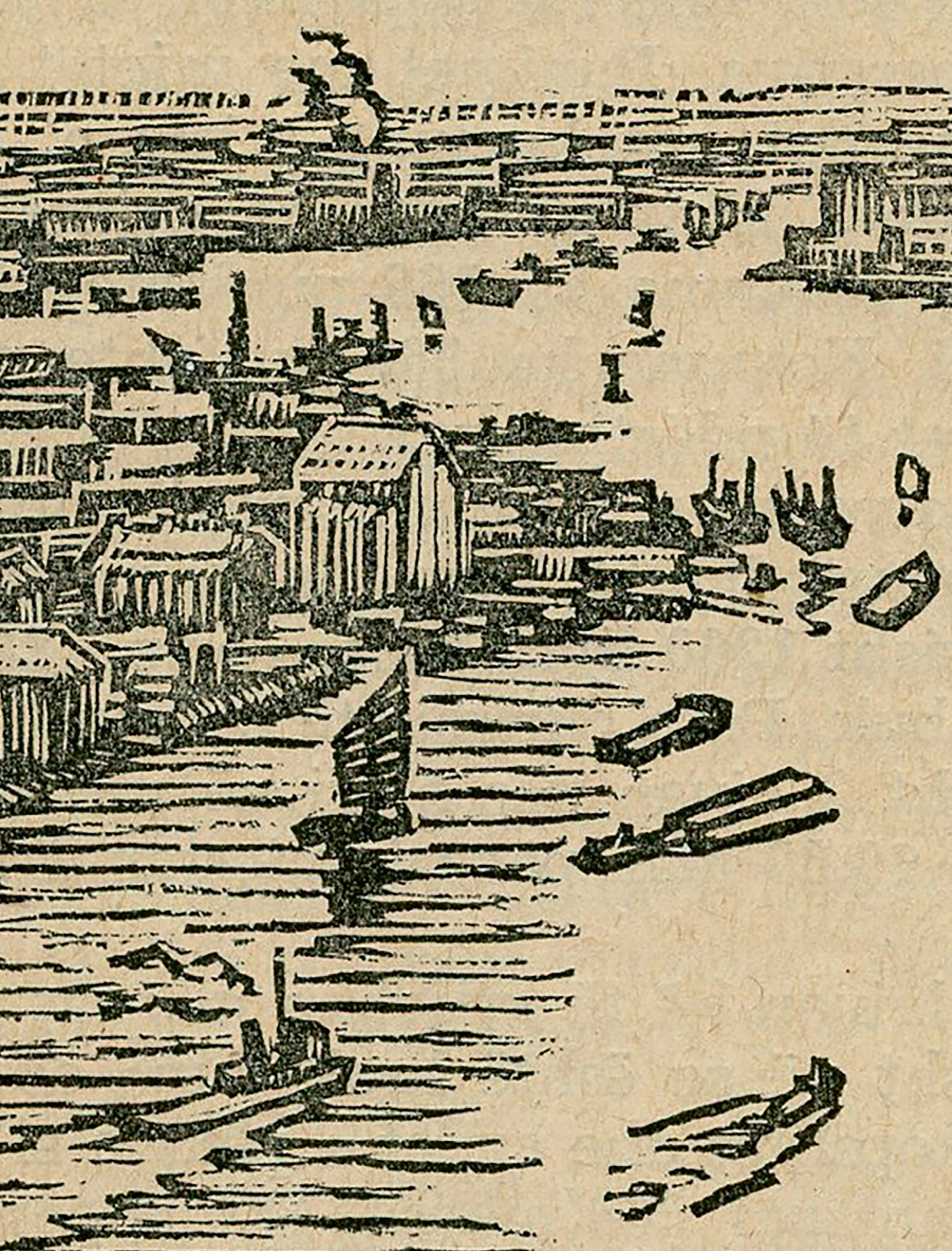

Between Two Easts: Picturing a Global Socialism in Albanian Post-War Art, 1959–69

Raino Isto

One of the first works that greeted visitors to the 2003 exhibition *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans* – curated by the renowned Swiss curator Harald Szeemann, at the Essl Museum in Vienna – was a tall, bright red shelving unit, arranged at an angle in the corner of a red room. Populating the shelves, looking directly out at viewers who entered the room, were more than forty busts in plaster, stone, bronze, and carved wood (*plate 1*). These busts had all been created by artists from the People's Republic of Albania between the 1960s and the late 1980s, and they reflected the country's adherence to socialist realism in the post-war period. This installation of largely naturalistic representations of industrial workers, villagers in traditional costumes, soldiers, and communist ideologues was collectively titled *Homo Socialisticus*, and Szeemann had first seen it on view in the National Gallery of Art in Tirana, where it had been on view as part of a much larger exhibition (featuring over 250 busts and sculptures) of the same name, curated by Gëzim Qëndro, which first opened in 1999.[1] *Blood & Honey* was not a historical survey – it was a regionally themed exhibition focused on contemporary art from the Balkans, and (as its title suggested) it was concerned with charting the relationship between the trauma and violence in the region's past and the artistic production of new generations of artists working in response to communism, in response to the breakup of Yugoslavia, and in response to the Kosovo War, among other conflicts.

Surrounded by the works of artists working in various neo-avant-garde, conceptual, and postmodern paradigms, the busts that peopled *Homo Socialisticus* served as a foil, a marker of the repression and the violence that contemporary artists from the Balkans – according to Szeemann's narrative in the exhibition – were working to therapeutically overcome.[2] These busts, positioned at the outset of the exhibition, also served as a marker of the past, a past juxtaposed against the 'future in the Balkans' represented by the recognizably 'contemporary' artists whose works made up the bulk of those on view. Szeemann was also crucially interested in the almost mythic status of the Balkans as a region, and his geographic frame for *Blood & Honey* was a rather tight one: while it explored the legacies of (Hapsburg and Ottoman) empire in Southeastern Europe, and referenced the effects of the First and Second World Wars on the nations of the region, *Blood & Honey* largely treated the idea of the Balkans as an essence, a persistent and eternal source of meaning. And despite the show's regional focus, the nation loomed large as a category of identity in Szeemann's framing of many of the works. The global was not absent from *Blood & Honey*, but nor was it emphasized.

Detail from Andon Kuqali, *Horizon in Shanghai*, 1959 (*plate 6*).

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1 Installation view of the exhibition *Blood & Honey*, The Essl Collection, Klosterneuburg/Vienna, 2003: *Homo Socialisticus*, 2003, installation of forty-three sculptures (middle and right); and Agim Zajmi, *Raising of the Flag in Deçiç in 1911*, 1978 (left). Private Essl Foundation of Public Utility, Klosterneuburg/Vienna – Archive Essl Museum.

If it had been, both Szeemann and critics might have noticed the fact that some of the sculptures of *Homo Socialisticus* enacted connections with a world far beyond the People's Republic of Albania: among the busts were Andrea Mano's *Kooperativiste Kineze* [*Chinese Woman Cooperative Worker*, 1968], and another work by the same artist, *Luftëtare Vietnameze* [*Vietnamese Woman Soldier*, 1967].[3] These two busts were created in the period of Albania's Cultural and Ideological Revolution, during which the country's dictator, Enver Hoxha, enacted a campaign of widespread structural changes in the late 1960s (primarily between 1966 and 1969) in solidarity with Mao's Cultural Revolution in China.[4] These busts index a set of geopolitical connections that have only begun to be explored in histories of post-war communism, and remain essentially untouched by art-historical analyses of the same: Albania's political – but also cultural – alliances with several of the East Asian socialist republics, including China, Vietnam, and North Korea.[5] Rejecting the varying forms of de-Stalinization that contributed to cultural reorientations across socialist Central and Eastern Europe, Albanian political leaders sought to both generate support for the small country's continued industrialization efforts and establish its cultural credibility as the last 'truly' communist country in Europe by attempting to unite its political struggle with East Asia.

