



Entertainment

Heady Hunan

CHANGSHA

How Mao Zedong's home province has become a font of popular culture

AMONG THIS summer's television hits in China has been "Sisters Who Make Waves". The show involves 30 female celebrities over the age of 30 competing for a spot in a five-member band. Viewers watch them train, perform and live together (some of the contestants are pictured). Five hundred women, picked at random, get to vote for their favourite. Within three days of its airing in June, over 300m had watched the first episode on Mango TV, a streaming app owned by the state television network of Hunan, a central province. Social-media sites brim with praise from young feminists for these somewhat older role models: at last, a break from the devoted mothers and dewy-faced ingénues beloved of official broadcasters.

Making waves is what Hunan Broadcasting System (HBS) does best. It is the most-watched television network after China Central Television (CCTV), the state broadcaster—and occasionally surpasses

its ratings. That is striking for an outfit run by the government of a province that is better known as China's largest producer of rice and the birthplace of Mao Zedong—"red tourism" centred on Mao's formative haunts draws devotees of the chairman from around the country.

But Changsha, the provincial capital, has become a font of China's popular culture. It is home to over 12,000 companies involved in creating it. They employ one in eight of the city's workers. By one official calculation, no other sector contributes more to Changsha's wealth. In 2017 (the most recent year for which figures are available) creative and cultural industries generated 9% of the city's GDP—a propor-

tion twice as high as their contribution to national output. At their heart in Hunan is a broadcaster with a knack for cranking out programmes that are watched throughout China. In 2018 HBS's affiliates produced six of China's best-liked costume dramas and eight of its most popular songs.

Changsha's standing has turned its biennial "Golden Eagle" awards into one of China's three most prestigious prize-giving ceremonies for TV stars. By GDP per person, Hunan ranks 16th among China's 31 provincial-level regions. But its 67m people are the country's fifth-biggest spenders on culture, education and entertainment.

Hunan's journey to national pop-culture prominence began in the 1990s when the provincial broadcasting authorities created a satellite TV station with licence to try something new. It produced lively news reports, a celebrity-led variety show called "Happy Camp" and even a matchmaking programme. By 2000 hotels in Beijing were luring guests with placards boasting, "We have Hunan Satellite TV", the *New York Times* observed at the time.

Much of that early success was the work of a Hunanese bureaucrat, Wei Wenbin. When he took over as director of the Hunan Radio and Television Department, Mr Wei read up about America's entertainment industry. On land once used by a state-run rose farm, he built a vast park for television ►►

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▶ and film production and moved the new satellite tv station there. The area, Malanshan, has since grown into a cultural powerhouse, drawing media giants such as iQiyi and Tencent. In 2017 eight of the ten most-streamed variety shows on the Chinese internet were hatched there.

Hunan TV was the first network in China to try broadcasting for profit. That led it to focus on entertainment, a priority which helped it avoid political mistakes, as Wu Changchang of East China Normal University has noted. According to Mr Wu, Hunan TV struck a delicate balance between winning the love of viewers and approval from the Communist Party, which is a “prerequisite” of commercial success in China.

The government has occasionally winced. In 2011 it took “Happy Girls”, a fantastically popular singing contest, off air. The official explanation was that the show was too racy for its prime-time slot, but many wondered whether its huge excitable fan base worried the party. In 2004 a forerunner of the show, “Super Girls”, had let spectators vote for contestants by text message—a first in China. That smacked too much of democracy for the government. After a few years Hunan TV limited voting mainly to a studio audience. These days the network strives even harder to please the party. In 2017 it launched a series about ideology called “Socialism is Kind of Cool”. It included a quiz show on the life and works of Xi Jinping, China’s leader.

Yet Hunan’s stations still have “political space to explore new things”, in the view of a manager at Mango TV. The government wants to get “closer to its audience”, he says, in particular to the young who spend hours glued to their smartphones. Internet broadcasters such as Mango TV, with 18m subscribers, help it to do so.

