Strategies of mediation. Considering photographs of artworks created by the ‘Stars’ in 1979/80 and their changing historiographical status

Franziska Koch

This article focuses on a set of thirty-two photographs of artworks which were created by the Chinese artists group the ‘Stars’ (Xingxing)\(^1\) and distributed in Beijing in 1979/80. It explores the role these photographs played at a time when Chinese artists searched for innovative ways to address an expanding local public as well as an increasingly international audience. This piece also considers how the historiographical status of these prints has changed from 1979/80 until today.

The small, modestly produced prints were initially made to be sold during the first and second ‘Stars’ exhibitions in response to the enthusiasm of the visitors, who had specifically asked the artists for memorabilia of the first ‘Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition (‘Xingxing’ lutian meizhan). Self-organised and short-lived, the latter exhibition was one of the earliest instances in which artists publicly reclaimed freedom of (artistic) expression in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and was thus generally perceived as a spectacular, liberalising event. Consequently, numerous Western exhibition catalogues of the late 1980s and early 1990s that have significantly contributed to the canonisation of what is now called ‘contemporary Chinese art’, mention the ‘Stars’ as a pioneering artist group and their exhibitions as vanguard undertakings that inspired successive artistic trends and activities of the first post-revolutionary generation of ‘professional’ artists, many of whom were graduates of the newly re-opened art academies.\(^2\) Yet, despite the considerable and

This article is dedicated to Dorothea and Peter Buttinger. The author would like to thank Wang Keping, Huang Rui, and Qu Leilei for spontaneously and generously sharing their memories with her. She feels greatly indebted to Wu Wen-Ting, Lo Yin-Yueh, Sun Yi, and Zhu Xianwei for their patient support as translators during and after the interviews and Bindu Bhadana for serving as English copy-editor. She would like to thank Wenny Teo for her careful and patient editorial support, Julia F. Andrews, who very quickly and comprehensively provided missing historical information, and Zheng Bo for his helpful comments as peer reviewer as well as the Asia Art Archive Hong Kong which assured easy access to some of the quoted sources. Last, but not least, heartfelt thanks go to Kippy Yeh for triggering this research by providing his set of photographs, to Rudolf G. Wagner for forwarding the material to the Cluster of Excellence ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context’ and to Madeleine-Christina Rettig for the digitalisation of the material.

\(^1\) Belonging to the initial group constellation of the ‘Stars’ in 1979/80 were the following artists in alphabetical order: Ai Weiwei, Bo Yun (alias Li Yongcun), Huang Rui, Li Shuang, Ma Desheng, Mao Lizi (alias Zhang Zhunli), Qu Leilei, Shao Fei, Wang Keping, Yan Li, Yang Yiping, Yin Guangzhong and Zhong Acheng (alias Ah Cheng). Li Shuang and Shao Fei are the only female artists in this list.

\(^2\) The author has focused on the question of how foreign exhibitions mediated contemporary Chinese art since the 1980s in her PhD thesis: Franziska Koch, \textit{Die ‘chinesische Avantgarde’ und}
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instantaneous local and international recognition of the ‘Stars’, their clever use of available media to promote knowledge about their works, and their successful later careers, it seems that art experts soon ceased to engage with their early works.\(^3\) Historiographical interest in the ‘Stars’ has only recently re-surfaced in documentary exhibitions such as *Origin Point. Star Star Group Retrospective Exhibition* (Beijing and Nanjing 2007),\(^4\) *Blooming in the Shadows. Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974–1985* (New York 2011),\(^5\) or *Light Before Dawn: Unofficial Chinese Art 1974–1985* (Hong Kong 2013).\(^6\)

A close-reading of the production, reception, and circulation of these photographs which takes into account the specificities of the medium as well as their strategic use, can offer an explanation for the complex, sometimes conflicting, canonisation process between local and global audiences and between the early and late recognition that the photographed artworks garnered. This case study takes the photographs as historical documents, and furthermore questions their role as an aesthetic medium that attests to, as well as engenders, transcultural


\(^2\) Even though there have been commemorative exhibitions for the ‘Stars’ such as *The Stars (Xing Xing) 10 Years* in Hong Kong and Taipei in 1989, *The Xing Xing. 15 Years* in Tokyo in 1993, and *The Stars 20 Years* again in Tokyo 2000, these did not generate a lot of attention and mostly focused on the most recent works of the artists. They were just enough to keep the discourse alive regarding the historiographical position and relevance of the group. Given the different cultural and socio-political settings that were involved when works of the ‘Stars’ were shown abroad – namely in the USA (as early as 1981), Japan (as early as 1985), and France (as early as 1990) – these initial foreign showings did not achieve the same spectacular response as the ‘Stars’ activities in Beijing. For a comprehensive overview of exhibitions of the whole group and of some of its members in varying constellations see in the unpaginated appendix of Huang Rui, ed., *The Stars Time. 1977–1984*, exh. cat., Shenzhen: He Xiangning Art Museum, Thinking Hands and Guanyi Contemporary Art Archive, 2007.


\(^4\) This show featured approximately seventy works by three pioneering artist groups: the ‘Stars’ (Xingxing), the ‘No Name Group’ (Wumingdang), ‘Grass Society’ (Caocao huahui). It was on display from 15 September – 11 December 2011 at the China Institute Gallery in New York. See for a comprehensive visual documentation of the exhibition: China Institute Gallery, ed., *China Institute Gallery Virtual Tour*, http://www.china360online.org/wp-content/themes/china_three_sixty/virtual-reform_AJAX.php (accessed 15 May 2014).

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historiographical processes. These become clearer when considering the context of the exhibition, the artists’ conflicted negotiations with the official art system, the absence of a highly developed local art market and a country-wide trend to ‘open up’ to the West as well as to a dominantly Eurocentric art historical discourse.

The larger historiographical question is whether or not these prints can be taken as photographic archives of artworks and their makers that fed and still feed into a particular system of knowledge, and thereby continue to form the shared discursive as well as material space of a border-crossing collective memory. That is, a ‘Chinese’ collective memory ‘gone global’ – mediated by these photographs, which travelled and surfaced not only in the context of the early vanguard exhibitions in China, but also in Western press reviews or in a university institute such as the Cluster of Excellence in Heidelberg, where they were only recently received.8

1. The set of thirty-two photographs and their characteristics

Figure 0 Random collage of thirty-two black and white photographic prints featuring artworks by at least eight artists of the ‘Stars’ (Xingxing) artist group, which were created and photographed between 1976 and 1980. Varying dimensions, circa 7 x 9 cm and 9 x 7 cm respectively. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

7 Of course the ‘Chineseness’ of the phenomenon is not meant to be essential, nor without transcultural precondition and history. On the contrary, the works of the ‘Stars’ exemplify a specific transculturality, in which Chinese artists actively interpreted and re-invented ‘modernism’. They did not merely look to Euramerica’s definition of the concept at the time, but related to certain aspects of previous modernist as well as pre-modern artistic idioms in China, which they found helpful and accessible.

8 The article presents first findings regarding the material, which was digitalized at Heidelberg University in 2012 with the aim to make it accessible for future academic research. The author is in charge of researching the missing meta-data and hopes to stir responses of interested readers, which might help to complete the task soon. The images with meta-data will be uploaded onto Heidelberg University’s image databank HeidICON until end of 2014, see http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/Login?login_error=&easysdb=b9s2l9u12ub3d6u9dv317o54d2&ts=1391723879. The captions of the illustrations show what kind of data is still missing.
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A first assessment of the material will help to explain how the photographs triggered the above questions and also provide some initial answers. The Heidelberg set consists of thirty-two black and white photographs,9 each featuring one artwork. According to Huang Rui,10 one of the two founders of the ‘Stars’, the artists produced such photographs in connection with the second showing of their first exhibition called ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition (‘Xingxing’ lutian meizhan) 1979 in Beijing’s Beihai Park and again in 1980 in connection with the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’ (Dier jie xingxing meizhan) in the China National Art Gallery Beijing (fig. 0). Heidelberg University received the small-sized prints (about 7 x 9 cm or 9 x 7 cm) from Kippy Yeh, who had acquired them as an ordinary visitor of one of the exhibitions.11 According to Huang, the production of the photographs as well as their distribution and sale was organised by the artists themselves, with him in charge.12 He could not clearly remember the price of a single print, but thinks they must have been comparatively cheap in order to be sold to average visitors, perhaps around 0.2 RMB for a single picture and up to 2 RMB for a set of five to ten prints.13

9 One photographic print features twice in the set (figs. 14 and 15), so that only thirty-one different artworks are actually presented. The double copy points to the fact that visitors could also buy several photographs of one artwork. An alternative explanation is that the producers did not pay attention when they quickly arranged sets of several prints, which unintentionally caused a second copy to be included.

10 Huang Rui, telephone interview with Franziska Koch with translators Sun Yi and Zhu Xianwei, 27 January 2014. In the interview, he confirmed the sale of photographs during the show in Beihai Park. In a correspondence following the interview, Huang also confirmed the fact that photographs were sold during the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’. Huang Rui’s answers translated and transmitted by his assistant Yufei, e-mail correspondence with Franziska Koch, 3 April 2014.

