

Art for Art's sake or for whom?
Art for Ideology's Sake, History for Art's Sake

Embarking from the argument made by Craig Clunas, this essay will focus on the issues of historical context and the use of non-traditional artists' objects as historical sources for Chinese art history focusing on the years surrounding the 1945-49 revolution in China. Clunas argues that "nothing less than the abolition of 'Chinese painting' as the sole object of study will suffice." (Clunas 14) Clunas' own recent revolution against Chinese painting connoisseurship finds an interesting parallel in the development of *xinguohua* during the years leading up to the revolution, and in the years following it. Both seek to expand the scope of 'art' in China, and the impact 'art' has on its producers and viewers (as well as the production of viewers). The analysis of art in the histories considered here all share the thesis that while painting continues to be important for art historians, the influence of a much wider range of art objects and their cultural significance are critical for an understanding of painting in the years surrounding the revolution.

Understanding the general reception in of Chinese art U.S. institutions after the Chinese revolution will shed light on the various historical projects here. Julia Andrews describes how students in art history classes would "roar with laughter when slides of [Dong Xiwen's *The Founding of the Nation*] would appear in the screen." (Andrews 80) Even other noted U.S. art historians were known to dismiss Dong's painting as "a mere piece of propaganda" (presumably propaganda is beneath art). (Andrews 80) Art made during the years of the PRC was rarely taken seriously for a number of reasons: in part because the U.S. political climate made 'communist' art somehow aesthetically inferior to art made in 'free' countries, and in part because of the synthesis and redefinition of art from the most traditional *guohua* to more avant-garde *xinguohua* and other art forms (such as oil or gouache paintings, *lianhuanhua*, and woodblock prints), did not appeal to the institutional dominance of conventional Chinese art connoisseurship. A

reviewer even writes that she once heard a prominent Hong Kong art critic state that “PRC paintings were ‘not fit for wallpaper.’”(White 1186) It may be an understatement then to claim that not only have non-painting art objects received less attention, but that a whole epoch of art objects was devalued and ignored.

Several notable books have been important in changing the perception of art during this period. Ralph Croizier’s *Art and Revolution in Modern China* follows the rise and fall of the Lingnan School of painters. The founding artists, Gao Jianfu, Gao Qifeng, and Chen Shuren, are catalogued here, beginning with their early training together, and then following the development of their ideas and art until the school’s demise. Instead of a simple monograph-type art history, Croizier provides a pithy historical setting, as well as an evaluation of the lasting impact left by the Lingnan School. What drives Croizier’s research most powerfully, however, is not merely biographies or the main actors’ influences, but a focus on the greater cultural and historical events that were critical in shaping the Lingnan School. In order to understand the motives behind the art of the two Gaos and Chen it is necessary to understand the historical moment they lived in, and partly as a result of this, also understand the training that they had. In this way Croizier already engages in two important methodological shifts: he embraces a wider historical understanding as a means to better understand the art, and he seriously studies how the nexus of historical events affected the art; Croizier’s serious engagement in both of these ipso facto provides a legitimizing effect on the art.

Among the major events in the three artists’ lives was the period of study in Japan where they came into contact with a model of Western knowledge that had been absorbed by Japanese culture. This was important to the young artists, as it was to China, because the previous years of semi-colonialization had taken its toll on the Chinese national morale. Croizier points out that

these three young artists all sought answers for how China would survive in “the new world of imperialistic powers.”(Croizier 25) This search was more than a desire to regain some notion of lost glory (cf. Schwartz 1964), but to contribute to the development of a modern nation without losing touch with, or contrarily, taking full pride in China’s “traditional cultural and regional characteristics.”(Croizier 5) The three artists, besides arriving from China with these sentiments, also found in Japan the syncretic knowledge they sought, as well as an environment filled with “radical political ideas,” an important source of which was Sun Yatsen’s Alliance Society.(Croizier 27) The pretext for this type of historical analysis is so obvious but often elided in connoisseur studies: the art that these artists would make (especially the two Gaos) would be driven by their political attitudes, and ultimately their ideas of nationalism. Thus beyond merely reactions to internal artistic movements or art styles, the Lingnan School painters should be understood in a much broader cultural framework.

