

高雄(三蘇)：二十年目睹香港怪現象

Hong Kong:
“A Performance Artist’s Paradise”
from *Two Decades of
Hong Kong Oddities*

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Introduction

*As Primordial Chaos divided into Yin and Yang,
Heaven and Earth were fixed variously in place,
And the isle of Hong Kong did appear.*

OF COURSE, it was nothing like the Hong Kong we know today; but I’m not interested in archaeology, or even geology. My concern is not whether Hong Kong was the result of some volcanic eruption, or whether its peculiar rocky outcrop of mountains was thrown up from the sea in ages past. In any case, back in those primaeval days Hong Kong was definitely no Pearl of the Orient. That coveted title has only been bestowed on the colony in the last two decades. Before the mainland became “Red China”, Hong Kong was little more than an ordinary trading port. It also doubled as an “emergency exit” for the officials and millionaires of old China, as well as being the first leg in the expatriation of the vast personal fortunes that were smuggled out of the country. Some even think of Hong Kong as the source of all evil, a cozy hideaway for all types of malfeasant. But let us not bother ourselves with any of that here.

Twenty years have passed since those early days, and in that time a number of formerly powerful officials and wealthy individuals have struck root in Hong Kong soil. Just as many have been buried, having lost millions of US dollars and

San Su was one of Hong Kong’s most popular writers in the 1960s. His writings include essays, short stories and novels, but he is best known for his writings satirizing social and political injustice.

gold bars in the fertile turf of King's Road. Some have moved from the luxurious Mid-levels to the wooden huts in the shanty towns of the new, impoverished mid-levels; others have become upwardly mobile, abandoning their jerry-built shacks to perch high up on Jardine's Lookout. Men who once threw money around without a care have been enlisted as generals in the ranks of the destitute; while former generals from the mainland now find themselves "growing bean sprouts", biding their time in the New Territories. The scions of wealthy families are incarcerated in debtor's prisons, and vamps who could once boast of having manipulated the political scene have married foreigners to become society hostesses. Many dance girls are the delectable offspring of good families; how many of them will end their glittering lives with an overdose of sleeping tablets? Ladies of ill-repute hand their unfinished business down to their children, and, of course, wherever you look the nouveau riches appear in the guise of gentlemen, grown fat on the proceeds of their fathers' dirty deals. Then there are the once mighty eking out a living from the proceeds of pawned heirlooms.

Yet the span of twenty years is but an instant in the orbit of the planets—although, for us, two decades is a very long time indeed. In such a period many young people have grown grey with age, and pretty women have become wrinkle-faced dames. And in these years Hong Kong has been like a juggernaut snow-balling its way to wealth, finally becoming this Pearl of the Orient.

Whatever you think of the place, Hong Kong is unique. In distant lands people may study a not overly detailed globe of the world with a magnifying glass and say apprehensively, "But there is no such place." For Hong Kong people, however, it is as though they have the whole world in front of them. It may seem strange, but it's true. We don't have to look too far back for the evidence. Take, for example, the case of a twenty-year-old who, having swum out from the mainland, recoils from the initial shock of seeing neon lights for the first time, and cries "What the hell's that?" Then in stores specializing in Chinese products he will come across expensive handicrafts that he'd never even dreamt existed back home, as well as colourful woollen sweaters. Similarly, a traveller from Taiwan will be equally surprised to find their first "shiny red book" [of Mao quotes] in a leftist bookstore, and have a chance to eat the famous fresh-water crabs from Yangcheng Lake. But Hong Kong people are surprised that *they* are surprised, because they are Chinese one and all.

This is what's so special about Hong Kong, and why so many weird things happen here. I am nothing more than a modern story-teller. Although I can hardly claim to have seen any dramatic changes over the past twenty years, I have seen the crashing waves and iron railings by the harbour at Wanchai filled in to become *terra firma*. Now it takes a twenty-minute walk to get to the harbour. I've also witnessed many odd happenings, and some that are stranger than fiction. I've recorded some of the less outrageous of these stories below for your amusement. Naturally, it has not been possible to avoid exaggeration altogether in the retelling; and, needless to say, all the names used are of my own invention. As to the veracity of these stories, all I can say is that the only reason people read stories in the first place is for diversion, isn't it?