11 Since Kippy Yeh’s family background is of American, Philippine and Chinese origins and his mother lived in Beijing, he often travelled between China and the USA. Asked by Rudolf G. Wagner, the co-founder of the Cluster of Excellence ‘Asia and Europe in a Global Context’ – he kindly allowed the digitalisation of the photographs. Upon the author’s first inquiry about the precise circumstances of the acquisition, Kippy Yeh remembered the following: ‘If I am correct professor Koch is referring to the photographs from the Star Exhibition (星星画展), which took place in 1979. If my memory is correct, which is a big if, those photographs were taken by me. The Star Exhibition was such a big event in 1979 – the first of its kind of art event – that we all went multiple times.’ Kippy Yeh, e-mail correspondence with Franziska Koch, 9 May 2013. The author’s further research proved Kippy Yeh’s memory was actually inaccurate concerning the question of who took the photographs; see in the following part of the article. Given that some of the featured artworks were only created in 1980, it seems that Kippy Yeh acquired this set of photographs only during the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’ in fall 1980 and not in connection with their first exhibition in 1979. See in the following part of the article.

12 These recollections were also confirmed by Wang Keping, another very active member of the ‘Stars’. He suggested that Ma Desheng might also have played a role in the making and distribution of the photographs, since Ma was the second co-founder of the ‘Stars’. Wang Keping, telephone interview by Franziska Koch with translator Wu Wen-Ting, 29 April 2013.

13 Wang Keping could not recall the accurate prices either, but he guessed that if the sales in connection with the exhibitions realised profits at all, Huang Rui and Ma Desheng would have used it to finance their subsequent travels around the country. Wang Keping, telephone
The sale was so successful that it substantially helped the impecunious artist group to cover the costs for the second showing of their first exhibition (for example costs for transport, storage, frames and other means of installation), which Huang recalled amounted to 200 RMB.\textsuperscript{14}

The visitors were all the more interested in obtaining photographs from the exhibits, since the artists did not offer a catalogue.\textsuperscript{15} At the time not every official exhibition came with a catalogue, only very prestigious and large scale shows offered this kind of publication. Catalogues tended to be small in size, containing only a few pages with descriptive texts or introductory essays and some illustrations, if at all. Julia F. Andrews, the author of \textit{Painters and Politics in the People’s Republic of China 1949–1979},\textsuperscript{16} summarised the historical background of this phenomenon as follows:

There was, of course, a pre-history of photographically illustrated exhibition and collectors’ catalogues in China that go back to the first part of the twentieth century. Documenting art in postcard form and small black-and-white photos (and selling them at art exhibitions) was also popular during the Republican period. More recently, there were some official catalogues published during the Cultural Revolution, particularly in the years between 1972 and 1976. There were both colour portfolios and pocket-sized black and white catalogues, such as those for the 1974 national exhibition and the exhibition to celebrate Chairman Hua Guofeng that I mentioned in \textit{Painters and Politics} (p. 513). So the resources for publishing existed and were used by the key administrators in the official art establishment. Indeed, these publications might have served as models, or counter-models, for artists working outside the establishment.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Huang remarked that some of the artists had actually lent their money to cover the costs. For example, Wang Keping had provided 100 RMB, Huang himself 50 RMB and others furnished the rest of the sum. Huang also stated that he still keeps the original list of the exhibition’s total revenue. Huang, telephone interview.

\textsuperscript{15} Also in their second exhibition, no catalogue in the strict sense was produced, but a list was sold that provided brief information on all artworks and the names of the artists.


\textsuperscript{17} Andrews, Julia F., e-mail correspondence with Franziska Koch, 8 May 2014. Asked specifically about catalogues produced during and after the Cultural Revolution, which she might not have mentioned in her book, she further explained: ‘[ … ] However, for some of
Since the ‘Stars’ were not an officially registered group consisting of ‘professional’ artists, but formed a heterogeneous group of amateurs and autodidacts alike, most of them served in non-fine arts related, stately assigned businesses. Many of them were the children of renowned intellectuals who had been branded and severely persecuted as ‘rightists’ in previous political campaigns. The artists had therefore mostly spent their school years as Red Guards without a proper school education, in camps for thought reform, or had been sent down to the countryside ‘to learn from the peasants’, without access to higher education. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) in particular, when universities as well as fine art academies were closed down for several years, the Communist Party had urged this generation to actively engage in iconoclastic activities, while individual artistic expression was a reason for serious persecution. Even after the rehabilitation of their parents and as young adults working in Beijing, the ‘Stars’ could not easily access bureaucratic procedures, which the production of a proper catalogue would have required, given the authoritarian control and (re-)established hierarchies of the official Chinese art world. As Andrews pointed out:

it was [due to a] lack of official status as artists that made a catalogue impossible for them, as they did endeavo[u]r to document and promote the event by various different means… This, of course, relates to the issue of control of printing facilities, as well as censorship. Before the introduction of the market (with the exception of a brief period in the early Cultural Revolution period), only state organizations, not individuals, had access to printing presses. The New Spring exhibition in 1979, comprised of mainly

the unofficial poets and artists who emerged in and immediately after the Cultural Revolution, you will find mainly mimeographed publications, such as the poetry journal Today [Jintian]. Because they are printed from stylus-cut stencils, it was possible for the artists, such as Qu Leilei, Ma Desheng, or Huang Rui, to draw or etch directly in the stencil – in some (but certainly not all cases) there might be no original artwork, only the print in the mimeographed publication. The Stars did publish a mimeographed catalogue (mulu 目录, unillustrated, as opposed to tulu 图录) that was comprised of a simple list of works organized by artist but accompanied by poems of their literary friends from Today and elsewhere. See Light Before Dawn: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974–1985 (Asia Society, Hong Kong Center, 2013), p. 46. [See author’s footnote 6 regarding this exhibition]. Huang Rui lent us this list. [Compare Huang Rui’s mentioning of this list in author’s footnote 15]. Distribution of Today was banned once the Deng Xiaoping government was firmly established, so unofficial publications became impossible with the end of Beijing Spring (…).’

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Official artists, was commemorated by a color portfolio of single sheet reproductions of some of the artists’ work. The Stars had the idea of producing both publicity materials and a permanent record (and possibly for sale to help cover the expenses) of their exhibition, as professionally done as they could (and therefore perhaps aspiring to the quality of official publications), but as unofficial artists they had to rely on themselves and their network of friends and colleagues to produce and distribute this material. They had photographer friends with access to film and paper, and through one of their members they had access to a mimeograph machine. So despite the strictly state-run economy of 1979, it was possible for them to create such a record, whereas publishing a formal catalogue was not, under the circumstances.19

Given these hierarchies of the Chinese art world and the general socio-political context of China’s late 1970s, namely, the gradual opening-up of the country after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the self-organised ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition was thus perceived as a ground-breaking event of historical significance, despite and because of its non-official, amateur outlook. The photographs no doubt added to the public appeal of the event.

1.1 Heterogeneity as a prominent feature: artistic content and material aspects of the prints

Given that the comparatively large set of photographs,20 which was digitalised and archived in Heidelberg, did not come in a labelled, numbered, or otherwise ordered form, an art historical assessment researching authorship, motifs, genres, styles, and possible dates of the artworks was (and partly still is) needed to make sense of what appears at first sight like a heterogeneous and random compilation of prints. For the buyer, the visual variety and playful possibility to order the untitled prints at will, thereby creating his/her own imaginary museum, might have actually caused aesthetic delight.21 However, even when arranged according to the criteria

19 Andrews, e-mail correspondence with Koch. She further remarked that ‘Li Xianting’s punishment for publishing them [the “Stars”] in Meishu is instructive of the official resistance to their project, as is the terrible pressure put on Jiang Feng for supporting them’. For both their roles in promoting the ‘Stars’ see in the following of this article.
20 The author considers thirty-two photographs a ‘comparatively large’ set assuming that the average visitor would buy only a handful of photographs, being most likely interested in and willing to pay for some and not all works on display and sale respectively. It seems also a considerable amount of prints given the logistical and technical efforts that it required to photograph these works; see in the following part of the article. However, if one considers that many more works were actually on display, the set of thirty-two prints might look rather small.
21 Indicative of the aesthetic potential, which this randomness and missing contextual information can cause, is the fact that the author was initially at a loss how to orientate figs. 14 and 15 respectively. Qu Leilei then clarified that fig. 14 is correctly orientated, while fig. 15 is oriented up-side down. Qu Leilei, e-mail correspondence with Franziska Koch, 28 April 2014.
mentioned for the sake of research, the heterogeneity of these prints remains apparent on at least two levels: their artistic content and their material aspects.