This emphasis on revolutionary politics is related to how the Lingnan School produced their art as well. Though the school was primarily trained painters in the developing syncretic *xinguohua*, the school’s political underpinnings meant that other visual mediums were influential. This can be traced in part to when Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng sought to make their early marks in Shanghai. As China’s most modern town, the social function and position of the artists was much different than in more traditional spaces. Though scholars such as Hsü have studied the professionalization of artists beyond the model of the literati painter, Shanghai in the early twentieth century was even more radical. Shanghai’s tastes were different with more emphasis on “popular subject matter,” and a market supported by an emerging bourgeois.(Croizier 67) This suited the Gaos well since they were interested in developing their new art along with ideas of new careers for artists. The Gaos set up a bookstore that published

their paintings, as well as periodicals that supported their political positions in word and illustration. As Croizier points out, the project “was a capitalist venture, but its purposes were public and aesthetic.”(Croizier 68) Their periodical, *Zheng xiang huabao*, fused art with politics in the form of political cartoons. While the cartoon medium was not how they envisioned making their artistic mark and changing Chinese painting, it is important to understand the wide range of sources the artists were utilizing. Gao Jianfu was also interested in handpainted porcelains, winning a prize at the 1912 Panama International Exposition; though his efforts to turn this into an export business failed with Yuan Shikai’s power grab.(Croizier 68) In this way the Gaos’ experience of China’s national identity-politics affected their self-perception as artists, as well as the mediums they chose to realize their ambitions.

While their early years are important, it is their mature paintings’ content and syncretic style that marks the Lingnan School’s transformation of Chinese art. In order to understand the importance of this transformation, and the problems the Lingnan School encountered in identifying styles that were beneficial or detrimental to the modernizing of China, art historians must again consider the historical conditions and their impact. Having done this, the paintings of the Lingnan School may be viewed not only as exceptionally well made works with deep socio-political resonance, but also as part of a continuity that joins so-called traditional Chinese painting with Modern Chinese painting. The value in understanding this continuity – even if that continuity also contains breaks with tradition – is to understand the historical value that the Chinese themselves placed on their own heritages and identities during this period. The conflict integral to the re-evaluation and renegotiation of Chinese early-Modern history is also vital for understanding the transformations that took place afterwards; yet it is equally valuable as a

lesson for understanding the process of contemporary Chinese history's re-evaluation of the connoisseur's canon of art.

Perhaps the work that best explores the connection between art and politics in Modern Chinese art history is Julia Andrews' *Painters and Politics in the Peoples Republic of China, 1949-1979*. While Croizier's work is invaluable in exploring one particular dimension of transition in the pre-revolutionary years, Andrews' work displays even greater diversity and depth in its historical analysis. Though Andrews spends time offering aesthetic analysis of the art works (and not all of her analyses are favorable), she presents an astonishingly strong argument linking art to politics and events, and most importantly to ideology.

It is establishing these links that causes Andrews to examine the extremely wide array of art objects and the accompanying ideology that deeply affects Chinese painting. The same underlying question of historical continuity exists in Andrews' earliest findings, when she first visited China in 1979 to discover that "the painting [she] had come to find [*wenrenhua*] was hung in China's museums, not practiced in [China's] studios." The potential rupture between ancient Chinese painting and what Andrews saw in 1979 is exactly what scholarship like Croizier and Andrews mends.

The exposition of CCP art policy leads to the exploration of non-painting art forms. By analyzing how CCP policy was disseminated and practiced, Andrews establishes the importance that ideology played in the production of art. To examine the historical processes that directly link art and ideology so strongly, a case study of Jiang Feng is presented. Jiang, similarly to the Gaos, was both a revolutionary and an artist. An exemplary proletariat artist, Jiang began art studies only to become seriously involved with leftist politics, eventually leading a Communist publishing house and learning woodblock carving and printing techniques from a Japanese

instructor acquired by novelist Lu Xun. The combination of teachers and political philosophy led Jiang to consider himself “as part of an international leftist art community.”(Andrews 14) Jiang soon thereafter was engaged by the CCP as an influential art administrator; a position he would maintain for fifty years.

