

## CHINESE OIL PAINTING OF THE PERIOD OF CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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**Sun Ke. Chinese Oil Painting of the Period of Cultural Revolution.** The process of Chinese oil painting formation within the period of 1949–1979 is investigated in the article. Transformations in Chinese art, which was strongly dependent on the political will of the ruling elite during the specified period is considered as well. Preconditions and driving forces of the processes that took place in Chinese society and art in particular are considered. The personal influence of political leaders and their environment on the processes of formation and development of stylistic features of Chinese painting is analyzed. The article is focused on figurative and ideological matters and meanings of paintings and their adherence to certain identical topics. It is shown, that the latter fact has also influenced the style and techniques of Chinese oil painting. The relationship between stylistics and ideology in painting works of the studied period is revealed on the example of the analysis of certain typical scenes. **Keywords:** China, oil painting, Cultural Revolution, peculiarities of paintings, styles.

**Сунь Ке. Китайський олійний живопис часів культурної революції.** Досліджено процеси становлення китайського олійного живопису періоду 1949–1979 років. Розглянуто трансформації у мистецтві Китаю, яке в означеному часовому проміжку було залежним від політичної волі керівної верхівки. Розглянуто передумови та рушійні сили процесів, що відбувалися в китайському суспільстві та мистецтві зокрема. Проаналізовано особистий вплив політичних лідерів та їхнього оточення на процеси становлення й розвитку стильових особливостей китайського живопису. Зосереджено увагу на образному та ідейному наповненні живописних робіт, їхньому зосередженні на одних темах, що вплинуло також і на стильові характеристики й художні техніки олійного живопису. На прикладі аналізу деяких, типових для досліджуваного періоду сюжетів показаний взаємозв'язок між стилістикою та ідеологією творів.

**Ключові слова:** Китай, олійний живопис, культурна революція, художні особливості, стилі.

**Сунь Ке. Китайская масляная живопись времен культурной революции.** Исследованы процессы становления китайской масляной живописи периода 1949–1979 годов. Рассмотрены трансформации в искусстве Китая, которое в указанный временной промежуток было зависимым от политической воли правящей верхушки. Рассмотрены предпосылки и движущие силы процессов, происходивших в китайском обществе и в искусстве в частности. Проанализировано личное влияние политических лидеров и их окружения на процессы становления и развития стилевых особенностей китайской живописи. Акцентировано внимание на образном и идейном наполнении живописных работ и их сосредоточении на одних темах, что повлияло также и на стилиевые характеристики и художественные техники масляной живописи. На примере анализа некоторых, типичных для исследуемого периода сюжетов показана взаимосвязь между стилистикой и идеологией произведений.

**Ключевые слова:** Китай, масляная живопись, культурная революция, художественные особенности, стили.

**Formulation of the objective.** In 1949–1979 Chinese art lost its primary importance and became the main instrument of political propaganda. Socialist realism, which was then the main artistic trend, has absorbed all the acute pain and suffering of the era – the factors influencing creative self-expression. The composition and choice of color were strictly controlled and regulated in oil paintings of that period, especially in 1966–1976, which was the result

of the “Cultural Revolution” in art. Before 1979, the main topic of oil paintings, as a rule, was heroism. Although realism has been postulated, but in reality, an exaggeration that ran up to such a large scale due to the fact that it was entirely due to political propaganda, has prevailed in art.

In the study of Chinese neoclassicism and modern art it is necessary to consider, first of all, the problems of the principles of realism from the time of the Cultural Revolution to the period of the openness reforms in 1979, since this period has had a significant impact on the development of realism in Chinese painting at the end of the XX – XXI century.

#### Analysis of recent research and publications.

Issues considered in this article were also studied by the following authors: C. Dezhen, R. K. Kraus, D. Leese, M. Neglinska, S. Prosekov, O. Rogotchenko and others. However, it should be accented that after analysis of their research, we found the blank gaps in determination of the relationship between modern processes in the art of China and the processes in earlier periods of its formation.

