

Chinese Painting Changed Through Time:  
An Examination Through the Works of He Sen

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A common ideal of Westerners is that Chinese painting started in ink wash traditions and has not evolved since ancient times. This assumption can be disproven when examining the ways in which Chinese painting rapidly evolved in the twentieth century through Socialist Realism, the Cultural Revolution, and Globalization. Contemporary artists such as He Sen take the historic traditions of ink wash and the new traditions of oil painting in China and merge them to create works representative of the rapidly changing and ever-growing world of Chinese painting. In his artwork He Sen both explores the ideas of New Painting and resurrects traditional subjects that were lost during the twentieth century.

To understand how artists such as He Sen came to be, first one must examine the changes to art in twentieth century China. In the early twentieth century the Qing dynasty was reaching its final years of its rule over China. The Qing Dynasty implemented programs to encourage young people to study abroad. This led to many artists to study abroad in Japan, Europe, and America. These students became inspired by the Western oil painting traditions they learned and encountered and brought them back to China.<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s, the term *meishu* (fine arts) became a concept in China, inspired by Greek and Japanese terminology; it defined fine arts as having three qualifications: conceptualization, beauty, and natural objects. Alternatively it is defined by skill or mastery and beauty.<sup>2</sup> The addition of the term *meishu* to Chinese vocabulary showed an influence by the West and allowed for a separation between common art (craft) and fine arts, which previously had a close relationship to one another.

Xu Beihong was one of the artists who traveled to Europe during the early twentieth century to study Western painting. In 1919 Xu traveled to Paris and traveled around Europe for until 1927. During his time in Europe Xu created oil paintings and studied old masters including

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<sup>1</sup> Peng Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art* trans. Bruce G. Doar (Milano: Charta Books Ltd., 2010,) 38.

<sup>2</sup> Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art*, 53.

Titian, Courbet, and Velazques by observing and creating copies of their works.<sup>3</sup> In 1928 Xu began teaching and by doing so he began to spread Western oil painting techniques and traditions to his students, who would have had little knowledge of Western art.<sup>4</sup> As an ink and oil painter, Xu Beihong and other artists who studied in the West started a ripple effect in Chinese painting in which two traditions from vastly different cultures began to interact and affect each other.

The Republic of China was formed in 1911 after the collapse of the Qing dynasty, and in 1927 Chinese art and painting came to be controlled by the government on a new level. Instead of scholars having the final say of what artwork meant and how to interpret a piece, the government began to take control of the meaning of artwork and whether or not it was an acceptable piece in the political climate of the time.<sup>5</sup> Chinese painting began to be propagandized by the National Party and anti-Imperialist ideals were pushed by the government. This meant that the government discouraged young artists from studying Western and Japanese ways of painting and instead pushed traditional methods of Chinese painting.<sup>6</sup>

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China, which meant another major change to the modes of art making in China. In this time period the goals of the Soviet Union and the PRC were aligned, and so China adopted the Soviet artstyle Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism was a movement in arts and literature that promoted Socialist ideals and often depicted healthy and strong citizens under the rule of Socialism.<sup>7</sup> For Chinese artists this meant that Western oil painting styles including Western Realism were

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Y. Otsuka and Fangfang Xu, *Xu Beihong : Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting : Selections from the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2011,) 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Otsuka and Xu, *Xu Beihong : Pioneer of Modern Chinese Painting : Selections from the Xu Beihong Memorial Museum*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art*, 79.

<sup>6</sup> Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art*, 80-83.

<sup>7</sup> Peng Lü, "Chapter 12: The Influence of Soviet Socialist Realism and the Transition to the 'Two-In-One-Combination,'" in *A History of Art in 20th-Century China* Trans. Bruce G. Doar (Milano: Charter Books Ltd., 2011,) 495-501.

thrown out due to their involvement with Capitalism and Russian Realism was taught instead. In this time frame there were a number of cultural exchanges between the PRC and the Soviet Union in which Chinese artists studied alongside Soviet artists, one such artist was Konstantin Maksimov. Maksimov taught in China from 1954 to 1957 and was extremely influential to the development of Realism (oil) painting in China.<sup>8</sup>

From Socialist Realism eventually came the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in which many pieces of historic and new art were destroyed. The Cultural Revolution is an era of chaos in Chinese History, during this time period the Red Guards were known to beat artists, destroy art and books, and use extremist tactics against those who went against Mao.<sup>9</sup> This art period was an evolution of Socialist Realism in which artists did not have to strictly be oil painters or strictly be educated to be recognized by the Chinese Government. Paintings were still heavily influenced by Socialist Realism, but artists became inspired by other sources including disposable prints. In this time, ink painting was still existing in the form of Black Painting, a collection of paintings that were considered problematic by the Chinese government.

