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MAO ZEDONG'S BAKHTINIAN LAUGHTER: The Chinese pop avant-garde and its origins

Chinese painting of the late 1980s and early 1990s, both traditional and modern, is deeply rooted in the context of Chinese culture and proudly employs elements of local aesthetics. Chinese art is a reflection of the historical and social circumstances of the time when it was created, and it is through those circumstances, therefore, that it should be interpreted and evaluated. Understanding the conditions that gave rise to the development of a given type of artistic expression is particularly important in the case of postmodern art in China. As a relatively new trend, Chinese pop avant-garde and all its mutations are very often exoticized in the Western world and seen through an Orientalism-tainted lens, and even considered foreign to the modern world art. Contrary to popular belief, however, this type of art can legitimately be treated as a fully-fledged representation of world art, even if it speaks a different language and does not always relate to global issues. The aim of the article is to familiarise Western viewers with Chinese avant-garde painting, taking into account its origins, the subsequent developments and links with pop art and other related arts, and acquaint them with its most important representatives. Considering the character of this publication, it was decided to omit a fair number of interesting phenomena and manifestations of protest culture (which evolved from the avant-garde into the pop avant-garde) in sculpture, theatre and experimental film, as they deserve separate discussion and analysis.

DEFINITIONS

Social, historical and cultural phenomena in China are often marked by specific dates to pinpoint their emergence. However, these are only arbitrarily defined watersheds that often deviate from the actual framework of the processes described. It is assumed, for example, that postmodernism in Chinese culture began in 1985 and was spawned by the lectures of Fredric Jameson (born 1934) at the universities of Beijing and Shenzhen.¹⁾ The same assumption is made about pop art, which was first presented to Chinese viewers at Robert Rauschenberg's (1925–2008) exhibition, which opened in Beijing on 15 November 1985.²⁾ (This particular appearance is thus dated to the day.) However, adopting such specific periodisations is often misguided, as the period of shaping a given current or phenomenon cannot usually be so clearly determined. As far as the pop avant-garde in China is concerned, its origins date back to the 1990s, specifically to the successful exhibition of Wang Guangyi (b. 1957) in Beijing in 1992, which made this particular current increasingly popular among local artists.

The term “pop avant-garde” has not yet taken root in the circles of sinologists and art critics with regard to Chinese art. However, the terms “pop” and “avant-garde” have been associated at least twice with this specific context. First of all, this association was made in the wake of the famous 1993 exhibition “Mao goes pop: China post-1989”, which was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney.³⁾ The other instance is Rosella Ferrari's 2012 book *Pop Goes the Avant-garde*,⁴⁾ which is devoted to the work of Meng Jinghui (born 1966), the director of the so-called “wayward theatre”.⁵⁾ Most of the cultural phenomena (such as pop art, postmodernism or avant-garde⁶⁾)

¹⁾ For more on Fredric Jameson's activity in China, see Wang (1997).

²⁾ Meng Yao (2009: 32).

³⁾ Accessed online [25.03.2020]: <https://www.mca.com.au/artists-works/exhibitions/6-mao-goes-pop-china-post-1989/>

⁴⁾ Ferrari (2012).

⁵⁾ The term, popularized among Polish sinologists by Izabella Łabędzka (see Łabędzka (2003)), denotes a range of phenomena characteristic of the experimental “small theatre” (小剧场 *xiao juchang*) that was often disobedient of the authorities.

⁶⁾ The avant-garde, albeit in a very limited form, reached China in the 1920s with the Western and Russian artistic trends. However, due to historical circumstances, it did not establish itself in Chinese art, as at the time it was regarded as being of no value for educational or propaganda purposes.

that reached China after the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) on the wave of Cultural Fever⁷⁾ were quickly Sinicised. Although these are Western phenomena and regarded in China as a manifestation of Westernization of culture, it is widely acknowledged that they were immediately filtered through local aesthetics, modes of artistic expression and topical choices. As a result, the artists of the 1980s and 1990s developed their own individual style, which they used when grappling with recent historical events; it was also useful in questioning the official national and state-wide historical narrative. However, the art created at that time cannot be described as a universal medium, as it is deeply embedded in the Chinese context and can be described as an amalgam of various aesthetic and stylistic orders.