**Artistic content of the exhibits and the photographic prints**

On the level of art forms and techniques, the artists group put an eclectic array of oil on canvas as well as water colour or ink on paper paintings on display with various, but almost always figurative idioms, as can be seen in photographs of the ‘Stars’ exhibition displays. In addition, black and white woodcut prints on paper formed a large part of the exhibits, because it was a relatively accessible, low-priced and also officially promoted technique favoured by autodidacts and academic artists alike (presumably figs. 18–21, 27–28). Pen and ink drawings (figs. 10–13, presumably figs. 31–32, too) were also presented as well as paper cuts (figs. 14–16) and a number of small to middle-sized wooden sculptures (figs. 1–9).

![Figure 1 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Wang Keping, The Kiss (吻), 1979. Wood, circa 40 x 40 x 5 cm, [exhibited in the first showing of The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.](image)

A website of the artist group, edited in 2009–2010, offers many historical photographs of their exhibition displays. Most of them were captured by friends of the artists, who belonged to the ‘April Photographic Society’, among others Li Xiaobin, see: The Stars Art, ed., 星星画会 The Stars Art, http://www.thestarsart.com (accessed 9 May 2013). At the time of writing this website was temporarily unavailable due to censorship by the Chinese government, it seems. But most of the photographs are also reproduced in Wang, *Wang Keping*.
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Figure 3 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Wang Keping, *Scar*, 1979. Wood, circa 40 x 30 cm, [exhibited in the first showing of *The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979*]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Figure 4 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Wang Keping, Bathing Woman, 1979. Wood, circa 45 x 25 cm, exhibited in the first showing of ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 5 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Wang Keping, [Title?], 1979. Wood, circa 60 cm, exhibited in the first showing of ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Figure 6 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Wang Keping, *The Moralist*, 1979. Wood, circa 25 x 40 x 25 cm, [exhibited in the first showing of ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

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Regarding the iconography of the works, there were some dominant themes such as the display of idealised female and male nudes, often engaged in ecstatic scenes of dance or symbolic postures (figs. 1, 2, 4, 10–12, 16–17, 22). Another prominent motif was the realistic depiction of peasants (possibly from ethnic minorities) and intellectuals alike – including some expressive self-portraits of the artists, pointing towards the socially engaged criticism prevalent among the ‘Stars’ (presumably figs. 21, 31–32). Another important theme of the exhibits were historically important sites such as the ruins of the Imperial Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) after its destruction by colonial forces (fig. 30) or pictures that alluded to previously forbidden philosophical and religious traditions, such as Daoist or Buddhist motifs and symbols (figs. 13, 27). Yet, only few artworks referred as directly and critically to Mao Zedong’s ambivalent rule and conflicts with the ideology of the Communist Party as Wang Keping’s statues Idol23 (fig. 7) and Silence (fig. 8) or Qu Leilei’s The Face of the Law (fig. 13).24

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23 This work became a signature piece of the ‘Stars’ activities and remains Wang Keping’s most renowned statue until this day owing to its political pointedness. Wang remembers the problems involved in its display at the second exhibition: Wang, ‘Memoirs of the Stars Exhibition’, 46–47.

24 Qu’s following description of We don’t want laws like this describes a very similar variation of the picture photographed in fig. 13: ‘In “We Don’t Want Laws Like This” I tried to show the many masks behind which “the law” masqueraded during the Gang of Four period. To some people the law presented an ingratiating smile, to others it showed an angry face. The torture devices worn on the head gives an idea of how savage and terrifying the legal system was during these years. The overall effect of the painting suggests hypocrisy, a person with one eye open and one eye shut. This painting was an attempt to express my outrage at the way the Gang of Four enforced “the law”, and my sincere hope that the principle of “equality before the law” could be realized.’ Li Xianting, ‘The Stars Talk About Their Work’, in: Huang, The Stars Time, 268–270, 270.

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Figure 10 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, Silent Dawn, 1976. Pen and ink on paper, 14cm x 18cm, exhibited in the first showing of ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Figure 11 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, *Cry Freedom*, 1978. Marker pen on paper, circa 50 cm x 70 cm, exhibited at the ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979 [according to Qu Leilei] and at the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [according to www.thestarsart.com]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 12 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, *Youth*, 1976. Pen and ink on paper, circa 18 cm x 14 cm, published in the magazine *Today* and exhibited at the ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979 [according to Qu Leilei] and at the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [according to www.thestarsart.com]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
Importantly, the ‘Stars’ had not found an independent, consistent, or clear-cut style of their own, nor did they aspire to do so. According to Huang, their main aim was to subvert the existent selection criteria of museums and the Chinese Artists Association, as well as to challenge the academic practices of the few other independent and/or senior artist groups, who were already active at the time. In

25 Huang Rui described the situation as follows: ‘First of all, it was about what kind of artist to become. At the time, I had become fed up with the academic school’s pursuit of Soviet realist art. In other words, with my first contact with reproduced works by Cézanne and Picasso, I instinctively idolized them. In terms of forming a creative ideology, there was no suitable reference at the time, thus I set some of my poet friends as a standard. Because, in comparison to art, modern Chinese poetry as an underground phenomenon had been active for a few decades, their choices in individual expression, social rebellion, and artistic form were relatively mature. […] I think there are a few points to make. One is the [Stars’] difference from mainstream artists in the “Same Generation” and “Oil Painting Research Committee”. Many of them were my teachers and close friends, yet I had no interest in their way of painting. What distinguished us was that we were from the same generation as the poets, not those who graduated from training classes in the fine art academies. Classes offered at the art academies, whether in terms of subject matter, or techniques for expression within the system of thinking as a whole, seemed to us quite conservative. […] there were no others who applied those materials as we did [regarding dimensions and materials of the artworks]. Even though the events operated with very limited funding, the events themselves demonstrated technical proficiency. In this area, we asked that the artists bear their own responsibility. In other words, the Stars instantly exposed Beijing’s free, boundless, independent artists’ creativity. These people were categorized as outside of the mainstream and shared the same interest in eagerly changing their time.’ Feng Boyi with

Figure 13 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, The Face of the Law, 1978. Marker pen on paper, 70 cm x 50 cm, exhibited in the ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition, 1979 [according to Qu Leilei and as documented by exhibition photographs]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Huang’s view, ‘the best thing “The Stars” did at that time [was] to overthrow the principles of selection’.\(^{26}\) And it was precisely this desire for, and deliberate embracing of, diverging individual expressions that made their public appearance a cultural sign, marking the departure from Maoist concerns of collectivism towards an era of heightened individualism.\(^{27}\)

Art historians agree that the ‘Stars’ exhibition initiative was innovative, while the aesthetic avant-gardism of the group remains contested: Chinese as well as Western critics have pointed out that most of their work and artistic practice was no singular phenomenon, nor without role models.\(^{28}\) Rather, the majority of it was in line with other innovative stylistic trends of the slowly liberalising Chinese art scene. Some of the artists’ works can therefore be classified as inspired by the latest Chinese academic painting trends at the time, such as ‘Scar Art’ (Shanghen yishu, 伤痕艺术) – veristic depictions of the poor, ugly, non-heroic reality of peasants and other people in contrast to the glorifications fostered by the state’s visual propaganda – and so-called ‘Rural’ or ‘Critical Realism’ (乡村 or 批判现实主义 Xiangcun or Pipan xianshizhuyi) – the rendering of ethnic minorities in melancholic and critical realistic modes, based on memories of labor campaigns in poor areas of the country (presumably figs. 31–32); while others picked up earlier pioneering practices, such as the plein air painting of the ‘No Name Group’ (Wumingdang 无名党),\(^{29}\) who had secretly created small-size painting in parks around Beijing already in the mid-1970s (fig. 30, maybe also fig. 24).\(^{30}\)

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\(^{27}\) This is also reflected in the group’s name, which marks the artists’ departure from Maoist ideology as Huang Rui once explained to students of the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts: ‘During the Cultural Revolution, you could talk about the Stars, but you could not do it in public, because the Stars did not exist. The reason the Stars did not exist was because there was only one sun; that sun was Chairman Mao. The sun was the only thing that shone; Chairman Mao was the only one who gave light. It was like that because the Cultural Revolution only talked about political philosophy, not natural science. Also, the Stars only appeared at night, which seemed very natural at the time; the Stars shine independently; every single star shines alone; it can exist by itself and for itself.’ Lv Peng, ‘Huang Rui in the context of the Stars’, in: Huang Rui, ed., The Stars Time, 34–47, 36.


