

# IB Comparative Study

Goal: To consider and analyze the impact and influence of sociopolitical context on the following works of art:

*Hometown Colors (1937-45)* by Lang Jingshan

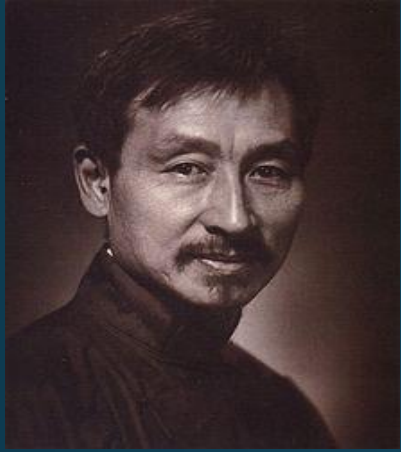
*The Red Stairway (1944)* by Ben Shahn

*The Louisville Flood (1937)* by Margaret Bourke White

Process: Given the chorological similarities of the pieces, the study will focus on the cultural and contextual differences of the artists

By: Albert Qian

# Lang Jingshan (Chinese, 1892-1995)



*Lang Jingshan* by  
Sam Sanzetti

With the defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War in 1895 and continued imperialist pressures, the country sought to assert and preserve Chinese culture. By the 1930s, Japan had once again invaded coastal China in the precursor to the Pacific theater of WWII. Lang began his career in 1920s Shanghai. A populous port city, Shanghai benefitted from the metropolitan influences of European colonizers such as England and France. For example, the British collection *Photograms of the Year* was a popular buy in Shanghai. Lang himself did photoshoots for newspapers. During WWII, he fled from Shanghai. When the Communist Party took power in 1949, he fled to Taiwan with other Nationalist sympathizers. He would live in Taiwan until his death.

As part of his fame among artists in Shanghai, Lang developed his own style of “composite photography”, a fusion of darkroom techniques and combination prints. His results resembled traditional Chinese ink paintings, which had been the high mark of Chinese art. Also known for integrating Western and Chinese photographic techniques, Lang became a renowned celebrity in China. His eclectic body of work included portraits, landscapes of flora and fauna, and still-lives, and he dabbled in the poetic, reminiscent, and social reality.



*Boating on Misty River* by Lang Jingshan

# *Hometown Colors (1937-45)* by Lang Jingshan

-The leaves and house in the background do not have the same texture as the photo, showing that those features are part of the “composite” portion

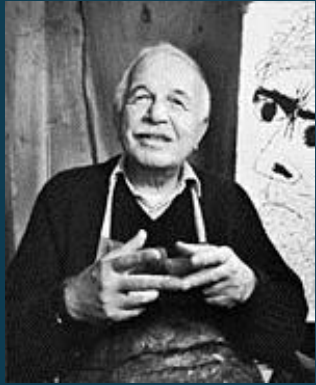
-The mountains and white-walled house in the background suggest literal and symbolic elevation over the despair in the foreground. The dirt trail leads from ruined houses to the white house, which connotes hope, purity, and peace.



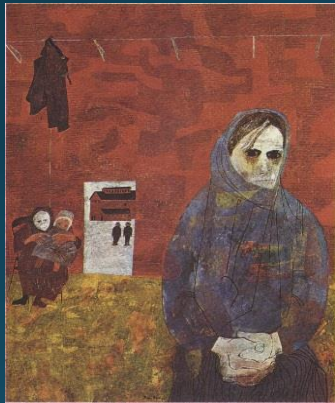
-Mysterious figures in black resemble grim reapers, emphasizing the dark mood and sense of decay

Taken during World War II, *Hometown Colors* is an example of Lang’s “composite photography” technique. The elevated white house in the background and the leaves of the tree in the middle ground resemble classic Chinese ink paintings. However, little is known of the specific location of the setting. The decaying brick houses, dirt road, and sparsely vegetated mountains suggest the rural countryside. Even though China was embroiled in war and Shanghai was occupied by the Japanese, the buildings do not appear to have been bombed or involved in military conflict. Yet, they still capture the depressing, destructive mood of the war. In effect, this photo embodies the opposite of Lang’s idealized pictures of nature and society. Lang, who disliked the violence of the Japanese and Chinese Communists, possibly wanted to comment on the horrors of war as opposed to the majesty of peace.

# Ben Shahn (Lithuanian-American, 1898-1969)



Self-Portrait of Shahn  
(1966)



*Miners' Wives* (1968) by Ben Shahn

Shahn was born in Lithuania (then part of Russia) to a Jewish family, but moved to New York City in 1906 due to his father's anti-czarist leanings. After an apprenticeship to a lithographer, he went to New York University before graduating in 1921. In the 1920s, Shahn toured the great historical works of Europe before joining the Social Realist movement. Social Realists supported liberal ideas and showed the ills of the poor: poverty, disease, urban decay, worker strikes. In the 1930s, he photographed Depression-era America, later using these images as references for paintings. His interest for political themes also showed in his paintings defending convicted anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. His later works of the 1950s, however, tended to be reflections instead of criticism. Throughout his career, Shahn intended for his work to communicate universal human needs and strengths by tying together the mind and the emotions.