Chinese avant-garde art, and especially the pop avant-garde, is hybrid in nature: a Sinicised, local version of the Western original, it was considered a mutation of postmodern art transferred into the Third World (at the time, China still referred to itself as belonging to it).⁸⁾ Ferrari defines the Chinese pop avant-garde as one that is neither an inferior version of the avant-garde nor a manifestation of its obsolescence but just another mutation. In China, in the shadow of post-socialism and a dynamically developing economy, the avant-garde has undergone a series of metamorphoses, regularly reimagining itself according to the ever-changing circumstances. The pop avant-garde is not the final stage of experimenting with the avant-garde in Chinese culture. Ferrari notes that it has been at the forefront of experimental art and has not been completely absorbed by the mainstream. On the contrary, “it has forced the mainstream to adapt and change”.⁹⁾ The pop component of avant-garde art epitomises the commercialisation of culture and its mass character. The pop avant-garde reaches to pop culture and to its origins in entertainment and commercialisation. Thanks to its “mechanical reproducibility” and the capability of being easily copied, it also meets the needs of the masses. It is becoming a proletarian art and, therefore, a sort of art that does not neces-

⁷⁾ The Chinese “Cultural Fever” (文化热 *wenhure*) was a period in 1980s when China saw an influx of cultural, literary and philosophical trends that had been out of reach for the Chinese under Mao Zedong, particularly during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.

⁸⁾ The deep Sinicisation of various manifestations of Western culture was not a novelty in China; the phenomenon in question is associated with the idea of “taking over” (拿来主义 *nalaizhuyi*) described and advocated by Lu Xun in the 1920s.

⁹⁾ Ferrari (2013), text accessed online [25.03.2020]: <https://www.berfrois.com/2013/09/notes-on-pop-avant-garde-china-rossella-ferrari/>

sarily have an elitist ring.¹⁰⁾ As a result, thanks to the qualities mentioned above, artistic expression, and especially pop avant-garde art, has become markedly democratised in China. In his introduction to Theodor W. Adorno's *Cultural Industry*, Jay M. Bernstein writes that postmodernism loses its ability to differentiate into "high" and "low" and does not fall short of the promise of high art.¹¹⁾ The Chinese pop avant-garde can also be characterised in this way, combining as it does mass and elite art, and becoming extremely difficult to categorise as a result.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POP AVANT-GARDE IN CHINA

Ten years after the Cultural Revolution had ended, the memory of it echoed strongly in the communal awareness of the Chinese. The entire stretch of Mao Zedong's rule, described as the 'red experience' (红色经验 *hongse jingyan*), paved the way for Chinese critical art to develop in the 1980s.¹²⁾ The beginnings of avant-garde art after the Cultural Revolution are often seen in New Wave '85 (85 新潮 *bawu xinchao*). It was one of the first movements in counterculture to seek a way to defuse trauma and expose the 'scars' of Mao's rule. The artists who gathered around New Wave '85, which was the first formalised avant-garde movement in China, produced their artworks in a fairly realistic manner, but they also used means of expression derived from political propaganda. This particular feature was a hallmark of the Chinese avant-garde as a whole and of its pop mutation in subsequent years. Thanks to the activities of New Wave '85, China saw a proliferation of private galleries of modern art and the emergence of professions hitherto unknown in communist circles, including contemporary art critics and dealers.¹³⁾

In the next decade, the artistic message was reinforced by the experience of the suppressed 1989 protest in Tian'anmen Square, and the effects of neoliberal economic policy and resulting commercialisation of all spheres of life, including the emotional sphere. The spring of 1989 became a reference point for an entire generation of artists and has marked a clear watershed

¹⁰⁾ For more on this, see Benjamin (2008).

¹¹⁾ Bernstein (2019: 53).

¹²⁾ The term "critical art" refers to a trend in Polish art of the 1990s that was critical of the transformation period. It seems to be particularly apt to the Chinese art of that period.

