

China

Robin Munro

Unofficial art in China

How artists like the 'Stars' have fared since 1978

The visual arts in China, although perhaps suffering less from the general Party stranglehold over the cultural sphere than literature and the performing arts, has nevertheless been subjected to a wide range of restrictions and political interference during the past three decades. Ever since Mao laid down the principle, in his 1942 'Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art', that art must be carried out in the service of politics, the limits to artistic freedom have never been allowed to exceed the more liberal interpretations of that doctrine. After Liberation in 1949, the visual arts borrowed heavily from the artistic style and vocabulary of Soviet Socialist Realism, with periods of liberalisation such as that of the early sixties tending to produce a resurgence of interest in traditional styles and themes of painting, rather than in any more radical or modernist approaches to art.

During the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, official concern with promoting proletarian purity in the arts reached almost paranoiac dimensions under ultraleftist cultural policies promoted by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing. This tendency was epitomised by the bizarre 'black paintings exhibition' of 1974, in which the works of such outstanding painters as Huang Yongyu, Li Keran and Huang Zhou were pilloried for supposedly advocating a restoration of capitalism. Huang Zhou is famed for his paintings of donkeys but, if one is to believe the critics of the day, Huang's donkeys were actually loaded up with illicit goods. One of Huang Yongyu's 'black paintings' (in the sense of the political distinction between the forces of light and darkness, rather than any artistic preference for black) was that of an owl with one eye closed and the other open, a work which was accused of attempting to poke fun at socialism. [See *Index* 1/1980.]

Official repudiation of the rigid political, economic and cultural policies of the Cultural Revolution following the death of Mao and the fall of the 'gang of four' in 1976 has brought with it an unprecedented degree of liberalisation in all cultural fields to which an important new dimension has been added by the simultaneous opening up towards the influence of the West. The first

Robin Munro, who studied in China in 1977-79, is now doing a doctoral dissertation on 'The Democracy Movement 1978-81' at London University.



Demonstration by unofficial artists and editors. On the far left is Wang Keping, a sculptor, and on crutches is Ma Desheng, a woodcut artist — both members of the Stars. The demonstration took place on 1 October 1979 with banners saying 'We want political democracy and artistic freedom'.

real sign of relaxation came in 1978, with the holding in Peking of a major exhibition of French Impressionist paintings, concentrating upon the work of the socialist painters, Millet and Courbet. Since then, the Chinese public has been introduced to a wide range of previously banned Western artists, including Van Gogh, Picasso and the German Expressionists; at the furthest extreme, a select few have even been treated to live displays of abstract laser holographic art. The biggest controversy in official art circles in recent years appears to concern the new murals painted for Peking airport in 1980. One of these, painted by Yang Yunsheng, was entitled 'Water Festival — Song of Life', and depicted an annual celebration performed by the Dai minority nationality of south-western China. The mural was controversial not only because of its Modigliani-style elongation of the figures (criticised as 'distortion' of the human body) but also because it contained two nude female figures. After considerable debate,

during which the views of both Chairman Hua Guofeng and the Dai people themselves were consulted, it was decided that the mural was offensive, and it was subsequently hidden from public view by a large drape.

While liberalisation in all fields was being promoted in official circles, ordinary citizens began to display a new-found sense of assertiveness in terms of political, literary and artistic self-expression, and a series of inter-related sub-cultures began to emerge, particularly among the young. The main focus for these new and exciting currents of grass-roots activity was the famous 'Democracy Movement', inaugurated in late 1978 by a flood of wall-posters and unofficial journals giving expression to demands for the democratic reform of society and for freedom to portray in literature and art both the 'dark side' of society and the private world of subjective emotion. The visual arts first burst on to Peking's Democracy Wall in the closing days of 1978, when an unofficial group from

Unofficial art China

Shandong calling itself the 'Faint Star Photographic Society' hung a collection of highly evocative semi-abstract photographs from the branches of a tree standing next to the politically-orientated wall-posters. The poetry and short stories published in *Jintian* ('Today'), the main unofficial literary journal of the Democracy Movement, were often interspersed with simple but effective illustrations, such as the delicate line-drawings of Lu Shi which employed a style and imagery combining themes of romantic love, individual struggle and human emancipation.

