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| Socialist Realism in China |
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| Socialist Realism was the primary aesthetic doctrine promoted during the 1950s by the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Ministry of Culture and the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Adopted from Soviet theory, the principles of Socialist Realism in the PRC closely corresponded to those proclaimed under the same banner in the USSR and Eastern Europe. As elsewhere, the scope of Socialist Realism extended well beyond its origins in literature and painting. It represented an overarching discourse relating cultural production to Marxism-Leninism, particularly in the way the latter was instantiated in the Soviet Union under Stalin. That said, the PRC’s assimilation of Socialist Realism was distinguished by the way Chinese cultural officials and artists confronted two essential, yet contradictory, aspects of the doctrine: its commitment to Socialist construction and Internationalism, and its appeal to a concept of ‘national form’. |
| Socialist Realism was the primary aesthetic doctrine promoted during the 1950s by the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) Ministry of Culture and the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Adopted from Soviet theory, the principles of Socialist Realism in the PRC closely corresponded to those proclaimed under the same banner in the USSR and Eastern Europe. As elsewhere, the scope of Socialist Realism extended well beyond its origins in literature and painting. It represented an overarching discourse relating cultural production to Marxism-Leninism, particularly in the way the latter was instantiated in the Soviet Union under Stalin. That said, the PRC’s assimilation of Socialist Realism was distinguished by the way Chinese cultural officials and artists confronted two essential, yet contradictory, aspects of the doctrine: its commitment to Socialist construction and Internationalism, and its appeal to a concept of ‘national form’.  Introduced in China as early as 1933 by literary theorist Zhou Yang (周扬) (1908-1989), Socialist Realism gained prominence in the People’s Republic after Zhou, in his new capacity as Vice-Minister of Culture, endorsed it in a series of official statements made between 1951 and 1953. The term was even inserted subsequently into new editions of Mao Zedong’s ‘Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art’, replacing Mao’s original invocation of ‘proletarian realism’. As with contemporaneous initiatives in industry, agriculture and science, promotion of Socialist Realism coincided with the party-state’s call to assimilate the experience of more technologically advanced Socialist countries—particularly, the Soviet Union—in order to hasten the PRC’s development and accelerate its timeline for overtaking and surpassing the achievements of capitalist nations.  One of the clearest instances of this emerged in the medium of oil painting. In 1952, PRC art academies began actively to promote Soviet art, art theory and art pedagogy as models for Chinese practitioners. From 1953 to 1962, such efforts expanded to entail sending Chinese artists to study at the Repin Art Academy in Leningrad and hosting Soviet and East European artists as instructors in the PRC. The first and most influential of these was Soviet oil painter Konstantin M. Maksimov (1913-1993), who taught a class of more than twenty students in Beijing from 1955 to 1957. Soviet-trained Chinese artists became prominent in the PRC cultural establishment. Upon completing their studies, many occupied important administrative and teaching posts throughout the country and they participated actively in the state-sponsored history painting campaigns of 1958, 1961 and 1964. Chief among these artists was Luo Gongliu (罗工柳) (1916-2004), who spent three years in Leningrad from 1955 to 1958. Following his return to Beijing, Luo headed a prestigious oil painting studio at the Central Academy of Fine Arts and taught a second specialised course in Soviet-style painting from 1961 to 1963.  Fig.1: Zhan Jianjun 詹建俊, *Starting Out* 起家, 1957, oil on canvas, 140cm x 348cm, collection of the China Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing . Graduation piece by a student in Maksimov’s oil painting class.  As a result of such efforts, an eclectic combination of nineteenth-century European painting and drawing traditions, processed through the filter of Russian taste and modified according to the needs of Socialist state power, became a vital part of the basic training for oil painters in the PRC. Simultaneously, however, the putative universality of Socialist Realism as a doctrine for Marxist-Leninist art stood in growing tension with an equally strong ideological demand for forms of cultural production more in keeping with the nation’s own heritage. This demand, articulated in calls for art that displayed ‘national characteristics’ and appeared ‘national in form’, had in fact been central to Mao Zedong’s own political and aesthetic views, and to Soviet Socialist Realism, as originally conceived in the 1930s. Additionally, increasing estrangement between Chinese and Soviet leaders, beginning with the latter’s denouncement of Stalinism in 1956, contributed a pressing geopolitical dimension to the perceived need for promoting internal cultural art practices.  The volatile development of ink painting during the 1950s staged this conflicted aspect of Socialist Realism in an exemplary way. After the establishment of the People’s Republic, the powerful cadres placed in charge of reforming China’s art academies viewed traditional Chinese painting as a moribund remnant of the old social order. It and its practitioners were programmatically marginalised as pedagogy structured around oil painting assumed priority. Cultural authorities enjoined ink painters to transform their practice by turning to contemporary subjects, creating imagery that extolled the progressiveness of socialist society and adopting techniques of composition, perspective, modelling and foreshortening derived from European art. Soviet-style drawing instruction became part of the mandatory curriculum for ink painting students, and recalcitrant artists—often, senior practitioners—found themselves subject to criticism, ostracism and dismissal.  