¹³⁾ Tuchman (2008: 90).

in the interpretation of contemporary Chinese art. After Tian'anmen, artists sensitive to all sorts of social changes were engulfed by the 'wave of commercialisation' of the 1990s. For avant-garde art, this was a time of experiments in search of new forms of expression, which resulted in coping better with economic globalisation and combining the outdated Leninist political model with new technologies.¹⁴⁾ In a short period of time, art became commercialised and massively replicated, and the goal of the copyists was to accumulate capital, which has been a characteristic of capitalism. After the initial period of rebelliousness, a large section of the countercultural artists (not only those active in the visual arts) managed to negotiate with the authorities, the mainstream and mass culture, which provided them with favourable conditions to create popular art and earn money from it. Thanks to their presence at artistic events such as the biennial of art in Venice in 1993 and Sao Paulo in 1994,¹⁵⁾ Chinese pop avant-garde art, defined as 'pop art' at the exhibitions, has earned worldwide recognition in the world and gathered a wide circle of enthusiasts. These two exhibitions were the first opportunity for Western viewers and critics to become acquainted with Chinese pop art, with Chinese artists gaining fame and wide recognition in the following years. Thanks to the Chinese presence at the Venice Biennale, the art world could see, among other things, Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism* series of paintings, which combines advertising and socialist realist art, and portraits by Li Shan (born 1942), especially from the *Pink* series presenting a camp-queer image of Mao Zedong. However, one should also bear in mind that the Chinese avant-garde was not limited to one strand only. After 1989, some artists went underground to create extremely bold and experimental art, commenting on the social and political situation of the time in a scathingly incisive manner. The artists of this strand formed several artistic collectives, the most famous of which was probably the East Village in Beijing (北京东村 *Beijing Dongcun*), gathering performers and photographers.

The 1980s and 1990s were a period of strong political inspirations in avant-garde art. Politics was most often commented on by free art through absurdity, humour, satire and ridicule. The Chinese pop avant-garde was influenced

¹⁴⁾ Barmé (2017), text accessed online [26.03.2020]: <http://chinaheritage.net/journal/chinas-art-of-containment/>

¹⁵⁾ In Poland, the first exhibition of Chinese pop avant-garde took place in the BWA Gallery in Bydgoszcz in 2003. Titled "CHINaRT", it was not devised as representative of a specific trend in Chinese art.

not only by Western pop art, but also by Soviet (Russian) political pop art,¹⁶⁾ which shared a similar experience of deconstruction of socialist realist art. In Chinese art, the image of Mao from different periods of his activity was commonly present. The postmodern and iconoclastic carnivalisation of the Chairman and his rule is quite clearly present in all trends of the pop avant-garde. It is precisely because of art that the deified Mao became secularised. However, this process took place within the limits allowed by censorship, as long as the work was subjected to it and publicly exhibited in the PRC.¹⁷⁾ The Chinese avant-garde, including the pop avant-garde, boldly commented on reality and recent history, usually remaining critical of it or ridiculing it.

CHARACTERISTICS AND ORIGINS OF THE CHINESE POP AVANT-GARDE

The concept of Chinese pop avant-garde is extremely broad. It contains a variety of artistic and cultural phenomena, of which pop art and political pop art are the most characteristic and best recognised. In addition, elements of popular culture are also used in other contemporary artistic trends, such as 'scar and wound painting' (伤痕绘画 *shanghen huihua*), gaudy art (艳俗艺术 *yansu yishu*), cynical realism (玩世现实主义 *wanshi xianshizhuyi*) or red pop art (红色波普 *hongse popu*). It happens that in one work they overlap and sometimes compete with different visions of Chinese identity or contradictory political doctrines (e.g. in Wang Guangyi's *Great Criticism*). While Western pop art contests the commercialisation of life, consumerism, popular symbols of culture and film, and the value of everyday objects, its Chinese counterpart also often reaches for politics and emblems of recent history, using such motifs as the Sun Yat-sen's costume, red shoulder plates, the communist red star and all the attributes of power. While Western pop art stigmatised and ridiculed greed, Chinese pop art (and, more broadly, pop avant-garde) also added to this their harsh opinion of power. The Chinese pop avant-garde boldly deconstructs history and politics and changes the existing order through carnivalisation, rewriting history and consuming it in a grotesque form. It creates a group narrative by using individual stories, multiplying the faces and images of its characters. The phenomenon of por-

¹⁶⁾ Szmyt (2007: 119).

