

How does Zhang Hongtu's artwork reflect his cultural diversity?

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Introduction

Zhang Hongtu was born to a Hui Muslim family in 1943 in Pingliang, Gansu Province in China. He grew up in the era of Chairman Mao, in a time of Civil War and the Cultural Revolution. These events had remarkable impacts on his life and his future career. He was studying in the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts in Beijing when the Cultural Revolution broke out. Zhang lamented that at that time there was limited access to books, since Chinese citizens could read only books with content which the government approved of. Despite that, he managed to lay his hand on many books enhancing his knowledge of various forms of art from the West (Asia Art Archive, 2009). He was keen to combine Chinese and Western imagery techniques, which at times gave rise to Chinese criticism of his interest in Western art.

Zhang's parents, who were devoted Muslims, were labeled as rightists and hence targeted in various political campaigns. Zhang's family had to move constantly from city to city in China. He had to quit his job as an artist and work in fields or jewellery shops, which he strongly disliked. In 1980 he decided to travel to America and continued his art career at the Art Students League in New York. Later there, he helped fellow Chinese artists, formed the Chinese United Overseas Artists Association, and held numerous exhibitions.

In light of this background, this essay aims to discuss and compare Zhang Hongtu's artworks made in different contexts, elucidate the messages Zhang presents, and determine how they reflect his unique life experiences. Throughout his life, Zhang's culture has been that of a minority; in his native China, he was considered a Muslim outsider (Jerome, 2007) and subsequently in the US, a Chinese foreigner. This essay discusses some of Zhang's controversial artworks that use the image of Chairman Mao or variations thereof and respond to certain economic and environmental issues of modern China.

Long Live Chairman Mao – Quaker Oats Mao

One of Zhang's most prominent and perhaps most controversial art series is titled *Long Live Chairman Mao*. This series was among the first political-pop artworks in China, or maybe in the world (Charles, 2015). Political pop is a combination of Western pop art with Chinese political and social themes. The artworks in this series are imbued with Zhang's knowledge of



Figure 1: Zhang Hongtu: *Quaker Oats Mao*, 1987, acrylic on Quaker Oats canister, 9³/₄ by 5 by 5 inches, from the series *Long Live Chairman Mao*, 1987-ongoing; at the Queens Museum.

traditional Chinese and Western art history, blending humor and surprise while ostensibly downplaying their political connotations. This allows viewers to enjoy the work as art, and at the same time appreciate the points that the artist tries to make.

One of the earliest in the series, and perhaps the very first Chinese-pop artwork as suggested by Wu (1999), is the *Quaker Oats Mao* (Figure 1). This work marks the true beginning of his career in America, when he moved from landscapes and portraits in the traditional Chinese style to political pop characterised by a fusion of Western and Chinese elements.

As shown in Figure 1, Zhang used a can of an American cereal brand “Quaker Oats” and transformed the face of the commercial “Quaker Oats man” into a portrait of the Chinese leader Chairman Mao. The art cleverly combines Western and Chinese elements. Zhang wanted to express the presence of Mao in Chinese citizens’ everyday life, including daily consumables like food, almost akin to the presence of Jesus in a Christian’s life (Queens Museum, 2014). It shows the dominant figure of Mao in China, where his existence was felt everywhere. The words “Old Fashioned” in the brand’s slogan could be susceptible of all manner of interpretations, as many, indeed, as the viewers’ imagination or experience may suggest.

Such suggestiveness and ambivalence sets this work apart from other Chinese artworks which use the Chairman’s image in the most laudatory fashion possible, such as *Follow the Communist Party Forever, Follow Chairman Mao Forever* (Figure 2), in which a tall and handsome Chairman appears at the centre surrounded and followed by an enthusiastic crowd,

against a backdrop of a sunrise, symbolizing hope and a new beginning.



Figure 2: Early 1970s, *Follow the Communist Party Forever, Follow Chairman Mao Forever*, *Yongyuan genzhe gongchandang, yongyuan genzhe Mao zhuxi* (永远跟着共产党, 永远跟着毛主席)
 Publisher: Renmin meishu chubanshe (人民美术出版社), 105x39 cm.
 Call number: BG E13/373 (Landsberger collection)

Another significant art piece made by Zhang is *The Last Banquet* (Figure 3), a re-creation of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* (Figure 4). In an interview with Jonathan Hay in 1991, Zhang explained that this work was meant to be a commentary on the unquestioned authority of Mao and the unimaginable concept of disobedience or disrespect. (Hay, 1991, pp. 295-297).



Figure 3: Zhang Hongtu: *The Last Banquet*
Laser prints, pages from the Red Book and acrylic on canvas, 60x168 inch, 1989.



Figure 4: Leonardo da Vinci: *The Last Supper*
1490s (Julian), fresco-secco, 460 cm (180 in) × 880 cm (350 in).

In Zhang's painting, the figure of Jesus and those of the Twelve Apostles in the original *The Last Supper* were all replaced by the figure of Mao himself, in similar dress and postures. This led Jerome to suggest that an element of self-worship and self-betrayal may have been introduced, perhaps to demonstrate the paradox in a society where one single authority is the arbiter of all things (Jerome, 2007).