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Figure 14 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, the first of eight pictures of the series My Motherland (祖国), 1980. Paper cut, 18 x 12 cm, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’. Collection of Chang Tsong-zung (Hanart Gallery Hong Kong). Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 15 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, the first of eight pictures of the series My Motherland (祖国), 1980. Paper cut, 18 x 12 cm, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’. Collection of Chang Tsong-zung (Hanart Gallery Hong Kong). The picture is shown up-side down; the correct orientation is that given in fig. 14. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Figure 16 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, the seventh of eight pictures of the series My Motherland (祖国), 1980. Paper cut, 18 x 12 cm, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’. Collection of Chang Tsong-zung (Hanart Gallery Hong Kong). Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 17 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Qu Leilei, Rhythm [according to Qu Leilei; the author has also seen the English title translated as Youth dancing], 1980. Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
Many of the ‘Stars’ amalgamated formerly forbidden foreign painting idioms when they experimented with post-impressionist, surrealist, and expressionist styles (for example figs. 10–11, 14–21, 23, 29). Huang Rui claimed Cézanne’s style, but also Picasso’s cubism as important inspirational sources for his semi-abstract works at the time (compare his fig. 30). The group’s works also made manifest the temporary liberalisation of cultural politics in their presentation of what could be considered academic nudes (figs. 2, 4, 10–12, 16–17, 22), as well as references to pre-revolutionary modes of the Chinese woodcut movement from the 1930s (figs. 14–16, 27–28), both of which had been labeled ‘bourgeois’, ‘elitist’, or simply ‘rightist’ during previous campaigns.

In sum, the ‘Stars’ art practices therefore consisted of a complex, eclectic mix of stylistic approaches with national as well as international connotations. It was ultimately only coherent and united in the desire to creatively experiment and pave the way for a greater freedom of expression. In its local setting, the characteristic strength and historic achievement of these artworks – which in Western eyes all too easily look as if they were oddly derivative and out of touch with international trends of the time – was exactly that the artists did not fear, but deeply enjoyed copying, appropriating, mixing, and changing stylistic elements and motifs rapidly without worrying about previous social contexts, art historical chronologies or possible cultural misunderstandings. As Huang put it: ‘We all talked, but not about profound theories, because nobody was profound, everyone was in the learning phase and everyone worshipped the Western masters. As far as art was concerned, we were rebels and hooligans, as they say.’

While they were eager to learn about styles and concepts from abroad, the ‘Stars’ were critical about acknowledging Chinese artists that could have served as role models, too: ‘[…] no matter what masters they [the Chinese seniors] were in their fields, we never had the mind-set of followers or worshippers. There are no masters; the only thing that counts is to listen to one’s inner calling.’ Already in 1993, the prominent art critic Li Xianting – an early supporter of the ‘Stars’ exhibition activities – called the artist group the ‘rebels’ of the ‘Post-Cultural

31 He explained his own stylistic approaches at the time as based on impressions gained from some Western catalogues, which he received through members of the ‘Stars’, who were students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts and the College for Art and Design in Beijing. Huang emphasised that his ‘knowledge did not come from reading criticism of cubism, instead it is based on visual characteristics I seized onto and learned through experience’. Bérence Angremy with Huang Rui, ‘Wind and Thunder, Characteristics of Early Works’, in: Huang, The Stars Time, 14–20, 15.

32 Regarding the issue of nude painting, Huang recalled that a few other exhibitions had already shown nudes without being censored by officials, but these paintings had still often rendered the figures partly clothed. The ‘Stars’ tested and increased the spirit of liberalisation in that they included depictions of completely nude bodies in their shows. Huang, telephone interview.


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Revolution’ era and saw their critical stance as characterised by ‘(...) first, an emphasis on stylistic freedom above and against uniformity; second, an emphasis on a return to humanity above and against the repression of totalitarian ideology. The Stars, born of the same moment as the Xidan Democracy Wall activists, called out, “Picasso is our rallying cry, Coleridge is our example.”’ 36 And as late as January 2005, Huang Rui pointedly responded to the still lingering discussion on whether or not the ‘Stars’ were – besides their political achievements – ultimately successful with their aesthetic practices:

In an extremely ideological national situation and era, art inevitably faced challenges coming from the absolutism of politics. Regardless of whether one employed a strategy of passive avoidance or active confrontation, one had to raise the status of art itself. Otherwise, the place of art could only be defined by the political situation: At that time, people were encouraged one day to go out and stimulate the economy, then punished the next for violating the moral order. In the face of such overwhelming political dynamics, the Stars maintained their attitude, and thus won dignity. This was not politics proper, nor some strange alternative form of politics. This was art – the basic condition and value of the artist. 37

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Figure 19 Black and white photograph of an artwork presumably by Ma Desheng [according to Qu Leilei, title?, date?]. Wood cut, [dimensions?, exhibited in ?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 20 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Ma Desheng, [title?, date?]. Wood cut, [dimensions?, exhibited in ?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
Although the set of photographs in Heidelberg represents this described characteristic and the contested plurality of art forms, themes, and styles of the ‘Stars’ work, it does so in a fragmented way. The most important difference is that only a fraction of the 150 exhibits of the first exhibition were photographed at all,\textsuperscript{38} so that even the comparatively large compilation of thirty two photographic prints cannot be considered representative of the artworks on display in 1979.\textsuperscript{39} In fact, only artworks of about eight artists\textsuperscript{40} out of the participating twenty-three artists\textsuperscript{41} feature in this set. One reason for this was surely the communicative and logistical effort involved in asking every exhibiting artist to contribute. At least, the set in Heidelberg only comprises of works created by the founding and/or very active members of the ‘Stars’, suggesting that they used their organisational power to decide in favour of their own works towards an easily manageable amount of works to be photographed: Wang Keping (nine, fig. 1–9), Qu Leilei (nine, figs. 10–17), Ma Desheng (five, figs. 19–21, 27–28), Zhong Ahcheng (two, figs. 31–32), Bo Yun (fig.

\textsuperscript{38} Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 12.

\textsuperscript{39} The author could not yet fully establish if the works illustrated by the photographs were actually all on display at once, that is during the first and/or second instance of the ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition’ in 1979. It is also possible that some works featured in the photographs were shown only once or again in the Second ‘Stars’ Exhibition’ in 1980. At least for a large part of the works, the first assumption can be substantiated, when comparing the material with photographs of the actual displays. See also established information in the captions of the illustrations.

\textsuperscript{40} The number of artists might be higher, since the authorship of at least two works featuring in the prints still remains to be identified.

\textsuperscript{41} Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 12.

Figure 21 Black and white photograph of an artwork presumably by Ma Desheng [according to Qu Leilei, title?, date?]. Wood cut, [dimensions?, exhibited in ?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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26?), Yan Li (two?, fig. 23? and fig. 29), Huang Rui (fig. 30), Li Shuang (fig. 18) are all represented, in addition to some as yet unidentified works (two, figs. 24–25).42

Furthermore, Huang and his fellow organisers had chosen artworks with stark contrasts of colour and line to be photographed, knowing they would at least roughly resemble the original, even when captured in black and white and reduced to small-sized, handy prints.43 This decision, caused by a lack of money for colour prints, also explains the high percentage of woodcuts among the photographs (at least five).44 It might also be the reason that Wang Keping’s sculptures and Qu Leilei’s works form the largest sub-groups of a single artist’s work within this set,45 because these prints are able to highlight the characteristics of Wang’s uncoloured or single-coloured sculptures as well as Qu’s line-based black and white depictions, even when viewed without colour and from a fixed angle. Other reasons for the prominence of Wang’s works in particular cannot be dismissed either. In comparison, he was arguably at the time, among the most prolific and stylistically innovative, as well as politically radical members of the group and his carved works significantly helped the ‘Stars’ to claim a broad spectrum of art forms,46 which made the exhibition scope look more ‘professional’. Last but not least, since the photographic sets were not fixed, but could be chosen by the buyer, it is possible that the obvious preference for Wang’s and Qu’s works also reflects the personal taste of Kippy Yeh at the time.

Material aspects of the prints

Figure 22 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Zhao Dalu [according to Qu Leilei, title?, date?]. Oil painting, circa 60 x 40 cm, [exhibited in ?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

42 At the time of writing, the author was unable to establish contact with all members of the ‘Stars’ in order to verify the authorship of these works. Unfortunately, some of the recent Chinese writings about the ‘Stars’ as well as catalogues of commemorative exhibitions, when published in China, are difficult to purchase or even access through Western library systems. See also footnote 8.
43 Huang, telephone interview.
44 See details regarding techniques as established by now in the captions of the illustrations.
45 Wang Keping identified all of his works on the nine photographs as did Qu Leilei. Wang Keping, telephone interview. Qu Leilei, e-mail correspondence with Koch.
46 For an autobiographical description of his role see: Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’.
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Figure 23 Black and white photograph of an artwork [by Yan Li or Li Shuang according to Qu Leilei], the meta-data of which has yet to be identified. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 24 Black and white photograph of an artwork [maybe by Bo Yun, according to Qu Leilei], the meta-data of which has yet to be identified. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
On the level of the photograph’s materiality, it is obvious that they have been created with different background settings. Some were apparently rather professionally lit and well-equipped venues, where the artwork was displayed on a plinth or in front of a neutral white or black background (for example figs. 1, 2, 5–7);
other instances show the artworks placed on the floor (fig. 25) or pinned to what looks like a working backdrop or easel (fig. 23–24). Consequently, the material does not appear as if shot and developed by only one person at a single place and point in time. Rather some prints convey a studio like atmosphere of work-in-progress, or point to a considerable hastiness in terms of how the photographs were taken (for example figs. 26 and 29) and developed (for example figs. 5 and 6). Huang Rui partly explained and affirmed this impression: except for Wang Keping, who had arranged the photography of his sculptures himself, obviously eager to set them up as professionally as possible, the photographs were actually captured at different places and points in time and then developed in one session in Huang’s private home, where he had a darkroom set up.47 His recent recollection does not necessarily contradict an earlier text written by his colleague Zhong Acheng, in which the latter stated: ‘I photographed everyone’s work thinking that if we sold the snapshots we could recoup some of the cost of running the exhibition; and […] I moved the paintings around. This involved taking them by pedicab to Huang Rui and Ma Desheng’s homes, and then to the park where the exhibition was going to be held, and finally framing them.’48 Both accounts seem to be vague and inconsistent with regards to the precise points in time in which the photographs were taken and the nature of their authorship, while their development at Huang’s dark room seems assured.49