A series of unofficial poetry reading sessions was held in Peking parks during 1979, organised by members of the *Today* group. The heady atmosphere of these events was heightened further by the exciting and unfamiliar spectacle of semi-abstract canvases hanging from trees amidst the crowds of spectators. These unprecedented cultural gatherings were allowed to proceed freely without interference, but this was not the case for an

impromptu exhibition mounted by a dozen or so young amateur artists calling themselves the 'Stars', the most accomplished and well-known body of unofficial artists in China.

In September 1979, the Stars took the bold and provocative step of putting together, in a small garden by the side of the Peking Art Gallery, their own display of more than 150 items, including oil paintings, water colours, woodcuts, sculpture and traditional Chinese paintings. The exhibition was soon raided by the police, closed down and the exhibits confiscated (one prominent Democracy Movement writer later compared this event to the notorious bulldozing of an unofficial art exhibition in Moscow in 1974, commenting that the relatively mild treatment given to the Stars at least offered evidence that some progress had been made over the years). However, the Chairman of the Artists Union, Jiang Feng, had seen their exhibition and, excited by the freshness and novelty of the event, he swiftly exerted his considerable influence in support of the

Stars. Another high-ranking official from the Artists Union was sent by the Peking municipal authorities to discuss matters with the Stars and, as compensation for the crassness of the police action, a remarkable series of offers was extended to the young artists: they would be allowed to join the Artists Union as a collective, space would be provided for their work in the Peking Art Gallery at some later date, the authorities would pay for notifications of the exhibition to be displayed in the national press, and the Stars would be permitted to keep a full 50% of income from the exhibition (contrary to usual practice whereby the gallery retains most of the income).

The Stars, however, took an equally remarkable stand by insisting that the police should be made to apologise for their repressive action, so as to ensure that the principle of freedom to engage in cultural pursuits be firmly and publicly underlined. A letter to this effect was sent to the municipal authorities by the Stars and representatives of Peking's unofficial press, and it was

China's unofficial writers — more arrests

At least 20 people associated with unofficial publications have been arrested since April 1981, according to human rights groups in Hong Kong. Three well-known editors of unofficial publications recently received severe sentences which may indicate the extent to which the authorities are prepared to go to punish 'counter-revolutionaries'. These measures follow the ban on wallposters (*dazibao*) and unofficial publications, and the clampdown on the 'Democracy and Human Rights Movement' in March 1979.

The three who have been sentenced are:—

Wang Xizhe, 34, was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment by the Intermediate People's Court of Guangzhou (Canton) for 'spreading anti-socialist propaganda, sabotaging law and order and organising counter-revolutionary groups'. Wang Xizhe had been detained previously. He was known in China and abroad as one of the authors of the long wall-poster 'Li Yizhe' in Guangzhou in 1974, which denounced abuses during the Cultural Revolution. He and two other authors were detained until January 1979. After his release he worked in a factory and edited a human rights magazine, published in Guangzhou, called *Learner's Bulletin*.

He Qiu, 33, was sentenced by the Intermediate People's Court of Guangzhou to 10 years imprisonment. He

was editor of the unofficial magazine *Road of the People*, published in Guangzhou.

Xu Wenli, 36, was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. He was editor of the unofficial magazine *April 5th Forum*, published in Peking. He was known as a reformist within the framework of Chinese communist revolution. When his magazine ceased publication in 1980 he and his colleagues continued to publish a private newsletter and appealed for the release of imprisoned dissidents and for greater democracy and freedom.

Those who are reported arrested and still awaiting sentence are:

Wang Rongqing, 38, Editor of *Zhi River* magazine, published in Zhejiang.

Chen Erjin, in his late 30s, writer of pamphlet 'On proletarian democratic revolution' published in Yunnan.

