

The Stars: Explorers of Chinese Contemporary Art

Li Xianting

The Stars Exhibition, as we know it, mostly refers to the official exhibition held at Huafangzhai Gallery in Beihai Park in December 1979. However, the earliest Stars exhibition was not held in this venue; it was presented in a little garden outside the walls of the National Art Museum of China, where artworks were hung on the fence on the east side of the museum. The year 1979 was a dynamic time when all forms of art, politics, and culture in China underwent major changes. After 1976, intellectual and cultural figures began to reflect on the Cultural Revolution, and at the time, two very important terms emerged in these circles: one was 'truth' and the other was 'humanity'. All art forms, including literature, film, dance, and visual art, started a new chapter. The Stars Exhibition emerged from these circumstances, but ultimately took on an outsized importance. Let's first recall several important art exhibitions in 1979, the most significant of which were two exhibitions held in February that year, one in Shanghai and one in Beijing. The Shanghai show, called 'The Twelve-Person Painting Exhibition' (十二人畫展), revealed the relationship between these artists and the wave of modernism that appeared in Shanghai and Zhejiang in the 1930s. Those artists had been young students studying overseas, and they were among the first students to go abroad to study in Europe, America, and Japan. Unlike Xu Beihong, who brought realism to China, they brought modernist art back to their home country. However, during the Kuomintang (also known as the Nationalist or Republican) era, realism was approved but modernism was suppressed. That is to say, the Kuomintang suppressed modernism. Fifty years later, modernism was even more suppressed, so it had always been an underground style. Most of the people in 'The Twelve-Person Painting Exhibition' in Shanghai were artists who had previously studied abroad in France, like Wu Dayu and Lin Fengmian. This meant that, in the decades from the 1950s to the 1970s dominated by revolutionary realism, modernism had always existed as an underground subcurrent. With the end of the Cultural Revolution and the ensuing political relaxation, this style came out from underground. Meanwhile, the exhibition in Beijing, entitled 'Beijing Landscape and Still Life Oil Painting Exhibition' (北京油畫風景靜物展), was also held in February 1979 at the Waterside Pavilion (*Shuixie*) in Zhongshan Park. The exhibition in Beijing shared many similarities with the one in Shanghai, most of its participants were older artists who were active in the 1930s, including Wu Guanzhong and Pang Xunqin. Pang was the founder of the Jue Lan Society (決瀾社), a group advocating modernism in the 1930s. Wu Guanzhong was a student of Wu Dayu, and Wu Dayu himself was a leading figure among the early students returning from France with modernism. Thus, these two exhibitions essentially brought modernism, which had been suppressed from the 1920s and 1930s to the 1970s, out of the underground and into the light. We can see the influence of Impressionism, Cubism, Fauvism, and Surrealism in their works.

This opened a new window for us, showing that art could deviate from realism and take the modernist path. I think that this is something we should consider today, with the one hundredth anniversary of the May Fourth Movement. I began pondering this in the 1980s, and in the late 1980s, I wrote an article entitled 'Critiquing the May Fourth Revolution in Art' (五四美術革命批判); this 'revolution in art', which was supported by many thinkers during the May Fourth New Culture Movement, advocated abandoning traditional Chinese literati paintings and introducing Western realism. They promoted the idea that art should take

up the hardly-achievable mission of saving the country. They believed that Chinese literati paintings made Chinese officials, or the bureaucratic spirit, detached from reality, allowing them to take refuge in a contemplative, aloof state; this detachment from China's reality had led to the decline of the Chinese spirit, which in turn caused China's 'failure' in confrontations with the world's great powers. The Chinese literati were scholars, officials, or bureaucrats, not painters; they represented a phenomenon that never appeared anywhere else. These bureaucrats painted landscapes, flowers, or birds; they were never concerned with reality. May Fourth Movement proponents believed that literati detachment from reality led to the modern failure of China, so they wanted to introduce realism and use art to save the country, but this was impossible in practice. Their criticism of literati painting, their advocacy of realism, and their desire to use art to save the world really reflected a Confucian way of thinking. While realism was being introduced into China, the entire Western world was giving it up for experimentation with modernism. The May Fourth New Culture Movement had opened up the country to ideas of science and democracy, but in terms of art, they had taken a very traditional and conservative path, the path that Chinese art would follow for the seventy years from the May Fourth New Culture Movement through the 1970s. Afterwards, realism was transformed into socialist realism by Stalin and then re-shaped into revolutionary realism by Mao; they used art to serve political purposes and these forms were welcomed by workers and peasants. Modernism resurfaced in China in 1979 in this context.

