

## Academicism and the Amateur Avant-Garde in the Post-Cultural Revolution Period (1979–1984)

To a certain degree, it was Mao's revolutionary pop art that halted the experimental practice of the cultural avant-garde of the early twentieth century. The total modernity and cultural avant-garde projects initiated by the May Fourth Movement were also exaggerated by Mao's Cultural Revolution. The synthesis of religion, science, and art represented by the first generation of Chinese intellectuals and artists was replaced by Mao's total revolution, which was oriented toward increased scrutiny and various kinds of cultural rectification. Mao's ambitious and utopian project ended with his death in 1976.

It was not until two years after that important moment, however, that the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution would allow any new activity to appear in the Chinese art world. A revival of the cultural avant-garde did not fully emerge until the mid-1980s. From a political point of view, public commissions generated around the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1977 and 1978, continued the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and simply substituted the icons of China's new leaders, such as Hua Guofeng, for those of the old.

New Chinese art activities began to appear after several crucial changes in the Chinese political and cultural situation took place. In 1978, Beijing held a national congress to consider the mistakes made by Mao and the zealots of the Cultural Revolution. The policy of opening to the West followed, along with the slogan "Seek truth from facts" (*Shishi qishi*). These circumstances encouraged people to express their long-suppressed desires to explore new art forms and to satisfy their demand for self-expression. In 1979, new art groups and painting trends began to emerge.

Trends in art developed along with those in other areas of intellectual activity. Between 1978 and 1980,

newspapers and magazines published many articles based on interpretations of Deng Xiaoping's slogan, "Practice is the only measure of truth" (*Shijian shi jinayan zhenli de weiyi biao zhun*). The idea that truth was no more than a hypervalidated practical reality caused Chinese people, who were disillusioned by the Cultural Revolution, to shift their values to pragmatism and individualism. Beginning in about 1981, philosophers began discussing questions of humanism and alienation.<sup>1</sup> This discussion was initiated by renewed research on Karl Marx's 1844 "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts." It used Marx's theory, developed in his youth, criticizing alienation and emphasizing humanism, to indirectly criticize the suppression of human nature in Mao's period, in particular during the Cultural Revolution. This discussion reached an important climax in 1983; the simultaneous philosophical debates promoted an awareness among Chinese people of the need to develop a modern and progressive society to accompany the planned economic development. These debates touched on human values, the humanist philosophical position, human dignity, human rights, and finally, human freedom.

Conservatives within the Communist Party immediately counterattacked by initiating the political campaign against spiritual pollution (*fan jingshen wuran*) in 1983. In the art world, the first cultural rectification was launched to criticize self-expression and the influence of modern, Western abstract art. Ultimately, 1984 was contemporary Chinese art's most dismal time. The Sixth National Art Exhibition was very backward-looking, and there were no official activities of new art taking place except one avant-garde exhibition, held in Lanzhou, Gansu province. The campaign of suppression, along

with the conservative Sixth National Art Exhibition, however, eventually stimulated a new avant-garde. The greatest consequence of this historical moment was the emergence of the '85 avant-garde movement (85 *qianwei yundong*). Therefore, we may call the art of the period from the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 to 1984 the post-Cultural Revolution (*hou wenge*) period.

The new interest in humanism, or *rendaozhuyi*, reveals a pursuit of a kind of modern identity transcending class, such as those exemplified by workers, peasants, revolutionary inheritors, or the proletariat in general. Therefore, humanism in the particular Chinese context after the Cultural Revolution means declassification (*qujiejibua*). The “individual” not only refers to a particular individual, but more importantly can be abstractly defined as any ordinary, nonpoliticized Chinese person. And furthermore, this ideal nonpolitical Chinese person can be representative of truth, goodness, and beauty, i.e., what is conceived of as the true human nature uncorrupted by any political propaganda.

Consequently, these ordinary, nonpoliticized people—equivalent to “nonpolluted human beings”—became the major subject matter in the art of academic realism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the same academic circles, apart from this realistic academicism, there was also a large group of artists who favored abstract and decorative art in a stylistic sense. The apolitical for them was manifested in their chosen subjects, which included landscapes, still lifes, and portraits. There was also a circle that consisted of various self-organized art salons (*huahui*), outside the academy and official organizations. These *huahui* can be viewed as the “amateur avant-garde,” who pursued individual freedom in their private space in the form of salon gatherings while they made modern paintings and poetry. The first quality of these groups was the fact that they were all self-taught artists. The second quality was the lack of integration between their “art for art’s sake” attitudes and their political sentiments that sought for individual freedom. The limited political circumstances combined with the new cultural resources made this avant-garde practice merely skeletal; in other words, not yet a complete cultural avant-garde or total modernity project. The social critique embedded in the amateur avant-garde,

however, was far more critical and radical than the critical themes promulgated by the academic realists, because the latter were framed by the general national policy reforms at this particular historical moment.

### “Scar” Art and Rustic Realism

Among the academics, realism was the dominant discourse of the post-Cultural Revolution period. This phenomenon can be understood as the continuity of the previous predilection for social realism when combined with a changing subject matter befitting the government’s policies of reform. Social realism, as previously stated, was also as the byproduct of the Soviet-influenced Chinese art education system.

One of the most striking aspects of Chinese contemporary art of the last three decades has been the ceaseless development and evolution of the notion of realism, particularly in painting, photography, and film. In particular, it is the specificity of Chinese historical conditions that Westerners have a tendency to overlook, as the Chinese have absorbed, by osmosis, the entire history of the Western tradition of mimetic representation since the time of Plato. This perspective goes along with an ideological (as well as market) view which is in favor of a simple social narrative of the “current China.”

Speaking from this perspective, China’s version of realism, especially in the last three decades, can be seen as a uniquely Chinese development that spontaneously emerged based on the nineteenth-century tradition of social realism. Social realism, speaking broadly, has been seen as an international phenomenon, including movements such as the nineteenth-century Russian *Peredvizhniki*, the Mexican muralists of the 1930s, and American painters of the early twentieth century, such as the American Ashcan School. It differs from socialist realism in that it is not controlled by national ideologies, but rather represents the intellectual circle’s independent consideration and critique of social reality. Social realism often focuses on the life of the lower classes, but reflects it through the intellectuals’ essentialist and liberal democratic ideas of society, and the artists of the West who participated in this style were overwhelmingly from elite backgrounds replete with special privileges.

During the past twenty years in China, many different manifestations of the legacy of social realism have appeared, including “scar” painting, rustic realism, cynical realism, the “new generation,” and most recently urban realism, to name just a few. All of these realisms may partially fit the basic characteristics of that designation, such as a free and independent critical perspective or attention to ordinary people. Nonetheless, we have to be aware that there is always an ambiguity among these realisms in the Chinese context of the past three decades. On the one hand, the artists committed themselves to serving as a critical voice examining society, and on the other hand, they also continued in the tradition of Mao-era socialist realism, making their art easily corrupted and co-opted by market forces due to its popped, kitsch nature. For instance, the realism of the post-Cultural Revolution period reveals the intellectuals’ criticisms of the Cultural Revolution, but it never approaches an institutional (whether artistic or political) critique. Perhaps the best example of this inherent corruption is the phenomenon of cynical realism, for it attempts to launch a social critique while wholeheartedly embracing commercial opportunism.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, the social critique present in China’s academic realism of the post-Cultural Revolution period remains a mere change in subject matter. Mao’s art only allowed three types of subject matter: images that glorified revolutionary history, images that glorified Mao’s leadership, and images that depicted the happy quotidian life of the proletariat, including workers, soldiers, and peasants. The socialist realism of the Mao period explicitly idealized a hypothetical “proletarian society” and attempted to create a propagandist framework advocating a socialist utopia. In contrast, the academic realism of the late 1970s carried different themes, such as the unhappy life of intellectuals, or tales of the Revolutionary leadership and history that were overshadowed or exaggerated during the Cultural Revolution. Images of important, newly prominent figures such as Zhu De, Liu Shaoqi, and Zhou Enlai suddenly proliferated in realistic art during the post-Cultural Revolution period, particularly in the Sixth National Art Exhibition which was held in the National Art Museum of China in 1984. In comparison, there were surprisingly few images of Mao.<sup>3</sup>

Two types of academic realist art emerged: “scar art” (*shanghen huibhua*), which emerged in 1979 and principally described the calamities and spiritual wounds caused by the Cultural Revolution, and “rustic realism” (*xiangtu xieshi zhuyi*), which sought to express a humanistic feeling by depicting ordinary shepherds and peasants.<sup>4</sup> Artists of these two types were of the former Red Guard generation, some of whom had excelled at painting in the Cultural Revolution style.<sup>5</sup> In late 1968, about two years after the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when they were teenagers, most of them were sent to the remote countryside for reeducation by peasants. When the art schools were reopened in 1979, many were selected and enrolled in art academies as new graduate students. The end of the Cultural Revolution completely destroyed their dreams of making a perfect world and dismantled their great loyalty to Mao.

