

INTRODUCTION TO “A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CHINESE ARTISTS AND MEXICAN PAINTER DAVID ALFARO SIQUEIROS”

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October 1956 marked two significant events in the history of Mexico-China artistic exchange: the opening of an exhibition of paintings and prints organized by the left-leaning Mexican artists' group National Front for Plastic Arts (El Frente Nacional de Artes Plásticas, FNAP) in the Working People's Cultural Palace in Beijing, and an accompanying visit to Beijing from Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896–1974) and his wife Angélica Arenal Bastar (1907–89). To mark these occasions, the Chinese Artists' Association (CAA), the official artists' organization within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), invited Siqueiros to speak to its members. They arranged for Siqueiros to deliver a formal address to CAA members on October 23, and to participate in two dialogues with member artists, on October 24 and 30. They also published two documents relating to Siqueiros's visit in the December 1956 issue of their official periodical, *Artists' Newsletter* (*Meishujia tongxun*): The first was a condensed transcript of Siqueiros's two conversations with CAA artists, portions of which have been translated and reproduced here.¹ The second article was a Chinese

1 The original text can be found in Feng Xiangsheng, “Zhongguo meishujia he moxige huajia xigailuosi zuotan,” *Meishujia tongxun*, no. 3 (December 26, 1956): 13–19. Feng's article is itself an abridged transcript of the two CAA-sponsored dialogues with Siqueiros, which occurred on October 24 and 30, 1956.

translation of a speech that Siqueiros had delivered in Moscow in October 1955, entitled “Open Letter to Soviet Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers” (“Gei sulian huajia, diaokejia, banhuajia de yifeng gongkaixin”), in which he critiqued Soviet artists’ stylistic stagnation.² This translation of Siqueiros’s “Open Letter” had been circulated with great interest among CAA members prior to their conversations with Siqueiros.³

Siqueiros’s trip had been proposed by Beijing-based Chilean artist José Venturelli (1924–88), an informal “ambassador” in China for left-wing Latin American intellectuals. Venturelli had been Siqueiros’s painting assistant in 1941, when Siqueiros was working on a mural at the Mexican School in Santiago. In 1952, Venturelli traveled to Beijing to participate in the Asian and Pacific Regions’ Peace Conference (APPC). Afterward he remained in Beijing to serve as the General Secretary of the APPC. In 1955, when Venturelli learned that the National Front for Plastic Arts was organizing an exhibition of paintings and prints to tour Eastern Europe, he advocated for China to be added as a final destination for the exhibition tour.⁴ He wrote to Siqueiros in October of 1955 to suggest that he, Siqueiros, accompany the National Front exhibition and visit China in the fall of 1956.⁵

Siqueiros was not the first Mexican artist to visit China. The cultural exchange between Mexico and China began with radical artists on both sides of the Pacific sharing practices that portrayed the struggles

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- 2 An English translation of this text was published in the United States in April 1956 as Siqueiros, “Open Letter to Soviet Artists,” *Masses and Mainstream* 6, no. 2 (April 1956): 1–7. The Chinese translation was published as Siqueiros, “Gei sulian huajia, diaokejia, banhuajia de yifeng gongkaixing,” *Meishujia tongxun* (December 1956): 20–22. Having already delivered a version of this speech in Warsaw entitled “Open Letter to the Young Polish Painters,” Siqueiros was perhaps not prepared for the outrage his “Open Letter to Soviet Artists” would cause in Moscow. The president of the Soviet Academy of Art, Alexander Gerasimov, who had been presiding over the event, left the platform and walked out a couple minutes into the speech, unable to tolerate Siqueiros’s comparisons of Socialist Realism to French Formalism. See Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1994), 229–32.
 - 3 USC Pacific Asia Museum, “Siqueiros in China,” YouTube video, 6:55, March 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.be/Vy9QnjUCHsQ>.
 - 4 The FNAP was a left-leaning artists’ association active between 1953 and 1958. For further reading, see Guillermina Guadarrama Peña, *El Frente Nacional de Artes Plástica (1952–1962)*, Colección abrevian.
 - 5 Historical details from Zheng Shengtian, “Winds from Fusang: Mexico and China in the Twentieth Century,” in *Winds from Fusang*, ed. Christina Yu et al. (Pasadena: USC Pacific Asia Museum, 2018), 11–21; and Zheng Shengtian, “Siqueiros in China,” unpublished lecture notes.

and lives of everyday working people and satirized political corruption and economic inequality. In October of 1931, Lu Xun (1881–1936), an influential writer and revolutionary, had published an introduction to Diego Rivera’s *Night of the Poor* (1928) alongside a reproduced image of the mural in the Shanghai literary journal *Beidou Big Dipper*. Lu drew parallels between Mexico’s revolution (1910) and China’s (1911) and suggested that Rivera, rather than Western Modernism, was the best model for the fledgling Chinese republic to follow in its search for a new, modern art that would serve the people.