¹⁷⁾ Szatkowski (2018).

traying the former hero as an anti-hero may seem to be a certain paradox of the art of the transformation period. Another distinguishing feature is the indigenously national character of contemporary Chinese art, which was born largely out of Western art and its proper aesthetics.

Pop avant-garde art feeds on socialist realist art with little or no respect for it, perhaps because artists have been forced to practice it for a large part of their professional lives, and any attempts to look critically at it were met with harsh reaction from the authorities. In the 1980s, in his *Great Criticism* series, the already mentioned Wang Guangyi used statues of three socialist realist heroes (i.e. a soldier, a peasant and a worker), placing them on advertising posters of Western brands (e.g. Coca-Cola, Kodak or Chanel). The heroes associated with the construction and establishment of the communist country became a symbol of the extremely fast transformation of the Maoist state into a country that embodied a new kind of ruthless capitalism.¹⁸⁾ Wang Guangyi juxtaposes two fetishes of the visual arts: the capitalist symbols of consumerism rooted in contemporary culture on the one hand and, on the other, socialist production forces (peasants and workers) and model heroes of the communist revolution (soldiers). At the same time, what distinguishes him from other counterculture artists is his artistic interference in the content and form of advertising. As Rafał Drozdowski summarises such practices:

In practice, taking semantic control is tantamount to either (1) physically breaking into the visual or/and linguistic structure of the message aimed at resemantisation, as a result of which it begins to signify something completely different from its original form, or to (2) producing and disseminating alternative campaigns, a kind of counter-campaign, which stylistically refer to their originals but reverse their actual tenor and open up to opposite interpretations.¹⁹⁾

The language of Chinese pop art resembles the classic American pop art style of the 1960s but is underpinned by the context of China. Of the many types of this art form, such as political, red or revolutionary pop art, each uses a visual identification appropriate to the theme of the work. This was particularly true in the 1980s, when the experience of Mao Zedong's rule and the Cultural Revolution was still fresh. It became common practice to com-

¹⁸⁾ Žižek (2013: 147).

¹⁹⁾ Drozdowski (2009: 124-125), za: Stańczyk (2017: 125).

bine conflicting elements of Maoist art and elements associated with capitalist consumer culture. After 1989 and the Tian'anmen Square protests and their suppression, artists gained new communal experience that became a new subject matter of protest art. The atmosphere of lost hopes, intensified by increased censorship, led many artists to leave the country, go underground or put an end to their artistic activity.

The origins of the avant-garde's becoming ever more pop can be traced back to the events of 1989. Before Tian'anmen, few painters were interested in Western aesthetics (e.g. scars and wounds painting still remained largely obedient to the socialist realist style). Gradually, however, this practice began to be abandoned. This process is briefly described by Lidia Kasarello:

The events of 1989 shook the art world, causing its temporary collapse, emigration, doubt, the end of dreams of freedom and democracy. Then came the time for derision, pastiche, parody, cynicism, pop-cultural play with political and social space, which gave birth to political pop art and cynical realism.²⁰⁾

The described tendency is confirmed by entire series of paintings with the image of Mao, created, among others, by Li Shan or Yu Youhan (born 1943). Mao became a kind of 'fetish', and the magical and sentimental power bestowed on his image proved the vitality of symbolic culture in China. Art gave the Chairman a new semantic value.²¹⁾ The ridiculing of symbols related to Maoism can be compared to the ridiculing of religious symbols in religious societies. It had and continues to have an iconoclastic character; hence artists' numerous problems with censorship.

It was not easy to combine criticism of the rulers with pop art or, more broadly, with the pop avant-garde, but there were individual works clearly referring to this experience (e.g. some paintings from the series of laughing faces of Yue Minjun (b. 1962)), which clearly referred to the massacre in Tian'anmen Square. Basically, however, the pop avant-garde in the second half of the 1990s rarely dealt with political phenomena, focusing rather on contesting the neoliberal economic and social reality, which ultimately led it to comment on politics, although not directly on who held the power. In

²⁰⁾ Kasarello (2011: 215).