The scar artists endeavored to represent real scenes from the Cultural Revolution to stimulate people to recall their past suffering “in order to show the purity, loyalty, and love inherent in the tragedy of their generation. They wanted to represent the beautiful things that were coldly destroyed by the naked brutal reality.”<sup>6</sup> They reexperienced the struggles with the zealous Red Guards and the downtrodden life of reeducated students through the creation of paintings illustrating the emotional wounds inflicted on the Chinese populace. Scar art attempted to liquidate the utopian passion of their generation as expressed during the Cultural Revolution. For example, the painting *The Snow on a Certain Day of 1968* and the illustrations of the short story “Maple” depict tragic scenes of the battles between different Red Guard groups caused by different orientations toward Mao’s leadership during the first two years of the Cultural Revolution. These subjects could only be undertaken following the death of Mao, when the cult of his personality was being reexamined by Chinese intellectuals. Overwhelmingly, the subject matter of each painting is, in fact, autobiographical. These paintings represent the tragic fate of a generation that experienced a schizophrenic double allegiance, as they portrayed themselves both as heroes (for protecting Mao’s ideology) and as victims of that same ideology. The moment that marked the emergence of the scar art phenomenon was the





Figure 2.1

Cheng Conglin, *The Snow on a Certain Day of 1968, 1979*.

Figure 2.2

Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin, *Maple No. 18, 1979*.



exhibition organized to celebrate the founding of the People's Republic of China, "Sichuansheng qingzhu guoqing cianshi zhounian zhanlan," depicting thirty years in Sichuan province. It was held in the Sichuan Provincial Museum in Zhengdu city in October of 1979. In the exhibition, major artists of scar painting such as Cheng Conglin, Luo Zhongli, and Gao Xiaohua displayed their works, including Cheng Conglin's *The Snow on a Certain Day of 1968* (*Yijiuliubanian moyuemore xue*) and Gao Xiaohua's *Why?* (*Weishenme?*).

In *The Snow on a Certain Day of 1968* it seems the author attempted to represent a monumental moment that took place on the street. A defeated Red Guard group led by a white-shirted female student, caught by the victors, are coming out from a building where a brutal battle has just taken place. On the two sides of the gate, all kinds of townsmen have come to look at the tragic scene, including a teacher of the Red Guards who was accused of being a counterrevolutionary and subjected to a punishment of sweeping the street every day. Both sides, however, are illustrated as heroic as well as victims. Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin's *Maple* paintings illustrate the story with that name, in which a couple of young lovers break up and become separated into two opposed Red Guard groups. In a battle, all her comrades have died and she is left standing on the roof of a building. She jumps down to her death; by





Figure 2.3

Gao Xiaohua, *Why?*, 1978.

the end, her boyfriend is executed for a murder. Luo Zhongli's *Orphan* depicts a child missing her father, who was persecuted to death by the Red Guard. Gao Xiaohua's *Why?* illustrates several Red Guard students falling into a depressive and silent moment after a battle has ended; they are questioning the purpose of the battle, even the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.

Scar art was quickly followed in the early 1980s by a trend that has been labeled rustic realism (*xiangtu xieshi zhuyi*).<sup>7</sup> These paintings depict ordinary citizens in a similarly realistic manner, particularly peasants, shepherds, and minority people. Most rustic realist artists had achieved recognition in the scar group. They shifted their attention from depicting their own experiences and observations during the Cultural Revolution to representing “the Other,” or China’s minority peoples, which number over



fifty ethnic groups. These exotic peoples, distinctly different from the majority Han peoples, had been encountered by the artists during the years they had spent working in the countryside. Their unidealized, often rather melancholy view of these people may be linked with the concern for humanism that swept China's intellectuals during this period.

Like the scar artists, the rustic realist painters used their highly developed technical skills in the service of socially critical subject matter. For example, in the oil painting *Father*, by Luo Zhongli, the artist creates an ugly, hard image of an old man by using naturalistic colors and the techniques of photorealism. Every detail—a wrinkled and weather-beaten face, a pair of hard-working hands, an old bowl used by preceding generations, the yellow sand in the water in the bowl—seems to tell a story, suggesting an old, poor peasant engaged in backbreaking work, ready to drink from a bowl of muddy water during a short break from his labors in a mountain village. The painter placed the peasant's eyes just in line with the viewer's, intensifying the vision of his monotonous and destitute life, repeated generation after generation, on the same piece of soil.<sup>8</sup>

In this case, what the rustic painter attempts to reveal is not a particular "father," rather the state of humanity in general, in the form of a good and beautiful natural ideal. It is very abstract and transcends the subject's class identity. The goal of the rustic realists was to express this humanistic ideal by freezing time (everything is old, original, and changeless) and eliminating social and historical evidence from the subject. However, they focused on specific details as examples to closely investigate the values of ordinary life, such as the father's wrinkles and hands which suggest hard work and diligence. They are totally heroic, even numb, and have nothing to do with the greatness of the peasants seen in Cultural Revolution posters.

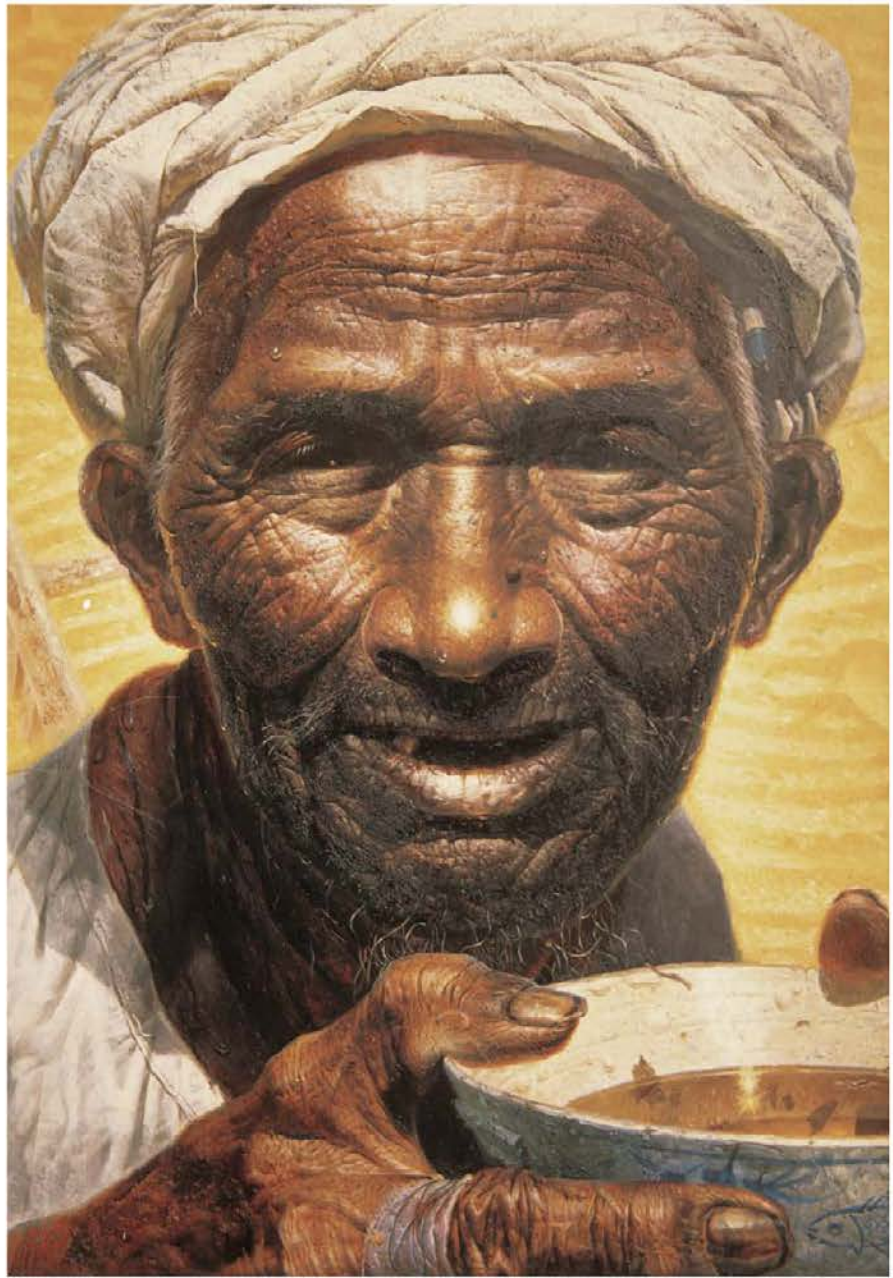
This approach perhaps closely matched the government's open policy at the time. Between 1978 and 1980, newspapers and magazines published many articles on Deng Xiaoping's slogan "Practice is the only measure of truth" (*Shijian shi jianyan zhenli de weiye biao zhun*). The idea that truth is not abstract, but rather what is experienced, observed, and measured in daily life, caused Chinese who



Figure 2.4  
Chen Danqing, *Tibetan Series: Going to Town*, 1980.

