3.1.1 CHENG CONGLIN: SNOW ON A CERTAIN DAY
IN A CERTAIN MONTH IN 1968

CHENG CONGLIN, Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 (1968 nian x yue x ri xue), 1979, oil on canvas, 196 x 296 cm, collection of the National Gallery Beijing, second prize in the Fifth National Art Exhibition (fig. 18).

Fig. 18 Cheng Conglin 程丛林, Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 (1968 nian x yue x ri xue 1968年x月x日x), 1979, oil on canvas, 196 x 296 cm, collection of the National Gallery Beijing. Reproduced with permission of Cheng Conglin.

The Third Plenary Session of the XI Central Committee in December 1978 issued a new directive for the creative artists. Art “was now to praise the masses of workers, farmers and soldiers, the Party and the old generation of revolutionaries rather than celebrating single personalities.” On December 22, 1978 the Symposium of Six Provinces and One City of Huadong on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary then focused on the new directive. The participants agreed, that the visual arts no longer should be obliged to glorify socialist heroes, and that the movement of the creation of heroes (zaoshen yundong) should end. Instead, the life of the ordinary people and the experiences of recent history became the dominant subjects of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The official directives, “search the truth in the facts” and “liberate thinking”, seemed to admit this position, resultin thus: “Some artists exclaims feelings through art. They form, as well as authentically the representation of real kind of aesthetic enlighten critique of Lin Biao and ti countryside” stayed within the picture story “Maple” and the pure consciousness Revolution. The artistic concerning historical conc before, the official side sti terms to describe not on stylistic affinity to natural.

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DESCRIPTION

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admit this position, resulting in a pluralism of subjects and styles. Gao Minglu put it thus: "Some artists exclaimed, Long Live the People" and appealed for the expression of feelings through art. They claimed art should express life experience, character and form, as well as authentically describe history." Most art critics and artists welcomed the representation of real people, of their nature and feelings. They considered it a kind of aesthetic enlightenment. The subjects of Scar art that concentrated on the critique of Lin Biao and the Gang of Four, or the educated youth working in the countryside stayed within the bounds of the politically admissible. As the authors of the picture story "Maple" mentioned, their aim was to show how "the sincere belief and the pure consciousness" of the youth had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. The artistic language of Scar art, however, provoked controversies concerning historical conception and adequate realistic representation. As I mentioned before, the official side stigmatized those works as small, bitter, and old, using these terms to describe not only the works' subjects but also their aesthetics and their stylistic affinity to naturalism.

Compared to paintings that focus on the disasters of the Cultural Revolution, for example Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968, works that concentrate on the educated youth, like Spring (Chun; 1979) by Wang Hai, Gao Xiaohua's I love the Oil Fields (Wo ai youlidian; 1980) and He Duoling's Youth (Qingchun; 1984) are less painful and less accusatory. Instead, they are melancholic and poetic. The intrinsic tension between the youth of the paintings' protagonists and the emptiness of their environment expresses the ambivalence of their experiences in the countryside. They think with melancholy of this period, which they at the same time consider a lost youth.

The new style, the new realism, was in particular developed by the students of the Fine Arts Academy Sichuan, who therefore were related to as the Sichuan Painting School. Artists who belong to the Sichuan School are next to Cheng Conglin, Luo Zhongli, Gao Hua, Zhou Chunya, He Duoling, Wang Chuan, Wang Hai, Gao Xiaohua, Ai Xuan and Zhu Yiyong. Because of his painting style and his close relationship to some of the students, Chen Danqing often is also considered as member of the Sichuan School, despite the fact that he did not originally study in Sichuan. (fig. 19)

DESCRIPTION

Cheng Conglin's large oil painting, Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968, reflects the violent battles between different factions of Red Guards. Those fights reached their bloody climax from late 1967 through 1968. Cheng, who was born in 1954 and grew up in one of those regions in Sichuan that later would see the most fervent fights, here depicts the ending of such a fight. The painting looks very much like a history
painting. For this reason, Lü Peng describes it as “the successful attempt to raise the concentrated expression of a concrete historical event onto the level of a universal statement regarding a historical drama”, which he considers to be the main concern of most artists of the post-Cultural Revolution period. Gao Minglu classifies the work as a prime example of Scar art, and reads it as the “expression of a sentimental humanism”.