²¹⁾ Kasarello (2011: 216).

the first two decades of the twenty-first century, there has been a strong influence of mainstream culture on the pop-avant-garde, which, through the strong commercialisation of art, the democratisation of cultural life and reproductions, has actually become popular culture. The pioneering works of Yue Minjun and other artists of the current (mainly those representing cynical realism) started to be reproduced and massively replicated, lost their avant-garde character and became a part of mass culture, which is most clearly manifested in the Beijing 'art district': Zone 798. Once the launchpad of avant-garde art, it then became a place that, on account of reproduction and mass character, evolved into the domain of pop avant-garde art with the dominant component of pop. The freshness of the pop avant-garde art of the 1980s and 1990s became commonplace in the twenty-first century: this type of art has become repetitive, and the mainstream has led to its uniformization. Now, it has been reduced to mere ornament.

The pop avant-garde is a concept that comprises a broader range of meanings than pop art, it also concerns a wider spectrum of art (including, among others, theatre and music) and carries a deeper message. Due to the fact that it traces its origins to the avant-garde, it is also known for its innovative character, but the pop component implies that it is more accessible to viewers and more open to interpretation. The pop avant-garde emerged from the collision of the powerful consumerist culture and the avant-garde, but it was the latter that played the dominant role in most cases, at least in the 1980s and 1990s. In the twenty-first century, the pop avant-garde has become a product that is marketed on a massive scale. Like many other areas of the liberal economy, it has been subordinated to consumption and politics. However, in a short period of time, it has 'commoditised' collective memory, symbols of recent history and, indirectly, social emotions. However, the mass character, reproduction and commoditisation of the pop avant-garde has blunted its message: in most cases, the signature qualities of the trend in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including rebelliousness, grief, trauma and the distinctively 'subversive' interpretation of Chinese reality, have become less prominent.

CHINESE POP AVANT-GARDE ARTISTS

Zooming in on the Chinese pop avant-garde artists whose activity peaked after 1989, it seems worthwhile to focus on those whose work has garnered particularly great acclaim and commercial success, whose biographies are

fairly similar, and who share a common code of historical experience and, in a way, a similar approach to aesthetics. In what follows, We shall concentrate on such artists as Yue Minjun, Yu Youhan, Wang Guangyi and Zhang Xiaogang (born 1958).

The paintings of Yue Minjun, considered to be the protagonist of cynical realism (more below), are characterised by a remarkable dose of freedom, independence and protest. The best-known series by Yue are the laughing (or guffawing) self-portraits. The seriality and multiplication of the wickedly grinning faces suggests that all human life is based on collectivity and repetition. Like other artists who suffered the cruelty of the Cultural Revolution, Yue tries to emancipate his own self. By extension, he does the same with the Chinese “communal self” that was first suppressed by Confucianism for many centuries and then, in the second half of the twentieth century, by Maoism. The artist does not expose the post-revolutionary wounds and scars in a literal manner. Neither does he use a simplistic language of artistic expression. His approach consists of using hallucinatory repetition: depicting situations that concern vast social groups typical of the Chinese context, he replicates the same inventory of figures, the same repertoire of situations and symbols. The serial and cyclical character of Yue’s painting makes them and their stories appear as if they were taken from a cartoon. His art mingles the style of socialist propaganda with the artistic language of consumerism: the background of many of his paintings is formed by images of Tian’anmen, red flags, red balloons, lanterns, colourful rain or doves of peace. The matrix for Yue’s human clones, with their petrified sardonic laughter, is his own self-portrait. The ultimate authority here is sheer absurdity,²²⁾ while the paintings reverberate with Bakhtinian laughter and carnivalesque mode. In interviews, Yue often emphasises his critical attitude towards pop culture, which he declares to be his prey. Yue Minjun’s art is emphatically political. By commenting on various phenomena of culture, power and recent history, he lays bare the enormous network of dependencies in which the lives of all Chinese citizens are entangled.²³⁾

Yu Youhan is considered to be one of the most important representatives of red pop art. One important feature of this particular trend consists of deconstructing communist art, usually Maoist in character, created in the

²²⁾ Kasarekko (2011: 217–218).

