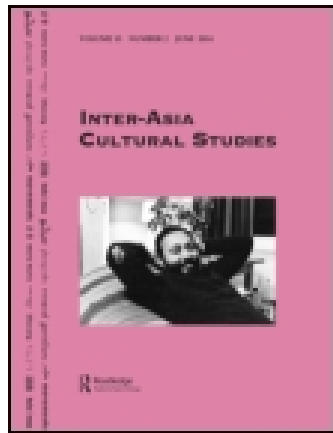


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Publisher: Routledge

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Inter-Asia Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riac20>

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Published online: 03 Nov 2014.

To cite this article: Jui-Hua Chen (2014) Popularization of paintings through book and magazine covers: the artistic practice of Wu Yaozhong, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 15:3, 439-454, DOI:

[10.1080/14649373.2014.951265](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2014.951265)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2014.951265>

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Popularization of paintings through book and magazine covers: the artistic practice of Wu Yaozhong

CHEN Jui-Hua (Translated by Mon WONG)¹

Forward: understanding art history from a social perspective

How to define a painter's status in art history? By his or her award records, affiliating art group, the style s/he pioneers, or the impression and effects generated by the painter's paintings among the viewers?

In Taiwan's art history, Wu Yaozhong (1937–1987) is probably the painter whose artworks have been most widely circulated. During the Debate over Taiwan Native Literature in the late 1970s, his paintings were used as numerous prominent writers' book covers, while in the early 1980s, with the opening up of political discursive space, he painted cover art for many publications of political commentaries and dissident magazines. Within the ten years from 1975 to 1984, Wu's paintings were introduced through book and magazine covers to a whole generation of youths who loved art and literatures.

The road to realist painting

Wu Yaozhong was born in 1937 into a dentist family in Sanxia, Taipei and became a disciple of the realist master painter Li Mei-shu in 1957. As Wu's mentor, Li Mei-shu (1902–1983) was one of the leading figures of Taiwan's New Art Movement during the Japanese colonial period. Li went to Japan in 1928, attended the Tokyo School of Fine Arts and was schooled under Okada Saburosuke (1869–1939). In order to understand the essence of the Saburosuke plein-air painting style, Li spent a lot of time exploring the ideas and thoughts of classicism, romanticism and realism exemplified by the works of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), Jean François Millet (1814–1875) and the like, which gave birth to impressionism (Xie [1978] 2007, 133). Under Li's tutorage, Wu acquired a solid skill in realistic painting and won numerous awards in the government-sponsored Provincial Art Exhibition and the privately-funded Tai-Yang Art Exhibition, two of the most influential art salons in Taiwan at that time.

As well as Li Mei-shu, Chen Yingzhen (1937–) was another person who had a direct influence on Wu's artistic creation. Chen was one of the most important leftist intellectuals in Taiwan after the Second World War. Wu knew Chen when he was in middle school and they were best friends ever since. They started to read socialist writings in college. Their studies of leftist thinking and explorations of life, society and the world at large gradually altered each other's inner worlds. The themes of Wu's paintings gradually transformed from the serenity and beauty of female subjects (*Girl in Yellow*, 1960; *Beautiful Garden*, 1960) and the peacefulness and tranquility of hometown landscapes (*Spring Dawn of Sanxia*, 1959) into the looming anguish of the dark of night (*Long Night*, 1962), the presentiment of intellectuals (*My Dear Friend Yongshan*, 1962), and the splashes of waves hitting reefs (*Breaking Waves*, 1968). Wu and Chen were both sentenced to ten years of imprisonment for their involvement in the Democratic Taiwan Alliance Incident until they were pardoned with reduced sentences, which coincided with the death of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. Throughout their lives, they had kept a brother-like friendship. If Li Mei-shu was the one who led Wu

into the artistic world of realism, allowing him to “experience in person the real depth and weight of the skill of realism” (Xu 1978), then Chen on the other hand was responsible for raising Wu’s social consciousness, allowing Wu’s creative style to evolve from classical realism to social realism.

In August 1978, Wu Yaozhong made the cover of an issue of *Lion Art*, the most important art magazine at the time, which featured Chen Yingzhen’s interview with him. The interview was published under Chen’s penname Xu Nancun. In the interview, Wu stated his view on art:

Realism should not only be about the study of form, light and color but also have content. [...] A work of art cannot be a good one if it only has artistic quality in form without cognitive content, and vice versa [...] If artistic skills are employed not to depict real life but instead to serve form for form’s sake, they are as nihilistic and cold-blooded as all formalistic arts. For the subject of all great art is always concrete and real in the flesh, consisting at the same time of a universal yet unique reality. (Xu 1978)

It was Wu’s concern for real life that made him esteem the works of Millet, Courbet and Honoré Daumier (1808–1879). He also considered Russian artist Ilya Repin (1844–1930) and German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) as his creative and spiritual mentors (Xu 1978; Lin 2012, 82–83).