**The Instant Artist:
A Mistress of Disguise**

PEOPLE LIKE to claim that Hong Kong is a cultural desert. Little do they realize that we enjoy a virtual cornucopia of artistic activities here. In the first place there are, of course, the annual arts and music festivals. There's always a recital of one sort or another going on in City Hall, as well as world-class theatre productions. And there's locally-produced cinema and drama, not to mention the countless art exhibitions.

The arts and the media in Hong Kong are not to be sneezed at either, and over the last decade there has been unprecedented activity in these areas. Just take the daily press: more newspapers are published here than in many major cities overseas. There's also a plethora of periodicals. To dismiss Hong Kong as a cultural desert is really a bit excessive. For a small island city of four hundred square miles the level of cultural activity in Hong Kong is not all that bad. But that reminds me: Hong Kong photography is of international standard and I've lost count of the number of local photographers who've made their way into international salons. As for cinema, well, the achievements are there for all to see.

But let us turn our attention now to the fine arts. Over ten years ago a woman artist was a meteoric success in the colony. Many may have forgotten her by now since she later moved overseas to live the life of a very rich lady, but at the time she was a hot property. She still puts on exhibitions occasionally. Although her reputation could never compare with artists like Zhang Daqian or Qi Baishi, back then at least everyone knew her. Since she's been forgotten anyway (alas, how many forgetful souls there are in Hong Kong!), let's just call her He Yaxian.

In those days everyone knew Yaxian's name, even people who were entirely ignorant of and uninterested in painting. Presumably they knew the woman behind the painting just as well. That's because she was a highly attractive woman, always dressed to kill, and as sexy and alluring as her painting. Her nude self-portrait created quite a furore when it was shown at her one-woman show, and for a while the jostling crowds at the exhibition were the talk of the town.

When the conversation turns to a discussion of her artistic style everyone is left speechless. That's because she was equally at home with Chinese painting, watercolours and oils. On top of that she could imitate works of any school or genre, from Huang Binhong's landscapes to Qi Baishi's exuberant sketches. Some of her paintings of beauties really did look like the work of Zhang Daqian. As for Western art, her talents were positively all-embracing. Naturalism, surrealism, realism—you name it, she was at home with all of them. Her subjects, be they landscapes, still-lives or portraits, were also executed to perfection. For this reason she was known as "the omniscient woman artist".

What was the background of this extraordinary lady, you ask? You'll die when I tell you. She started out as a dancehall escort at the age of sixteen, by eighteen she was a movie star and at twenty she married the son of a rich family. After that she became a film producer. At twenty-three she was divorced and after travelling in America for a year she reappeared in Hong Kong as a socialite. That's when her career in art began in earnest.

Miss He didn't know the first thing about painting before she became the mistress of a banking Taipan, Jin Shanghang. An embarrassingly wealthy man and a real sucker for culture, Jin liked befriending artists and had a small collection of old masters; dealers in paintings and calligraphy were always knocking on his door. The *à la mode* artists of Hong Kong also made a point of using his house as a salon. The only problem was that Mrs Jin was not at all at home with their comings and goings; she preferred to while away the hours playing mahjong with the wives of the rich and famous. She believed all those arty types were only after their money, and she made no attempt to hide her displeasure. Mr Jin found this very upsetting and he never tired of saying to her,

"You really are a cultural low-life!"

"Well, maybe you're right," Mrs Jin retorted, "but at least I don't let those phonies walk all over me."

"You don't understand art," he replied. "How do you know they cheat me?"

"You act like those fakes they dump on you are masterpieces," she nagged, pointing at an oil

painting hanging on the wall. "You paid \$5,000 for that thing and God knows what it's supposed to be."

"That proves it. You wouldn't know the first thing about art. Why should I waste my breath talking to you?"

"Very well. But let me tell you right here and now: I don't like those people and from now on I forbid you to invite them to my house. You'll regret it if you do."