Following the death of Mao in 1976, the Chinese government drastically changed which allowed for a drastic change in its art world. The one child policy was introduced in 1979 and spurred a number of artists to react to it through art. From the 70s to the 80s Chinese artists made a number of apolitical to highly political works that weren't forcibly controlled by Socialism. These works existed from private to public and are often what the West considers /to be China's version of Modern Art. Exhibitions such as *The China/Avant-Garde* art exhibition showcased trends in Chinese art, but were still safeguarded by the Chinese government.<sup>10</sup> Works in this

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<sup>8</sup> Lü, "Chapter 12: The Influence of Soviet Socialist Realism and the Transition to the 'Two-In-One-Combination,'" 502-505.

<sup>9</sup> Richard King and Jan Walls, "Introduction: Vibrant Images of a Turbulent Decade," from *Art in Turmoil: The Chinese Cultural Revolution, 1966-76* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010,) 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> Hung Wu, "The China/Avant-Garde exhibition, 1989," in *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History (1970s-2000s)* (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2014,) 1-3.

exhibition ranged from conceptual to vulgar, with artists pushing the limits to see what they could get away with. Chinese art in this exhibition seems to exist at two polarities, with some artists recognizing and reflecting upon the Cultural Revolution and others exploring mediums that could not have been recognized prior due to the political climate, this included performance and abstraction.<sup>11</sup>

Political Pop emerged in the 1980s and can be seen as combining elements of Pop Art and Socialist Realism to question the rapidly changing political and social climate of China from Socialism and isolation into semi-Capitalism and globalization.<sup>12</sup> Without a vast knowledge of Western art, Chinese artists tended towards free expression and Modernist questions. This alongside the different development of art movements in China compared to the West means that China's Modernist and Contemporary eras have different timelines than Western ones.<sup>13</sup>

The Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 ushered in a new era of art in China. In 1989 Chinese artists and painters began to deconstruct Chinese symbols, including ones that were recent, and art began to recognize that history was not yet over but the future had already begun.<sup>14</sup> New Painting is a catch-all term to describe the artwork that Chinese artists started making following the Tiananmen Square Protests including Cynical Realism and Political Pop. New Painting is also a term representative of the turn of the twenty-first century and Contemporary Art, the period of art that exists today.<sup>15</sup> Cynical Realism rose in the 1990s and is a term coined in relation to Socialist Realism, as it is a form of art that critiques and satirizes socialist realism.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Wu, "The China/Avant-Garde exhibition, 1989."

<sup>12</sup> "Political Pop," Tate, Accessed December 15, 2023. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/political-pop>.

<sup>13</sup> Peng Lü, "Chapter 6: New Painting and Painters," in *Fragmented Reality : Contemporary Art in 21st Century China* (Milano: Charta Books Ltd., 2012,) 314.

<sup>14</sup> Lü, "Chapter 6: New Painting and Painters," 315.

<sup>15</sup> Lü, "Chapter 6: New Painting and Painters," 313.

<sup>16</sup> Angie Kordic, "Cynical Realism and Reflections of Contemporary China," *Widewalls*, November 25, 2016, <https://www.widewalls.ch/magazine/cynical-realism>.



Figure 1. Zhang Xiaogang, *Flora no. 1*, 1986, acrylic on canvas and paper, 51.5 x 36cm.

He Sen is an artist who was born in 1968 in Yunnan Province, eight years before the death of Mao. He Sen was born into the Cultural Revolution and grew up during the end of the Mao era. As a child he would have seen the remnants of Socialist Realism and the extremist destruction during the Cultural Revolution. He Sen attended the Sichuan Academy of Fine Arts under Zhang Xiaogang and was trained in the expressionist Sichuan Style.<sup>17</sup> Zhang was influenced by Western masters and art movements including Vincent Van Gogh and Surrealism.<sup>18</sup> *Flora no. 1* (fig. 1) by Zhang Xiaogang is an example of the type of style He Sen would have been exposed to in his schooling.