²³⁾ See “Yue Minjun xianshi de haha jingxiang” (2006: 106).

spirit of Chairman Mao's Yan'an Talks.²⁴⁾ Compared to those by other pop avant-garde artists, Yu Youhan's works are more noticeably pervaded with a sense of humour and characteristically offer a smaller dose of realism. The artist relatively often applies new elements to images that have become deeply ingrained in collective memory, such as that of Mao Zedong visiting his home town of Shaoshan. At the same time, he also applies uncommon painting techniques, which prompts the viewers to reinterpret the images they are so familiar with. Paintings by Liu Dahong (born 1962) evince similar qualities, offering remixes of images of Mao and the Cultural Revolution and making references to landscape painting, Buddhist painting or the Orthodox Christian iconostas.

As for Wang Guangyi, from among his numerous and heterogeneous works one has to note especially the above-mentioned *Great Criticism* series, in which the artist combines propaganda posters from the period of the Cultural Revolution and emblematic features of the commercialisation of Chinese culture. The heterogeneity inherent in his art is aimed especially at viewers with similar experiences. Provoking a certain sense of consternation, it destroys the established sense of aesthetics. Wang Guangyi employs the "angry look" of workers, peasants and soldiers in ostensible advertisements of such Western products as Coca-Cola and Kodak. The Great Criticism series recounts China's recent history and illustrates the emotional state of the country and its people, linking politics with the market, history with the present and the West with the East. Wang Guangyi is the best-known representative of red pop art. He was inspired by Andy Warhol, especially in the creation of the *Grid* series, in which he used a large-format portrait of Mao Zedong, which he placed behind bars.

One of the most recognised (and highest-paid) painters in China is Zhang Xiaogang. In his most famous series (*Bloodline* 血缘 *xueyuan*), he contested the human fate and recent history of the nation on the basis of photographs that he reproduced on canvas. Zhang Xiaogang's work was very noticeably influenced by the aesthetics of the early years of Mao's rule and the Cultural

²⁴⁾ Mao Zedong's talks of 1942, published as "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art", delineated the boundaries within which artists could operate. The framework remained in force for many years: writers and artists were expected to draw on folk and popular art and transform its language into a socialist, mass language, aimed at the simple man. Excerpts from the Yan'an talks were included in the chapter "Culture and Art" of the Little Red Book. The Yan'an talk was also used by the so-called "Gang of Four" in 1966 to create a new kind of culture, including model arts.

Revolution. The artist makes abundant use of elements of mass culture and anti-elitist memory, which makes his art qualify as postmodern.²⁵⁾ In *Bloodline*, by reproducing photographs, he tried to depict the collective character, emotions and spirit of the nation of the 1950s and 1960s. The family portraits present rigid and austere figures, bulging eyes and pale complexions, their faces stamped with yellow, red or grey stains. Men and women have the same facial expressions, which deprives them of their sexuality and gender-specific qualities. The repetitiveness of situations, faces and emotions (despite the apparent lack thereof) allows Zhang to convey a sense of aloofness, separation and blunt superficiality in human relations.²⁶⁾ In *Bloodline*, the artist portrayed collective traits, both emotional and physical, common to the Chinese society of the 1950s and 1960s. The popularity of the avant-garde of the 1980s and its later pop avant-garde mutation contributed to Zhang's great success, in both commercial and artistic terms, not only in China but also worldwide. Zhang Xiaogang's works, alongside the laughing faces from Yue Minjun's paintings, have become widely recognised as emblems of contemporary Chinese art.

The obsessive seriality of replicated figures and the mass production of this kind of art paved the way for these works to circulate as part of pop culture. As Monika Szmyt rightly observed, representatives of this trend earned great acclaim and wealth, obtaining the paradoxical status of dissidents and nouveaux riches.²⁷⁾ Cynical realism and pop art offered non-Chinese viewers a key to understanding Chinese art: unlike literature or theatre, they do not require fluency in the Chinese language. The works by Fang, Yue and Zhang achieved remarkable success in the West, becoming symbols of contemporary Chinese art.