Therefore, in 1979, these two modernist exhibitions in China opened a new and refreshing window for viewers, but they were experiments with styles that referenced early Western modernism introduced from Europe, at a time when China was completely closed off and isolated from later developments in the international art scene. Therefore, despite the art



The poet Bei Dao during a *Today* gathering, 1979 / Photographer: Chi Xiaoning

world's excited response to these two exhibitions, there was no significant reaction from society in general. From this perspective, the Stars touched on something very different. It was not merely a revolution in modernist style; it was an individual artist's expression of his suffering under the ideology of the time. All of this happened against the larger background of the intellectual liberation movement. Early Stars artists such as Wang Keping, Ma Desheng, and Huang Rui, Wei Jingsheng, a leader of the democratic movement at the Xidan Democracy Wall, Hu Ping, founder of democratic movement publication *Beijing Spring*, and Bei Dao and Mang Ke, modern poets and founders of the poetry publication *Today*, were all part of this milieu. The Stars Exhibition was an important force in this context. Ma Desheng and Huang Rui also did illustrations for *Today*. The unofficial publication was mimeograph printed back then, and they made some woodcut prints to be glued onto the magazine. As a result, the Stars Exhibition was an important force in this democratic, open, and liberated movement. We could see that it was completely different from the pure experiments with modernism in early 1979; instead, the Stars took a rebellious ideological stance, and they expressed the damage that ideology had done to people. For example, Wang Keping's sculptures *Silence* showed a mouth plugged and *Long Live!* showed a figure holding *Quotations from Chairman Mao*. Huang Rui's *Yuanmingyuan* and Ma Desheng's *The Land* reflected an inheritance from the New Woodcut Movement of the 1930s. When Lu Xun spoke of the New Woodcut Movement in the 1930s, he mentioned that they were influenced



Visitors at the First Stars Exhibition, 1979 / Photographer: Li Xiaobin

by German expressionist group Die Brücke. The Stars were important in two ways: First, they expressed the truth and humanity of the harm that ideology had done to the people. Second, they employed a modernist approach in their style. There was a slogan at the Stars Exhibition: 'Kollwitz is our banner; Picasso is our pioneer'. This was an experiment with language and style, but it also showed the artists' concerns for present-day life as people who suffered under social and political pressure. Today, as we look back on the Stars Exhibition, this point is particularly notable, because the show also highlighted the most important thing in all of Chinese contemporary art history — the relationship between art and politics, a topic many of us are still unwilling to touch today. Here, politics does not mean the politics of politicians, but the freedom to express myself through art. The freedom to express the sadness in my heart and the dissatisfaction that I feel with totalitarianism is, in itself, political. At that time, one of Wang Keping's sculptures, entitled *Idol*, was excluded from the exhibition; the piece transformed Mao's face into a religious idol, and the work remains powerful even today. At that time, government officials in the arts were already quite liberal. The exhibition was approved by Jiang Feng and Liu Xun. Jiang Feng was the chairman of the China Artists' Association and Liu Xun was the chairman of the Beijing Artists' Association; both had been imprisoned for many years during the Cultural Revolution, so they deeply understood the loss of freedom. They felt a connection to the Stars Exhibition and saw why it needed their backing, so they supported the Stars. The first Stars exhibition I saw was the one where the artworks were hung on the fence on the east side of the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, but it was soon banned by the police. Afterwards, Jiang Feng and Liu Xun helped to secure and store the artworks temporarily in the museum and to coordinate with Huafangzhai in Beihai Park, an exhibition space frequently used by the Beijing Artists' Association. The exhibition dates were at the end of November or early December. The exhibition had attracted a lot of attention from the public since its opening, and people had left comments that filled thirty comment books. The majority of the audience had a positive opinion of the exhibition.