As art history increasingly turns its attention to Yugoslavia's role in the Non-Aligned Movement, and its significance for a global history of post-war modernism,[6] Albania's own efforts to participate in building a transnational (or at least globally international) socialist culture have received virtually no attention from historians of the arts and visual culture.[7] At the same time, Albania's political isolation from its own immediate

neighbour, Yugoslavia, and from many other Central and Eastern European states that began to shift their ideological frameworks after Stalin's death, meant that it did not develop a neo-avant-garde[8] in the way that many other Eastern bloc nations did, and as such its narrative does not easily fit into recent analyses of avant-garde or experimental art and cultural exchange between artists working in these countries.[9] Other recent efforts to survey post-war cultural exchange between socialist nations likewise omit discussion of Albania's curious alliance with East Asia, and its artistic results.[10]

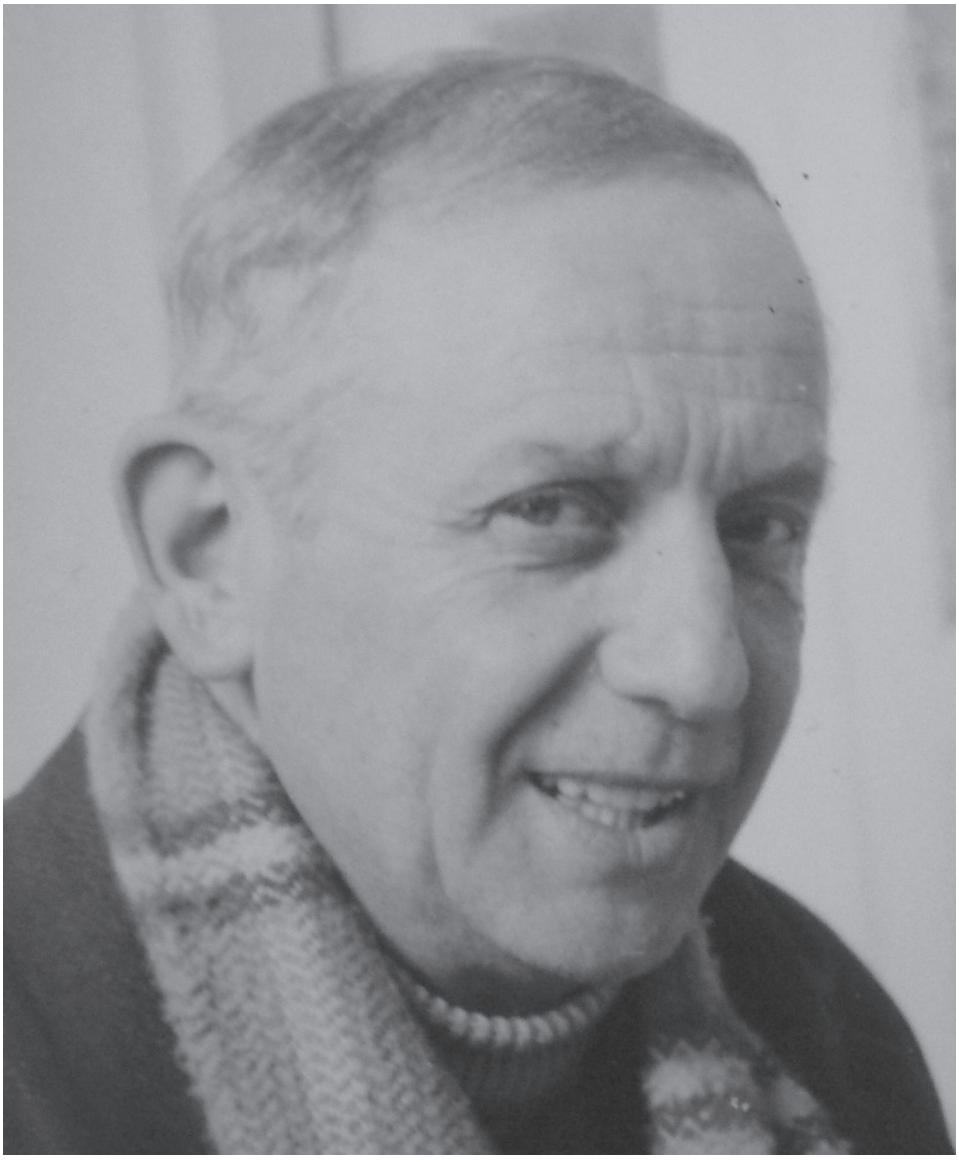
In this article, I take some first steps towards integrating Albania's post-war art history into a global narrative of socialist visual culture, exploring Albanian artists' efforts to picture a supranational socialist condition.[11] I focus most closely on analysing an early episode in this encounter, one that might appear relatively minor, but that encapsulates many of the challenges that such a cultural unity posed: a travelogue – accompanied by sketches and prints illustrating the text – written by Albanian artist and art critic Andon Kuqali and published in 1959 in the journal *Nëntori* (*November*, named for the month that marked both Albania's liberation from fascist forces in 1944 and the country's declaration of statehood marking the end of the period of Ottoman control in 1912) (*plate* 2).[12] Titled 'In *Zhongguo*', Kuqali's illustrated account appeared at a crucial point in Albania's political history. At the close of the 1950s, the small Southeastern European nation was beginning to break its ties with the Soviet Union in the wake of Stalin's death, and to seek stronger alliances with Asian socialist republics. After the Sino-Soviet split, Albania oriented itself firmly as an ally of China, and indeed, as Ylber Marku argues, '[i]t was ultimately China – a country little known to most Albanians prior to 1949 – that had the most lasting impact on Albania during the Cold War period'.[13] Albania's closer alliance with China, however, involved bridging significant geographic and cultural gaps, and ultimately, these gaps would prove too great to overcome. By the late 1970s, Albania would also break with China, leaving itself with no major allies in the Cold War, pursuing its own (still Stalinist) form of non-alignment. But prior to that, we can glimpse the possibility of a transcontinental socialist alliance meant to symbolically prove both the viability of an Eastern European socialism not based on the Soviet Union and the compatibility of that cultural and ideological vision with East Asian socialism.

Kuqali's lengthy travelogue chronicles a month spent in China as part of a cultural delegation, and it aims to give his readers a sweeping introduction to Chinese traditions, life, art, and – perhaps most crucially – the characteristics of socialism in the country. The essay brings with it a set of Orientalist presuppositions about the exotic character of life in East Asia. These presuppositions are not surprising, given that Orientalism also played a major role in the literature produced by modernizing figures in Albanian history, such as the well-known novelist Ismail Kadare.[14] But Kuqali seems to recognize that his readers share such presuppositions (about strange eating habits, about differing mannerisms, and about the perceived level of 'modernity' of Chinese society), and he also makes efforts to dispel or complicate them.[15] In the introductory paragraphs of the essay, Kuqali writes,

> For a European – because there one feels not only Albanian but first of all 'European' – in the beginning, everything in China seems interesting, from the people's faces to their communes. It is as if one is discovering a new world. The manner of dress, the plants, the architecture, the language, the mountains, the food, and certain forms of social organization – all of them are completely new, and often difficult to understand at first.[16]

This image – of a 'European' entering an exotic and imposing new world – reflects both an Orientalism and the complexities of this encounter between two states still seeking the ideal path to socialist modernity. As Elidor Mëhilli has argued, nationalism and globalization were not fundamentally contradictory forces during Albania's Cold War cultural and political interactions with either the Soviet Union or China: rather, the two occurred side by side, mutually reinforcing each other even as they sometimes produced conflicting expectations on the part of socialist subjects.[17] Here, we also see Kuqali wrestling with this encounter as part of Albania's effort to solidly place itself within the European cultural sphere, to cast off some of the exotic associations of the 'East' even as the country set out to ally itself with that region.

If this account seems to place China at a remove from the Albanian (European) context, the illustrations that accompany Kuqali's text do a great deal of work to humanize the people of China for his Albanian readers. His sketches of metallurgical workers in Chongqing, of a member of the People's Army, of the director of a textile factory in Shanghai, and of various members of workers' communes represent lively and individualized subjects, protagonists in the building of socialism with whom his readers could presumably empathize (*plate* 3). Alongside these



2 Unknown photographer, photograph of Andon Kuqali, undated. Tirana: Vasil Koçi Collection, Center for Artistic Documentation, Institute for Cultural Anthropology and the Study of Art (IAKSA).

