

*JIZI: A Journey of the Spirit*

By Thomas Rose

*Dao can mean a road, a path, a way”, and is the metaphysical principle of China’s Daoist philosophy— I have named my paintings the Dao of Ink Landscapes. The Dao is the spirit of the great universe. What I seek as an artist is the unification of Heaven and Earth and Man, insight into the Dao, the material universe, and myself. — JIZI*

As an artist, my interests have been in the connections we, as human beings, have with the places we inhabit and how these spaces might be represented and theorized in visual, literary or musical form. My own thinking derives from architecture, due in large part to subtle influences impressed upon me by the house in which I grew up, and certainly the architectural heritage passed on to me through the work of my father and grandfather. Later in life I wandered and wondered in places both real and imagined providing me with a love of mystery and ambiguity, and the narrative that drew me to the work of the artist Jizi, an artist born in the same year as I, and yet having lived a completely different life. In 1942, World War II dominated the world stage, in China the Nationalist and Communist forces created an uneasy alliance to defeat the Japanese Imperial Army that had occupied China. In 1949, China under the leadership of Mao Zedong began to rebuild and regroup, sweeping away old paradigms and traditions in the hope of creating a utopian classless society. Jizi was a part of this whirlwind in time and place, experiencing as a boy the terror of war and later the confusion of lost cultural anchors.

I’m not sure that Jizi’s magnificent imagery can be tied directly to his experiences growing up, but as we are all tied to our formative experience in the world I will say that the works I have seen and experienced by Jizi are the embodiment of restless and chaotic times. If landscape painting is generally regarded historically as the highest form of Chinese painting in the literati tradition then Jizi has extended this tradition into a new reality. His work moves away from images of the familiar contemplative landscape to a visualization of sound and light, a landscape not of this world but of a cosmic nature, a living breathing spirit upon which no solid footing may be found. My first viewing of work by Jizi took place in 2006 in his unpretentious small

“studio” room that would normally be a living space in the small apartment shared with his wife in one of hundreds of high-rise apartment blocks on the edges of Beijing. I remember being hit hard by a work on the wall behind his worktable—my first thought was wonder. It was a sensory experience rather than analytical or intellectual, like walking into a storm of undetermined force, yet eliciting many deeply imbedded emotions — it was like a punch to the gut. The work was large in size for the space it occupied, but much larger in its implications. It was not what I had expected and was not easy to assimilate into my conceptions of Chinese ink painting. It was Wagner of Das Rheingold, Beethoven’s 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony and a perfect example of Kant’s theory of the Sublime. The scope of, and inspiration for Jizi’s oeuvre is both intimate and immense, illuminating the grandeur of the natural world as well as a representation of the larger sphere of the universe. Using as inspiration photographs taken by the Hubble telescope Jizi brings us images filled with wonder, phenomenal in scope and in execution. His most recent images are swirls of color amid dark voids that offer visions of spectacular emotional depth. These are no sweet dreams of a paradise filled with reassurance, rather they are the visually embodied consciousness of being, expressing a poetic narrative of loss and longing in a universe devoid of meaning. There is an existential element of aloneness in the work, suggesting that “being” is the subject while meaning has been internalized and brought forth through the will, persistence, and determination of the artist.

Jizi is certainly familiar with Western literature; of special note would be John Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost*. It occurred to me that the engravings by William Blake might apply, not in image reflection rather in the sense of humanity, and in the examination of the true nature of the human soul. In his modest library is a copy of Milton’s epic with mezzotint illustrations by John Martin, in them the dark and forbidding landscape overwhelms the figures of lost angels cast down by God into perdition; however, in Jizi’s stormy spaces there are no figures, angelic or otherwise to disturb or contemplate —only the void. And yet his works are deeply spiritual, even religious in a sense that religion is the structuring of spiritual awareness and a means by which he expresses unity of mind, body, and spirit in the materials of ink, paper, and brush.

These works operate metaphorically to the point that he refers to his work as the “Dao of Ink”. If the term Dao may be interpreted to mean or imply a journey, a road or travel in a direction then the metaphor connects

with the word ink. In the West ink is pragmatic, a material for writing, and signing of contracts, its material substance is fixed and focused on an end product, whereas the Chinese sense ink as an idea as well as a material — Its fluidity and lack of shape or form embody the struggle for control over the self and the journey to self-understanding. This metaphorical use of materials and their philosophical conceit is the underlying structure of Jizi's enterprise; it is not about the images but the internal transformation of the self.

A masterwork in this exhibition is the scroll, 1 meter high and 40 meters long, an abstract expression in brush and ink unfolding the story of creation and end times. This work is not a didactic warning nor is it a prophesy, rather a rendering of forms natural and beautiful moving across the paper and melting into air. The brushwork and the subtleties of ink wash and solid black engage the eye and impress upon the viewer the consummate skill of an artist who over years has mastered material and technique. It is impossible for me to think of this work without commenting on its production, a feat of innovation in itself. This amazing and immense work was completed in the studio I saw and in the room no larger than a small living room, perhaps ten by twelve feet with a small worktable three by six feet. A single sheet of rice Paper was laid out on the table and Jizi begins to paint, working across the surface to the end and gluing each sheet in turn to the finished sheet and carefully rolling it on to a cylinder, repeating sheet after sheet. Patience and determination and the belief in the “great work” were the driving force in creation, and so it is with Jizi's great scroll.

Jizi is a narrator of stories, visual journeys that do not rely on illustrations of narrative events— rather his images form a unique world of unseen forces. When thinking or speaking of epic journeys, the standard — at least in the Western canon — might be the ballads of Homer, or the Grail legends of medieval Europe— the hero's quest. As to China, classic mythic tails and transcendent dream lives share many common traits and themes, e.g. redemption, self-knowledge. The great Chinese narrative, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, also known as *Dream of Red Mansions*, is a story of politics and power, the folly of pride, and jealousy, framed around the transformative power of love. It is in the nature of human beings to self-destruct and create chaos through greed; however, the spirit of the two lovers BaoYu and Dai Yu, redeemed through sacrifice transform from stone, and mud to flesh in dream time framing the Buddhist understanding that life is an illusion and earthly existence is fleeting as the great wheel of time turns. Jizi is a transformer of visions; a mystic creating

without pretention his vision of the “Dao”, or journey. In these works, the journey is the process through which truths are revealed. The ink, the paper and the brush are simple tools yet they are, and contain the meanings and the very being of who we are. In the Western Masonic tradition the rough stone is the unformed identity and the choices one makes in life are what shape the result — as in “Dao” the individual is responsible for the choices made.

Not the first, but certainly one of contemporary Chinese art’s originators of “New Ink Painting”, Jizi has transformed ink wash painting in ways that combine the philosophical position of the literati artist with a painting style of controlled chaos, alternating between layered application and wash. The surfaces are fully animated rather than uniformly flat. Subtle differences in thickness add vitality to the swirling and wind-swept space. His introduction of color reflects, as mentioned earlier, his experience of seeing images from deep space. This cosmic activity and drama unfolding in the universe is translated through his mind’s eye to the paper through the bristles of the brush — as with the images from space we are awed by Jizi’s ability to transform distance to the here and now.