Yang Zaixing, member of the Enlightenment Society of Guizhou province.

Liu Eran, Editor of *Bricks of Democracy*, published in Hunan.

Peng Guangzhong, Editor of *Fortnightly Review*, published in Guizhou.

Wang Tanuan, Editor of *The Review*, published in Tianjin.

Xing Dakun, Editor of *Friends' Forum*, published in Shandong.

Ye Zongun, Editor of *April 5th Tribune* and *Zhi River*, published in Zhejiang.

Liu Liping, Editor of *Bulletin of Ideals*, published in Hunan.

Chu Jianbian, 26, staff member of *Zhong Sheng* magazine, published in Wuhan.

Zhang Jingsheng, 27, Editor of *Gonghua Bao* magazine, published in Changsha City.

Sheng Feng, Editor of *Hai Langhua*

magazine, published in Shandong.

Yang Jing, in his early 30s, a staff member of *April 5th Forum*.

Fu Shengqi, 28, a staff member of *Voice of Democracy* magazine, published in Shanghai.

Sun Feng, a staff member of *Hai Lang Hua* magazine, published in Qindao.

Lu Lin, a staff member of *Tan Suo* magazine, published in Beijing.

Ye Zhong Wu, Editor of *Si Wu* magazine.

Zhao Nan, a poet and staff member of the literary magazine *Jintian*, published in Peking.

Furthermore, two Hong Kong residents have been arrested in China during the past year. **Luo Fu** is a well-known journalist in the British colony. He was the editor of a communist daily *Xin Wan Bao* and deputy editor of *Da Gong Bao*, an official daily of the People's Republic published in Hong Kong. He was arrested in Peking in May and it was not until July that his family was told that he had 'breached Chinese law and the discipline of the Party'. According to Luo Fu's friends in Hong Kong, he was arrested because of his close contacts with foreign journalists in the colony, and was thus suspected of being a source about Chinese affairs.

The other detainee is **Liu Sanqing**, a member of the 'Solidarity with the Democracy Movement in China'. He was arrested in December 1981 in Guangzhou when he tried to see the wife of the detained dissident Wang Xizhe.

Lek Hor Tan

China Unofficial art

stipulated that unless a reply was received quickly, a public demonstration would be held in protest. Since no reply was forthcoming, the demonstration went ahead as planned on 1 October, China's National Day and 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic. At the head of the column of several hundred demonstrators were leading editors from the unofficial press, together with Ma Desheng, a woodcut artist crippled in both legs, and Wang Keping the sculptor — both members of the Stars. Large banners bearing the slogans 'Uphold the spirit of the Constitution' and 'We want political democracy and artistic freedom' were held aloft. Despite the misgivings of some activists who had feared that it represented too rapid an escalation of the confrontation, the demonstration passed without any violence or police interference. Indeed, the authorities continued to adopt a tolerant attitude towards the Stars, and in November they were allowed to mount an exhibition of their work in a pavilion in the grounds of the beautiful Beihai Park.

Similar groups of unofficial artists were formed in other parts of China around this period, although little is known about them. One group of five young artists, headed by Kuang Yang, organised an exhibition in Guiyang in October 1979, and published an accompanying collection of poems. One poem was entitled 'The Artist':

The artist is —
the commoner, the traveller, the miner, the sower, the forester, the surgeon, the marathon runner, the one whose blood turns into black ink.

The artist is —
the son of the people, the humanitarian warrior, the conscience of mankind.

The work of Xue Mingde, an unofficial artist from Chongqing in western China, has attracted international recognition, and Xue was even, for a brief period in summer 1980, allowed to open his own public gallery, the Black Oxen Art Gallery.