Mr Jin was helpless. He knew that Mrs Jin had a violent temper, and if crossed there was nothing she wouldn't do. He had no choice but to relocate his salon. Things were so different when he met He Yaxian. Now she understood art; she appreciated artists. She said they were superior people, learned and experienced, deep thinkers and well-read. Mr Jin fell for her immediately. From then on his salon found a new home in her apartment.

"This is a real artist's salon, and I'm the mistress. In France this is truly for *la haute*."

From then on the artists and dealers beat a track to Miss He's apartment. Mr Jin had far too many social engagements to be able to be on hand every night, but he did like the idea of the salon. He told them all,

"Miss He is a generous lady. She loves art, and none of you should feel any compunction about visiting her salon."

Compunction was the very last thing any of those characters would have felt. And Miss He was generous to a fault, always making sure that there was plenty of food and wine laid on for her visitors. Anyway, why should she be stingy with Mr Jin's money? He had said to her,

"I trust you and I know you feel nothing for any of these artists except friendship. I can't be here with you every day, so I know you must be bored. I'm glad these people can be around to distract you; it makes me feel a lot better."

"You're so right," Miss He chimed. "I've learnt a great deal from them, my life is so much richer now. We do so need a life of the spirit, otherwise we'd all end up as automata."

And the artists just loved her. They could eat and drink to their heart's desire at her place; they could also engage in endless discussions, or simply listen to music and sing. Although they were all enamoured of her beauty, none of them

had any ambitions in that area. After all, none of them wanted to offend their patron, Mr Jin, and although it was obvious that Miss He was a free spirit, it was equally obvious that she wasn't *that* free. For her part Miss He was a perfect hostess, and never exceeded the boundaries of propriety. Though on occasion she might kiss a friend on the cheek, it was always in public, nothing more than a platonic peck.

Only one of their number had designs on her. He was a traditional painter in his thirties by the name of Zhang Bashan. He was such a great fan of the Ming dynasty artist Bada Shanren, he'd taken the name Bashan for himself.

Zhang turned up at the salon one evening when Miss He was at a banquet. The maid told him,

"The others knew Miss He had an engagement this evening so they didn't come. Some of them said there was an exhibition on tonight."

"That's all right. I'll just listen to some music and wait for Miss He to return."

It was a house rule that friends could come over any time they pleased and the servants had been instructed to entertain them. Sometimes Miss He would leave a room full of guests to their own devices while she went out for some social do. Nobody minded.

Miss He didn't get back until midnight. When she found Zhang sitting in her living room smoking, she said with a surprised smile,

"How come you're the only one here tonight?"

"No idea," he replied. "I've been sitting here by myself for the past two hours."

"They've all gone to an exhibition of oil paintings. You couldn't be expected to know about that as you don't paint in the Western style."

She went to change while Zhang continued to sip at his drink.

"Mr Jin not coming tonight?" Zhang asked.

"Not tonight. He's terribly busy: three banquets in a row."

"Miss He," Zhang said holding his glass of brandy. "There's something I've been meaning to tell you for a long time."

"Go on," she said with a smile. "Going to tell me you love me?"

"It's true that I admire you deeply. But I know I don't have a hope—you won't go for me

because you're not a loose woman. But that's not what I wanted to talk about."

"Then what is it? No sweet nothings, I trust."

"No, no. I've been wondering, since you know so many people in the art world, why don't you try your hand at painting yourself?"

"Me, a painter?" She burst out laughing. "You must be joking. How could I ever become an artist?"

"Nothing to it," Zhang said waving aside her doubts, "as long as you're interested, that is."

"Of course I'm interested. But I've never even held a brush."

"You can learn."

"At my age? Forget it. I'd be grey by the time I could paint anything."

"I know a shortcut. You'll be a painter in only three months. In a year you'll be a big name."

"Enough of your joking." Miss He coyly held her hand to her mouth as she laughed. "There's no such thing as an instant artist. They had me read van Loon's writings on art. From the word go he says, 'Art is patience, patience and yet more patience.' I don't have any patience. There's no way I could get anywhere in such a short time."

"Trust me; I'll take care of everything."

Despite He Yaxian's dubious look, Zhang seemed earnest.

"So what style of painting should I take up?"