Hunan TV’s ability to experiment matters for the development of Chinese broadcasting. Li Shuwan, a former presenter at the station, says the province is a training ground for much of the country’s television talent. Industry insiders call Changsha the “West Point” of China’s cultural-entertainment industry, a reference to the American army’s elite academy.

It is just as competitive. In 2013 Ms Li was one of only two students from Hunan University who were admitted to Hunan TV’s graduate programme. This year some 30,000 people applied for 100 spots on Mango TV’s trainee scheme. Mango TV encourages young recruits to speak up and suggest fresh ideas. They can receive funding to implement their proposals.

Yang Tianhao, a co-founder of Erka Media, which manages 600 social-media influencers from its offices in China (including Changsha) and Los Angeles, says that young people in Hunan’s capital are risk-takers, with parents who are more willing to let their children try their luck in a fickle

industry than counterparts in richer Chinese cities. Well before Hunan’s “Sisters” filled smartphone screens, a Hunanese woman was making them: Zhou Qunfei, the founder of Lens Technology. Born to a poor, rural family, she was named the world’s richest self-made woman in 2018.

People in China like to point to character traits which they believe are shared by natives of a particular province. The executive at Mango TV detects “a cultural gene to break the rules” among Hunanese. For evidence, he points to Mao and Liu Shaoqi, who was born in Changsha and served as Mao’s prime minister. Hunan’s broadcasters certainly have an interest in cultivating the stereotype: an edgy feel is crucial to the success of their brand. ■



Body art

The new ink masters

WENLING, ZHEJIANG

China makes its mark on the world of tattoos, both in design and in approach

THE ARMS are those of a tall young man, his muscles toned and skin firm. One is covered in thick sweeps of black Chinese calligraphy from shoulder to wrist. That and the other limbs—around ten in all—are piled in a disembodied heap on Wu Shang's desk. They are models that he commissioned, made of silicon rubber that looks and, crucially for him, feels like real skin. Wu Shang is a tattooist in the coastal city of Wenling. Having seen hundreds of his carefully inked pieces of art walk out of his studio door, he wanted to keep a few to decorate the walls. "Otherwise, all I have is imperfect pictures," he says.

These might be the quirkiest tattoos in China, but they are part of a much broader trend. Tattooed arms, backs and legs are fast becoming common sights in the country's biggest cities. The delicate flora and fauna of traditional Chinese art have migrated from rice paper to bodies, carried along by a revolution in techniques. And the innovations pioneered by China's tat-

toists for their swelling market are transforming the art of inked flesh everywhere.

The Communist Party is not among those who appreciate their work, instead viewing tattoos as undesirable avatars of hip-hop culture. As part of its fumbling effort to control them, China's top media regulator has ruled that actors cannot show their tattoos on television. Footballers have been ordered to cover up theirs before taking to the pitch.

At the same time, the party has shown some flexibility, bowing to the facts on the skin. The People's Liberation Army now allows recruits to have small tattoos. For a

government so concerned about cultivating its global appeal, the real question is why it cannot recognise the beautiful gift under its nose—or, more accurately, on the forearms of the nation.

Tattooing is not new in China. Literature from the Tang dynasty (618-907AD) describes people getting tattooed with scenes of natural beauty and lines from poetry. Without question the most famous tattoo in Chinese history belonged to Yue Fei, a revered 12th-century general in the Song dynasty who had four characters inscribed on his back: *jing zhong bao guo*, or "serve the realm with utter loyalty".

These, though, are the positive exceptions. For much of Chinese history tattoos were seen as markers of trouble. They were the preserve of borderland barbarians, rogues, bandits and criminals, whose faces were sometimes tattooed as punishment. Some believe that Confucianism frowns on tattoos as an act of filial impiety that damages your body, which is seen as an extension of your parents.

China's modern dalliance with tattoos began in the 1980s as foreign fashions streamed into the country, just then opening to the world. Tattoo parlours popped up in its biggest cities, especially Shanghai and Beijing. Artists mostly imitated the designs popular elsewhere. But by the late 1990s a uniquely Chinese style was emerging, best captured in the work of Shen Wei- ▶▶

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guo, a soft-spoken man whose studio in Shanghai remains a fixture on the Chinese scene today.