During the time of the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956), however, appreciation for Chinese ink painting as a valuable national tradition resurfaced, with vocal support from high-ranking officials, including Zhou Yang, Premier Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong himself. Following the initial phase of the subsequent Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-59), Party authorities again rehabilitated ink painting, this time with even firmer institutional sponsorship. Notably, they re-christened the medium *guohua* (国画), or national painting, and examples of reformed approaches to its practice achieved equality with respect to oil painting in the official history painting campaigns of the late-1950s and early-1960s.  Fig. 2: Shi Lu 石鲁, *Fighting in Northern Shaanxi* 转战陕北, 1959, Chinese ink on paper, 218cm x 208cm, collection of the China National Museum, Beijing. Example of ‘socialist realist’ *guohua*.  While the centrality of Socialist Realism eroded in the more inclusive climate of the Hundred Flowers Campaign, PRC cultural authorities, unlike their counterparts in the Soviet Union, did not finally repudiate the doctrine. Zhou Yang’s synoptic 1960 report to the Third National Conference of Chinese Literary and Art Workers included a forceful defence of Socialist Realism, even while simultaneously reaffirming a shift—already underway since 1958—towards the alternative formulation ‘integrating revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism’. The rhetorical eclipse of Socialist Realism during the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) crucially highlights the fact that the doctrine, with its Soviet-inspired emphasis on developmentalism, represented only one aspect of Maoist ideological practice. Subsequent PRC aesthetic discourse would increasingly emphasize other theoretical concepts, particularly Mao’s notion of class struggle. Nevertheless, while the period of its explicit promotion was brief, pedagogical methods and iconography promoted in the name of Socialist Realism would have an enduring impact on PRC art throughout the Mao era and beyond. |
| Further reading:  (Andrews)  (Clark)  (Laing)  (Yang)  (Zhang) |

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| Socialist Realism in Russia |
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| Socialist Realism was a term used to characterise the state of art and literature in the USSR during the 1930s-1950s. It was defined as a fundamental method of socialist art, literature and criticism that demanded from artists a ‘truthful and a historically real representation of socialist reality in its development’. Truthfulness and an historical reality of socialist life, as reflected in art, was intended to help educate Soviet citizens in the spirit of the revolutionary socialist-Marxist ideology.  The official definition of ‘Socialist Realism’ was accepted in 1934 by the First Congress of the Soviet Writers. The first steps towards this new socialist art were undertaken during the 1920s with the establishment of the Association of Revolutionary painters and the founding of VKhUTEMAS (a state art and technical school). New Art associations required that their members show the everyday life of ordinary citizens of the new social order: workers, peasants, Red Army men, party and Soviet leaders and Bolshevik heroes of the revolution. |
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New Art associations required that their members show the everyday life of ordinary citizens of the new social order: workers, peasants, Red Army men, party and Soviet leaders and Bolshevik heroes of the revolution.  Since 1934, Socialist Realism was defined as the only form of artistic creation. It became the official guideline for art and literature and the sole criteria by which the validity of any literary or visual creation of art was appreciated. From then on, art and literature were regarded solely as instruments of Communist propaganda. They were intended to reflect, or to describe, the brighter sides of life under Communism. Any art considered not to conform to this agenda was rejected as an expression of bourgeois decadence.  Socialist Realism was based on three main principles: First was a national character intended to make art understandable to ordinary citizens. The second was to connect artistic images to proper ideological (and idealised) content—artists were expected to show the peaceful everyday life of Soviet citizens, and the heroic deeds of workers, peasants, and soldiers involved in the construction of a new and improved society for humanity. The third principle was the principle of actuality. Artists were required to be objective in their descriptions of everyday reality in its historical development, following the requirements of a materialistic understanding of history and presenting it as a class struggle by working people striving for a better life. According to Russian Marxists, changes of existence determined changes in consciousness and the perceptions of existing reality, and the art of the time must clearly embody this historical, objective point of view whilst representing their subjects as positive heroes, true builders of a better society: a Communist paradise on earth.  Fig.1: Alexander Deineka, *Relay Race along the Garden Ring*, 1947**.** Oil on canvas. 199 x 299 cm.  State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.  