Styles, subject matters and practice sites

Wu’s artworks are generally divided, along with his imprisonment, into two periods: classical realism and social realism. Works created once he became the pupil of Li Mei-shu and then attended the Department of Fine Arts in college belong to the first period, and consist mostly of portraits and landscapes that conveyed a solid expressive technique; while the subjects of his works in the latter period were often laborers and common people, exuding strong ideas of socialism (Chen 2012a, 14–15). Between these two periods, the transformation of his thinking brought about the stylistic change of his works, as exemplified by the psychological side of the people depicted in his paintings (see *Long Night* and *My Dear Friend Yongshan*). The transformation suffered a setback due to his imprisonment but was continued and completed after he was released from jail.

During the final stage of his creative life, Wu’s paintings again exhibited a stylistic change. In 1982, he contributed a number of exceptional monochrome oil paintings (such as *Operation of Paper Product Workers* and *Children at Play*) for magazines that called for social reform and featured reports of social realities. It seemed he stopped painting in 1983, but then pulled himself together and concentrated on his creative effort in the next year, leaving several extraordinary oil paintings. For example, he used free strokes to depict a group of construction workers on scaffolds in *At Work*, which was painted for the dust jacket of the bound volume of *Taiwanese Literature*. He also painted *Mountain Road*, depicting a “revolutionary carrying his head” while striding forward, for the cover of a collection of works by his good friend Chen Yingzhen. If Wu’s first transformation was manifested by the figures and chaos that depicted his inner turmoil in searching for a revolutionary path of his own, his second transformation came about after his social practice and its setback, when he gained an understanding of the fate revolutionaries faced and the world laborers experienced, which allowed him to break out of the confines of realism, to depict the world and life itself with the colors of romanticism and a poetic gloominess. Unfortunately, Wu did not leave more works to show how he would have transformed next. *At Work* and *Mountain Road* are Wu’s last paintings to be found. On January 6, 1987, Wu died of liver disease due to longtime alcoholism.

Creating a new life of art through book and magazine covers

Book and magazine cover art was Wu Yaozhong's most important field of artistic undertaking after he got out of prison. A painter would generally be reluctant to be labeled as a book and magazine cover art painter—that means his or her artworks were not valuable unless used as covers or illustrations for books and magazines. However, because Wu embraced a socialist artistic view, for him book and magazine cover art was what allowed him to introduce artworks to the general public. In his interview with Chen Yingzhen, Wu made these comments:

Among all art forms, painting possesses the quality of private ownership the most. A painting can easily be framed, hung in a parlor room and become a property, thus creating the most opportunist market. The popularization of paintings must first shatter its rarity. Block printing, etching and lithography facilitate the mass production of paintings. Therefore, by fully grasping the esthetic of printing, the mass production of paintings is a meaningful path to take. My paintings are not excellent, but I never want them to be kept by only a handful of people. Cover arts and designs allow me to realize part of such ideal of mine. (Xu 1978)

Cover art was not only the field for Wu's artistic undertakings, it also became a factor for him to arrange his artistic expression accordingly. Because he knew his artworks would become book and magazine covers, Wu developed a different way to design his layout. In conventional Western style painting, a painter would view the painting paper or canvas as an enclosed universe. Once the painting is completed, it means that there is no more space to be filled, or even can no longer to be filled. However, when Wu created these cover artworks, he knew in his heart that once his work was done, his art would be connected to literature, investigative journal reports and commentaries and furthermore be developed into new lives.

As the New Art Movement developed during the Japanese colonial period from 1920 to 1930, Wu's mentor Li Mei-shu and other predecessors in the artistic circle mainly worked with the space of salons in mind. By participating in the Empire Art Exhibitions held by the colonial mother country and the Taiwan Art Exhibitions held in the colony, they achieved great accomplishments with their artistic endeavors. After the Second World War, in the late-1950s to mid-1960s, a new generation of young artists organized the Fifth Moon Group and the Ton Fon Art Group to challenge these senior painters who monopolized the selection process of important exhibitions and established their own authority by going international. But the key space for artistic undertaking that all the painters of the plein-air realism during the Japanese colonial period and the abstract painters of post-war modernism had in mind were the "salon" or "art group." They also justified the values of their paintings by winning awards from their colonial mother country or international authorities.

