

# A Preliminary Research on the Art Exchange Activities Between China and the GDR from 1949 to 1989

Fangjun Shi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zhoukou Normal University

Correspondence: Fangjun Shi, Zhoukou Normal University.

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## Abstract

After the end of the Second World War, Germany was divided into two parts. The political, economic, cultural, and artistic policies implemented by the German Democratic Republic (also known as East Germany), dominated by socialist ideology, followed the pace of the Soviet Union. At the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China, it maintained friendly and cooperative relations with Eastern European countries such as the GDR. It organized a variety of exchange activities at the cultural level. From the perspective of the sociology of art, this paper discusses the foreign exchange strategies of the founding of China and the Eastern European countries that were also socialist camps, especially the art development of the GDR. At the same time, it sorts out the art exchange activities and interactive trajectories between China and the GDR from 1949 to 1989, thus deepening the understanding of cultural exchanges with foreign countries during the construction of China.

**Keywords:** art exchange, the German Democratic Republic, Chinese contemporary art, socialist realism

## 1. Introduction

The art exchange between China and foreign countries is a history of continuous absorption and acceptance of new elements, promotion of national cultural image, expansion of international influence, and literary and artistic innovation. In the past 50 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, foreign cultural exchanges have shown diversified, multi-channel, and multi-level characteristics. According to incomplete statistics, more than 100 cultural exchange programs involve nearly 2000 people each year. During this period, China sent 168

performance art troupes and artists, 10133 people; reception of foreign art troupes 225 groups, 21,524 people, held more than 1000 cultural exhibitions. It shows the activity and extensiveness of cultural exchanges in New China. Among them, the new China has closer ties with the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, the GDR, and other socialist countries, and art creation is mainly influenced by the style and trend of socialist realism. This paper mainly focuses on the communication between New China and Democratic Germany. Understanding the artistic activities between the two countries from 1949 to 1989 analyzes the

relationship between art and society and politics in a unique historical context and its role.

## 2. Art Exchanges with Eastern European Countries at the Beginning of New China

After the end of World War II, the international situation was roughly divided into the capitalist camp and the socialist camp led by the United States and the Soviet Union. The diplomatic policy “*Leaning to One Side*” during its early period was that New China allied with the Socialist Camp headed by the Soviet Union, opposing imperialist aggression and safeguarding world peace and development. On the other hand, from the founding of the People’s Republic of China to the reform and opening up, it has consistently implemented the foreign policy of “*Culture First, Diplomacy Behind*”, opened a new situation through cultural exchanges and promoted the new achievements of Chinese revolution and construction. In the 1950s, China maintained friendly relations with Eastern European countries with the same socialist camp, such as Poland, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, signed cultural cooperation agreements. Cultural relations between countries have been fully developed, such as culture, art, publishing, news, education, science, and other aspects.

The content of artistic expression in Eastern European countries has changed with the change in political strategy and material lifestyle. Based on inheriting traditional classical realism, artists also continued to learn the socialist realism art style and methodology advocated by the Soviet Union. As the mainstream methodology of the Soviet literary and artistic circles, socialist realism is an ideal realistic style with a powerful ideological metaphor. Since the 1930s, it has continuously deepened with the development of society and even gradually became dogmatic and narrow, criticized by critics at that time.

Regarding the art exchanges between Eastern European countries, *the Art Exhibition of the People’s Republic of China* in 1950, exhibited in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, is one of the representatives. The exhibition is the first significant event for the external display of Chinese art since the founding of new China. It has been displayed in Moscow, Leningrad,

Warsaw, Berlin, and other places, causing a warm response. It not only allowed more people worldwide to understand the characteristics of Chinese art and cultural image but also showed the achievements of the development of the Soviet socialist realism style in China, thus enhancing the friendship and unity among socialist countries. In November 1955, *the Exhibition of Propaganda Paintings and Illustrations in The People’s Republic of Poland*, and *the Folk Creations of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria*, organized by the Bureau for External Cultural Relations, were also held in Beijing. These exhibitions fully demonstrated the achievements in artistic creation made by countries such as Poland and Bulgaria at that time and promoted peaceful and friendly relations among countries.