Source: <http://www.artpoisk.info/artist/deyneka_aleksandr_aleksandrovich_1899/estafeta_po_kol_cu_b>  Distinguished artists were encouraged with commissions provided by the All Union Houses of Art Work; however, the rules and restrictions imposed upon artists were numerous and specific. Party and Soviet authorities took responsibility for the organisation of exhibitions and provided living conditions for Soviet artists. Freedom of artistic creativity was confined to technical methods and colour palette. Party and Soviet organisations, further, became the main customers of these paintings and sculptures, as works of Socialist Realism were mandatory in every public place, from party and administrative buildings to schools and hospitals. In this way artistic production was completely policed, from its conception to its final destination.  Fig.2: Isaak Brodsky, *Vladimir Lenin in Smolny,* 1930. Oil on canvas. 190 x 287 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  Source: <http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/_show/image/_id/331>  A number of artists stand out as successes of the time. Isaac Brodsky (1883-1939), a student of Ilya Repin, should be mentioned among outstanding representatives of Socialist Realism. He was known for his gallery of portrayals of Soviet and party leaders, mostly Vladimir Lenin and paintings dedicated to the events of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Russian Civil War. Alexander Samokhvalov (1894-1971) was famous for his impressive and expansive technical abilities, including painting, graphics, illustration, sculpture and teaching. Alexander Deineka (1899-1969) was a painter, graphic designer and sculptor. His paintings depict scenes of sporting events and general labour. His set of mosaics became the decoration of Maykovskaya Metro Station in Moscow, which opened in 1938. Pavel Korin (1892-1967) was born into the family of an icon-painter, was a student of Mikhail Nesterov and Konstantin Korovin, and became known for his monumental paintings (Alexander Nevsky) and restoration work. Dmitry Nalbandyan (1906-1993) was given the nickname of ‘the first paint brush’ of the Communist leadership, mostly for his portraits of Josef Stalin and his circle.  Fig.3: Pavel Korin, *Alexander Nevsky,* 1951. Oil on canvas. 101 x 72,5 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  Source: <http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/collection/_show/image/_id/343>  Socialist Realism became a fundamental art principle in the countries of Eastern Europe (Romania, Bulgaria, German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland) and the Far East (China, Vietnam, North Korea). It became a substitute for actual reality; In its place, artists offered a myth of an imaginable reality, as envisioned by the Communist dream. |
| Further reading:  (Bown, Art under Stalin.)  (Bown and Lanfranconi, Socialist Realism: Great Soviet Painting 1920-1970)  (K. Clark)  (Gorky and Radek)  (Grays and Rougle)  (James and Vaughan)  (Paperno and Grossman)  (Prokhanov)  (Terz) |

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| Socialist Realism in Vietnam |
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| Socialist Realism was the dominant style in the visual arts of North Vietnam from 1945 to the early 1980s. The style was widely promoted following the 1945 revolution through the writing of Truong Chinh (1907-1988), a senior Vietnamese Communist Party member and leading theoretician. Socialist Realism in Vietnamese visual art is characterised by its easily-legible, realist style, its optimistic tone and its generally limited subject matter, which mostly consisted of portraits of Ho Chi Minh, scenes of industrial and rural work, soldiers and historical events associated with Vietnam’s revolutionary development. While Socialist Realism in Vietnam was influenced by art from other Socialist states, the style was also adapted to local aesthetics, especially those founded at the École des Beaux Arts de l’Indochine (1925-1945), and influences from popular painting and printmaking. Socialist Realism in Vietnam retained several elements of colonial-period art, such as the techniques of silk and lacquer painting, and the influence of Impressionistic oil painting. Decades of war in Vietnam also affected the development of Socialist Realism, as many artists had to work primarily on producing ephemeral propaganda materials. Socialist Realism retained its primacy in North Vietnamese art until the 1980s. |
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Influenced by Mao Zedong, Truong Chinh argued that Vietnamese art should be national, scientific and popular in character, and promote the development of a Socialist society. He specified Socialist Realism as the basis for artistic practice, and vigorously rejected modernist formal experimentation (Truong, 1948, rep. 1977). Not all artists received the Party’s framework uncritically, for example, the painter To Ngoc Van (1906-1954) published some articles arguing for greater artistic freedom in the late 1940s (Ninh 73-82).  