In any case, the self-made style of production is also apparent in the variety and handling of photo papers that the artists used: some glossy (for example figs. 3–4, 31–32), some already rasterised (for example fig. 17) as conventionally used when preparing a photograph for a printed media publication. Most of the prints seem to be cut out from what must have been a larger sheet of photo paper with several reproductions on it. Judging from the rough paper edges of many prints, it appears that the cut-out was often hastily executed – as if the artists took whatever material was at hand to quickly produce a significant number of copies for sale. Although Wang Keping wrote in his ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’ that professional photographers belonging to the ‘April Photographic Society’, were actively documenting the ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition using photo and film cameras to capture the event,50 the artists could not or were not willing to mobilise such professional care when they created the photographs for sale. Most plausibly, a

47 Huang, telephone interview. Inquired about the above quote of Ah Cheng, Huang Rui affirmed in a correspondence following the interview with the author that he agreed with Ah’s statement of being the one that came up with the idea of making and selling the photographs. Huang, e-mail correspondence with Koch. His colleague Qu Leilei recalled that it was him, who arranged the lights for Wang Keping’s photographs and he thinks that the camera in this case was provided by Ah Cheng, who might have also taken the photographs by himself. However, Qu could not remember who took the photographs of his own artworks, but said that cameras were expensive and therefore rare among amateur artists at the time. Qu, telephone interview.


49 In addition to his statement during the interview with the author, Huang affirmed again for record that the photographs ‘were shot in different places and times but all developed in Huang Rui’s home’. Huang, e-mail correspondence with Koch.

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combined lack of time, money and man power prevented them from dedicating more energy to this endeavor, particularly whilst they were facing other more urgent organisational tasks.

All in all, the set is thus not representative of the related exhibitions in their totality. Rather, it serves to mediate some of the exhibits in a very particular, partial way. As can be seen in exemplary comparisons with surviving colour reproductions of the artworks and shots of the exhibition displays presented on a recent website commemorating the ‘Stars’, the modest photographic quality and size of the black and white prints attests much more to the amateur quality of photography as a medium, which the artists could mobilise quickly, than to the actual pictorial outlook of the artworks that were captured in this way.

The socio-political background of the prints: the contested exhibitions of the ‘Stars’

Rather than dismiss the photographs as curious, marginal occurrences, a closer look into the connected activities and the outlook of the two major exhibitions of the ‘Stars’ is needed in order to understand their broader historiographical relevance and role. This is all the more important, because at first glance, and especially to Western beholders, the photographs look out of sync with pictures of artworks that made the news in Europe or the USA during the same years. The following retelling of the events is based on Wang Keping’s article ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, which is excessively detailed, and frames the negotiations between the artists and the cultural bureaucrats – the police and other persons involved – with a dramatic tone.

In accordance with Huang Rui, Wang points out that the ‘Stars’ were crucially inspired and supported by some radical writers/poets, who were engaged in the Beijing Spring – a brief period beginning in October 1978 and ending around December 1979, when citizens could post their liberal and even openly critical political opinions at the so-called Xidan Democracy Wall. It is therefore important to view the photographic prints as only one artistic expression of a multi-layered and interdisciplinary momentum, which was crucial to explore new stances beyond the limits of mainstream academic and/or official positions at the time. Yet, it seems to have been a very effective and cost-efficient means of assuring and maintaining a public for their works that lasted longer than the actual exhibition, and addressed viewers far beyond its initial temporal and local range.

When, in the early morning of 27 September 1979, the ‘Stars’ installed 150 artworks of twenty-three artists, including some poems by writers of the non-official magazine Today (Jintian) at an iron fence of forty meters length surrounding a park

52 Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’.
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adjacent to the China National Art Gallery, the loosely organised artist group had been discussing and preparing their first show for several months. During their search for official support and a suitable exhibition space, they had approached Liu Xun, the president of the Beijing Association of Artists, but were told to wait with their project for the next year, since all official exhibition venues managed by the association were already booked. However, given the versatile political climate, the ‘Stars’ did not want to wait and decided to simply stage their works in an outdoor show at a reasonably frequented street. Cleverly, they had set the date for the exhibition around the same time as China’s National Day, 1 October, and simultaneous with the opening of the National Art Exhibition for the Thirtieth Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Republic of China, which was held inside the China National Art Gallery. Although the artists distributed mimeographed invitations and posters announcing ‘The Stars’ Outdoor Art Exhibition (‘Xingxing lutian meizhan’), which they had drawn themselves, and posted them along some prominent roads and at Beijing’s universities one day before the opening, Wang mentions that ‘the Xidan Democracy Wall – the most important location – didn’t have a single Stars exhibition poster. The people sent were unreliable and were too scared to post them there. This may have been a good thing, leaving the relevant authorities one step behind our plans’. Nevertheless the outdoor display quickly drew a large crowd of curious onlookers that enjoyed the unusual offer and arrangement of works, most of which were directly hung at the fence, sometimes placed on the ground and in some cases also attached to nearby trees. The paintings were mostly framed and often also carried labels; the same holds true for Wang Keping’s sculptures, some of which were fixed on additional wooden supports, if not directly attached to the fence. Wang describes the audience’s response as follows:

Students from the CAFA [China Academy of Fine Arts] affiliated high school ran over during their breaks, observing and sketching the works in their notebooks. Quite a few famous literary and art figures attended with great enthusiasm. Everyone praised the liberating exhibition method and was astonished with the quality of the art. Jiang Feng, president of the National Association of Artists and director of the Central Academy of Fine Arts attended. After viewing the exhibition, he offered his immediate endorsement, saying, ‘It is really an excellent idea to have outdoor exhibitions. Exhibitions can take place within museum walls, just as they can take place outside museum walls; art academies can produce artists, just as the outside world can produce artists.’ Jiang Feng was an honest man. Being branded a ‘rightist’ in 1957 caused him to suffer constant political

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55 It remains the country’s foremost official museum of fine arts until today.
58 ‘Xingxing lutian meizhan (星星露天美站)’ is the title of the exhibition as announced on one of the posters that the artists installed 27 September 1979 on the streets. It is documented by a photograph shown on their commemorative website, see: The Stars Art ™, ed., 星星画会. The Stars Art, http://www.thestarsart.com (accessed 9 May 2013).
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harassment. At the time, he had just resumed his job, and his prestige was rather high within the art world. Jiang Feng even asked if we needed help with anything. We told him that we didn’t have a place to store the works at night, and hoped that we would be allowed to keep them in the museum at night. Jiang Feng agreed immediately, and instructed his secretary to notify the museum directly. The museum’s vice director, renowned female painter Yu Feng, visited the exhibition, took a look, and lavished great praise, saying, ‘Some of the works are as good as those on display in international exhibitions’.  

While Wang’s glorious memories help to explain and affirm the avant-garde aura this exhibition has acquired in Chinese as well as Western historiographies of this formative period of modern Chinese art, he also remembered how contested and by no means natural its final success actually was:

A park and recreation services employee came over to interrupt, asking ‘Who allowed you to hold an exhibition here? This is a park, not an exhibition hall. There are too many people. It is causing a great deal of chaos, and look, the ground is littered with popsicle wrappers…’ A middle-aged woman started yelling from a distance, ‘What kind of art exhibition is this? It is not artistic at all! Who is your leader? I am going to notify the police!’ […]

Another self-proclaimed employee of park and recreation services came to say that we were forbidden to continue the exhibition the next day. Tian Li [who was the first Chinese citizen after the Cultural Revolution, given authorization by Deng Xiaoping to marry a foreigner] and his French wife visited the exhibition. He commented at great length. When he heard about the argument between the people and the park and recreation services personnel, he whispered quietly to me, ‘You know, this type of exhibition would not be allowed in Paris either. It would also require official approval.’

Obviously, this was what the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, which was the ultimate authority having to deal with the unexpected incident, thought too: On the second day of the exhibition, 28 September 1979, thirty to forty special unit police officers showed up, demanding the immediate closure of the exhibition. However, after some debates and with Huang Rui as well as Ma Desheng spending an hour in discussions at the office of the East Beijing Police Department, the police did not insist on the closure and the second day of display ended without further interruptions.