Shahn had a special perspective as a European immigrant raised almost entirely in America during the early twentieth century. Not only did he witness the tumult of the World Wars, Great Depression, and battle of ideologies and -isms, but his lenses was that of his immigrant parents who fled totalitarian Russia with left-wing sympathies.



# *The Red Stairway* (1944) by Ben Shahn

A classic example of Shahn's social realism is *The Red Stairway*, in which an old, crippled man prepares to scale a large stairway along the side of a façade. Painted during WWII, which decimated Shahn's birth land of Lithuania and his fellow Jews throughout Europe, *The Red Stairway* internalizes those events into a somber reflection. In a 1968 interview, Shahn claimed the work to be about the "indomitable spirit of man to rise from incredibly impossible situation or morass". Apart from the individual journey, the painting may also be a parable of the World Wars and in particular, the perpetual cycle of war and suffering.

-As realism is not afraid to leave out the undesirable elements of art, elements apart from the subject, such as rubble and dark colors, are featured prominently to convey the mood

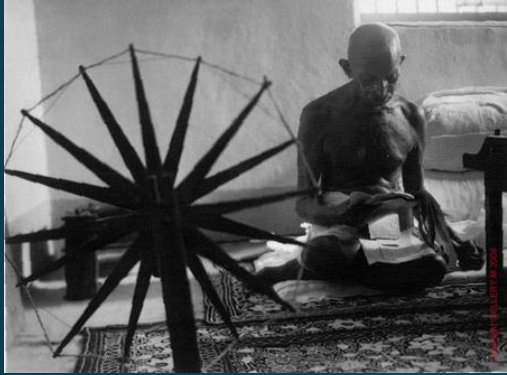
Crude brush strokes for the sky and wall suggest a harsh and unforgiving environment



The man could represent a WWI veteran (crippled), and his lack of attention to what is ahead parallels the unawareness of the world to the brewing (and ultimately greater) conflict following 1918 armistice

-The stairway, with its red color, could represent Nazism and Fascism. Following WWI, many ordinary citizens blindly followed the promise of these ideologies to rebuilt their countries. The stairway, like these ideologies, seem to act as façades and block out the surrounding destruction. Note that the stairway only leads to a bleak horizon

# Margaret Bourke-White (American, 1904-1971)



*Gandhi (1946)* by  
Margaret Bourke-White



Self-Portrait of  
Margaret Bourke White

Bourke-White, like Ben Shahn, was raised in New York City. She became familiar with photography due to her father, who developed offset lithographs and took young Margaret to factories and museums around the city. These diverse trips sparked the interest in various topics (such as Gandhi's independence movement) she would later photograph. After studying aimlessly at seven different colleges, including Columbia and Cornell, she became a professional photographer. Her pictures of the Otis Steel Mills earned her a job and further shoots of American industrial might. This success, despite a failed marriage, led to her 1936 trip to the USSR and its growing industries. There, she witnessed the plight of the common people, and from then on, she dedicated her work to social documentary and photojournalism. She and writer Erskine Caldwell, took numerous trips around the US (including the South), Europe, North Africa, and eventually India. Margaret Bourke-White noted that her legacy was built upon her being "in the right place at the right time". She traveled the world to cover the 20<sup>th</sup> century firsthand, bringing history to the doorsteps of people. This practice of photojournalism, telling news through pictures, continues to this day due in part to her work.



# *The Louisville Flood (1937)* by Margaret Bourke White

Taken during a trip to Kentucky, *The Louisville Flood* chronicles the aftermath of the Ohio River Flood of 1937, which claimed 400 lives and left a million homeless. Although the photo seemed to show the absolute bottom of the Great Depression, it was actually part of a larger photoshoot of the Flood. However, *The Louisville Flood* still reveals tragedy and irony.

-Since the camera does not focus on a single object, people in the foreground have expressions of glumness and the models in the background are cheery and smiling.



-The enormous size of the poster, which appears to loom over the people, shows contrast between the lost "American Way" and the plight of "small" African Americans

The line of glum African American men, women, and children are waiting for food and shelter following the flood. Often the ignored and unrepresented class of American society, African Americans are here contrasted against the propagandistic poster of a prototypical white (and thus "American") family, creating a great sense of reflective irony. Both the racial juxtaposition and verbal irony of the "highest standard of living" definitely upset the 1930s audience, who could only wonder as to how America had fallen so far.