Mao himself was known to have opened the famous Yan’an Talks by ensuring “that literature and art became a component of the whole revolutionary machinery. To achieve this goal, artists and writers needed to be more aware of their roles in the revolution. They needed to identify with the masses and with the CCP; they needed to be clear that their audience was the workers, peasants, and soldiers; and they must understand Marxist-Leninist writings”(Andrews 19) It is with this proclamation to reach a wider audience that artists had to find ways to produce art. To this effect they looked toward popular sources, as well as similar politico-aesthetic sources such as Soviet socialist realism. The latter was used in dictating official style and content, but the medium was often uniquely Chinese. Two such examples of this were the *nianhua* paintings and woodprints that were made and widely distributed, and the *lianhuanhua* that had the advantage of wide circulation with a strong narrative message. For *nianhua*, art students were sent out to work alongside the peasants to understand from experience their pictures’ subjects, and to learn “the principle that life is the source of art.”(Andrews 45) Alternatively, *lianhuanhua* lessened its “overtly propagandistic direction by relating them to the national heritage or by basing them on great works of ancient or modern literature.”(Andrews 129) Adding to the mixture between old and new, elite and mass, traditional artists were hired to make illustrations for the *lianhuanhua*, and in 1963 there was even a national exhibition of *lianhuanhua*.(Andrews 130)

Art for the masses still had two sides, however. Andrews points out that though there was a great commitment to reach the masses through artistically rendered *nianhua* and *lianhuanhua*, the officially approved academic style was Soviet socialist realism (with a Chinese twist). Socialist realism was seen as ideally suited for capturing the reality of social forms (i.e., representing the proletariat) in a manner that also communicated official ideology. To a greater or lesser degree socialist realism adapted to Chinese *guohua*, gaining international recognition in the works of Feng Zengxian (*Every Grain is Hard Work*, 1955) and Zhou Changgu (*Two Lambs*, 1954). That two sides existed in the CCP's official rhetoric designates at least two important issues. The first is that in spite of Mao's or others' proclamations, the ideal between 'high' and 'low' art was neither static nor even fully locatable. As the political climate shifted between moderate and radical, different models of 'appropriate' art were given, and the flux prevented any one artistic style from becoming the sole archetype. Secondly, though the ideal could not be fixed, ideology's influence on art policy and art production was inseparably connected.

Andrews' work constantly returns to these two features. As she details the changes in art from the CCP's early years up to its reopening of China to the West, the focus is always on how art styles adapted to the state's needs, and in so doing, also challenged artists to find creative solutions for their artistic expression. The strict artistic boundaries placed upon the artists by the CCP should not be viewed as the end to creativity or China's illustrious art history. Rather, the examination of this period of China's history, as in Croizier's work, should lead to points of continuity. That is, though different artistic styles were privileged over *wenrenhua* or *guohua*, these stylistic departures must be understood as part of China's development beyond the revolutionary years, but still within the project of its national identity and re-emergence.

Croizier and Andrew publish their works shortly after China's borders reopen to the West. Part of the general lack of scholarship can then be blamed on a lack of access to research materials. Yet part of the problem lies in the fact that, as Clunas pointed out, art history about China (and elsewhere, for that matter) has nearly always focused on paintings. What transpired as a result was almost an analytical myopia: other forms of art could not be considered simply because they had never been considered. Thus when Nebiolo's compilation of Mao-era comics was first released in Italy in 1971, followed by an English release in 1973, it was ignored by the world of art history. Furthermore, *The People's Comic Book* was compiled by Nebiolo, Jean Chesneaux, and Umberto Eco, yet none of the authors seems to have ever taken the subject up again. Yet this volume now contains a valuable link to the artistic program of the PRC, and offers one instance of historical (non) reception in the West. It also acts as an excellent example for ideological myth making.