Before 1967, Wu Yaozhong also tried to prove his painting skill and gain his identity as a painter by joining art salons and winning awards. But since 1967, Wu began to open up a new space for his artistic undertaking through his illustrations for magazines. After he was released from jail in 1975, he not only continued his previous endeavor to create artworks themed on laborers and common people, with social realism as his style, but also painted book and magazine covers in order to face the common people and the social reality. As a result, he left behind meaningful artworks for Taiwan's post-war artistic development.

Forty Years of Taiwanese Art in Turmoil is the first book about the post-war artistic development in Taiwan. The author Lin Hsin-yueh wrote: "By the time of the seventies when the native movement began to thrive, there wasn't anyone in the art circle capable of forging a new order along with literary writers" (Lin 1987, 222–223). However, when we go beyond the artistic space of salons and art groups, stop taking art exhibitions as the basis of judging a painter, and, instead, evaluate a painter through his or her relationship with

society, we discover the legacy Wu Yaozhong left to Taiwan's art history, which is so precious, bountiful and beautiful.

Acknowledgement

Images of the paintings and covers in this essay are courtesy of Lee Shien-Wen [李賢文] (Painting No. 1), Wu Ming-chu [吳明珠] (Painting No. 2), Chen Jing-ji [陳金吉] (Painting No. 3), Vista Publishing [遠景出版事業] (Painting Nos 4–8), Hsu Lu [徐璐] (Painting No. 9), Chung Chiao [鍾喬] (Painting No. 10), Chung Chao-cheng [鍾肇政] (Painting No. 11), and Yang Tu [楊渡] (Painting No. 12).

Note

1. Note on spelling: besides the translator all the Asian names in the text are presented in the Asian order: last name first. In some of the earlier publications, Wu Yaozhong is also spelled as "Wu Yao-Chung" or "Wu Yiao-Chung."

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Figure 1. *Girl in Yellow* [黃衣] (1960, oil painting, 117 × 90 cm).



Figure 2. *Beautiful Garden* [芳苑] (1960, oil painting, 150 × 120 cm).

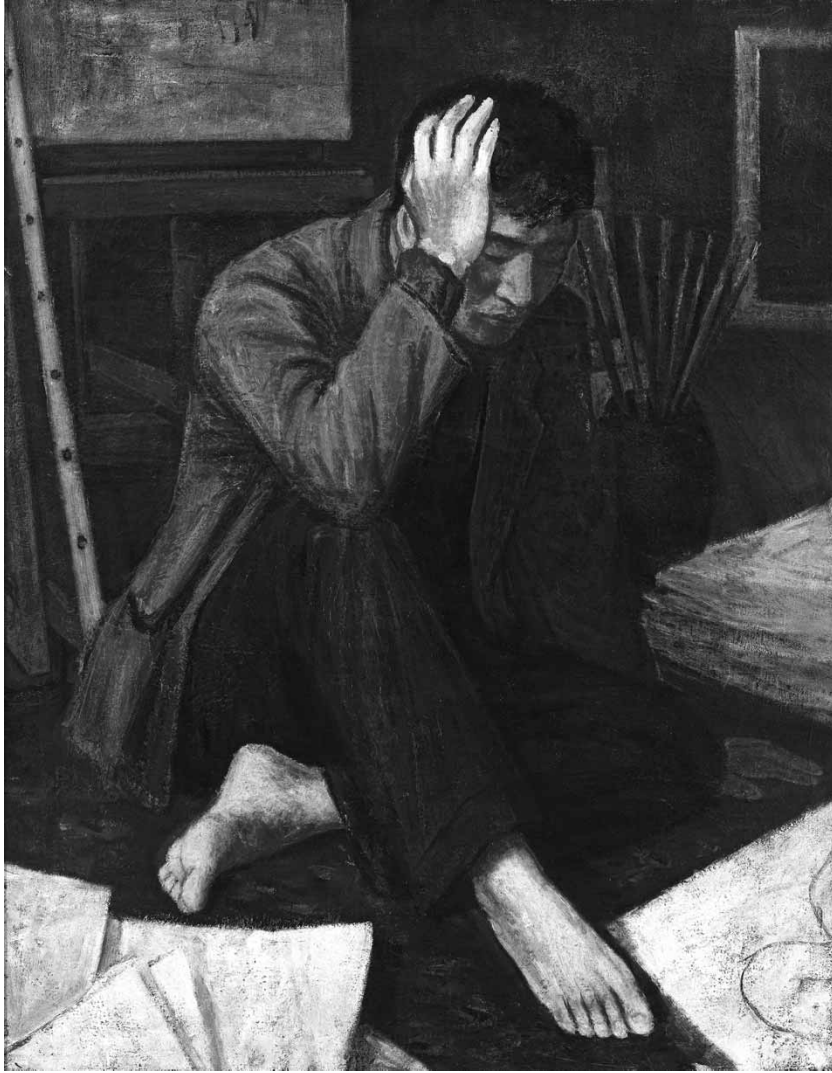


Figure 3. *Long Night* [長夜] (1962, oil painting, 116 × 90 cm).