Mr Shen was drawn to the Japanese fondness for dense images, infused with historical legends and covering the whole back. He also admired Western oil painting and China's own cultural heritage. In his hands these were fused into what became known as the "Chinese neo-traditional school", similar to the tattoos associated with Japan's Yakuza gangsters but with Chinese content and brighter colours. (Think more dragons, fewer waves and less rigid rules.) Not that Mr Shen himself likes being called a neo-traditionalist. "I jump around a lot. As soon as you define yourself as this or that, you stop evolving," he says.

Two other distinctively Chinese styles are now edging out the neo-traditional school in popularity. One is classic calligraphy, updated with a modern sensibility. Chinese characters often appear as tattoos in the West, too, but these mostly look like basic handwriting. By contrast, Wu Shang and other tattooists in China apply bold, inventive strokes (see below, left).

The other style is an approximation of ink-wash painting, the stuff of traditional Chinese landscapes. Among its finest exponents are Joey Pang (see below, right) and Chen Jie (see main image), two women who got started in the early 2000s, the former in Hong Kong, the latter in Beijing. Orchids bloom up the napes of necks; songbirds perch on branches that run across shoulders and down arms; mist-wreathed mountain ranges extend across collarbones. Their tattoos have an almost ethereal quality, as if floating above the skin. And just as important, they are perfect for the age of social media: Ms Chen has more than 420,000 followers on Instagram.

As is increasingly common globally, some of the best Chinese tattooists had formal art training before opting for ink and skin as their preferred medium. Wu Shang attended the prestigious China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, where he studied Impressionist painting. He says that he intended Wu Shang, his *nom de plume*, as a tribute to the French artist Paul Cézanne, meaning "I am no Cézanne". Coincidentally or not, it can also mean "None are better than me".

For art-school graduates, the lucrative potential of tattooing is part of the allure. A famous tattooist can charge 3,000 yuan (\$435) an hour. Purists worry that such rewards have created unwanted pressures. Consider the fate of Ms Pang, the ink-wash pioneer in Hong Kong. She spent a decade studying under a calligraphic master. As her reputation spread, people came from around the world to her studio. By 2017 her waiting list stretched three years into the future. "I need time to think and draw before I work on skin, and I didn't have that," she says. Her husband was also her busi-

ness partner. When their relationship collapsed, she left him and her business and fled to Dali, a city nestled among mountains in the south-western province of Yunnan, her birthplace.

After a couple of years spent fighting deep depression, Ms Pang is getting back into tattooing with a new studio. It looks nothing like the dingy lairs of the popular imagination. It is a one-room country retreat, with a floor-to-ceiling glass wall and a courtyard set up for tea service. "I can reconnect with my art here," she says, speaking in her first interview since her disappearance. She adds a pledge to former clients: she will complete their unfinished tattoos for nothing if they come to Dali.

The other revolution

Ms Pang's ability to create watercolour-like works on skin is a result of dramatic improvements in tattooing equipment, which is linked to China's rise as a manufacturing powerhouse. Tattooists used to rely on coil-based machines, which produced a buzzing sound as the needle bounced up and down. Over the past two decades many have switched to rotary alternatives. They are lighter and quieter, with more efficient motors. This allows tattooists greater precision as they wield two different formations of needles: a pen-like point for outlines and a flat brush for colouring. Their technique resembles painting, mixing different hues to generate the right look and then dabbing the colours on the skin.