The diverse background and social status of the Stars seems to parallel that of activists from the more political side of the Democracy Movement. Certain key members came from high cadre families, others from families of intellectuals who had suffered persecution during the Cultural Revolution, while a significant number came from ordinary working-class backgrounds. Qu Leilei (whose style of simple line-drawing points strongly to his being the identity of the pseudonymous 'Lu Shi' illustrator of the *Today* journal) is the son of Qu Bo, a famous novelist and high-ranking industrial administrator. Li Shuang, who worked as a scene painter at the Peking



Self Portrait by Li Shuang, an unofficial artist who fell in love with a French diplomat and was accused of 'incitement to debauchery'. She is now serving a two-year sentence in a labour camp.

Youth Arts Theatre and who was one of three young women artists in the group, came from a predominantly intellectual background, her father being a university professor who had been condemned as a 'rightist' in the purges of 1957. Ma Desheng, the woodcut artist, seems to have come from a working-class family, while the painter Yan Li worked as a machine tool operator. What most of the Stars had in common was that they were amateur artists, frustrated with their full-time job assignments; they had little or no formal training in art, and paid for expensive art materials entirely from their own small incomes. It seems likely that, as in other sections of the Democracy Movement, it was the presence of members from high cadre families which tended to shield the Stars from suppression

by the authorities, and helped to generate the considerable degree of tolerance which was shown to them. However, there is no doubt that a certain amount of official recognition was given to the artistic achievement of their work; the artists Qu Leilei, Huang Rui and Zhong Acheng, for example, all had items of work reproduced in national art journals.

Western influences

Official recognition of the Stars seems to have gathered momentum rapidly from the time of their first open-air exhibition, for in August 1980 they were extended the rare privilege of being invited to hold their own full-scale exhibition inside the Peking Art Gallery itself. This exhibition, which lasted for 10 days and comprised nearly 200

Unofficial art China

exhibits by some 30 artists, was a tremendous success; it drew a total of 50,000 visitors and public interest was so great that a second display hall had soon to be made available. The catalogue of exhibits was published by the *Today* group, and carried poems specially written by the unofficial poets Bei Dao, Zhao Nan and Jiang He. The exhibits clearly showed the influence of Western styles such as Post-Impressionism, Surrealism and Expressionism, as well as Cubism. 'The world grows even smaller', wrote the Stars in their foreword to the exhibition; 'the traces of man are to be found in every corner of the globe, and there are no longer any new continents to be discovered — today, it is within ourselves that we shall discover new continents!'

If the subjective bed-rock upon which much of the unofficial art of the Soviet Union seems to rest finds expression in the imagery of religious iconography, then that of Chinese unofficial art (together with much of the work of the new generation of officially trained artists) seems to find expression in a style and imagery reflecting the deep-rooted traditional humanism of Chinese society — albeit in a new and strongly individualistic mould. In terms of theme and content, the art of the Stars ranges from powerful social and political comment to bold exploration of emotional inner space. In a large oil painting entitled 'The Great Wall', Yin Guanzhong portrays a nude male and female couple bound together by the wall — symbol of China's long self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world — with a pile of human skulls littering its base. This work seems to echo an earlier *crie de coeur* by the unofficial 'Enlightenment Society' against the 'spiritual Great wall' surrounding China. Yan Li's painting of 'Tired souls in the garden of fantasy' shows two figures leaning dejectedly against one of a macabre group of trees with leafless branches arching together and ending in barren stumps. Some of Li Shuang's paintings portray turbulent personal images of the Cultural Revolution, while others offer touching and nostalgic glimpses of family life, within an overall ambience of melancholy and loneliness. The work of sculptor and television drama-writer Wang Keping explores particularly the theme of human sexuality; in one of his woodcarvings he depicts a naked female form being crushed in a giant fist, and in another he offers an overt representation of the phallus. One of the most controversial items on display, reportedly sneaked in after the official checking of exhibits, was Wang's 'Idol', a witty and satirical comment upon Maoism: it consisted of the bland and smiling head of a Buddha wearing a circular cap with a red star in the centre. Ma Desheng, prevented from applying for art college on

account of his physical disability, seeks through his woodcut prints to exploit the stark contrast between black and white which the medium affords. His 'Black sun with faces twisted aside' shows a harsh explosion of light filling the sky while fragmented line-drawn faces stare out from behind a black battlement. Ma's 'White cat and black cat, soundly sleeping' is inescapably suggestive of a famous remark by Party Vice-Chairman Deng Xiaoping — 'it doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice' — which Deng made in the early sixties in response to criticism that his views suggested a return to the capitalist road; in Ma Desheng's whimsical satire, neither of the two cats catches any mice!