"Traditional Chinese painting," Zhang said. "I'm not saying this because that's what I do. It's easy to get into, easy to get fast results."

"But I prefer oils. I'd rather be a Western painter."

"One thing at a time," he responded with a knowing laugh. "Let's just start with ink painting. I'll be your instructor."

"I'm flattered. But could you stand a student like me? I'm afraid I might be a disappointment; my failure could bring dishonour on your good name."

"Don't be so modest. You can tell everyone you've been studying with me for years."

"Why would I want to do that? Who'd believe me?"

"Just say you've been going to my studio every day to paint," he continued. "Anyway, there're always so many people around you should take a break and come to my place for a couple of hours

every day for lessons. I guarantee you'll be able to have your first exhibition in six months."

"Come, there you go again," she chided him bashfully. "I'd be satisfied if I could finish one painting, and here you are talking about an exhibition."

"All will be revealed when the time is right," was the response. "Well, are you game? Don't worry, I have no ulterior motives in getting you to come to my studio."

"I know. I trust you."

"Okay, then let's start tomorrow. I'll have everything set up."

"But just look at me, I don't even know what the different colours in Chinese painting are called."

"As I said, you don't need to worry about anything. It'll be easy. I'm going to make a great artist out of you, just see if I don't."

Miss He was excited. She tried to get him to reveal his special methods of instruction, but he wasn't giving anything away. She kissed him on the cheek.

"Will that do for beginners? I'll give you a special present when I've finished."

Zhang was in seventh heaven.

The next day, Miss He began commuting to Zhang's studio to learn the fundamentals of Chinese art. She rapidly advanced to painting bamboos, first copying from the *Mustard Seed Garden Manual* and then receiving personal direction from Zhang. Of course, he was well known for his bamboo painting. Equally famous were his goldfish, but he kept her away from such a taxing subject, preferring her to concentrate on bamboos.

So under Zhang's guidance Miss He persisted, reproducing the same picture many times each day. At the end of about a month she was getting very tired of this and finally said,

"Can't I do something else, teacher? This bamboo is beginning to rattle me."

"Certainly not. Just do what I say. This painting is going to make you famous some day, believe you me," Zhang said with a smug smile on his lips. "Don't forget what van Loon said: patience. Now back to your bamboo."

She had no choice but to follow orders. She lost count of how many paintings she did of the

same bamboo during the first two months. She was a clever pupil and the object of her teacher's continuous praise and encouragement. He took out a sample of the bamboos she'd done a few months earlier and compared them with her recent work. Even she felt she'd made a lot of progress.

At the end of three months, upon seeing her latest bamboo Zhang said,

"Now you're ready for your first exhibit."

"What?" she said with a bemused squawk. "How could I make an exhibit out of a few dozen paintings of the same bamboo? It would be a joke."

"Don't worry. I've got one hundred paintings ready and waiting for your signature and seal."

Miss He was aghast. Zhang went over to his bookcase and took out a roll of unmounted paintings and spread them out for her to see.

"These are the work of a pack of unknowns. They want to sell them and, if you take my advice, you'll snap them up at rock bottom prices. All of the artists are good friends of mine. None, of course, has any money, and I can promise you they'd never say a word about our little transaction."

"You're asking me to hold an exhibition of *other* people's work?"

"Of course," Zhang chuckled. "They're not bad, are they?"

"They're all very good," Miss He concurred as she went through the pile of landscapes and flowers, fish and birds, all in different styles, and really quite excellent.

"I've made this selection for you," Zhang admitted. "Once they're mounted and hung, no one would have the gall to say you're not a painter. To be quite frank, none of these artists could sell any of this stuff on their own. Even if they held an exhibition they wouldn't be able to get anyone to go to it. Now you're different. You're well-known, you have lots of friends who'd be sure to turn up if they heard you were going to have a show. Your acquaintances in the media would, I'm sure, be more than willing to write you up in the press. It would be excellent publicity. If you just invited them out for a decent banquet they'd feel indebted and could be relied upon to repay you in kind. Then there's Mr Jin and his friends. I'm positive you'll be turning people

away."

