

# 'Rebel' Artists Finally Recognized in Beijing

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In Beijing on 29 September last year, a group of two dozen young, deviant artists, who were very definitely *not* following the centuries-venerated methods and content of Chinese traditional art, but who wanted to exhibit their works, were driven away from outside the prestigious National Art Gallery by more than a hundred policemen. Finally they had their show in Beihai, a public park.

This year, from 20 August to 7 September (held over by public demand), the same group had an official exhibition of 150 items in the same art gallery, China's most famous. They presented woodcuts, sculptures in wood and stone, oils, Chinese traditional paints, aquarelles and pen sketches. The oils, a relatively new medium in China, predominated.

The exhibit was attended by almost 5,000 viewers a day. No one had paid any attention to the young artists' demands for a showing—until Jiang Feng, national head of the Union of Chinese Artists looked at their works and ordered the gallery opened to them. There were apologies by the Beijing Municipal Committee and other organizations, criticism of the police (and also criticism of the young artists for 'actions that did not help solve the problem'). This time there were no police.

Did the Beijing city and art officials simply bow to 'uncomfortable' public pressure, or has there been a genuine recognition of the value, or at least the right, of young artists to paint freely and offer their works openly to the public to judge? One hopes the latter. After all, Marxists claim that socialism includes the democratic concept.

China's young people today—indeed, the vast masses of the people—insist that 'the

proof of the pudding is in the eating', i.e., in this case, that either democracy exists in daily life or it does not. The Communist Party is now constantly repeating that theory comes from practice. The young artists don't quarrel with theory, they told me. The elders can sit in their studies and write *theory* in their beautiful calligraphy, but the younger generation is more interested in what actually *works*—for the people—and for themselves—in a society into which they did not ask to be born—and with which they are not at all sure they are satisfied.

By far, the vast majority of people who attended the young artists' exhibition were themselves young people—those of an uncertain and dissatisfied generation which is such a large segment of China's population today—those whom a very high government official told me seriously were the 'irretrievably lost' generation. (I don't believe this.) Whether or not these young viewers agreed with all of the ideas expressed in the works exhibited, one could *feel* and *see* the warm kinship they felt with the 'rebel' artists—for both viewers and artists alike belong to that generation of millions who were traumatized during the 'Cultural' Revolution by the errors of the Communist Party in which they had been taught to have so much respect.

Just before the exhibition, Beijing's *People's Daily* made another bow to this battered but courageous generation, writing that they 'have undergone great changes (*sic!*), are not content with the present, and hate cultural despotism and taboos.' Yet the paper, a party organ, managed to leave its readers with the *impression* (though it did not actually *say* so) that such young people 'have fallen behind or even been corrupted', and ended its

comment with words the young people have learned to hate so much: 'But a whole generation of young people are maturing and marching forward' (whatever *that* means!).

'Maturing'? What young person is not? 'Marching forward'? Who marches *backward*? In any case, the young people say no, if 'marching forward' means submissively following old ways dictated to them by self-important, arrogant bureaucrats who try to 'lead' (it means 'control') their lives. Yes, they say, if it means no longer listening to empty words but searching for honest answers and thinking for themselves (certainly a step forward from the restriction and confusion in which much of their lives has been spent).

The *People's Daily* commentary didn't seem to cause any firecrackers, drums and cymbals. Meanwhile, I went on having serious, friendly, completely frank discussions with these young people who it is implied are 'fallen behind, even corrupted'. They are around me in this capital city by the tens of thousands. Many of them seem to have the same idea that one of the young artists in the exhibition expressed to me (I had asked him if he objected to my printing certain things he had said): 'You can write anything we say, for *we have nothing to lose.*'

China—which is often behind in many things (except perhaps in the political awareness and humanitarianism of the people)—does not know how to take the works of these brash newcomers in art (or, indeed, whether to call them 'art' at all!). Officials, master painters and art critics, both the famous and the not famous, attended the exhibition, and came away on both sides of the argument. One, a famous artist whose works have run as high as 30,000 *yuan* (about US\$20,000) in Liu Li Chang art shops, came away with flooding enthusiasm. So did others, high art critics and the more broad-minded. On the other hand, some master artists, whose names are also known in every art museum in the world, called the young people's work 'worthless'.

