-cultural messages, artistic style, and the historical development of Chinese art.

For this review, sources such as scholarly articles and dissertations, primarily found through online article and journal-keeping services, will be analyzed through both holistic and reductive perspectives. Quotations from these sources will be indented and accompanied by page numbers. A reductive analysis will first be applied to understand the specific arguments made by the authors, followed by a holistic perspective to situate these findings within the broader context of Chinese art and its reception by Western audiences. This dual approach will provide a comprehensive understanding of Zhang Daqian's role in bridging cultural and economic divides, as well as his influence on the global art market.

2. Artistic Inspiration: Tradition and Innovation

2.1 Dunhuang Murals as a Cultural Catalyst

Zhang Daqian's 1941-1943 expedition to the Mogao Caves marked a pivotal moment in his artistic career (Song, Y., 2021). By meticulously copying Dunhuang murals, he synthesized Buddhist iconography with literati aesthetics, creating a unique style that has been described as "modernized antiquity" highlights that works such as *Drawing of Birthday Peach Offering* (1944) exemplify this transformation, showcasing a shift toward vibrant colors and dynamic brushwork that diverged from the subdued traditions of literati painting.

The Dunhuang murals, with their intricate depictions of Buddhist narratives and vibrant color palettes, provided Zhang with a rich source of inspiration (Yang, Q., 2021). His ability to adapt these ancient motifs into his own works not only demonstrated his technical mastery but also highlighted his role as a cultural bridge between the past and the present. However, some scholars caution against overstating Dunhuang's influence on Zhang, arguing that it has overshadowed his engagement with other classical paradigms and artistic traditions (Guan, X., 2021).

2.2 Landscape Paradigms and Spiritual Expression

Zhang's landscape paintings are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese artistic and philosophical traditions. His works often incorporate mythical and spiritual motifs, such as the Xumi-Kunlun mountains and the Daoist One Pool Three Mountains, which symbolize cosmic harmony and spiritual ascension. For instance, in *Life in Picturesque Mt. Qingcheng* (1949), the towering peaks reflect a profound connection to nature and philosophical narratives.

The Xumi-Kunlun mode, inspired by Buddhist and Taoist mythology, represents a cosmic vision of the universe, while the One Pool Three Mountains mode reflects the Daoist pursuit of immortality. Zhang's ability to weave these spiritual themes into his landscapes not only showcased his technical skill but also resonated with audiences seeking a deeper connection to Chinese cultural heritage. While such analyses illuminate Zhang's technical mastery and philosophical depth, they often overlook the socio-political contexts that influenced his stylistic evolution (Zhou, W., 2019).

3. Commercialization Mechanisms and Global Reception

3.1 Hong Kong's Art Market: A Transnational Nexus

Following the end of World War II in 1945, Hong Kong emerged as a vital hub for displaced artists and collectors, fostering a vibrant art market. The city became a sanctuary for many Chinese artists fleeing political instability, creating a dynamic cultural environment that facilitated the exchange of ideas and artworks. Intermediaries such as Liu Shaolv played a pivotal role in introducing Zhang Daqian's works to Western buyers through curated exhibitions. These exhibitions strategically emphasized the "spiritual consonance" of ink paintings, aligning with Western audiences' growing fascination with Asian mysticism and spirituality. By framing Zhang's art within a narrative that resonated with Western ideals of Eastern philosophy, these intermediaries successfully bridged cultural gaps and expanded the appeal of Chinese art to a global audience.

By the 1960s, Zhang's annual earnings surpassed \$1 million (adjusted for inflation), with works from his "refined period," particularly his lotus paintings, commanding premiums of 23% over his later abstract pieces. This commercial success underscores Hong Kong's significance as a transnational nexus for the globalization of Chinese art. The city's unique position as a bridge between East and West allowed artists like Zhang to reach a global audience, while also preserving the cultural integrity of their work. Hong Kong's art market not only provided a platform for the sale of artworks but also served as a cultural incubator, where traditional Chinese aesthetics were reinterpreted for modern audiences. The city's cosmopolitan nature and its role as a meeting point for diverse cultures enabled Zhang to navigate the complexities of global art markets, balancing commercial demands with artistic authenticity. This period marked a transformative phase in the history of Chinese art, as it transitioned from a regional tradition to a globally recognized and valued cultural commodity.