**Main study.** Nowadays China is actively involved in the international art space. Oil painting clearly reflects and reveals modern processes in Chinese art as a whole, since it has emerged relatively recently and can be regarded as a new kind of art. Transformations, which take place in modern Chinese art and in particular in the oil painting, have deep roots, so it is necessary to study the previous periods of their emergence for better comprehension.

In 1966 a sociopolitical movement of “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” was started in China. This movement has put China’s economy at the brink of collapse, while total state control in the field of art largely deprived painting art of freedom. Within the period of the “Cultural Revolution,” for ten years, the tendency of praise and exaltation of Mao Zedong, the founder of communist China, and his works which were studied and applied universally in China, prevailed in works of art. During that period, the works of Mao Zedong became widely available, they role was a kind of religious, and their author became for Chinese people not so much the most powerful person as a magnificent and sacred phenomenon. All the works of that period embodied the cult of personality of Mao, which sometimes reached the extremes, which at that time actually were the factor of creation of a new culture.

Based on the analysis of previously secret archival documents, unknown objects and political pamphlets, Daniel Leese in his study of the personality cult of Mao Zedong revealed the need to trace the turbulent history of the cult in the Communist Party

at its lowest levels. He noted: “The original intention of the party leadership was the development of an outstanding symbol, a brand that would compete with the rise of nationalists, Chiang Kai-shek. However, nobody expected Mao to use this symbolic force to mobilize Chinese youth for uprising against the party’s bureaucracy itself. The result was anarchy, and when the army came, in the restoration of the order it relied on obligatory ritual worship, such as the daily reading of the ‘Little Red Book’ or performance of the ‘Dance of Loyalty’” [4, p. 245]. Those extremely important details of historical events of that time cover not only the cult of Mao’s personality, but also the cult of worship of a hero in art. Of course, a painting of a certain artist becomes much more comprehensive if you know that this artist was every day reading quotations of Mao with expressions such as “art for the art, a non-class art which evolves away from politics or independently of it, does not really exist,” “every class in any modern society always places the political criterion in the first place, and the artistic in the second” etc. [5].

The collective creation of a series of works, “Leader Mao, Portrait Painting, 12 Paintings” (Fig. 1) by students and teachers of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, is a striking example of the processes that took place during this period in the art of China. The “Cultural Revolution” in art as a social and cultural phenomenon had been developed under the influence of special historical conditions and ended by the end of 1976. Its influence on Chinese art in the late 1970’s has exhausted and extinguished, but its effects on culture and art can still be traced to the present, especially in contemporary Chinese painting.

The main goal of the “Cultural Revolution”, as well as many other revolutions, was embodiment of the banal slogan “to destroy the old, to create a new”. Considering the influence of the “Cultural Revolution” on art, first of all we should understand that the induced by it transformation in painting was artificial by nature. According to Richard Curt Kraus: “The Cultural Revolution sought to eliminate feudal and bourgeois artistic influences and destroy the ‘four elders’ – customs, cultures, habits and ideas. The Red Guard cleansed China from counter-revolutionary culture – from national treasures to hairstyles. However, Mao wanted a more serious change in course, wherein he secured his wife Jiang Qing’s aid and participation” [3, p. 120]. The political leader’s wife was even more vigorous about culture and art than Mao himself, she even tried to prove the need to create a new art style, which would have more rigid limits than socialist realism itself. However, socialist realism led the art processes in China until the beginning of the reforms. Aesthetics of the revolution has been exaggerating utilitarianism over any other creative principles, and the art of the Cultural Revolution favored activities of amateur artists, rather than creativity of professional artistic elites. Spontaneity in art, as the basis of any creativity, was not only condemned, but often persecuted, making art a hazardous profession.

At a rally dedicated to the Cultural Revolution, Lin Biao, a military commander, who was considered

Mao’s right hand, urged the Red Guards to “annihilate all existing old ideas, old culture, old customs and old practices.” He also appealed people to support the Red Guards in “their proletarian rebellious spirit, in their courage to storm, courage to dethrone and courage to do” [6, p. 25]. Consequently, one can state that the main driving forces of the Cultural Revolution made use of simplicity, ignorance, curiosity and impulsivity of young people to whom this appeal was directed to achieve the goal. Due to that, on August 19, 1969, an unprecedented movement “Destroy the Four Elders,” which quickly spread throughout the country, broke out in Beijing.

