

# Contemporary Chinese Oil Painting Between Iconography and Iconology: A Case Study from the People's Republic of China's 60th Anniversary Exhibition

Caterina Egenhöfer

## Abstract

*This paper seeks to analyse the iconographic and iconological significance of the 2009 exhibition Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country (Guójiā zhòngdà lìshǐ tícái měishù chuàngzuò gōngchéng). The exhibition was set up on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China and was part of a series of cultural, artistic and literary activities at that time. Created and promoted by the Ministry of Finance, Culture and Propaganda, the exhibition set out the artists' mission as the presentation of the great history and 'great national spirit' (wěidà mínzú jīngshén) of the people of China and 'the cultivation and spreading of the national spirit' (péiyǎng hé hóngyáng mínzú jīngshén). This was realised through the media of oil painting, sculpture and traditional Chinese painting, with oil paintings, as the traditional tool of representation, taking up the biggest part of the exhibition. Based on Erwin Panofsky's art-historical method of the three-stage model, the text explores and displays the iconographical and iconological meaning of one representative painting: The March of the Volunteers.*

**Keywords:** Chinese contemporary art, socialist realism, oil paintings, exhibition



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## Celebrating the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China<sup>1</sup>

In September 2009, the National Art Museum of China (Zhōngguó měishùguǎn 中国美术馆) ceremonially inaugurated the exhibition *Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country*<sup>2</sup> (Gzmeishu 2009). As part of a series of cultural, artistic and literary activities, the Art Project was set up to celebrate the nationwide commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China (PRC)<sup>3</sup> and toured as a 'travelling exhibition'<sup>4</sup> through such major cities as Shànghǎi 上海, Hángzhōu 杭州, Wūhàn 武汉, Xiàmén 厦门, and other places (Zhāng 2010: 97). In this way, the Art Project was presented to a huge number of visitors all over the country. Within the context of this particular anniversary, the exhibition acted as a reminder of key events in Chinese modern history and the struggle of the Chinese people up to the present day. As Cài Wǔ 蔡武, the current head of the Chinese ministry of culture, explained: 'the magnificent anti-imperial, anti-feudal, anti-colonial battles of our country and the important historical events of the socialist revolution, construction and reform serve as main topics [for the exhibition]'<sup>5</sup> (Cài 2009a: 9).

The whole project was organised and financed by the culture, propaganda and treasury department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)<sup>6</sup> (Yán 2009: 1). Wáng Jiāxīn 王家新, deputy director of the treasury department's bureau of education, science and culture, emphasised the importance of this kind of art project:

100 million [yuan] have turned into 104 artworks that will be collected by the state; I am of the opinion that this state investment will change into a national as well as a cultural asset and continuously increase in value (Yán 2009: 1).<sup>7</sup>

In 2006, the culture and treasury department issued instructions on 'Implementing Methods for the Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country'<sup>8</sup> (Zhāng 2010). These rules were meant to serve as a working guide for the participating artists and helped in creating the special character of the art project. According

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1 All translations from Chinese are by the author, if not explicitly noted otherwise.

2 *Guójiā zhòngdà lìshǐ tícái měishù chuàngzuò gōngchéng* 国家重大历史题材美术创作工程.

3 *Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó* 中华人民共和国.

4 *Xúnhuázǎn* 巡回展.

5 以我国波浪壮阔的反帝，反封建，反殖民主义斗争和社会主义革命，建设，改革的重大历史事件为主题内容。

6 *Zhōngguó Gònghéguó* 中国共产党.

7 1个亿换来104件作品，将来要由国家进行收藏，我认为这是把1亿元的国家财政投入换成了目前价值1亿的国家文化资产，而且这个资产将会不断增值。

8 *Guójiā zhòngdà lìshǐ tícái měishù chuàngzuò gōngchéng shíshī bànfǎ* 国家重大历史题材美术创作工程实施办法.

to these instructions artists were asked to illustrate ‘epic characteristics of the nation’<sup>9</sup> in their works and ‘cultivate and spread national spirit’<sup>10</sup> (Zhāng 2010).

At a conference in Běijīng 北京 in the days following the exhibition’s opening ceremony, Cài Wǔ 蔡武 emphasised the important issue of correct guidance in Chinese contemporary art and heralded the exhibition as a model for future art projects in China (Yán 2009: 1):

... We have to learn how to define the guidance of dominant culture while respecting differences, and how to strengthen the leading function of core values while taking into account diversity, and as we give guidance to our culture, art is developing towards the right direction and on the right path. This right direction is just the principles, long adhered to, of ‘serve the people and socialism’ and ‘letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend’ ... The Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country leads and points the way for the direction in which contemporary art-making develops and has taken up the function of an exemplar ... (Cài 2009b: 1).<sup>11</sup>

As the accentuation of terms and issues like ‘correct orientation’<sup>12</sup>, ‘function of an exemplar’<sup>13</sup> and ‘cultivate and spread national spirit’<sup>14</sup> indicates, one of the political aims of the Art Project was an educational one (Cài 2009b: 1). The educational character was underlined by the fact that the project functioned as a travelling exhibition and, in this way, was shown to a huge number of citizens all across the country.

Consideration of all the organisational, formal and educational conditions of the exhibition throw up questions such as ‘How are the above-mentioned instructions reflected in media and how did artists implement them?’, ‘What topics were chosen?’, and ‘Is there a deeper meaning behind the promotion of this kind of art project?’ These questions serve as a starting point for the following analysis.

As the exhibition catalogue *Lishǐ yǔ yìshù* 历史与艺术 (History and Art) points out, the instructions set up by the culture, propaganda and treasury department are reflected in 104 works, which were realised through the media of oil, sculpture and traditional Chinese painting (GGB 2010: 1).