Figure 2.5

Luo Zhongli, *Father*, 1980.





were disillusioned by the Cultural Revolution to shift their values to pragmatism and individual observations. Therefore, the desire to “seek truth” resulted not only in a change in subject matter from Mao’s revolutionary subjects to the nonrevolutionary daily life of the people, but also in a call for a “true” realistic method, which was very much influenced by the critical realism of the nineteenth-century Russian Peredvizhniki in scar art, as well as by photorealism and the work of Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009), an American painter similar to the rustics.<sup>9</sup>

With the intention of “seeking truth,” the scar and rustic painters adopted a photorealist approach. In the illustrations based on the short story “Maple,” rather than portraying Jiang Qing (Mao’s wife) and Lin Biao (Mao’s “betrayal”) as deformed caricatures—the style favored by their contemporaries to criticize the Gang of Four (*Sirenbang*)—the artists simply copied news photographs of Jiang and Lin for their illustrations, without any defacement. This photorealist style immediately shocked the art world of 1979, as audiences were accustomed to a method of representation that either idealized or caricatured. This attempt at a neutral stance represents a very important step away from the previous socialist realism, at a time in Chinese art when the conventions and styles of Mao’s socialist realism were still very much in use.

In 1978, innumerable caricatures of the Gang of Four and of Lin Biao had been created and were the only acceptable way to depict these subjects. The neutral depiction of Jiang Qing and Lin Biao in the “Maple” illustrations sparked a debate in the Chinese art world about the relationship between moral truth and the representation of physical appearance. The debate became so heated and widespread that authorities halted the distribution of the issue of the *Journal of Illustration* (*Lianhuan huabao*) that published the illustrations for “Maple.” Although the question seems quite simple and even naive, it was a step forward for the post-Cultural Revolution period.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it was the first time that contemporary Chinese artists used a postmodern method to explore the ambiguous nature of reality. Although American photorealism influenced rustic painting in the early 1980s,<sup>11</sup> there is a fundamental difference between these two phenomena. The former was part of postmodern artistic praxis since



Figure 2.6

Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin, *Maple No. 1*, 1979.

the 1970s, in which painters attended to details with photographic precision, hoping through such attention to achieve “distortion” and thus to reveal the constructed nature of reality. The rustic realist painters of China, on the other hand, used photorealist techniques in order to achieve honest observation and an expression of the truth of human life.

Moreover, the realistic technique of rustic painting was derived from the socialist realist tradition. One of the fundamental techniques of the socialist realism of Mao’s era was the use of a staged or photographic



Figure 2.7  
Liu Yulian, Chen Yiming, and Li Bin, *Maple No. 14*, 1979.



Figure 2.8  
Li Jingyang, *Revolutionary "Flag Bearer,"* 1977.

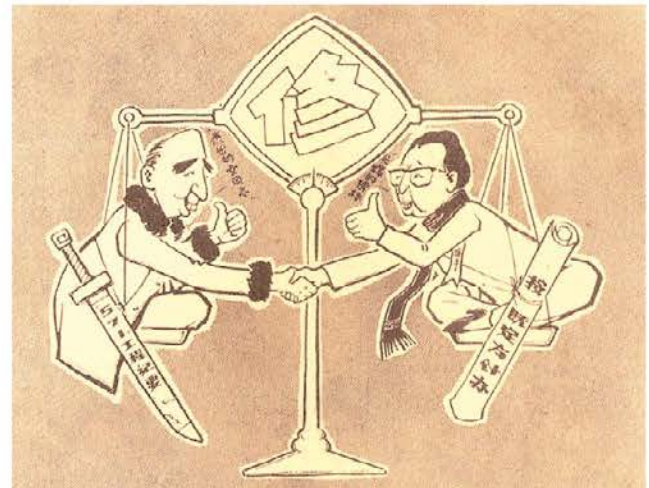


Figure 2.9  
Chen Maozhi, *Six of One and Half a Dozen of the Other (Ban jing ba liang)*, 1977.

view to frame a glorious historical scene in order to communicate the outstanding successes of the ruling leaders and the happy, prosperous lives of the masses. This nearly photographic style was adopted in order to make the picture appear more real, and therefore more convincing, or “truthful,” to the masses. The best example is Sun Zixi’s 1959 oil painting *In Front of Tian’anmen* (see figure 1.22), in which the artist used a photographic style to represent a peasant family’s happy life. The painting, however, does not attempt to highlight the family, but rather the state, which is symbolized by the monumental Tian’anmen Square as well as by Mao’s portrait, centered above, and seemingly among, the family members. Mao, the painting suggests, is the true father of both the family and the nation.

Compared with the nationalist-ideological “reality” expressed in *In Front of Tian’anmen*, Luo Zhongli’s *Father* expresses a critique independent

of the intellectual class, and the photographic “reality” of *Father* is in line with the lived reality of the common people. Not surprisingly, in 1979 Luo’s painting moved many people, and some even suggested that it hang above the Tian’anmen gate in place of Mao’s portrait. The painting itself, however, contains a contradiction between its own status as moral monument and the real, quiet, and ordinary peasant that it depicts, inasmuch as the truly ordinary is, in fact, the opposite of the monumental. In other words, *Father* is not a portrait in the common sense of portraiture, because neither the artist nor the audience pays attention to the identity of the subject. It is not a portrait of an individual, but rather a portrait of a type of spirituality recognized by all the Chinese people in that particular period. In ancient China, the subjects of portraits were emperors, ancestors, and literati officials. The portraits were never intended to be shown in public, but rather circulated in private.



Figure 2.10

April 1979, the first exhibition of the April Photo Society, outside the Orchid Door of Zhongshan Park. Photograph provided by Li Xiaobin.



Therefore, even as the rustic realist painters appropriated the monumental style and photorealist techniques of the previous socialist realists, they also inadvertently introduced the postmodern device of contradiction, thus subverting the original monumentality. This legacy of antiportraiture, which was initiated by Luo's *Father*, was later transformed into "big head" (*dalian hua*) painting, a major characteristic of the cynical realism of the 1990s (discussed in chapter 8).

It is ironic that when the whole nation of China was asked to look forward, the rustic realist painters insisted on looking backward, downward, and inward through their images of rural misery, stark poverty, and the rudimentary world of backbreaking peasant toil so characteristic of rural China's "primitive," or at the very least marginal, regions. Simultaneously, in literature the "searching for roots" (*xungen*) school led to a preference for the rustic and rural in both subject matter and style.<sup>12</sup>

One of the most important facets of twentieth-century Chinese culture was the look backward to traditional or native "roots" to explore certain widespread modern aesthetic values. This also reflects the vacillation of twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals between an all-embracing humanitarianism and narcissism; between social responsibility and elitist escapism; between the reality of those close to the soil and the representations of a constructed, imaginary utopia.

In comparison with academic realism, the first self-organized photography organization in Beijing, known as the April Photo Society (*Siyue yinghui*), seems more critical of contemporary society and authority. Both take the ordinary as their subject matter, but the latter is truly critical and thus represents the true continuum of social realism.

Founded in April 1979 by Li Xiaobin and Wang Zhiping, the April Photo Society was the first unofficial photography organization in China following the Cultural Revolution. Shortly after its founding, the April Photo Society held a photo exhibition entitled "Nature-Society-Man," which showed pictures taken by its members documenting a Tian'anmen demonstration. This caused a great sensation and controversy at the time. Later on, in 1980 and 1981, this photo society held two other exhibitions.<sup>13</sup>

Li Xiaobin was not only the initiator of the April Photo Society, but is also considered one of the founders of the photodocumentary movement during the new era in China. He has reported on typical events of every era since 1975. A representative example is his *The Person Who Appealed to the Central Authority* (*Shangfang zhe*), a picture that could not be published until nine years after its making, when it was praised as the earliest and most representative work of documentary photography in China. According to Li Xiaobin, the picture was taken in November 1977, when he passed an old man on his way from the main entrance of the Forbidden City to Tian'anmen Square. Upon seeing him, Li said he "had an impulse, a very intense impulse. With heavily beating heart and shaking hands, he felt that he was obliged to take the picture. He must do it."<sup>14</sup> From 1976 to 1979, Li took a large number



Figure 2.11

Li Xiaobin, *The Person Who Appealed to the Central Authority*, 1977.