3 Andon Kuqali, *Workers in Chongqing*, 1959. Ink drawing. In Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, Tirana, 184. Collection of the author.

reproductions from his sketchbook, the series of linocuts reproduced in the 1959 issue of *Nëntori* focused primarily on the industrial land- and cityscapes of China, offering a point of comparison with Albania's likewise transforming urban and rural environments. In both mediums, Kuqali's goals aligned with realism, and specifically with the international appeals of socialist realism: they are unabashedly humanist representations, aimed at marking common ground not only between newly allied nations but also between emerging proletarian publics.[18]

Before delving deeper into Kuqali's travelogue, I wish to give readers a brief overview of the developments in visual art and the cultural sphere in Albania leading up to the late 1950s. Prior to the post-war period, Albanian painting and sculpture in the twentieth century must include mention of the significance of Italian academic training, which shaped many of the first generation of visual artists to practise under socialism – artists

like the sculptor Odhise Paskali and the painters Nexhmedin Zajmi and Abdurrahim Buza.[19] This generation of artists, while they sometimes adopted paradigms that aligned with Socialist Realist representation – such as aggressively saturated colours and dramatic compositions based on the military struggles of the anti-fascist resistance in the Second World War – maintained an approach often more focused on exploring the specificity of Albanian folk traditions and identities. A slightly younger generation of artists and art critics, like Kuqali, would instead study in the Soviet Union, in cities like St Petersburg (then Leningrad), Prague, Bucharest, and Sofia (where Kuqali completed his studies), and, together with a small number of Italian-trained artists, these artists would become the first group of leaders in Albania's own art world.

In the 1950s, Albania gradually developed the set of cultural institutions that would establish the norms of practice under socialism: in 1954, the National Gallery of Figurative Arts opened in Tirana, and that same year the journal *Nëntori* began publication. Until the close of the 1950s, the Soviet Union remained an influential educative force in Albanian culture: often after completing training at the Jordan Misja Artistic Lyceum in Tirana, painters and sculptors were sent to study at the Ilya Repin Institute. In 1956, the Union of Albanian Writers (first established in 1945) and the Union of Albanian Artists (created a few years later) merged into a single union, which also included architects, photographers, musicians, and other professionals working in the creative fields. Also beginning in 1956, exhibitions of Soviet figurative art were held in Albania, conferences devoted to figures such as Ilya Repin and Vera Mukhina were organized by the directory committee of the Union, and works such as Mukhina's *We Demand Peace* were exhibited there.[20] Delegations of Soviet artists visited Albania, and groups of artists were sent to Russia and other republics of the Soviet Union, where they often created artworks that would be shown in Albania upon their return. Ultimately, in these years, the development of socialist art in the Soviet Union served as a guide for changes in the Albanian fine arts, 'an exemplary wellspring of revolutionary experience'.[21] In 1955, surveying the activity of the Union of Albanian Artists during the first years since its founding, composer and art critic Baki Kongoli lamented, 'We still have not learned enough, as much as we should from the experience of Soviet art.'[22]

But this lament came, already, too late: while visual artists from Albania were attempting to chart the ways that the artistic path of the Soviet Union might provide a blueprint for Albania's emergent socialist modernity, Albanian national politics were already shifting, as the country's dictator, Enver Hoxha – long a deep admirer of Stalin, and no longer willing to tolerate Khrushchev's de-Stalinization – broke with Moscow in 1961[23] and shifted his associations to China. This shift was not easy, either in a practical or an ideological sense. Although Hoxha in part insisted that Khrushchev desired to retain Albania as a provincial and underdeveloped agricultural supplier, the reality was that technicians and experts from a vast range of Eastern bloc countries had been placed in Albania during the 1950s.[24] Although the Chinese were forthcoming in sending their own experts, and perhaps more effective in encouraging Albania to move towards a self-sufficient economy, the shift nonetheless produced a geopolitical situation in which Albania was forced to transform from a nation following the Soviet example to – by the early 1970s – a nation that sought to project an identity as the last true bastion of socialism in Europe.

Throughout the 1960s, Albanian commentary on global socialist art changed in both subject and tone: the frequency of East Asian cultural coverage increased, but at the same time Albania was treated more and more as a beacon of socialist culture. There was, of course, a great deal of work to be done to bridge the geographic, cultural,

and linguistic separation between Albania and East Asia. Translations of Chinese short stories, poems, and plays, as well as descriptions of Chinese revolutionary operas performed in Albania (sometimes accompanied by photographs), appeared in the pages of the key publications of the Albanian Union of Writers and Artists – *Drita* [*The Light*] – a weekly newspaper – and *Nëntori*. Brief reviews and articles about exhibitions visiting Albania from China were often printed in the 'Cultural Chronicle' section in the back pages of *Nëntori*, although images of the exhibitions were rarely published and generally of such poor quality that readers could hardly have been expected to glean much visual information from them. Nonetheless, these brief pieces of reporting highlight artistic exchange and the efforts to build a narrative of international and mutually reinforcing socialist imagery. For example, in September 1965, on the occasion of the People's Republic of China celebrating the sixteenth anniversary of its founding, an exhibition of prints, caricatures, and posters from China opened in Albania. The works presented 'the just and self-sacrificing struggle for freedom and independence waged by the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the unflinching will of the Chinese people to support this struggle'.[25] Tellingly, as the report in *Nëntori* notes, the exhibition apparently included at least one work – a print entitled *Shqiponja Partizane* [*Partisan Eagle*]) praising the bravery and determination of the mountain warriors of northern Albania in this global struggle for socialism – suggesting that Albania was the sole remaining link in Europe that could connect the surrounding countries in their revolutionary efforts. It was not uncommon for these brief reports on foreign exhibits to reinforce the notion of Albania as a socialist utopia that provided significant artistic inspiration to the East. Such was the case, for example, in a short report on the exhibition of Korean artist Lju Hien Suk [Albanian transliteration] in Albania in November 1965. The painter, who at the time served as vice-director of the gallery of figurative arts in North Korea, had apparently spent a short but productive time in Albania and created a collection of paintings depicting the Albanian landscape and people. The Albanian reporter for *Nëntori* praised the works for their inspired representation of the 'pulse of the new Republic, which is building socialism on the shores of the Adriatic with vitality and self-sacrifice'. In a particularly telling passage, he noted that 'in nearly all the works exhibited, the colours are sweet and warm, bright and happy, as nature itself is in our country'.[26]

The late 1960s, especially 1966–69, coincided with significant social changes in both Albania and China. Both nations were transformed by Cultural Revolutions, but these were markedly different in character. At the Fifth Congress of the Albanian Party of Labour in 1966, Enver Hoxha outlined his model for 'further revolutionization of life in the country', which ultimately manifested itself in various ways.[27] Large-scale projects focusing on the commemoration of Albania's Partisan fighters helped solidify a narrative of the country's role in the international anti-fascist resistance movements that took place during the Second World War. Hoxha's government intensified its anti-religious policies – especially vis-à-vis the Catholic tribes in the north of Albania, whose loyalty to familial ties presented an ongoing challenge to centralized governmental control.[28] At the same time, the construction of a civil religion centred on the national hero Skanderbeg began, and this civil religion in turn established a link between Skanderbeg's alleged role as medieval unifier of the Albanian people (against the Ottomans) and Hoxha's socialist state.[29] Albania's socialist government also prioritized women's emancipation during the Cultural Revolution, beginning a series of initiatives to address the education and social conditions of women, often focusing on temporary work exchange programmes to move women out of regions of the country where more religious and conservative traditions dominated.[30]