May be. But I *enjoyed* this exhibition—its verve, its daring (in Chinese terms, at least), its implied defiance of the strictures of Chinese painting tradition, its often beautiful pieces, and especially the fine, warm feeling of earnestness, freedom and friendliness of viewers and artists alike. (One exception was a middle-level bureaucrat who was very clearly ill at ease that the young people should be talking so intimately with a foreigner.)

I had long talks with these young artists in the National Art Gallery and later in my home (itself a breakaway from a tendency of bureaucrats to cling to old, anti-foreigner rules). They call themselves the 'Star' group. Their average age is in the twenties. The majority are ordinary workers. Most of them protested their job assignments, not only because they were made without their agreement but because they cannot spend their time with art. Many of them come from intellectual families, a number of them connected with art. Only a half-dozen have had any formal training. The rest have taught themselves and, while some critics have charged a lack of well-mastered technique, this did little to detract from the vivacity, spirit and passion breathing in their works.



The South—Ai Weiwei

Among the aquarelles at the exhibition *The South* by Ai Weiwei was a marvelously gay and colourful work depicting a village facing the high, green waves of a lake on which a boat in black, orange and blue is making for the shore. This painting conveys a very real feeling of the struggle of the boat in the tossing waters and the solid safety of the village to be reached on the shore. Ai Weiwei is a good example of the young artist who

