

Broken Wings

by Dier Hu

It was during the first painting class in primary school that I first heard (hua shé tian zu) drawing feet for a snake is ridiculous. When I was eight, painting was the most amazing thing that drew me in. I could draw everything in my mind on the white paper and create my own fantasized world. Clouds could be candy-shaped, the sun could be a smiling face, and houses could be made of biscuits. You can't imagine how excited I was before the first painting class.

“Ring...” finally, there went the class bell. I sat on the chair, kept tangling the corner of my shirt with trembling hands, and watched the teacher walk into the classroom with a dozen sheets of white paper in her hand. She was middle-aged and didn't smile a lot. The woman briefly introduced that the theme of today's painting class was “fish.” “Just draw the fish you've seen in your mind. You must have seen one, right?” Then she asked the monitor to give a paper to every student in the classroom.

The moment I got my paper, I didn't immediately take out my crayon, because I was afraid that I would spoil my first work at school if I rushed to finish drawing. Therefore, I sat on my seat, gently stroked the blank piece of paper and started thinking about “fish.” I had seen fish swimming in a pond of a park, fish spitting bubbles in a fishbowl, fish I ate at the dinner table. They were so common, almost like birds flying past me everyday. Wait! Why can't fish fly in the sky? Maybe, thousands of years ago, they used to possess wings like birds, or some fish in the future will actually develop the skill of flying. The fish I've seen might spit bubbles for preparing their future adventure in the upper air. I couldn't stop imagining about desperate fish struggling to jump out of water and achieve a new field, so I decided to draw a pair of wings on the fish's body to help their dreams come true. In order to emphasize the wings, I sketched the

contours of angel wings and filled them with the seven colors of rainbows, the most gorgeous combination of colors I knew then. Given limited time, I could only create one fish. I put it in the golden sky, high above the blue sea. I was so focused that my nails all got dirty with different colors of the crayons, and I didn't notice that the teacher had walked close until—"What are these? 鳍 qí (fins)? Though I hadn't imagined how I would be appreciated for my painting, being asked about the word fins, which I hadn't heard of, I panicked. "Fin...fins? I don't know." I didn't even dare look up into her face. "Then what are these?" I answered hesitantly: "Wings. I drew wings...so fish could fly." Somehow, I felt intimidated and stuttered a lot. The word "fin" spoken out of the teacher's mouth seemingly on such good authority made me hesitant to talk about the "wings" I gave to the fish in my mind.

"Fish? Fly? Drawing feet for a snake is ridiculous 画蛇添足 (hua shé tiān zú)!" At that time, I also had no idea of what 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú) meant, but with the falling intonation, I sensed harsh criticism. Later on, as I grew up, I learned that those words meant that drawing fish wings was as fallacious as drawing feet on a snake. For my primary art teacher, there could only be fins by the side of fish's bodies, just as it's impossible for an artist to create a snake that owns feet.

The metaphor 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú) is so pervasive that almost everyone in China keeps using it to illustrate that there is the way things are and the way things should be. Yet, this metaphor rejects the possibility of ideas outside of the box, as most creative innovation seems abnormal and outrageous at the beginning. Why is the metaphor so popular in Chinese society then if it's killing creative thinking? Do people realize that the four words, 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú), bury countless imaginations and inventions? The answer is that we *are* actually fully aware of the fact that disparaging feet drawn on a snake is an indication of bias against creative

thinking. The truth is that most Chinese people are risk-averse satisfiers who obey the Doctrine of Mean (中庸 Zhōng yōng), a classic ideology of Confucius. The concept of “the Mean” is a core idea of Confucianism. It says that in all activities and thoughts, one has to adhere to moderation, which will result in harmony in action, and eventually in a harmonious society. The guiding principle is that one should never act in excess. Yet, unlike thousands of years ago, when the Doctrine of Mean helped the imperial state reinforce peace in society by restricting people’s behaviors, today the ideology of “the Mean” functions more as a major contributing factor of the abject ethnic stereotype in modern China; it prevented reform or creative ideas from happening. We prize superficial harmony instead of open-mindedness and inspiring arguments; we value avoidance of disputes more than controversial and novel invention. Accordingly, the reconcilable and the compromised are more recognized. Creative thinking? No! If people insist upon their own ideas or keep making up distinct and pioneering perceptions of different things, contentions and heated discussion will end peace and consistency. Without an authority’s radical proposal pushing them, Chinese won’t pursue even the mildest reform. Thus, sacrificing unfamiliar imagination and innovative voices, Chinese people achieve silent and pacific society with lowest possibility of conflicts. The art teacher insisted that I paint a representational image of a fish because, for her, drawing a fish with wings is bizarre and excessive. She’s satisfied with her perception of the way fish should be according to the conformist majority of society and, moreover, imposes her perception on her students. Apparently, she tends to discriminate against creative students and favors the conformist classmates who more readily follow directions and do what they’re told. Reflecting the whole society, Chinese people, especially adults, prefer to stick to the Doctrine of the Mean and find the easy way out—either by not engaging in very careful thinking or by modeling the choices on the preferences of those who will be evaluating