Figure 2.12

Li Xiaobin, *April Fifth Tian'anmen Demonstration*, 1976.

of pictures recording numerous highly significant social and historical events, including the April Fifth Tian'anmen Demonstration, the accusation of the Gang of Four, the 1978 Democracy Wall phenomenon in Beijing's Xidan district, the appeals of the very many city-bred yet reeducated youths who were returning to the cities, and finally the outdoor exhibition by the Stars. In the April Photo Society, the social critique was much more straightforward, liberal, and humanitarian than that of the scar and rustic movements.

The style of rustic realism continued to develop during the 1980s. After the mid-1980s, however, it became an increasingly decorative form of exotic painting, and by the 1990s it was one of the most popular sources for commercial art. The rustic realist painters began by creating an imaginary utopian world on metaphorical earthly soil with strong socially critical implications. Yet eventually, to their detriment, these artists found escape in the exotic world of self-indulgence.



Figure 2.13

Li Xiaobin, *Democracy Wall*, 1978.



### "Art for Beauty" in the New Academicism

Western-type art academies emerged in China in the early twentieth century. The National Beiping (as Beijing was then known) Art School, the first modern national art school, was founded in 1918; its director was Lin Fengmian, who, as mentioned above, was trained in Paris and was very interested in synthesizing Chinese traditional and Western modern art. The second national art school, the Hangzhou National Academy of Art (*Hangzhou yizhuan*), was established in 1928. Around the same time, many private art schools opened and departments of fine art were established in some normal colleges (*shifan xuexiao*, universities that train teachers). Many influential artists, such as Lin Fengmian, Liu Haisu,

and Xu Beihong, were trained in Paris and then taught in art academies after they returned to China.

The art educational system was strongly supported by Cai Yuanpei, the influential educator and philosopher of modern China's history, who had taken a position as the first president of the National Educational Ministry of the Republic of China in 1911. Under his policy advocating the Westernization of education and his promotion of rationalist aestheticism with the phrase "Replace religion with aesthetic education" (*Meiyu dai zongjiao*), during the first half of the twentieth century many different art styles were practiced in the art academies, as determined by the different interests of the directors and teachers.<sup>15</sup> Neoclassicism, French realism, impressionism, cubism, and futurism as well



Figure 2.14

Chen Junde, *Snow Scenery in Fuxing Park*, 1978.

as other styles influenced the academic painters. Among the various isms, French realism was advocated by Xu Beihong, and various modernist styles from impressionism to cubism were favored by Lin Fengmian, Liu Haisu, Pang Xunqin, and Ni Yide. Western styles were translated and integrated into the Chinese painters' practices. Almost all the academic painters in the early twentieth century attempted to create a new Chinese modern art in which Western art forms could be combined with traditional aesthetic aspects, such as the themes and form of literati painting, all in the hopes that a new Chinese style would be perfectly realized. The national art schools, especially the Hangzhou National Academy of Art, cultivated a number of artists who then became the central members of the New Art movement in the 1930s.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Xu Beihong's French realism immediately became the predominant academic visual language and the basis for the educational model, at least until the socialist realism of the Soviet Union began to dominate the Chinese art academies around the middle of 1950s, as discussed in the last chapter. The other Western modern styles, even those favored by influential Chinese modernists such as Lin Fengmian, were eliminated and outlawed until after the end of the Cultural Revolution.

A new academicism (*xinxueyuan zhuyi*) emerged two years after the end of the Cultural Revolution. This new academicism might have had nothing to do with the issue of modernity at the moment immediately following the Cultural Revolution, except that the goal of its visual form was to reveal human perceptions and desires for beauty as these were articulated by the Beijing Oil Study Society (*Beijing youhua yanjiuhui disanci zhanlan*): "We will strive to create the new oil paintings expressing human feelings and the people's love from multiple perspectives in a true democratic environment."<sup>16</sup> Its main elements can be summarized as: (1) apolitical themes; (2) an elegant, refined style; (3) a belief that the purpose of the creation of art is technical experimentation (*chunhua yuyan*); and (4) a rejection of any spiritual or conceptual emphasis.<sup>17</sup>

This trend of "art for art's sake," therefore, had already lost the energy required to pursue modernity

as did the first generation in the early twentieth century, though stylistically these artists still looked for a synthesis of East and West (*zhongxi hebi*). The new academicism marked a departure from any proactive cultural or social involvement.

In 1979 and 1980, many "oil painting research groups" (*youhua yanjiu hui*) were devoted to the study of European painting traditions, and consequently they represented the peak of the new academicism.<sup>18</sup> The leading painters of the trend were artists who had devoted themselves to socialist realist painting before. Among them, Jin Shangyi, who was born in 1934 and was the director of the Central Academy of Fine Art from 1985 to 2003, has been the most influential advocate of the new academicism and the leading figure of the Beijing Oil Study Society. The subject matter of his painting changed over time from Mao's political topics to portraiture. Meanwhile, traditional-style Chinese painting was revitalized after the Cultural Revolution, undergoing aesthetic investigation and launching a similar new academic style against the propagandist ink painting of the Maoist era.

Several important experimental exhibitions took place in Shanghai and Beijing, in which most of the works shown were landscapes, figures, and still lifes.<sup>19</sup> In February 1979 a group of twelve artists aged 30 to 48, including Kong Boji and Chen Junde, organized an exhibition called the "Twelve-Person Show" ("Shierren huazhan") at the Palace of Infants in Huangpu district. This was China's first modernist show since the middle of the twentieth century. The works were influenced by impressionism and postimpressionism, which was considered radical in the post-Cultural Revolution context, although the subjects were traditional (birds, flowers, landscapes, etc.).

The "New Spring Painting" exhibition ("Xinchun huahui zhanlan"), which opened in February 1979 at Sun Yat-sen Park in Beijing, was the first important group exhibition of its type in the city. The show featured some forty artists from different generations, including influential older artists such as Liu Haisu (1896–1997) and Wu Zuoren (1908–1995), all of whom advocated an apolitical approach to art-making.

Another significant moment in the development of the new academicism came in September 1979,



when several murals were unveiled at the Beijing International Airport. Yuan Yunsheng's *Water-Splashing Festival: Ode to Life* (*Poshuijie: Shengming de Zange*) included nude female figures, which triggered a serious controversy over nudity in public art.<sup>20</sup> The subject is a romantic festival which takes place in the Dai minority area in Yunnan province. The artist was fascinated by the exotic life and vitality of the Dai people. The painting had nothing to do with politics. Because of strong criticism from some conservatives who considered the painting pornographic and demoralizing, the mural was boarded over in 1981. Yuan Yunsheng, the painter, therefore became not only the representative of what was then known as “aestheticism,” but also a martyr to the pursuit of beauty.<sup>21</sup>

The debate over academicism and individual style continued during this period. A typical manifesto of this new academicism is an article entitled “Abstract Aesthetic” (“Lun chouxiangmei”) by Wu Guanzhong (b. 1919), a French-trained painter of the older generation who argued against the dominant forms of realism in favor of “abstract beauty,” or “no subject, just form.”<sup>22</sup>

With his thought that abstract beauty was the presentation of real perceptions of noble human qualities, Wu Guanzhong clearly opposed Western modernism in the sense of its conceptual and philosophical approach. The quality of Western modern art was, in his words, also validated by its beauty. In addition, he believed that abstract beauty had existed in China since ancient times, in the elaborate literati landscape garden culture, calligraphy, the pursuit of pine tree form, and Qi Baishi's paintings. As far as he was concerned, “somewhere between likeness and nonlikeness” is the right place for abstract beauty.<sup>23</sup>

With his idea of “abstract beauty,” Wu Guanzhong became a standard-bearer of aestheticism, and his thoughts encouraged the production of a large number of works featuring the pursuit of decorative art and stylization, including the point-line-surface ink paintings that he himself produced at the time. This apolitical, or “art for art's sake,” attitude became the major official style apart from academic realism.

