

1 Under a Red Sky

In Praise of Heroism

History is an unbroken river; events happen and then fade from memory, and people are born and then die. History is simply placing the records of these events and people in chronological order. Important events and figures are often given epoch-defining status, because they are used as markers for historical periods. In twentieth-century China, history chose a moment in the middle of the century, dividing it in two. As the wheels of history rolled past this point in time, history was entirely rewritten. Art is a part of history, and its history is comprised of artists and artworks, but the history of art relies on political and cultural events that have an impact beyond art itself. No event in the history of Chinese art has more intensely influenced the annals of art history than the founding of the People's Republic of China (often called *Xin Zhongguo*, or New China). The immense political change did give the new era a name, but many artists also consciously responded to this call and enthusiastically praised the new nation and its founders. A wide range of art forms were used to praise this new era, and the landscape of art underwent an earth-shaking change. The establishment of New China dominated artistic creation, producing its own artists and histories.

The revolution was an important moment for the Chinese people, and the victory of revolution was a grand occasion. On October 1, 1949, the establishment of the People's Republic of China represented the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in the People's Revolutionary War, the end of nearly one hundred years of war and starvation, and the foundation of a stable, flourishing China. The majority of artists felt as the people did, wholeheartedly supporting New China and its Communist leaders, but many artists from the old society might not have realized that their artistic lives would also undergo a significant change. The May Fourth Movement was an important period in modern Chinese cultural history, in that China's new culture movements began under the influence of the May Fourth Movement, fostering a generation of young

artists and authors who threw themselves into creating a new cultural landscape. However, the mandates of that time did not place specific restrictions on individual artists. They could choose to accept or reject new cultural influences; the generation of late Qing artists, including Wu Changshuo, Huang Binhong, Qi Baishi, and others, continued to perfect their own elite art in an ivory tower. Their works may have implicitly reflected the changing times, but these shifts could also have been related to simple stylistic evolution, instead of a direct response to historical change. Under the influence of the New Culture Movement, art students receiving training in Western painting and ideas simply introduced classical and modern concepts and methods from the West into China. Although these ideas objectively served to attack feudal culture, the concept of “art for art’s sake” was accepted almost completely intact. Left-wing artists involved in the anti-imperialist and antifeudalist movements and the artists in Yan’an and the liberated areas who participated in the People’s Revolutionary War made their political beliefs their artistic foundations. They consciously accepted Communist leadership, choosing to use art to wage revolutionary war and engage in political struggle. For these artists, party principles were higher than artistic principles; art served the party’s political line, art served the party’s political agenda, and art served the workers, the peasants, and the soldiers. These were not the only missions of artistic creation, but this ideology was organically incorporated into their artworks. After New China was founded, these artists moved from the liberated areas to the cities, and the majority became party leaders in various levels of the Ministry of Culture. Together with a few artists who had participated in progressive cultural activities in Kuomintang-controlled areas, they constituted the core power behind the creative methods and cultural policies of Revolutionary Realism.

Two types of artists educated in the old society entered into this new era. One group welcomed liberation with open arms; they were artists with progressive tendencies or those who had even worked with the Communist Party, such as Wu Zuoren, Xu Beihong, and others, or they were progressive artists dissatisfied with Kuomintang rule, such as Dong Xiwen. Although their ideas were somewhat different than those held by artists in the liberated areas, they wholeheartedly supported the Party leaders and consciously accepted ideological reform. They enthusiastically participated in the art education and cultural structures of New China, thereby making an important contribution to the art of this new nation. The second group of artists from the old society had rather clear artistic ideas and did not care much about politics. They concentrated on elite artistic creation, and although their artistic achievements did serve

to develop a national art, they did not conform to the party's requirements for art. In particular, oil painters felt uncertain about painting in the Revolutionary Realist mode. For them, this intellectual transformation was a painful process. They could either abandon their artistic ideas, or they could be abandoned by the times. Wu Guanzhong is a classic example of this.

In 1954, the leader of the China Artists Association published an essay in the inaugural issue of *Art (Meishu)*, the association's magazine. He wrote, "An artist should live in a constant state of struggle, continually observing and experiencing life and preparing to work. As an art worker educating the people in the socialist spirit, an artist is first required to embody a socialist spirit in his work and life."¹ Creating socialist art with a socialist spirit actually placed art under the party's jurisdiction; as artists consciously accepted the party's leadership, they had to change their worldviews and their thinking, and the results of this reform were presented in their artwork. What counted as socialist art had not been clearly defined at the time, but there were two important references: the art of the Soviet Union and the art of China's liberated areas.