Among the many forms of communication between China and the socialist camp countries, the *Oil Painting Training Class* is extraordinary. The most representative is the artist, Максимов.К.М (1913-1993), from the Soviet Union and Eugen Popa (1919-1996), from Romania. From 1955 to 1957, Максимов.К.М’s training course opened at the Central Academy of Fine Arts made Soviet socialist realism mainstream in China’s professional art colleges and profoundly impacted Chinese artworks (Figure 1). Popa’s training course organized by the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts from 1960 to 1962 introduced early western modernism into China, opening the possibility of diversified art development (Figure 2).

From the late 1960s to the 1970s, the official cultural exchanges between New China and other countries gradually recovered and developed. China’s Diplomatic Policy also shifted from a solid ideological tendency to de-ideologization, opening up a new diplomatic pattern of total openness and full participation.



**Figure 1.** The photo of the Graduation exhibition from Максимов.К.М's Oil Painting Training Class



**Figure 2.** The photo of Eugen Popa and the students

### 3. The Art Exchange Between China and the GDR

#### 3.1 *The Friendly Exchanges Between the Two Countries after the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations*

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China and the GDR belonged to the socialist camp of the Soviet Union. Although there are many similarities in their political and economic policies, there are subtle differences in the visual presentation of artistic works, closely related to their respective national characteristics and political lines. In 1955, the two countries concluded the *Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the German Democratic Republic*, marking the

beginning of friendly relations and cooperation. Since establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries in October 1959, China has had 1306 scientists, artists, journalists, and other cultural circles visit the GDR. At the same time, the GDR also sent 117 people to visit China.

In addition to studying and visiting, the number of art exhibitions between China and the GDR has gradually increased. In particular, China held at least one special art exhibition of East Germany annually. For example, the *Exhibition of Printmaking and Sculpture in the GDR* in 1955, *Original Works of Adolf Menzel Sketch Masters* in 1956, the *Works of German Masters Dürer from 15th to 16th Century* in 1957, and *Art Exhibition of the 10th Anniversary of the Founding of the GDR* in 1959. In the same period, the GDR also held various art exhibitions about Chinese paintings, such as the *Chinese Ceramics Exhibition* in 1959 and the *Exhibition of new China Paintings* in 1960. Especially Chinese ink paintings made people in Eastern European countries at that time more aware: the *Shrimp* drawn by Qi Baishi, the *House* painted by Xu Beihong, and other paintings were highly sought after and even became a decorative fashion.

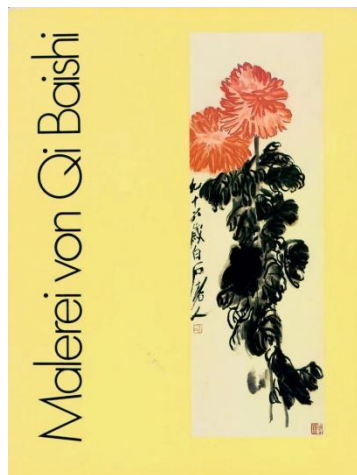
These frequent exhibition exchanges between China and East Germany were summarized by Chinese painter Lai Shaoqi as follows: cultural exchanges and unbreakable friendship between the two countries would always be accompanied by socialism, and the prosperity of the people in material and cultural life would make the friendship more consolidated. We can say that such expectations and prospects reflected the prosperous period of cultural exchanges between China and the GDR.

However, most of the exchange visits were arranged by officials at that time, and only a few artists had the opportunity to be sent to East Germany every year. Furthermore, in the 1960s, as China carried out social and cultural changes to strengthen the criticism and struggle against artists, the communication between the two sides also stopped. It was not until the 1980s that artists could revisit East Germany. For example, in October 1986, a delegation composed of Hua Junwu, Guo Shaogang, and Hao Boyi visited the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Bulgaria; in August 1989, a delegation of Chinese artists Li Shaoyan, Fang Zhaohua, and Ma Dechun, went to

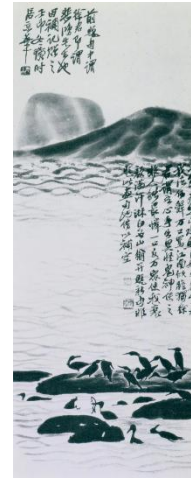
the Soviet Union for a 35-day visit. It can be seen from these that artists try their best to maximize communication results within limited conditions. Each art exchange was a valuable learning opportunity that profoundly affected Chinese art's development direction and appearance.

