

## Jubilancy from Graft: Emptiness, History and Competition

by Wang Min'an

Born in Beijing, Shao Fan, a freelance artist, presents himself as a unique figure somewhat different from his large arrays of Beijing-based peers. His parents, both professors of Central Academy of Fine Arts, are renowned painters of China. Shao's father is among the revolutionary artists nurtured by the Communist Party in Yan'an and his legendary experience is shared by the artists of his generation: joining the army at the age of 13 and hence dubbed as "HongXiaoGui (kids participating in the revolution)", then becoming a buzzword among the communists, pursuing his calling in communications in the revolutionary system and was allowed access to specialized art education in the prestigious Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Yan'an thanks to his outstanding calibres in visual art. Later, he grew into one of the first communist artists after the founding of People's Republic of China, most of whom embarked on teaching in Central Academy of Fine Arts afterwards. Those artists including Shao's father, who derived from Yan'an, became the mainstream artists of socialist China in the 1950s-1970s. Their paintings originated from the revolutionary history of socialism, usually reflecting the keen communist belief and strengths stemming from such belief. In techniques, they were influenced by Maxim, a celebrated painter accredited by USSR to China. Such family, fraught with revolutionary artistic atmosphere was where Shao grew up. His mother is also a teacher with Central Academy of Fine Arts.

However, Shao's father, who was by no means confined to materials of revolutionary nature, extended his aesthetic interests beyond revolution. During the Cultural Revolution, he collected a multitude of old-fashioned furniture, paintings, calligraphies and traditional Chinese artworks, which, in the 1960s and 1970s in China, were labelled as symbols of feudalism. In Chairman Mao's view, those artworks are poisons and shall be eradicated; and only by shaking off those antiques and separating from the entire traditional and bourgeois culture system can the leading socialist ideology prevail. Thanks to his professional identity as a communist artist and political identity as an official in the Communist Party, Shao's father enabled his family to escape from the search of Red Guards and secured his collections eventually. Brought up in an environment loaded with ancient furniture, Shao was given access to many antique furniture and articles, which was rare for those of the same age. In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the Chinese were living in poverty or even famine as there was an extreme shortage of materials – even daily necessities were in great deficiency, needless to say the ancient furniture. At that time, Chinese people stressed the practicability of goods, paying no attention to their aesthetic value and entertainment performance. Material production in the entire society was practicability-oriented, without consideration of Baudrillard's so-called symbol production. However, as his family enjoyed a virtually "red aristocracy", Shao experienced no predicament as his age group sustained, and only found a boring and dull life as a result of poor social production and social life. For most of the Chinese children, eating was the most pressing problem they strived to solve; but that was not the case for Shao. Under the influence of his family, his interest toward aesthetics began to sprout, which later developed vigorously in the generally indigent society. Inspired by the simple and rough "new" articles made in socialist China in the 1960s and 1970, Shao's enthusiasm for the old-style furniture in his home grew, from which he encountered aesthetics, fun and passion. Boasting remarkable perception of objects' immanence and texture, Shao's father was good at handwork and interested in dismantling and assembling various articles, and even took a try to "invent" some new things, intoxicated by the process of dismantling, assembling and inventing. Witnessing his father's work from childhood, Shao was affected by the joy of the work and developed a strong interest in objects' texture and immanence as his father did. He tried to penetrate the secrets of these articles, which, for him, were the complex and mysterious relationship of combination, the ingenious composition of various materials and the smooth and miraculous graft of substances. Driven by curiosity, he delved deeply into secrets of the combination relationship; hence, he, together with his father, worked on a wide variety of tools and even learned to develop films. His "technical" gift of controlling articles was exhibited at the very beginning. His child painting, in contrast to the puerility and naivete typically found in children's artworks, demonstrated a rational idea of scepticism. Children on the way home and inverted images under the noon sunshine in Shao's child artworks were not at play as usual, but displayed a marvellous and complicated movement relationship. The exploration for relationship, issues of the type or in other words curiosity of the type grabbed him. For Shao, immanence was the secret of object and what his curiosity directed. What were behind the surface of those objects? Where did their charms originate? What was the art of their connections, lines, shape and materials? Those were all that captivated the little Shao, which did not fade away as he grew up, while on the contrary, became part of his instinct and underlay in his later works, continuously and robustly. However, in 1970s, that was merely an interest, a bourgeois interest that was to blame and represented a non-revolutionary decadence of hedonism. Whether in reality or ideology, Shao's interest was behind the sunshine, and was only a form of home game, unable to go beyond the family to become an open art practice. As he was not hailed by hunger and poverty in childhood, Shao seems calm and composed. In my impression, he never complains, which, however, does not signifies his full satisfaction with life, but shows his ignorance of some dissatisfaction by completely immersing himself in the aesthetic world of a certain object.