While the officials had argued that the show would violate the ‘Six Clauses of the Beijing Revolutionary Committee Notice’, which forbade ‘posting posters, etc. anywhere aside from the Xidan Democracy Wall’, the artists convincingly claimed that their exhibits were artworks and not posters. They also argued that even

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though the exhibition was not officially approved, they had the support of the directors of the National Association of Artists and the Beijing Association of Artists, who had both visited the exhibition in show of their support.

While the ‘Stars’ artists’ demand for a public space for artistic practice coincided with ‘a large scale press conference with both Chinese and foreign media, [which China’s Minister of Culture, Huang Zhen convened] to announce a conference for individuals working in literature and art that would take place for ten days in October’, the local lower authorities were not so quick in embracing the liberalisation: on the third day of the exhibition, an official statement was issued by the East Beijing Police Department and the Bureau of Management of the Eastern District of the City of Beijing (all under the authority of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee) that banned the exhibition. Again, policemen were sent to keep the artists from fetching their artworks that had been stored in the National Gallery.

It was only owing to the efforts of Liu Xun, who acted as mediator between the political as well as the police authorities and the artists, that a compromise was reached in the afternoon of that day: the artists were assured they would be able to re-open their exhibition in mid-October at the Huafangzhai (Pleasure Boat Gallery) located in Beihai Park (north of the Forbidden City). This space provided actual exhibition pavilions belonging to the Beijing Association of Artists. The ‘Stars’ at first considered this to be a victory against bureaucracy. But later that night they gathered with some radical writers of the Xidan Wall movement and in a more heated mood, decided to draft the ‘United Proclamation’ asking the Beijing Municipal Party Committee to correct the Police Department’s misconduct, despite the fact that the cultural officials had already reached a compromise with them. This proclamation audaciously implied that the artists would organise a public demonstration if the Committee failed to react.

Contrary to the artists’ assumption, the Committee did not respond immediately to the proclamation, which had been handed over to the officials and additionally posted on the Xidan Wall. As a result, core members of the ‘Stars’ went on to lead a protest march on 1 October 1979, the 30th Anniversary of the People’s Republic, using the following slogans:

1. Demand political democracy, demand artistic freedom!
2. Beijing Municipal Party Committee must guarantee citizens’ rights!
3. Banning the Stars Exhibition is trampling the constitution!
4. Strongly demand that the Beijing Municipal Party Committee seriously try the perpetrators of the Stars Exhibition case.
5. Guarantee citizens’ right to participate in social culture movements!
6. Long live the people! Long live democracy!

The protestors started their demonstration at the Xidan Wall with some speeches and marched to the Main Office of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee.

A large number of ordinary people joined them on the way, which increased public pressure on the officials. Interestingly, even though the police showed up again, they only forced the protestors to take a different route than originally planned, but did not prevent them from reaching their final destination. Wang speaks of ‘five to six hundred people’ in the beginning, and around ‘a thousand’ at the end.\(^6^8\) A few representatives of the artists delivered their demands to the Committee and ended the protest thereafter. In Wang’s account this was much to their advantage, since it turned out later that the Beijing Municipal Party Committee had already been given orders to arrest the artists in case they did not disband within a reasonable time.\(^6^9\) After this spectacular march, high ranking cultural officials variously cited the exhibition and the protest either as very harmful to Chinese society or as an exemplary initiative to be tolerated in accordance with the new direction of the Party. According to Wang’s (perhaps a little exaggerated) account it was ‘the first non-government organized demonstration in thirty years’.\(^7^0\) Significantly, those officials arguing against the artists’ independent activities and outspoken demands were mostly concerned about the considerable foreign press echoes the events had generated:\(^7^1\)

The Stars demonstration threw the central authorities into disorder. None of the foreign media reported on the extremely important speech delivered by Committee head Ye Jianying [in connection with the Fourth National Culture Congress of Literature and Art, which was delayed and finally held in Beijing on 30 October 1979, promising greater freedom to the artists]. Instead, they all focused on the demonstration.\(^7^2\)

Given that on 16 October 1979 the startling trial took place that condemned Wei Jingsheng to a sentence of fifteen years in prison for calling for democracy in his essay titled ‘The Fifth Modernization’, which he had posted at the Xidan Wall one year earlier, it is quite astonishing that the ‘Stars’ only had to wait until 20 November, when they were finally notified that they could indeed proceed to exhibit in the Huafangzhai as promised earlier by Liu Xun.\(^7^3\) They opened their First Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’ again from 23 November to 2 December 1979 and sold

\(^6^8\) Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 34.
\(^7^0\) Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 33.
\(^7^2\) Official Xia Yan in his opening address to the same congress, as quoted by Wang, Wang Keping, 39.
500 tickets for the first day, while the norm was seventy to eighty tickets for an opening.\textsuperscript{74} On the final day, they even counted 8,100 visitors.\textsuperscript{75} According to Wang, as per custom none of the impressive ticket earnings went to the artists, but they considered the many volumes of written guest books as their reward.\textsuperscript{76} As confirmed by Huang Rui, photographic prints of the exhibits were sold during this extended period of the first exhibition in Beihai Park.\textsuperscript{77} Given the turbulent first showing of the exhibition, it seems indeed rather unlikely that the artist group could have calmly managed to organise the making and distribution of these prints right from the beginning, as Zhong Acheng’s recollection seems to imply (see above). After the re-opening in Beihai Park, the exhibition was also mediated by established Chinese media: in March 1980 the official art magazine \textit{Meishu (Fine Arts)} published an article by Li Xianting, which was ‘the first domestic commentary to introduce the ‘Stars’ (not counting internally circulating documents that were critical of the Stars)’.\textsuperscript{78}

Encouraged by their tremendous success, some of the artists established ‘The Stars Art Society’ (Xingxing huahui) and officially registered it with the Beijing Association of Artists.\textsuperscript{79} Backed by Liu Xun once more, Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, and Wang Keping became members of the Beijing Association of Artists, which marked their transition from ‘amateur’ to ‘professional’ artists in the view of cultural bureaucrats. Because of their new status, the ‘Stars’ finally succeeded in exhibiting within the China National Art Gallery itself, with the assured support of Jiang Feng (45–46). This \textit{Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’} (\textit{Dier jie xingxing meizhan}) ran from 20 August to 7 September 1980. According to Wang, within these sixteen days nearly 100,000 visitors, approximately 5,000 each day, came to see the show. While Huang Rui confirmed that the artists did not publish a catalogue this time either, he pointed out that they sold a cheap leaflet stating all the artists’ names and a complete list of exhibits.\textsuperscript{80} He also recalled that they sold photographic prints of the works this time too.\textsuperscript{81} Given that Qu Leilei and other ‘Stars’ dated some of their artworks featured in the Heidelberg set of prints to 1980, and/or mentioned them in connection with the showing in the China National Art Gallery, it is likely that this specific set was only sold during the \textit{Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’} and not during the second showing of their first exhibition in Beihai Park.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{74} Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 41–42.
\textsuperscript{75} Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 44.
\textsuperscript{76} Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 44.
\textsuperscript{77} Huang, telephone interview.
\textsuperscript{78} Wang, ‘Memoirs of The Stars Exhibition’, 44.
\textsuperscript{79} Among the members in this instance were: Ai Weiwei, Gan Shaochung, Huang Rui, Li Shuang, Li Yongcun, (Bo Yun), Ma Desheng, Mao Lizi, Qu Leilei, Shao Fei, Yan Li, Yang Yiping, Wang Keping, Yin Guangzhong, Zhao Gang, Zhong Acheng, Zhu Jinshi, and others. Wang, ‘Memoirs of the Stars Exhibition’, 45.
\textsuperscript{80} Compare footnotes 15 and 17 above.
\textsuperscript{81} Huang, telephone interview.
\textsuperscript{82} See captions of the photographic prints for the dates of the artworks and their exhibition instances as established by now, especially figs. 7, 11–12, 14–17, 27–32. Compare also author’s footnotes 10 and 11 above.
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Figure 27 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Ma Desheng, [Title?, date?. Woodblock print on Chinese paper?, dimensions?], exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [according to www.thestarsart.com]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 28 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Ma Desheng, Untitled 5, 1980. Woodblock print on Chinese paper, 53,7 x 29,4 cm, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [according to www.thestarsart.com]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Figure 29 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Yan Li, *Life Friendship Love* (生活 友誼 愛情), [1979/80?]. Oil on canvas?, dimensions?, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [as documented by a exhibition photograph]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 30 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Huang Rui. *Renaissance*, part of the Funeral Series (重生, 「葬礼」系列), 1979. Oil on canvas, 65 x 80 cm, exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [according to www.thestarsart.com, but a motif from the same painting series was already exhibited in 1979 as documented by exhibition photographs]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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Figure 31 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Zhong Acheng (alias Ah Cheng), [Title?, date?. Pen and ink on paper?, dimensions?], exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’, 1980 [according to www.thestarsart.com]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.