For the purpose of restricting the number of the exhibition’s art works that might be analysed, the underlying study concentrates on oil paintings only. This restriction was dictated on the one hand by the fact that oil paintings made up the major part of

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9 *Mínzú shǐshī xìngzhì* 民族史诗性质.

10 *Péiyǎng hé hóngyáng mínzú jīngshén* 培养和弘扬民族精神.

11 我们要学会怎样在尊重差异中来确定主流文化的主导，在包含多样性中来加强核心价值观的引带作用，以引导我们的文化，艺术向着正确的方向和轨道发展，这个正确的方向就是长期以来坚持的“为人民服务，为社会主义服务”“百花齐放，百家争鸣”。[...] 国家重大历史题材美术创作工程 [...] 引导和指引了这个时代美术创作的发展方向，起到了示范性作用。[...].

12 *Zhèngquè de fāngxiàng* 正确的方向.

13 *Shìfàn xìng zuò yòng* 示范性作用.

14 *Péiyǎng hé hóngyáng mínzú jīngshén* 培养和弘扬民族精神.

the Art Project's media. On the other hand, oil paintings—inasmuch as they provide the possibility of a realistic depiction of both people and historical events—were traditionally used as a method of political representation in the West. Using a Western art historical approach for the analysis of oil paintings on historical themes in the context of a politically motivated exhibition therefore appears to be an appropriate theoretical and methodological choice.

In order to answer the questions listed above, the underlying study uses the iconographical and iconological three-stage model of the German art historian Erwin Panofsky (1892–1968).

In his study Panofsky points to the presence of deeper meanings which are inherent in art pieces, meaning information that cannot be discovered through mere superficial examination alone and which provides insight into the socio-political, historical and ideological elements and so forth in the background to the creation of an art piece (Panofsky 1939). As Panofsky outlines, 'iconography is that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meanings of works of art, as opposed to their form' (Panofsky 2006a: 86).

Panofsky systematised the analysis of the meaning in art works into a three-stage model: the pre-iconographical description, the iconographical analysis, and the iconological interpretation. The pre-iconographical description, also referred to as the 'primary or natural subject matter, subdivided into factual and expressional', provides the basis for the following levels of interpretation and appears to be the easiest stage to implement 'by identifying pure forms ..., by identifying their mutual relations as events, and by perceiving ... expressional qualities ...' (Panofsky 2006a: 88). The model's second level constitutes 'the world of images, stories and allegories' (Panofsky 2006a: 87). One has to be familiar with semiotics and the way special figures, stories and so on used to be pictured in a certain time and area. Panofsky refers to this level as a 'history of types (insight into the manner in which under varying historical conditions, specific themes and concepts were expressed by objects and events)' (ibid.). The iconological interpretation appears to be the most extensive stage of Panofsky's analysis and deals with the 'intrinsic meaning or content' of the art work (ibid.). At this point, a work of art has to be seen as a product set into a special historical and cultural environment and no longer to be handled as an isolated occurrence. Here, Erwin Panofsky finds the 'controlling principle of interpretation' in the 'history of cultural symptoms or "symbols" in general (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, essential tendencies of the human mind were expressed by specific themes and concepts)' (Panofsky 2006a: 87).

In order to apply the method proposed by Panofsky's iconographical and iconological three-stage model to the analysis of the PRC's 60th anniversary exhibition, we first need to focus on the historical context of Chinese political art creation and be aware of what the 'controlling principles of interpretation' are: What kind of

'history of types' is used by the artists and what 'history of cultural symptoms' can we find here? (Panofsky 2006a: 87). To answer these questions this paper will first provide a short introduction to the painting style of socialist realism and its correlation to history painting as a 'history of types'. As a case study, the oil painting *The March of the Volunteers* by Quán Shānshí 全山石 (b. 1930) will be analysed, followed by concluding remarks.

## Socialist realism and history painting

The art theory of socialist realism is based on Lenin's *Party Organization and Party Literature* published in the year 1905. In his text, Lenin criticises '... the bourgeois principle of freedom. This clearly marked the birth of the theory of art serving the Party and the revolutionary machine' (Lü 2010: 497). Eventually, in 1932, the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union under Stalin defined socialist realism as the given political direction for the development of art (Bown 1998: 140). Two years later, it became officially the 'einzig sanktionierte Ausdrucksform' (only sanctioned form of expression) of art in Soviet state communism (Clark 1997: 82). Socialist realism defines itself as a politically controlled, realistic painting style. A standardised, easily comprehensible language of symbols carries a narrative content which—at its core—represents ideology and goals of socialism and communism.

Máo Zédōng's 毛泽东 talks at the Yán'ān Forum on Literature and Art<sup>15</sup> in May 1942 introduced Soviet art theory and therefore socialist realism as a point of reference in the creation of art during the Máo era. The Yán'ān Talks can be considered as a 'profound shift' in the comprehension of art and in the meaning of 'aesthetic values' in China (Chiu 2008: 1). From then on, Chinese art creation had to follow new principles and ways of implementation: the meaning, function and target group of artistic production changed and were placed in the hands of the party (ibid.).

Against the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese War, the main aim of the talks was to find a new possibility to realise national liberation and defeat the enemy. The basic idea was to use art as a tool to ideologically strengthen and mobilise the nation.

The purpose of our meeting today is precisely to ensure that literature and art fit well into the whole revolutionary machine as a component part; that they operate as powerful weapons for uniting and educating the people and for attacking and destroying the enemy, and that they help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind (Mao Zedong 1942).

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15 *Yán'ān wén yì zuòtánhuì* 延安文艺座谈会.

After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese literary theorist Zhōu Yáng 周扬 strongly promoted the theory of socialist realism, which eventually, in 1953, became the official directive for literature and art (Lü 2010: 501). From then on, art was no longer in the hands of the artists and turned into a strictly controlled political instrument.