<sup>17</sup> “WHITE RABBIT COLLECTION/ ARTISTS & WORKS / He Sen 何森,” Judith Neilson Projects, Accessed December 15, 2023, <https://judithneilsonprojects.com.au/project/hesen>.

<sup>18</sup> Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art*, 538-542.



Figure 2. He Sen, *Shattered World I*, 1989, 200 x 350 cm.

New Painters were known to delve into personal concepts, reflecting their own personal states.<sup>19</sup> In He Sen's early work following his graduation he often depicted depressed figures. Works such as *Shattered World I* (figure 2) reflect the mental state of He Sen's generation in light of the Tiananmen Square Protest and rapid political change in China. He Sen is also known to have had issues in his personal life that he reflects in this period of art.<sup>20</sup> He Sen's influence from Socialist Realism can be seen in *Triptych with Scenic Residences in the Middle* (fig. 3). Though the figures in this painting are not political or known, the shades of red that were highly present during Socialist Realism surround the left figure, border the piece, and are present in all three of the figures' faces and clothing. This features realistic figures, a man with a neutral face on the left panel, and a man with a neutral face looking at the audience and a woman smiling on

<sup>19</sup> Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art*, 606.

<sup>20</sup> Lü, *A Pocket History of 20th-Century Chinese Art*, 608.



the right panel. In combination with the average street in the middle, this piece could be a spin on Socialist Realist art that depicts a true reality rather than an idealized reality.



Figure 3. He Sen, *Triptych with Scenic Residences in the Middle*, 1992, 180 x 370 cm.



Figure 4. He Sen, *Young Girl Turning Sideways*, 1998, 150 x 120 cm.

Through the 1990s He Sen's style continued to evolve and his brushstrokes transformed from impressionistic to smooth. His work often included figures in liminal spaces with only



walls, beds, or couches to dictate where they are making eye-contact with audiences (see fig. 4). From 1996 to 2000 his figures had facial features and made eye contact with audiences, but they did not have eyes. He also began to use limited-pallets of purple and blue that continued on into the 2000s. In 2001 he began to depict his figures with eyes once again and he began his series of paintings of (mainly) girls smoking.



Figure 5. He Sen, *Two Girls I*, 2003, 200 x 250 cm.

The style in which He Sen paints his smoking girls (fig. 5) is reflective of a trend in New Painting based on photography. In the late 1990s and early 2000s painters in China began to take more reference from photos due to the rise of handheld cameras and cell phones. This trend was considered unacademic and lazy by institutions, but that did not stop artists. Some New Painters even began to mechanically produce photographs.<sup>21</sup> He Sen's photographic-style paintings of women are reflective of changes in painting that happened in both the East and the West, never before had artists been able to reference an unmoving subject so easily. By depicting subjects

<sup>21</sup> Lü, "Chapter 6: New Painting and Painters," 325-326.

who are scantily-clad, smoking, putting on makeup, and holding stuffed animals, He Sen's work can be interpreted as depicting Chinese youth who were overly influenced by Western culture.<sup>22</sup> Given the work's neutrality in subject with its photographic style the art could also be interpreted as neutrally documenting changes in Chinese culture.

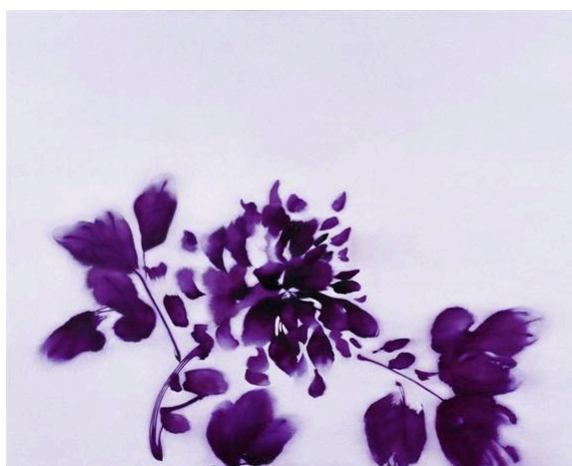


Figure 6. He Sen, *Xu Wei Peony*, 2005, oil on canvas, 200 x 500 cm.