Figure 32 Black and white photograph of an artwork by Zhong Acheng (alias Ah Cheng), [Title?, 1980?. Pen and ink on paper?, dimensions?; exhibited in the Second Art Exhibition of ‘The Stars’?]. Photograph courtesy: Kippy Yeh.
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The canonisation of the group’s works and their position in Chinese art history was, however, still ambivalent: on the one hand, they received so many invitations from work units around the country that Huang Rui and Ma Desheng travelled from late October to early January 1981, visiting twenty six cities and giving about ten talks on ‘The Stars and Contemporary Art’. On the other hand, works which Huang, Ma and Wang – by virtue of being new members – had handed in for an exhibition of the Beijing Association of Artists, were ‘thrown into the garbage on the very next day’ by the people in charge. Regardless of such external ambivalence, the core members of the artist group themselves grew increasingly tired of the political discussions attached to their works and tried to focus on individual artistic development of their work.

Shortly thereafter, the overall political climate changed again and even reinstated high-ranking art officials like Jiang Feng were severely criticised for supporting the ‘Stars’. During the ensuing years, Wang Keping and other members of the group were often interrogated by the police and visibly put under surveillance, especially when they met foreigners (mostly journalists and diplomats). Although Huang, Wang, and Ma managed to exhibit works in the Zixin Road Elementary School in Yuanwu district, Beijing, in August 1983 the Beijing City Public Security Bureau ordered a closure of the show several days after the opening and the artists later learned that ‘they were barred from taking part in exhibitions, from having their names mentioned in any media, and from joining any government organization’. Most of the ‘Stars’ core members therefore sought and eventually managed to leave China for the USA, France, Japan or other Western countries; quite often after marrying a foreigner or acquiring a student visa.

83 For a recent Chinese discussion of this aspect see for example Yi Dan, Xingxing lishi [A History of the Stars], Changsha: Hunan Art Press, 2002, as well as the catalogues quoted in the author’s footnotes 4–5 above.
86 According to Huang Rui: ‘[ … ] after the Second Stars Art Exhibition in 1980, I became annoyed with this kind of social event [ … as did Wang Keping and Ma Desheng later]. Other than our long period of travel to the South introducing the activities of the Stars, we did not establish any other close communications with society. In fact, we wanted to calm down to produce experimental activity within our own works. Which is what I have done.’ Feng Boyi with Huang Rui, ‘Water and Fire, Creative Authenticity behind Actions’, in: Huang, The Stars Time, 10–14, 13.
87 In his case, this added to the psychological distress remaining from earlier traumatic experiences as a branded ‘rightist’, which seems to have led to his premature death in 1982.
90 For example Ai Weiwei was one of the luckier and youngest members, who managed to leave the country as early as 1983. In contrast, notorious Wang Keping, even though he had married a French woman in China, had to wait for three years before being allowed to move with her to Paris in 1984. Katie de Tilly, ‘Wang Keping – The Wood Master’, 69. Huang Rui obtained his visa for Japan in August 1983 also on the basis of marrying a Japanese and
3. Conflicting negotiations with the official art system and increasing commercialisation of Chinese contemporary art: long term effects

If we consider the story of the ‘Stars’ as narrated by Wang Keping and other core members, it is obvious that it was deeply marked by political issues from the very beginning. This helps to explain why the set of photographs appeared so many years after the events in Germany, rather than already being archived in a mainland Chinese museum that deals with historical (art) events and their documentation. Even the presentations of the ‘Stars’ historical achievements, which were realised in Beijing in 2007 and Hong Kong in 2013 speak of the conflicting negotiations with the Chinese official art system in that most of the remaining artworks and documents are still either provided by the artists themselves or a few private collectors and supported by art historians and curators, who – in turn – had often left the country and only returned decades later or for temporary exhibition projects. While the realisation of these historiographically conceived shows is a sign that officials have ceased to censor and/or ignore socially engaged and politically critical art positions with regard to these early pioneers, the lingering effect of the former official stance is still strong: not only did the ‘Stars’ original artworks lose their meaning in foreign contexts, but the artists also lost impact on the following generation of academically trained Chinese artists. Even though most of the ‘Stars’ stayed in contact with each other and have returned to work in China or at least opened solo exhibitions in their homeland in the last ten years, they could not openly pursue their former political demands, even if they had wanted to do so.

This was not only because they had to adjust to various foreign settings and the Western art system after their emigration, but also because of the emerging art market in China itself, as the case of Huang Rui shows. He kept true to the collectively minded ideals of the group when he founded ‘798 Art District’ in 2002, occupying a former industrial quarter on the outskirts of Beijing that he, together with other independent artists re-used as a cheap studio and project space and saved from demolition. However, his initiative was only successful as long as this place was perceived as an alternative to the commercial and/or official mainstream of contemporary Chinese art. As soon as international gallery owners, collectors, and art lovers started to regularly frequent the place, commercialisation took over and led to a gentrification that forced emerging artists and non-commercial ventures to move out of the increasingly expensive area. Around the year 2000 the government decided to officially foster the cultural industries, including

could soon thereafter open a successful individual exhibition at the Central Gallery in Osaka. See under ‘1983’ of the chronology in the unpaginated appendix of Huang, The Stars Time.


92 The temporary imprisonment of Ai Weiwei in 2011, who became increasingly outspoken and socially engaged in his art after the Sichuan earth-quake in 2008, shows that it remains doubtful if the Chinese government is actually willing to accept the freedom of art and speech when it comes to more recent social and political conflicts.

experimental contemporary artworks, which were now presented to the world as a sign of ongoing Chinese liberalisation. Another six years later, cultural officials even claimed ‘798 Art District’ to be a role model for the many art districts to be promoted with a strong focus on commercial benefit.

While this official embracing of a venture that started out as an experimental, socially engaged as well as politically critical art initiative demonstrates that, in a certain way, the ‘Stars’ independent spirit was effective and fostering liberalisation in the Chinese art world in the long run, it can also be argued that such official acknowledgement was a double edged sword, cutting-off the original critical potential of non-mainstream artistic endeavours. In this regard, the rapid commercialisation also often works to the advantage of the cultural bureaucrats, in that direct censorship of critical artists and pointed artworks become superfluous. The market itself ‘regulates’ how intellectually challenging, politically edgy or otherwise vanguard positions get less opportunities to be shown and are harder to sell than works which are aesthetically pleasing, keep to conventionally established formats and techniques, and meet the taste of the masses with popular themes and unproblematic motifs.

Historically, the international (and later also increasingly domestic) market for contemporary Chinese art had been paradoxically established after the Tian’anmen protests; it fostered the marketable cliché of the most promising Chinese artists working ‘underground’, while reinforced cultural restrictions upon experimental exhibitions and censored media coverage forced emerging artists to look for foreign buyers. This situation soon rendered the idealist collectivism of the ‘Stars’ and other early artist groups obsolete. While the ‘Stars’ sale of photographs was dedicated towards covering the expenses of their exhibitions, and they did not have to make a living off their art then, later shows aimed at earning income. At the beginning of the 1990s, most Chinese artists only strategically collaborated for short periods and specific exhibition projects in order to obtain the official permits to exhibit, while they were increasingly careful about promoting their works as individual and singular expressions with regard to critics and potential buyers.94

3.1 Choosing photographs to address a broad audience: the logic of the medium

Given this historical background, the long journey which the set of photographs underwent in terms of space and time, seems to be mainly the result of socio-political circumstances. Yet, it partly also lies in the very logic of the medium, which the ‘Stars’ indeed chose quite spontaneously, but not naively, to ensure a widespread, low priced, and convenient circulation of their works. Black and white photography was the ideal medium in these respects, not only because it allowed the artists to quickly develop the prints by themselves, but also because the number

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94 For example, the Chinese artists, who participated in the first show of contemporary Chinese art at the Venice Biennale in 1993, were annoyed when they discovered that their densely arranged group display resulted in the European audience viewing them as ‘the Chinese’ in general, rather than distinguishing their positions and appreciating them individually.
of copies was principally unlimited and could be flexibly adjusted to the demands of their audience. Compared to the original artworks, the small size of the photographs and the inexpensive material involved surely encouraged circulation from hand to hand. It also must have been an advantage in a time when political approval of the artworks was still doubtful, because these prints were easy to store at home and keep out of official view.

The ‘Stars’ might not have envisioned how long and far this journey would actually take the prints, but they surely aimed at local as well as foreign audiences; at the average Chinese visitor of their exhibitions as well as professional journalists, critics, and foreign observers alike. This becomes obvious, when reading the press articles which reviewed the group’s activities at the time and can be accessed at the website of the ‘Stars’. A close comparison indicates that at least in three cases, journals published in Chinese and English used the same photographic footage that the artists used to produce the set of prints for sale to visitors.