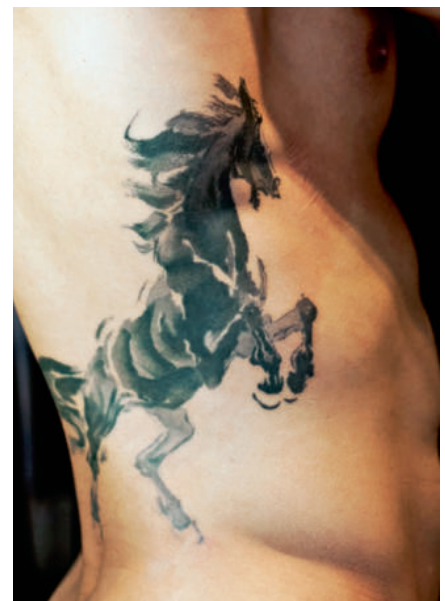
But China's manufacturing muscle has also generated a problem: a proliferation of cheap tattoo machines. "It used to be really hard to get tattoo equipment if you weren't an artist yourself," says Matt Lodder, an art historian at the University of Essex who

has written extensively about tattoos. Now the devices can be easily purchased online. In the West some in the tattoo industry (normally averse to rules) have started calling for regulation to control the sale of equipment and ensure that studios meet adequate standards.

In China several prominent tattooists are taking a different approach. They have set up schools. In Wu Shang's studio four students are hunched over flat pieces of silicon rubber—mimicking skin, just like his model arms—trying to recreate images that they first painted on paper.

That might seem inoffensive, but it goes against a widespread but unwritten code. Masters may take an apprentice or two under their wings, but only if they are truly committed to the craft. The idea that anyone can just show up, pay a tuition fee and after a few months apply ink to skin leaves purists aghast. Even in China some are critical. Mr Shen, the neo-traditionalist, says that he honed his technique over many years by wielding needles by hand. "You need to learn about the relationship between skin and needle. You can't just get that overnight in school," he says.

There is, however, a counter-argument. People in the business estimate that China now has tens of thousands of tattoo studios, up from hundreds a decade ago. Last year at least 16 large tattoo exhibitions were held around the country, bringing together crowds of would-be tattooists and soon-to-be-inked patrons. Given the surging demand, the need for well-trained artists is evident. Wu Shang knows that all too well. A garish orange-and-yellow fish on the underside of his left forearm testifies to the experiments on himself that taught him his craft. Who could begrudge his students wanting to start on fake arms? ■



Ink meets skin meets tradition



Shaolin monastery

The profession of renunciation

How tales of a “CEO monk” obscure the more complex business of faith in China



DENG FENG

FOR NEARLY two hours the monks sit folded in the lotus position, motionless and silent. All are robed in grey apart from the cherubic man in saffron, their leader. When the last joss-stick burns down, he glides out of the room without a word, later offering a brief explanation of the meditation: “True wisdom emerges not from a calculating mind but from the wellspring of your heart.” It is the kind of line that might appear on a motivational poster. Voiced by this man, Shi Yongxin, the words sound heavier, weighed down by scandal.

Mr Shi is abbot of Shaolin Monastery, one of the world’s best-known Buddhist shrines. Tourists flock there to see its warrior monks, impossibly flexible young men who fell imaginary foes with flying kicks beneath the craggy peaks of Mount Song. Founded 1,500 years ago, it is the cradle of kung fu and Zen Buddhism. But in recent years it has had more infamy than honour. Mr Shi has been criticised for transforming hallowed ground into a crass business venture. “CEO monk” is his moniker, appearing in headlines again and again. Who could resist it? Under Mr Shi, a monk with an MBA, the monastery has expanded abroad and made plans to list on the stockmarket.

In 2015 the extent of his hypocrisy seemed to be revealed. Police opened an investigation after an accuser claimed that Mr Shi had enriched himself and violated

his vows of celibacy. It was easy to dismiss the abbot as a sham, a venal man cloaked in religious garb. But Buddhist parables are rarely so straightforward.

Five years on, Mr Shi is still at Shaolin, cleared of all charges. He lives in a windowless room in its centre, looking less like a cunning mastermind than a quiet man of faith—one who may have renounced earthly desires but remains at the mercy of earthly forces. Religious institutions everywhere must negotiate between the articles of their belief and the realities of the world. In China that negotiation can get especially fraught.