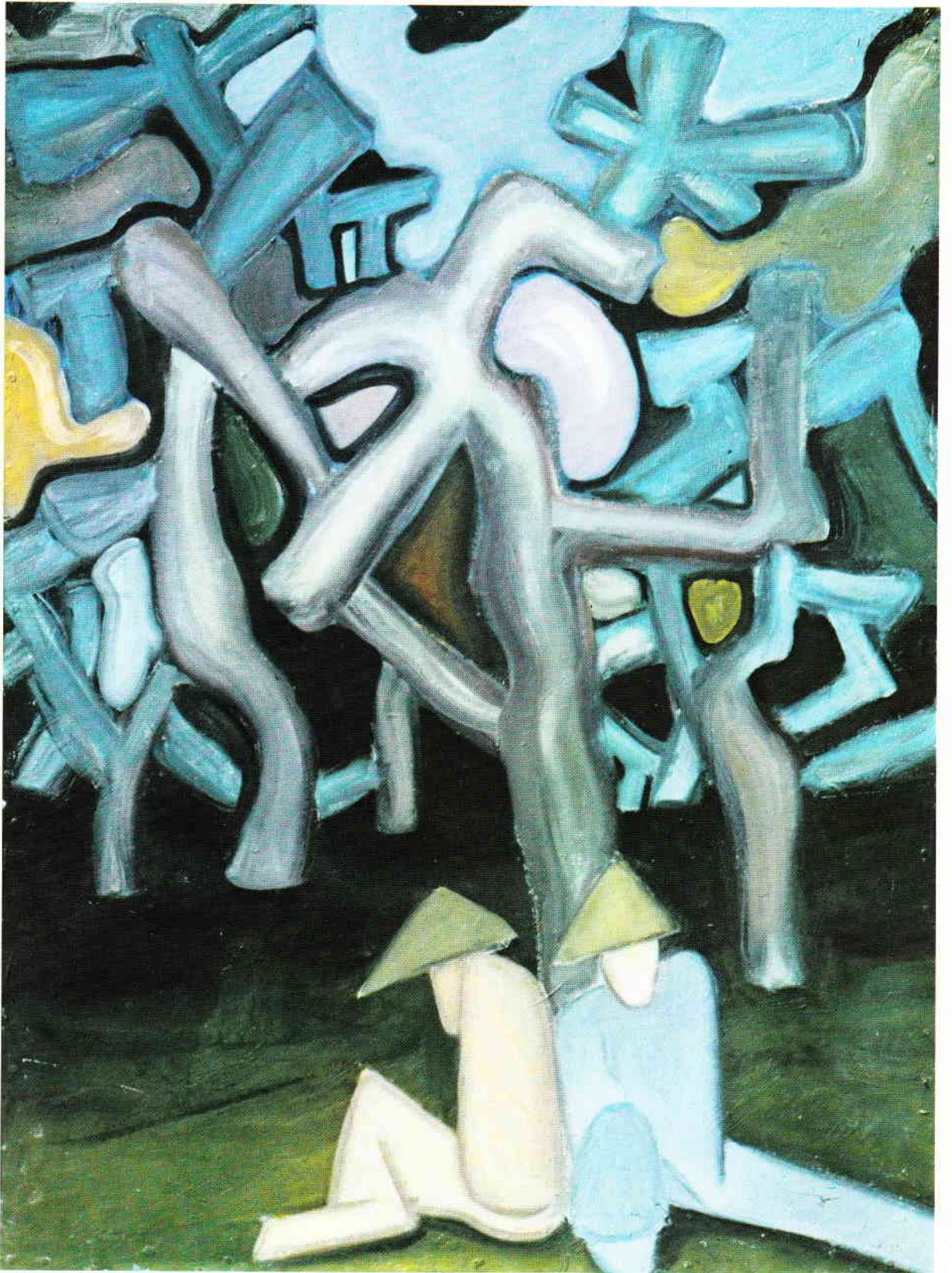




The Great Wall

*Yin Guangzhong*





The Weary in the Garden of Fantasy

*Yan Li*

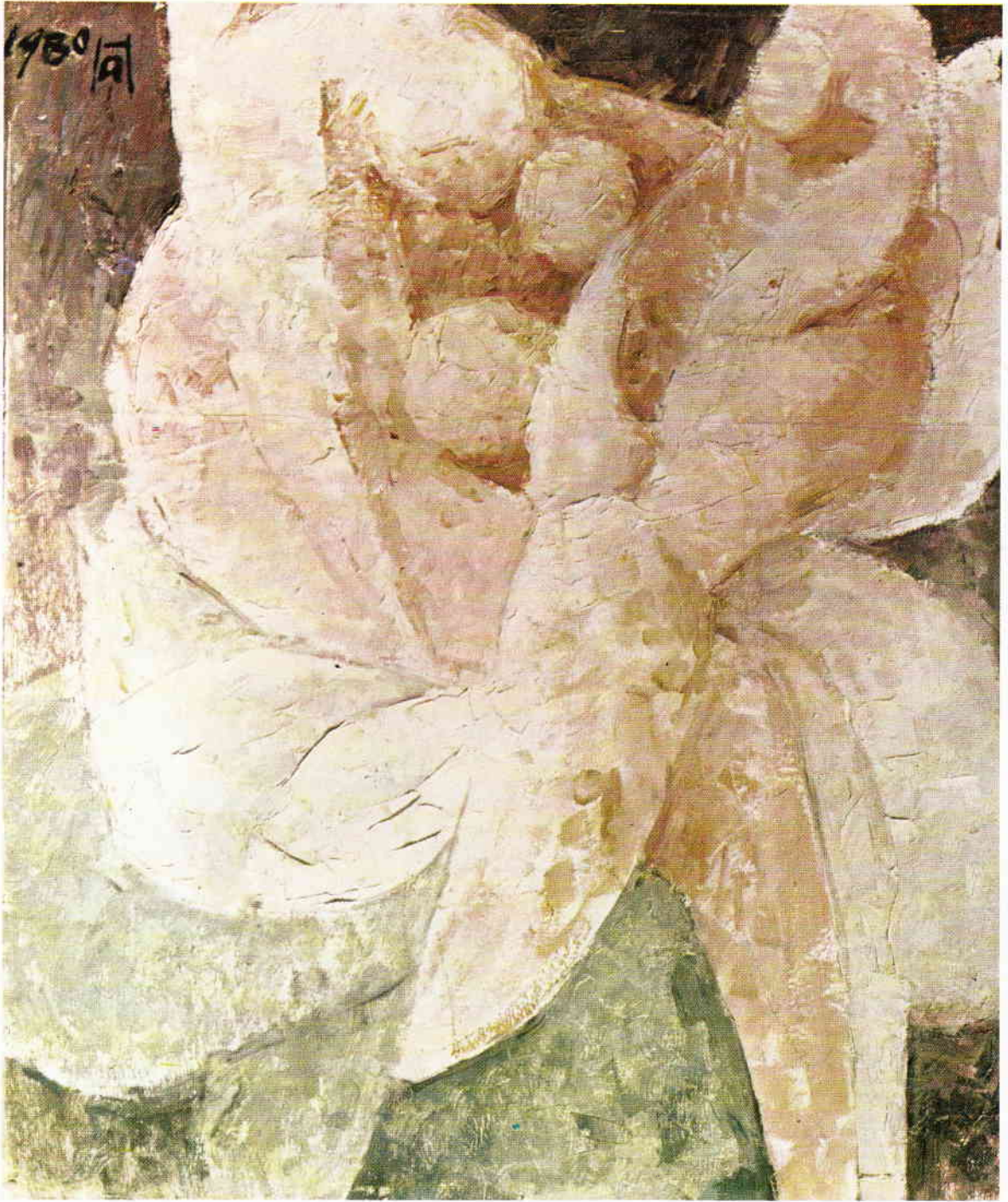




Looking at a Picture Album

*Huang Rui*





Mother and Son

*Huang Rui*

comes from an intellectual family. His father is not only the famous poet Ai Qing but a painter and connoisseur who studied art and literature in France and counts among his friends the master artist Lin Fengmian. We can say that Ai Weiwei's work also seems to reflect the warmth and positive outlook that his father holds in spite of 20 years of oppression (now ended).

One might as well note here the strong influence of such innovators in Chinese traditional painting as Lin Fengmian on some of the young painters of the group. This can be seen easily, for example, in the works in Chinese paper and ink of Bo Yun, 32, who readily admits his indebtedness to this great master. With some art training in the middle school attached to the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Bo Yun's entries in the exhibition came closest to the Chinese painting inheritance. His paintings have some of the characteristics readily seen in Lin Fengmian. Though generally not as bright, they fill the entire space, they carry only the signature and seal of the artist, and they use the many possible hues of ink with great sensitivity to mood and atmosphere. In *Town by the Water*, for example, the black-roofed houses are reflected in water without a definite shore line, making them appear very elongated and enveloped in fine mist. His *Fishing Village* is striking for its use of tones of ink to give one the unmistakable impression of a cold and windy day, gray and wet after a rain. Here one is instantly reminded of the chilly day of ap-



Fishing Village—Bo Yun

proaching winter one feels in Lin Fengmian's *Geese in Autumn*.

Over one-third of the works in the exhibition were oils. I particularly liked two by the group's leader, Huang Rui: *Looking at a Picture Album*, a sensitive portrait predominating in bright blues and reds, and, in a genre little attempted in this socialist country, and *Mother and Son*, an abstract painting of soft beauty in subtle tones of beige and pale green.