One of the ways in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defined itself both to the people and the outside world was through art. After 1949, art was employed to give concrete expression to the many different abstract policies and the many grandiose visions of the future that the Party proposed and entertained over the years. ... The most important demand was that art and artists had to serve politics, as formulated in Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art' (1942). The 'Talks' served as the basic literary and art policy and enabled the CCP, as both patron and educator, to control the arts. Officially recognized artists were those who were organized in art academies, art publishing houses, museums, associations, etc., organizations which for all intents and purposes functioned as (state) employers. ... These preconditions gave rise to an art form with Chinese characteristics that closely followed political dictates and was politicized to the extreme (Landsberger 2009: 1108).

During this time of politically influenced art in China, a type of painting emerged that specifically corresponded to the idea and intentions of socialist realism: (*gémìng*) *lishìhuà* (革命)历史画 ((revolutionary) history painting) (Hung 2007: 785). In 1951, an important exhibition was organised under this heading by the *Zhōngguó gémìng bówùguǎn* 中国革命博物馆 (Museum of the Chinese Revolution). This exhibition was intended '... to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the Party's founding. The planned exhibition was to include a series of historical paintings and sculptures depicting the Party's history' (Hung 2007: 786). The 'revolutionary history painting' had the purpose of illustrating the *gémìng jīngshén* 革命精神 (revolutionary spirit) of the nation (Quán 1962: 50). Hung Chang-Tai describes this new type of painting as 'the CCP's propaganda effort to reconstruct an official visual narrative of the nation's history', in accordance with its form and ambitions (Hung 2007: 785). It thus forms part of the phenomenon of *xuānchuán huà* 宣传画 (propaganda painting).

It should be noted that in China *lishìhuà* 历史画 dates back to the early times of the Han dynasty. In ancient times the term *rénwù gùshìhuà* 人物故实话 described historical paintings which had the purpose of depicting important events that had actually taken place and which should serve as influential examples or reminders for posterity (Liú 1991: 441). In the 20th century, Chinese history painting came closer to the European style of history painting through the strong influence of Russian art theories and painting styles that China had assimilated since the second half of the 19th century. A Chinese art encyclopaedia defines 20th century history paintings with the words:

Events that become topics of history paintings usually are significant incidents known by the whole nation and often show the appearance of a national hero; in his work the painter usually displays the methods of idealisation and standardisation. Therefore it can be said that the meaning of history painting has less to do with the true recording of historical facts than with the search for an important historical meaning of an event, with a great scene forming a backdrop. It can be said that art's function of knowledge and education is the most important aspect of the presentation in history paintings (Liú 1991: 441).<sup>16</sup>

At the end of the 1950s, ideological contradictions between Máo Zédōng and Nikita Khrushchev gave rise to a split between China and the Soviet Union that also brought to a halt the dependence on Russian art. In 1958, Máo explained: 'The wholesale adoption of Soviet rules and regulations lacked the spirit of original creation' (Lü 2010: 510). The new aim was to accentuate Chinese national characteristics in art that was part of the emergence of the *mínzúhuà* 民族化 (nationalisation) of that time (Hung 2007: 812). '[I]n the 1950s nationalization was a nebulous concept with numerous meanings—artistic, technical, and political. Artistically, nationalization meant creating a Chinese style of painting by blending indigenous and Western techniques' (ibid.). Dǒng Xīwén's 董希文 essay 'Chinese Style of Oil Paintings',<sup>17</sup> published in the magazine *Měishù* 美术 (Art) in 1957, illustrates this new ambition: 'We need this kind of tolerance, and then, when we have absorbed the foreign, we can as well turn it in our own'<sup>18</sup> (Dǒng 1957: 6). The topicality of this discussion is shown in the article's reissue in *Měishù* in the year 2003 (Dǒng 2003).

But, despite this re-thinking of national art development, a multitude of Soviet art forms, including socialist realism, still remained a constituent part of Chinese art production. In particular, the semiotics of socialist realism can be found in Chinese paintings.

Wolfgang Holz describes five main 'allegorical elements' of socialist realism which were and still are used in Chinese art (Holz 1993: 74); they are illustrated in the art works of the 2009 exhibition *Art Project concerning Important Historical Events of the Country*.<sup>19</sup> The first element Holz mentions is 'the illusion of instantaneous progress' or 'the immediate equation of "is" and "will be"'. This element illustrates the 'utopian vision' of a better future, which is suggested to the viewer of the picture. The present is shown as a time of positive progress which leads the way into an auspicious socialist future. Present and future therefore seem to be fused

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16 成为历史画题材的事件，往往是该民族众所周知的大事，并常常有民族英雄出场；画家在表现上，一般呈现理想化，典型化的方法。因此，历史画的意义，与其说在于对史实的忠实记录价值，不如说在于对事件的重大历史意义和宏伟场面情节的追求。美术的认识作用和教育作用，可以说在历史画中表现的最为突出。(Liú 1991: 441)

17 *Yóuhuà Zhōngguó fēng* 油画中国风。

18 *Wǒmen bìxū yǒu zhèyàng de yī zhǒng qìdù, xīshòule wàilái de, yě kěyǐ biàn wéi wǒmen zìjǐ de* 我们必须有这样的一种气度，吸收了外来的，也可以变为我们自己的。

19 *Guójiā zhòngdà lìshǐ tícái měishù chuàngzuò gōngchéng* 国家重大历史题材美术创作工程。

together. The colour Red is another important element in socialist realism. As a symbol for socialism and communism, anything corresponding to their ideology is coloured in varying tones of red (Holz 1993: 75). 'The New Soviet Man, the social body with a communist soul' is mentioned as the third allegorical element. The New Soviet Men/Women illustrate 'standardized heroic bodies for each particular production class'. The depiction of Communist China's men and women is the same: strong, muscular and healthy people enjoying their work. Furthermore, socialist realism deploys religious symbols that are rooted in Christian semiotics of icon painting. These symbols are used as a tool to glorify the revolutionary leader and give the content of the painting a religious touch. 'Overabundant, heavenly light', for instance, symbolises 'the final state of socialist ecstasy' (Holz 1993: 76). As a last element Holz describes the 'dream theater' as a 'theatrical communication strategy' through which the viewer of the painting will be absorbed by the painting and becomes part of its content (Holz 1993: 77).

