

# The Asian Reporter

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## MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



# Illustrating the art of Chinese watercolors

Willow Zheng considers herself lucky she started grade school at the end of China's Cultural Revolution. During this time, from 1966 to 1976, the arts were considered the "old way of thinking" and many of China's artifacts were actually destroyed by the government and artists were oppressed. It was part of a movement by Mao Zedong to purge all capitalist and traditional aspects of Chinese society.

As a child in the north-eastern province of Shaanxi in China, Zheng loved to draw. Her father enrolled her in an arts school when she was in the sixth grade. It was 1973, and she knew classmates who were being "re-educated" in the countryside. She was fortunate to attend an art school that still allowed basic arts training. She took to it eagerly, learning to sketch western sculptures from replicas such as Michelangelo's "David." As she grew into adulthood, she eventually earned bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts from the Xi'an Academy of Fine Arts.

"I love to draw and sketch from real life," Zheng told me. She found work while attending art school; for a time she was a set painter for a Chinese Opera company and an illustrator for a newspaper. She yearned to paint full time on her own projects, though, so she did not take any permanent positions.

During the past couple months, I got to know Willow and became familiar with her artwork. I enlisted her to illustrate *Mei Mei, A Daughter's Song*, the 25-year-old radio documentary about the relationship between my mother and me that I was turning into a film. For several Sundays, Willow created beautiful Chinese brush paintings at my office. As I watched her work, I learned more about her and the process of Chinese watercolors.

Using brushes of various sizes, Willow would effortlessly dip water into the watercolor paints as she mixed colors directly on the rice-paper canvas. At one point she showed me how she "mounted" the thin rice paper onto boards to eliminate the wrinkling effect of her finished paintings. I gasped a little when she brushed more water on the painting, thinking it would smear and destroy the artwork. But to my open-mouthed astonishment, I saw how

well the deceptively thin paper held up as she pulled out the wrinkles and permanently stretched the paper canvas.

Zheng created 11 original paintings in four Sundays as well as writing some calligraphy. She said it was the first time since her husband's death in 2007 that she was able to concentrate on creating art. She told me that her husband, Rosario



"Two Girls at the Lake," by Willow Zheng, watercolor on rice paper. (Photo courtesy of the Mei Mei Project)

Agliandro, was the long-time executive director of the Northwest China Council (NWCC). They were college students when they met in China, fell in love, and married. Rosario brought Willow to the U.S. in 1988. For the most part, she was able to work on her art while he was alive. She also taught Chinese language courses at NWCC. When her husband passed away, nearly 400 people attended a memorial held at the Portland Classical Chinese Garden (now called the Lan Su Chinese Garden).

During the time her husband was alive, Willow painted a great deal and held art shows at venues such as the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center. She became a still artist at the Rental Sales Gallery at the Portland Art Museum, where people have been able to rent her paintings. After her husband's passing, she realized she needed to work more hours to support herself, so being a full-time artist was not realistic. She now teaches Chinese language courses at Portland State University and Washington State University Vancouver as well as the classes at NWCC.

When I asked Willow to paint Chinese watercolors for the more mythological scenes of the Mei Mei Project, she realized she had no place to work so I let her use my office. It has been a source of frustration for her knowing that even when she does have time to work on art, it is not practical to paint because her personal living space is too small. For me, it's been a pleasure to watch her work her magic, blending Chinese classical and modern illustrations.

"I especially like a kind of Chinese painting technique called *gong bi zhongcai*," Zheng said. It loosely translates to "fine line drawing with heavy color." She said she loves the technique and it can

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