At the time, nearly every issue of *Art* contained essays or translations of essays about art from the Soviet Union and the socialist eastern European nations. In Issue 11 of *Art*, a column entitled "Learning from Soviet Art" was launched, showing that the Soviet Union was held up as a model for oil painting, printmaking, sculpture, and illustration. In the 1930s, the principles of Socialist Realism were established in the Soviet Union, which gave the party complete control of literary and artistic matters and required artists to work within the cultural parameters specified by the party. Although the party established some requirements for art forms, Socialist Realist art forms primarily perpetuated the tradition of Critical Realism in nineteenth-century Russia. This tradition laid a strong foundation for Socialist Realist art, retaining the literary and narrative conceptions of painting from the Russian painting schools. Realist imagery and dramatic, literary narratives were easily accepted and understood by the masses, and it was also the most effective way to promote the party's line and policies, and "encourage the people, educate the people, and inspire the people." In the early twentieth century, Russia also gave birth to avant-garde art movements that have a very important place in the history of modern Western art, producing such great artists as Wassily Kandinsky and Kazimir Malevich. A number of modern artists were actively involved in proletarian revolution,

¹ Ruohong Cai, "Kaipi meishu chuangzuo de guangkuo daolu" (Building a wide road for artistic creation), *Meishu (Art)*, 1 (1954), 12.

participating in the culture of the soviets. However, the modern artistic styles they pursued could not be utilized by the revolution, nor could they be understood or appreciated by the people, and so they were rejected and criticized as being part of bourgeois ideology. These lines of cultural thinking were naturally accepted by the cultural leaders of New China. Soon after the nation was founded, China formed a political alliance with the Soviet Union and copied its economic model. In his “Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art,” Mao Zedong noted that culture should serve the workers, farmers, and soldiers, be accepted by the workers, farmers, and soldiers, and be utilized by the workers, farmers, and soldiers.

Mao Zedong’s cultural ideas formed the theoretical foundation for the Chinese Communist Party’s cultural line. The first to put Mao Zedong’s cultural ideas into practice were the artists in the liberated areas centered on Yan’an. During World War II and the War of Liberation, these young revolutionary cultural workers used art as a weapon. Under very difficult conditions, they traveled deep into the countryside, working and making art that promoted the party’s policies and organized and mobilized the masses. Art became “the gears and the screws” of revolution. Due to the straitened conditions of that time, artistic creation was primarily focused on woodcuts, and the resulting artworks were extremely influential. In 1942, Zhou Enlai brought the works of Gu Yuan, a relatively obscure young Yan’an artist, to Chongqing and showed them at “The National Woodcut Exhibition.” After Xu Beihong saw Gu Yuan’s woodcuts at the show, he wrote excitedly:

At 3 p.m. on October 15, 1942, I discovered Gu Yuan, an amazing talent in the Chinese art world and a major artist in the Chinese Communist Party. . . . I cannot help but rejoice that a major star, who is not yet twenty years old, has been born to the Chinese printmaking world. Gu Yuan will later be a champion in international competitions, and he will earn glory for China.²

Xu Beihong’s words were not simply an old-fashioned expression of praise. The woodcuts of Yan’an did in fact launch a new era in Chinese printmaking, achieving artistic heights that later artists would find very difficult to attain. At the time, Gu Yuan (1919–1996) was only twenty-two. He was born in Zhongshan County in Guangdong Province (now the city of Zhongshan). In 1938, he traveled to Yan’an, where he received a year of training in the Fine Art Department at the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art in Yan’an. This was the extent of his artistic

² Gu Yuan tongzhi zhisang xiaozu (The Comrade Gu Yuan Funeral Group), “Chentong daonian Gu Yuan tongzhi” (Grieving for Comrade Gu Yuan), *Meishu (Art)*, 10 (1996), 4.

education. After he graduated from the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art, he served as a secretary in a village government in the countryside for a year, then returned to the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art to create and teach woodcuts. During the Yan'an period, Gu Yuan created *Rent Reduction Meeting (Jianzuhui)* (Figure 1) and other works, which are considered representative of Yan'an woodcut art. The sincere emotion and simple modeling conveyed a strong sense of reality and history. The forefathers of the Yan'an woodcuts were a group of young leftist artists who had been personally trained by Lu Xun. Influenced by the May Fourth New Culture Movement, the artistic ideas behind their woodcuts were primarily inspired by German Expressionist works. Traces of this influence can be seen in many Yan'an woodcuts, but Gu Yuan and others gradually worked to eliminate them. They retained the real scenes of life, the simple figures of the farmers, and the forms taken from folk art. These pieces are moving because they embody a passion for life and a sincere devotion to the revolution. The influence of academic art is not visible in their works; their technical immaturity and emotional sincerity meant that they had a natural affinity for rural subjects and folk art, and it was precisely these elements that gave their work a lasting appeal. However, because of these experiences and this unique environment, the beliefs that art should serve politics and reality should be depicted according to political needs were also deeply rooted in their artistic ideas.