All of these allegorical elements can be found in the works of the 2009 exhibition. Socialist realism can thus be identified as their 'history of types'—or the 'controlling principle' for their iconographical analysis, as Panofsky refers to it (Panofsky 2006a: 87). In the following section, use will be made one of the most exemplary exhibits to illustrate that socialist realism still plays an important role in the creation of contemporary Chinese art.

## **Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country**

The 53 oil paintings representing diverse events and key figures of Chinese history since 1840 and illustrating the power of endurance of the Chinese people, formed the largest part of the project (GGB 2010: 1). The art works in the exhibition resemble paintings of the 1950s and 1960s, a period that can be described as the climax of Chinese history painting. As Hung mentions in his study, the contents of Chinese oil paintings in this period can be divided into five categories according to the main subjects shown in the paintings: 'the martyr, the military, the leader, the worker, and the founding of a new nation' (Hung 2007: 83). In recognition that the topics of the 2009 Art Project paintings draw a huge bow over Chinese modern history exceeding the 60 decades of the People's Republic, Hung's categorisation has been adapted into a scheme of somewhat rougher differentiation, resulting in the categories of 'war', 'portrait', 'political history' and 'miscellaneous'.

The 'war' category counts 20 paintings illustrating scenes of anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial resistance as well as the Anti-Japanese and the Korean wars; scenes from the Anti-Japanese War account for the greatest part of this section. Eleven 'portraits' picture eminent persons in China's history since 1840. They may be subdivided into martyrs, national leaders, intellectuals, and important members of

the party. The 13 paintings in the category 'political history' deal with party history and depict important political events under Communist rule. Only one oil painting does not deal with the leadership of the Communist Party of China; it is dedicated to the Chinese Nationalist Party. The category 'miscellaneous' consists of oil paintings on subjects like 'military', 'music and film', 'important achievements' and 'unity of the nation'.

A general overview reveals the fact that women are represented as individuals to only a limited extent. Only three portraits represent the women of China and their significant contribution to the history and society of their country: *Sòng Qìnglíng* 宋庆龄 (wife of Sūn Zhōngshān<sup>20</sup> 孙中山), *Lǚliáng jīnguó* 吕梁巾帼 (*The Women of Lǚliáng*, heroes of the resistance against Japan) and *Guāngfùhuì* 光复会 (a depiction of the feminist and martyr Qiū Jīn 秋瑾).

Compared to the oil paintings of the 1950s and 1960s, the depiction of Máo Zédōng clearly plays a less important role in the 2009 exhibition. There is no single individual portrait of Máo Zédōng;<sup>21</sup> the viewer will recognise him only in a group of figures, but still highlighted as a significant person. He is portrayed as an important founding member of the CCP, as in *Setting Sail – First Conference of the CCP*,<sup>22</sup> as a teacher in *Talks at the Yán'ān Forum on Literature and Art*<sup>23</sup> and as a great leader of the country, as in *Máo Zédōng meets President Nixon*.<sup>24</sup>

In the context of the use of oil paintings as a traditional medium to celebrate eminent political leaders, this placing of Máo only in group paintings could be interpreted as a conscious dissociation from the custom, long adhered to, of putting emphasis on his presentation, with the consequent excessive personality cult of the Cultural Revolution. Apart from that, the exhibit *Talks at the Yán'ān Forum on Literature and Art* seems to remind theviewer that the content of the Yán'ān Talks still has an impact on the creation of Chinese contemporary art.

In the next section, the *March of the Volunteers*, a painting belonging to the 'miscellaneous' category, has been selected for analysis and interpretation because of its striking exemplarity concerning the use of the style of socialist realism.

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20 Better known as Sun Yatsen.

21 In contrast to this, the exhibition presents an oil portrait of Dèng Xiǎopíng 邓小平, which symbolises the importance of his opening-up policy and its striking influence up to present-day China.

22 *Qìháng – Zhōnggòng yī dàhuìyì* 启航 中共一大会议.

23 *Yán'ān wényì zuótánhuì* 延安文艺座谈会.

24 *Máo Zédōng huìjiàn nīkèsōng* 毛泽东会见尼克松.

## March of the Volunteers

### *Pre-iconographical description*

Figure 1 *March of the Volunteers*<sup>25</sup>



Source: National Art Museum of China<sup>26</sup>

The basic composition of *March of the Volunteers* (Figure 1) gives the viewer the impression of looking at the stage of a theatre and watching a scene from a drama. A fervent red dominates the whole painting and communicates tension. Thick, grey clouds reflect red light and hang over a vast plain filled with millions of Chinese men and women. In the distance, mountain ranges block off the huge crowd, and the blood-red, shining horizon of the background illuminates mountains and people. Along the mountain peaks spreads a long, red glowing wall where the masses of Chinese people are coming from to fill the vast plain at the foot of the mountains.

25 Quán Shānshí; oil on canvas, 400cm x 480cm, 2009. For biographical data, see the section on iconological analysis on page 13.