"There's just one thing," Miss He asked hesitantly. "If you already had all of these paintings in store, why did you make me go through the masquerade of learning to paint a single bamboo for the last three months?"

"Ah, that's the key to the whole show," Zhang cried gleefully. "No one knows you can paint, right? So it's crucial that you give a demo at your exhibition. Once they've seen you do a painting in front of their very eyes, who'd doubt that you did all the others hanging on the walls?"

"A public demonstration!" Miss He exclaimed. The penny finally dropped. "You're quite the operator, Teacher Zhang," she said coquettishly.

"I guarantee you a great success. I've made a name for myself by painting bamboos, and you're my disciple. It's only natural that the subject you'd choose to paint in public would be a bamboo."

Miss He was ecstatic, and she ran over, hugged Zhang Bashan, and gave him a passionate kiss on the lips.

"Now that's not the big present I was saving for you. Let's just call it a little thank you."

Zhang shot right back up to seventh heaven.

A week later at a large banquet held in her apartment, Miss He revealed that she had been painting on the sly, and amidst the warm approbation of her guests she announced that she was about to hold an exhibition of her work.

"My teacher is Zhang Bashan," she declared pointing at her mentor.

The assembled crowd was dumbstruck. Some of their number expressed their delight at this news with loud applause, while a few pleaded with her to give them a sneak preview of her work. She reluctantly declined.

"Unfortunately, I've had everything sent out to be mounted; however, I look forward to your comments and criticisms when the exhibition opens. I do hope all of you will do me the honour of attending, and if any of you feel inclined to broadcast the news of my debut, I will be greatly indebted to you. After all, I'm just a girl, a rank amateur; I've no idea as to how I should be going about any of this. Since up to now I've always kept my passion for painting a secret, I have to rely on all of you to let people know about my

debut.”

“It will be an honour,” they chimed in chorus.

“I really should ask your forgiveness right here and now. I’m venturing forth into the world ashamed of my minor accomplishments, and without your support I’m sure to lose face.”

Miss He followed this by toasting the company.

“Is this a joint exhibition with Bashan?” someone asked.

“How could I ever dream of exhibiting with him,” Miss He spluttered. “Even if he’s not worried about me dragging him down, my works would appear embarrassingly lacklustre if put up next to his.”

Everyone agreed that she was being far too modest. Zhang Bashan jumped in at this juncture to add,

“Miss He is a very talented and devoted artist; a natural, a genius. Although she has only been painting for a year, I am confident that the works she will put on exhibition will not fail to impress. I hope she will see you all there.”

“Are the paintings for sale?” someone queried.

“I really can’t decide,” Miss He said. “I certainly don’t need the money, but my teacher says exhibitions are so much more interesting if you sell your work.”

This led to a general discussion of the question with arguments on both sides; those against the idea of selling the paintings said it was a vulgar thing to do. Finally, Hu Xinding, an oil painter chimed in,

“I’ve got an idea. Miss He can hold a charity exhibition, and give half of the proceeds to some charitable institution, say an orphanage, or a women’s organization. You’ll still get some money for all your devoted hours of work, and you’ll get the charities to support the exhibition.”

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Miss He exclaimed. “It’d be best to donate the money to a women’s organization. I know them and they’re all rich.”

This met with general approval, and Miss He got them all to help arrange things: rent a gallery, send out invitations, write reviews, and so on. Everyone happily complied, excited to have a role in the affair. It was a perfect opportunity to express their gratitude to Miss He for all the lavish meals they had enjoyed under her roof in the past.

For the next few days Miss He was in a tizzy

with the preparations. She’d had talks with leaders of the women’s organizations, arranged for Mr Jin’s friends to attend her opening, not to mention the banquet she’d held for her friends in the press and the art world during which she entreated them for active support. On this last occasion she actually gave everyone a preview of her works. After a sumptuous meal and copious amounts of good wine, her arty friends were feeling extremely well-disposed towards Miss He’s remarkable talent and swore they’d be willing to exert themselves on her behalf. On the following day articles began appearing in the press about Miss He making her debut with her “charitable exhibition of a ‘virginal’ painter”, which was accompanied by a flattering picture of the artist. A flurry of critiques and appraisals of her work, penned by the leading contemporary artists of Hong Kong, also hit the press at the same time. By the end of the media rush simply *tout le monde*, artist or no, knew about the up-and-coming exhibition and Miss He’s name as a redoubtable artist.