The scene takes place in a snowy schoolyard that would normally be peaceful, but now has turned into a battlefield. The students, formerly friends, now fanatical fighters, are split into enemy factions. Cheng Conglin arranged the protagonists of the incident like actors on a stage. White and diffused light strangely illuminates the schoolyard, which occupies the left and middle foreground of the painting. A group of people crowds around the right side of the courtyard, where the silent witnesses of the fight are scattered onto the churned and bloody snow: a steel helmet, a red flag and a torch. A white wooden cross to which a barbed wire fence was affixed, and cartridge cases also are reminders of the clash. The school building is covered with slogans and bullet holes. A group of wounded and exhausted young men and women stagger out of the building across a half-landing to the schoolyard. These are the fighters from the defeated faction. Their faces speak of defeat, hatred and fear. As a sign of defeat, their clothes are torn to pieces. One of them, in the front row on the right, carries a half-naked, unconscious man whose head is bandaged. A sign with humiliating slogans hangs around his neck. Another seriously wounded man, shown in the left center of the painting, is supported by a strong but exhausted boy. His feet drag across the snow, a head wound bleeds, blood drips off his flabby arm. Two frightened girls follow behind him. Their faces express stupor. It is not their personal defeat, but that of their ideological line, which to them is unbelievable.

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On the left, in the background, members of the victorious faction, stand on a platform, watching the losers, who are taken away like prisoners of war. Other victorious youth form a line along the half-landing. They triumphantly laugh at the crushed enemy. Some of them carry arms or boxes filled with munitions. One of them, on the right side of the half-landing, nudges the back of a wounded young man with his rifle butt. On the right, in the front, a young war-horse holds a machine gun. He stands strong in his warm shoes. Around his neck, he wears a khaki bag on which the character for loyal (zhong) is emblazoned in red. The bag formerly contained the words of the Great Helmsman (i.e., Mao Zedong), to which one had to be loyal. Now, in accordance with Jiang Qing's motto "Attack with words, defend with arms", the bag is filled instead with munitions.

In the center of the painting, the female protagonist, the leader of the defeated faction, immediately draws the eye. She walks slowly to the front, upright, but her clothes are torn and she is barefoot. With one hand she holds her tattered white blouse, while with the other she takes the hand of the heavily wounded comrade to her left. Her right shoulder is bare and shows scratches and blotches. As a sign of contempt, her hair has been cropped. The expression of her fragile and delicate face, her ecstatic look, show rage, injury, and the unshaken belief in the rightness of her ideological conviction. She returns the hateful gaze of her opponent, who by contrast wears a warm military coat. A young comrade leans on the opponent's shoulder. Both form a group together with two other victors. One of them is the head of the victorious faction. He stands besides a motorbike, looking with composure at the female protagonist. The end result of the fight seems natural to him. The viewer sees his back; his warm coat draped loosely over his left arm. There is a white spot on one of the straps of his red undershirt. Does he wear the red of communism or is his shirt simply stained with blood? One of his comrades bandages his arm. Even though he is injured, he still carries weapons: he leans on a bayonet held in his left; a holster is pulled over his right shoulder. Another member of the victorious faction, standing at the left side of the stairs and carrying a box of munitions, looks at the female protagonist. His furtive look speaks neither of triumph nor of hatred. He seems rather to fear for her life, and his slightly crouched posture speaks of the inner defeat of this victorious fighter. Cheng Conglin here represents the affective relation between members of two enemy factions, perhaps, as in Zheng Yi's short story "Maple" (Feng), a romantic attachment.