Very interestingly, in the late 1970s and early 1980s Chinese artists, no matter whether

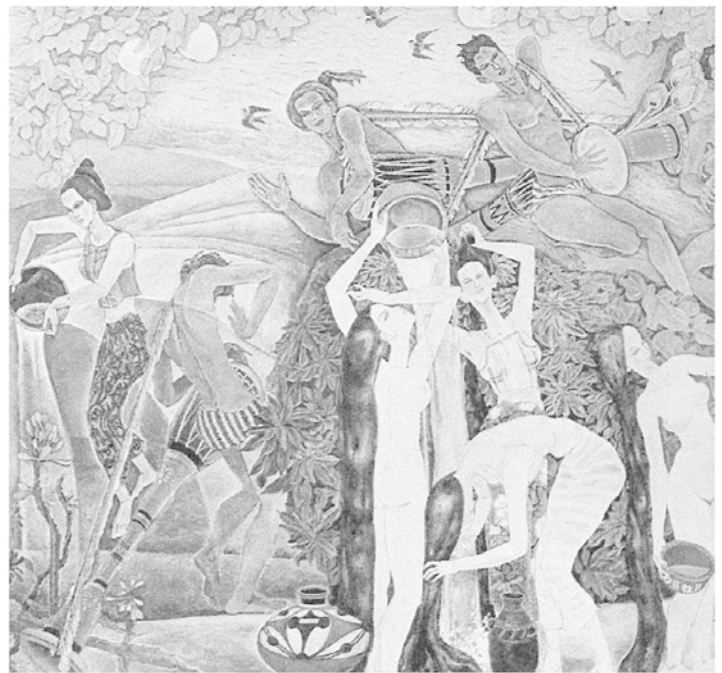


Figure 2.15

Yuan Yunsheng, *Water-Splashing Festival: Ode to Life*, 1979.





Figure 2.16

Wu Guanzhong, *Landscape*, 1979.

underground or academic, were all fond of talking about the “abstract,” for it was synonymous with Western modernist art. In addition, in the eyes of the conservative official camp “abstract” was equivalent to the contemporary Western decadent school and liberalism. Modernism always bore the brunt in each official political campaign, while the term “abstract” in fact became a byword for illegal art.

The illegitimacy of abstract art was even touched upon in a discussion of abstraction conducted in the magazine *Art Monthly*, and consequently the term “abstract” was deemed to be representative of decadent bourgeois ideas during the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign carried out by the government in 1983.<sup>24</sup> This fear of abstraction reached its apex when the '85 Movement emerged, because the more radical artistic forms, such as performance art, began to be carried out and propagated by the new generation.

In the middle of the 1980s, however, the new academic painting had lost its revolutionary impulse, and the painters shifted their attention to marketing and producing academic-kitsch works. Along with traditional ink painting, the New Academic painting

became the major genre propelling the Chinese art market. Because of its apolitical approach and marketability, the new academic painting also became a force in opposition to the avant-garde art that emerged in the mid-1980s, and thus we can say that it became nothing short of a pseudo-official art.

In October 1984, under the influence of the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, the most influential official exhibition since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Sixth National Art Exhibition (*Diliujie quanguo meishu zuopin zhanlan*), opened in eight cities, and “The Awarded Works of the Sixth National Art Exhibition” opened for viewing in the National Art Museum of China in Beijing from December 10, 1984 to January 10, 1985.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition resurrected the political themes and propagandist art forms of the Cultural Revolution, and demonstrated that the new academicism carried the force of the dominant official art style in the Chinese art world. The *retardataire* content and style of the exhibition provoked a widespread backlash among artists, especially the young. This laid the groundwork for the emergence of the '85 Movement.<sup>26</sup>



Figure 2.17

A group of Beijing intellectual youths, 1974.

Photograph provided by Zhu Jinshi.

## The Amateur Avant-Garde

In the 1970s and early 1980s, there was an anti-academicism, or a kind of unofficial “art for art’s sake,” in addition to the one previously discussed in the academic camp. Compared with the academic one, this “pure art” was born of a rebellious conception built upon ideas of individual freedom and social democracy. The absence of an academic background enabled these amateur youths to express this idea of freedom within the idiom of modernist form regarded as novel at the time. They also exhibited a kind of romantic lament, because reality is tragic and always less than ideal.

In fact, this self-organized *huahui* (or amateur) art, which emerged during the Cultural Revolution and reached its summit in the late 1970s, has never been considered a legitimate school, but instead a loose organization made up of salon-style gatherings, or life drawing teams, often associated with poetic activities. This typified the underground literary and artistic movements of the time, when there were a large number of young artists who despised the ideological art of the Revolution and passionately pursued modern art in Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities. Most of them were self-made intellectuals whose reading covered many of the Chinese classics as well as the Western literary canon.<sup>27</sup> Besides literary works, they taught themselves painting techniques utilizing references from the impressionists and postimpressionists.

In fact, modern movements spurring artistic activities, including new literature and poems, as well as the Democracy Wall phenomenon constituted a whole set of initiatives at the time. The year 1974 witnessed the climax of underground artistic movements in Beijing. Painters and poets, including Zhou Maiyou, Zhu Jinshi, Peng Gang, Xie Yali, Feng Guodong, Wang Choude, Ma Kelu, Tang Pinggang, Gu Cheng, Bei Dao, Chen Shaoping, and Zhong Ming, often gathered together. In addition, the Stars, who made a sensation at home and abroad in 1979, grew out of these underground artistic movements in the 1970s. These artists often exhibited their works on Democracy Wall. In Zhou Maiyou’s work *Witness of the Years* (1977), for example, the artist painted human eyes with the dates from the important





Figure 2.18

Zhou Maiyou, *Witness of the Years*, 1977.

historical events of the twentieth century embedded within the iris.

While Democracy Wall had a wider cultural and political significance, it had an important connection to artistic practice. In August 1978, the first edition of the magazine *Chinese Youth*, which resumed after the Cultural Revolution, was banned for carrying an article written by a participant in the April Fifth Movement. With the support of Hu Yaobang, the secretary general of the Communist Party of China's Central Committee at that time, the editorial office of *Chinese Youth* posted the edition on a wall in the Xidan district of Beijing in protest. Following this, quite a few so-called big-character posters were found on the wall, which was later dubbed Democracy Wall. At first, the posters on the wall were mainly concerned with unjust or false cases that had occurred during the Cultural Revolution. Then, gradually, posters appeared calling for the reassessment of Mao, his policies, and his thoughts, as well as openly demanding democracy, human rights, rule of law, and of course, free speech.





Figure 2.19

*Today*, vol. 1, cover.

From the winter of 1978 to the spring of 1981, a total of more than fifty nonofficial magazines were published in Beijing, most of which could be categorized as political, like *Exploration* and *Forum*, together with some literary ones like *Today* and *Soil*. It was quite common for artists to offer illustrations to those magazines, through which amateur painters expressed their hopes of individual freedom and human liberation within the stylistic idiom of abstraction, creating a new aesthetic they based on formalist beauty. Childish as their “abstraction” was, these images were profound forays into modernity compared to those abstract paintings of the quasi-official academic group mentioned above. Beijing was the geographical locus of this salon phenomenon, which fell into three loose groups: No Name, Stars, and the “loose wanderers.”

### The No Name Artists

The Yuyuantan Lake School, the predecessor of the No Name group, was the first group to staunchly uphold the principle of “art for art’s sake”; that is, they completely separated themselves from politics. In Chinese contemporary art history, the No Name group (*Wuming huahui*) has been overlooked as the first self-organized *huahui* during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>28</sup> It began even earlier than the more widely known Stars group (*Xingxing huahui*), which



Figure 2.20

Zhao Wenliang, Yang Yushu, and Shi Zhenyu (from left), sketching along the way, 1965. Photograph provided by Shi Zhenyu.



Figure 2.21

Zhao Wenliang, *August 18, 1966*.

emerged in 1979. Interestingly, No Name also had one of the longest life spans of any collective group, persisting for nearly half a century. The history of the No Name group can be traced back to 1959, when Zhao Wenliang and Yang Yushu met each other at the Xihua Fine Arts Institute. Xihua was one of the few private educational institutes in Mao's era.<sup>29</sup> Over the nearly 50 years since their initial encounter, they not only formed a remarkable bond that goes well beyond mere friendship, but Zhao and Yang also became the spiritual fathers of the No Name group. Along with Zhang Da'an and Shi Zhenyu, whom they met around 1962, they formed the nucleus of the nascent group. Their activities established the core philosophy of the No Name group and laid the groundwork for

its future direction. During the Cultural Revolution, they rejected the politics of the day and instead advocated "art for art's sake." For instance, on August 18, 1966, when Chairman Mao addressed the Red Guards in Tian'anmen Square, Zhao Wenliang, Yang Yushan, and Shi Zhenyu did not exactly throw themselves into the revolutionary frenzy. Rather, they decamped from the city center to the suburbs where they painted all day long. It was for this reason that Zhao Wenliang inscribed on the back of his painting "8-18": "After this painting was completed, the bloody terror of 8-18 occurred. I stopped painting for 15 days. On October 21 [I] again took up the brush. This painting has lain dormant in my carrying case for nearly ten years now."<sup>30</sup>