It is worth noting that in the case of Fang Lijun and Yue Minjun, the concept of the face should be decoded on a number of levels. The Chinese term mian (面), translated as 'face', indicates how important the concept of one's own image is for the Chinese. Behind the sardonic smile (or grin), there lurks a whirl of hidden, suppressed emotions. Replicated in innumerable copies, they become unified, expressing the emotional state of the society as a whole.

²⁵⁾ Lin [N/D], text accessed online [27.03.2020]: <http://cpfd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CPFDTOTAL-SYSY201505001039.htm>

²⁶⁾ Lin [N/D], text accessed online [27.03.2020]: <http://cpfd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CPFDTOTAL-SYSY201505001039.htm>

²⁷⁾ Szmyt (2007: 116)

Interpretation is handed over to the viewer, who can notice a vast range of emotions in those out-of-shape faces, including fear, exasperation, playfulness and indifference. Cynical realism can be seen as a form of criticism aimed at the ethical principles of Chinese society, most notably as a reproach for wearing those impenetrable masks at all times. On account of its characteristic means of artistic expression, this type of art is often compared to Russian soc-art, but it must be noted that the latter does not employ the fetish of consumerism among its signature motifs.²⁸⁾

THE POP AVANT-GARDE AND OTHER POSTMODERN TRENDS

The output of individual artists escapes unambiguous classification, and it is relatively difficult to assign them to the specific pop avant-garde phenomena. The trend as a whole uses various traits of pop, kitsch and remix, and is associated with cynical realism, a trend that emerged as a response of art to the unbearable reality.²⁹⁾ However, the topics addressed by artists had a common denominator: the most recent history and its traumas, sexuality emancipated after years of suppression, consumerism and various attempts at redefining Chinese culture at the time of Deng's liberal policy of opening-up. Cynical realism expressed disillusionment and aversion to the intellectual idealism of the art of the 1980s. In the 1990s, the trend often manifested the intellectual torpor and exasperation with the pathos ensuing from the suppression of protests in Tian'anmen Square. At that time, Fang Lijun (b. 1963) and Yue Minjun portrayed realistic and grotesque clones shorn of individual emotions that served as cynical caricatures of modern society. These realistic depictions by Fang and Yue, heavily imbued with cynicism and grotesque, have become easily recognisable emblems of contemporary Chinese art. The figures painted by Zhang Xiaogang, Yue Minjun and, at least to some extent, Fang Lijun are characterized by apathy, atrophy, empty gazes and helpless laughter. This refers the viewer to the existentialism that was often present in the Chinese

²⁸⁾ Szmyt (2007: 119)

²⁹⁾ Hou Hanru formulated an interesting opinion on the relationship between the avant-garde, political pop and cynical realism, which states that these phenomena should be considered separately. He believes that both political pop and cynical realism were rarely censored, and also enjoyed the benefits of free market economy. See Hou (2010: 364).

art of the early 1980s (e.g. in Gao Xingjian's theatre) and especially after 1989 in visual arts, with its characteristic emphasis on the nonsense of existence. In devising their own means of expression, Chinese artists, especially the pop avant-garde, very commonly combine a large dose of humour with de facto pessimistic messages.