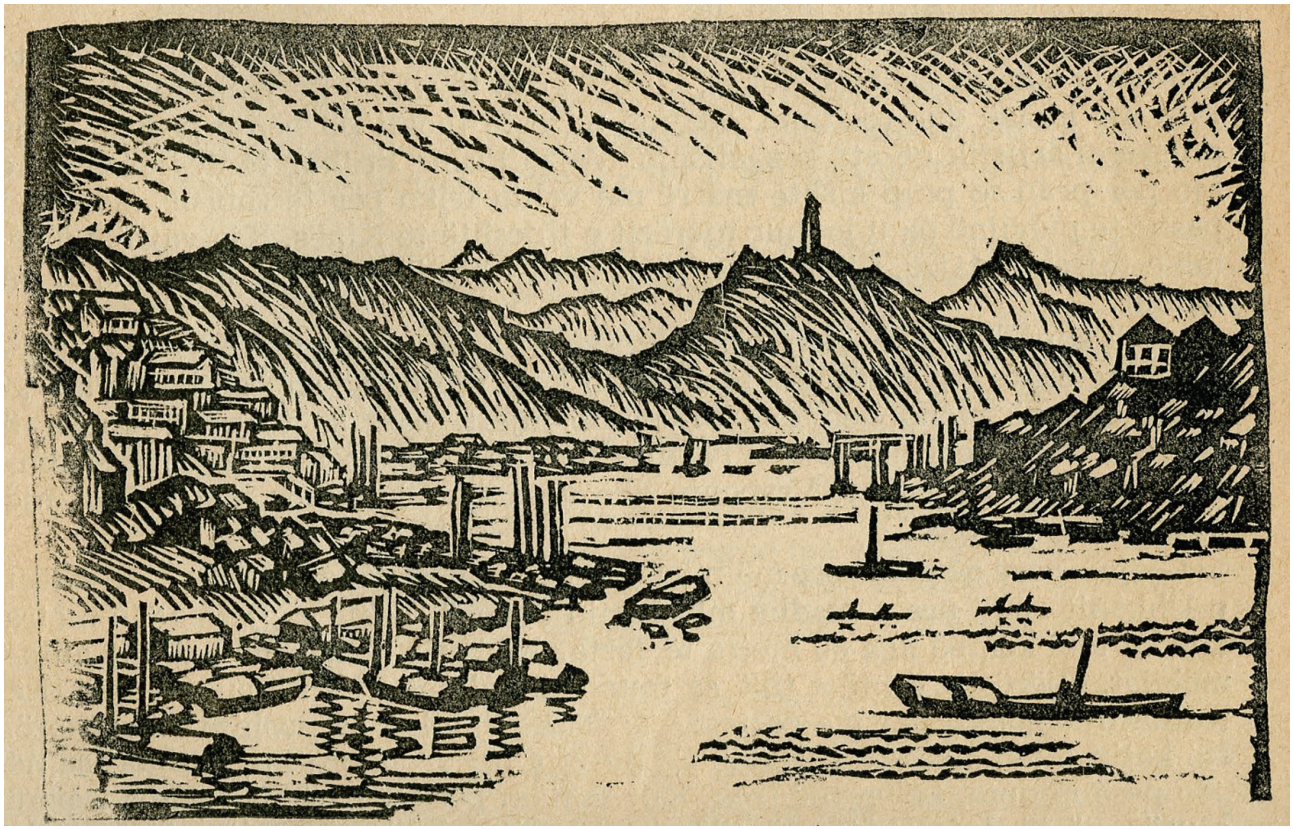
As these internal changes were taking place, Albanian officials often produced glowing statements about the alliance between the Albanian and Chinese Cultural Revolutions, at the same time that new infrastructural and technical projects were being undertaken with Chinese financial support – and technical expertise.[31] Nonetheless, to Hoxha, Mao's Cultural Revolution was too frenzied, too potentially dangerous to merit imitation; a more controlled, top-down method seemed prudent. Furthermore, Hoxha was also critical (even more so in hindsight, in later edited published versions of his writings) of the rise of the Mao personality cult. At the same time, however, Hoxha and others continued to praise Mao as an important figure, and to point to China as a leader in the struggle for world socialism.[32] Albania had established itself as the nation that would criticize any deviation from Stalin's model, and yet it still needed China's help. (A further complication included the insistence that in Albania class enemies had long since been eliminated, and thus that a class war was unnecessary – though of course one was still being constantly carried out.) In 1967, Albania fully put its official support behind Mao's Cultural Revolution. In 1968, perhaps the largest-scale example of artistic exchange took place: China sent a version of the massive sculptural installation *The Rent Collection Courtyard* to Albania, for an exhibition that opened in April of that year. It comprised ninety-nine life-size plaster reproductions of sculptures modelled after the clay originals. As Vivian Li has shown, the version of *The Rent Collection Courtyard* created for display in Albania emphasized the role of the People's Liberation Army, making direct connections between the revolts of the peasants and the Chinese Communist Party, and framing Mao's thought as a necessary element in class uprising.[33]

In some important ways, Andon Kuqali's travelogue prefigures this unity and the role of cultural producers in sustaining its credibility. One of the most interesting aspects of his account in fact focuses precisely on his observation of contemporary artistic production in the country. He writes,

> In Shanghai, I had the opportunity to observe the executing of *guohua*. I first observed it in a workers' club, where there was an amateur group of *guohua* painters. They drew collectively. On a table, they laid out a large piece of rice paper. In front of it were small bowls with various colours of ink and brushes with bamboo handles and sheep's hair bristles. Before they set to work, they consulted together on the form and general composition the drawing would take. Then they began: one drew a flower, another drew a different type of flower next to that one. A third painter drew a cliff, or a blade of grass, and so on until the composition was complete.[34]

Although he also expresses the power of more recognizably ideological art forms, praising 'agitative sculptural groupings' installed in parks and public spaces, Kuqali is clearly most enamoured not only with Chinese painting, but also with the mode of collective artistic production (a practice that Albanian artists would also later celebrate, following the experience of the Cultural Revolution).[35] Indeed, this collective execution of *guohua* painting was a significant aspect of Maoist art, one that – as Christine Ho argues – underwent a transformation in the late 1950s, precisely when Kuqali visited China.[36] As Ho notes, 'Collectivity in socialist China was practiced through harmonizing multiple hands and voices within the subject, style, and surface of a work, and in so doing, pushed the radical form of collectivity as an artistic practice, and as a medium, to its conceptual limit'.[37]

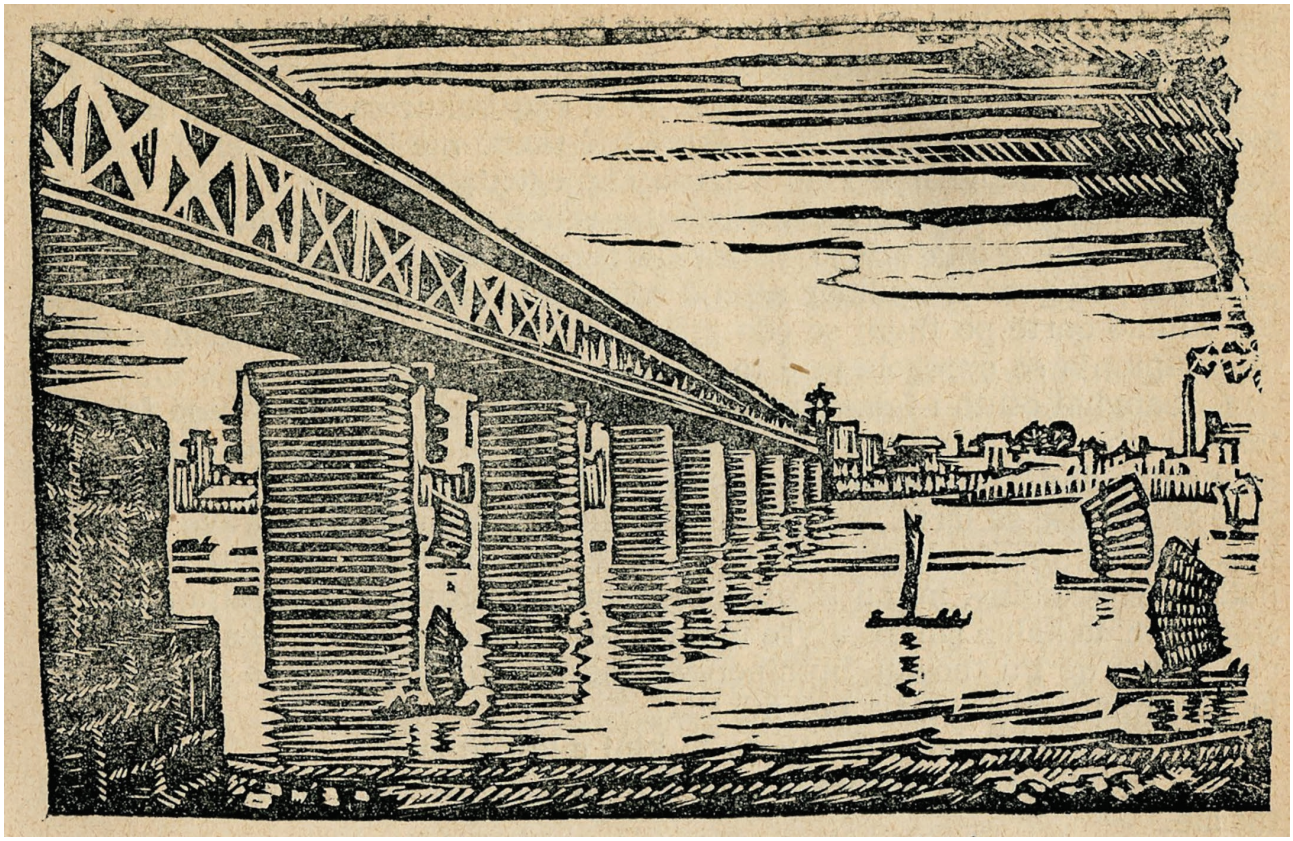
It is just this process of collaborative decision-making and creation that Kuqali fixates upon in his account (although Albanian artists would never sustainedly strive