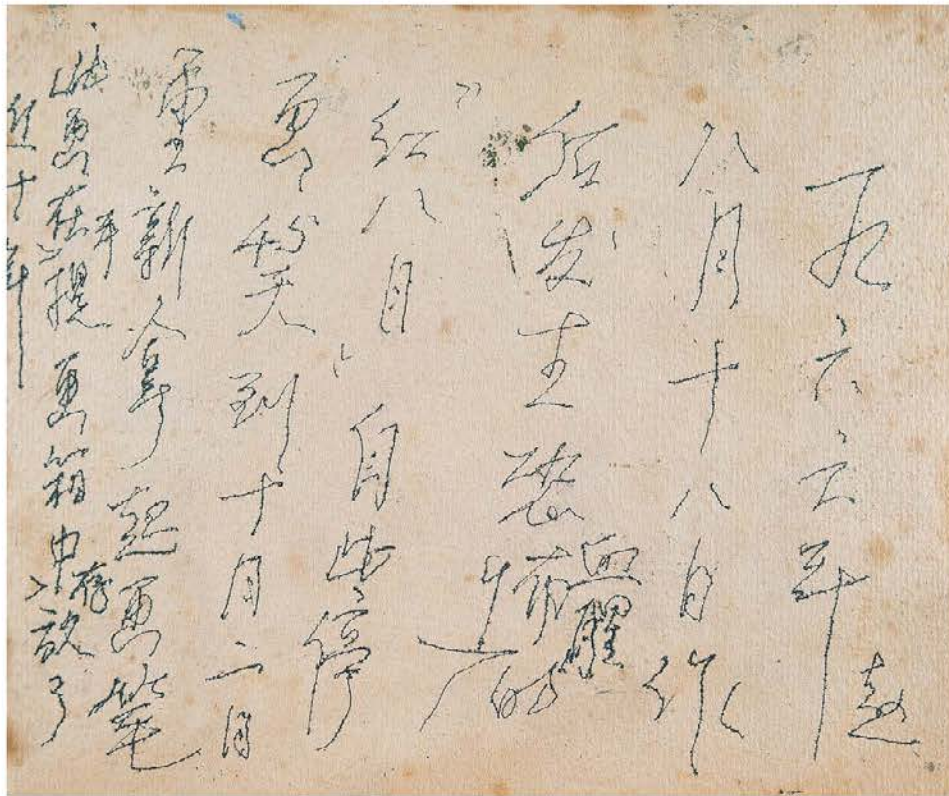


Figure 2.22

Zhao Wenliang, August 18, words on the back.



Figure 2.23

Zheng Ziyan, Zhao Wenliang, Li Shan, and Ma Kelu (from left), making sketches concerning *zi zhu yuan*, 1974. Photograph provided by Zhao Wenliang.





Figure 2.24

Tian'anmen, April 5, 1976. Photograph provided by Zhao Wenliang.

After 1973, some talented young students returned from the countryside, where they had been sent by the government for “reeducation,” and soon joined Zhao Wenliang and Yang Yushu’s art circle. These young people included Zhang Wei, Li Shan, and Ma Kelu, among others. They formed a larger group that people would later call the Yuyuantan Lake School of painting (*Yuyuantan huapai*). Under the instruction of Zhao Wenliang and Yang Yushu, these young painters would often make time on weekends and holidays to go outside and paint from life in the plein air tradition. Many times the artists numbered some twenty or more. Significantly, in 1976, when the April Fifth event occurred, the No Name group was there in Tian’anmen Square. The event was initiated by the masses’ commemorative activities on the occasion of the death of Premier Zhou Enlai on April 5, a date when people traditionally commemorated their ancestors and celebrated the Qingming Festival.

However, on this occasion, the event turned into a political demonstration against the Cultural Revolution and its leadership, the Gang of Four, as well as Mao himself. Some artists of the No Name group participated directly in the demonstrations, some fought with the police, and some busied themselves recording this historic political event, painting scenes of the demonstrations at the Monument to the People’s Heroes. Interestingly, they did not use standard methods to narrate the scene, but rather expressed these events in the form of landscapes. The same kind of representation of the Democracy Wall movement which took place in Beijing in 1978 can be seen in Ma Kelu’s painting *Democracy Wall* (1978), done in oil on paper. In the painting, smoke spreads everywhere from the big-character posters to suggest anger and provocative voices against authority. A man leaning on a walking stick hints at the leader of the Star group, Ma Desheng, as he takes in the demonstration on the street.

No matter how much we might want to pass judgment on the impressionistic, quasi-traditional literati landscape painting of the No Name group, the phenomenon of the group is one of the indispensable parts of the art from the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath. Without the presence of the underground art from this period, the narrative of the art history of



Figure 2.25

Wei Hai, Zheng Ziyan, and Zhang Wei (from left) at Tian’anmen, April 5, 1976. Photograph provided by Zhao Wenliang.

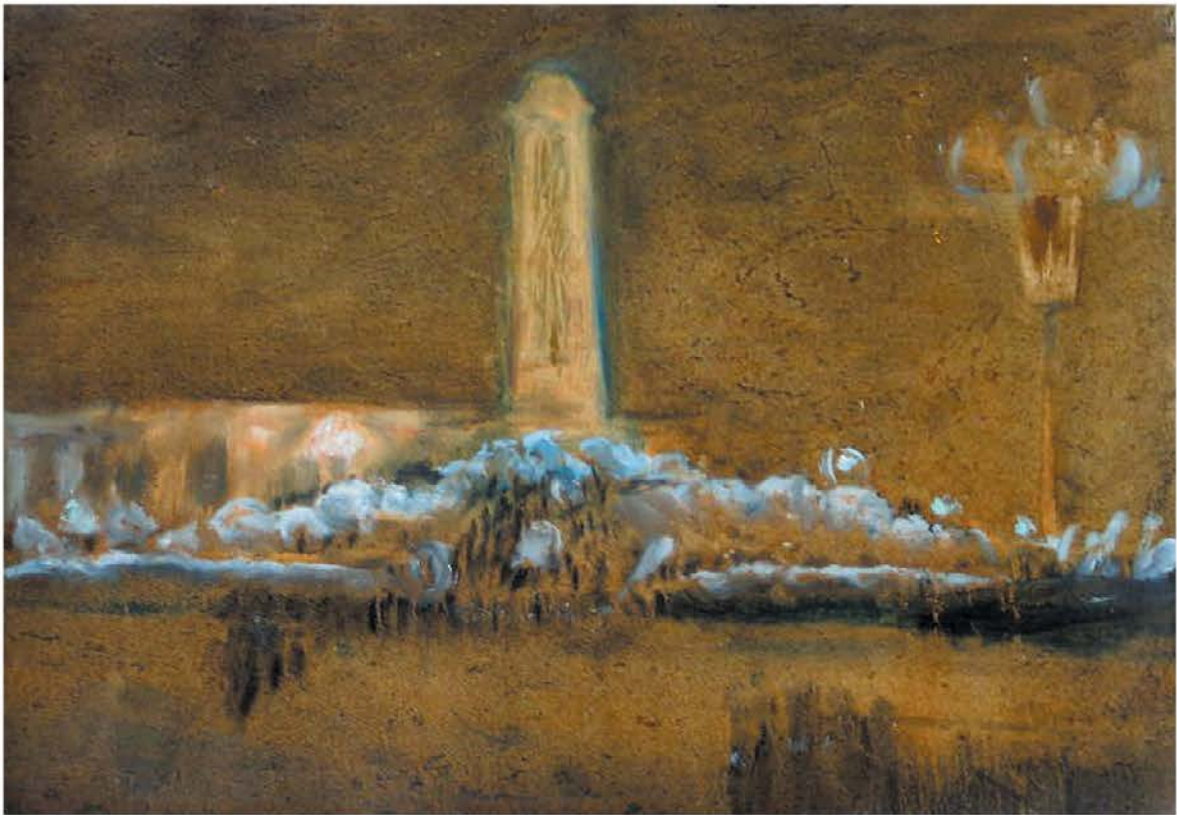
Figure 2.26

Zheng Ziyan, *In Memory*, 1976.

Figure 2.27

Ma Kelu, *Democracy Wall*, 1978.