During the war, many artists joined the Viet Minh resistance movement against France, and moved into the mountainous areas of northern Vietnam. The works they produced there can be considered the first phase of Socialist Realism in Vietnamese art. However, due to the extreme material shortages caused by the war, most artists were unable to produce major artworks during this period. Instead, they sketched the activities of farmers and soldiers, and made prints promoting various political campaigns. Stylistic and technical developments in the arts were minimal although a studio for revolutionary lacquer painting was briefly established by To Ngoc Van and Nguyen Thu Nghiem (b.1919). Institutionalisation and the Second Indochina War (1954-1975) Once peace was restored in 1954, the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) began to establish new cultural institutions. The use of Socialist Realist style was strongly tied to the state-based system of art production and display. From 1957, visual artists were organised into an Artist’s Association (Hoi My Thuat). Without a private art market, many artists made their living through a stipend paid through the Association. The Association was also the main channel for the organisation of art exhibitions, and thus exercised a strong influence over artistic production (Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi* 53-56). The post-war period also brought more contact between artists from Vietnam and other Socialist countries. Vietnamese artists were sent overseas to study or exhibit their work in Socialist countries, and in the early 1960s, teachers from the Soviet Union came to teach at the University of Fine Arts, Hanoi (Bui, Pham, and Chien, 98). However, despite this increase in international contact, there was also a deliberate emphasis on defining ‘national character’ in the visual arts (Taylor, *Framing the National Spirit* 113-14).  Improved material conditions after 1954 meant that artists were now able to develop larger works. A painting from this period that was considered to be an acceptable example of Vietnamese Socialist Realism was *Gap Nhau* (Meeting), by Mai Van Hien, appreciated for its positive tone, simple style, bright colour and message of cooperation between soldiers and civilians (Taylor, *Framing the National Spirit* 116-17). Other artists at this time conducted further research into lacquer, creating large lacquer paintings on themes such as wartime victories, Vietnamese history, and idealised images of workers and farmers. A significant example is the large 1957 painting *Xo Viet Nghe Tinh* (Nghe Tinh Soviets), representing an anti-colonial movement of the 1930s, which was collaboratively painted in lacquer by six prominent Vietnamese artists, from a sketch by Nguyen Duc Nung (1909-1983). Painting on silk continued to be practiced, using the techniques developed at the EBAI, but capturing the lives of workers, farmers and soldiers, for instance in the works of Nguyen Thu (b.1930) and Vu Giang Huong (1930-2011). In sculpture, artists like Nguyen Hai (1933-2012), Diep Minh Chau (1919-2002) and Le Cong Thanh (b.1932) began to develop new styles for conveying revolutionary subject matter in a heroic mode.  Fig.1: Nguyen Duc Nung, Tran Dinh Tho, Nguyen Van Ty, Pham Van Don, Nguyen Sy Ngoc and Huynh van Thuan, *Xo Viet Nghe Tinh* (Nghe Tinh Soviets), 1957, lacquer on board, 160 x 320 cm, collection of National Museum of Fine Arts, Vietnam.  The late 1950s were also marked by the most significant episode of dissent against the Party’s control over culture, which was known as the *Nhan Van Giai Pham* affair, after two new literary journals that emerged in 1956. The intellectuals involved with these journals – many of whom were Communist Party members who had participated in the revolution – advocated for greater cultural and civic freedoms. The movement was repressed in 1958, and the key intellectuals (including artists) involved with the publications were punished (Taylor, *Framing the National Spirit* 115; Ninh 136-63). Following this incident, certain artists, such as the renowned modernist painters Bui Xuan Phai (1921-1988) and Nguyen Sang (1923-1988), retreated from mainstream culture, working largely unsupported and outside state structures. This episode marked the beginning of a schism between the state system of Socialist Realism and underground modernist art (Taylor, *Framing the National Spirit* 115-20).  As the activity of the Second Indochina war increased in the mid-1960s, artists were less able to devote themselves fully to art, as many had to serve as soldiers or factory workers. The government began to devote most of its cultural resources to the production of propaganda materials. Poster production began on a larger scale in the late 1960s. The aesthetics of Vietnamese propaganda posters had several different influences and sources: the painterly sensibility of the EBAI, the influence of local folk printing aesthetics, and a bolder, high-contrast, graphic style. Waning Influence of Socialist Realism (1975-1986) Following the end of the Second Indochina War and the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, Socialist Realism became the official style for the whole of Vietnam. Large-scale works were made in this period to commemorate the heroism of the war. The theme of industrial labour emerged more prominently than in previous decades (Bui, Pham, and Chien 250). However, from the early 1980s, artists increasingly began to broaden the stylistic parameters of their work, even within conservative settings like the annual national exhibitions (Bui, Pham, and Chien 243-44). Northern artists were also influenced by their new contacts with artists from South Vietnam, as well as artists returning from studies elsewhere in the socialist bloc. Inside the Artist’s Association, a younger generation of reformists began to advocate for change (Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi* 77-93). This anticipated the official shift in government policy from 1986 through the policies of *Doi Moi* (Renovation). In the years following *Doi Moi*, most artists moved away from Socialist Realism towards wide-ranging experimentation with different styles, subjects and practices, supported by the development of the private market and independent art spaces. The principal area in which Socialist Realist aesthetics persist in Vietnam is in the public posters and promotional materials for government social campaigns. Socialist Realist poster art from the wartime period also has a popular second life as souvenirs for the tourist market. |
| Further reading:  (Ninh)  (Bui, Pham and Chien)  (Taylor, Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art)  (Taylor, Framing the National Spirit: Viewing and Reviewing Painting under the Revolution)  (Chinh) |