Three figures stand out from a group of people, represented in the upper right section of the painting. The first is a forty to fifty year old woman dressed in black. Thick black horn-rimmed glasses indicate that she is an intellectual. She is holding a besom for her work as a road sweeper, the typical occupation of intellectuals who were branded rightists. Desperately she watches the scene that reminds her of her own destiny. Or perhaps she fears for the young, but lost generation. Next to her a child, dressed in a blue uniform, naively has a closer look at a machine gun. Besides him stands a young
boy about thirteen years old, wearing glasses and a shirt sporting Mao button. His face is turned towards the viewer, but his eyes are closed. He stands, absent-minded distanced from the scene. Is it cruel reality or nothing but a frightening vision? In this young boy, Cheng Conglin, a thirteen-year-old at the time of the incident, represented himself.27

STYLISTIC MODELS, TYPES

Cheng Conglin’s Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 refers to history paintings in the style of simple revolutionary realism,28 a style in which, for example, the paintings for the Ten Great Buildings (Shida jianzhu) built between 1958 and 1965 had been created.29 Cheng thus returns stylistically to pre- Cultural Revolution models. One such model is Wang Shikuo’s large drawing Bloody Clothes (Xueyi; 1959; fig. 20) rehabilitated in 1977 by an article written by Wen Lipeng and Li Huaji.29 Cheng’s work is inspired by Bloody Clothes’ composition, its representation of particular characters, and its strong narrative component.30

Similarities begin with the scene and the plot of the incident represented. In Bloody Clothes and Snow Day the narrative unfolds in front of an official building, on a staircase and a half-landing. The function of the building is transformed because of the particular historical event: in Wang Shikuo’s case a temple is transformed into a place of judgment, and in Cheng’s case a school is transformed into a battlefield.31 Both paintings’ plots are focused on an originally pure, white garment placed in the most prominent section of the composition. The composition is particularly similar in the arrangement of different groups of figures, as well as in the strong dynamic, which is provoked through the use of devices such as diagonal lines suggesting movement, generally described by accessories. Another similarity is the drama of the representation. Both artists create dramatic tension through contrasts within pairs of syntactic elements, for example the contrast of movement, the contrast of bright and dark zones, and the contrasts of complementary colors. Tension is further created through an emphasis on individual characters and the exaggerated description of their gestures and facial expressions. Here, Cheng not only was inspired by Wang’s Bloody Clothes, but also by the works of the Russian critical realism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Those highly stylized paintings had been the models of Wang Shikuo and others who created history paintings during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Later, they were of interest to painters of the post- Cultural Revolution period.32

Surikov in particular was appreciated for his representations of dramatic conflicts and of crowd scenes. Liu Feng mentions two of Surikov’s paintings as relevant for Cheng’s Snow Day. The Morning of the Execution of the Guardsmen and Boyarina Morozova (fig. 21) Cheng’s choice to stage the incident in a snowy courtyard might have been
968 refers to history which, for example, it between 1958 and the Cultural Revolution Clothes (Xueyi; 1959; peng and Li Huaqi). As representation of presented, in Bloody ficial building, on a nsformed because of s transformed into a l into a battlefield.21 arment placed in the articularly similar in rong dynamic, which sgesting movement, the drama of the tracts within pairs of ontrast of bright and on is further created rated description of inspired by Wang's ilism of the late 19th the models of Wang 50s and early 1960s. lution period.23

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Fig. 23 The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse rianger jun 紅色娘子軍), revolutionary ballet. still of Wu Qinghua. From: Le detachment feminin rouge. Wuwen chubanshe, Beijing 1973: p. 28.

