

## INTRODUCTION

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**F**IVE YEARS AFTER the founding of the People's Republic of China, the painter Qian Songyan produced an ink painting that he inscribed *Do a Good Job Painting the Nation's Rivers and Mountains* (fig. 0.1). Painted in pliant, undulating lines, the scene of girls sketching outdoors is pastoral, bucolic, and picturesque. Two students sit cross-legged atop a grassy knoll, scarlet Young Pioneers' scarves knotted over their crisp shirts; their blooming wholesomeness is metaphorically expressed by a plum tree in blushing flower. With two drawing boards cradled in their laps, they busy themselves carrying out the command given in the painting's title. One moves her pencil across a clean page, while the other squares her fingers as a makeshift viewfinder, framing the scene for her squinting eyes. The students' hands are a deictic marker of a witnessed view, the implied yet unrepresented and unformed national landscape. Here sketching is figured as a communal, sociable activity, and the painting itself becomes a how-to manual for the title's directive, a demonstration of the process of outdoor sketching in action.



FIGURE 0.1

Qian Songyan, *Do a Good Job Painting the Nation's Rivers and Mountains*, 1954. Ink and color on paper,  $18\frac{3}{4} \times 27\frac{1}{8}$  in. (47.5 × 69 cm). Private collection. © China Guardian.

Consider the rhetorical devices of Qian Songyan's painting next to a nearly contemporaneous photograph of the elderly brush-and-ink painter Yu Tongfu at work (fig. 0.2). Long-whiskered and wearing the flat cloth cap of a worker, he, too, is captured in the act of sketching, his hand hovering over a sheet of paper. In this case, the pictured landscape is divulged. Yu Tongfu is poised on the precipice of Sanmenxia Gorge, located on the middle segment of the Yellow River, while the object of his concentration appears to issue forth from his sketchbook, a large-scale dam that had just been completed at the time of the photograph. As the water pours downstream through sluiceways, vaporous spray obscures the harsh monumentality of the concrete structure, imparting a misty atmosphere of otherworldly sublimity to the construction site. Combined with the squashy, blurred effects of the inexpensive camera that captured this snapshot, the scene becomes ambiguous, nearly dreamlike: the landscape of technological progress beyond seems a figment of the artist's imagination, conjured forth by the sketch pad and materialized through the hand's action upon the paper.

Implicit in photograph and painting is that sketching as a generative, formative act brings New China into existence. An action of transcribing to the "imaginary plane," drawing is the bridge within Mao Zedong's famous metaphor for developmental narratives of the unrealized state, his pithy characterization of the untapped potential of the Chinese people as a medium "poor and blank": "On a blank sheet of paper



FIGURE 0.2  
Yu Tongfu Sketching Sanmenxia,  
1960. Private collection.

free from any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written; the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.”<sup>1</sup> The performative gesture of the hand, the unfinished openness of the drawing and sketch, correspond to the coordinated orchestration of socialist society under development, the ongoing visualization of a new, emergent state order. Under Maoist ideas of the cognitive processing of the artist, a sketchbook of jottings was more than the impression of mental activity: sketches tracked and registered ideological intent through the action, purposeful or coincidental, of the hand upon the page.

Both painting and photograph stem from and redouble the act of sketching, often conducted in the company of others: Qian Songyan painted *Do a Good Job Painting the Nation’s Rivers and Mountains* on a sketching trip near his hometown of Wuxi in 1954, and Yu Tongfu was photographed in 1960 on a three-month-long sketching tour in the company of thirteen other artists, headed by the painter Fu Baoshi. So pervasive and frequent was the state-organized sketching tour that trips undertaken in the first seventeen years under Chinese Communist leadership were leveled as accusatory evidence against the privileges afforded to senior artists in *Chronicle of the Two Lines of Struggle on the Art Battlefield, 1949–1966*, compiled by the art academies’ Red Guard student factions during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>2</sup> Marshaled as criticism of art world hierarchies, the chronicle meticulously documents, alongside special exhibitions and costly publications, a series of scenic travels sardonically characterized as leisurely junkets (*youshan wanshui*), each enumerated as another line of credit in a steadily increasing deficit of centralized cronyism and dogmatism. A selection of sketching tours offered for criticism includes those of Guan Shanyue and Fu Baoshi to Mount Changbai, Wang Xuetao’s jaunt to Yunnan and Sichuan, Zhang Ding’s visit to Xishuangbanna, as well as trips sponsored by the Chinese Artists’ Association for unspecified members to tour Guilin, Lijiang, Hainan, Dalian, Qingdao, Mount Bianlian, Mount

Huang, and Mount Tai. Although the Red Guards' account twists such trips, nearly unrecognizably, into features of corruption within the art world, their record also reveals the heightened attention and widespread promotion accorded to the official sketching tour.