them. It's ironic that even though children are taught the accomplishments of the world's most innovative minds such as the story of Copernicus and his "geocentric" view, implying the significance of creative ideas since childhood, their own creativity is being squelched. As an eight-year-old girl, I was unconsciously shackled spiritually by the metaphor and did not realize until years later, when I became the person who dispensed the adage myself, how ridiculous and reckless it was to simply judge someone's idea as 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú).

On one of the hottest afternoons in that summer, I had just finished shopping in the grocery store with my nine-year-old nephew, who was at the best age of curiosity about everything and always kept asking weird and endless questions of me. On the way, as we walked from the grocery store to the bus stop, my nephew started to complain about how heavy the bags were: "I hate these bags as heavy as elephants. They make my hands bloody red and tortured. I can only switch these lead sinkers from one hand to the other, back and forth to bear the weight."

"Hey boy! You are not the only one who's suffering from this. I'm carrying things ten times heavy as yours." I couldn't bear his grumbling and interrupted him.

"Why don't people make an invention to avoid such suffering..." he began. Oh no, oh no, I was about to hear the endless Q & A again. I rolled my eyeballs and answered, "because there is no need."

"How do you know there is no need? It could just be a small invention like a glove or something you wear on your hand." Apparently, my answer was quite dissatisfying for the inquisitive boy.

"Because every invention requires investment. No one would like to invest money in such a trivial device."

“How do you know it’s trivial? I can make the invention! I will design it as soft, portable, and ...” The sun was scorching me, and the mosquitoes kept attacking my leg, and the bags in my arms seemed heavier and heavier. Not only was the sweat vaporing on my skin under the high temperature, so was my patience. “Enough!” I shouted at the boy and said, “your whole idea is simply 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú)!”

The boy who was just making ambitious plans of developing a shopping bag holder was clearly frightened by my anger. His big eyes previously filled with hope and colorful dreams suddenly went dim. Looking at him down in the dumps, I was suddenly reminded of the rainbow color wings I once painted on a fish. When I was his age, I had dreams of helping fish fly using crayons and was forced to accept the truth that fish couldn’t have wings and my paintings had to reflect the world around me not the inventions in my mind. Somehow, sadness filled my heart, and I started to feel ashamed of depriving the boy’s right to creativity as my art teacher had once deprived me.

Did I really dislike the boy’s novelty? No, to be honest, I always knew that most of his ideas were fantasies. Nevertheless, I resented unknown and unfamiliar things since I’ve been used to jumping on the bandwagon and relying on established, empirical solutions. Deep in my heart, I was actually jealous of the innocent boy who hadn’t lost imagination and courage to enjoy creativity, which made me more depressed. Each time when he kept talking about his new proposals, I couldn’t help feeling inferior to a child who is nine years younger than me. On the other hand, my self-esteem pushed me to do something to remain in authority; thus, I dealt with the situation in a crude way and broke off the boy’s ‘wings’ by declaring 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú) as the primary art teacher had once done to me. This leads me to think about my experience in my first painting class. The teacher might be threatened by her student’s daring new

perspectives like many other adults who confront intimidation when a lively young mind proposes fresh plans that they have never thought of. More than risk of losing harmony and conformity in society, what frightens adults more is losing authority when new inspirations come to birth, because deep inside, they are jealous and know the power of the ‘wings.’ In a world that only allows fish with fins and snakes without feet, the adults manage to retain their superiority.

The metaphor 画蛇添足(hua shé tiān zú) reveals the fact that as much as we celebrate creativity and innovation, there is a surprising amount of pressure to conform. Conformists avoid stirring things up, even if it means forsaking the truth or rejecting a good idea because of the Doctrine of Mean. In order to reduce the risk of losing authority or prevent possible social unrest, people choose to obey experts or authorities who identify the most conventional idea, which is closest to what they already know, thus denying more inspirations. Pathetically, the place where our first creative ideas go to die is the place that should be most open to them—school.