By then, I was quite well-acquainted with the members of the Stars. I had known them since the exhibition in the garden next to the museum. I lived in Houhai at the time, which was quite close to where Wang Keping, Ma Desheng, Huang Rui, and Zhong Acheng lived, so I reached out to invite them to an interview. In the end, I could only include a brief part of what each of them said. Nevertheless, several lines from our discussion later inspired a significant response. For instance, Qu Leilei said, 'Art is about self-expression.' This was the strongest and most direct subversion of the ideas that art should serve politics or art should speak for the workers, peasants, and soldiers, which had prevailed in previous decades. The interview touched on certain critical issues in art at the time, and even in today's context, these words still seem relevant and not at all outdated. The interview was done during the Huafangzhai exhibition in 1979, and it was published in early 1980—I forget whether it was in January or February. At that time, most editorial manuscripts required the revision and approval of the editor-in-chief, but this piece could not be decided solely by the editor-in-chief. When I received the editing notes on my manuscript, there was a memo on it. In addition to the comments from the editor-in-chief, there were also signatures from all the key Artists' Association leaders; Jiang Feng, Hua Junwu, and Liu Xun all signed it. However, they did not agree to placing the Stars' images on pages dedicated to artworks; some images could only be inserted into the text as illustrations. The most influential pieces — also the most sensitive — were not included. I remember one of the images used was *The Great Wall* by Bo Yun, but they did not fully understand the work; though it was about the Great Wall, the work showed a *collapsed* Great

Wall. They also included a line drawing, a portrait of a pallet worker, by renowned writer Acheng. Forty years have passed, but what does it mean when we look back on the Stars from today's perspective? I think I've already touched on this. In the end, art reflects how an individual presents his life today and expresses his true feelings; art is not purely about form or language. When we talk about language, this is first and foremost human language, which proves that you live in the present, in the contemporary world. We can sense, through an artist's work, how an individual exists in his surroundings in that particular time period—namely, how society has made him suffer or what it has made him feel. You have to express these feelings. I think that the Stars directly faced this reality through their artworks, so their most important contribution was precisely that—facing reality. Especially since 2000, Chinese art has become ever more commercialised. Chinese art, and contemporary art in particular, has lost its courage and sensitivity in facing reality. Looking back on the exhibition, this was the Stars' most important contribution.

On the other hand, whenever we speak about contemporary art today, many critics, including the generation of critics younger than myself or those even younger, would consider the beginning of Chinese contemporary art to be the '85 Art Movement; they do not see art that came before then as contemporary art, but I have always thought that Chinese contemporary art began in 1979, and this has to do with how we define contemporary art. Contemporary art does not have a strict definition; it is a concept that results from general agreement, unlike modernism, which can be clearly distinguished. Even in the many international discussion panels I attended in the 1990s, the Western critics and art historians I encountered could not give a clear definition for 'contemporary art' or say when it first appeared. Contemporary art is actually a collective of basic values as opposed to past modern art; it is a general attempt to make value judgments on the changing art of today. However, one thing is clear: the word 'contemporary' originated from the Latin *con-* (with, together) and *temporarius* (of time), which refers to the present, the real moments you face, and the life you live. From this perspective, new art in China did not begin to face its times in the mid-1980s; instead, it has been facing its times since the Stars. This new art has faced some very sensitive social and political issues and dared to express political and ideological suppression—the oppression that people faced during the Cultural Revolution. Today, though we live in a world of consumerism, can we say that ideology no longer oppresses people? Therefore, in my opinion, many contemporary artworks today cannot deal with reality directly; they are becoming more commercialised and more visually appealing, and they are tailored to the tastes of certain collectors, but they have almost nothing to do with contemporary art.

Some people disapproved of the Stars Exhibition, thinking that the works were copies of Western modern art. If we take this tack, then the entire development of contemporary art was an input of Western information; we have even embraced the entire culture. Our lifestyle today, including the t-shirts you wear and the mobile phones and cameras you use, is all from Europe or America. Consider our lives as part of globalisation; it is getting harder to find a pure, independent regional culture. All cultures influence one another. It is only natural that China's modern and contemporary art were influenced by Western art, and we should acknowledge that reality. As we are being influenced, there is a part that is the result of our own creativity. From this perspective, we can see that many things in the Stars Exhibition are unique. I often cite Wang Keping as an example. His background was quite special; he was not formally trained to be an artist, and he was a scriptwriter first, but he was fascinated by