After the founding of the People's Republic, Gu Yuan primarily worked as an art educator, and his artwork never again reached the level that it had during the Yan'an period and the War of Liberation. However, there were many other artists from Yan'an who continued their work from that time and had an immense influence on art in New China. At an exhibition in March 1949, Xu Beihong greatly admired the colored woodcut *Reforming Idlers (Gaizao erhuizi)* (Figure 2), created by liberated-area artist Wang Shikuo. The painter Ai Zhongxin recalled, "Mr. Xu was reluctant to leave today's exhibition. He called people over to look at Wang Shikuo's *Reforming Idlers*. He said that the subject matter was most important, but that the theme was also very new. In terms of composition, Xu felt that the picture was perfect, because Wang was successful in his use of figures and brilliant in his use of technique."³ At the time, Xu Beihong did not know Wang Shikuo, but he was deeply convinced by his art. The woodcut of *Reforming Idlers* was produced in 1942 and the colored woodcut was made in 1947. Like Gu Yuan, Wang drew scenes

³ Xiangyi Feng, "Buhui guoshi de yishu" (Art that will not become outdated), *Meishu Yanjiu (The Study of Art)*, 2 (1979), 20.

from real life in Yan'an, but the choice of subject matter served the needs of real political struggle. If the form of Gu Yuan's *Rent Reduction Meeting* reflects an unsophisticated and direct observation of reality, then *Reforming Idlers* depicts a more complex narrative subject with rather mature technique. Wang Shikuo (1911–1973) was born in Ye County, Shandong Province. His ancestors were farmers, and he worked on the farm from a young age, so he had a deep attachment to farmers and the countryside. In 1930, Wang Shikuo enrolled in the Art Department at Ji'nan Aimei High School, where he began learning art. Two years later, because he was dissatisfied with the level of instruction at the school, he transferred to the Beiping Art Academy and studied Chinese painting. One year later, he attended the Hangzhou School of Fine Arts and began studying Western painting. He learned drawing under the instruction of Wu Dayu, who had studied in France, and in 1934, Wang transferred to the Western Painting Department at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts. By the time he graduated from the College in 1935, Wang Shikuo had passed through a number of art schools in just a few short years, and these institutions provided him with a good artistic foundation and an extremely broad outlook. However, it was his two years of study in Japan that gave his paintings a solid foundation in modeling. In 1935, Wang Shikuo arrived in Japan, and after studying Japanese and sketching for a few months, he enrolled in the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, where he received formal training in drawing and oil painting. When the Second Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1937, Wang Shikuo decided to suspend his studies and return to China to participate in resistance activities. The two years he spent studying in Japan had an important impact on his later artistic path, as drawings have an extremely important place within Wang's body of extant work. His drawings reflect rigorous modeling standards, while retaining a keen sense of imagery and form. He mingled planes and unique lines, instead of stubbornly pursuing a Western style of planar modeling. His lines accurately summarize contours and planes, seeming rough yet dignified, especially in the sketches of peasants. Wang's personal style was well-matched for rural themes, which was rare among the Yan'an artists whose artistic skills were rather underdeveloped. Wang Shikuo died during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, but his drawings already had an extremely important place in modern Chinese art history.

Wang Shikuo traveled to Yan'an in August 1938, and after studying for a few months at the Counter-Japanese Military and Political University in Yan'an, he was transferred to a teaching position at the Yan'an Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art in December. In May 1942, Wang participated in the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art,

and Mao Zedong's words at the conference had a profound effect on him. He was influenced by Mao Zedong's cultural ideas at the beginning of his artistic career, so it was very natural that he would accepted the principles of Revolutionary Realism. In answering the call of Mao's cultural principles, Wang Shikuo went down to the countryside, learning not from professors at the Lu Xun Academy, but from real experiences in the wider world. He combined political propaganda and artistic creation, depicting groups of model workers, female cadres, and ordinary farmers in sketches and woodcuts. *Reforming Idlers* was a work from this period. In the 1950s, Wang went to Beijing to teach at North China Joint University. After the North China Joint University Fine Art Department and the Beiping Fine Arts School were combined to establish the Central Academy of Fine Arts, he became a professor and the deputy director of the Research Department at that institution, where he worked and taught for many years.