Ironically, when Zhang proposed showing this work in an exhibition in the US, it was disapproved of and rejected as its alteration of the image of Jesus Christ was deemed offensive to the Christian community. Thus, his artwork caused controversy in both China and the US. Despite, or perhaps because of this, due to the wide media coverage, *The Last Banquet* came to be noticed by many and gained considerable influence.

Again this artwork combines Western and Chinese elements. While it is modelled on Da Vinci's artwork, and uses the medium of acrylic on canvas, it depicts Mao and other Chinese figures. An observant viewer may notice a spittoon in the bottom centre next to Mao's feet, a common item used by Chinese leaders at the time.

Zhang noted that if he had to step on the toes of any specific society, he would like to do that to both the Chinese and American societies equally.

Kekou-Kele

One of the more recent non-politically based artworks of Zhang, *Kekou-Kele* (Figure 5) displays the merging of Chinese and Western art forms. It is also an artwork that is not a drawing or portrait but a craft work. *Kekou-Kele* is the Chinese transliteration of Coca-Cola, the American company and soda brand. However, rather than the typical plastic, this artwork was made of porcelain in the style of Chinese Ming-dynasty blue-and-white porcelain, which was used to make royal potteries (Record of the Princeton University Art Museum, 2010). The surface was painted with scenes of Chinese children playing and Chinese floral patterns. Zhang wanted to create for the viewer a contrasting image of ancient porcelain and the recent production of soft drinks. It represents both the ancient and more modern eras in China when it opened itself to the rest of the world and started international trading. The trading of the former times involved the Silk Road, central Asia and porcelain, while the modern trade involves the West, especially the US and Europe, and the importing of goods such as Coca-Cola.



Figure 5: Zhang Hongtu: Six-Pack of Kekou-Kele (Coca-Cola), 2002

Jingdezhen porcelain with underglaze blue designs
each (with caps): 25.5 × 7 cm (10 1/16 × 2 3/4 in.)

Remake of Ma Yuan's Water Album (780 Years Later)

Since 2008, Zhang has produced a series of remakes of the *Water Album*, an artwork of the famous Song dynasty artist Ma Yuan. However, the series is not merely a copies of the originals. This is another non-politically based artwork of Zhang. He addresses the issue of environmental pollution in China by a dark and murky re-rendering (Figure 6) of the famous scenery of clear water and sky (Figure 7) (Charles, 2015). He also seems to suggest that the urge to develop industry and agriculture is the root of environmental pollution. On the left side of Figure 6, he inscribed his thoughts on the pollution crisis in China, which can be translated as: “Many parts of Ma Yuan’s *Water Album* have been lost as 800 years passed by. People today are lucky to have

the remaining twelve pieces. One should be extremely thankful! But is the water in the drawings still there?" This question draws refers to the same setting, which has been contaminated and polluted beyond recognition.



Figure 6: Zhang Hongtu: *Remake of Ma Yuan's Water Album A (780 Years Later)*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 50 x 72 in. Courtesy Jon and Jenny Steingart, Cheryl McGinnis Gallery

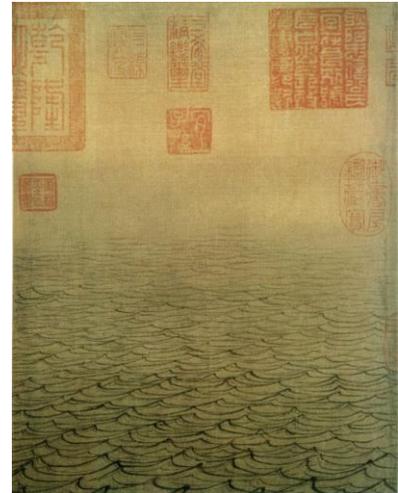


Figure 7: Ma Yuan: *Water Album*, Song Dynasty, ink on silk

Adding to the message in his work, Zhang used Western methods to reproduce the artworks. The original was ink on silk, an ancient Chinese medium, while his work was oil on canvas, a Western medium. The brushwork was achieved with different techniques. Ma Yuan's brushstrokes were smoother and thinner compared with the blurry and thick ones of Zhang. This painting signifies that even though Zhang was living in a foreign country, he was still concerned about China, as reflected in his effort of keeping himself aware of the latest issues faced by China. (Asia Pacific, 2016).

Conclusion

Zhang Hongtu's cultural diversity – a Muslim in atheist China and a Chinese foreigner in the US – has played a crucial role in the provoking themes and motifs of his art. He has merged elements from both Chinese and Western societies, producing artworks that are rich in symbolism and meaning. His artworks blend different cultures in order to break the wall of misunderstanding and mistrust between them. Zhang declared in an interview, "I believe in the power of the image, but I do not believe in the authority of the image." (Hay, 1991). He believes that no culture or person who is holding a specific belief should feel superior or inferior, or else the world will not be at peace.

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