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## Fresh strokes

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# FRESH STROKES



A HKDI project to breathe new life into the work of two famous Chinese artists has sparked fresh interest in traditional cartoons and painting techniques, while providing an international showcase for the ground breaking work of local design students. **SUMMER CAO** reports.

TWO BOYS AT FENG ZIKAI EXHIBITION AT HKMA

HKMA



LEFT FENG ZIKAI; RIGHT IMAGES CAPTURED FROM *CHILDLIKE HEART* AND *FAMILY*. VIDEO CLIPS CREATED BY HKDI STUDENTS BASED ON FENG ZIKAI'S WORK

In order to preserve the flavour of Feng's work and pass on his humanistic teachings to a new generation, the Hong Kong Museum of Art presented two thematic exhibitions this summer, titled *Creating a World of Compassion* and *Cultivating Life and Soul*, curated with assistance from Zhejiang Provincial Museum.

"Feng's work has long been sidelined because the fine art world thinks his subject matter is too trivial, while the cartoon world believes his calligraphy is too eccentric," says Szeto Yuenkit, curator of the Hong Kong Museum of Art. "However, I believe that as long as work touches the emotions, it is art. And Feng's cartoons are definitely capable of arousing strong feelings. Through this exhibition, I hope we can promote new thinking about Feng and a more flexible approach to setting the boundaries of art."

One of the highlights in the Feng exhibition is an e-book of Feng Zikai's cartoons combined with two animated clips called *Childlike Heart* and *Family*, which were created by the Communication Design and Digital Media Department of HKDI.

The themes for the short animations were chosen from creative ideas suggested by students. *Family* depicts the family life of the past as affectionately painted by Feng, while *Childlike Heart* is a reflection on the lives of contemporary children and tells the story of how a boy obsessed with online games learned to enjoy the companionship of his family through playing the traditional games found in Feng's work.

Feng's thoughts on the role of art and the artist suggest he would have been happy with then HKDI's recreation of his work. Scholars of Feng's writings say the artist spent his entire life trying to become a better human being, a course that he might have been inspired to take by his mentor Hong Yi (his life-long teacher and friend) of whom he once said "I admire him greatly because he is very close to being a true human."

Born as the 19th century came to a close, Feng hailed from Zhejiang's Shimen Town. His birthplace has the typical scenery of Southern China, with gurgling streams and picturesque crop fields. It is the water and rice from this tranquil and idyllic place that first nurtured Feng's heart, and lent his work a simple and graceful character, like the flowers, trees, low-roofed houses and honest villagers in his hometown.

At 16, Feng was admitted to the Zhejiang No.1 Normal School

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and met Li Shutong who taught him art, and humanistic values such as kindness and humility. Li was one of the most accomplished scholars of his time, and he later became an influential Buddhist with the name Hong Yi.

Feng himself admitted in his book *Telling Hong Yi's Stories to the Youth* (為青年說弘一法師) that "I would not have taken the path of painting without him." And Hong Yi is also credited with inspiring Feng's compassionate approach to art. Feng's six-album cartoon series, *Paintings to Protect Life*, which was created over five decades, was the result of a promise Feng made to Hong Yi.

The project began when Feng celebrated Hong Yi's 50th birthday by painting 50 pieces dedicating to the idea that life is sacred and should be respected.

This became the first album of the *Paintings to Protect Life* series. At Hong Yi's 60th birthday, Feng painted 60 pieces. Hong Yi then proposed that Feng should create an album every ten years – at his 70th birthday, Feng should paint 70 pieces; at the 80th birthday, 80; at the 90th birthday, 90; in the end, at the 100th birthday, a final 100 pieces.

Every piece in *Paintings to Protect Life* is intended to arouse a respect for the sanctity of all living things. Feng believed that by protecting each



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single life, one was protecting or cultivating the dignity of humanity as a whole. Even after Hong Yi's death, and in the hard years of the Cultural Revolution when the intelligentsia was suppressed, Feng persisted with his humanistic project. A short time before Feng's death in 1975, the 450 pieces required for the six albums was finally accomplished.

Feng also adored children, regarding childhood as a halcyon period in the life of a human being, one that he would like to return to, although he regretted that by the time a person realise the precious nature of their childhood it is too late.

In his short essay *To My Children* (給我的孩子們), Feng wrote of his sadness that childhood could not be preserved forever: "I long to stay in your world. But when you are able to understand what I have written... you will no longer be in the world where I long to be."

Feng believed that children were masterpieces and by recording their behaviour, the best part of human nature could be shown.

The two HKDI animations at the HKMA were inspired by Feng's views of childhood and his humanistic belief that "With life comes compassion; and with compassion, art". As such the animations explored the social problems that families have in the high-tech era, and emphasised the importance of quality family time, all while capturing Feng's philosophy of respect for human life and his simple drawing style.

"The students had to employ the imaginative capacity of an artist to create colours that matched the calligraphy painting strokes of Feng's work as well as adding appropriate elements to avoid anachronisms," says Ken Wong, the supervisor who led the HKDI animation team and coordinated their collaboration with the digital music and printing & publishing teams. "I am very happy with the outcome. In order to make every movement more vivid, they used one month to look for children to cast for the animation, and then spent three to four months to hand draw each frame."