Wang Shikuo's art began in Yan'an, and the 1950s was his most brilliant period, marked by the large-scale drawing *Bloody Clothing* (*Xueyi*) (Figure 3). After the 1950s, Wang's work closely followed the pace of the times, and he primarily created oil paintings in coordination with political propaganda efforts, including *Peasants Enlisting* (*Nongmin canjun*), *Joining Forces at the Jinggang Mountains* (*Jinggangshan huishi*), and *Chairman Mao Working at the Ming Tombs Reservoir* (*Maozhuxi zai shisanling shuiku laodong*). Most of these works were dominated by the requirements of propaganda; after the theme was determined, his experiences of life at the grassroots level, the material he collected, and his mode of artistic expression were inevitably constrained. He poured all of his energy into *Bloody Clothing*, which perfectly synthesized Chinese history and individual fate and blended his personal, lived experiences and the revolutionary view of life. Early in the land reform period, he wanted to create a painting that would reflect the immense historical changes taking place in the lives of Chinese farmers. In the intense conflicts between class interests, Chinese farmers were freed. The figures chosen to represent the liberated peasants and the feudal influences in *Bloody Clothing* are not just witnesses to the historical fact of the fight between the peasants and the landlords; they were historical symbols of the changing times. In 1953, Wang made the first draft of *Bloody Clothing* based on the large amount of material he had collected. In 1957, the draft and six preparatory sketches were published in *Art*. In 1959, the Museum of the Chinese Revolution exhibited the large drawing *Bloody Clothing* in honor of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. This hasty decision meant that a drawing, a genre seldom seen in the history of world painting, was preserved in the annals of art history; its

formal integrity and thematic depth are incomparable. The drawing *Bloody Clothing* was originally made in preparation for an oil painting, but Wang was dissatisfied with the draft. He had always wanted to make a life-size oil painting, but when the Cultural Revolution erupted in the mid-1960s, he was forced to stop painting, the shared fate of a generation of intellectuals and artists. In 1972, Wang Shikuo returned to Beijing from the countryside, and had another chance to work. The next year, with the support of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the Museum of the Chinese Revolution, he went to the mountains of Henan to collect materials for an oil painting version of *Bloody Clothing*. While he was drawing portraits of farmers, he suddenly fainted and died. Thus, an accident of history meant that the drawing of *Bloody Clothing* became the embodiment of Wang Shikuo's artistic output. If he had actually completed his painting during the Cultural Revolution, would the drawing still be held in such high regard?

Bloody Clothing was a successful example of Revolutionary Realism, and the principles of realism were fully reflected in this revolutionary theme. The farmer's wife holding aloft the bloody clothing creates the dramatic, climactic moment that realism required. The antagonism between the farmers and the landlords forms the primary narrative conflict in the image. The composition of the drawing is dynamic, well-suited to the intense emotional impact of the theme. Dense crowds form diagonal lines on both sides of the composition, a tension that is made even more striking by the diagonal void in the middle of the crowd and the acute triangle formed by a group of farmers on the right side of the drawing. The leaning body of the peasant woman holding the bloody clothing creates a visual contrast with this larger triangle, forming the visual center for the entire image. A blind old woman leaning away from the peasant woman forms a small triangle with her, powerfully highlighting the intensity of the narrative. The distribution of light and shade create a unified, lively rhythm, with the white tablecloth setting off the landlord wearing the black robe, and the peasant woman wearing the black shirt highlighting the bloody white clothing in her hands. The diagonal bands of gray tones and the large expanse of gray sky unify the contrasting black and white with the real environment. The complex visual contrasts and the undulating narrative perfectly unify content and form, and as such, *Bloody Clothing* is one of the highest achievements in Chinese realist art. From an art historical perspective, the piece can only be compared to *The Morning of the Execution of the Streltsy*, a work by Russian painter Vasily Surikov. However, Wang Shikuo successfully adapted realist standards from the European painting tradition to the Chinese cultural context.