fluenced directly by those paintings, which he knew from numerous publications in Russian and Chinese art magazines and catalogues. Protagonists’ postures reminiscent of religious martyrs are also drawn from critical realism, as Wang Shikuo and his contemporaries relied on this style for the creation of a repertory of types, second only to their reliance on socialist realism. That Cheng followed this repertory is clearly demonstrated by a comparison of his work with Feng Fasi’s painting Liu Hulan (1957; fig. 22) or with Zhan Jianjun’s Five Heroes of Mount Langya (1959). Even though Scar art attempted to overcome the aesthetic principles of socialist realism, particularly as manifested in the Cultural Revolution, these principles—such as stylization and the theory of the three prominences (san tuchu)—were still assimilated into their paintings. In Snow Day both aesthetic principles are employed, and it is appropriate to describe the painting, as Gao Minglu does, as a kind of carefully arranged box, in which the typical elements are inserted one after the other. This synthetic procedure is in accordance with the eclectic principle Cheng employs for the creation of his painting. In addition, the description of the individual characters still relies heavily on the aesthetic principles of the Cultural Revolution. Most notably, the facial expression of the female protagonist is comparable to the exaggerated expressions of the heroines of the Cultural Revolution, such as Wu Qinghua, the female protagonist of the revolutionary ballet, The Red Detachment of Women. (1970; fig. 23) Still, Cheng avoids the brilliant colors typifying Cultural Revolution art, preferring a scale of grays and shades. Again it is Surlakov’s art, and in particular Bovarina Morozova, that inspires Cheng’s coloring, as well as the loose brushwork and the opaque and thick paint application. Shades and gray-scale colors create an air of melancholy, which generally is evident in the paintings of Scar art. Another important reference for Cheng Conglin and the artists of the late 1970s was the sentimental works of the late 1950s and early 1960s representing individual tragedies. An example is Qin Zheng’s Home (1957; fig. 24), a work that was criticized as expressing the bourgeois theory of human nature. Hence, Cheng’s Snow Day stylistically refers back to expressive paintings that have a strong narrative component and a melancholic mood, and that represent tragic conflict situations.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The narrative structure of Snow on a certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 corresponds strikingly to that of works of Scar literature, particularly “Maple”, which has also been published as a picture story. First, there are similarities concerning content. Cheng represents several narrative levels. On the first level, he describes the ending of a battle between Red Guard factions. Cheng emphasizes the dialectical tension between the factions through the use of syntactic antonyms. As with the art of the Cultural Revolution he attributes meaning to pairs of syntactic antonyms. (fig. 27) The contrast between bright and dark zones that in Cultural Revolution art...
the dichotomy of positive and negative is used here primarily to generate dramatic tension. Contrasts between complementary colors, such as red and green, or blue and orange, correlate with the expressive qualities active and passive, respectively cold and warm, and underscores the protagonists’ different roles. The losers, being forced into a passive position, are therefore represented in scanty bluish and greenish clothing and barefoot, while the warm clothes of the winners are mainly painted in olive-green, and shades of orange, red and brown. Both factions play the roles attributed to them by the political guidelines: the winners are persuaded of the victory of their correct political guideline, and the losers behave like martyrs of the revolution.

On a second narrative level, Cheng Conglin tells an affective relationship between members of enemy factions. He describes a moment in this relationship, when the ideological and emotional distance between the two friends reaches its most extreme point. However, unlike Zheng Yi’s short story, this relationship has no tragic ending.

On a third level, he recounts a personal memory, to which I shall return later. As in the short story, Cheng employs figures of identification. The figure of the thirteen-year-old Cheng in the painting corresponds to that of the narrator of the short story, who like Cheng is motionless as he observes the climax of the incident. The intellectual represented in the short story by the figure of the narrator, in Snow Day finds his correspondance in the elderly woman standing to the left of Cheng Congling. Both the thirteen-year-old Cheng and the female intellectual are figures of “reflection and diversion.” They not only propose their point of view to the viewer, but also raise the represented event onto a different temporal and conceptual level. I shall discuss their function in more detail later.

In the details of the scene’s depiction, Cheng seems again to be inspired by the literary counterpart. The battle takes place in front of a school building covered with bullet holes. As in the short story, the color red appears and re-appears in the painting like a leitmotif. Red here similarly connotes the red of communism, as well as the red of blood. The depiction of the Red Guard hitting the wounded enemy in the back with his rifle butt can also be read in “Maple”: “Swearing, he turned around the rifle and hit me with the
rifle butt.” Further, the detailed description of individual characters shows many parallels to Scar literature in general, and to Zheng Yi’s short story in particular. As an example, Cheng’s painting of the female protagonist could nearly be read as an illustration of the figure in Zheng Yi’s story: “Short hair, like that of boys, a square face, thin lips, an energetic snub nose, and, behind the loose hair, a pair of still naive eyes (...)” (fig. 25)

The accessories that Cheng put in the hands of the protagonists seem as if chosen from diverse films and stem from different periods. They include a pistol and a mortar from the Anti-Japanese War period (1937), a Soviet bayonet and machine gun from the time of the Korean War (1950s), and a Czech motor bike from World War II.