Two bright oils by Yan Li also stood out. *Life, Friendship, Love*, done in planes of pure and mostly primary colours, expresses a feeling and a reality denied to the young people during the puritanical years of the Cultural Revolution. Standing before this work, one senses humour and pathos at the same time. Something of the same impression is conveyed in *The Weary in the Garden of Fantasy*. The viewer (I, at least) has the sudden awareness of what the young people call the dark years of the past decade: fantastic, menacing and weird. Of this eery emptiness the people are tired. Putting myself into Yan Li's surrealistic 'garden', I could see no way out—and this pessimism, too, though we may disagree with it, is found among today's generation.



Life, Friendship, Love—Yan Li



Two other items in the exhibition reflected the acute problems of the young today as they consider their situation and its causes. One was Yin Guangzhong's *The Great Wall*, an oil in many fascinating tones of blue, depicting the wall entwining two nudes, a male and a female, enchained and unable to escape. The wall continues on, while below the couple the rocks appear as human skulls. The technique and composition are good, though the apparent message of the painting causes pain that any of a socialist generation should feel so starkly imprisoned and depressed. Perhaps this painting also depicts something of the idea expressed to me by the young exhibitors, which can be summarized like this: The purpose of art is to liberate oneself. It must reflect society as it is. There are too many barriers to art in China—one has to paint with one hand while using the other to fend off troubles.

The other example reflecting this problem of situation and cause was Wang Keping's much discussed and controversial sculpture, *Idol*, the head of a Buddha in brown wood, with a red star on its headdress. Wang's mother is an opera actress, his father a writer. He himself is self-taught.

