



Just Shao tattooing a female customer with a 3D biomechanical tattoo

Journey To the East

Mark Andrews speaks to a Shanghai based tattoo master who is attracting a steady stream of foreigners wanting to study from him. This is a wonderful story...

“Just Shao is a tattoo monk” says Daniel Whitford with a smile. Dan is the latest foreigner (student) to make the pilgrimage to an unassuming tattoo shop on Shanghai’s Xiangyang South Road to learn from this master. Just is perhaps the only tattooist in China to employ a 3D effect biomechanical style.

Were Just Shao, or Shao Gang as he is known in Chinese, to don robes he might well be mistaken for a monk but his Zen calling while spiritual is very much rooted in art. It has been a long journey for the 39 year old originally from Wuhan, a city of more than 10 million in the centre of China.

In his early career he was a punk musician and while at the time tattoos weren’t common in China they were popular amongst this group, who were far more open to western ideas. Since a child he has loved drawing and he found art his true calling. Just was one of the first group of people in modern China to learn to be a tattooist. At the beginning he learnt the basic knowledge from an American for a week but after that he studied by himself.

Just didn’t have the luxury of learning under a skilled master. With little information



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available in China he looked overseas for inspiration from the Internet and magazines. “Honestly speaking when I started there were not many people in China tattooing and so it was impossible for a Chinese tattooist to influence me” explains Just. He soon, though, found his attention drawn to the works of renowned American tattooist Guy Aitchison. “It was his style and serious attitude towards tattooing. For me I felt I also wanted like



Just Shao and Guy Aitchison collaboration

him to take tattoos as firstly art and not just as work or a tool for earning money.” Today, 17 years later, Just’s story has come full circle. He is now the master with foreign students and is recognised by Guy for his prowess.

Over time Just has developed a philosophy towards tattooing that wouldn’t seem out of place in an Eastern religion’s search for enlightenment. As he explains to me there are five levels to being a tattooist. In his early career he never refused a customer as he needed to accumulate experience and was just happy the client was willing to let him work. At the second stage he wanted to design part of the tattoo so that the customer could have a unique piece. Following on from that he increased his artistic input to just asking the customer the theme or subject before creating it based on those requirements and with consultation. In the forth stage the artist develops everything himself without consultation based on a theme set by the customer. Complete mastery is where the customer provides the canvas and the tattooist does as he sees fit. “This is the highest peak of the mountain. It is the most difficult as you need to gain the customer’s total trust and is also only possible when you have sufficient knowledge of art” explains Just who is currently trying to accomplish this.

For Just, tattooing is a serious business. “It is not a fashion trend. You can’t have a tattoo



Just Shao selecting the inks to use for his tattooing session

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when you’re young and erase it when you’re older. It is a serious thing and no matter what angle you look at art, it’s serious” he explains. Over time his attitude has matured along with his understanding of the meaning behind the art form.

“Tattooing is more meaningful when things are combined because you can keep them on the human body as a form of art. I think when you express a theme that has a spiritual connotation it is the best combination. When I was young I didn’t have these kinds of ideas but as I get older they are getting deeper and



deeper” says Just. His work now involves trying to express the beauty of human nature.

Today he is working on such a piece, it has a dream like quality with a Sci-Fiesque exploration of the human form. He tells me that it is all his idea based on research online; he wanted the long sleeve design to be mysterious and have a spooky quality about it from using abstract ideas and philosophy.

Instagram could almost have been developed with tattooists in mind and the very visual nature of the work lends itself to the platform. Just was a follower of Guy Aitchison on Instagram and over the years put comments and likes on Guy’s work. Then in

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2015 Guy returned the compliment with the comment “Your work is amazing.” Just was elated because for such a long time he had followed Guy from afar and he had been such a big influence from the start. He responded by asking Guy if they could meet. Guy though wanted more; he suggested they cooperate on a piece.

Even before Just set foot in the US, the pair had been working for weeks sending a design back and forth with the initial draft com-



Just Shao's latest class of students practising tattooing onto silicon



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ing from Just. On meeting there was little bullshit with them both quickly getting down to work. They spent a day and a half making big changes to the design. After completing the design phase, it took another two days to apply it to the customer's body. They inked the near full sleeve biomechanical piece on Just's friend.