The “Cultural Revolution” in China is a unique phenomenon, which also had its own peculiarities in the field of art. The most important of them – in all the works Mao was supposed to be higher than the rest of people around him, that was the only way to emphasize the greatness of the Great Leader. For example, this can be clearly seen in Chang Jing’s “The Leader Mao at a large Production site” and Chen Ennin’s “The Leader Mao Visited some Townships in Guangdong” (1972), (Fig. 2). In addition to Mao himself, in other paintings devoted to other subjects, other characters were also shown as heroes, as in Pan Jiazung’s, “I am a Petrel” of 1971 (Fig. 3) which depicts a woman soldier who has grabbed the telegraph pole in a strong shower rain. She is a soldier of the liberation army, who was commanded to repair the communication lines. She embodies the courage of the struggle, symbolically associated with the bird mentioned in the picture name. The strained environment created by nasty weather, and calm, brave people, with an optimistic gaze and gesture, show the spectator a sharp contrast between external forces and the heroism of struggle. But there involuntarily raises the question: is it even possible in real life, how in such an environment can people look so calm and feel no physical danger? The answer is the fact that heroism in such works is deliberately extremely exaggerated, on the contrary, the reality, the realistic depiction of the situation is not taken into account.

Another distinctive feature of the art in the period of the Cultural Revolution was the denial of possibility to depict a naked nature as one of the genres of painting.

In May 1964, in a report by Mao Zedong called “On the issue of the Use of Nude Nature”, Kang Sheng, one of the leaders of the Communist Party of China, the head of the State Security Agency, who was also one of the organizers of the Cultural Revolution, sharply criticized the methods of Chinese artists who were studying graphical drawing by means of depiction of nude female models. In his opinion, the use of nude models did not correspond to the tradition of Chinese culture, since throughout the previous historical period the great Chinese masters had not been depicting a naked female body in their works. Therefore, contemporary artists, in his opinion, could also manage without it in their work. “And one does not have to use the need to study the anatomy and the heritage of European classical art when working with a nude model as a cover. In fact these are just refusals to use it in own obscene vulgar

interests” [2]. In his opinion, which later was used as a basis for the ban of painting and drawing of naked nature, in a capitalist society, nude models were used to exploit women’s beauty, which was unacceptable for China. It is notable that subsequently Kang Shen was posthumously condemned along with the “Gang of Four” participants.

Three months later, the Ministry of Culture of the People’s Republic of China issued an order prohibiting the use and study of nudity in artistic educational institutions. This order caused astonishment among academics and artists. Academics and lecturers of the Central Academy of Arts of China, Veng Li Pen, Wang Shi Guo and Lee Hua Ti, wrote on May 13, 1965 a letter to Mao Zedong, in which they expressed the opinion that the construction of a new system of artistic education for the proletariat should certainly take away any old feudal traditions and methods, at the same time portraying of naked nature is the basis of artist’s academic study. “By studying a nude model students discover the proportions, human anatomy. They learn to simulate the shape, understand the structure of human body. For a full-fledged education of painters and sculptors the depiction of naked nature is essential” the letter said [2].

After the study and depiction of naked nature had been banned, the professional skills of Chinese students have deteriorated significantly, which is obvious from the quality of their paintings. Therefore, the discussion about the need for re-examination and reconsidering of this issue broke out among the artists-teachers. Due to that discussion, on July 18, 1965, Mao Zedong signed an order for Tin I, Kan Sheen, Joe An Lai, Liu Shao Qi, Deng Xiaoping, Peng Jen, which states that “this issue needs to be resolved. The study of nude models is essential for painting and sculpture. The ban of the nude models is a feudal approach. If any negative moments occur in the process – this is common for both art and science” [2]. Mao Zedong also wrote that Chinese artists had already successfully studied nudity. Here he gave an example of Xu Beihun, who had studied European art and depicted nude models. He also mentioned the name of Liu Hui Su. An interesting detail of this order was noted by Tsai Dezhen, who investigated the issue of banning the painting of nude models in China at that time. He noticed Mao Zedong wrote the word “model” not as a hieroglyph, but in Latin letters [2]. Guided by Mao Zedong’s response to the aforementioned letter of artists, on November 11, 1965, the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda Division issued an order stating that artists have the right to depict naked human body.