*Drawing From Life* examines how the mass sketching movement, shaped equally by state administrators and artists, was integral to developing the politics of recognition within the socialist fine arts throughout the first seventeen years of the People's Republic of China, nearly two decades of reconceptualizing the methods of art-making that would form the presumptions and practices of Cultural Revolution art.<sup>3</sup> Mass sketching was the bureaucratic, institutional, organizational solution to the problems of creating socialist art that confounded art administrators in the early People's Republic of China: how could artists, many of whom had little hands-on knowledge of revolutionary culture, come to comprehend the new conditions of socialist life? How could artists, urbanite intellectuals by instinct and nurture, become intimates of the rural and military communities that they were mandated to serve? If the purpose of socialist realism was to shape collective understanding of a radical social project, to make its aesthetic experiences palpable and possible for mass comprehension, how could artists register these experiences without direct knowledge of physical labor, the social relations of a commune, or, indeed, the conditions of any life lived outside of an urban center? How could artists become *cultural workers*? Sketching on site as cultural producers mobilized during mass campaigns hence became the definitive artistic practice in socialist China, and the mass sketching trip the foundation for artistic production in all mediums.<sup>4</sup>

If drawing and sketching are acts of externalized thought—as writers and philosophers have continued to impute to the exercise within the broader literature on drawing—then such acts could be subject to discipline. Writing on modern and contemporary drawing equates the open-ended, unfinished nature of drawing with self-expression, an unqualified utterance of freedom; drawing becomes romanticized, even embraced, as a gesture unfettered and performative, returning to the unrestricted hand a humanistic agency, creativity through reinvestment in chance, mistakes, and imperfection.<sup>5</sup> Nearly forgotten within such attributions of liberating potential to modern drawing as an agent of a precognitive intuition is a quieter, sprawling history of drawing as a disciplining mechanism. Through its cornerstone role in artistic pedagogy, drawing in the twentieth century has also been deployed to regulate modern perception through gendered education and colonial enterprises.<sup>6</sup> Drawing is, of course, subject to a set of conventions. Detached from notions of autonomous genius or presumptions of modernist critique, drawing still connotes something of its disciplinary origins. For every mark that sets forth the potential for another mark, another is precluded, denied, unrealized, and unspoken.

If drawing is ideation, what was produced by the act of collective sketching? Drawing and sketching became revolutionary praxis in the socialist Chinese cultural world,

the exercise through which the artist, in engaging with the real scene, recognizes and envisages socialist life as palpable, physical existence. As the mechanism by which cultural production would come to construct “a newly promoted politics of dignity,” official organization of mass sketching trips for artists manifested what has been characterized as the “productive apparatus” of postrevolutionary Chinese socialism, combining administrative action and traditional-revolutionary hybrid modes of art-making to produce “revolutionary ideals of equality and new social classifications and divisions; visions for [an alternative] political society and desires for a new lifeworld.”<sup>7</sup> A political-artistic movement in which artistic practices were not only formed by but concurrently inflected methods of state implementation, mass sketching as the essential exercise in the socialist art world reveals an evolving, metamorphosing search for forms that could represent New China, one that was far less foreclosed than has been previously understood, one that negotiated between state and artistic concerns. Tracing the sketch as it comes into being on the blank ground of the paper is, in some ways, synecdochically evocative of the experiment of socialist visual culture itself, in which avenues of experimentation are variously and changeably picked up, opened, elaborated, and shut.

#### **REALISMS AND POLITICS IN MODERN CHINA**

Mass sketching answered to a broader experiment with the forms of socialist culture, responding to a pointed demand to create Chinese socialist realism as part of the state identity of the fledgling People’s Republic of China.<sup>8</sup> Although the hegemonic status of socialist realism has frequently been understood as a foregone conclusion, packaged together with Soviet technical assistance and delivered alongside Soviet modernity after the Chinese Communists declared victory in October 1949, the adoption of socialist realism as the preferred official style in cultural production was conditioned by immediate histories of the previous decades. Socialist realism, despite its unambiguous messages and didactic overtones, did not barge into mid-century China as a straightforward, lucid, and coherent concept, easily imitated and assimilated, but surfaced within a more uneven, and frequently challenged, terrain of competing theories of realisms. From the very beginning, disputes over defining realism in Republican-era China ensured that the meaning and style of socialist realism remained unstable, open to interpretation.

Theories of socialist realism arrived in Shanghai simultaneously with their official promulgation in Moscow. “Socialist realism is style and method,” pronounced Andrei Zhdanov, famously and pedantically, in 1934, suggesting a problem: the bifurcation between the mode of expression and the praxis itself.<sup>9</sup> The year before socialist realism was officially adopted by the First Congress of Writers of the Soviet Union, the literary critic and Marxist theorist Zhou Yang published his essay “Socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism” in a 1933 issue of the literary journal *Les Contemporains*.<sup>10</sup> Thus marked the official entry of socialist realism into the Chinese literary