In 1933, the Mexican illustrator and cartoonist Miguel Covarrubias (1904–57) and his wife Rosa Rolanda (1895–1970) had visited Shanghai, where their hosts introduced Covarrubias to the influential poet and publisher Shao Xunmei (Sinmay Zau, 1906–68), a well-connected, Cambridge-educated member of Shanghai’s literati circles. Shao called Covarrubias the “prince of caricature” and introduced him at an artists’ salon hosted by the modern ink painter and calligrapher Zhang Zhengyu (1903–76).⁶ There Covarrubias met with Chinese illustrators, caricaturists, and artists, including Ye Qianyu (1907–96), who drew the comic strip *Mr. Wang* (*Wang Xiansheng*), and Zhang Guangyu (1900–65), whose influential drawings of daily life appeared in *Shanghai Cartoons* (*Shanghai Mahua*) and *Independent Cartoons* (*Duli Manhua*).

However, cultural exchanges halted in the 1940s, as China was plunged first into war with the Japanese and then into civil war between the Nationalist and Communist parties. When the Communists eventually gained the upper hand, establishing the People’s Republic of China (PRC) on October 1, 1949, most Western democracies refused to acknowledge the CCP as the legitimate government of China, choosing to recognize Taiwan’s Nationalist Party, or *guomindang*, instead. While the PRC initially allied with the USSR, by early 1956 the Sino-Soviet relationship had begun to fray, resulting, in the art world, in a more critical stance toward Soviet-style Socialist Realism.⁷ As Chinese foreign policy reoriented toward building relationships with nonaligned countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, artistic exchange again reflected diplomatic priorities.⁸

6 Shengtian, “Winds from Fusang,” 11–12.

7 Lorenz Lüthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 49–50.

8 These were referred to collectively as *yafeila* (an abbreviation for Asia, Africa, and Latin America) in CCP propaganda, suggesting a flattening of differences among these regions within the PRC’s foreign policy.

Thus, when Siqueiros arrived in Beijing early in October 1956, he was received by the highest echelons of CCP leadership, meeting with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976) and Vice Secretary of the Propaganda Department Zhou Yang (1908–89). On October 17, 1956, Siqueiros spoke with Zhou Enlai for roughly two hours in a private interview, with several of Zhou’s cabinet members in attendance.⁹ Zhou raised the topics of the Bandung Conference for Afro-Asian cooperation that had occurred in April 1955 and the nationalization of Egypt’s Suez Canal in July 1956 as reference points for the kind of goodwill between anticolonialist states that he hoped to foster. He also offered words of support for “the people of Latin America,” whom he called China’s allies in the “common battle against colonialism and imperialism.”¹⁰ Siqueiros’s comments were similarly laudatory, saying of the PRC: “You are the ones who have to advise us [the Mexican people] on how you have been able to assert your economic and political sovereignty against the imperialist coalition of the Europeans and the Yankees. . . . Believe me, I will do my best to take the great message of what you have done and continue to do, to our lands in the Americas.”¹¹

On the topic of art, Zhou refrained from commenting directly on aesthetic questions regarding the Mexican art exhibition, deferring instead to Vice Secretary of Propaganda Zhou Yang (1908–89). Speaking four days later, Zhou Yang offered his own thoughts on the show, connecting it with what he saw as the new policy position of the propaganda department:

I toured, as carefully as possible, the recent exhibition of Mexican art in Beijing, and drew from it the conclusion that muralism, together with print, represents one of the . . . fundamental forms of art that is definitively intended for the masses, and, for that reason, the [art form that is] the closest equivalent to our new State. I also