As Zhang Bashan had predicted, they virtually had to turn people away at the opening. Miss He fluttered among her guests like a delicate nymph, and red **SOLD** stickers alighted on the paintings one by one. By the end of the day half of them had been sold. In response to popular demand Miss He agreed to display her talents the following day and under the eager gaze of over one hundred people she put brush to paper and threw off a bamboo painting. Of course it was that same bamboo she’d been practising these three months past. Both her technique and composition were faultless. Many of the onlookers applauded, some gasped in amazement.

The exhibition was scheduled to last for five days, but on the fourth day all one hundred paintings had been sold, much to the disappointment of late-comers. They were not to be deprived, however, and many of them ordered paintings from Miss He on the spot. She initially felt some reluctance to accept their orders, but once again Zhang Bashan came to the rescue and whispered to her,

“Don’t worry, I’ll get my people to take care of it for you.”

At the end of the exhibition Miss He and Zhang sat down to calculate the takings and found they’d made some \$60,000. She announced the final

figure and made a big show of handing half the money over to the women's organization. After having paid for various incidentals including, of course, the paintings themselves, she found herself left with \$20,000.

"We've got a goldmine on our hands," Zhang said gleefully. "What do you think of my idea now?"

"You know it's not the money I'm interested in, it's the fame," Miss He said with considerable satisfaction.

"Well, now everyone knows about the artist He Yaxian!"

"I should give you half of this for services rendered," decided Miss He.

"I couldn't accept," Zhang smiled. "But may I remind you that you said if we were successful you would have a big present for me? Forget the money, it's too crass to give cash as a present."

"Then what can I give you?" Miss He said, batting her eyelids.

Zhang laughed and Miss He collapsed in his arms giggling.

"I think the teacher has designs on his pupil. You know my secret and I'm in your power."

"I'd never use it against you," murmured Zhang, as he kissed her passionately.

"There's one condition, however. I like oils. Have you got any way of teaching me how to paint in oil?"

"Nothing to it," Zhang responded. "I'll teach you everything I know—after I get my present."

She laughed and gave him what he wanted. Zhang Bashan was more than satisfied.

A fortnight later Miss He got in touch with Hu Xinding, the oil painter who frequented her salon, and invited him over for afternoon tea. It was a crisp and sunny day. They sat down to tea alone on the balcony. Miss He got straight to the point.

"I have to thank you for your decisive part in my recent success. I'd like to give you something as a token of my gratitude, but I didn't know what you'd like."

"Don't mention it, please," Hu said grinning broadly. "I'm a constant beneficiary of your generosity here."

"Food and drink are nothing," Miss He said coquettishly. "I want to give you something to remember me by; but first there's one more

favour I'd like to ask you . . ."

"Please go on. You name it."

"I'd like an oil."

"What type of painting? One by me, or someone else?"

"By you, of course," she replied. "I want you to paint me."

"It would be my pleasure," he cried. "I was so scared you'd refuse, I never dared ask you to sit for me. Of course I'll paint you."

"I want you to paint me in the nude," Miss He looked at him with a faint smile on her lips.

"Wonderful. To think that you'll be modelling for me."

"No, no, not for you, for me."

"Sorry, I don't get your meaning," Hu was confused.

"I want to be able to tell people it's a self-portrait. After all, although I'm an unmarried woman, I do have Mr Jin to think of. How could I possibly let another man paint me in the nude? There'd be no problem if I could say it was a self-portrait. Of course, that means I'll be stealing your thunder."

"Don't give it a second thought," Hu laughed happily. "It'll be my pleasure to paint such a luscious body."

"It's settled then. So you'll keep my secret; and after you've finished the picture I'll sign my name on it."

Hu Xinding had none of Zhang Bashan's reserve, and as Miss He finished speaking he leaned over and started kissing her energetically. As he did he spluttered,

"You're a darling, I'm the luckiest man in the world."