Of course – in accordance with their democratic convictions – the ‘Stars’ addressed their photographic prints to ordinary visitors in the first place. Addressing the local public turned out to be crucial not only in terms of the aesthetic discourse, which the ‘Stars’ hoped to foster, but also because it was the significant interest of ‘the people’ which substantially helped the group to politically succeed with their protest march, to re-open their first exhibition as well as to finally enter the China National Art Gallery, thereby canonising their artistic positions and claiming socio-historical relevance for the group. The fact that visitor Kippy Yeh has kept the photographs ever since affirms the substantial meaning and memorial value which small and fragmented mediators acquired in these circumstances.

In the second place, the ‘Stars’ also knew about the decisive role of foreign attention, as Wang Keping’s recollection shows, wherein he mentions the number

96 See The Stars Art™, ed., The Stars Art, http://www.shigebao.com/html/articles/shiliao/3242.html (accessed 9 May 2013). These cases are: Ma Desheng’s woodcut works depicting a Buddha statue with ballerina (fig. 27) and a traditional Chinese door (fig. 28) and Zhong Acheng’s line drawing depicting the face of an elderly man (fig. 32).
97 Also in retrospect, Huang Rui seems convinced that the social and artistic strength of the ‘Stars’ lay in their ability to address and represent an emerging public of self-responsible citizens that had long been repressed under the Maoist term of ‘the people’: ‘I now regard these two affairs as one matter even more than before. It might be that the activity is part of your work; maybe your work includes an explanation of the action. The problem of “The Stars” was that they caused problems; the merit of “The Stars” was that, when they got problems, they could admit that they caused these problems themselves. […] And so when we encountered problems, we didn’t behave like the scholars in the past who claimed that they had nothing to do with it.’ Huang further mentions as ‘integral symbol of “The Stars”’ the example of the contested group decision of the protest march, which he himself had opposed. But when the majority of the members voted for it, he agreed and resumed his position as official spokesperson thinking that this was his responsibility as the founder of the group. Gao Minglu with Huang Rui, ‘Past Events and Present Existence’, in: Huang, The Stars Time, 48–59, 57–58.
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and kind of foreigners supporting the ‘Stars’ protest march in detail. The international illustrated press reports proved especially effective, because they served the artists’ argument to demand greater Chinese press coverage as well: Wang Keping recalled a heated argument between an antagonistic Xinhua News Journalist and Ma Desheng, in which the journalist claimed that – through censorship – Chinese media would actually try to ‘refute those foreign journalists’, who had ‘[wrongly] endowed The Stars with a few emblems of distinction, naming them dissident artists, underground artists, rebel artists’; while Ma responded ‘So, Chinese people won’t be able to read it then? Never mind if they write anything right or wrong. […] Why is the Xinhua News Agency afraid of reporting on such a major event for the Chinese public…?’

Hence, selling photographic prints to local and international visitors alike helped to visually foster the artists’ contested stance at a time when even the first professional Chinese review in Meishu remained unillustrated. When the critical writer Bei Dao, a friend of the ‘Stars’ and newly appointed editor of the New Observer commissioned articles on the ‘Stars’ that finally also featured six photographs (including one of Idol) for the issue of 10 October 1980, it was enough to enrage the Propaganda Department of the Communist Party Central Committee and triggered the attack against Jiang Feng, which led to the end of the ‘Stars’ public recognition.

3.2 Diverging local and international reception and the historiographical question

While the national reception of the ‘Stars’ was a sound success in terms of the number of visitors and their favourable comments in the guest books, the international reception of the ‘Stars’ works centered around their political audacity,

98 ‘We started gathering at 9:00am sharp. There were not many people from The Stars present. Most people were enthusiastic participants in democratic movements and general observers. The greatest turnouts came from foreign journalists stationed in Beijing. A few plainclothes police scattered around glaring fiercely at the crowd. […] [Some hours later, after the crowd had reached already ‘a thousand’ people:] This time, the vast and mighty procession committed yet another misstep: more than ten little vehicles of foreign professionals and various embassies stationed in Beijing trailed behind the procession. Aside from journalists, many foreign exchange students, foreign experts, and diplomatic personnel also joined the ranks of the procession. The Deputy Minister of the French Embassy, Claude Martin, mingled quietly in the crowd.’ Wang, ‘Memoirs of the Stars Exhibition’, 34–38.

99 While at least the second instance of the first exhibition was already mentioned in the People’s Daily, it seems that a review was beyond what the journalists were allowed to publish at the time. Instead ordinary visitors were so enthusiastic that ‘they started making large, hand-made advertisements for the exhibition themselves, posting them in their work or school units to urge others to attend’ according to Wang, ‘Memoirs of the Stars Exhibition’, 42.


101 Wang, ‘Memoirs of the Stars Exhibition’, 47: The New Observer was ‘one of the more influential bi-monthly national publications […] Among the articles were old writer Feng Yida’s “Joyful Exploration” and Li Yongcun’s (alias A Man) “The Continuation of the Street Exhibition”’. 
particularly the successful protest march. It largely dismissed the aesthetic achievements of the ‘Stars’ as amateur art that was not even comparable with what was considered contemporary art in the West. As a result, only very few early artworks of the ‘Stars’ made it into Western exhibitions, even after the artists had settled in the USA or France. If shown, they were framed as examples of the artists’ political demands as well as the Chinese social setting and put on display in small institutions, such as university galleries or private museums. The aesthetic discrepancy between the then current performance, conceptual or multi-media art practices in Europe and America and the ‘Stars’ favored artistic languages was so stark that it prevented major museums of modern and contemporary art from featuring works of the innovative Chinese group on par with leading Western artworks.

While foreign curators thought the ‘Stars’ pictorial styles already outdated, naively derivative, or too eclectic, the artists and their Chinese audience did not distinguish between their political and aesthetic goals, but thought them inseparable at the time. However, the next generation of Chinese critics and artists graduating from the academies when most of the ‘Stars’ left the country, were less interested in picking-up the aesthetic and political discursive threads of the ‘Stars’, given the huge changes of the economic and educational setting in China as described above.


103 In Huang Rui’s eyes, a presentation which the younger art critic Fei Dawei gave at the conference ‘Creating History: Chinese Contemporary Art in 1980s’ held in the Overseas Chinese Town Contemporary Art Terminal OCAT and the He Xiangning Art Museum in Shenzhen, was exemplary for this tendency. Fei apparently argued that Chinese vanguard and contemporary art had started only really after 1985 in contrast to Huang, who saw the younger generation of artists active in 1985 in a direct line of oppositional and outspokenly critical art stances beginning with the ‘Stars’, see Britta Erickson, ‘Essential Search for Artistic Freedom: Huang Rui Talks about His Early Career’, in: Huang, The Stars Time, 60–66, 65–66.

104 Indicative of this situation is an answer that Huang Rui gave when asked how his close poet, artist, and critic friends view(ed) his paintings, regardless from views on the ‘Stars’ as a group: ‘This is one of my major disappointments. These paintings have been in existence for 23–28 years. During these times, there were little positive reviews and feedbacks, since we are not viewing these paintings under a normal cultural setting, and we have all sorts of forces within the realm of public discourse to reinforce other explanations for these paintings. I believe under this environment, even in an environment of Chinese art as seen by Western critics, including modern art, these paintings in China will not be viewed
In the recent retrospective shows, the diverging local and international initial reception of the artworks seems to have converged under the pressure of globalisation. Thanks to a post-colonial turn in the writing of art history and the establishment of transcultural perspectives which question the dominance and Eurocentrism inherent in the master narrative of modernism that tends to exclude multi-layered and ambivalent practices such as those of the ‘Stars’, European and American scholars nowadays welcome the opportunity that cases such as the ‘Stars’ photographs offer. They allow research into the conditions of a worldwide, entangled, art-related knowledge production, to consider how modern art history was written, and the epistemological consequences this poses for example for the (photographs of) artworks of the ‘Stars’ today.

The larger historiographical question – if these photographs can be considered part of photographic archives of artworks and their makers, which feed into a particular knowledge and thereby form a shared discursive as well as material space of collective memory across national boundaries – can tentatively be answered positively: it seems that this visual heritage forms a vital part of a ‘Chinese’ memory ‘gone global’. The photographs, which travelled and surfaced not only in the context of the early vanguard exhibitions in China, but also in foreign press reviews or in a university institute in Germany render them visible and allow a re-actualisation of the affiliated discourse at the same time.

With regard to answering the question of whether this memory can also be claimed to be collective, we might need to wait for further results of a trend to put historical materials, such as the ‘Stars’ artworks and political claims on display in historicising exhibitions and catalogues. At least, the academic discourse inside and outside of China seems critically aware of the value and need to discuss such documents and media, while it remains to be seen if political agents will also acknowledge and support the re-actualisation of the ‘Stars’ achievements in a broader way. The ambivalent, if not outright negative official reaction, the partly on-going media and exhibition censorship or even unfounded state violence, which some of the matured members of the ‘Stars’ such as Ai Weiwei or Huang Rui have met after their return home, tell us that their historical stances and photographic mediations are not simply past history, but carry an enormous relevance for the most recent Chinese artist generation.

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