COLLECTIVE CATHARSIS, COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 is a painting with pedagogical aims. Differing from a simple history painting, it not only aims to communicate national identity, but it also seeks to stimulate reflection of the recent past and, like classical drama, to provoke the inner purification of the viewer.

Cheng Conglin planned Snow Day as the first painting of a series of three. According to Cheng, this series is to simulate and to stimulate the process of self-introspection (fan si). Snow Day was intended to represent the psychic condition of fanaticism (kuang re). The second unfinished painting, Deep Autumn of 1977 (1977 nian sheng qiu), depicts an educated youth on a visit back home, and was to stand for the condition of hesitation (pai hui). Cheng intended the third painting, A Summer’s Night in 1978 (1978 nian xiao ye; 1980; fig. 26), to represent hope (xiao wang). The process of collective self-reflection that started after the Cultural Revolution and was channelled into Scar literature and Scar art aimed for collective purification. And it is catharsis, the awakening out of dull fanaticism, which Snow Day was to provoke as a first step on the way to the condition of hope.

To lead the viewer to catharsis, Cheng Conglin sought to arouse his inner participation and identification. For that he employs different strategies. First, he creates a kind of emotional fluid through the dramatic tension of the narrative component. The syntactic elements are the primary means of generating this tension, and are most effective when paired. Cheng sheds a pale light onto the painting space, and in particular onto the faces of his protagonists and thus heightens their facial expressions and gestures. He further employs pairs of syntactic antonyms, such as the contrast of signs of movement (i.e., straight, upright and diagonal, stooped), the contrast of masses (full and empty surfaces), as well as intense contrasts of bright and dark zones and of complementary colors (red and green, or blue and orange). Tension is intensified through colors, for example.

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is intensified through the suggestive application of the signs. Clashing contrasts of colors, for example, provoke the viewer’s discomfort and repulsion.

Second, as mentioned above, Cheng Conglin employs figures of identification, through which the function of the viewer is anticipated within the painting. He further creates the feeling of recognition through the representation of the incident as a fragment of his personal memory. The figure of thirteen-year old Cheng Conglin, the elderly female intellectual, the child, and the crowd in the background all are figures of identification. Within the crowd, all kinds of emotions and social strata are represented. The group of the child, Cheng as teenager, and the elderly intellectual embody different generations. Cheng here provides a representative cross section of Chinese society to connote general concern, and the spectators in the painting are therefore counterparts of the viewers. The figure of the intellectual is only indirectly related to the viewer. As a figure of reflection and diversion, she represents the viewpoint of her generation and her class. Like most of the intellectuals of her generation, she considers the youth that grew up during the Cultural Revolution the lost generation. However, the teenager Cheng directly addresses the viewer and recounts the events of that certain day in 1968 from his personal perspective. Snow Day for him is a visual memento, representing the past from a subjective and emotional standpoint. The aspect of the past is expressed through the somewhat hermetic quality of the communication within the painting. No communication is possible between the viewer and the protagonists. And more, the plot seems to take place in another sphere, in a different time, and appears as a vision of the artist, who himself is represented at the margin of the plot, present and absent at the same time. Thirteen-year old Cheng Conglin’s closed eyes, as well as his half-darkened face, connote this kind of inner vision. The empty snow covered area in the foreground of the painting acts as a plane of projection for the personal memories of the artist and the viewer. The traces left on the snow are like stimuli for the process of remembering. Further, the white area connotes the aspect of the non-realized and non-achieved, which makes the representation become relevant for the present.