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- 9 Siqueiros mentions “it was a surprise for me to find that he was expecting me along with more of the cabinet members,” but he does not mention where the meeting took place. Zheng, “Winds from Fusang,” 17; *Algunas de las Opiniones Expuestas por el Primer Ministro de la República Popular China, Señor Chou-En-Lai, a David Alfaro Siqueiros, en Entrevista Celebrada en la Ciudad de Pekin, el día 17 de Octubre Pasado (1956)*, Siqueiros Archives, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City.
- 10 *Algunas de las Opiniones Expuestas por el Primer Ministro de la República Popular China, Señor Chou-En-Lai, a David Alfaro Siqueiros, en Entrevista Celebrada en la Ciudad de Pekin, el día 17 de Octubre Pasado (1956)*, Siqueiros Archives, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City.
- 11 Personal notes of David Alfaro Siqueiros on his trip to Beijing, 1956, no. 23, 1–4, Siqueiros Archives, Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Mexico City. The translation is mine.

took away from my tour the opinion that *realism cannot be in any way a recipe, a formula, something immobile, but a fact in perennial change, according to the transformation and development of the corresponding society*. I hope that this initial contact with the Mexican art exhibition in China will expand to include the exchange of all possible technical experiences between Chinese and Mexican artists.¹²

Siqueiros had expressed a very similar sentiment in his “Open Letter to Soviet Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers,” saying: “I am sure that you will agree with me that realism cannot be a fixed formula, an immutable law; the whole of the history of art, which shows the development of increasingly realistic forms, proves this.”¹³ He then went on to accuse Soviet artists of forgetting this principle, criticized Soviet-style Socialist Realism for looking too much like early 20th-century American advertisements, and reminded Soviet artists that old realisms belonged in the immediate past: “Your formal language has not progressed at all, you have merely improved your technique.”¹⁴ Finally, in his letter, Siqueiros admonished Soviet artists for not looking for new materials, techniques, and technologies in painting, and warned them that an unbending commitment to improving on a fixed style had historically led to inferior works.

The timing of Siqueiros’s visit to China was no coincidence. His trip coincided with a shift in the CCP’s cultural policies away from Soviet-style Socialist Realism and toward greater support for nativist aesthetic traditions: precisely the positions for which Siqueiros had advocated.¹⁵ Previously, within the state-run art academies, especially the flagship Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, the consensus had been that traditional Chinese ink painting, or *guohua*, had been

12 Algunas de las Opinions Expuestas. The translation is mine, and the emphasis is added.

13 Siqueiros, “Open Letter,” 22.

14 Ibid.

15 In 1942, the would-be CCP Chairman Mao Zedong (1893–1976) set the tone for the future PRC’s cultural policy with his Yan’an Addresses, a series of talks given in the Communist stronghold of Yan’an on the role of artists and writers in the Communist revolution. At a time when the Communists were still at war with the Nationalist Party, Mao called on artists to identify with the working people, or *gong nong bing* (literally, workers, farmers, and soldiers), to understand artists’ roles in the revolution, and to work to reach a wider audience. He advocated the unity of art and politics, stating that art and literature were meant to serve the people in accordance with Marxist-Leninist principles. And he stated that art should be evaluated according to two criteria: political content and artistic form. In 1956, influenced in part by an ideologically driven rift in Sino-Soviet relations, Mao started his “One Hundred Flowers” campaign, which encouraged the expression of diverse styles and opinions.

corrupted by its feudal past and that a new style would have to be built on the foundation of naturalistic oil painting.¹⁶ The Soviet Union provided a model for this transformation, in the form of Socialist Realism. One of the leaders of the Chinese transition to Socialist Realism was Jiang Feng (1910–83), the president of the Central Academy of Fine Arts and a revolutionary artist and printmaker, whose 1946 essay “The Problem of Using Old Forms in Painting” (“Huihua shang liyong jiu xingshi wenti”) argued that Western realism, which he viewed as scientific, was the only appropriate means to reflect the life and ideals of modern people, and that reforming national traditions would only extend the life of tired old forms.¹⁷ Between 1949 and 1956, Chinese artists were dispatched to study in the Soviet Union, while Soviet painters were invited to teach in the Chinese art academies.