A visitor looking at Wang Keping's *Silence* during the First Stars Exhibition, 1979 / Photographer: Chi Xiaoning

the Theatre of the Absurd. We lived close to each other; I lived on the west side of the Drum Tower (*Gulou*) and he lived to the east of it. We met up quite often, and when he spoke of his earliest desires to create, he said that there was a shop downstairs from his home that sold firewood, and every time he walked by, he was intrigued by the knots in the wood. In Chinese folk art, there is an art form called 'root carving', but he did not follow traditional ways of sculpting something figurative. Instead, he discovered what he wanted to express within the forms. In *Silence*, he saw a plugged mouth in a tree knot. However, the root of Wang's artistic language was folk art. Later, Wang Keping left China for France, where he continues to make sculptures. I have been to his studio in Paris several times, and his more recent work is not as political as his earlier pieces, because he has left the context of China, but the styles of the sculptures he makes have a simplicity and directness that can be traced back to the clay figures of Chinese folk art. Especially when enlarged, they are very distinctive in today's international sculpture scene. Many interesting and original things in the Stars Exhibition require further research. After we admit that we were influenced by the West, the focus should shift to discovering the creativity derived from that influence. Likewise, the colonisation of other cultures influenced the development of Western modern art, but numerous examples of this phenomenon need not be repeated here.

Compiled from an audio recording of Li Xianting, 《星星，中國當代藝術的開拓者》(2019).

Translated by Celine Ho.

We Want Artistic Freedom

Huang Rui

The Slogan

On 1 October 1979, there was a small demonstration on the broad Chang'an Avenue—that was us forty years ago. Our banner read: 'We want political democracy! We want artistic freedom!' It was the truth, and a real appeal. The passage of forty years has made things hazier, and we can barely see our previous shadows. We cannot see truth in the present, and what was once true is not true anymore. However, we are still in the present and we can still reflect on this slogan.

If history could be treated like a piece of art, there would be no such burden. We could cut out the slogan like a neat piece of fabric. I think we cannot take too much, so perhaps half of it is best. 'We want artistic freedom' reduces the controversy by half, even though it is quite vague.

I personally welcome this situation, because creative imagination can easily become work in front of you. I am an artist and a workaholic. Perhaps I choose to continue as an artist because I want to do more work. This work—this artwork—still has a determined quality: a demand for artistic freedom.

Though I could state this objective clearly, I could not describe this artwork. I touch it, as if sizing up the army in front of me, but I know nothing about the outside world beyond my comrades.

As Cézanne once said: 'I could paint for a hundred years, or even a thousand years, without stopping and I would still feel as though I knew nothing'.

The Times

In February 1979, Jiang Feng, an open-minded official of the Communist Party, wrote earlier that year in an exhibition preface: 'Freedom does not just fall from the sky; it must be fought for with our own hands.'

At the time, Jiang Feng was the chairman of the China Artists' Association, but he soon had to pay the price for fighting for freedom. He died three years later amidst political condemnation.

1979 and 1980 were thoughtful years. You could think about what you did and how you did it. You could even attempt personal projects or attempt to promote societal reform through art.

At the time, there were many Chinese, but too few of them could think. The thinkers had freedom of thought and movement, but unfortunately, that freedom expired after two years.



From left: Huang Rui, Mang Ke, and Lü Pu at the protest, 1979 / Photographer: Wang Rui

From 1981 to 1984, conservatives promoted the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, which cleansed cultural and artistic circles throughout the nation.

Today, there are even more Chinese, and almost everyone is thinking. 'I think, therefore I am'. Unfortunately, if there is no free thought or freedom of thought, then the Chinese, as a powerful whole or as countless individuals, cannot create individuals or freedom.

Forty years later, politics has inevitably and unarguably regressed fifty years. Those extra ten years were a freebie from the government. 'Buy forty years get ten years free.'

Is the current memorial for the Stars nothing but a labour of Sisyphus?

The Individual

Jean-Paul Sartre believed that freedom is at the centre of all human experience, and this distinguishes human beings from other objects. He also said that, as a person, he did not possess a pre-defined essence. His essence was created based on the choices he made. He always wanted to be a step ahead of himself, defining himself as he moved forward.