

# Guangyi Wang's *Great Criticism*: Coca Cola: A Compromising of Art Languages

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**Abstract:** Guangyi Wang is regarded as the iconic figure of Chinese political pop. In 1980s, he attended and organized North Art Group. In 1990s, he create Great Criticism series which have wide influence in international art world. This paper takes Guangyi Wang's "*Great Criticism*" as the research object to investigate the correspondence between compromising art languages in this artwork and social change at the time.

**Keywords:** Wang Guangyi, Chinese contemporary art, Political pop.

## 1. Introduction

The year of 1993 was a memorable year in the history of Chinese Contemporary Art Society, in which sixteen Chinese artists led by Wang Guangyi made their debut at 45th Venice Biennial. Later, there were increasing Chinese artists presenting in international exhibitions and creating artworks cross-regionally on the heels of this monumental debut.

Wang Guang's "*Great Criticism*" series was a representative work of Chinese contemporary art. As for Wang himself, *Great Criticism* is a radical shift from which he calls 'Second-hand art history to first-hand art history'[1] This work was first published in the Flash Art magazine in Italy in 1991 and displayed on Cocart International Exhibition in 1992, later sparking bitter controversies among Chinese critics about usage of two juxtaposing Chinese symbol Gongnongbin and western symbol Coca-Cola.

The Oxford dictionary defines 'compromise' as an agreement made between two people or groups in which each side gives up some of the things they want so that both sides are happy at the end. To some extent, capitalist and socialist elements reflected the social reality of China in 1990s through these two mutually exclusive but integrated capitalist and socialist symbols. This essay aim to circumvent the prompt about how Wang referencing and recalling for two specific ideologies and compromising them to reflect social reality in his Great Criticism.

## 2. Overview of Two Crucial Symbols in Great Criticism: Gongnongbin and Coca Cola

Let's begin with the centralized figures of GongNongBin (Workers, peasant and soldiers) in the first painting of this series. Gongnongbin was an iconic figure regularly printed on the propagating posters during the period of Cultural revolution. In *Great Criticism*, Wang Guangyi juxtaposing these representative identities of Cultural Revolution together, which look very Chinese, very simple, very eye-catching, very historical and very heroic at the first glance. They are holding an enormous pen(sometimes it's replaced by rifle or hammer), regularly seen on the picture posters use for criticizing the politicians and act as propaganda during Cultural Revolution.[2] Wang erased all the brushstrokes in

this oil painting, for example, there is no neutral color or transition color but only contrast of bright red and yellow, stressing and ensuring this artwork truly represents the Cultural Revolutionary poster. It's also noticeable that gestures of figures are highly dramatized to highlight the visual impact and attraction of the picture. That is to say, Wang reuses two typical traits from propaganda during Cultural Revolution, the revolutionary-slogans and the combination of workers, peasants and soldiers.[3]

Employing the poster of a short period of history was seemingly valid for a short time by the means of Wang's sets of interviews, but actually it does not. In the following piece of previous interview, Wang talked about the inspiration that sparked the creation of Great Criticism:

*'I went to Hangzhou, where at Lao Zhang(Wang's friend) he found me a copy of the masthead during the Cultural Revolution. Later, Liao Wen went to Beijing and looked for me again. After Lao Zhang gave it to me, I did not turn it over for a long time. I felt very excited, so I started to get this thing when I came back. At first I didn't expect coke, at the beginning I wanted to enlarge, I draw one again. At that time, it was one meter by one meter, which was really a plaid painting, because I couldn't draw exactly the same feeling, so I didn't know how to do it, but I thought it was a problem, which potentially seemed to constitute some cultural pattern. There was smoke, coke, and coke was a luxury commodity, a bigger jar. When I drew, I placed the coke next to the canvas. I accidentally found that it was very good. I couldn't know where to put it, so I felt it was finished.'* [4]

It is noticeable that in this interview, Wang was very excited when he saw the images of the Cultural Revolution, which showed that he was familiar with but had forgotten this notion. Thus, a speculation is given that he learned painting during the Cultural Revolution hence such images have been ingrained in his mind for a long time. And the result is the production of this cut-out posters in *Great Criticism*. Even though, *Great Criticism* incorporates western elements of coca-cola in the artwork, it still unique and distinctly different from western pop.