However, in 1956 Zhou Enlai reversed course and intervened on behalf of older artists, who still practiced traditional *guohua* and felt alienated by the Communist Party’s wholesale embrace of Soviet-style Socialist Realism. The government established research institutes and grants to allow traditional painters to preserve their craft, travel across the country, and develop a new form of landscape painting that built on traditional Chinese ink painting while adapting it to the goals of Socialist art.¹⁸ On June 13, 1956, the head of the Propaganda Department, Liu Dingyi (1906–96), published his often-quoted article “A Hundred Flowers Blooming, a Hundred Viewpoints Contending” (“Baihua qifang, baijia zhengming”) in the *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the PRC.¹⁹ Liu in his article warned artists not to follow the Soviet Union’s example unquestioningly.²⁰ Instead, he promoted

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- 16 *Guohua* (literally, “national painting”) was the term used to refer to ink painting, regardless of time period or style. It implied that ink painting was inherently Chinese and nationalistic, in contrast to oil painting, *yohua*, which had associations with Western art and modernity. The dichotomy between *guohua* and *yohua* cast artistic mediums—ink and oil—as metaphors for Chinese and Western, premodern and modern. For further discussion of *guohua*, see Yang Wang, “Envisioning the Third World: Modern Art and Diplomacy in Maoist China,” *ARTMargins* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 31–54.
- 17 Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China, 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 18–27. For further discussion of the terms “Western realism” and “scientific realism” within a Chinese context, see Wen C. Fong, “The Modern Chinese Art Debate,” *Artibus Asiae* 53, no. 1/2 (1993): 303.
- 18 Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998), 228–37.
- 19 Liu Dingyi, “Baihua qifang, baijia zhengming,” *Renmin ribao*, June 13, 1956.
- 20 Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 4.

stylistic diversity, including a return to *guohua* and the traditional techniques that the art academies had previously rejected.

Premier Zhou, Secretary of Propaganda Liu, Vice Secretary of Propaganda Zhou Yang, and their political allies thus sought to redeem Chinese artistic traditions and rehabilitate an older, more conservative generation of Chinese artists who still painted in the *guohua* style, much to the chagrin of the academy artists, who believed in the wholesale replacement of ink painting with Soviet-style Socialist Realism. This tension between reform and radical factions within the art establishment—with the latter in control of the art academies and the former entrenched in arts administration roles within the party—formed the backdrop for Siqueiros's 1956 visit and his conversations with members of the CAA.

When Siqueiros delivered his speech, entitled “The Modern Mexican Painting Movement,” to an audience of CAA members on October 23, 1956, many in the audience were waiting for information on how Mexican artists were able to represent socialist themes using native stylistic traditions. For many younger artists in the audience, listening to Siqueiros's talk and seeing the works in the Paintings and Prints from the Mexican National Front of Plastic Arts exhibition were the first times they had encountered art with socialist themes represented in any style other than Soviet-style Socialist Realism.²¹ In the initial years of the PRC, the association between socialist art and Soviet-style Socialist Realism was so strong that, as the artist Yao Zhonghua (1939–) later recounted, “If you opposed Soviet art, you opposed socialism.”²² However, the works in the exhibition, such as Siqueiros's painting *The Good Neighbor* (1951), Diego Rivera's (1886–1957) *Glorious Victory* (*La gloriosa victoria*, 1954), and José Clemente Orozco's (1883–1949) *The Women Soldiers* (*Las soldaderas*, 1926), all presented socialist themes in styles that differed radically from Soviet art, utilizing bold colors, Surrealist symbols, and styles that offered affinity with Mexican artistic traditions. These works demonstrated that socialist themes could successfully be divorced from Soviet-style Socialist Realism. While no transcripts of this particular speech by Siqueiros seem to be extant, the content likely echoed his earlier addresses to artists in Argentina, Barcelona, Cuba, Uruguay, America, and the Soviet Union,

21 USC Pacific Asia Museum, “Siqueiros in China.”

22 *Ibid.*

in which Siqueiros had promoted technological innovation, social realism, and distinct national styles.²³