This statue, a daringly irreverent rendition of Mao Zedong, has caused the eruption of much discussion in the West. Many journalists and others, instead of describing it as it is—one young man's angry comment on the personality cult and the Cultural Revolution—have tried to use it to prove the existence of a large, dissident underground in China. But Wang's carving has been written about in domestic journals and was exhibited to thousands in the official National Art Gallery. Not very 'underground'.

More pointedly, the West has used Wang's statue within the framework of what it calls 'de-Maoification'. Even some of the young people are astonished by this, for most of them consider Mao to have been a great man who, from the mid-50s, however, made more and more mistakes as he became separated from the people. In any case, there is a lot of discussion in China about Mao, about the errors of the party, at least about the line prevailing in the party in the confused and damaging years covering the cultural revolution. It is a hot subject that chews the consciousness of millions in China and many abroad—and I consider Wang's statue a contribution to this discussion.

Idolatry, of course, is superstition and must



Fetish—Wang Keping

be condemned, but in discussing Mao's role in history neither the positive nor the negative of the man's life can be ignored, *much less eliminated*. In Marxist terms this is dialectics. One should not be frightened that such a statue appears. In fact, it practically *commands* discussion. A good thing, for the masses of people themselves are the final determiners, arbitrators and executors of history. The time of the Inquisition, the burning of books, the censor's scissors can no longer be. China's drive toward modernization cannot afford such antics—for modernization means the scientific approach, not the witch doctor's pinning of labels 'good' and 'bad'. Science means thinking—and letting democracy and practice determine truth.

In discussing with the group I asked why there is such conflict and discussion around these young artists and their works. There seem to be three reasons: First, there is a generation gap in which the old do not understand the young and the young find it hard to understand the old. Second, there is an enormous, entrenched bureaucracy in China—people who think in old ways, who possess nothing but already-fixed answers, and who think of the young artists' work only as the result of 'bourgeois influence'



on them. Third, high figures in the Chinese art world (there are many notable exceptions) do not understand the new work, either because they can't or because they do not want to.

The young people's exhibition included an interesting innovation: comments and poetry written by others and placed alongside the items presented. Some of these, I think, help us understand the larger meaning of this exhibit for China. One is a poem by Zhao Nan accompanying the fresh, warm *Self-portrait*, an oil by Zhu Jinshi. It seemed to

quietly express the mainstream of these young artists' feeling:

*I am the beautiful eyes  
That stare at the clear, golden sea;  
I am the stars of blue  
That every night play and travel with the  
children.  
I am a little tree on the mountaintop  
That watches those who pass by;  
I am the footprint in a field  
Soaked with the sweat of men;  
I am the wind, the rain...  
I am man.*

## WHAT IS BEAUTY

'What is beauty' is the theme of a column in *Workers' Daily* on 23 October discussed in four letters from readers expressing different views.

Two of the letters emphasize the importance of 'inner beauty', while criticizing excessive attention to fashions or hair styles. The other two letters suggest that concern for style is harmless and a personal matter.

A reader from Hebei province writes that some young people lack a real conception of beauty, and merely copy what is fashionable whether the style suits themselves or not. They imitate foreigners or movie stars, try to be 'modern' in a way which only shows their 'ignorance and poor taste'.

Yet these people should not be accused of 'pursuing the bourgeois way of life,' this reader writes. There is no definition of proletarian beauty either, he writes.

Real beauty, this Hebei reader says, is the beauty of the inner soul in harmony with outer beauty.

Another reader from Nanjing writes that a revolutionary is not against beauty or even a good appearance—but not to the neglect of beauty of the character. The reader says if young people only care about how they look—their hair, dress, shiny shoes and sunglasses—they will not have any real beauty.

A factory worker from Jiangsu province, on the other hand, writes that since working people labour to grow cotton and weave textiles, they ought to enjoy the fruits of their labour in wearing fashionable clothes. He says there is no reason for everyone to wear the same style of dress, and that people should enjoy themselves while they are young. He sees nothing wrong with permanent waves, dancing parties, and even lipstick and makeup. 'We all work hard so we can have a better life,' the worker says. 'So what is socialism if people cannot enjoy themselves a little bit?'

Another reader from Shaanxi agrees, saying that people should dress as they like and there should not be a set mode. In his view, so long as young people work hard and don't let outside interests affect their work, how they dress and spend their leisure time is their own affair.

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