One such example of myth making, or myth maintaining powers, can be found in the historical treatment of Sanyuanli. In Wakeman Jr.'s seminal *Strangers at the Gate* the incident between British soldiers and Chinese peasants was for "the British only a skirmish,... but for the Chinese a great popular victory." (Wakeman 19) Further accounts by the British put the toll at one dead and fifteen wounded, whereas Chinese sources put the death toll somewhere between ten and two hundred! Nebiolo also includes a comic version of Sanyuanli. Here the comic describes how the British fall into an ambush "spilling out the brains of the British pirates and splashing their blood in every direction.... A British ensign... was speared and hacked by a villager named Yan Hao-chang." [sic] (Nebiolo 8) The slaughter continues as the peasants "rout the British pirates" twice more before "some were killed by the peasants using hoes, others fell to their knees and begged for mercy," until the Chinese peasants "killed another two hundred

troops and captured ten.”(Nebiolo 10) The comic version, printed in 1967, had changed the events considerably from Wakeman Jr.’s version. Ironically, Wakeman Jr. published his book merely one year before the comic circulated. Neither authors had access to the other, and both reflected the case as they saw it (though it seems Wakeman’s account for the British deaths is probably more accurate).

Andrews writes of the importance of Shanghai illustrators’ adaptation of texts to the *lianhuanhua* genre. As mentioned above, the combination of didactic narrative and massive circulation was important to the CCP. She then writes about He Youzhi’s contribution to this genre. He was able to form astonishing combinations between the use of Ming-era planar illustration styles, Qing-era print usage of white-linear contrasts, and a contemporary mastery of human figure drawing. Andrews then goes on to produce two frames from He’s *Li Shuangshuang*. Oddly, Nebiolo reprinted a full version of this very work by He in 1971, from a comic he had acquired in 1964. Here the same mastery of form that Andrews lauds had been available for study in the West at least twenty years earlier. Though Andrews cannot be cited for this omission in history, as it is remarkable that her volume was prescient enough to rediscover *lianhuanhua*’s merits, it seems nearly a case-in-point example of the myopia present in art history at the time.

Of course, for the sin of myopia, one might cite Nebiolo, et alia. Nebiolo’s brief introduction describes how he first encountered the comics on a nighttime train ride, served along side a cup of tea. Later in the introduction, Nebiolo makes a considerable gesture towards the importance of these comic books, citing their ability to reach and educate people in the CCP who were otherwise unable to access erudite cultural forms, as well as the CCP’s drive “to achieve capillary penetration of the masses.”(Nebiolo xv) That Nebiolo, et alia did not continue

investigating the comics is a disappointment, but excusable in part because according to Nebiolo, the comics “emerged only sporadically from the country of their origin, and western readers do not know them at all.”(Nebiolo xvi) It is important to acknowledge the contribution that *The People's Comic Book* made at the time, though it was not widely used. The compilers' interest was to present, no matter how arbitrarily, a group of *lianhuanhua* publications that were unavailable in the West. To this effect they were progressive in realizing the potential importance of the comic medium.

Lastly, in dealing with the historical context of art and the valuable use of a wide array of art objects, certain parallels with other works may be drawn. Though it seemed self-evident that China's art in the twentieth century was driven by various ideologies, there was a resistance to this belief on the part of understanding just *how much* ideology affected history. To this effect, Chen Jian's *Mao's China and the Cold War* has been important as an investigation into the question of 'how much'; it seems the answer is 'very much'. Chen's seeming support for a “big-man theory” of history in the presence of Mao goes a long way in edifying the conclusions of Andrews, and a little way in supporting Croizier by demonstrating the power of ideology as it can work in China. Chen's examination firmly links Mao's foreign policy to his domestic policy, and his domestic policy to his ideology. If anything joins Chinese art of the twentieth century together, it is its struggle to reform and revitalize itself in respect to reforming and revitalizing ideologies. That Chen reaches this conclusion about high political affairs bears strongly on the production of art in China. Understanding the political climate of the period is essential for any understanding of the production of art and its meaning. Ultimately this returns to one of Croizier's opening points, that: "art historians cannot work without a thorough

understanding of the larger historical milieu, and historians must understand the value of art as a broadly illuminating part of the record for any historical era.” (Croizier 2)

Patrick Deegan (2003)

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