Figure 4. *My Dear Friend Yongshan* [寫至友永善] (1962, oil painting, 46 × 38 cm).

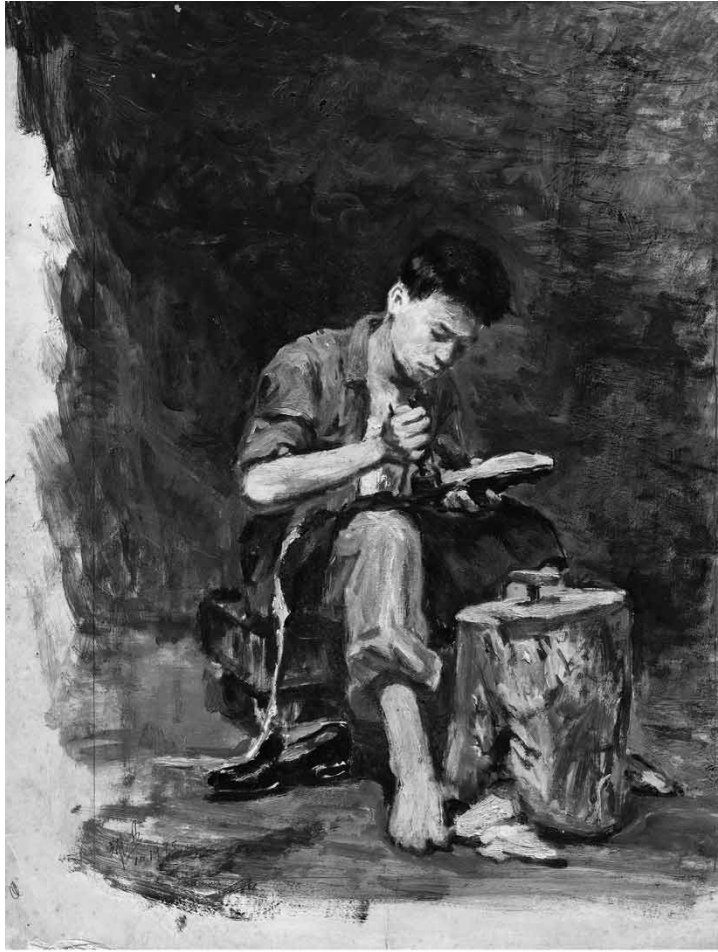


Figure 5. *Teenage Shoemaker* [少年鞋匠] (1975, oil painting, 40 × 31 cm), and the book cover for *Generals* [將軍族] by Chen Yingzhen [陳映真] (1975).

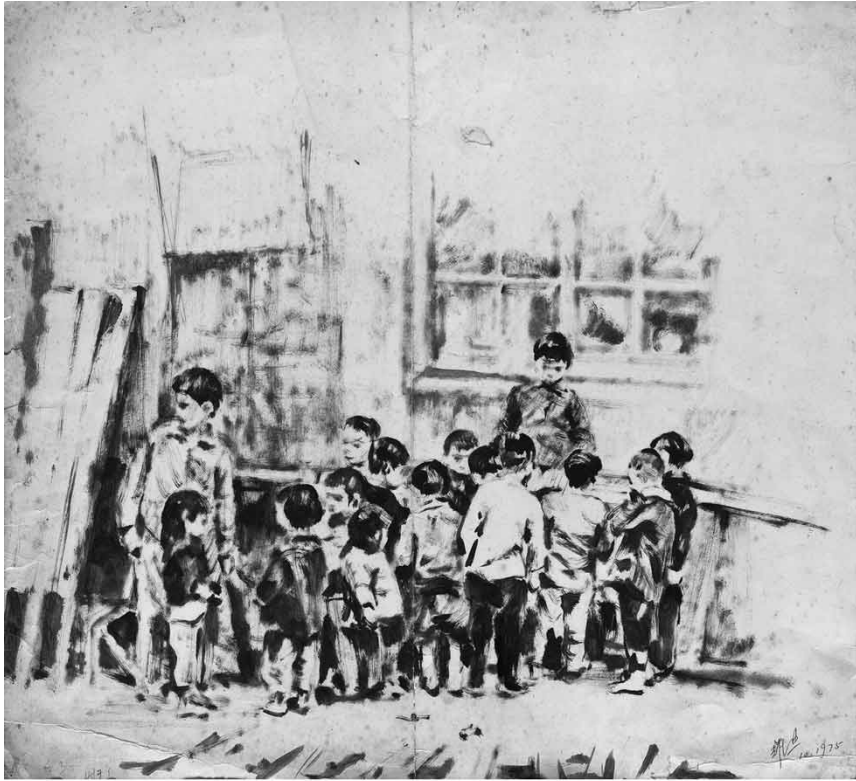


Figure 6. *The First Task* [第一件差事] (1975, oil painting, 40 × 43 cm), and the book cover for *The First Task* by Chen Yingzhen (1975).