4 Andon Kuqali, *View from the Port of Chongqing*, 1959. Linocut. In Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, Tirana, 185. Collection of the author.

for a similarly complete immersion in collective production), apparently recognizing the ideological import of adapting *guohua* collaborative painting practices to socialist life.[38] He is also anxious to show that *guohua* does not simply replicate traditional subjects – 'the mistaken idea that *guohua* can depict only flowers, that it cannot address real [contemporary] subjects, is disproven' by works showing 'life in the factories and workers' communes, new industrial projects, [and] the joyous lives of children'.[39] These are the same subjects that Kuqali in turn attempts to depict in his own images, which include linocuts showing the bustling streets of Beijing, the Wuhan Yangtze Great Bridge (completed just a few years earlier in 1957), and Chinese children (*plate 4*, *plate 5*, *plate 6*, *plate 7* and *plate 8*). Kuqali's illustrations are an effort to use socialist realism as an affective force, to unify the Albanian and Chinese experiences of socialist modernity by means of creative expression as much as through ideological communication.[40] One can see in this relatively minor collection of images the beginnings of a more profound communication, something more than simply a pragmatic political alliance. Kuqali's reception of the significance of Chinese socialist society hints at the promise of socialist cultural exchange, a promise that can also be seen in the works of artists from Albania like Andrea Mano and Foto Stamo, who also travelled to China during the 1960s and documented their experiences. Did this political alliance result in two distant nations uniting across the interceding expanse of the Eurasian continent? Was the promise fulfilled?

The answer to these questions must be no, but the character of that 'no' is still of interest to us. It is at least important to understand the ways that the Sino-Albanian friendship became, in some ways, simply a symbolic effort, characterized by fundamental uncertainties – at least in the Albanian context – about which citizens from which country would stand for progress, for the triumph of Marxist-Leninist ideals. China remained a world that resided either too close (because of its shared



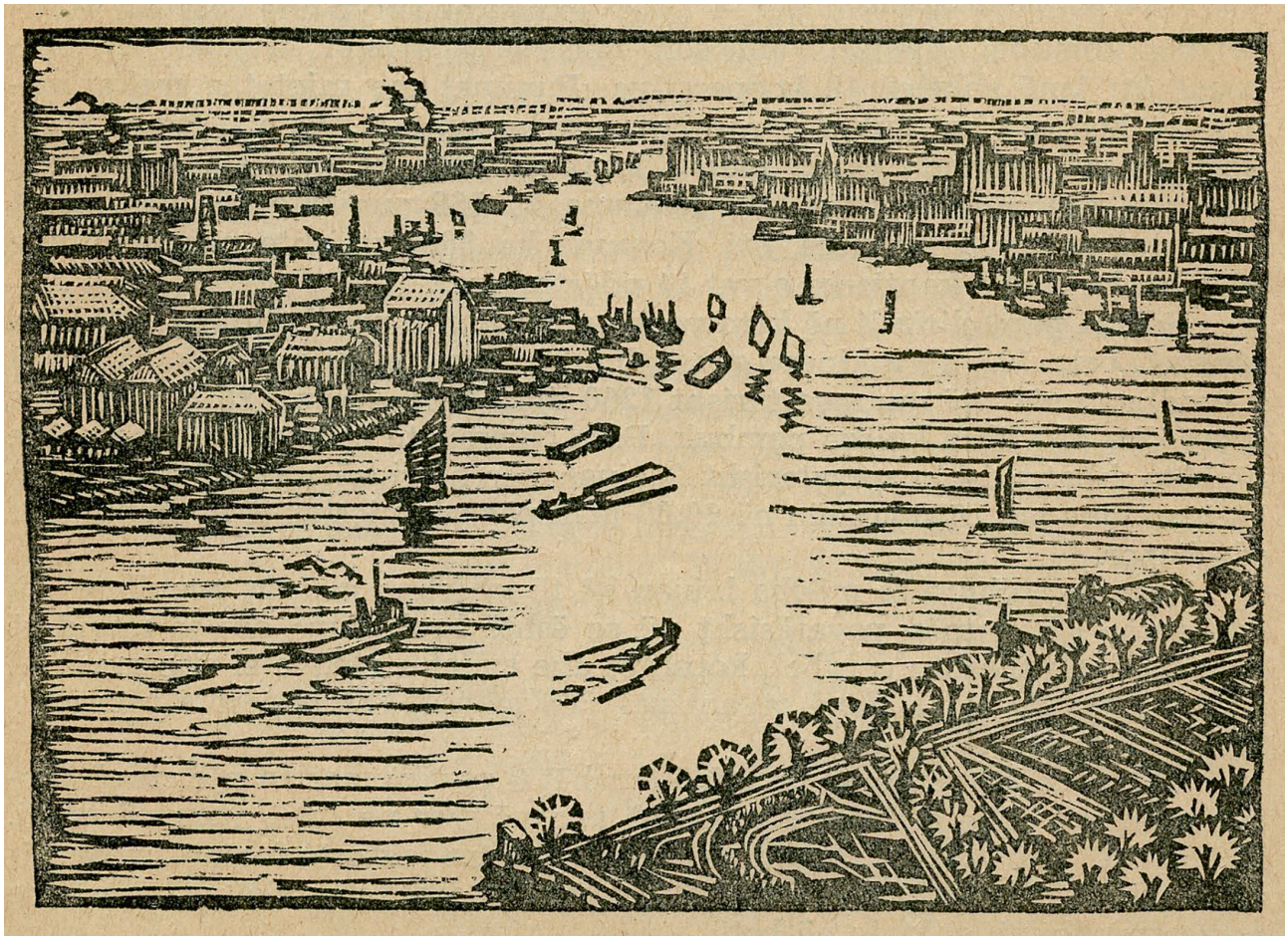
5 Andon Kuqali, *The Wuhan Bridge*, 1959. Linocut. In Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, Tirana, 187. Collection of the author.

commitment to communism) or too far (because its history and people were simply too unknown to most Albanians). In 1969, ten years after the appearance of Kuqali's travelogue, the expansive catalogue *The Figurative Arts in the People's Republic of Albania* was published 'on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of liberation [from fascism] and of the triumph of the people's revolution'.[41] This book (also published as a loose-leaf album with individual images) – with its text printed in Albanian, Chinese, and English – contained reproductions of nearly one hundred works of art produced in Albania, in a variety of media: painting, sculpture, printmaking, and poster design were included. The three languages are telling: the book is at once a marker of the alliance between Albania and China and of the effort to promote socialism's progress to the – English-speaking – West. Nearly all of the images included documented socialist Albania's history and revolutionary present, depicting the heroes of the struggle to liberate the country from either the Ottomans or the fascists, as well as the everyday heroes labouring to build the 'new reality' of socialism. The heritage of Soviet Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist thought was represented by Kristina Koljaka's monumental bronze sculpture of Lenin and Kristaq Rama's plaster bust of Joseph Stalin. These two in turn were matched with Odhise Paskali's official portrait of Enver Hoxha, which established Hoxha as a new link in the lineage of communist leaders. The global struggle of the proletariat from Vietnam to Africa was depicted in Pandi Mele's linocut *Popujt Luftojnë Kundër Imperializmit* [*The People of the World Fight against Imperialism*].