When Mr Shi arrived at Shaolin at the age of 16, life there was much harsher. It was 1981, not long after the Cultural Revolution, when Mao Zedong had suppressed Buddhism and Red Guards had destroyed temples. Mr Shi found it in partial ruin. Just 20 monks lived there, subsisting on two steamed buns a day. Soon he had established himself as a lieutenant to its aged, nearly blind abbot. They trekked to government offices in Dengfeng, the monastery’s home county, seeking permission to rebuild temple halls, to perform Buddhist rites and, crucially, to sell tickets.

In a remarkable twist of karma, Shaolin became a hot destination. In 1982 “Shaolin Temple”, Jet Li’s debut, hit the cinemas, depicting a foundational story: how 13 monks, supposedly skilled in kung fu, saved a future Tang dynasty emperor in battle. The monastery went from 50,000 visitors a year to 2m in 1984.

Kung fu is just one aspect of Shaolin—a physical discipline that accompanies chanting and meditation—but easily the most distinctive. Tales of its warrior monks have been popular since the 16th century. Knowing that kung fu was Shaolin’s best hope for appealing to secular society, Mr Shi helped create a performing troupe in 1987.

From the outset, cross-cutting interests complicated matters. The main conflict was between the monks and the Dengfeng officials. For the monks, tourism was a financial lifeline to restore their monastery. For the officials, overseeing a poor county with half a million people, it was a kick-start for development. They squabbled over ticket sales. When the monks sold tickets at the temple’s entrance, the officials erected a new gate 1km up the road, controlling access.

Shaolin also became a magnet for profiteers. People flooded in from nearby villages to open guesthouses, shops and karaoke parlours outside its walls. In the 1990s the streets around it turned into a small city, with 20,000 residents. Dozens of kung fu schools, claiming to be the heirs of its fighting tradition, sprung up. Companies around China used the monastery for branding: with “Shaolin” cigarettes, cars and, most gallingly for the vegetarian monks, ham and beer. “We did not seek commercialisation. It was thrust upon us,” says Mr Shi.

He sought advice from officials in Henan, Shaolin’s province, about how to safeguard the monastery’s image. The only answer, they concluded, was for Shaolin to lay claim to its name. In 1998 it established the Henan Shaolin Industrial Development Co as a vehicle to

► file for trademarks—for tea, furniture, hardware and more. Today, Shaolin owns nearly 700 trademarks.

Having swatted away the impostors, Shaolin emulated some of their techniques. The monastery produced a kung fu teaching mobile app, backed a fighting-monk movie and launched a line of traditional Chinese medicine. Mr Shi also joined a dozen monks on a short MBA, a publicly funded course to hone their managerial skills. To its detractors Shaolin embodied the worst of modern China, an ancient religious order debased on the altar of riches. For Mr Shi the logic was—and remains—undeniable. “This is how to make Buddhism relevant.” If the pope can televise daily mass, why can’t a Shaolin monk seek publicity?

Karmic cycle

For a time Mr Shi was riding high. He was officially named abbot in 1999. The monastery grew to more than 200 monks. He worked out an agreement with Dengfeng county: 70% of ticket sales to the government, the rest to the monastery. Officials razed the streets around the temple, relocating the residents in town—a move that solidified Shaolin’s bid for UNESCO world-heritage status, obtained in 2010. Shaolin became a weapon in China’s soft-power arsenal. Mr Shi met Queen Elizabeth and Nelson Mandela. He was also skilled at aligning the monastery with the Communist Party. He made the case that Shaolin was not a religious threat but the government’s humble servant, promoting Chinese culture. From 1998 to 2018 he was a deputy to the National People’s Congress, the first representative of China’s Buddhists in the rubber-stamp legislature.

Yet trouble was brewing. Dengfeng county officials wanted greater economic dividends from Shaolin. In 2009 they formed a joint venture with China National Travel Service (CNTS), a big state-owned company. Dengfeng would inject its share of Shaolin ticket revenues into the venture; CNTS would invest in local tourism infrastructure. Pointedly, the abbot did not show up at the company’s inauguration ceremony. Word soon spread that Shaolin wanted to list on the stock market, raising as much as 1bn yuan (\$150m). Media reported it as another extravagant example of the abbot’s worship of mammon. There was just one problem: he was adamantly opposed, fearing it would make Shaolin a for-profit business. He asked questions that reached Beijing. Wen Jiabao, then China’s prime minister, quashed the listing, saying it would harm Shaolin’s identity.