26 The image is reproduced with permission of the National Art Museum of China.

In the foreground of the picture several Chinese soldiers—at the head of the crowd—form a line and turn their faces with a brave expression towards the viewer. Behind them black smoke is rising, and the masses of men and women lift red flags and white banners. As can be seen clearly, the whole crowd is armed and—even though most of them are cut and bloodied, with clothes already tattered—still willing to fight in the frontline. The line of soldiers in the foreground is framed: on the right side a young soldier is turning his face towards the sky and energetically blowing a trumpet adorned with red cloth. On the left side another man with fierce and stony-faced expression is holding his sabre ready and showing his half-naked, muscular body like a weapon. At his feet two soldiers lay down the dead body of a martyr.

### *Iconographical analysis*

The title of the painting informs the viewer about its content: *March of the Volunteers* is the name of the Chinese national anthem written by Tián Hàn 田汉 and set to music by Niè Ěr 聂耳 (GGB 2010: 164). What is shown to the viewer is an artistic representation of the anthem. In 1935, Tián Hàn worked as a scriptwriter for the Anti-Japanese resistance film *Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm*<sup>27</sup> for which Niè Ěr composed the theme melody (Pickowicz 1991: 64). The song reflected the spirit of this difficult time and therefore touched the inner soul of the Chinese: ‘The melody of the song sounded majestic and spirited and aroused the whole country’s unanimous patriotic enthusiasm in the resistance against Japan’<sup>28</sup> (GGB 2010: 168).

In the year 1949, *March of the Volunteers* became China’s national anthem for the first time (GGB 2010: 168).

Years later, during the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution Tian Han was jailed and subsequently died in 1968. As a result, *March of the Volunteers* was banned. In its place, many used ‘The East is Red’ a popular Communist song. *March of the Volunteers* was eventually restored as the Chinese anthem in 1978 but with different lyrics that specifically praised the Communist Party and Mao Zedong (Chiu 2012).

In 1981, during the volleyball world championship in Hong Kong, Chinese citizens started singing *March of the Volunteers* using the original lyrics from 1949. This eventually brought about the official re-use of the old lyrics in the following year (Liú 1998). Thereafter, the version with the original lyrics of *March of the Volunteers* again became, and remains, China’s national anthem. The official exhibition

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27 *Fēngyún èrnǚ* 风云儿女.

28 *Gēqǔ qūdiào xióngzhuàng jīáng, huànrǎo quánáguó rénmín wànzhòng yīxīn gòngtóng kàngri de àiguó rèqíng* 歌曲曲调雄壮激昂，唤起了全国人民万众一心共同抗日的爱国热情.

catalogue points out that ‘March of the Volunteers is not an historical event that occurred in a concrete time or place, and no real persons were involved’<sup>29</sup> (GGB 2010: 168). Nonetheless, the soldiers’ weapons and clothing, which are in the military style of the 1930s, resemble those of the era in which the song was composed (Jowett 2005: 7).

When considering the ‘controlling principles of interpretation’ of the iconographical analysis, the viewer does not need to relate to the ‘history of types’ to find out about the content of the oil painting, because the title of the painting already provides enough information (Panofsky 2006a: 87). Nevertheless, for further interpretation and better understanding it is still important to focus on this aspect.

Various elements of socialist realism can be pointed out: the image of the soldiers—especially those on the frontline of the crowd—resembles the depiction of the ‘New Soviet Man’, as Holz defines it (Holz 1993: 75). Brave, ready for the battle and even for death, Chinese soldiers and citizens stand rigid and face their enemy. This refers to Clark’s ‘Personifikation der politischen Ideale’ (personification of the political ideal), the model of the perfect soldier or citizen who would fight with weapon and body to defend his home country and compatriots until his last breath and will then be celebrated as a martyr, another type of the ‘political ideal’ (Clark 1997: 87).

‘Heavenly light’ falling down from the sky and illuminating the masses is a typically dramaturgic effect of socialist realism and part of the ‘immediate equation of “is”, [“was”] and “will be”’ as well as of the ‘religious signification’, according to Holz (Holz 1993: 76). The light represents the ‘final state of socialist ecstasy’ (ibid.). Even the trumpet-blowing soldier can be traced back to Christian iconography and as a religious constituent mirrors an angel who is framing the illustration.

On closer inspection, it seems as if the masses of Chinese people are using their shouting and singing to call on the viewer to attend the fight: ‘As the Chinese people have arrived at their most perilous time, each and every Chinese has to expel his very last cry. Arise! Arise! Arise!’<sup>30</sup> (Gov.cn 2013). Here we find another of the characteristics of socialist realism, the ‘dream theatre’. The ‘theatrical communication strategy’ leads the spectator into the pictorial reality and makes him part of what is happening (Holz 1993: 77). The method of ‘group confrontation’ uses the depiction of a group and its strong charisma to arouse the viewers to want to be part of the group and share the group’s feelings (ibid.). The calling of the masses, their invitation to join them in fight, is an important aspect of the national anthem, as the song’s text describes: ‘Arise, all who refuse to be slaves! Let our flesh and blood forge our

29 *Yìyǒngjūn jìnxíngqǔ bùshì yīgè yǒu jùtí shíjiān, dìdiǎn, rénwù de lìshǐ shìjiàn* 义勇军进行曲不是一个有具体时间, 地点, 人物的历史事件。

30 *Zhōnghuá mínzú dào le zuì wēixiǎn de shíhòu, měi gè rén pò zhe fā chū zuì hòu de kǒngshēng. Qǐ lái! Qǐ lái! Qǐ lái!* 中华民族到了最危险的时候, 每个人迫着发出最后的孔声。起来!起来!起来!

new Great Wall!<sup>31</sup> (Gov.cn 2013). The coalescence of people and wall in the background of the painting clearly illustrates the representation of these lyrics. In this spirit, the omnipresent red of the oil painting can thus be interpreted as the blood of patriotic citizens and socialist unity. The revolutionary, blood-infused atmosphere of the scene, the depiction of an upcoming battle and the enthusiasm of the masses can be described as ‘revolutionary romanticism’, as formulated by Máo Zédōng (Cui 2004: 44). The illustrated self-confidence of the Chinese people and the splendour of their courage bear the sign of an already achieved victory.