sphere, but theories of cultural production associated with the October Revolution had begun in China at least a decade earlier, prefigured by novels of critical realism and theorized in writings on proletarian literature (*puluo wenxue*) advanced by Qu Qiubai and others.<sup>11</sup> During the Sino-Japanese war, translations of Soviet texts on concepts associated with socialist realism, such as theories of the image, reflection, typicality, and creative method, were disseminated in periodicals devoted to tightening Sino-Soviet relations, but Chinese writers did not swallow socialist realism uncritically and indiscriminately.<sup>12</sup> Although the *locus classicus* of socialist realism in the Chinese visual arts has been frequently traced to Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," a series of speeches given over the course of a week in May 1942 but not published until the following year, Mao's definition of "proletarian realism," which would be revised into "socialist realism" in subsequent editions, is heavily shaped by the disagreements and fissures within the literary world that preceded the Yan'an Rectification Campaign.<sup>13</sup> As Mao would come to define proletarian realism, the Yan'an model of literary production marked a shift that deviated from its Soviet progenitor, emphasizing what Maurice Meisner has characterized as the features of Maoism, its populist utopian and romantic rural tendencies.<sup>14</sup> By 1960, after the Sino-Soviet split, the term socialist realism would largely be substituted with ever more sublime aspirations, phrased as "the combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism."<sup>15</sup>

So much for a brief pass at the textual articulations of socialist realism in modern China. Without a similar defining moment in the history of the visual arts, the formulation of socialist realism in the Chinese art world did not cleave tightly to its literary counterpart. Instead, early twentieth-century debates over the modernization of Chinese art, transnational alignments of art history following studies in European and Japanese institutions, changing hierarchies of the fine arts under technological and pedagogical movements, and the fracturing of the art world during the Sino-Japanese war prepared the ground within the fine arts for socialist realism.

By the time the first All-China Literary and Art Worker's conference was held in July 1949, the art world had already made a decisive turn to realism. The process had begun in the early twentieth century, marked by a signal preface written in 1917 by the late Qing dynasty reformer and former statesman Kang Youwei. In the seminal introduction to a catalogue of his personal painting and calligraphy associated with his studio, named the Thatched Hall of Ten Thousand Trees, Kang grumbled about the dire state of Chinese painting, its tired orthodoxies and repetitive reworkings of familiar motifs, the lack of cultural vigor a metaphor for the failed dynastic state.<sup>16</sup> Within his plaint, Kang framed what was no doubt the most important artistic debate in Republican-era China, carried out within the prestige medium of traditional brush-and-ink painting: the confrontation between mimetic realism (*xieshi zhuyi*) and the artistic methods of copying, construed as an opposition between learning from nature and learning from old masters. Quasi-scientific and shaped by his own visits to Euro-



pean museums, Kang's antithesis of copying and nature, neoconservatism and modernization, mapped over an East-West binary that provided the parameters for artists who took on the burden—figured as a national imperative to resuscitate a weak China—of creating modern art and systems of art education equal to those that they studied in Japan and Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Early twentieth-century conceptions of realism were far more reasoned and complex than a clear-cut division between traditional Chinese painting and oil painting, between inherited brush models and life models vis-à-vis European academicism, between figuration and abstraction. The divide set by Kang Youwei, which was taken up by those in his associated circle, such as Cai Yuanpei and Xu Beihong, reconfigured contemporary appraisals of dynastic art history, downgrading the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) school labeled as the Four Wangs in favor of mimetic properties found in Song dynasty (960–1126) painting before Yuan (1279–1368) literati painting corrupted the development of painting history through its perceived formalism.<sup>18</sup> In response, painters such as Chen Shizeng defended the importance of literati painting, enfolded its recognition of expressive priority into international modernist movements.<sup>19</sup> Most critically, the Cantonese brothers Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng, who both studied in Japan, returned to Shanghai to promote concepts of “new realism” appended to Japanese ink painting, *nihonga*, reformulated by means of technical effects and practices associated with European painting.<sup>20</sup> Far from being unaware or isolated from world art history, artists such as Huang Binhong and Hu Peiheng sought to redefine ink painting with recourse to nativist ideals of traditional painting theory, traveling, observing from life, and developing brush models enjoined by indigenous realism.<sup>21</sup> Under the Westernizing tendencies of the New Culture Movement, the art world should most properly be nuanced within a broader awareness of *realisms* rather than adherence to a single unifying agreement over the nature of realism, one of the underlying points of contention in the famous debate between Xu Beihong and Xu Zhimo.<sup>22</sup>

While elite painters and intellectuals scrutinized the possibilities by reordering histories of realism within the medium of painting, carried out primarily as an explicit politics of national identity and cultural nationalism, it was the medium of print, and the young art students who propelled the modern woodcut movement, that helped bring forth the articulation of the relationship of politics to art-making. Because the movement's acknowledged father, the writer Lu Xun, was himself cagey and unresolved about his own political affiliations, art historians have been largely reluctant to locate a nascent political consciousness in the modern woodblock movement, a historiographic project that was undertaken by the Communists themselves during the mid-1940s in order to claim the woodcut movement as part of a larger rewriting of revolutionary art history.<sup>23</sup> Whether or not the incipient aesthetic categories intimated by woodcut artists' manifestos have been retrospectively interpreted as forecasting the shift to state socialist realism, Tang Xiaobing's account of the modern woodcut movement has sought to recast its political importance by rereading the

aesthetic ambitions of the loosely organized movement, identifying a shift within the conception of the creative act as an expression of individual subjectivity to an externalized, concrete shaping of political and social reality.<sup>24</sup>