A closer analysis of the syntactic elements confirms the reading of the painting as an inner vision, or visual memento of the artist. It seems adequate to use the notion inner representation, which can be related to surrealism and associated with the unconscious. The employment of the white diffuse light, and the dissolving of forms that are painted at the margins of the represented scene (achieved through blurring of the outlines and the modulation of gray to blue) generate a visionary expressive quality. Color and material qualities also reach beyond their visual appearance, which is particularly evident with large areas of color, such as the white snowy area in the foreground. This aspect is emphasized by Cheng’s loose brushwork. Here, material quality is primarily a metaphor for the psychic condition of the protagonists. This is in fact a typical feature of Cultural Revolution art, where light and natural phenomena are frequently used to describe the character and mood of the protagonists. In Snow Day the signs
point to the emotional, spiritual aspect of the representation. Gao Minglu's reading of Scar art as the expression of a "sentimental humanitarism" (shanggan de rendao zhuyi) is thus appropriate.\textsuperscript{51} Snow Day here contradicts the materialist world view.

Cheng Conglin's individual memory is, however, transposed onto the level of collective memory through the formal and iconographic correspondence with history paintings. Further, the employment of signs with a high grade of iconicity (likeness) allows the objectification and generalization of the representation. Hence, Cheng defines the incident and the collective condition represented in Snow Day as factors molding the collective memory and the identity of his generation.

How does Cheng Conglin then characterize these definitive factors? Contrary to the official position that in 1979 still considered such incidents isolated phenomena, Cheng describes them as typical of recent history. In addition, he clearly defines them as abnormal and absurd. The syntactic elements, and the descriptive details of the scene together serve to emphasize this. As mentioned above, light, shades, gray scale colors, and their blurring create an unreal, visionary expression. Furthermore, the scene takes place in a snowy schoolyard in Sichuan, one of China's hottest provinces, where snow is a rare natural phenomenon. The abnormality of the natural phenomenon, which according to popular belief connotes the end of an illegitimate rulership, introduces a fateful aspect into the representation. It is the lost innocence of sincere enthusiasm that has been betrayed and turned in fanaticism through political agitation, to which Cheng here alludes. To emphasize this he employs a symbolic use of colors. These symbols are ambivalent: red is the red of the ideological conviction and of blood; white is the white of innocence and of death. Material qualities have additional symbolic significance. Cheng uses the contrast between structured and unstructured surfaces to emphasize the ambivalence of the symbols. The churned, dirty snow, like the torn and stained blouse of the female protagonist, signify lost innocence. Wearing the white blouse of the martyrs of the revolution, she is victim not hero, and a symbol of her generation.\textsuperscript{52} Another symbol for the lost innocence is the wounds that appear everywhere in the painting.

Lü Peng comments on the scene: "The clearest expression of their apathy and ignorance is the confidence of the losers that they fight for the truth and would rather die than yield, that they consider themselves heroes. (...) Is there anything more ridiculous and reactionary than to sacrifice one's own precious life for an untenable belief?"\textsuperscript{53} A member of the victorious faction takes a photograph of the feigned historical moment. He did not imagine that after the ten years of "great calamity" (haojie),\textsuperscript{18} the winners would also turn out to be losers.

Cheng Conglin thus depicts the scene as the result of an incredible betrayal, of which the youth of his generation had been victims, and which, like fanaticism, was typical of the emotive between attack one th and de could and th Snow establ passiv is fun painti white surfac a simi

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of the Cultural Revolution. The cynicism as well as the scope of the human and emotional loss become very evident, if one considers the affective relationship between the members of the enemy factions, represented in the painting. Affective attachments or romantic love were taboo during the Cultural Revolution. However, if one thinks of the human disaster, represented in Snow Day, they appear as the true and durable values. Thus, Cheng not only poses the question of why such a disaster could happen, but also appeals to the people to emerge from their dull fanaticism, and then to reconsider the values of society. The result of the catharsis provoked by Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968, should theoretically be the establishment, or re-establishment of values. The viewer is not supposed to be a passive receiver of ideological dogmas, but rather an active partner of the artist. This is fundamentally different from the viewer’s relationship with the propaganda paintings and history paintings of the People’s Republic. On a syntactic level, it is the white, empty area in the foreground of Cheng’s painting that acts as a projection surface for the viewer’s sentiments and associations. The figures of identification have a similar function.