Luo Gongliu's oil painting, *Tunnel Warfare (Didao zhan)* (Figure 4), was another an important work of Revolutionary Realism in the 1950s. Luo's personal experiences were similar to those of Wang Shikuo. Like Wang, Luo Gongliu was a revolutionary artist trained by the Communist Party. He participated in the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art and he was deeply influenced by Mao Zedong's cultural ideas. In 1915, Luo Gongliu was born in Kaiping County, Guangdong Province, where his father was the owner of a small rural general store. In 1931, Luo Gongliu was admitted to the High School Affiliated with Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou, which was where he completed high school. After he graduated, he worked and taught himself to paint. In 1936, he enrolled in the Hangzhou School of Fine Arts, but he only studied there for one year. Due to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, he traveled to Wuhan and he worked with the National Anti-Japanese Woodcutters' Association. He arrived in Yan'an in 1938. After a brief period of training in the Department of Fine Art at the Lu Xun Academy of Literature and Art in Yan'an, he received orders to follow the Lu Xun Academy's Woodcut Work Unit to the anti-Japanese frontlines in south-eastern Shanxi, beginning his work with the Eighth Route Army. During this time, he primarily focused on mass cultural activities, using art forms favored by the rural masses to publicize the Party's plans for fighting the Japanese. In the later stages of the Second Sino-Japanese War and in the beginning of the War of Liberation, Luo Gongliu spent two years working with a rural grassroots unit. He was then transferred to the Central Cultural Work Research Office to serve as the deputy head of the Fine Art Team. During this time, one of his more important works, woodcut illustrations made for Zhao Shuli's novel, *The Rhymes of Li Youcai (Li Youcai banhua)*, were published in Yan'an's *Liberation Daily (Jiefang Ribao)*.

In the early years of the People's Republic, Luo Gongliu taught at North China Joint University in Beijing, then served in the leadership of the newly-established Central Academy of Fine Arts. Luo Gongliu first picked up an oil paint brush in 1951, creating two important pieces, *Tunnel Warfare* and *Reporting on Rectification (Zhengfeng baogao)*. Of the two, *Tunnel Warfare* occupies an important place in modern Chinese oil painting.

Modern Chinese oil painting rose during the May Fourth era, and it had a close relationship to the New Culture Movement. In 1911, Zhou Xiang, who had studied Western painting in Japan and Europe, opened China's first Western painting school in Shanghai. A number of famous artists, such as Liu Haisu, Xu Beihong, and Lin Fengmian, studied Western painting in modern art schools or departments. They gradually

introduced Western oil painting techniques and ideas that were hundreds of years old into China, training waves of young artists. Revolutionary artists such as Wang Shikuo and Luo Gongliu were also influenced by this mode of education. Oil painting before the People's Republic of China was basically divided into two styles, realism and modernism, represented by Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu, respectively. Lin Fengmian attempted to combine Western painting with the spirit of traditional Chinese painting. Oil painting rose in China at a time when Western modernist art was flourishing, and young Chinese artists studying abroad mostly traveled to Japan and Europe. Oil painting in Japan was far from orthodox, and the techniques and concepts of oil painting that students learned did not necessarily delve into the essence of the medium. Students who traveled to Europe did not find themselves surrounded by classical European art; they were immersed in the ideas of modern art, even if they, like Xu Beihong, wanted to learn traditional realist painting. These students gained a strong foundation in drawing, but there was still a rather significant gap between what they were taught and Europe's humanistic classical tradition, which considered history painting the essence of oil painting. Xu Beihong actively rejected the Western modernist painting that came after the Impressionists, because he believed that "only realism can treat the disease of emptiness."⁴ After he returned to China, he created history paintings such as *Tian Heng's Five Hundred Warriors* (*Tian Heng wubaishi*) based on Chinese historical subject matter, which obviously reveals both technical immaturity and insufficient understanding of history painting. However, this was a courageous attempt at history painting that laid a foundation for later Chinese history painting in oils. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, many artists focused their work on real events of the war. Wang Shikuo's *The Bloody Battle of Tai'erzhuang* (*Tai'erzhuang daxuezhàn*), Li Keran's *Avenging Compatriots who Died for their Country* (*Wei sinan tongbao fuchou*), Situ Qiao's *Put Down Your Whip* (*Fangxia nide bianzi*) (Figure 5), and Feng Fasi's *Searching for Lice* (*Zhuo shizi*) were records of real events, capturing important moments in colorful and moving ways. However, when matched against the demands of history painting, the spatial relationships and the modeling of real environments and figures in these works do not compare favorably to European history painting. Despite this, Chinese history painting developed from these pieces, blending the aesthetics of traditional Chinese painting, the forms of Western modern art, and the modeling of immature realist painting to create a kind of

⁴ Yongbai Tao (ed.), *Zhongguo Youhua Erbai Bashi Nian* (*Two Hundred and Eighty Years of Chinese Oil Painting*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 1988), 4.