The leftist consciousness of proletarian artistic and cultural theories, spreading from leftist spheres in Japan, circulated among certain woodcut artists, especially those affiliated with the League of Left-Wing Writers. Of the groups that proclaimed proletarian art as their motto, the most well known is the Eighteen Art Society, which held its first exhibition in spring 1930 in Shanghai, where members split over the stated embrace of the proletarian mission.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the 1930s, polemics and histories of proletarian art were published in Chinese translation within the League's various publications, such as *Mass Literature*.<sup>26</sup> Translations of prominent Japanese critics, such as Kawaguchi Hiroshi, offered an international perspective on the global development of proletarian art, singling out important writers and artists worldwide, such as Diego Rivera.<sup>27</sup> The straw man of pure art (*wei mei*) and citations of the detached alienation suggested by the image of the ivory tower loomed large: as one critic wrote under a pseudonym in a 1932 essay, "Proletarian artists are not like those capitalist artists who wear their hair long and hide in the ivory tower," before going on to describe a demand for art that acts beyond a given field of formal possibilities, ruling out impressionism, dadaism, fauvism, analytical cubism, classicism, romanticism, and realism.<sup>28</sup> Instead, the critic cites Käthe Kollwitz's *Peasant War* and *Weavers* etching series as art that creates collective life, operating without the constriction of "isms" to reveal the oppression of workers; exposes the crimes of capitalist landlords; and resists imperialism. In short, an art that constructs proletarian consciousness.

The emergence of the concept of "new realism" (*xin xieshi zhuyi*) was intertwined with an incipient and short-lived proletarian art movement, though young students who most fervently promoted proletarian art would significantly change the formal expression of their commitments during the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>29</sup> It was at the organizing meeting of the League on March 9, 1930, that, according to the reporter Lu Hongji, the first known instance of "new realism, also known as revolutionary realism" was publicly articulated by Lu Xun.<sup>30</sup> New realism, in its early formulation, was bound up with the articulation of an art to liberate a new audience, the masses (*qunzhong*), through aesthetic stimulation, a project that young painters who had studied in Japan would take up across multiple mediums, from painting and woodcuts to theater. Secret societies organized in quick succession, including the Youth Literary and Art Worker's League, Painting Worker's League, Proletarian Painting Society, and World Art Society, sought to promote proletarian art by producing realist painting in the vein of their heroes, Jean-François Millet and Gustave Courbet, but such works by artists who self-consciously described themselves as proletarian are relatively rare. While a student in Beijing, the art critic Hu Man produced a triptych of canvases that he referred to as proletarian painting, *Three Songs of the Peasant*.<sup>31</sup> *Extracting a Thorn*, which was selected for reproduction in the Soviet magazine *Abroad*, edited by Maxim



Gorky, and shown in the *Chinese Revolutionary Art Exhibition* in 1934, represents a peasant, seated next to a basket, who contorts his body in an attempt to remove a spur from the bottom of his foot as a barely veiled metaphor for the liberation of the marginalized. In his ambition to become what he proclaimed the “Millet of China,” Hu Man’s rendering of the hefty, nearly leaden form of the peasant is redoubled by the rough crudity with which the oils are laid upon canvas.

The short spurts of campaigns to forge proletarian art through earthbound depictions in easel painting would not last long. Rather than speaking for a political mass, easel painting and its imported visual vocabulary was seen as an incomplete, even failed, attempt to forge an experience of revolutionary awakening in the national proletariat who could not recognize themselves as historical agents within a foreign idiom of nineteenth-century realist painting. Early on in 1932, Ni Yide, who had recently returned from artistic studies in Japan, first characterized the “new realism” as possessing “substance, weight, real existence,” which he defined as unifying the description of material, physical objects with the use of perspective to capture a haptic sense of space, a concept that he gave up by 1939, when he wrote, “‘Old realism’ only unimaginatively describes objects, with an overly objective manner, so what results is common and weak, pale without energy, possessing little vitality, but ‘new realism’ seeks to add subjectivism to objectivity, allowing objects to be strongly expressed.”<sup>32</sup> During the demand for persuasive and easily produced propaganda during the Sino-Japanese War and the civil war, the urgency to develop painting appropriate to revolutionary China largely fell by the wayside as artists and future arts administrators staged debates over the nature of communicative transmission and public reception, with the mass address of woodblock prints ultimately triumphing over other mediums.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, the cosmopolitan origins of the woodblock print would be spliced into an indigenous history of the folk form, the New Year’s print (*nianhua*), to realize mass appeal, pedagogical motives, and popular legibility.