A Summer’s Night in 1978, understood by the public as a continuation of Snow Day, represents the next stage in the collective experience of Cheng’s generation and is a metaphor for hope. Summer’s Night represents young students who have successfully enrolled in one of China’s universities following their reopening in 1978. Crowded together in a classroom, they attentively follow the lesson. Seen arriving through the open windows, coming out of the dark summer’s night, young people crowd into the brightly lit classroom. Out of the night of ignorance and blind fanaticism they push into the bright room of knowledge and hope. The youth, commonly considered the hope and the backbone of society are depicted, however, as invalid and abnormal. They are unable to realize their dreams regarding the new values of “knowledge, beauty, freedom and progress, they want to strive to the front, and cannot; they want to turn back, and cannot”, as Cheng Conglin has described the dilemma of his generation. According to Cheng, the reason for this dilemma is the blind emotional and irrational attitude of his compatriots. For lack of reason and self-consciousness they are unable to attain the new values. The juxtaposition of Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 with A Summer’s Night 1978 makes Cheng’s claim for reason and self-consciousness particularly evident. His later paintings Fellow Students (Tongxue; 1982) and Harbor at the Coast in 1844 - The Stairs of the Harbor (1844 nian Zhongguo yanhai kou'an - matau de taijie; fig. 28) and Harbor at the Coast in 1844 - Boat of the Chinese Workers (1844 nian Zhongguo yanhai kou'an - huagong chuani) (both 1984), also express Cheng’s claim for these values. Furthermore, in these paintings, the lack of reason and self-consciousness appears as a decisive factor in the course of Chinese history.
A REFORMED REALISM: FEELINGS REPLACE POSTURES, INDIVIDUALS REPLACE TYPES

The critics and the public highly estimated *Snow Day* because of its strong dramatic tension and, according to their opinion, its authentic representation. Lü Feng calls it the most influential painting of Scar art. Its psychological aspect was considered unique and most profound in comparison to other works such as Gao Xiaohua’s *Why (Wei shenme)*, generally considered a mere illustration of the critique of the Cultural Revolution. *Snow Day* was exhibited in Sichuan in October 1979 as part of the *Exhibitions on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China* (Qingzhuyi jingguo sanshi zhounian meishu zuopin zhanlan) that had been organized all over China, and in the *Fifth National Art Exhibition* (Di wujie quanguo meishu zuopin zhan) in the National Gallery in Beijing in February 1980. This was the period of the Great Criticism of the Gang of Four and of the Big Change, both new movements within the government’s reform program. Cheng’s painting, originally considered politically explosive, now was in accordance with the official program. It garnered the second prize of the *Fifth National Art Exhibition* and was collected by the National Gallery. Since the painting corresponded to the official policy and stylistically overcame revolutionary realism (*geming xianshi zhuoyu*), a quest of artists of all generations, most artists and art critics considered it a prime example of innovation of realism, particularly revolutionary realism: *Revolutionary realism aims for the authentic reflection of reality, the appraisal of the positive, but also the uncovering of negative forces that harm the people. What those works denounce is not the socialist system, but the poison that the Gang of Four circulated in the fields of politics, ideology and morality, the faults of bureaucracy, and the belief in book and learning and privileges.*

*Snow Day* was nevertheless implicated in the controversies concerning what could be a satisfactory form of realism. Those controversies started with the artists’ quest to overcome revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism (*geming langman zhuoyu*). *Snow Day* was criticized for two main reasons. First, the representation of events was neither heroic nor idealizing, and showed negative aspects of life. Second, Cheng made no clear distinction between negative and positive characters. Even though he employs the expressive qualities of colors to indicate the different roles attributed to the protagonists, all protagonists represent both, positive and negative aspects. The typical weak and nasty anti-hero of the model operas, wearing clothes dyed in cold colors, cannot be found in Cheng’s painting. Cheng evokes sympathy with the losers, who are represented in the colors that bear negative connotations and simultaneously shows the winners, who play a less sympathetic role, in colors with positive connotations. Similar to the ambivalent use of symbolic colors, the artist also plays with the ambivalence of syntactic elements. Cheng thus neither creates a dialectical
cause of its strong dramatic presentation, Lu Peng calls it logical aspect was considered such as Gao Xiaohua's Why tion of the critique of the 1 in October 1979 as part of the Founding of the People's eishu zuopin zhanlai) that nal Art Exhibition (Dwujie n Beijing in February 1980, Four and of the Big Change, ram. Cheng's painting, origi- with the official program, bition and was collected by to the official policy and hi zhuyi), a quest of artists ed it a prime example of Revolutionary realism aims the positive, but also the those works denounce is rculated in the fields of y, and the belief in book

counterpart nor does he adopt a clear ideological standpoint. The ending of the fight therefore appears arbitrary, which is in contradiction to the materialist conception of history.