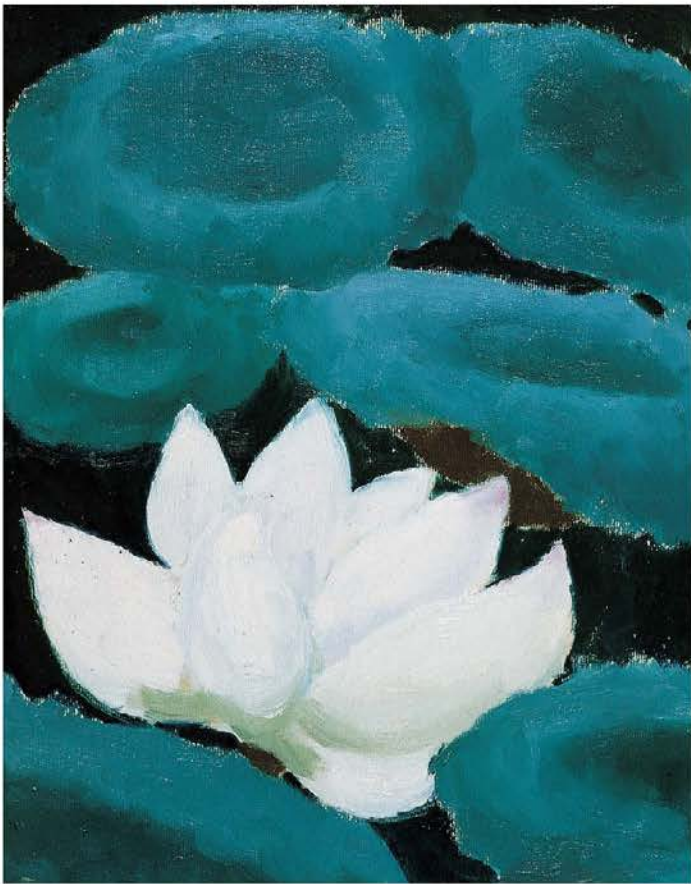


Figure 2.28  
Li Shan, *Water Lily*, 1978.

the Cultural Revolution would be incomplete. The No Name group is also an important, but overlooked, phenomenon within the historical trajectory of Chinese modernity and the ensuing avant-garde of the twentieth century.

Through their innocent landscapes, these artists expressed their sincere feelings about truth, beauty, and harmony under the circumstances of the dirty, oppressively politicized Cultural Revolution period. Furthermore, the choice of landscape and life drawing had everything to do with opposing the political trends of China in the 1960s and 1970s. This kind of art was considered “antirealist.” It was banned and criticized as a manifestation of bourgeois modernism. The choice to go to the suburbs to paint was made not because the artists found the location to have the most delightful subject matter, but because it brought the least amount of trouble and let the artists go about their work unwitnessed and unpunished. Moreover, it was some small comfort and mental support for the individual artists to be able to go out as a group and paint. Together they could experience a sense of freedom.

In 1975, during the Cultural Revolution, the artists of the No Name organized an underground exhibition in Zhang Wei’s home in the apartment building called 203 Big Yard.<sup>31</sup> It is important to keep in mind that this kind of “themeless” (or apolitical subject matter) painting—still life, portraiture, and landscape—only appeared in 1979, two years after the Cultural Revolution, at the “Twelve-Person Show” in Shanghai and the “New Spring Painting” exhibition in Beijing, when the government began to adopt an open policy. Still life was prohibited during the Cultural Revolution due to its bourgeois tendency. Any naturally beautiful scene, such as a woman and flowers, would be seen as a corrupted theme. As Mao said, “They love their battle array, not silks and satins” (*Buai hongzhuang ai wuzhuang*).<sup>32</sup> The artists of the No Name, however, painted a numbers of still lifes of flowers. Among the artists, Li Shan was a still life specialist. Innocence and purity were symbols of beauty, not only for women but for all the Chinese who were looking for a peaceful life. Yang Yushu also painted a still life with plum blossoms, one of the four symbols of virtues in ancient literati painting, to symbolize encouragement against the cruelty of Mao’s



Cultural Revolution. The painting was done on the very day after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976. After the devastation of the “harsh winter,” the flower was still alive. Therefore, the painting could be described as a self-portrait of the artist.

After the Cultural Revolution, in 1979, with support from Liu Xun, an official leader from the Beijing Artists Association, No Name held its first official art exhibition in the Beihai district in Beijing. It was at this time that the name “No Name” first came into formal usage.<sup>33</sup> Two months later, another avant-garde event, the Stars group’s first self-organized exhibition, took place, causing a public sensation which led to its being shut down by the police. Above all, seen from the perspective of the Chinese indigenous scene, the No Name group’s pursuit of “art for art’s sake” was almost unique in the second half of the twentieth century in China. The subjective value of the No Name group was individual and elite, and art was, for them, a quasi-religious way of eliminating emotion and exiling the self from an idealess society.

For nearly fifty years now, through every sort of political and economic vicissitude, the No Name group has been consistently overlooked. Never have they received official plaudits, nor have they achieved commercial success. Naturally they look upon the latter with undisguised diffidence, continuing to uphold their original belief in “art for art’s sake.”

No wonder people have taken to calling them the contemporary version of Bo Yi and Shu Qi. Bo Yi and Shu Qi were brothers, as well as princes, during the Shang Dynasty (1766–1122 B.C.). Historical documents recorded that after the Zhou Dynasty (1121–221 B.C.) took over the empire from the Shang, the princes refused to eat Zhou’s rice and died on Shouyang mountain. The story can be seen as a metaphor. Comparing the artists to these brothers expresses Zhao and Yang’s refusal to prostrate themselves, either to the political powers of the time or the current materialism. A half-century of reclusive life has indeed enlightened Zhao Wenliang and Yang Yushu, and they seem to have become modern self-cultivated literati, in a traditional moral sense. But when we consider the No Name as an important phenomenon of Chinese contemporary art, the tragic, anonymous fate of the

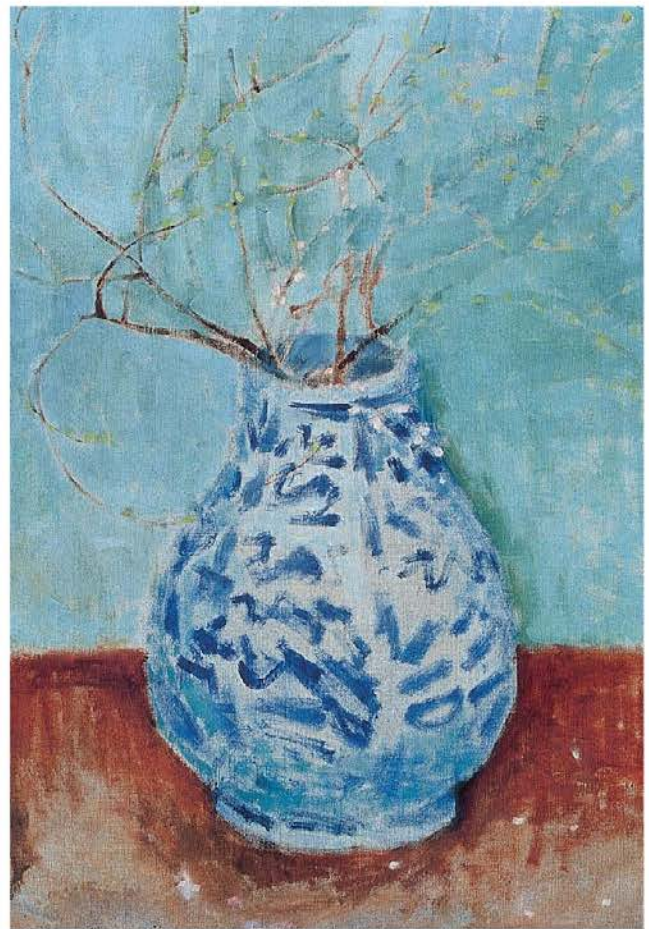


Figure 2.29  
Yang Yushu, *After Calamity*, 1976.



group becomes a significant oversight in Chinese art-historical research. The continued anonymity of the No Name group cannot be considered an isolated incident; rather, it implicates, and perpetuates, the incomplete view in which we narrate the history of Chinese modern art.

### The Stars

The second major group, chronologically speaking, is the Stars, a painting group that advocated artistic intervention into society, even though they accomplished this with the artistic formalism characteristic of the philosophy inherent in “art for art’s sake.” The Stars (*Xing xing*) were the most controversial group during the post-Cultural Revolution period.<sup>34</sup> They, too, were of the same Red Guard generation as the scar painters, but they were principally self-taught artists (i.e., not trained in the academy). The Stars were, in a popular sense, the first influential avant-garde group, challenging both aesthetic conventions and political authority. Their use of formerly banned Western styles, from postimpressionism to abstract expressionism, was an implicit criticism of the status quo. The group’s first exhibition, in September 1979, was a provocative display of about 140 works by twenty-three artists, hung without official permission on the fence outside the National Art Museum of China, Beijing. After the police disrupted the exhibition, the artists posted a notice on Democracy Wall and staged a protest march. The Stars were then granted their first formal exhibition (“Xing xing huazhan”), approved by the authorities, which was held in the Huafangzhai (the hall of painting boat) of Beihai Park, Beijing, in November of that same year. This time, 163 works by twenty-three artists were displayed.<sup>35</sup>

In March 1980, *Meishu* published an article about the Stars by Li Xianting which quoted Qu Leilei, a Stars painter, as advocating “art for the sake of self-expression” (*ziwobiaoxian de yishu*).<sup>36</sup> The article prompted a debate about art’s function that continued for two years. The Stars held yet another exhibition, also with official approval, at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, in August 1980. Although the group’s primary intention was to criticize orthodoxy implicitly by emphasizing



Figure 2.30

Scene of the Stars exhibition, 1979. From Gao, ed., *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, 17.