Decorations and ornaments in the Zhen Cang tattoo shop in Shanghai

"He has extraordinary talent, after working with him I think his ideas are number one. Honestly I learnt a lot from him but most importantly his spirit or mentality. The kind of power he has is very different, not everyone can have it. I'm afraid I can't be like that, but I'll try my best" Just says with humility about Guy.

Changing the subject, I ask Just about his English name, he laughs telling me it is a funny thing and not really even a story. Back in 2004 he was working in a tattoo shop in Hong Kong. The two Americans who worked there couldn't ever remember his name and so started calling him 'Just King.' It struck him as strange, it had no real meaning and he had no idea why they called him that. After the Americans left he changed it to Just. "However Just is not a name but I learnt it means justice, so for me it turned into my logo or symbol" he explains. Today he puts it down to a suitable coincidence.

Whilst Just never had much opportunity to formally learn tattooing he now sees a steady



Photo by Zhen Cang

stream of students come to learn from him. It all began with an American, Oliver Wong. Oliver describes it as *yuan fen*, the Chinese concept of fate. Expressing an interest in tattooing, a friend introduced him to Just. However at the time Just had no interest in taking students and said he was too busy.

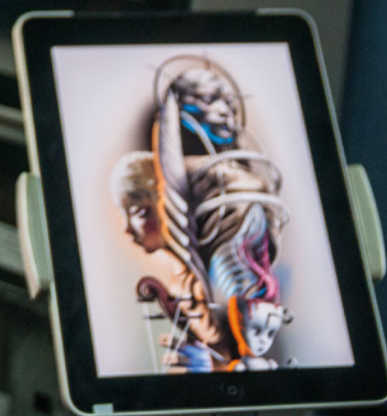
Oliver had just finished an MBA in Shanghai and had in the US worked at Morgan Stanley as a financial advisor. The 2008 financial crisis and the pollution he saw in China left him disillusioned with this path. "I had developed a distaste for a future as another cog in the multinational corporate machine" he says speaking from San Francisco.

Intrigued by Oliver's willingness to give up his previous life for tattooing, along with his persistence in showing his artwork, Just relented. The encounter ended up not just being life changing for Oliver, who now works as a tattooist back in the US, but also for Just. Zhen Cang, Just Shao's main studio, now offers courses once or twice a year to students wanting to learn the art.

Leo Zhen felt coming to learn under Just in Shanghai was his best option when changing careers from sushi chef to tattooist, despite having emigrated to Canada. "I couldn't find any style I liked in Canada and I couldn't find a class that was really well organised" he says. Leo became interested in tattoos back in 2010 and having majored in graphic design designed his first three tattoos by himself. The tattooist of the first two recommended Just when Leo was searching to study. "Many



Fifth and final session for the tattoo. Customer poses showing progress so far against original artwork on iPad



WHEN YOU EXPRESS HUMAN NATURE THROUGH ART YOU CAN COMMUNE WITH PEOPLE EASILY BUT I'M NOT TRYING TO TOUCH PEOPLE ALL THE TIME, FOREMOST I NEED TO BRING MEANING FOR MYSELF



artists only focus on one style they like and maybe never try to do other styles but Just Shao is not the same. He does all the styles, all the kinds of tattoo and he is trying to discover a new style himself” Leo continues.

Dan Whitford is the fifth foreign student to study under Just and unlike the ones before spoke no Chinese when he arrived. “I was attracted by the photorealism, the high level of execution, there’s no sloppy line work. It’s the depth he shows on a person, if he makes a Koi tattoo you see it and want to throw breadcrumbs at the fish,” Dan alludes going on to describe Just as the most successful artist he knows.

There is little difference between teaching Chinese and foreigners believes Just as it is about learning a skill. Despite not being able to speak much English there have been few problems with teaching Dan and where needed he has used Leo to interpret.



With his students Just hopes to instil in them a perfection in technique, the art however is up to them to discover and evolve. Leo is interested in the Japanese traditional style and is influenced by that. Dan on the other hand sees his style in a more psychedelic multi-perspective Daliesque way. Oliver, who started it all, has returned to the west yet has created a style heavily influenced by East Asian art.

“When you express human nature through art you can commune with people easily but I’m not trying to touch people all the time, foremost I need to bring meaning for myself” says Just. Art as he sees it is a way of expressing things like the spiritual state, affection and humanity and because tattoos are unerasable these thing when combined have a spiritual connotation that is more powerful. ▣