### 3.2 The Communication and Learning Between Chinese and East German Artists

Li Keran and Qi Baishi are the most famous and popular artists in China's exchanges with East Germany. Speaking of Qi Baishi's connection with Germany, as early as the 1930s, he met with German people at the "Chinese Art Exhibition" in Paris, organized by Xu Beihong, which was very popular. In 1955, Qi Baishi became an honorary member of the German Academy of Sciences and Arts and was awarded a certificate of honor by the then Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl. In 1959, the first issue of the Democratic German magazine *Bildende Kunst* included a series of representative artists' articles at that time, including the *TSCHI PAI-SCHI* (Qi Baishi) compiled by Gerhard Pommeranz Liedtke. In the 1980s, Qi Baishi's paintings were exhibited locally many times. For example, in 1984, the painting exhibition of Qi Baishi and Xu Beihong at the Pergamon Museum, Berlin; in 1988, The Art Review Exhibition of Qi Baishi showed the works around 1964, to which the local people warmly responded. (Figure 3-4)



**Figure 3.** The Art Exhibition of Qi Baishi, Picture Album, Berlin, 1988



**Figure 4.** Qi Baishi's Landscape, exhibited at The Art Exhibition of Qi Baishi, 1988

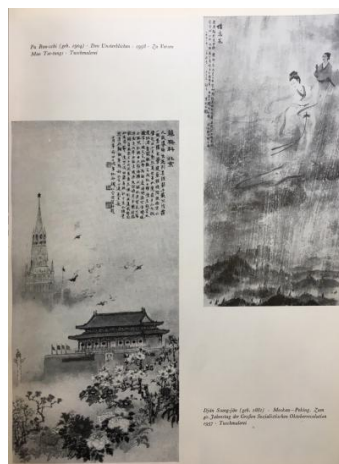
In 2013, on the 150th anniversary of Qi Baishi's birth, the Asian Art Museum in Berlin once again held the art exhibition named *Qi Baishi: Seasons of an Artist*. This exhibition not only introduced Qi's paintings but also mentioned his accomplishments in seal cutting, poetry, and calligraphy to show the world the diversified creative ability of this Asian artist.

Li Keran also occupied a unique position in the art activities of the GDR. In particular, he created traditional Chinese paintings with western techniques, which had excellent artistic expression and deeply attracted East German artists. Li Keran's works also participated in many exhibitions in East Germany, such as *the Exhibition of Modern Chinese Ink Paintings* held in East Berlin in 1957, which showed the pursuit of traditional Chinese paintings.

Not only that, but the popularity of traditional Chinese painting was also confirmed in the most crucial official magazine of East Germany, *Bildende Kunst*. For example, in the fourth issue of 1959, there was a unique article introducing the buildings of the Forbidden City in Beijing and the cultural relics, calligraphy, and painting collected therein. Furthermore, the sixth issue, Gerhard Pommeranz Liedtke published the article *Die Traditionelle Chinesische Malerei audit dem Wege Zu Neuen Themen*, which was a reflection and summary of his exchange and study with the older generation of Chinese painters. At the same time, Chinese paintings, Yang Daji's *Essentr ä ger in*



der Winternacht and Dong Xiwen's *Sie arbeitet in der Produktion und ist zugleich eine gute Familienmutter*, were also appeared. (Figure 5-8)



**Figure 5-7.** The Picture of *Die Traditionelle Chinesische Malerei audit dem Wege Zu Neuen Themen*, Bildende Kunst, 1959 (7).



**Figure 8.** Dong Xiwen, *Sie arbeitet in der Produktion und ist zugleich eine gute Familienmutter* (劳动生产管家务, 人人夸奖好媳妇) 1958.

#### 4. Conclusion

The art exchange between Chinese and East German artists deepened the friendship in the socialist cultural construction of the two countries. It made their culture and art shine in this specific historical period. The creative style of democratic German artists brought new inspiration and inspiration to Chinese artists while learning western techniques. Similarly, Chinese traditional culture also provided new inspiration and materials for creating artists of the GDR so that the two countries could make standard progress in exchanges.

In essence, art exchange is the mutual exploration and understanding of national culture and ideology and the necessary bridge for artists to absorb nutrition across borders. The development of fine arts in New China also incorporates new techniques and diverse trends of thought for its use through a series of international exchanges and studies. While pursuing international style, artists should focus on developing their national cultural characteristics, retaining the inherent core of individuality, and making Chinese traditional culture and artistic characteristics radiate different charm from the international perspective.

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