The Dengfeng officials were furious. They saw Mr Shi as “a monk who won’t obey authority”, according to one intermediary. They started building a rival temple, to lessen their reliance on Shaolin. In May 2015 national authorities halted the project over concerns that it might damage the area’s cultural heritage. Local media reported that it was the abbot who had again foiled the plans, though he denied that. Three months later, salacious accusations surfaced online. They were posted by “Shi Zhengyi”, a self-described Shaolin monk whose pseudonym meant “justice”. He accused the abbot of raping a businesswoman, having two children and embezzling millions.

The Henan government investigated Mr Shi but in 2017 exonerated him of all the main accusations. Evidence in the public domain had always been thin. Paternity tests revealed that neither child was Mr Shi’s.

Being China, though, doubts persisted about the investigation’s credibility. Perhaps the abbot had mighty backers. Or perhaps China did not want to sully Shaolin’s image. Yet those doubts were hard to square with the government’s zest for corruption prosecutions in recent years. Xi Jinping, China’s leader, has repeatedly shown that he believes that institutions matter more than any person (with the notable exception of himself). Surely, the same logic could apply to Shaolin.

With the abbot’s name officially cleared, the obvious question was whether someone had framed him. Local police told him that they had identified suspects and asked whether they should pursue them. It was as if they were looking for his blessing to let the conspirators off the hook. Mr Shi obliged. “What could I do as a monk? So long as I’m fine, I hope everyone is fine.”

For all the controversy about Shaolin, its most striking feature is its smallness. On an autumn afternoon, yellow leaves swirling around, a woman prostrates herself outside its gate, howling inconsolably. Inside, several buildings have warped roofs. The monks urinate in an open trough before entering the Chan Temple, its holiest site. “Jing’an [a gold-trimmed temple in Shanghai] is worth ten Shaolins,” says one.

And for all the headlines about Mr Shi’s business acumen, there exist many examples of his restrained, even naïve, approach to commerce. Shaolin’s most notorious project was a \$300m temple-and-hotel complex in Australia, including a 27-hole golf course. Mr Shi had thought the temple would bring Shaolin more followers. Instead, the golf plans—pushed, the abbot says, by local partners—brought scorn. Moreover, Shaolin never had the money to complete the project. It lent its name and seed funds, trusting its partners to raise the rest. Construction has yet to start.

There is money to be made in all the kung fu schools near Shaolin. One has more than 30,000 students. But Shaolin has no involvement in the big schools. They offer no Buddhism instruction and their graduates go on to serve in the armed forces or as bodyguards. Some members of the much smaller Shaolin fighting troupe have left to found their own schools. Mr Shi has limited sway over them. Occasionally he asks for donations—more supplicant than master.

CNTS put its stake up for sale in October. It has lost money on Shaolin this year, with tourism hurt by the pandemic. But a dearth of bidders so far points to a deeper reason for the sale: the abbot has outmanoeuvred the investors. He has also read the changing political winds in Xi Jinping’s China. In 2018, for the first time in its history, monks raised the national flag over Shaolin. At the ceremony Mr Shi pledged to do more to fuse Buddhism and Chinese culture, a message perfectly aligned with Mr Xi’s prescriptions for religion.

At lunch the monks gather in a hall, sitting in neat rows. Mr Shi is alone on a raised platform, with a painting of a lion, jaws agape, on the wall behind him. For a second or two he looks fearsome. Then young monks come by with pots of rice and vegetable stew, slopping some into his bowl. Head down, he eats silently and quickly. In the afternoon a line-up of locals want to see him, to discuss personal problems and matters of faith. Some bring sweet potatoes as gifts; others apples or tea. Visitor numbers may be down, but those entering the monastery are, the abbot says, more serious about their Buddhism. “This is what we want to see.” *

For Mr Shi the logic was—and remains—undeniable. “This is how to make Buddhism relevant”