Another controversial point was that Cheng Conglin aimed at representing individuals, not types. Like most of his contemporaries he refused to follow the obsession with heroes, typical of the Cultural Revolution. He is not interested in the propagation of an ideological or moral concept but rather in the representation of the nature and the feelings of the youth of his generation. In Snow Day Cheng still assimilates socialist realist models of representation; after all, he did paint it when he was a student. Still, his aim to represent individuals and differentiated feelings is evident in the strongly psychologizing narrative component, as well as in the ambivalence and emotionally expressive qualities of the syntactic elements. He writes: "If the artist can mediate


Fig. 27 The Red Detachment of Women (Hongse niangzi jun 红色娘子軍), revolutionary ballet, still of Hong Changqing. Le détachement féminin rouge. Beijing: Waiwen chubanshe, 1973: p. 91.

Fig. 28 Cheng Conglin 郭公林. *Harbor at the Coast in 1844 - The Stairs of the Harbor* (1844 nian zhongguo yanhai kou’an - maou de taiji 1844年中國海外口岸－碼頭的臺階). 1984, oil on canvas. Reproduced with permission of Cheng Conglin.
feelings through his painting, how many modes of expression, enriching the fascination of art, can be created.” Critics praised this aspect of Snow Day, too: “Many figures with a distinct character are represented, authentic and credible.” This aspect is more evident in the last painting of the trilogy, A Summer’s Night in 1978. As in Snow Day, Cheng generates dynamics and tension through contrasts of signs of movement and bright and dark zones. He however abandons the exaggerated gestures and facial expressions of the protagonists in favour of a more detailed and individual depiction of the more than one hundred figures represented in the painting. Cheng further abandons the principle of the three prominences. There is no leading character, which lessens the narrative component. In this regard the painting looks rather like a group photo. He also used a more expressive and loose brushwork, which was criticized as unprofessional technique. Cheng read the criticism as confirmation that he had obtained his aims: “I think I understood the true meaning of art and, in future, I want to strive for this kind of painting that employs unprofessional technique.”

VALUES

Snow on a Certain Day in a Certain Month in 1968 represents history as individual experience. Both the notion of the individual and the concept of personal responsibility, brought up here, are opposed to the notion of collectivism. The negative results of collectivism, such as loss of critical faculty, the neglect of logical thought in the favor of an emotional collective consciousness, are evident in the disasters of the Cultural Revolution. Cheng critiques the fateful egotism of the political factions that generate such collective consciousness for their aims. The official critique, however, understood the painting simply as a critique of the Gang of Four. They overlooked the aspect of individualism, evident in Cheng’s painting, which questions the concept of collectivism per se. The catharsis that Snow Day aimed to effect was finally to lead the individual out of collectivism to a realization of self-consciousness. The representation of Cheng’s visual memento in the genre of history painting defines it as a moment melding the Chinese identity, which he characterizes as irrational and emotional. Cheng’s critique therefore is only on a superficial level directed against the Cultural Revolution. A consideration of Cheng’s later paintings and the psychologizing aspect of Snow Day reveals that the artist defines irrationality and emotionality as the roots of the historical and human tragedies of the last 150 years of Chinese history. As alternative values, Cheng proposes instead love, represented in Snow Day in the affective relationship between the members of enemy factions, and reason, represented in A Summer’s Night in 1978. Cheng Conglin’s painting thus is related to the May Fourth Movement tradition of cultural critique and belongs to the critique of tradition movement, initiated by the intellectuals of the 1980s, of which the television film River Elegy is the most prominent example.

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