Though refrained by the whole society symbolically, yet once lifted, the interest, inspired by his father, will thrive like a seed shooting up.

In the 1980s, Shao became a student of an academy of fine arts as natural and began his career in a research institute of fine arts after graduation and then the influential intellectual-targeted Guangming Daily. In the early 1990s, Shao quitted his job and turned into a freelance artist. At that time, there were few freelance artists in Beijing, who, nevertheless, were regarded as marginal minorities – neither

known to public nor accepted by the government. Filled with anxieties and concerns, most of them eked out a poor existence and were uncertain about their future. If it had not been for the passionate love of art, Shao's resignation from his worldly decent and stable job would be rarely understandable to others.

Now, he is free. World is under his own control without need to consider others. In the 1990s in China where hedonism and consumerism overwhelmed revolutionary discourse, Shao's strong fondness for object relationship buried in his childhood, a non-political interest, erupted. His long enchantment with old-fashioned furniture, the source for his passion, shaped the relationship between concrete furniture and abstraction, the two integral sides of Shao's interest, in a perfect manner. He once addressed himself to multiple creation practices: ceramics, wood sculpture and painting. However, he was dissatisfied with plain painting as there were varieties of constraints to the expression of complex relationship, while his reinvention of old furniture – the origin of his artistic propensity – would be a good outlet for his impulse toward relationship in a formalistic manner. In this way, Shao's old "furniture", or the Shao -invented "non-furniture" began to emerge.

Shao started his artwork creation in 1995. He travelled to a village in Hebei Province, a famous rendezvous of old furniture where 80% of the villagers were involved in old article related activities to seek old furniture. Shao, for the first time, hired a truck and bought over 30 incomplete chairs home. Maximizing his imagination, he finished his sketches firstly. Afterwards, with the help of several professional carpenters, his new decade-long creation life kicked off.

What kind of furniture, or more appropriately, artworks does Shao invent? Grafting part of the old-fashioned furniture, mainly chairs in Ming Dynasty, into today's new wooden worked products, articles with completely new looks are created, featuring abstract furniture style (you may think they have nothing to do with furniture) but no practicability. In Shao's mind, shapes of those old chairs are set, which have their own norms, principles and aesthetics. He retains their dependency while integrates modern style with those independent old chairs by adding new materials. It is through those creative integrations that the traditional norms and aesthetics lose their inherent meanings. Fresh significance is added by new timbers and materials. Showing different colors, strong contrasts and diverse shapes, these two entirely different materials, new and old, in Shao's works manage to maintain their own integrity locally but not in the least restrict their meanings within their own respective areas. This is because there is a sort of marvellous relationship of connection and complementarity between them: the connection sometimes is symmetric, sometimes proportional, sometimes is an echo of shape, sometimes a natural linkup of lines and arcs that cannot be severed, sometimes a deliberate sentimental appeal, but sometimes seems an imperative combination. They cling to their respective territories, but echo each other. It is through the echo resulting from the graft that a new relationship between Ming furniture and today's timber is formed, expressing the connotations of the works. This is a relationship of hybrid; but it is through the hybrid that those two kinds of materials gain their new significance, or more accurately, become materials with new significance, which give the "new furniture" a complete meaning. In that case, the repair of Ming Dynasty's chairs is neither aimed at restoring their original utility, nor targeted at recalling the out-dated decadent aesthetics or scholastic interests, or cherishing the memory of old times and events. In the relationship that Shao builds up, old furniture brakes away from its immanent context. Chairs of Ming Dynasty only gain their identities in the integration with today's timbers, in the specific relationship, in a kind of connection and in the process of building the whole. Likewise, rough lumbers nowadays are endowed with the original significance by the relationship. No matter what significance will be, a qualitative change of lumber will take place in the course of connection with old furniture, whose meanings can only be reflected in the relationship. Furniture, both new and old, while shaking off the inherent meanings, retains their trace and creates a new object with different meanings. However, the new meaning generated by connection is absolutely neither firm nor self-sufficient, but wavering, emerging only in the process of assembling, graft and connection, in relationship, in the moment of relationship crossover or friction.