They began three days later in Hu's studio. Miss He discarded her raiments without a blush and, looking at herself in a mirror out of the corner of her eye, covered up the vital zones of her anatomy with a towel, posing as though she were wiping herself dry. She kept her gaze fixed on the mirror into which she stared in disconsolate self-appreciation. A ray of sunlight shot into the room at an angle creating an ideal atmosphere and adding the final touch to the composition of the painting. Hu threw himself into the task heart and soul, working for three hours every day on the portrait. Miss He never failed to give him a

passionate kiss in appreciation at the end of each session; although any attempts on Hu's part to go further than merely hugging his subject's smooth, naked torso were firmly rebuffed.

"There'll be plenty of time for that after you've finished the painting," Miss He admonished him.

In two months it was ready. The picture was stunning, perhaps better than anything Hu Xinding had ever done.

"I really don't want to give it to you," he sighed. "It's a masterpiece. But I've promised, so now it's time for you to sign the thing."

In the painting Miss He's body seemed to be illuminated by the sunshine. She had her back to the artist but her front was reflected in the mirror before her; in this way every inch of her delicate, milk-white skin was revealed to the public's gaze. It seemed as though her torso was painted in three dimensions, lusciously inviting to the touch.

"It's brilliant!" Miss He squealed as she grabbed the brush from the artist's hand. She signed her name in the bottom corner of the painting in red. Thereupon she swung around, and flinging the towel that concealed her modesty to one side, flopped into Hu's eager embrace. They set to work rolling around on the artist's queen-size bed.

Afterwards, Hu crouched down at her feet like a little puppy.

"It was all worth it; that was a bonus I'll remember for the rest of my life. I love you."

"Now don't you go and forget that I'm already spoken for," Miss He brushed aside his fawning with a laugh. "But, honestly, I am very fond of you. You have the civilized and romantic appeal of an artist."

"Yaxian, let's not end it here. I'll love you forever."

"In that case, may I impose on you once more?" Miss He asked without missing a beat. "Will you help me become a oil painter?"

"If you're willing to work hard I swear I'll be able to make a painter of you in three years."

"Three years?" she echoed. "I'll give you three months."

"Impossible," Hu was bemused. "No one can become a painter in a few months. I've been at it for over fifteen years."

"No, no, I want an intensive course. In three

months I want to be able to hold my first exhibition."

"You must be joking," Hu shook his head in disbelief. "It just isn't possible."

"I know a way," Miss He offered. "You're a famous painter, certainly you know many less fortunate artists, not to speak of students. Why not buy up some of their work and arrange an exhibition in my name?"

Hu stared at her in astonishment. Suddenly he realized what had been going on. He burst out laughing and pointed at Miss He,

"So you *bought* all the paintings you displayed at that exhibition!"

"That's right, except for the one I did on the spot. Now that I'm your lover you're not going to tell me you're going to stand between me and fame? Don't you want me to make a bit of money? Anyway, if you don't agree I'll tell Mr Jin and his friends all about us. Of course, I won't tell them I was a compliant partner."

"Is that a threat?" Hu asked bitterly.

"No threats, I'm just asking for your help. I'm sure you won't turn me down, will you, my sweetheart?"

With the memory of the pleasure they'd shared only minutes before and confronted now with her pressing request, Hu knew he couldn't say no. At last he managed a laugh,

"There's no way you can prove you painted an oil; at least no one'll expect a demonstration."

"That's the best thing about it," she bubbled. "If people don't believe I did them that's their problem. Anyway, no one would dare say anything. Even if they did they'd have no proof, unless of course you or the other artists betray me. But somehow I doubt that you would."

"Very well," he shouted. "I love you and I'll do my very best for you."

Miss He fell onto the artist once more, her face beaming with a lascivious smile.