Finally, four images depicted subjects from the People's Republic of China. These works – respectively, a linocut print, two paintings, and a plaster bust – were Andon Kuqali's *Mbi Lumin Janse* [*On the Yangtze River*], Nexhmedin Zajmi's *Shanghai*, Foto Stamo's *Pionerja Kineze* [*Chinese Pioneer Girl*, 1961], and Fuat Dushku's *Mao Zedong*. It is from these images that we might derive a glimpse at the failure of the supposedly shared period of 'cultural revolution', which, in Albania, essentially ended in 1969, although at a

national level the policies enacted in the late 1960s continued to resonate into the 1970s. The catalogue was devoted primarily to national themes, and its primary purpose was to demonstrate to other nations – and secondarily to citizens within the country – the creative fecundity of socialist Albanian society. In this, there is nothing particularly surprising, but it is telling that after three years of intense (supposedly transnational) 'ideological and cultural revolution', Albanian artists were still essentially confined to creating works that focused solely on conveying the significance of their own unified national identity to their own publics, and to other nations, as opposed to depicting transnational struggles. Even as Albania struggled to play the role of the European exemplar of universal socialist values, it also struggled to define for itself what that truly meant. Of course, this very universality, which had first developed during the alliance with the Soviet Union, relied on the idea that Albania was a success story precisely because if its initial 'backwardness' and lack of sufficient industrial apparatuses and infrastructure.

That only five out of ninety-six images managed to truly reckon with a global socialist world,[42] and that only four of them managed to depict what was meant to have been a transformational new alliance between distant peoples – the Albanians and the Chinese – brought together by a shared ideology, must be seen as a failure. The four images in the 1969 catalogue related to Albania's alliance with China do not all convey the same message; rather, they propose four separate quandaries: the question of Mao's status as both iconic leader and great Marxist-Leninist thinker; the acknowledgement of the (foreign) city as a site of the dissemination of socialist culture; the projection of a pastoral or pre-industrial socialist landscape; and the shared experience of socialist



6 Andon Kuqali, *Horizon in Shanghai*, 1959. Linocut. In Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, Tirana, 192. Collection of the author.

youth across national borders. It is not accidental that the four images come from four distinct artistic genres: the bust of the leader, the cityscape, the landscape, and the realist portrait of the young pioneer. The inclusion of Fuat Dushku's bust of Mao is doubtless the easiest to understand: alongside Kristaq Rama's Stalin and Odhise Paskali's Enver Hoxha (the first image reproduced in the book), Mao is present as another of the great thinkers of Marxism-Leninism (*plate 9*). This framing clearly expresses the respect that Hoxha espoused for Mao, even as the form of the bust tempers some of the more zealous aspects of Mao's personality cult by placing him more firmly within the tradition of Marxist-Leninist thought, rather than depicting him within any concrete historical scene. There is no effort to depict Mao in the process of building Chinese socialism, for example, although there are many such images of Hoxha.

7 Andon Kuqali, *On the Streets of Beijing*, 1959. Linocut. In Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, Tirana, 180. Collection of the author.

8 Andon Kuqali, *Chinese Children Are the Most Beautiful in the World*, 1959. Linocut. In Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, Tirana, 191. Collection of the author.

Nexhmedin Zajmi's aerial view of Shanghai – no doubt the image in the album most unrelated to the Albanian struggle for liberation – is a much more curious inclusion, although the city's significance as an industrial centre certainly made the city a symbol of socialism's success. The remoteness of the aerial viewpoint is telling. Rather than placing the viewer in the midst of the city, Zajmi preserves a general viewpoint that obscured embodied contact with the 'socialist reality' of the foreign city. This preserves a fundamental tension, choosing to cast the city as a vast but abstract organism, rather than focusing on a street-level scene of contact

9 Fuat Dushku, *Bust of Mao Zedong*, no date. In *Artet Figurative në Republikën Popullore të Shqipërisë*, Tirana, 1969, 34.

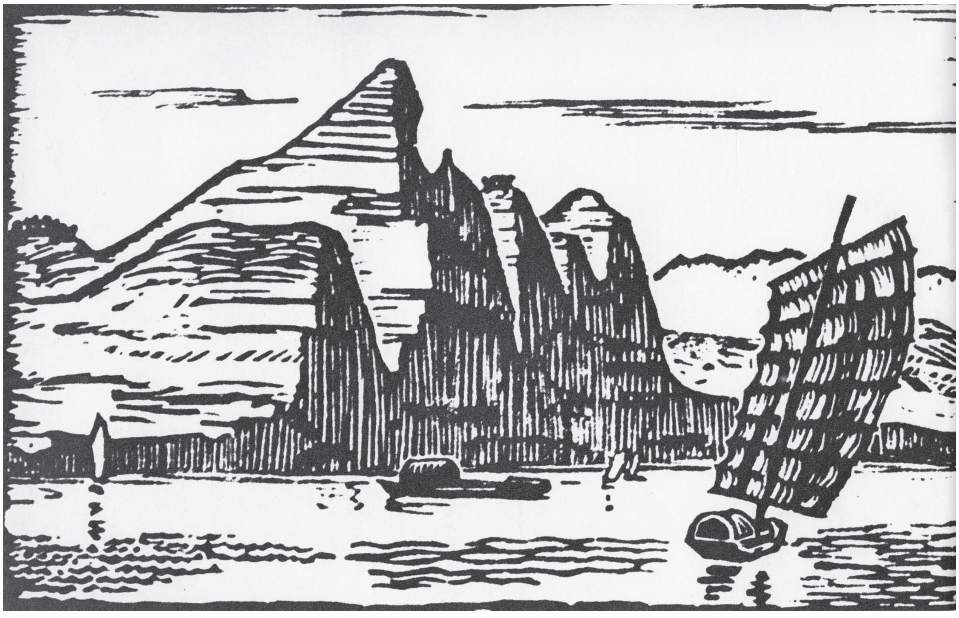
between individual socialist citizens. Whereas Kuqali's illustrations published in 1959 showed both – and thus achieved a marked intimacy – Zajmi's view is rather cold and academic.

A different kind of distancing effect is evident in Andon Kuqali's *On the Yangtze River*, no doubt produced at the same time as the other linocuts based on his 1959 journey (*plate 10*).[43] Kuqali's linocut presents China not as a nation of socialist development but rather as a place where life is deeply related to nature. Advanced industry is absent from the image, and it immediately calls to mind landscape paintings depicting the Yangtze's sublime natural features. At the same time, the visual resonance between the linocut and woodcuts at once references the traditional (European) associations of that medium, and its role as a vehicle for avant-garde aesthetic developments in modern China.[44] Perhaps as interesting is the fact that, in the catalogue, Kuqali's print appears

opposite a painting by Aristotel Papa entitled *Shtylla e Tensionit të Lartë* [*Electrical Towers*], which depicts both the eponymous towers – a perennial sign of the modernized landscape – together with lines of workers in the fields. In this juxtaposition, the Albanian landscape appears as the more advanced example of socialism, and China's landscape – both literally and as a recognizable aesthetic sign – stands for a pastoral existence that also implicitly introduces the past into the dynamic present of building socialism.

Finally, the most direct image of the four is Foto Stamo's *Chinese Pioneer Girl*, likely executed during or after a visit Stamo made to China in 1961 (*plate 11*). In some ways reminiscent of Semyon Chuikov's *The Daughter of Soviet Kirghizia* (1948), Stamo's painting lacks any surroundings that might locate the pioneer girl. Instead, his focus is on the lively and forthright quality of her gaze, suggesting a depth of personality even as it is also clearly concerned to mark racial difference. Again, however, the choice of juxtaposition within the album is telling: *Chinese Pioneer Girl* appeared opposite one of Stamo's paintings of industry in the Albanian rural landscape, *The Mine at Pishkash*. Without a clear setting of her own, the young pioneer from China could just as well be growing up into one of the villagers who would work in the Pishkash mine as into a proletarian in a Chinese village or city. In this sense, the painting perhaps comes closest to suggesting the ways socialist modernity could be a fundamentally shared experience.

If we consider these two juxtapositions (Kuqali's print against Papa's painting, and Stamo's pioneer against the Albanian village mining operation), we glimpse some of the complexities at play in charting Albania's own Cultural Revolution in relation to its international alliances. In the first case, the Albanian landscape is posited as the more advanced one, against the foil of a simpler relation to nature's rugged beauty. In the second case, the younger generations of the world's socialist nation are conceived as the shared inheritors of Albanian industry, and the experience of socialism becomes horizontal rather than chronologically hierarchical. What stands out most about these images, however, is their incongruity in the context of the album, which is undeniably focused on narrating a uniquely national history, attempting to elevate that history to the rank of similar narratives about, for example, the history of art in the Soviet Union or China, respectively.



10 Andon Kuqali, *On the Yangtze River*, no date (presumably 1959). In *Artet Figurative në Republikën Popullore të Shqipërisë*, Tirana, 1969, 22.