Figure 7. *Under the Eaves* [屋簷下] (1976, oil painting, 60 × 46 cm), and book cover for *The Complete Works of Chung Li-he, vol. 5: Lishan Farm* [鍾理和全集卷5——笠山農場] (1976).



Figure 8. *The Construction Series No.2: The Stride* [建設連作之二——邁步] (1978, watercolor and mixed media, 46 × 39 cm), and magazine cover for *Taiwan Literature* [臺灣文藝], vol. 5, issue 58 (1978).

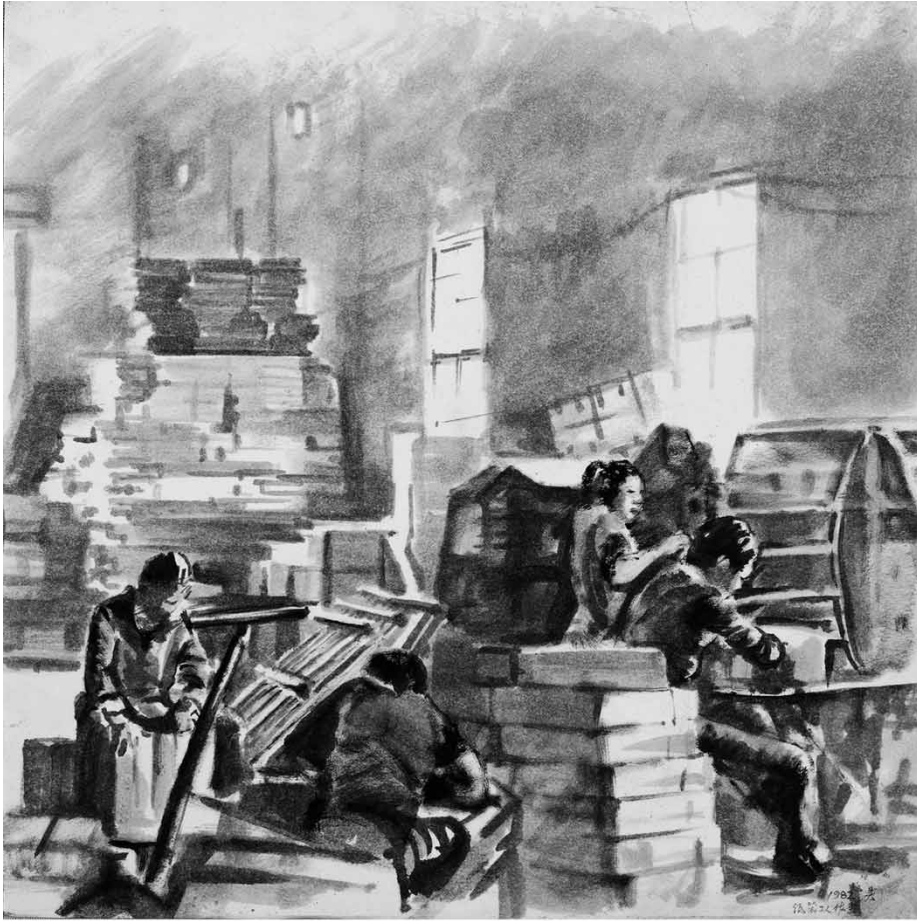


Figure 9. Operation of Paper Product Workers [紙器工人作業] (1982, wash drawing, 37 × 37 cm) and magazine cover for *The Earth* [大地], vol. 7 (1982).



Figure 10. *Children at Play* [童玩] (1982, wash drawing, 23 × 33 cm), and magazine cover for *Caring* [關懷], vol. 6 (1982).



Figure 11. *At Work* [上工] (1984, oil painting, 107 × 204 cm), and the cover for *Taiwan Literature* [臺灣文藝] (bound volume) (1984).



Figure 12. *Mountain Path* [山路] (1984, oil painting, 46 × 38 cm), and book cover for *Mountain Path* by Chen Yingzhen (1984).