As artists’ citations of German and Mexican compatriots in the struggle of proletarian art suggest, it was also not inevitable that the “new realism” would become conjoined with Soviet revolutionary art. Both Lu Xun and Xu Beihong contributed to a wider awareness of Russian revolutionary prints and painters, but their introductions to Soviet art took place within a larger, cosmopolitan environment of world art histories, constituted, as Rebecca Karl has written, of the configurations of nationalism to statism among late Qing intellectuals, “global modernity . . . produced, illumined, and recognized through the most visible spaces of unevenness in the modern world.”<sup>34</sup> For his private collection that he shared with his students, Lu Xun had purchased a set of prints by Anatoly Lunacharsky alongside etchings by Kollwitz, Frans Masereel, and George Grosz.<sup>35</sup> After Xu Beihong organized the *Chinese Painting* exhibition that traveled to Moscow in July 1934, he introduced the history of Soviet art in the 1936 issue of the magazine *Chinese-Soviet Culture*, where he outlined the development of Russian painting, beginning in the eighteenth century with the *plein air* practices of the

Wanderers School (*Peredvizhniki*).<sup>36</sup> While acknowledging the debt of Russian painting to French impressionism, Xu Beihong ends his essay by describing how the Soviets have thrown off the shackles of Western Europe's "*caprise* [sic]" and "*fantasie*," using realist brushes that possess a quality that he approvingly, and with complete absence of irony, terms as *fraîcheur*. The preface is followed by an introduction by Cai Yuanpei to an exhibition of Soviet woodblock prints. A 1935 essay published in *Soviet Discussion* introduced a Soviet painting exhibition of three years earlier that rejected *Cézannisme* in favor of the mass forms of commemorative or memorial sculpture, mural painting, and architectural spaces such as worker's clubs.<sup>37</sup> Immediately thereafter, popular magazines, such as *Young Companion*, published spreads introducing the works of major Wanderers painters, including Ilya Repin and Vasily Surikov, alongside introductions to sculptors such as Rodin and Rembrandt, while magazines published to advance the Communist cause in China, such as *New China* and *Friendship*, produced blurry reproductions of recent socialist realist paintings.<sup>38</sup>

The intertwining threads for the state promotion of socialist realism in China are therefore complex and multifaceted, encompassing local debates over the ontological status of realism by confrontations with new media technologies of photography and rejection of canonical histories of painting, theorization of "new realism" under the proletarian art movement, and alternate channels to histories of art, in order to define non-European modes of becoming modern. Though the defining moment of state socialist realism is typically ascribed to Mao Zedong's Yan'an "Talks," many of these mutually constituted strands continued to shape the practice and expression of socialist realism in early socialist China.

In a global history of postwar art, the embrace of socialist realism in the People's Republic of China must be understood as an act of agency and expression of modernity, not as a passively received, unidirectional export of thematic repertory and catalogues of style from the Soviet Union. The choice of socialist realism was born of, as well as answered to, continual redefinitions about the political-national implications of style, medium, and method against the bourgeois determinism of the capitalist art world.<sup>39</sup> What is referred to as "socialist realism" in the People's Republic of China refers to a wide variety of mediums, expressed in a range of folk, academic, traditional, and modernist styles, often combined to hybrids conveying an unusual effect, both as conventional as pabulum yet perplexingly ahistorical—and each of these choices must be understood within the preconditions given above.

The commitment to embrace socialist realism in the fine arts is perhaps best viewed within a series of incomplete solutions to the politics of recognition in modern Chinese art: another rejoinder to questions of marginality, sovereignty, self-determination, and national identity that might be encountered in other modern art worlds outside Western Europe. Rather than the sporadic efforts to redefine the revolutionary crowd or the political masses, socialist realism was central to a particular and unique aesthetic project of the twentieth century, one in which the state seeks to redistribute

the politics and stakes of recognition.<sup>40</sup> Charged with the power of forming political knowledge in its producers and ideal audiences, socialist art in its purest praxis might best be characterized, then, as implicated within a critical redistribution of the sensible. A revived interest in the relationship between aesthetics and politics articulated through Jacques Rancière's theorization of the distribution of the sensible, as many critics have noted, finds uncanny resonances with Maoist aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Rancière conceives of the artistic process as possessing a particular nature that, if integrated within the fabric of social structures, presents an emancipatory potential for community-making, community participation, and changed orders of representation.<sup>42</sup> For Rancière, art-making is productively located within the conciliation or arbitration between the autonomous space of art and the praxis of everyday life, in which "politics is aesthetic in principle because it reconfigures the common field of what is seeable and sayable."<sup>43</sup> In its earliest aspirations, the philosophical, administrative, and educational principles for artistic production in the People's Republic were designed to effect similar transformations of equality, to inculcate respect for previously invisible subjects within socialist cultural production. From the encouragement of amateur painters—falsified as such attempts may ultimately have been—to the creation of mass art galleries, and the bevy of cultural programs produced in tandem with the mass campaigns of labor, the early People's Republic was saturated with the transformative power of art made accessible for those previously excluded and unseen.<sup>44</sup>