When challenged about the lack of a 'national character' in their work, the Stars replied that, regardless of any particular Western form or style they might adopt, their art provided a true reflection of Chinese experience, since the subject matter was invariably drawn from the life and world they knew. They rejected the idea that it was necessary to paint in traditional styles to preserve the national characteristic of art, arguing that on the contrary such painting tended to be artificial and formalistic, divorced from any truly contemporary national experience.

Stimulating and challenging

Despite a plea made by Wang Keping for visitors to the exhibition to have confidence in their own subjective interpretation of the exhibits and to refrain from complaining that they 'didn't understand them', many visitors still appear to have found the exhibition artistically inaccessible. Others were simply outraged by the abstract and provocative nature of the work. One comment in the visitors' book read: 'To find out what all this means, please visit an insane asylum.' Another commentator felt that for the next Stars exhibition 'it should be sufficient to simply invite a few blind people to daub colour on to canvas — for the following one some beggars could be asked to select a few "exhibits" from the rubbish tip — finally, an exhibition could be held in a completely empty hall where people would be able to breathe fresh air'. Another visitor was less imaginative but more plaintive in his comments: 'I felt an inexpressible sense of loathing and revulsion while viewing this exhibition... I experienced extreme spiritual torment.'

Although frequently mystified by the new and unfamiliar aspects of the work, the majority of visitors to the exhibition nevertheless seem to have found it a stimulating and challenging experience, a feeling which was well expressed by one visitor who simply wrote: 'May all the stars in the sky shine

more brightly than the sun!'

In allowing a group of artists closely connected with the unofficial political currents of the Democracy Movement to display their work in the nation's most prestigious art gallery, the authorities displayed a clear desire to provide some kind of channel (albeit one which was least overtly challenging to the establishment) through which the widespread sense of social dissatisfaction among the young might find expression. But by early 1981 the balance of opinion within the Party had tilted decisively in favour of complete suppression of the newly-emergent social and political sub-culture and, in the name of opposing 'bourgeois liberalisation', the net quickly began to tighten. All the leading political activists of the Democracy Movement were arrested, leaving those on the literary and artistic sides of the movement, although still at liberty, to reflect soberly upon the limits to artistic freedom in China. At least one member of the Stars did, however, become a direct casualty. In September 1981, the young artist Li Shuang was preparing for her approaching marriage to a French diplomat when she was suddenly arrested just outside the diplomatic compound in Peking where she had been living with her fiancé for the previous two months. Li Shuang's premarital relationship had clearly outraged the traditional Chinese sense of sexual propriety, but another major factor contributing to the harsh sentence of two years' hard labour which she subsequently received was probably the keen interest taken by her fiancé in the activities of the Democracy Movement, and the fact that he had developed extensive personal contacts with its members. Having made it quite clear that the previous limited tolerance towards unofficial tendencies in society was at an end, the authorities were now issuing a clear warning to foreigners not to sympathise with or foster such tendencies.

Art and literature, being less controversial than directly political forms of self-expression, have long tended to flourish in China under even the most adverse of circumstances. The 1981 campaign against 'bourgeois liberalisation' met with strong opposition from many establishment intellectuals, writers and artists, and even from high-ranking political figures, and it is likely that the situation will stabilise in a climate of cautious and limited tolerance towards the arts, and that there will be no wholesale reversion to the cultural sterility of previous years. We must hope that this will be the case, not least because it would allow artists like the Stars to continue their exploration of new forms and ideas, to mature artistically and to build further upon their exciting initial achievements. ■