3.2 Authenticity Debates and Replication Practices

The question of authenticity in Zhang Daqian's works has sparked significant debate, particularly in the context of his replication practices. A notable example is the contested attribution of *Along the Riverbank*—a work alternately

ascribed to the ancient master Dong Yuan or to Zhang himself. Western connoisseurs prioritize provenance and technical analysis to determine authenticity, while Chinese traditions valorize *lin* (imitation) and *fang* (stylistic emulation) as essential pedagogical tools and artistic practices.

These divergent values complicate Zhang's legacy: while his replicas are celebrated domestically as technical masterpieces, they are often dismissed in Western markets as forgeries. This tension highlights the cultural and philosophical divides that continue to shape the global reception of Chinese art. Zhang's ability to navigate these tensions—by creating works that appealed to both Eastern and Western audiences—demonstrates his unique position as a global artist.

Beyond mere replication, Zhang's approach to *lin* and *fang* reflects a deeper engagement with artistic lineage and historical continuity. In traditional Chinese art, copying is not seen as a sign of deception but rather as a mark of reverence and mastery. His meticulous study of Tang and Song dynasty masterpieces enabled him to internalize classical techniques, refining his brushwork and compositional strategies. However, in Western art markets, originality and innovation are prioritized, and Zhang's replications were sometimes scrutinized under forensic testing methods that overlooked their cultural context.

Moreover, Zhang's ability to recreate historical styles with remarkable accuracy led some Western critics to question whether certain works attributed to ancient masters were, in fact, his own creations. This controversy was fueled by his well-documented forgeries, which he often produced as academic exercises or as personal tributes to historical painters. Despite the debates surrounding his replicas, Zhang's works continued to command high prices, illustrating how cultural perceptions of authenticity remain fluid and market-driven. His ability to engage with both traditional Chinese methodologies and modern commercial art markets underscores his adaptability and lasting influence (Qian, C., 2022).

4. Conclusion

Zhang Daqian's artwork has been a significant part of traditional Chinese art. His myriad of techniques and various themes continue to form the legendary image of a master Chinese painter and replicator. Through the above research and studies, it can be well understood that Zhang Daqian's artistic inspiration originally derived from more traditional sources, such as the replication of previous traditional Chinese art, as well as from inscriptions such as the Dunhuang murals.

Zhang's landscape works in his early years have also been largely accredited to the Chinese landscaping modes and paradigms. Although his more traditional and Dunhuang-inspired works garnered more popularity amongst the émigré community in Hong Kong during the 40s, their style and motif did not necessarily resonate with the wider Western audience. However, his later works, by utilizing the Tang dynasty technique of "splashing ink" and combining it with vibrant and vivid colors, created a style of "pocai" which became greatly welcomed by more contemporary Western collectors. To this end, the contributions of art dealers like Liu Shaolv could not be forgotten. The Western connoisseurship of traditional and contemporary Chinese art is largely impacted by the influence of potential forgeries as well as a harsh focus on the economic and historical value older dated paintings provide (Li Houqiong & Yu Junmin, 2021). Through the lens of Zhang Daqian's artwork, evidence of both worlds of art converging towards a more common goal, thus ultimately closing the gap between now contemporary Chinese artwork and contemporary Western artwork.

As Zhang says in Zhang Daqian Hua Shuo: "As far as I can see, there is no real difference between Chinese and Western painting... Whatever difference there is [is] in the form of representation..." From a reductionist viewpoint, there is a great number to analyze Zhang's personal contribution to the Chinese art market, but the holistic perspective presents his efforts based on the years of contributions by others who came before him, be it émigré artists, collectors, or dealers. Ultimately, Zhang Daqian's artworks have contributed greatly to the Western consumption of traditional Chinese artwork, both in cultural value and economically. Despite the complexity behind evaluating forgeries and replicas, Zhang's work has continued to be a symbol for the wider Chinese art community, and will likely continue to do so.

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