#### **POSTWAR MODERNITY AND THE SOCIALIST FINE ARTS**

Until recently, studies of socialist visual culture isolated its realist tendencies, pedagogical motives, and romanticization of the rural as a backwards irruption in the broader trajectory of modern and contemporary Chinese art.<sup>45</sup> While seminal surveys by Julia F. Andrews and Ellen Johnston Laing presented the intricate interactions among major institutions, artists and administrators, state policies, and historical precedent that shaped the art of the People's Republic of China, something of the complexity and nuance of their scholarship has been flattened into the centralized operations of the slogan "art in the service of politics," especially through the rapidly expanding body of writings on contemporary art in China.<sup>46</sup> Within the paradigm of Cold War dichotomies that pitted modernist individuality against neotraditionalist collectivity, studies of socialist art have scrutinized the crevasse between fact and fiction, advancing a view of socialist art that emphasizes its fortification of authoritarian power through propagandistic and falsifying means.<sup>47</sup> In such accounts, at best the artist employs tricks of subterfuge and misdirection, his independence and resistance valorized as a heroic, though ultimately failed, utterance of protest against the repressive state regime; at worst, advanced in Boris Groys's famous formulation, the artist aspires to what only the state can achieve, namely, total dominion over an engineered, utopian social project.<sup>48</sup> Narratives flattened to widen the gap between socialist institutions and the purported independence and freedom of an emergent postsocialist

contemporary Chinese art world also deploy similar narrative conventions, in which the spent energy of Cultural Revolution polemics, violence, and political infighting diluted any charge left from revolutionary promises.<sup>49</sup> In order to reify the distinctions among the high and vernacular forms of modernism in Republican-era China, internationalizing art markets and global exhibitionary complexes of the Reform period, and the socialist art world, studies of modern and contemporary Chinese art have tended to celebrate an artistic freedom associated with Euro-American models of artistic modernity that triumph over regressive state cultural policies. Where recent exhibitions have sought to map the period's binary oppositions of bourgeois capitalism and radical socialisms, First World democracies and Third World postcolonials, abstractions and figurations, into dynamically interlinked nodules of a global postwar art world, the complex motivations, practices, and, consequently, legacies of socialist art and its creation are still largely unarticulated.<sup>50</sup>

With historical distance, the creation of socialist culture sharpens into one of several overlapping attempts throughout the history of twentieth-century China to produce a new and national form of modernism and modernity, one that is consonant with other, similar experiments across the globe.<sup>51</sup> To apprehend socialist culture as generated through hybrid traditional and local references rather than as imposed irruption, as cosmopolitan and international in orientation rather than as closed isolation, as diverse and eclectic in effect and appeal rather than blandly monolithic and monotonous, and as compelled by unprecedented beliefs in the capacity of art-making to forge the world anew rather than as crudely purposive propaganda, is to define socialist culture's centrality to the formation of Chinese modernity. In the study of modern China, the genesis for a larger reconsideration of revolutionary culture's modernity, distinguished from the bourgeois modernity that preceded it, is Cai Xiang's study *Revolution and Its Narratives*. Focusing upon "the day after the revolution," or the literature produced during the so-called Seventeen Years (1949–65), the period between the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 and the onset of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), Cai delineates socialist culture as an *aesthetic* project, in which representational modes grapple with, and attempt to resolve through multiple resources, inherent possibilities and impossibilities produced by actually existing historical conditions.<sup>52</sup> Composed with "understanding-based sympathy" for the productive value of socialist literature, Cai's project thereby differs from approaches that insist upon the ideological machinations of socialist realism, such as Evgeny Dobrenko's well-known argument that socialist realism was the medium of Stalinist social construction, the cement "to fill the space of 'socialism' with images of reality."<sup>53</sup> Alongside Cai's identification of the problematics that continually defined socialist culture in China—the persistence of and negotiation with local and traditional forms, the mutual constitution of national and international aspirations, and the necessity for experimentation in form and content in response to "self-negation

and impulses for continuous revolution”—scholars in film, literature, and media studies have come to grapple sympathetically with the lingering fullness of socialist culture, to examine its formal sophistication and hybrid innovations that held in tension internal contradictions beyond mere undiluted and unidirectional bombast.<sup>54</sup>