# Lang vs. Shahn



-Linear Perspective:  
Pathways lead to a destination, albeit with opposite messages: hope via physical elevation vs despair via endless horizon

-The Public Audience:  
Chinese photography was still in its nascent stages, and the audience likely only gravitated to the beauty of the photo. Shahn's western audience was receptive to modern art that commented on politics, but still conformed to contemporary styles



-Man in Black: Omnipresence of black figures vs the singular black figure. Since the color has a negative connotation in many cultures, black dress suggests strict formality, often in a time of loss. This correlates to the destruction around the rest of the frame.

-Undercurrent of War: Both were composed during WWII, but each artists had a different perspective of it. Lang had the ability to directly confront and photograph the impact of war on nature and landscapes. Weight is given to the houses and tree over the people. Shahn, who lived in New York, instead focused on the human and symbolic aspects of the war (in the fashion of Social Realism). He laments the fruitless ignorance of the individual in the face of political clashes.



# Shahn vs. Bourke-White

## -Irony:

In Shahn's work, the injured man does not notice his current path leads to only more despair. With Bourke-White's, irony lies in the racial disparity and the supposed downfall of the "American Way"

## -Perspective & Depth:

Shahn's linear perspective shows the stairway leading to the horizon to signify the impending future. *The Louisville Flood* lacks that level of volume and depth. Its 2-D layout signifies the present and inescapable crisis of the Depression.



## -War & Poverty:

Underlying topics differ, but both document human suffering. Both photojournalism and social realism deal with these unaesthetic matters in order to effect social change and shock the audience.

-Black & White: Bourke-White presents a minority perspective of the Great Depression to emphasize the irony and message. Shahn's man of unknown race, though likely white, suggests that he represents all of humanity.

-People in Need: Motif of desperation common to both works. African-Americans waiting in line for subsistence and shelter complement the crippled man attempting to find an escape from a sea of rubble. Curiously, this desperation pays homage to the spirit and survival of humans.

# Lang vs. Bourke-White

-Living in the Moment: Both photos seem to capture the transience of history, the glimpse of shuffling homeless or the settling rubble of a mountainside dwelling. As Bourke-White said, photography requires random timing to encounter defining events. When the opportunities presented themselves, both photographers recorded these passing images to help define a historical era or event

-How Message is Conveyed:

*The Louisville Flood* involves text on propaganda and the racial disparity between the people in the image.

*Hometown Colors* presents a visual contrast between the dark foreground and the bright, “composite” background.



-Photojournalism: Bourke-White made her reputation telling stories through the facial expressions, posters, and historical context of *The Louisville Flood*.

Artist's Goal: Despite the turmoil involving China and Japan, Lang's focus continued to be capturing the beauty (and unfortunately despair) of the world. On the other hand, Bourke-White intended to find images in America that would represent the newspaper's story (photojournalism). Through two different contexts and settings, both photographers found the need to show unspectacular and unglamorous.



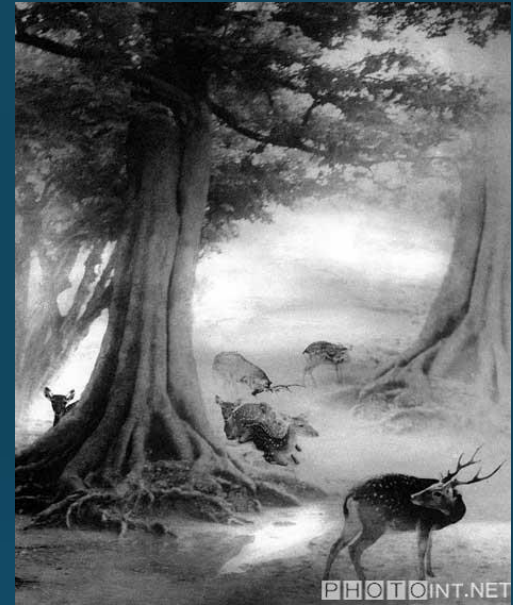
# Conclusion

## Major Contextual Topics:

- World War I & II (Shahn and Lang)
- The Great Depression (Bourke-White)
- European Imperialism of Asia (Lang Jingshan)

## Major Artistic Techniques/Movements

- Social Realism
- Photojournalism
- Composite Photography



*The Yearling (1956) by Lang Jingshan*

## Findings:

Even though the three selected artists originated from distinct cultural settings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, each created works alluding to the dominant conflicts of their respective contexts. By adhering to their individual artistic techniques and tools, they depict society through their own perspective. Both Shahn and Bourke-White specialize in covering top news and social stories, while Lang did the same in order to evoke the crimes of war against his beloved nature. All of the artists drew from their personal backgrounds into art that is both personally engaging and important for a universal human audience.



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