But even after that, the Red Guards did not always followed this directive. There were cases of brutal treatment of students who painted naked nature. To put an end to such actions, which further questioned the validity of the orders of the state ruling elite, on Aug. 4, 1967, Mao Zedong issued an order stating that the drawing of naked nature is a science. “Artists have to keep to the track beaten by Xu Beihun, who very professionally portrayed the naked nature” [2]. He also opposed the creative

developments of Xu Beihun and Qi Baishi. According to Mao Zedong, the right one was Xu Beihun, who showed the life realistically and truthfully.

The study of the naked nature was reintroduced to the curricula of artistic higher education after the Cultural Revolution (when the “Gang of Four” was posthumously condemned) had ended. On December 15, 1978, the Department of Arts and Education of Chinese Communist Party issued an order to practice imaging of nude models in artistic educational institutions. The order stated that “the Gang of Four’ had been hindering the proper education of students for some time, as teachers and students were often persecuted for the depiction of naked models. The artistic creativity was being victimized. The activity of the ‘Gang of Four’ resulted in several art academies and institutes are still not practicing the study of naked nature, which is in fact essential and absolutely necessary, and is due for immediate introduction into the curricula” [2].

The administrative methods, relied upon by the communist regime to control the stylistic peculiarities of painting in China during the reviewed period, were almost completely adopted from the USSR. That is why the course of events and even the fate of Chinese artists often repeated Soviet ones. O. Rogotchenko described this process as follows: “Socialist realism won over other artistic trends not in an open confrontation, rather by force and order, its content and meaning changed over the 60 years at least thrice. The only unchanged thing remained the party affiliation, for preservation of which the artistic and aesthetic norms of the newly created state were developed. Over the years of its existence, the style has evolved and transformed, conforming to the political order. It exterminated the opponents, while glorified and provided financially for the adopters of its policy and rules. Yet we should admit the period of socialist realism domination has brought us quite a few new names of talented artists, who managed to create real masterpieces after adoption to the new unwilling circumstances” [1, p. 88]. It can be seen that the situation in the artistic environment of China if not absolutely repeated the Soviet, but inherited most of its features, both in style of socialist realism and in the historical events caused by it in the culture and art.

For a researcher who is familiar with the works of soviet artists, a resemblance of their paintings to some of the works of Chinese artists is obvious. For example, a close look at Gu Pan’s “Another Crop” (Fig. 4) clearly shows it is very similar to the graduation work of the Ukrainian artist Tetiana Yablonska – “Bread” in terms of color and composition. Which is primarily due to the incredible similarity of the cultural and artistic doctrines of the two countries at that time. In a joint 4,5-meter large work by Chen Yifei and Wei Jingshan “Pioneers”, 1972 (Fig. 5), we see a group of builders who carry rails in the rain, it shows the heroic spirit of the working class, once again declaring it as a model for imitation. That was the main goal the ruling party was trying to gain for works of art.

Thus, it can be argued that Chinese artists of the reviewed period were largely dependent on the



Fig. 1. Students and teachers of the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts. The Leader Mao, Portrait Painting, 12 Paintings. A series of collective works. Oil on canvas. 60 × 80 cm. 1969



Fig. 2. Chang Jing. The Leader Mao Visited some Townships in Guangdong. Oil on canvas. 173 × 295 cm. 1972