The aesthetic dimensions of the socialist fine arts are yet to be fully examined. Admittedly, the auratic associations of the fine arts—easel painting, brush-and-ink painting, sculpture—appear at odds with the socialist experience, which seems most authentically textured by the mass arts, calculated for collective reception by an audience maximally sized: the flat graphic immediacy of the propaganda poster or vivid coloration of a New Year’s picture, flicker of narrative film, or the static crackling from broadcasting loudspeakers.<sup>55</sup> It is precisely this tension, between the elite, technical, and bureaucratic associations with the fine arts and the popular address sought by revolutionary mass culture, that shaped artists’ and administrators’ struggles to define a socialist fine art and socialist realism in China. Formed by the conditions of wartime China and oriented within the debates previously staged within the Republican-period art world, the creation of the socialist fine arts refracts the continual contradictions of constructing a revolutionary state culture. While the producers of fine art were accountable to discursive systems developed and established during the revolutionary period, the fine arts are largely formed during a *postrevolutionary* moment, viewed as constitutive of nation-state development.<sup>56</sup>

The institution of revolutionary cultural theory within the postrevolutionary state is uniquely magnified by the mass sketching campaigns, which were organized to produce the socialist fine arts as emblematic of official state culture. What the administrative promotion of mass sketching reveals is that institutionalizing the socialist fine arts was a contingent process, through which socialist realism came into being, dually constituted by the preconditions of Chinese revolutionary experience and Cold War aspirations for state and national identities, amalgamating theories of revolutionary and proletarian culture within the demands of state formation. The distinctive form of Chinese socialist realism that developed in the first seventeen years of the People’s Republic of China was never solely a top-down imposition of Soviet ideology but rather molded through negotiation with prerevolutionary artistic precedent, revolutionary forms of cultural practice, in concert with contemporaneous political and economic campaigns, and, above all, given concrete visual language of inchoate artistic theory through mass sketching. Accordingly, in socialist China, mass sketching bears a dual legacy, one that traverses the boundaries between the opposed regimes of expressive freedom and disciplinary regulation that constitute drawing studies’ discursive realms, a mixed practice that bears the imprint of conjoining revolutionary means of practice with postrevolutionary state formation. Mass sketching provided the unifying procedure for cultural production while concepts of socialist realism remained diffuse, diverse, and theoretical; mass sketching was the *artistic method* of socialist realism in the visual arts.

## MASS SKETCHING AND SOCIALIST REALISM

In socialist China, the mass sketching tour turned what was once a workshop or pedagogical exercise into a collective, public act. Examples of preparatory drawing in imperial China are few, though they exist.<sup>57</sup> In the late nineteenth century, the modernization of teacher training schools, industrial academies, and other secondary educational institutions to produce the modern citizen was based upon technical and scientific curricula transferred from Japanese academies, as well as hands-on contact with visiting Japanese teachers.<sup>58</sup> Part of the technical curriculum was the integration of practical technical graphic skills (*tuhua*), which encompassed courses on watercolor, design, and drawing.<sup>59</sup> Beginning in the late 1910s, however, under the New Culture Movement's answer to Cai Yuanpei's call to promote aesthetic education, the function of drawing shifted from a component of technical education to spiritual and moral elevation of the national subject. Meanwhile, Chinese art students sent abroad to study European painting in Japanese art academies were immersed in firsthand experiences of life drawing in art studios and directed in outdoor sketching, returning to urban Chinese centers to found art academies that marketed themselves as centers of modern artistic education. In her study of the changing conditions of modern visual perception, Evie Gu explores how drawing courses were subsequently taught as a marker of global artistic modernity, sold to eager urbanites as participating in a form of artistic professionalization and Western leisure.<sup>60</sup> Overlapping conceptions of Republican-period drawing as science, technique, and modern practice shaped the administrative promotion of the mass sketching movement as a fundamental tool, yet the united goal, to forge a politics of recognition, would mark socialist sketching as conceptually distinct from the discourses of scientism.

Because mass sketching was exercised throughout all of the major specializations within socialist visual culture—woodblock prints, sculpture, comic narratives (*lian-huanhua*)—my discussion of mass sketching applies to many of the same problems that arose within medium-specific histories. Here, however, the focus is the administrative revival of painting as a medium representative of the official postrevolutionary state. As proletarian painting was discarded in favor of experiments with monumental public formats in the 1930s, primarily the mural, with an even more decisive turn to the woodblock print during the 1940s, the *return* to painting is bound up with centralized authority over political culture and the processes of state socialism. Artistic commissions and creative processes of socialist painting underscore the conundrums that artists and administrators faced in early socialist China as they confronted the project of institutionalizing revolutionary aesthetics within the postrevolutionary state. Rather than isolating easel painting as the socialist realist medium par excellence, this book treats the establishment of revolutionary history painting and reform of traditional brush-and-ink painting as mutually constitutive projects in the creation of a distinctive expression of Chinese socialist realism. This treatment of the mutually interpenetrating, dialectically informed inflections across oil and ink is not an academic or conceptual conceit, for to consider the transmediality of oil and ink as inter-



linked reflects the actually existing conditions of modern Chinese artists, who worked in close concert with their colleagues in other mediums and oftentimes were equally conversant in multiple techniques.<sup>61</sup> The particular issues surrounding socialist brush-and-ink painting, moreover, disrupt the quintessential divide that has marked studies of postwar art, because socialist realism, as some of these chapters will demonstrate, was not always understood by Chinese painters as solely based upon the pedagogical appeal of figuration and often troubled the ontological status of realism.