During the two meetings between Siqueiros and CAA members on October 24 and 30, excerpted in the following Document, his interlocutors were keen to expand on these topics, including Siqueiros's critique of Socialist Realism in his "Open Letter to Soviet Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers." For example, the artist Dong Xiwen (1914–73), an instructor from the Central Academy of Fine Arts, agrees with Siqueiros that Soviet artists were wrong to simply reproduce the techniques of old masters: "If we repeat the art of the past again and again, people will grow tired of it. I believe that if we think of any great master, although their original works were flawless, still if we copy them too often, people will tire of them."²⁴ However, Dong then pivots, to use this example to advance another criticism—that artistic styles in the Soviet Union are too restricted: "The road they walk is not wide." Finally, Dong uses Siqueiros's letter to make the case that each country must develop its own national style: "I'm not commenting on whether Soviet painting itself is good or bad, but if every other country also paints this way [i.e., Soviet-style Socialist Realism], then I agree with what Comrade Siqueiros said: this is [just] another form of 'globalism.' . . . Each race or nation has her own distinct style, just as they have different faces and looks. Therefore China must also develop its national traditions."²⁵

Meanwhile, Dong's colleague Li Zongjin (1916–77) also raises the topic of Soviet artists, but instead of criticizing them for stylistic stagnation, as Siqueiros had done in his open letter, Li places the blame on the Soviet art system: "The problem that Soviet painting now faces isn't the one that Siqueiros's 'Open Letter' raised. Rather, I would say [the problem is] that their road is too narrow."²⁶ Li's criticism that "there is only one

23 See, for example, Siqueiros, "Call to Argentine Artists," *Crítica* (June 2, 1933); Philip Stein, *Siqueiros: His Life and Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1994); and Mario De Micheli, *Siqueiros*, 1st American ed. (New York: Abrams, 1968). For additional reading, see Alejandro Anreus, Leonard Folgarait, and Robin Adèle Greeley, *Mexican Muralism: A Critical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Lisa Shaw and Stephanie Dennison, *Pop Culture Latin America! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

24 Feng, "Zhongguo meishuijia he moxige huajia xigailuosi zuotan," 16. Siqueiros was critical of Soviet-style Socialist Realism's mimicking of the style of 19th-century academic Realism. However, Dong may also be making a veiled critique of traditional Chinese painting, in which for hundreds of years the pedagogical approach was to copy old masters.

25 *Ibid.*, 16.

26 *Ibid.*, 16–17. Li's comment could be read as a veiled critique of the arts policy of the first five years of the PRC, in which the academies focused on teaching Soviet Realism with no consideration of *guohua*'s ink traditions.

road, and debate is rather lacking” in the Soviet Union also expresses support for the recent party doctrine to encourage stylistic diversity in painting, or to “let one hundred flowers bloom, let one hundred schools contend.”²⁷ By placing the blame on the Soviet Union’s overly restrictive arts policy, Li suggests that, with a more liberal attitude toward innovation, Soviet-style Socialist Realism could still present a path forward for Chinese artists.

The discussions between Siqueiros and the Chinese artists also touch on the appropriate attitude toward technological advancement in art. Siqueiros strongly encourages artists to learn from breakthroughs in engineering and manufacturing, saying “we live in the modern era, so we should look for new methods.”²⁸ Dong then praises the advancements Siqueiros describes in the manufacturing of new paints, proclaiming that “when I hear that Mexican artists have new methods to resolve [technical problems], eliminate reflection [on painted surfaces], make [paint] long-lasting, and make colors richer, I think we should learn from them.”²⁹ However, Secretary of the CAA Wang Qi (1918–2016) pushes back against this in his own response, arguing that instead of replacing old tools, artists should find new capacities for traditional tools. Referring to an earlier comment from Siqueiros, that “it’s very fitting to sing the Communist International in church,” Wang argues, “When the Communist International came out, the brass instruments to perform it were already available.”³⁰ Wang is implying here that traditional artistic media, such as the ink stones and calligraphy brushes of the *guohua* tradition, can similarly be used to create new works with Communist themes.

Siqueiros’s 1956 dialogues with Chinese artists represent a significant and previously neglected moment of cultural exchange between postwar peripheries, marked on both sides by intense curiosity and the promise of a nonaligned network of Third World nations connected by aesthetic discourse as well as political interests. However, within the PRC, Siqueiros’s views were also used to justify shifts in both foreign and cultural policy. Thus, his critique of Soviet-style Socialist Realism and his praise for China’s native traditions dovetailed perfectly with the CCP’s agenda.

27 The title of Liu’s opinion article in the *People’s Daily*, this phrase became shorthand for a policy of allowing multiple points of view.

28 Feng, “Zhongguo meishuijia he moxige huajia xigailuosi zuotan,” 14.

29 *Ibid.*, 17.

30 *Ibid.*, 16.