

Wang Guangyi, *Great Criticism: Disney*, 2000, L.2008.72.3

Submitted by Wendi Chen

Artist: Wang Guangyi was born in Harbin, Heilongjiang Province (Northeast China) in 1956, studied oil painting at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and graduated in 1984. Today he lives and works in Beijing. His paintings are internationally known, demanded, and respected. According to the Wikipedia article, his massive *Mao AO* painting from 1988 was sold for £2,036,000 (\$4.1 million) at a [Phillips de Pury & Company](#) auction in London in December, 2007.

Wang Guangyi is known for being the leader of the New Art Movement circles that erupted out of China after 1989 and for his *Great Criticism* series of paintings. The paintings of this series are characterized by the combination of propaganda posters of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and brand names of Western commercial advertising. Idealized peasants and workers and soldiers yield pens instead of hammers or shovels and appear to extol the virtues of Coca Cola, Nokia, Disney, or Swatch. Wang Guangyi calls the ironic effect produced by the juxtaposition of icons, cultural or ideological, from different eras anomic structuralism. This anomic structuralism destroys or enhances the original intent of each image resulting in either an absurdity or a strong social commentary.

Key points and Questions:

- **What do you see in this painting? How do you describe the poses of each person?** (There are three figures in the painting. The left one wears an army uniform and represents soldiers, the middle one holds a hammer in one hand and represents workers, and the right figure represents peasants. They are the major types of the proletariat in the Socialist China during the 1950s to late 1970s. These images are taken from the propaganda posters popular during the Cultural Revolution.)
- **What kind of expressions do you see on their faces?** (In the old propaganda posters, they are usually portrayed as resolute, confident masters of the country, holding their own destinies in their hands. They possess high aspirations, lofty idealism, and unselfish motivation. They are heroes for other people to emulate. In this painting, you can see their determined look and their strong fists raised high as if they were shouting revolutionary slogans. However, in this case, they might be doing some other propaganda.)

- **What else do you see in this painting?** (Disney: This well-recognized icon of the Capitalist USA appears incongruently with the revolutionary figures of the Socialist China, making the combination look either absurd or poignant, depending on how you look at it. To me, the seemingly absurd combination makes a very strong social commentary about the recent changes China has experienced. These same people—workers, peasants, and soldiers, the backbones of the socialist China—are now engaged in promoting Western values, as suggested by the Disney logo both above and beneath these figures.)
- Through the juxtaposition of two entirely contrary ideologies (Socialist propaganda and capitalist advertising), each represented through iconic symbols, Wang makes a social commentary on the Western influence in China, as well as the Chinese readiness to accept consumerism the Western style.
- The major colors used: red, yellow, greenish black. These were the colors commonly used for the old propaganda posters. Red is the traditional Chinese color for happiness, but during much of the 20th century, it became a color representing progress and revolution.
- Wang's art also seems to revisit or pose interesting questions about the function and purpose of art. **What function does art serve? Whom does art serve? How do artists deal with their own traditions and foreign influences?** In Socialist China, the roles of art were set by Mao: art and literature serve the masses of people. Ordinary people consume art, and at the same time, they are the subjects of art. Another well-known statement by Mao is "Make the old serve the new; make the foreign serve China." I believe Wang Guangyi is probably intentionally making use of the 60s art to serve the new era, and also incorporating the foreign influence in his painting to show both he the artist and China the country are making the foreign to serve China. It's a brilliant idea.

The following excerpts are from the famous speech Mao Zedong gave at Yen'an in 1942 ("Talks at Yen'an Forum on Literature and Art"). You can see for yourself Mao's view on the function of art and literature as expressed in these two short paragraphs. When I was in school in China, I studied the long speech with all my classmates very seriously.

We should take over the rich legacy and the good traditions in literature and art that have been handed down from past ages in China and foreign countries, but the aim must still be to serve the masses of the people. Nor do we refuse to utilize the literary and artistic forms of the past, but in our hands these old forms, remolded and infused with new content, also become something revolutionary in the service of the people.

Who, then, are the masses of the people? The broadest sections of the people, constituting more than 90 percent of our total population, are the workers, peasants, soldiers and urban petty bourgeoisie. Therefore, our literature and art are first for the workers, the class that leads the revolution. Secondly, they are for the peasants, the most numerous and most steadfast of our allies in the revolution. Thirdly, they are for the armed workers and peasants, namely, the Eighth Route and New Fourth Armies and the other armed units of the people, which are the main forces of the revolutionary war. Fourthly, they are for the labouring masses of the urban petty bourgeoisie and for the petty-bourgeois intellectuals, both of whom are also our allies in the revolution and capable of long-term co-operation with us. These four kinds of people constitute the overwhelming majority of the Chinese nation, the broadest masses of the people.

Wang Guangyi's art makes the baby boomer generation look back to their earlier life and reflect on the recent history; at the same time, his work raises the young generation's curiosity, making them want to learn about the Chinese history. In that sense, his art bridges the East and West, the past and present. I guess the more one looks into it, the more interesting it becomes.

- I don't know how to interpret the numbers, especially the two repeated numbers: 679 and 4625679. If any of you can crack this hard nut, please share the fruit.

Click for [Other images](#) representing the major types of artwork during the Cultural Revolution

Below is a sculpture by Wang Guangyi.



http://www.chinesecontemporary.com/wang_guangyi.htm

For your interest, here is a short article by Wang Guangyi.

Issues about Art

by Wang Guangyi 2004

The Materialist series of sculptures I created in 2001 can be said to have grown out of the work I had been doing previously with site-specific installations. The experience of using every type of material and format in these works was a freeing experience. My artistic horizons were widened, and I began to feel that there were no limits to the forms of expression possible for me. From a theoretical standpoint, it could be said that the Materialist sculpture represent a movement away from the kind of visual dichotomies that characterized my earlier works. There was no longer any question of introducing western brand names into the images. Rather, I left a strong urge to return to the basic forms of Socialist expression. The process of creating the sculptures in fact gradually helped me to formulate a conceptual framework for my work: that is, the concept of a Socialist visuality. This is an idea that had been in my mind for some time, but it was not until I created the sculptures that I was really able to articulate it. This was a watershed for me. In my sculptures I attempt to return to the simplest, purest state of fundamental faith. From the standpoint of present society, I am not trying to criticize anything; rather, my hope is to create signifiers of cultural memory for future generations.

Conceptually speaking, this process of returning to the original expression has meant for me a return to the original ideological worldview that guided my earliest educational; experience, and, by extension, to the earliest views on the questions of form that were imparted to me. In fact, it could be said that all the work I am now doing is related to this idea of going back to the original, and of reducing things to there essentials. In the past, I never thought this way, but now I am following the trajectory of my own growth development. I realize that is very important for an artist.

The Eternal Halo series also represents this idea of a return to the original state or condition. The impetus behind these works is actually the artistic language of the 'blackboard newspaper'. In the past my thinking was very unclear: I thought this was all distant history. But in reality this history has cast a huge shadow – whether for better or worse – not only over China, but over the world in general. It is a shadow that will not lift for a very long time, and in this lays its significance.

My feeling now is that when you look at an artist's work, you are seeing a view of his personal history; but it also represents a whole generation. This is one value of the artist in the overall structure of society. At the same time that an artist criticizes society, he also acts to alert it, to awaken it to the awareness that there may be many things spreading forever through one's consciousness. This awareness may perhaps be the starting point for the revival of a nation and a people.

[Shanghar Gallery](#)

Other links: <http://www.escapeintolife.com/artist-watch/wang-guangyi/>

<http://www.shanghart.com/texts/wgy0.htm>