### *Iconological interpretation*

For the third step of Panofsky's interpretation model, we have to look at ‘Kunst als Symptom von etwas anderem’ (art as a symptom of something else) (Panofsky 2006b: 42). Time, culture, religion, politics, fashion, and so forth can consciously or subconsciously influence an artist's creation, and the creation of art is moreover largely subordinated to the sponsor's will.

If we therefore take a closer look at the background of the artist responsible for the painting, Quán Shānshí, we will understand why the organising committee chose him as one of the exhibition's artists. Born in 1930, Quán Shānshí had the misfortune of experiencing the Sino-Japanese War in person as a child and lived through the whole of the development of the PRC from 1949 up to the present (Hung 2007: 803). As someone involved in most of the important historical events in the last century, he seems to fit well into this kind of exhibition and is able to illustrate emotions that are part of the nation's experiences.

As an artist, Quán Shānshí belongs to the school of socialist realism. He was trained in oil painting in the Soviet Union for six years from 1954 to 1960. At that time, ‘an icon in Chinese Communist oil paintings was the image of a fallen comrade, ... an example of Soviet socialist realism, was Quán Shānshí's ... *Unyielding Heroism*<sup>32</sup> (1961)...’ (Hung 2007: 803). As for *Unyielding Heroism*, Quán ‘claimed to have been inspired by Máo's influential 1945 essay “On Coalition Government”’ (Hung 2007: 803).

The Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese people were neither cowed nor conquered nor exterminated. They picked themselves up, wiped off the blood, buried their fallen comrades and went into battle again (Mao 1977: 211).

Máo's quotation also matches with the character and mood of *March of the Volunteers*. The illustration of a martyr's dead body being laid on the ground by two

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31 *Qílái! Búyuàn zuò nǐ de rénmen! Bǎ wǒmen de xièròu, zhùchéng wǒmen xīn de chángchéng!* 起来! 不愿做奴隶的 人们! 把我们的血肉, 筑成我们新的长城!

32 *Yīngyǒng bùqū* 英勇不屈.

soldiers at the foreground of the painting—apart from its symbolic glorification of all Chinese who went to their deaths for their motherland—can be interpreted as a cross-reference to *Unyielding Heroism* and the artistic biography of Quán Shānshí. Furthermore, Hung’s description of *Unyielding Heroism* displays explicit similarities with *March of the Volunteers*:

Quan’s painting depicts the body of a martyr lying in a lush field and covered by a red cloth, an indication of his revolutionary spirit. Surrounding the body are peasants ... In their hands are long spears, pitchforks, and guns in preparation for the next skirmish to defend their territories. Red banners, signifying the group’s political nature flutter in the background. ... The individuals in the painting reflect a new realism in art that differed markedly from traditional Chinese painting in which artists emphasized the inner lives of individuals, and not their formal appearance, by means of their surroundings and various attributes (Hung 2007: 803).

The use of socialist realism in the form of red banners, arms like long spears and the pictured will to fight and protect home and companions are totally identical. But the most important marker of both paintings is the illustrated unity of the Chinese nation. As Quan explains, *March of the Volunteers* ‘shows the national spirit of the Chinese nation united in strength while facing a threat’<sup>33</sup> (Měishùjiā 2010). And what indicates unity more than the collective activity of singing songs whose lyrics arouse common feelings and let people share emotions and memories?

In many cases music was and is still used as a ‘rhetorical phenomenon’ to achieve certain goals, in the way the popularisation of songs acted as an instrument to propagate revolutionary consciousness during the Cultural Revolution:

The rhetorical impact of these art forms went far beyond the functions of aesthetics and entertainment. They were important aspects of the political discourse, exerting powerful, persuasive appeals and inciting revolutionary fervor (Lu 2004: 97).

*March of the Volunteers* therefore clearly implements the order to ‘cultivate and spread national spirit’<sup>34</sup> with its glorious illustration of heroic unity (Zhāng 2010).

As the exhibition was primarily conceived for a national audience, the symbolic meaning of the painting can be read as ‘Remember, compatriot, together we are strong!’ and therefore matches with the lyrics of the Chinese national anthem: ‘united as one’.<sup>35</sup>

33 [...] *biǎoxiàn zhōnghuá mínzú zài wēinàn zhī jì, wànzhòng yīxīn, zhòngzhìchéngchéng de mínzú jīngshén*  
表现中华民族在危难之际，万众一心、众志成城的民族精神。

34 *Péiyǎng hé hóngyáng mínzú jīngshén* 培养和弘扬民族精神。

35 *Wànzhòng yīxīn* 万众一心。

## Conclusion

A critical investigation of Chinese literature on the *Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country* shows an interesting fact: not one of these texts uses the term 'socialist realism' in the context of the exhibition. This seems quite interesting since the comparison with other, mostly earlier paintings and the analysis of *March of the Volunteers* points to the opposite.