Two months hence Miss He held another exhibition. This time she was showing Western painting, not only oils; there were also watercolours. The *pièce de resistance*, however, was her self-portrait in the nude, the only picture marked NOT FOR SALE. Again the papers dutifully ran articles on the exhibition and printed her picture; this time around Miss He was completely at home

running the whole operation from start to finish. On opening day people streamed into the gallery dressed as though they were going to meet royalty. The only difference between this and the last exhibition—apart, of course, from the type of paintings on show—was that she was keeping all the proceeds from sales for herself. Now charity was to begin at home. She made a clear \$100,000 profit. Of that she gave Hu Xinding \$10,000, as well as a very big bonus.

The only people who knew about this operation were Hu, Zhang Bashan and Jin Shanghang. Mr Jin said with a shake of the head,

“You’re a remarkable woman, quite the ‘quick-change artist’. Now you’re a Western artist on top of everything else. But what do you want with all that money?”

“You know it’s not the money, it’s the reputation I’m interested in,” she responded. “Now the papers are calling me a virtuoso. My next step is to hold a one-person exhibition of my Chinese and Western paintings in America.”

“God, you’ve got hide,” Mr Jin couldn’t help laughing. “Aren’t you scared they’ll see through your little charade?”

“Why should they, no one here suspects a thing. Anyway, everything’s arranged.”

Mr Jin simply shook his head in silence.

And so it came to pass that three months later Miss He took a load of paintings to America for a travelling exhibition. It was an immediate success, for both local Chinese community leaders and the art world flocked to see the works of this legendary Hong Kong genius. Of course, Miss He had been sure to take care of the necessary pre-exhibition publicity, so she was given an enthusiastic reception wherever she went, selling so many paintings that she had to phone Zhang and Hu in Hong Kong and get them to air-freight her another batch. She returned to Hong Kong two months later a celebrity, and amidst the clamour for her to hold another exhibition she declared she needed to hide away to paint. In fact, she went straight back into the salon business.

Some months later she set off yet again, this time for Europe. Mr Jin asked her the reasons for her trip.

“To study painting. This time I’m really going to learn how to paint.”

“Start again from scratch? How long do you think that will take you,” Mr Jin asked suspiciously.

“A year—one can’t expect instantaneous results.”

Mr Jin was unwilling to let her go, but Miss He was determined. In the end she won out and he gave her a sizable amount of money for her travels and tuition fees, and agreed to see her off at the airport. Her friends in the arts held a sumptuous farewell party for her.

Once in Europe, however, she was back to her old tricks again and held another exhibition, after which she took it from country to country, selling paintings to all and sundry as she went. After a year she was back in Hong Kong. Once she’d disposed of the usual round of welcome parties, Mr Jin finally got her alone and asked how her studies were progressing.

“I’m returning to France next month. I’ve been accepted at an art school. This time I’m really going to learn how to paint.”

“So, when will you be back next time?”

“Two or three years from now, although I’ll be popping back from time to time as the need arises.”

Before leaving, however, she held one more exhibition. It had been two years since her last public show and in the meantime her success in America and Europe had helped make her something of a superstar in Hong Kong. Naturally, business was excellent. By this stage absolutely everyone knew of this local artistic genius.

Hu Xinding and Zhang Bashan were behind her all the way, just as in the past. They even agreed to let her exhibit some of their own paintings under her name. Naturally, Miss He gave them a cut of the proceeds, an amount that was invariably far in excess of the price they would be able to command for their works on the open market. They were well satisfied.

Miss He went off to France and hasn’t been back since. After six months, Mr Jin got a letter from her. It read in part,

“... I would have been found out sooner or later, so I think it’s best if everyone were to think of me fondly over here, or better still to forget about me altogether. You were always good to me, but I can’t come back now. I’m going to

America. Hope to see you there sometime . . . ”

Mr Jin later heard that Miss He married an American Chinese. Rumour had it that he was a big name and they hadn't got married at all but were simply living together. Mr Jin did not go to see her, although occasionally he would get a post-card or a Christmas card from her. For the last few years, however, it seems that he's been dropped from her mailing list. Word has it that she's moved to South America.

What could she be doing there? No one knew. When Zhang Daqian visited Hong Kong from South America a couple of years back he said she was the owner of a very successful restaurant.

Of course, many people miss her, not only Hu Xinding and Zhang Bashan, but countless other nameless artists, who without her patronage can't get anyone to take a second look at their paintings.