Although Wang includes Coca-cola in his artwork, Wang uses to symbol to reflect political situation in China. Meanwhile, there is another factor Coca-cola derived from the western pop art. Influenced by pop artist Andy Warhol,

Wang saw art as nothing more than a strategy game.[5] Both of them abandoned the traditional way of painting and withdrew the emotional factor from their works. Andy Warhol copies iconic imagery from popular culture and commercial items and reuse into the painting using the language of "repetition." On the other hand, Wang also uses commercial factors Coca-cola from capitalist culture. However, if Wang only reproduce or misappropriate the Western pop pattern, then the "Great Criticism" series is not very creative, and also not enough to attract the attention of the Western and Chinese art circles. Actually, Wang and Andy Warhol possess different ideas of art. Except using the popular symbols, Wang also juxtaposes and highlights the contrast and portrayal of two essences, the commercialisation of capitalism and the unity of socialism., that are fundamentally distinct from one another.[6] Regard to another fundamental distinction between Warhol and Wang, Wang places greater emphasis on the performance of politics and history in addition to the performance of popular elements, and economic life. It can be said that the great criticism is to transform on the basis of Warhol and build its own style.

As for Wang himself, he called his unique way of narration a 'foggy' thought, which was a sense of confusion in his creation.[7] We could see the 'foggy' thought in terms of Wang embodies in the whole Great Criticism series by the means of the visual antagonism between Coca-cola and Gong-Nong-Bin. Take an example of the one created in 1991, in the scene, Gong-Nong-Bin holding a giant pen, pointing straight to the Coca-Cola trademark below, echoing the headline 'Great Criticism'. ('Great Criticism' refers to well-known phrases from the Cultural Revolution that denigrated the bourgeoisie)

Even if eastern and western elements point out the existence of "opposing elements", complex intertextuality relationships in the series which alludes to the history and current development could not be ignored.[8] Tracing back the history and looking at the delicate relationship between China and the West after the Opium War- -as an invaded country, China maintained a hostile relationship with the West for a long time, but had to learn advanced western science and technology. For example, the late Qing government dedicated to learn and catch up with western technology in 1900s. Thereupon, the intertextuality between great criticism and history also suggests that these two elements of Chinese unity and American capitalism are not contradictory, but compromise to form a harmonious scene.

Not only that, combining with the social situation of the 1990s when the reform and opening-up policy that was being implemented at that time, the Great Criticism somehow tapped onto the social reality by juxtaposing the present and the history.

At first, in brief, as for issue of timeliness in Chinese art circles, the compromise exists between 'avant-garde' and 'national canon of art'. Without reservation, the 'official art' represented by historical Gong-Nong-Bin propaganda gradually transfers to 'unofficial art' due to the demands for social recognition of the artworks.[9]

Moreover, as for Chinese social development, art capacity for timeliness could be seen when it faces audiences at that time, stimulating their contemplation about past. Future-shared past was indeed in the past, when materialistic consumerism invades this socialist society. The situation calls

for Chinese prompt action to find a new path and solve this urgent issue. As the witnesses of history, we have already knew the answer, corresponding to what Great Criticism visually implies, these two cultures finally compromise and coexist after mutual control, prompt and negation. However, young people born after the 1990s may not care on this prompt because they are already familiar with Coca-Cola, and the symbol of the Cultural Revolution is unfamiliar to them.

Just as Lu Peng once mentioned in his work Chinese Contemporary Art in 90s: Chinese Pop art is considered to contain more cultural critics, and thus seems to have more cultural value. The meaning of the artists' works is thus fixed when the artists express their double mockery of politics and consumption in front of journalists. Pop art, as an art style that eliminates meaning, is only a strategic statement of artistic discourse, because meaning never exists in a fixed language.[10]

### 3. Conclusion

Generally speaking, *Great Criticism* obtained the contemporary nature of art through the reference and displacement of specific ideologies, transformed the second-hand art of the old era into first-hand art. Meanwhile, the sharp antagonism between the two images unconsciously reflect the reality and development of the society at that time based on the compromise consensus between two cultures beneath the images.

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