It seems as if today's Chinese art literature tries to avoid the term 'socialist realism' when referring to Chinese art works. Even new and detailed academic encyclopaedias about Chinese oil paintings paraphrase the term with other words (Zhāng 2010). In a publication of the journal *Měishù* (Art) in the year 2010, for instance, the art creation of the 1960s—the climax of socialist realist painting—is described as 'abiding by the Party's art and literature orientation'<sup>36</sup> and 'intensively reflecting the era of socialism'<sup>37</sup> (*Měishù biānjíbù* 2002: 1072). Even in an anthology published by the Society of Chinese Oil Painting<sup>38</sup>—which was established in 1995 by the Ministry of Culture and works as an engine to drive the oil painting art scene in China—the term 'socialist realism' cannot be found (*Zhōngguó Yóuhuà Xuéhuì* 2007). One article there describes the development of China's oil painting as a 'contorted progress'<sup>39</sup> (Shuǐ 2010: 39). It continues: '... the epochal social changes led to respective changes in art creation, from content to form. Oil painters were faced with a new topic: the relation of art and politics, to serve workers, peasants and soldiers, to immerse themselves in the life of the masses, etc.'<sup>40</sup> Although the author of the article lists chronologically the development of Chinese oil painting, he never describes its results as socialist realism, but merely mentions the intensive study of Soviet art (Shuǐ 2010: 40). And even the *Lexicon of Chinese Art*<sup>41</sup> does not include an entry on the term 'socialist realism'<sup>42</sup> (Shào 2002).

It is surprising that a method of illustration adhered to for so long should not even be mentioned retrospectively today. Is the omission of 'socialist realism' a consequence of its implicitness in Chinese art perception or of dissociation from the Soviet concept in favour of reinforcing 'nationalisation'?<sup>43</sup> Do Chinese art historians differentiate between 'socialist realism' and 'socialist realism with Chinese characteristics', since Máo had wanted Chinese art to emancipate itself from the Soviet model as early as 1958 (Lü 2010: 511).

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36 *Jiānchí dǎng de wényì fāngxiàng* 坚持党的文艺方向.

37 *Dàlì fǎnyìng shèhuì zhūyì de shídài* 大力反映社会主义的时代.

38 *Zhōngguó Yóuhuà Xuéhuì* 中国油画学会.

39 *Qūzhé de Qiánjìn* 曲折地前进.

40 [...] 翻天覆地的社会变革导致艺术创作从内容到形式的相应变化。油画家们面临新的课题：艺术与政治的关系，为工农兵服务，深入群众生活等等。

41 *Zhōngguó měishù dàcídiǎn* 中国美术大辞典.

42 *Shèhuìzhūyì xiànrshízhūyì* 社会主义现实主义.

43 *Mínzúhuà* 民族化.

It is not possible to answer these questions here, as this would exceed the scope of the paper. Nevertheless, what we can assert is that politically influenced art comparable to art works of socialist realism of the Máo era and revealing an educational character has been exhibited in the PRC during recent years. In the pluralism of Chinese contemporary art, state-regulated art creation still plays an important role and has been increasing again over the last decade (Sullivan 1999: 720). Art production for events like the Olympic Games in 2008 or the PRC's 60th anniversary were obviously done in the style of socialist realism with Chinese characteristics (see, for example, *Ode to the Olympic Games*<sup>44</sup>). The exhibition *Glorious Historical Process – Art Exhibition in Celebration of the CCP's 90th Anniversary*<sup>45</sup> in 2011 further underlines this tendency (Féng 2011: 11).

The importance of history painting as a genre<sup>46</sup> is expressed in a speech concerning the 2009 art project illustrated by a publication under the title 'Selection of Revolutionary History Paintings' in *Měishù jiè* 美术界 (Art Circle) (Měishùjiè 2011: 50). Finally, in a speech concerning the 2009 project, Professor Shào Dàzhēn 邵大箴 of the Central Academy of Fine Arts tried to induce contemporary artists to 'pay more attention to topics of deep historical meaning'<sup>47</sup> (Lǐ 2010: 103). He gets support from Liú Xīlín 刘曦林, who states in his article:

In the 1950s and 1960s traditional Chinese painters and oil painters created a series of art works that hit the peak. Today a series of new works on historical topics is needed in order to promote revolutionary history education for the populace and to reconsider history<sup>48</sup> (Liú 2010: 11).

*March of the Volunteers* acts as a representative example for this new trend of historical painting. The depiction of the Chinese people united in patriotism and their will to fight for their compatriots and their country reflects the instruction to spread 'great national spirit'<sup>49</sup> (GGB 2010: I). The style of painting and the distinct use of allegories clearly refer to socialist realism as a 'type of history' (Panofsky 2006a: 87). With regard to employing the stylistic device of allegories and the need to dictate the promotion of history in order to educate the people and legitimise power, Stephen J. Greenblatt would critically say: '...one discovers that allegory

44 One example is the painting, *Ode to the Olympic Games*, by Liú Yǔyī 刘宇一 (b. 1940); *Àolínpìkè Sòng* 奥林匹克颂, 112m x 5m, 2008.

45 *Guānghuī lìchéng – qìngzhù zhōngguó gòngchǎndǎng chénglǐ jǔshí zhōunián měishù zuòpǐn zhǎnlǎn* 光辉历程·庆祝中国共产党成立九十周年美术作品展览.

46 A recent text on this topic can be found in *Měishùjiè* 美术界 (Art Circle) under the title "Selection of Revolutionary History Paintings." *Gémìng lìshihuàxuǎn* 革命历史画选, *Měishùjiè* 2011: 50.

47 *Mùguāng gèngduō de tóuxiàng yǒu shēnkè lìshǐ yìyì* [...] *de tícái* 目光更多地投向有深刻历史意义 [...] 的题材.

48 上世纪五六十年代, [...] 国画家和油画家创作了一批美术作品, 形成了一个高潮。到了新时期, 为了对广大人民群众进行革命历史教育以及重新反思历史, 需要有一批新的历史题材作品出现。

49 *Wěidà mínzú jīngshén* 伟大民族精神.

arises in periods of loss, periods in which a once powerful theological, political, or familial authority is threatened with effacement. Allegory arises then from the painful absence of that which it claims to recover ...' (Greenblatt 1981: viii).