In 2005, He Sen began to recreate traditional Chinese artworks from reference and from stories, but he depicted them with oil on canvas instead of with ink on paper. His work *Xu Wei Peony* (fig. 6) is a recreation of the work of Xu Wei, a famous Chinese painter from the Ming period. He Sen expands upon Xu Wei's work by depicting the peonies in purple oil paint on canvas instead of black ink on canvas. This piece is reflective of He Sen's color palette as an artist during this time period, which can be seen when comparing it to *Two Girls I* (fig. 5) and *Young Girl Turning Sideways* (fig. 4). From 2005 onward, He Sen has had a split artistic practice of depicting historic Chinese stories and motifs and depicting realist girls and women in liminal spaces.

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<sup>22</sup> "He Sen," Primo Marella Gallery, Accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.primomarellagallery.com/en/artists/22/he-sen/>.



Figure 7. *The Romance of West Chamber - Farewell at the Pavilion*, 2011, oil on canvas, 300 x 400 cm.

He Sen's current artistic practice is reflective of a blend of Western and Chinese historic, Modern, and Contemporary practices. He often creates paintings that are split into two or three sides, with different colors and different artistic practices reflected in each section. In *The Romance of West Chamber - Farewell at the Pavillion* (fig. 7) the painting is split into three sections with horizontal stripes. The top and bottom sections feature the figures in oil paint that is reminiscent of traditional Chinese watercolor paintings, and the middle section features a thick layer of gray impasto oil paint. By using impasto oil paint instead of thin water colors, He Sen mirrors Western art traditions and merges historic practices together. He questions the materiality of his pieces as well as his subject matter.

As per subject matter, *The Romance of West Chamber - Farewell at the Pavillion* (fig. 7) is a visual representation of a classical text in which two lovers say goodbye to each other at a pavilion. He Sen's depiction of this subject is appropriated from an artwork by Wang Shuhui, who was commissioned by the People's Fine Art Publishing House to publicize the new marriage

law of 1953.<sup>23</sup> The new marriage laws allowed women equal rights in marriage, and allowed for marriages that seemed to be forced to be denied by the government, other artworks that announced and celebrated this law were often done in a Socialist Realist style.<sup>24</sup> Many of Wang Shuhui's works were reproduced as stamps in 1983 and were highly recognizable to the public, but many of her works were also destroyed.<sup>25</sup> In his work, He Sen celebrates a highly-recognizable image by the Chinese people, but also alters its depiction through his usage of oil painting.

During the twentieth century Chinese painting rapidly evolved and changed through the government's embracement of Socialist Realism and oil painting for political gain. With the rejection of Black Painting and the loss of artwork during the Cultural Revolution, ink painting and traditional Chinese subjects became unpopular. In the beginning of his artistic career, He Sen played on newer types of Chinese painting and the themes of New Painting and was highly experimental with his subject matter and paint application. In the 2000s his work evolved into experimentations with realistic subjects inspired by photography and the portrayal of Chinese youth affected by Western culture and consumerism.

While He Sen explored his realist subjects, he also began to resurrect lost Chinese art and tradition with his contemporary stylings of traditional Chinese subjects through oil painting. Through his career He Sen's work has reflected recent Chinese artistic exploration and an urge to return to traditional Chinese subjects. The artistic trends in twentieth century China set He Sen up to create a new form of artwork that merges and embraces both ink and oil painting traditions.

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<sup>23</sup> "The Romance of West Chamber - Farewell at the Pavilion : He Sen," White Rabbit: Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, Accessed December 15, 2023, <https://explore.dangrove.org/objects/1937>.

<sup>24</sup> "New Marriage Law (1950)," CHINESEPOSTERS.NET, Accessed December 15, 2023, <https://chinese posters.net/themes/marriage-law>.

<sup>25</sup> White Rabbit: Contemporary Chinese Art Collection, "The Romance of West Chamber - Farewell at the Pavilion : He Sen."

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