Figure 2.31

Scene of the Stars exhibition, 1979. Wang Keping’s wood sculpture is visible in the background. From Gao, ed., *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, 18.



Figure 2.32

Protest of the Stars group, 1979, Beijing (at front is Ma Desheng).

From Gao, ed., *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, 27.



Figure 2.33

Protest of the Stars group, 1979, Beijing. From Gao, ed., *The '85*

*Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, 28.





Figure 2.34

Group photo of the Stars outside the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, where they held their second exhibition in 1980: Shi Jing-sheng (first from left), Ma Desheng (second from left), Chen Fan (third from left), A Cheng (fourth from left), Li Yongcun (aka Bo Yun) (seventh from left), and Qu Leilei (seventh from right). From Gao et al., *The '85 Movement: The Enlightenment of the Chinese Avant-Garde*, 49.

self-expression (*ziwobiaoxian*), this show became controversial for its overt political content. In particular, a sculpture by Wang Keping, *Idol*, turns Mao's portrait into an image of Buddha, in order to hint at the personal worship that peaked during the Cultural Revolution. In another work, titled *Silence*, a man appears with his mouth blocked by a wooden stick to keep him from talking. All these images use metaphor to speak about the people's desire for freedom and democracy and opposition to dictatorship.

After the exhibition was criticized by the authorities, most of the Stars artists moved overseas. In 1989, on the tenth anniversary of the Stars' debut, the major figure in the group, Ma

Desheng, wrote, "Every artist is a star. Even great artists are stars from the cosmic point of view. Ten years ago we called our group the Stars in order to emphasize our individuality. This was directed at the drab uniformity of the Cultural Revolution."<sup>37</sup> Individuality and freedom are bound together with hope for the future and for a new modern nation, as suggested in Qu Leilei's print *Homeland, Homeland! No. 1*. The different artists of the group held different ideas about art. Some favored abstract expressionism, some cubism, and others impressionism. Their socially critical tone, however, was similar to the search for previously proscribed individual freedom.

In contrast with the No Name group, the Stars have been the best-known avant-garde group in



Figure 2.35  
Wang Keping, *Silence*, 1979.



Figure 2.37  
Qu Leilei, *Homeland, Homeland! No. 1*, 1979.



Figure 2.36  
Wang Keping, *Idol*, 1980.



the post-Cultural Revolution period, due to the sensational closing of their exhibition under political pressure. This can perhaps be considered parallel with the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition in 1989, which was shut down twice. Both drew a lot of attention from the public and the authorities. There is a tremendous discrepancy, however, between the two in terms of scale and the specific motivations of the artists from the two different periods. For instance, the avant-garde artists of the 1980s no longer concerned themselves too much with self-expression and intrinsic, individual values; rather, they followed a broad universal idealism. Nonetheless, the historical circumstances that transformed an artistic activity into a historical, political event remained the same.

Both the Stars exhibition and the “China/Avant-Garde” exhibition developed unpredictably; both were closed and became political events. In the case of “China/Avant-Garde,” the cause may not have been the exhibition itself but the performance that emerged suddenly from it, in particular the two gunshots by Xiao Lu (discussed in chapter 4). The unpredictable Stars show, however, had been secretly predicted by the artists involved. In the early summer of 1979, Huang Rui and Ma Desheng, the two organizers of the Stars group, submitted an application to the Beijing Artists Association. It was accepted by the chairman of the association, Liu Xun. Because of the full schedule of the association’s art gallery, Liu could only promise to have a Stars exhibition in the next year, 1980. The artists of the Stars could not wait, and finally decided to secretly open their exhibition in the public park near the National Art Museum of China without a note to Liu Xun. (Nonetheless Liu Xun welcomed the exhibition and was present in the park; in a photo from the event, Wang is showing his work to Liu.) However, nobody predicted the shutdown by the police, which turned the show into a political protest.

### Loose Wanderers

The last group can be defined as the “loose wanderers” (*xiaoyao*), which could be found in many cities during the late 1970s. In Beijing the group was led by Guan Wei, Guan Naixin, Song Hong, and others. Their view of art was located between that of the No



Figure 2.38

Stars outdoor exhibition, 1979, with Qu Leilei (first from left), Liu Xun, chairman of the Beijing Artists Association (second from left), Li Shuang (third from left), Wang Keping (fifth from left). From Gao, ed., *The '85 Movement: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, 32.

Name and the Stars: they believed the principle of “art for art’s sake” was not so much about art itself, as the No Name group proposed, nor did they believe that should art be used as a political tool, as the Stars insisted; instead art should be viewed as part of our daily life. Their attitude might be summed up as “we are living in art.”<sup>38</sup> Considering this, their art was very much like a kind of “loose wandering” (*xiaoyao*), with a kind of reclusive lifestyle as an essential feature of their outlook. The activities of this group included frequent mutual visits among artists, poets, musicians, and writers to generate salon discussions, poetry readings, life drawings, the singing of songs, and debates in philosophy.<sup>39</sup> In fact, these kinds of avant-garde activities can be found in many cities in the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s, but thus far they have never been considered as a legitimate artistic movement, or a school with a true name. Therefore, I have given them the name “loose wanderers.”

If we see the entire amateur avant-garde art of the 1970s as part of China's "modernity in art" campaign after the Cultural Revolution, we must also recognize "individuality" as its core and soul. Individual style and self-expression were the major pursuits. In the *menglong shi*, or misty poetry, by Bei Dao and Gu Cheng, and in the paintings by the Stars, this type of self-expression took the form of tender feelings and self-love of the petit bourgeois, but with strong anger at the authorities and deep sympathy for the multitude, which we can trace back to early-twentieth-century literature. What should be remembered is that this petit bourgeois taste was regarded as the true human spirit under the circumstances just after the Cultural Revolution. It was a sign of the revival of belief in the nobility of human nature—somewhat sentimental, melancholy, and exemplified by one's lament over adversity and suffering.

Although the social function of the *huahui* art in the 1970s was to call for freedom and to criticize the feudal concentration of power, this function still attached itself to a petit bourgeois aesthetic taste while embracing the concept of "art for art's sake." This could also explain why the Stars later became a political issue, though their paintings were basically made in pursuit of stylization, "formalist beauty," and the expression of emotions, the only notable exceptions being a few wood carvings by Wang Keping whose provocative composition actually carried some political implications. Thus there seems to have been a dislocation in the aesthetic conceptions and social awareness of the 1970s underground groups, in the paintings of the Stars, the No Name, and misty poetry alike. However, as I have mentioned above, this dislocation was necessary at the time, and makes much more sense in the specific context. Because the aesthetic spirit of petit bourgeois art in the 1970s was explicitly rebelling against the Cultural Revolution, the petit bourgeois aesthetic ideas that originally concentrated on self-directed and inward orientations could function as social critique.

This is why these amateur avant-garde circles did not have a mature and consistent style, aesthetically speaking. Perhaps only the No Name had consistency in terms of artistic conception and expression. The amateur avant-garde artists were still hesitating as to

whether objects in artistic works should reflect more of the "self" of the subject or more truthfully represent the outer visual reality. This hesitation could be seen in paintings by some members of the No Name and the Stars. Individual aesthetic choices were built on self-awareness, contrary to the "non-ego" philosophical approach advocated by the precepts of the Cultural Revolution. Meanwhile, self-aware aesthetics deemed "beauty" to be the final outcome of utopia, a harmonious integration of truthfulness, goodness, and beauty. Although rebellious in the sphere of social awareness, the avant-gardists of the 1970s still revered harmony, perfection, and unity and detested ugliness and disharmony. This kind of petit bourgeois aestheticism exactly matched the high-ranking family backgrounds of the artists. Most of the artists in the No Name group were born into sent-down intellectual families. Members of the Stars may have had a higher origin. Ai Weiwei's father was Ai Qing (a renowned writer in China), and Wang Keping, Qu Leilei, and Bo Yun were all from families of high-ranking officials and revolutionary intellectuals. Although they were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, they were privileged culturally afterward. They were worlds apart from the pioneer youth who later rose up in the '85 avant-garde movement. The latter were born in the 1960s, so they did not experience the Cultural Revolution as working artists; and they were commoners, and thus more rebellious in culture rather than merely in politics.





Part Two

## **The '85 Movement**