In this sense, it is important to understand the 2009 exhibition as a fundamental statement and its exhibits as documents offering a better understanding of the present relation between China's history, art and politics.

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## GLOSSARY

<i>Àolínpíkè Sòng</i>	奥林匹克颂	<i>Ode to the Olympic Games</i> , oil painting (2008)
Běijīng	北京	capital of the People's Republic of China
Cài Wǔ	蔡武	head of the Chinese Ministry of Culture since 2008
Dèng Xiǎopíng	邓小平	politician initiating 'reform and opening' in 1978
Dǒng Xīwén <i>Fēngyún èrnǚ</i>	董希文 风云儿女	Chinese oil painter <i>Sons and Daughters in a Time of Storm</i> , Anti-Japanese resistance film (1935)
<i>gémìng jīngshén</i> <i>gémìng lìshǐhuà</i> <i>Guāngfùhuì</i>	革命精神 革命 历史画 光复会	revolutionary spirit revolutionary history painting <i>Guangfuhui</i> (Secret Society), oil painting (2009)
Guānghuī lìchéng – qìngzhù zhōngguó gòngchǎndǎng chéng jiǔshí zhōunián měishù zuòpǐn zhǎnlǎn	光辉历程·庆祝中国 共产党成立九十周年 美术作品展览	<i>Glorious Historical Process – Art Exhibition concerning the Celebration of the CCP's 90th Anniversary</i>
Guójiā zhòngdà lìshǐ tícái měishù chuàngzuò gōngchéng	国家重大历史题材美 术创作工程	<i>Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country</i>
Guójiā zhòngdà lìshǐ tícái měishù chuàngzuò gōngchéng shíshī bànfǎ	国家重大历史题材美 术创作工程 实施办法	<i>Implementing Methods for the 'Art Project concerning Important Historical Issues of the Country'</i>
Hángzhōu lìshǐhuà	杭州 历史画	the capital of Zhèjiāng province history painting
<i>Lǚliáng jīngguó</i>	吕梁山巾帼	<i>The Women of Lüliang</i> (heroes of the Sino-Japanese war), oil painting (2009)
Máo Zédōng	毛泽东	founding father of the PRC, gov- erned the country from 1949 to 1976
<i>Máo Zédōng huìjiàn Níkèsōng</i>	毛泽东会见尼克松	<i>Máo Zédōng meets President Nixon</i> , oil painting (2009)
<i>Měishù</i> <i>Měishù jiè</i> <i>mínzúhuà</i>	美术 美术界 民族化	<i>Art</i> , Chinese art journal <i>Art Circle</i> , Chinese art journal Nationalisation
Niè Ēr	聂耳	composer of the Chinese national anthem
<i>Qìháng – Zhōng Gòng yī dàhuìyì</i>	启航 中共一大会议	<i>Setting Sail – First Conference of the CCP</i> , oil painting (2009)
<i>Qiū Jīn</i>	秋瑾	feminist and martyr, oil painting
Quán Shānshí	全山石	oil painter
<i>rénwù gùshíhuà</i>	人物故事画	history painting; a term used in ancient Chinese times

Shànghǎi	上海	a major city located in the Chángjiāng river delta on China's eastern coast
Shào Dàzhēn	邵大箴	Chinese painter and art theorist; professor at the Central Academy of Fine Arts
<i>shèhuìzhūyì xiànsí zhūyì</i>	社会主义现实主义	<i>Socialist Realism</i> , painting style and art theory based on Lenin's text <i>Party Organisation and Party Literature</i>
<i>shíshī bànfǎ</i> <i>Sòng Qīnglíng</i>	实施办法 宋庆龄	implementing methods <i>Song Qingling</i> (wife of Sun Zhōngshān), oil painting (2009)
Tián Hàn	田汉	author of the text of the Chinese national anthem
Wáng Jiāxīn	王家新	deputy director of the education, science and culture bureau of the treasury department
Wūhàn Xiàmén	武汉 厦门	the capital of Húběi province a major city on the southeast coast of the PRC, located in Fújiàn province
<i>xuānchuán huà</i> <i>xúnhuìzhǎn</i> <i>Yán'ān wényì zuòtánhuì</i>	宣传画 巡回展 延安文艺座谈会	propaganda painting travelling exhibition <i>Talks at the Yán'ān Forum on Literature and Art</i> , oil painting
<i>Yīngyǒng bùqū</i>	英勇不屈	<i>Unyieldign Heroism</i> , painting by Quán Shānshí (1961)
<i>Yìyǒngjūn jìnxíngqǔ</i>	义勇军进行曲	<i>March of the Volunteers</i> , oil painting (2009)
<i>Yóuhuà Zhōngguó fēng</i>	油画中国风	<i>Chinese Style of Oil Painting</i> , article written by Dǒng Xīwén, published in <i>Měishù</i>
Zhōngguó Gémìng Bówùguǎn	中国革命博物馆	Museum of the Chinese Revolution, founded in 1959. In 2003, together with the Museum of Chinese History, turned into the National Museum of China
Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng Zhōngguó Gòngchǎndǎng chénglì jiǔshí zhōunián měishù zuòpǐn zhǎnlǎn	中国共产党 中国共产党成立九十 周年美术作品展览	Chinese Communist Party (CCP) <i>Art Exhibition concerning the Celebration of the CCP's 90th Anniversary</i>
Zhōngguó měishù dàcídiǎn	中国美术大辞典	<i>Lexicon of Chinese Art</i>
Zhōngguó měishùguǎn	中国美术馆	National Art Museum of China
Zhōngguó Yóuhuà Xuéhuì	中国油画学会	Society of Chinese Oil Painting
Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó	中华人民共和国	People's Republic of China (PRC)
Zhōu Yáng	周扬	Chinese literary theorist; promoter of socialist realism in China