Wong continues, "When the project started, a lot

BELOW TANG HOICHIU, CHIEF CURATOR OF HKMA, IS SHOWN THE E-BOOK OF FENG ZIKAI'S CARTOONS CREATED BY HKDI STUDENTS AT THE EXHIBITION; RIGHT WORK FOR FUN BY FENG ZIKAI



of students found the calligraphy painting style quite boring. But during the months of research and production, students have learned to appreciate the loving and caring spirit hidden in every detail. They came to realise that cartoons are not just for entertainment, but are able to reflect social issues."

To adequately convey the messages within the animations, music and sounds were combined with the new images. Racky Chan, the supervisor of the digital music team says, "Students had to learn the music of that era and how it relates to the vitality of Feng's cartoons. From birdsong, to the sound of dressing, and pouring tea, all the details should combine to assist viewers to understanding the emotions that are at the heart of the animations."

Although this was the first time that different departments from HKDI had collaborated so closely for a big art project the outcome has been hailed as a success by the HKMA.

"I have been very impressed by HKDI students," says Szeto. "For example, the students did extensive research on teapots and found designs that were used in Shanghai in the 20s. Based on several options, they chose the most likely one. Nowadays when commercials and movies make so many anachronistic mistakes, this kind of quality is invaluable."

Jessica Ho, supervisor of the printing & publishing team says, "It was a big confidence boost for an established museum to be willing to exhibit the students' work."

Ho says the project also has a life beyond the exhibition "The e-book of Feng's cartoons is now available at the Apple apps store. The public can download and read it for free. And we have now been commissioned by the Hong Kong Museum of Art to create an e-book and animation clips based on the Xubaizhai (虛白齋) collection."



《I LONG TO STAY IN YOUR WORLD. BUT WHEN YOU ARE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND WHAT I HAVE WRITTEN... YOU WILL NO LONGER BE IN THE WORLD WHERE I LONG TO BE.》



LEFT PANORAMIC VIEW CAPTURED FROM THE ANIMATION OF XU BEIHONG'S HORSES; BELOW STUDENTS IN THE HKDI DIGITAL DESIGN STUDIO ANIMATING XU BEIHONG'S WORK

"Both of these animation projects strove to use new media to bring out a fresh message and feeling regarding Feng Zikai and Xu Beihong," says Ben Mau, Head of the Communication Design and Digital Media Department. "I am very happy to see these two pioneers from Chinese culture find a new audience among young designers. We need to build on this experience, especially on cross-programme cooperation, and hopefully work with more museums and NGOs in the coming year."

Accolades for HKDI's Communication Design and Digital Media Department have also come from The Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (HKFYG), which has asked HKDI students to animate Xu Beihong's (徐悲鴻) horses for its 2012 China Week exhibition *The Heritage of Chinese Ink*. The work is two metres high, eight metres long and includes nine horses as well as magpies, pines and mountains. The project has given HKDI students a further opportunity to revive interest in an important Chinese artist.

"We want to draw the attention of the younger generation," says Choi Yusing from the HKFYG. "By exhibiting the digital version of the horses with Xu's original works, visitors can make comparisons that will allow them to see the original work more clearly."

Xu Beihong's pictures are characterised by bold and confident brush strokes and the artist, who died in 1953, became a household name by combining Western perspectives and methods of composition into Chinese ink-and-wash painting, after he studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris. Emphasising the importance of natural authentic, he included cats, cranes, dogs, eagles, people, lions, magpies, pine trees, roosters and horses into his paintings, all portrayed in natural settings and without excessive adornment.

For example, unlike his predecessors who were

keen to depict horses with jewelled saddles and excessive refinement of form, Xu's horses are drawn from nature and are bold, uninhibited and beautiful. The nostrils are bigger, revealing excellent breathing capacity; the legs are longer, showing them to be capable of great speed; the mane and tail suggest strong will and vitality. Filled with a patriotic romanticism, the horses represent the intrepid spirit of the Chinese people. As the mid-century war against the Japanese escalated, the horses galloping from his brush became ever more muscular and lean, as if eager to go to the battlefield.

In order to capture the horses' spirit as well as the master's painting style for the collage, HKDI students were divided into three groups – one was assigned to observe real horses and study their movements; one to research the context and background of Xu's paintings; one to research Chinese paintings.

"The project began in March, and finished in late June," says Eric Lee, the project supervisor. "In 4 months, the number of participants shrank from 60 to 30, and the students who endured were those with a real interest. I am very happy to see the final product, especially given those 30 students were all beginners, and capturing the dynamics of Xu's paintings, as well as recreating the hidden elements which cannot be seen in the original works has been a real challenge. Through this project, they also had to meet the client and experience a project in the real world, which is an invaluable experience."

The Feng and Xu collaborations have done much to bring a new generation to the work of these great Chinese painters, as well as creating an appetite at HKDI for additional projects of the same type.

## 《THE FENG AND XU COLLABORATIONS HAVE DONE MUCH TO BRING A NEW GENERATION TO THE WORK OF THESE GREAT CHINESE PAINTERS》



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