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The New York Times

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

# How a Poor Student Rebelled to Become China's Hottest Artist

By JANE PERLEZ

BEIJING

AT the gallery opening of China's hottest-selling artist, Zeng Fanzhi, in Manhattan a year ago, Chinese billionaires mingled with the upper crust of New York's art world. Mr. Zeng had flown in with his well-to-do pals, and after dinner at a clubby Chelsea restaurant, the Chinese crew retired to the Park Hyatt for late-night drinks in the lobby bar.

Here at home, an even larger banquet for 500 guests, including the granddaughter of Mao Zedong, celebrated Mr. Zeng's 25-year painting career, at the September opening of the first retrospective in his own country.

His works hang in American museums and palatial Hong Kong apartments, and over the fireplace in the London living room of the art baron François Pinault, the owner of Christie's. At the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, record crowds have poured through his current show, which includes two 33-foot-long, fiercely colored landscapes.

Chinese artists roared onto the international art scene about 10 years ago, but few have exhibited the staying power of Mr. Zeng, and none have fetched \$23.3 million for a painting at auction, the price paid for his version of "The Last Supper" in 2013.

How has he managed to stay at the top? "You might say I am very cunning," he said, a small cheeky smile across his broad, smooth face. "I only sell my paintings to those who really like them. Then those people will help me promote my works."

It is this approach of cultivating collectors who cherish his art, combined with indisputable painting skills, that has propelled him to the fore, said Philip Tinari, the director of the Ullens Center.

"China needs a great artist, and the way he has gone about it is very intelligent," Mr. Tinari said. "He understands the milieu his works circulate in, the actual collectors' homes, cultural institutions and galleries. He invites these key people to be part of his

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ADAM DEAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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ZENG FANZHI

success, and as he achieves higher degrees of validation it's something everyone feels good about."

MR. ZENG, 52, is a compact figure, his cropped hair flecked with a few grays, a Cuban cigar never far from his fingers as he sits in a well-worn red leather chair in his studio. To his usual attire of understated jeans and sneakers, he adds a black gabardine coat for warmth in his chilly space. A retinue of research assistants works at his gray brick complex in an artist enclave not far from the city center.

He has come to enjoy the good things in life. An Hermès leather-topped desk sits at one end of his studio, and an eclectic art collection decorates the double storied space that looks onto a manicured garden of graceful

trees, two Harry Bertoia steel sculptures and a sprawling gold-fish pond.

The emerald green lawn appears fresh on a crisp fall day. "It's not real," he said sheepishly. Fastidious about things being neat, he grew weary of Beijing's messy brown grass.

From his early days as a poor art student in Wuhan, a gritty city along the Yangtze River, he caught the attention of teachers and critics who admired his rebellion against the standard fare of Communist-approved social realism.

"The head of the library at my school said if I wanted to see better art books, I should go to the library in Zhejiang Province," he said of the austere days in the mid-1980s. "I took a leave and traveled three days and nights by train to Shanghai, and then another three hours to Hang-

zhou." There, and later at the art institute in Wuhan, he discovered the German artist Max Beckmann and admired the work of Willem de Kooning.

By his third year of art school, he had completed 45 works. None of them fit the official style, but a teacher, Pi Daojian, encouraged him to mount a solo show.

He had depicted the down and out. (Three of them appear in his current show.) One figure in a red shirt sits in a twisted pose, asleep, a jagged red line down the side of his face. Another painting shows four sleepy shoeshine men waiting for work.

"He painted what he saw," Mr. Pi said during a recent reunion with Mr. Zeng in Wuhan and a meal that featured black tofu, frog legs and chopped duck necks. "He found his own way to express emotion."

Local propaganda officials

pounced. "I was called to the exhibition place," Mr. Zeng said. "I was panicked." They grilled him.

"What is the meaning of your paintings? Are you trying to make a political statement? Is this blood on his face?" they asked," he recalled. "I said, 'Yes, it's blood, but it doesn't mean anything.' They asked why are these people looking so sullen."

The exhibition was closed to the public; only art students were allowed.

UNDETERRED, he painted an even more raw series of works that showed the anguish of patients at the hands of callous doctors at a public hospital in his neighborhood. Then he zeroed in on the nearby butcher's shop and its huge slabs of frozen meat. One canvas, smothered in the red and pink of



raw meat, showed the butcher and his family taking an afternoon nap atop a thinly covered carcass.

The boldness of the paintings impressed an influential art critic, Li Xianting. Emboldened by his support, Mr. Zeng left for Beijing.

There, he shunned the dirt-floor artists' colony on the city

outskirts, and shrewdly chose a tiny, leaky apartment in the upscale embassy district.

By then, the government was encouraging people to get rich. But there was an undercurrent of unease born from the government-ordered Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. He began painting what became a signature theme: portraits of men and women, sometimes in groups, sometimes alone, all wearing masks. They were almost always grinning with exaggerated smiles, but underneath lay feelings of angst.

Word spread. By 1993 he had held his first solo show in Hong Kong. In 1998, an art curator in Beijing, Karen Smith, introduced him to Lorenz Helbling, a Swiss citizen, who became the most influential Western dealer in China and has represented Mr. Zeng ever since.

In one of his first sales, Mr. Helbling sold a Zeng painting of eight young Chinese men and women wearing masks to an American tourist for \$16,000. Ten years later, the painting sold at a Hong Kong auction for \$9.7 million, making Mr. Zeng the most expensive contemporary Chinese artist, a position he retains unchallenged.

In time, Mr. Helbling arranged the big break: an introduction to Mr. Pinault.

"Pinault had been saying he wanted to come and see my works," Mr. Zeng recalled. "I drove myself, and on the way there was a car accident. I kept Pinault waiting for three hours. People were calling me and yelling: 'Where are you?' I nearly screwed the whole thing up."

During the visit, Mr. Pinault bought two canvases and wanted to buy more. "Actually," Mr. Zeng said, "I told him: 'I was only going to sell you one. But since I am late I will sell you two.'"

Mr. Zeng's works have been shown in two historic palazzos in Venice that Mr. Pinault restored as venues for his huge art collection. The fact that Mr. Pinault owns one of his favorite paintings, a portrait of the artist Lucian Freud, and displays it so prominently in his Belgravia home in London in a \$100,000 18th-century frame, seems to give Mr. Zeng the most pleasure.

"I asked him many times to borrow the Lucian Freud for one of my shows, and he always said no," Mr. Zeng said. As a gesture of their friendship — they hang out together in Europe, Mr. Zeng said — Mr. Pinault agreed to send it to Beijing for the show.

There was a reason for the reluctance. Mr. Zeng said, "They had to close off the street in London and get a crane to take it out of his front window."