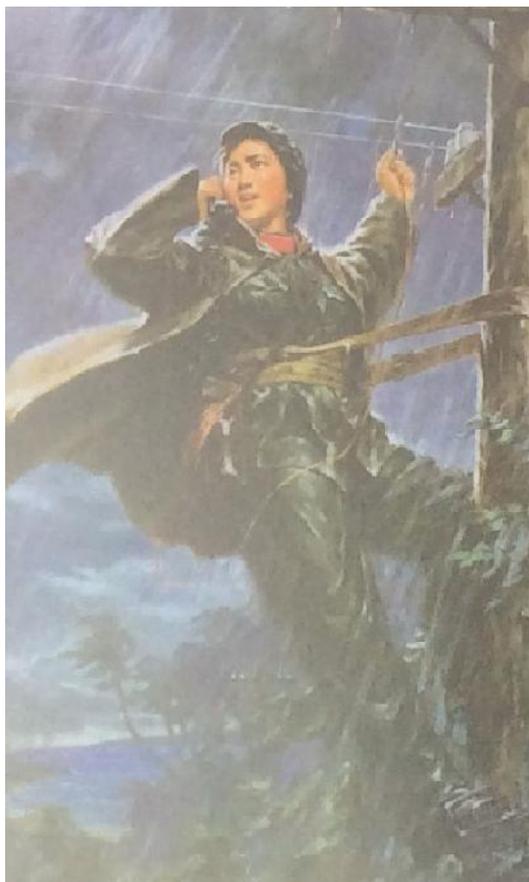


Fig. 3. Pan Jiazung. I am a Petrel. Oil on canvas. 90 × 120 cm. 1971

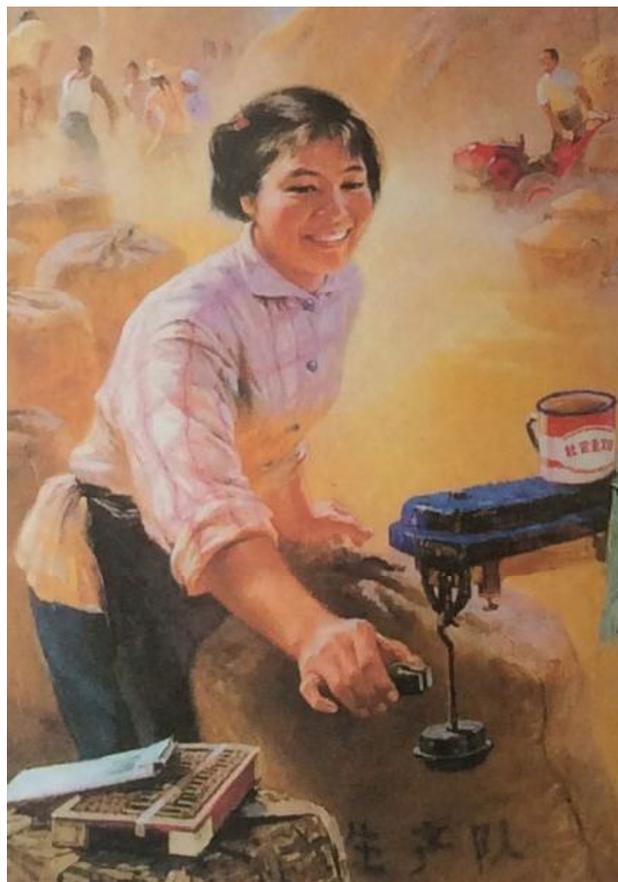


Fig. 4. Gu Pan. Another Crop. Oil on canvas. 110 × 80 cm. 1972



Fig. 5. Chen Yifei and Wei Jingshan. Pioneers. Oil on canvas. 300 × 450 cm. 1972

political will of the ruling elite, both in terms of the artistic career and in the ideological and figurative meaning of their works. This led to considerable tension in the artistic community and in cultural environment as a whole, which subsequently led to a number of artistic transformations, which have had a significant impact on Chinese art up to now.

**Conclusions.** Thus, the bright characteristic of the oil painting of the “Cultural Revolution” period was a new artistic ideal, the romanticization and heroization of both the communist elite and ordinary people in the plot of the class struggle, creation of a new communist society, etc. But the main feature of such romanticism and heroism within the limits of socialist realism was that they were primarily a product of political pressure, that is why the depictions of beauty and nobility were distorted. Despite this, the works of that period are a unique kind of art, and how much valuable they are for the history and modern times remains a polemic issue, which should be well reasoned and based on further studies of art.

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