To reconsider the formation of socialist realism and its aesthetic functions, this book straddles both sides of 1949 to consider recent histories that shaped the formulation of mass sketching. The first part of this book offers the conceptual functions of mark-making within histories of Chinese modernity: from the international and transnational origins of drawing as a disciplinary agent in the socialist art academy, as the primary exercise to document the participatory social actions of Maoist “going to the countryside” campaigns, and within contestations between international and national forms of artistic practice. The second half of the book offers a typology of socialist realist genres that emerged from organized mass sketching—experiences of the industrial sublime, revolutionary history, and cosmopolitan exchange—before concluding with a collective sketching trip that unified the cultural geographies of socialist experience, extracting the lessons of the previous tours toward what would become termed the union of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism.

The evolution from socialist realism to its heightened complement, revolutionary romanticism, shapes the chapters and choice of material encompassed in this book. Because the aesthetic aspirations of socialist realism and revolutionary romanticism, as well as the efforts by cultural producers to create a new socialist culture, extended far beyond representations of the figurehead of Mao Zedong, this book focuses upon less explored genres of socialist painting, widely accepted by art historians in China, to explore the baseline visual environment at the expense of works that represent the cult images of political figures. It is an indisputable fact that images of Mao saturated the media environments of socialist China, the production of which has been discussed in some depth within the literature.<sup>62</sup> Pragmatically speaking, however, the resources devoted to producing portraits of great leaders were far outnumbered by the bureaucratic and financial organization of sketching tours of varied geographies and purposes; most of the settings for portraits of great leaders, such as Hou Yimin’s painting of Liu Shaoqi and the Anyuan miners, were based upon real-life observations taken during sketching tours, while the portraits themselves were frequently based upon photographs or design manuals. Presented below are cases that have been selected to resist reductionist accounts of the project of the socialist fine arts, in which the relationship of politics to art consists of the picture of headless automatons marching to the Great Chairman, in favor of reflecting, with greater accuracy, the “heterogeneity, limited pluralism, and tensions between official and unofficial cultures” with which historians have begun to characterize socialist China.<sup>63</sup>

If *Drawing From Life* does not conceive of the purpose of socialist art as solely riven by the nexus of oppression and resistance, it is because any study of the socialist art world must acknowledge that part of its heterogeneous nature was the interaction between artists, administrators, editors, and art critics, whose roles on occasion overlapped and converged. Artists, in other words, administered other artists. The artists at the center of each chapter's major cases—Wang Shikuo, Li Keran, Li Xiongcai, Dong Xiwen, Fu Baoshi, and the final case, the Jiangsu Chinese Painting Academy—have been selected because they exemplify the major features of mass sketching and stand as figureheads within the major debates that surrounded the creation of socialist painting, and the diversity of their approaches demonstrates the central contradictions of creative exploration and disciplinary motivations within drawing practice. Few of them discussed their historical position explicitly, for what they tended to produce were claims of broad aesthetic categories about their art, hazy discourses about painting that obscured any clearer sense of their immediate contexts.<sup>64</sup> A largely biographical approach to these artists that accepts their discursive categories at face value does a disservice, I would argue, to any productive application of a period eye to their works, to understand the stakes of the formal means by which socialist painters went about solving the problem, again, of representing *revolutionary politics* in a post-revolutionary state.

To these ends, this book describes the development of the practice of socialist realism within drawing and sketching. The grounds for socialist realism, as discussed above, cannot be understood as purely Soviet in origin or exercise. Undertaken from 1954 onward, Sovietization was itself an irregular and incomplete process of exchange. The first exhibition of real Soviet painting, to be studied by Chinese painters in Beijing's Soviet exhibition hall, did not arrive until 1954; the two instructors of Soviet painting and sculpture, Konstantin Maksimov and N.N. Klindukhov, would not appear until a year later; the first generation of students to study in Moscow would not return to China until 1957; artists did not only study in the Repin Academy and the Surikov Institute, but also the Kassel Art Academy, among other Communist-allied countries; and wholesale Sovietization of the art world diminished after the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. If the overweening attribution of the importance of draftsmanship cannot be wholly attributed to the Soviet model, then what accounts for the unmistakable appearance of works produced under the socialist art academy? Chapter 1 establishes the heterogeneous sources for the application of the most famous pedagogical statement associated—to the present day—with the Central Academy of Fine Arts: "Drawing is the origin of the plastic arts." One of the consequences of translated modernity, the conceptual understanding of the arts as possessing a "plastic" affect, entailing a representational responsibility to capture an interaction between object and environment, came to underlie the promotion of drawing as an academic practice. This link between academic drawing and the plastic arts would become associated with the students of Xu Beihong, who comprised one important camp in the socialist academy, and their *Beaux-*