In describing his painting Paradise (featured on the cover), Chong says that he is borrowing from the Chinese Han style of human figure stone relief which uses simple and vigorous lines to express male power. “My painting aims to portray an indispensable part of American life, namely the sport of basketball. From the imagery in the painting, I hope people will see the dynamic mix, the rhythm, and the quick pace of life in our modern society.”

Art Professor Fuses Chinese and Western Artistic Traditions

For Cong Zhiyuan, Assistant Professor of Chinese Painting at China’s Nanjing College of Arts, undertaking an Master of Fine Arts in printmaking at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University has provided a singular opportunity to create a very personal vision which fuses Chinese and Western approaches to visual art.

Cong came to Bloomington in 1989 to enhance his knowledge and artistic skills in Chinese visual arts through the study of Western art techniques, particularly those of printmaking—silk screen, lithography, and etching. The university’s willingness to admit especially promising foreign scholars who initially lack fluency in English was crucial in enabling Cong to study in the United States. His first year at IU, which involved the intensive study of English, was made possible through support from his mentors, Ya Ming and Chen Dayu, two of China’s most highly respected artists. Since then, Cong has received additional support through two fellowship programs administered by IU’s International Programs office—the Starr Fellowship (for students from the People’s Republic of China) in 1990, and the Irving and Lena Lo Fellowship for four years (1990-93). Cong supplements his income by teaching and demonstrating Chinese arts, as well as by the exhibition and sale of his original paintings and prints.

Cong Zhiyuan is a mature artist, fluent in a broad range of Chinese arts, especially painting, ink painting, calligraphy, and seal carving. He attributes the quality of his work to his teachers, among them the renowned painter Liu Heisu, who first introduced contemporary Chinese art to the West in a 1975 European exhibition. Cong completed an MFA in Chinese Painting at Nanjing College in 1986, where he pursued a broad course of study encompassing traditional as well as contemporary styles of Chinese painting. He taught at Nanjing for over nine years, specializing in the instruction of figure painting, landscape, and bird-and-flower painting. Because landscape painting required numerous field-site trips, Cong had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout China and broaden his awareness of his country’s diverse artistic heritage and regional arts.

Cong’s desire to expand his knowledge of art led him to Indiana University, where he is developing an understanding of Western art and a mastery of certain Western techniques which enable him to create his innovative vision combining both traditions. As a contemporary artist committed to building “a new Chinese art,” Cong infuses his work with the energy of images drawn from modern Western life, as well as the feelings and self-expression considered central to Western art.

Through his MFA studies in printmaking, Cong has developed expertise in silk screen, lithography, and etching, using these Western techniques as a new means of expressing the themes and imagery of Chinese art and philosophy.

While studying at IU, Cong gives private lessons in Chinese art and teaches classes offered through IU’s Division of Continuing Studies, the Campus Community Arts Center, and Collins Living Learning Center. He has conducted demonstrations of Chinese art throughout the state, and last summer was selected as the featured artist at the Chicago Art Institute’s opening of their Asian Art Gallery. His paintings and prints have been featured in exhibitions throughout Indiana, with an exhibition of traditional Chinese mural painting at the Indianapolis Museum of Art last year. In 1992, Cong was selected as the first artist to appear in the personal exhibition gallery of Bloomington’s Waldron Arts Center. In the 1993 American States Arts Competition in Indianapolis, Cong was awarded first place for Paradise, a stylized Chinese-color painting depicting the all-American ritual of basketball (featured on the cover of this month’s Newsletter).

In addition to his studies and other activities at IU, Cong has also initiated, under the sponsorship of the Indianapolis Museum of Art, a proposal to develop a major museum collection focusing on the distinctive arts of China’s remote northwestern Qinghai Province. During his travels throughout China, Cong had observed that the unique and diverse artistic traditions of this province had not received the study and recognition they truly deserve, traditions which he characterizes as “a rich mosaic” of ethnic and religious art traditions rooted in Tibetan, Taoist, Buddhist, and Islamic religions. Qinghai Province is already known for its archaeological sites containing outstanding examples of Neolithic pottery.

Begun in 1990, the project team initially consisted of Cong, James Robinson, East Asian Art Curator of the IMA, and IU-B Emeritus Professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures Irving Lo. In the second year Sue Tuohy, assistant director of IU-B’s East Asian Studies Center, joined the team and was instrumental in the expansion and development of the NEH proposal. The project team now includes IU-B Tibetan scholar Elliot Sperling and two professors from Ohio State University. This year, the National Endowment of the Humanities awarded a planning grant to the Indianapolis Museum of Art to fund a 40-day collection and research trip to Qinghai Province by the project team in Summer, 1994. If the project receives full funding, the exhibit will be scheduled to open in Indianapolis in 1997, and to travel during the next two years to Washington D.C, Seattle, Germany, Hong Kong, and on to the Peoples’ Republic of China. Classes to be offered in conjunction with the exhibition are being planned for the IU-Bloomington and Ohio State campuses.

As an student, artist, and art educator, Cong Zhiyuan is committed to combining the knowledge and practice of art. In speaking of what is required to be a good artist, Cong feels that there are three great teachers: “tradition,” or the knowledge of the history, philosophy, and techniques of art—Chinese as well as Western; “the natural,” which draws upon all of life as the source of inspiration which energizes art; and “self-expression,” or artists’ expression of their feelings and ideas through the personal styles of their art.

The fruitfulness of Cong Zhiyuan endeavors while at IU—both the Indianapolis Museum of Art-sponsored research and collection project involving a team of scholars from Indiana University and Ohio State University, as well as his own innovative blend of Chinese and Western art traditions and techniques that Cong has developed in the course of his studies here—provide a outstanding example of the true benefits which result from Indiana University’s enduring commitment to international scholars.