A separate phenomenon, still fairly understudied, is another strand of the pop avant-garde: gaudy art (艳俗艺术 *yansu yishu*). This type of art uses well-known objects of Chinese reality, symbols of everyday life and politics, and then processes them in a postmodern way with a generous tinge of satire and parody. Gaudy art went alongside cynical realism, and its role was not to ease the social trauma or alleviate the harm done to artists who suffered persecution. Its task was rather to offer a derisive deconstruction of Mao Zedong's image and the symbols of Mao's rule. Over time, in the 1990s, gaudy art gradually superseded red pop art by commenting on the current situation.³⁰⁾ With its growing popularity, pop avant-garde art strode into a period characterised by ample use of cartoons, meme art, caricature and satirical drawing, heavily charged with absurdity and self-directed irony. In a relatively short time, the trend became markedly commercialised, breaking the boundary between everyday life and art. One of the representatives of this trend is Wang Qingsong (b. 1966),³¹⁾ who created series of collage photographs featuring individual naked men (sometimes having a female body), modelled on the thousand-handed Avalokiteśvara. Their hands hold various objects, such as cigarettes, money, telephones, CDs or Chinese flags. The Luo brothers are also associated with gaudy art, creating paintings and porcelain figurines depicting children. The figurines are usually accompanied by elements of Chinese folk culture (at times including references to politics and religion) that are substituted by objects commonly associated with the Westernisation of everyday life in China, including hamburgers and Coca-Cola. While Western culture is presented in their works by employing a few simple elements without any significant connotations, the references to the symbols of Chinese folk culture go much deeper, using, among other things, animal motifs (and their culturally-determined meanings), allusive representations of fruit and colour and masks characteristic of Chinese opera. Another important artist of

³⁰⁾ Of course, the image of Mao Zedong did not disappear completely: it continues to be used in art, which is testimony to the vitality of symbolic culture in China.

³¹⁾ Wang Qingsong is an artist of multifarious specialties. Other works by him can be qualified as representative of other pop avant-garde strands.

the trend is Xu Yihui (b. 1963), who uses everyday objects to transmute into porcelain artefacts. Mass products and ordinary objects that created China's reality in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are treated by the artist as artworks in their own right. The little red books, boxed food and other products that were aimed at establishing and sustaining a sense of national community and a common cultural code are reproduced in porcelain, which increases their value. For English-speaking viewers, the semantic field of interpretation is expanded by referencing the lower-case word "china". As a result, objects of everyday use made of porcelain become in a way "sacralised" by employing Chinese artisanal tradition.³²⁾

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese pop art and pop avant-garde should be observed through the prism of postmodern culture that is composed of a whole range of cultural phenomena, including collages and remixes of existing artworks, and bold utilisation of mass culture. These trends in art evince great interest in deconstruction, recycling and eclecticism. In China, they often draw inspiration from the nation's history, taking on an iconoclastic character, which above all deals with Mao Zedong and his policies, but also with the later ideas of creating a harmonious socialist state. The Chinese pop avant-garde, replicating the original artworks on a massive scale in innumerable copies, and also by the artists themselves, who create vast series of similar, almost identical works, significantly reduces the original aesthetic experience. One of the most prominent characteristics of the pop avant-garde is its irreverent attitude toward classicism and elitism. It consists of demolishing the wall that traditionally separated art from politics.

The Chinese authorities approach avant-garde and pop avant-garde art with reserve. After the protests in Tian'anmen Square in 1989 and their ruthless suppression, the Communist Party of China began to criticise the new art more vehemently than ever before, accusing it of failing to promote the ultimate positive role model and hero (implicitly: the Party itself). This kind of art was accused of moral nihilism, lack of support for reforms and lack of information (propaganda) character. The parody of the two great

³²⁾ Other notable gaudy artists are Luo Weidong (b. 1963), Luo Weibing (b. 1964) and Luo Weiguo (b. 1972).

narratives, i.e. the revolutionary Maoist one and the other that hails consumerism (expressed through the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism), lies at the root of Chinese pop avant-garde. As a result, the permissible (i.e. allowed by the authorities) cultural and political provocations have become, to some extent, its second nature. In Chinese contemporary art, laughter is a manifestation of rebellion and grief: the Bakhtinian laughter manifests fear. Using these means of expression, the pop avant-garde art aims to go beyond the aesthetic appeal and provoke a certain sense of consternation, forcing the viewers to revise their opinions. In postmodern times, when art, too, has become more democratic and accessible to everyone (owing mainly to the possibility of reproduction and to the new media), the pop avant-garde is still understandable to wide circles of viewers, even though it does require some knowledge and competence. Chinese postmodern art can be regarded as national, as it is closely related to the locality and hence does not hold universal appeal. On the other hand, it can be properly interpreted by non-Chinese viewers, too, especially on account of its bold rebelliousness, originality and message, provided that remixes are also regarded as original artworks in their own right.

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