Any shared version of this socialist vision would only deteriorate further in the 1970s, after Enver Hoxha's famous speech 'We Must Deepen Our Ideological Struggle Against Foreign Influences and Liberal Attitudes towards Them' at the Fourth Plenum of the Albanian Party of Labour's Central Committee in 1973. This speech marked the inception of a new period of centralization and ideological strictness in the country, in which many prominent artistic figures were censured and in several cases imprisoned, and it also showed the country's trajectory away from foreign alliances with other socialist nations (European or Asian).[45] It should be noted that Kuqali was among those who suffered for his overly 'liberal' attitudes, and he was removed from the editorial leadership of *Nëntori*, in which he had played a pivotal role for decades. He nevertheless continued to publish important works of aesthetic criticism in the journal. By the end of the 1970s, Albania had broken with China just as it had broken with the Soviets

11 Foto Stamo, *Chinese Pioneer Girl*, 1961. In *Artet Figurative në Republikën Popullore të Shqipërisë*, Tirana, 1969, 33.

12 Armando Lulaj, still from *NEVER*, 2012. Video, Full HD, black & white and colour, sound, 22 minutes. Courtesy of the artist, DebatikCenter Film, and Paolo Maria Deanesi Gallery.

before, in reaction against China's growing diplomatic engagement with the West. This break even resulted in one of the most famous examples of an Albanian artist being forced to alter one of their works in line with official propaganda: artist Guri Madhi painted *Mbledhja e Moskës* [*The Moscow Meeting*] in 1974, showing the Chinese delegation alongside Enver Hoxha denouncing de-Stalinization, but just a few years later in 1978 he was instructed to remove the figures of the Chinese delegation originally shown in the work, leaving Albania alone as the sole force standing up to Khrushchev's 'revisionism'.[46] Such was the fate of the Sino-Albanian alliance, in art and in history.

By way of conclusion, let us make a great leap forward in time, to the year 2015. In the catalogue for the Albanian Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale (where artist Armando Lulaj exhibited his *Albanian Trilogy: A Series of Devious Stratagems*), curator Hou Hanru and philosopher-critic Boris Groys both – in separate texts – make reference to Albania's curious status as a beacon of socialist possibility in the latter half of the century.[47] Lulaj's 'Albanian Trilogy' at the biennial included documentation of his massive landscape intervention *NEVER* (2012), in which he altered a massive geoglyph that spelled out Enver Hoxha's first name (ENVER) across a mountainside, near the Albanian city of Berat (*plate 12*). Created in 1968, that geoglyph looked out across a valley that housed the Mao Zedong Textile Factory, built with the assistance of Chinese engineers and their technology. Enver and Mao, facing each other, across a wide-open valley – united in their respective Cultural Revolutions. The other two works in Lulaj's trilogy (entitled *It Wears As It Grows* and *Recapitulation*), while they were not focused to such a significant degree on the transnational juxtapositions of Albanian socialism, likewise explored the limits of memory in relation to Albania's Cold War existence. As a whole, the pavilion grappled with erasures, including the successive erasures of Albania's alliances with various other socialist nations, and eventually the encroaching erasure of the socialist past itself after 1991.

Hou Hanru notes, in an interview with Lulaj, that after the break with the Soviets, 'Western' painting had often been represented in China by Albanian socialist-era painting, which had served as a key paradigm for socialist aesthetics. Groys writes of his own

memories of listening to Radio Tirana and marvelling at the daring with which Hoxha's government criticized virtually every other socialist nation, allowing for no deviation from the principles of a 'pure' Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist philosophy. In this sense, Groys argues, Albania in fact represented the most 'universal' iteration of socialism possible, in so far as it appeared to eschew both all national specificities and all capitulations with 'imperialism' or 'revisionism'. Within Albania, of course, this was far from an accurate description of the situation, but it bears repeating that Albanian socialism – including its aesthetic production – was often called upon both domestically and internationally to mediate between universal and specific embodiments of socialist representation as a system. This was by no means a situation unique to Albania, but the nation's tumultuous path through alliances with the Soviet Union and then China meant that the recurring strain of redefining the universal and the specific could be said to have been particularly severe.

Socialist-era art in Albania, as indeed were so many artistic projects of the twentieth century, was always a process of assembling an apparent multitude of diverse and disparate pieces – a painting here, a print there, the remembered image of a landscape. Each piece, however, in fact comprised two utterly separate aspects: one spatially (geographically) universal but temporally focused, the other geographically specific and yet fundamentally eternal. The project of much socialist art – including socialist realism, a term that might seem too dogmatic in its associations to do justice to Kuqali's sketches and prints – was to maintain the fiction that the two coincided absolutely, and the project of global socialism was to build a society in which, one day, all citizens of the world would live that fiction as reality. Once, there was the dream that the shared experience of this reality would be unmediated: in 1959, after a month spent travelling in China, Kuqali wrote, 'As I watched the people, it was as if they were dancing, not labouring. And it was not difficult to read the happiness that lit up their faces'. Kuqali sought to show this happiness to his Albanian readers as something that needed no translation, no communicative triangulation through official avenues.

How different today: Armando Lulaj concludes his interview with Hou Hanru with a quip: 'Paradoxically between you and me there is this iPhone. We are recording, and someone is listening to this conversation right now. I think they are in between [us].' Hou replies, 'Perhaps we should ask them for the transcript'.[48] After 1989, and the effective end – at least for the time – of communism as a credible global project, what has come 'in between' is a new set of discourses that propose a different kind of universalism: the universalism of the market, of the neoliberal subject, of a supposedly post-ideological neocolonialism. Art cannot naively return to the past utopian dream of an unmediated global socialism – but in that past, perhaps it can find the tools to rewrite the 'transcript' of the present, to propose a vision that could once again unite the world around the idea of shared revolutions.

Notes

1 See Gëzim Qëndro, 'What's Your Name, Puppet?', in *Blood & Honey: The Future's in the Balkans*, ed. Harald Szeemann *et al.*, Vienna, 2003, 76–79.

2 Harald Szeemann, 'On the Exhibition', in *Blood & Honey*, ed. Szeemann *et al.*, 26–32.

3 As it was, when they mentioned *Homo Socialisticus*, commentators on the exhibition read it as a straightforward effort to overcome the strict doctrine of socialist realism through irony, by presenting the cultural output of Albania's socialist years as essentially undifferentiated, as if lifeless and automated. For a lengthier discussion of *Blood & Honey* and the role that *Homo Socialisticus* played in the exhibition, see the article by Raino Isto, '"I Lived without Seeing these Artworks": (Albanian) Socialist Realism and/against Contemporary Art', *ARTMargins*, 10: 2, 2021, 29–49.

4 See Isa Blumi, 'Hoxha's Class War: The Cultural Revolution and State Reformation, 1961–1971', *East European Quarterly*, 33: 3, September 1999, 303–326; and Elidor Mëhilli, 'Mao and the Albanians', in *Mao's Little Red Book: A Global History*, ed. Alexander C. Cook, New York, 2014, 165–184.

5 In the field of political history, Albania's connection to East Asian socialist nations has recently been explored in Elidor Mëhilli's nuanced history of Albanian socialism, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the Socialist World*, Ithaca, 2018, which represents the first sustained effort to examine Albania's post-war history in a truly globalized socialist framework.

6 See, for example, Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985*, Chicago, 2020, as well as a growing number of conference panels and symposia devoted to the cultural shifts brought about by the Non-Aligned Movement.