Then what does the significance look like? Firstly, we shall not materialize the significance. The new objects (no name can be given) created by Shao are not parables that bear great implications at any rate, or a powerful symbol system, or tools of representation, or functional machines either. They are merely significance of symbols utterly governed by the symbols, which are only subject to thinking, interests and habits. They are selected as a result of instinct and an acquired taste, or in other words, the significance is entirely symbolic, hence a antisense significance, an empty significance; or the significance carries no meaning, which is emptied or contrarily filled by a sort of joy, temperament and wisdom. These objects, whether in the eyes of artists or audience, will spur substantially emptied nothing and ensuing joy that fills the former. By inputting their values and potentials into a kind of joyful but emptied sign, Shao's new objects, in this regard, are continuously inspiring people's sense of nothing in virtue of connection and relationship.

Secondly, these new objects, whether chairs in old times or worked wooden products in modern society, are artificially made and frequently used in human life. Even if the dust is wiped out, the historic significance can not be removed. In its long history, chairs are used repeatedly for ages by multiple users, at many places and experience different fates. They are not inhuman, but on the contrary, they witness the changes of times. The new chapters of chairs start with Shao, with whom, their missions never end. It is Shao who changes their destiny in another form. Thus, those old-style chairs, together with the new timbers chosen by Shao, combine and connect each other to produce another new life in their history.

Thirdly, new timbers and old chairs are inevitably competing against each other in the relationship. Interconnecting and independent, they constitute a combination with contradictions; inseparable and conflicting, they are in concert but under forced juxtaposition. Despite the large gap of time, they combine perfectly. Immanent rival, jealousy, momentum, power and will are found in the objects. Is it a mere object? Or an object with no life, sense or feeling? Isn't there a living world for objects? They display their passion – immanent passion here. If we call to mind that new and old furniture is made up of wood, wood has its growth rings, wood once experienced wind, rain, death and health, then the objects composed of wood shall have feelings, emotions, sorrow and happiness. People like to compare the quality and form of the two elements in Shao's "furniture", which, under mankind's eyes, are doing their utmost to showcase themselves as they are integrated in the combination. Is the two inseparable but competitive elements deconstructions? Yes. It is a deconstruction of the whole, but I prefer to call them a mutual becoming: an old tree generates a new tree; an old style generates a new style; a straight line generates a curve; an existing style generates another one; a function value generates a symbolic value. This is an object, but meanwhile a vigorous generator. Or further, Shao's workshop is an incessant generator, whose symbol is the line of becoming that is not severed, but instead, is winding, flying, transmigrating and murmuring.

In the recent two years, Shao has begun his re-imagination of old furniture. It goes beyond the mere graft and combination of new and old materials, but is a rewriting of old furniture. He has employed many ways of rewriting and conducted in-depth research over the textures and integration principles of those old furniture. This time, he feels quite easy as he parodies old furniture, its form, charms and integration materials. Parody is the reproduction of the old furniture with new materials; however, it is not aimed at restoring the old furniture to the original, but rather rebuilding its historical mythology and making the humanism buried in those mythologies thrive. Shao's parody is full of wisdom. He integrates his respect and dissatisfaction with the old furniture. As it presents an incredible beauty, the old furniture also demonstrates dense sense of decline. Countless people see it as symbol of their waning enthusiasm. No one understands the aesthetic secret of the decline of old furniture better than Shao, and it is because of this that he is not "devoured" though he is attracted as he becomes increasingly cautious against his surrender. Therefore, Shao always dismisses the decline beauty with a smile. There are varieties of parody for him: make the leg absent and let the chair recline on the ground; or change its position and order and make it look more funny; or cut part of its body and turn it into another new piece of "old furniture"; or dismantle the coupling, a way of exposing the structure and integration principles of old furniture rather than constructing. The paradox is thus exhibited, which goes as follows: the way of completing a work is to dismantle it. If Shao's works in the earlier stage are centered on the graft of new and old materials, then his works now stress the dismantling of old materials with new ones. By dismantling, we are trying not to let the decadence in the old furniture become a soother for us today.