7 One important study in the field of film is Elidor Mëhilli, 'Globalized Socialism, Nationalized Time: Soviet Films, Albanian Subjects, and Chinese Audiences across the Sino-Soviet Split', *Slavic Review*, 77: 3, Fall 2018, 611–637.
8 For this reason, the historical trajectory posited by Boris Groys, wherein socialist realism develops from the political-aesthetic project of the historical avant-gardes, cannot be so easily applied to art in Albania. (See Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle, Princeton, 1992.) Instead, in Albania, socialist realism developed primarily out of the dual influence of Italian academic training and global realist influences (including first Soviet and then Chinese socialist realisms).
9 Klara Kemp-Welch, *Networking the Bloc: Experimental Art in Eastern Europe 1965–1981*, Cambridge, 2019.
10 See the admirably extensive volume *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe*, ed. Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, New York, 2016, which explores many curious examples of inter- and transnational artistic encounters, but still does not examine the Sino-Albanian relationship.
11 This endeavour is necessarily preliminary: extant efforts to write a nationally focused history of Albanian post-war art remain general, based upon broad surveys of socialist-era art and theoretical examinations of socialist realism. (See, respectively, Ermir Hoxha, *Realizmi Socialist Shqiptar*, Tirana, 2017; and Gëzim Qëndro, *Le surréalisme socialiste: l'autopsie de l'utopie*, Paris, 2014.) At the same time, Albania and its neighbouring Kosovo have been left out of many efforts to gather primary-source material on the art of Central and Eastern Europe (see, for example, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, ed. Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl, Cambridge, 2002; and *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Roxana Marcoci, Ana Janevski, and Ksenia Nouril, New York, 2018).
12 Andon Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', *Nëntori*, 6: 4, April 1959, 178–203. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Albanian to English are by the author. On the history of the journal *Nëntori*, and Kuqali's role as one of the critics whose writing importantly reflected the journal's development, see Raino Isto, '"Criticism Should Open Up Horizons for the Future": The Albanian Union of Writers and Artists and the Status of Art Criticism in the People's Republic of Albania', *ARTMargins Online*, 19 October 2020, https://artmargins.com/criticism-should-open-up-horizons-for-the-future-the-albanian-union-of-writers-and-artists-and-the-status-of-art-criticism-in-the-peoples-republic-of-albania/.
13 Ylber Marku, 'China and Albania: The Cultural Revolution and Cold War Relations', *Cold War History*, 17: 1, 2017, 1–17.
14 See Enis Sustalrova, *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi Shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja*, Tirana, 2007. In the case of Albania, these presuppositions were more often aimed at the Ottoman Empire, which some authors and ideologues treated as a completely foreign imposition on Albanian cultural sovereignty. Nonetheless, in more recent analyses of Albania's Stalinist dictatorship, some authors have conflated these 'Easts', representing Albania's modern history as a series of oppressive occupations from Eastern forces (first the Ottomans, then Soviet communism, then East Asian communism); for an example from a publication that was long cited in English-language literature on Albania, see Arshi Pipa, *Albanian Stalinism*, Boulder, 1990.
15 For example, early in the text Kuqali chastizes people who obsessed over Chinese culture's foreignness (for example by persistently asking him if he ate dog or snake meat while visiting the country) (181–182). In the opening pages of the essay, he points out his own efforts to subtly suggest that Chinese machinery is not as advanced as that in Albania, and then recounts his embarrassment at realizing he was in error (178–179).
16 Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', 178.
17 Mëhilli, 'Globalized Socialism', 612.
18 On the international appeals of realism, see Nikolas Drosos and Romy Golan, 'Realism as International Style', in *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic 1945–1965*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, New York, 2016, 443–447.
19 Ylli Drishti and Leon Çika, *Artistë Shqiptarë në Akademitë Italiane/ Artisti Albanesi nelle Accademie Italiane*, Tirana, 2005.
20 Baki Kongoli, 'Aktiviteti i Lidhjes së Artistëve nga krijimi deri më sot', *Nëntori*, 2: 3, March 1955, 116.
21 Kongoli, 'Aktiviteti i Lidhjes', 118.
22 Kongoli, 'Aktiviteti i Lidhjes', 118.
23 Hoxha's confrontation with Khrushchev in Moscow, and his defence of Albanian autonomy, played a major part in the novel *Dimri i Madh* [*The Great Winter*, 1977] by Ismail Kadare, which chronicled the Soviet–Albanian split. Later, Kadare wrote a second novel, *Koncert në Fund të Dimrit* [*Concert at the End of Winter*, 1988] dramatizing the Sino-Albanian split.
24 Elidor Mëhilli, 'Socialist Encounters: Albania and the Transnational Eastern Bloc in the 1950s', in *Cold War Crossings: International Travel and Exchange across the Soviet Bloc, 1940s–1960s*, ed. Patryk Babiracki and Kenyon Zimmer, Arlington, 2014, 108.
25 Enver Fico, 'Ekspozita e Gravurës, Karikaturës dhe e Pllakatit të R.P. të Kinës', *Nëntori*, 12: 9, September 1965, 221.
26 Enver Fico, 'Ekspozita e Piktorit Korean Lju Hien Suk', *Nëntori*, 13: 1, January 1966, 207.
27 Enver Hoxha, *Mbi Letërsinë dhe Artin*, Tirana, 1977, 241.
28 Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History*, New York, 2014, 197.
29 On the cult of Skanderbeg as a civil religion, and the association of Skanderbeg with Hoxha, see Egin Ceka, 'Muzeu Kombëtar dhe Muzeu i Skënderbeut si Institucione të Religjionit Civil Shqiptar të Komunizmit', *Përpjekja*, 11: 21, Fall 2005, 121–147.
30 See Luljeta Ikonomi and Shannon Woodcock, 'Imoraliteti në Familje: Nxitja e Ankesave të Grave për të Përforcuar Pushtetin e Partisë në Revolucionin Kulturor Shqiptar', *Përpjekja*, 32–33, Spring 2014, 162–163.
31 Mëhilli, *From Stalin to Mao*, 220–224.
32 Mëhilli, 'Mao and the Albanians', 172–179.
33 Vivian Li, 'Redefining Artistic Value in Communist China: *Rent Collection Courtyard*', *Oxford Art Journal*, 39: 3, 2016, 394–396.
34 Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', 197.
35 See, for example, critic Kujtim Buza's article 'Puna Krijuese Kolektive në Fushën e Arteve Figurative', *Drita*, 27 September 1970. For discussion of artists' collectives elsewhere in Southeastern Europe, see Caterina Preda, 'The Role of Artists' Collectives in Producing State Socialist Art in 1950s Romania: The Bottom-Up, Pragmatic Professionalization of State Commissions', *ARTMargins*, 9: 3, 2020, 29–52.
36 Christine I. Ho, '*The People Eat for Free* and the Art of Collective Production in Maoist China', *Art Bulletin* 98: 3, 2016, 348–372. It is worth noting that the exemplary work that Ho discusses, *The People Eat for Free*, was completed in 1958 – just a year before Kuqali's journey to China – and travelled to Moscow that same year.
37 Ho, '*People Eat for Free*', 349.
38 However, it is worth noting that Kuqali conflates the traditional practice of collaborative ink painting with the contemporary creation of collective paintings in the *guohua* style, ignoring the ideological shifts underpinning the two different practices. Compare Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', 197, and Ho, '*People Eat for Free*', 357.
39 Kuqali, 'Në Zhongghuo', 197.
40 On the emotional valence of socialist realism, see Christina Kiaer, 'Lyrical Socialist Realism', *October*, 147, Winter 2014, 57–77.
41 *Artet Figurative në Republikën Popullore të Shqipërisë*, Tirana, 1969.
42 The fifth image being the above-mentioned linocut by Pandi Mele, *Popujt Luftojnë Kundër Imperializmit*.
43 Since almost none of the works in *The Figurative Arts* are dated, it is difficult to ascertain precisely when they were made, but it seems safe to say that the images related to China were made between the late 1950s and 1969.
44 Xiaobing Tang, *Origins of the Chinese Avant-garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*, Berkeley, 2008.
45 Enver Hoxha, 'Të Thëllojmë Luftën Ideologjike kundër Shfaqjeve të Huaja e Qëndrimeve Liberale ndaj Tyre', in *Mbi Letërsinë dhe Artin*, Tirana, 1977, 375–443. See Ermir Hoxha, 'Nga artikulli i Alfred Uçit te fjalimi i Enverit, si nisi fushata kundër kulturës e artit pas Festivalit të 11-të', *Panorama*, 1 February 2020, http://www.panorama.com.al/nga-artikulli-i-alfred-ucit-te-fjalimi-i-enverit-si-nisi-fushata-kunder-kultures-e-artit-pas-festivalit-te-11-te/ (accessed 6 June 2021).
46 Hoxha, *Realizmi Socialist Shqiptar*, 28.
47 Hou Hanru and Armando Lulaj, 'The War for Truth', in *Albanian Trilogy: A Series of Devious Stratagems*, ed. Marco Scotini, Berlin, 2015, 115–128; and Boris Groys, 'Memories of Hybrid Communism', in the same volume, 89–97.
48 Hanru and Lulaj, 'The War for Truth', 128.