

# Chinese Sculptor Ridicules Mao's Ubiquitous Red Book

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PEKING — In a dark brown rectangular wooden sculpture titled "Self-Portrait," Wang Keping depicts himself as a creature with the body of a man and the head and tail of an ape.

Above this beast, squashing him down, is the spine of a book. The tome is not labeled. But many of the thousands of visitors who trooped to a controversial exhibition of works by Mr. Wang and 30 other unofficial Chinese artists recognized it as the famous Little Red Book of quotations of Mao Zedong.

"It was such a weight on us we regressed into apes," explained Mr. Wang, a slightly unkempt looking man with long hair protruding from beneath his gray workers cap.

The exhibition represented a major breakthrough for China's youthful, avant-garde artists, who, unlike members of the official Peking Artists Association, are not supported by the state. The Government art academies tend toward conservative reproductions in the traditional Chinese ink-wash style or hortatory woodblocks of heroic Communist figures.

## Shown in a Courtyard

The group of unconventional artists had tried since June to get its works shown, and had even staged a protest march through Peking on Oct. 1. But they were twice banned by the police or other local authorities, even though they thought satisfactory arrangements had been made.

Finally, the group, which styles itself the "Starts," was given permission to exhibit its works in a lovely old Chinese courtyard in the Beihai Park, once part of the Imperial City. Its 170 paintings and sculptures were hung in a series of four red-painted pavilions built around a pool frozen over by Peking's winter.

Mr. Wang and the others are not sure just who decided to let them have their show. The courtyard was rented by the Peking Artists Association. But whoever was responsible, they see it as an encouraging sign that China's Communist Party leaders are sincere in calling for "a hundred flowers to blossom" in art and literature.

The exhibition included paintings in a variety of modern Western styles that had earlier been attacked as decadent or formalistic: imitations of French Impressionists, hallucinatory abstracts and a sprinkling of nudes.

But it is Mr. Wang's brazenly political, often grotesque sculptures that stole the show. A visitor could see a number of young Chinese standing beside them, tracing their distorted shapes in copy books.

As Mr. Wang was explaining his ideas recently to a foreign visitor, a middle-age man approached him for his autograph. As if in apology for the intrusion, the man said: "I was an artist too, until they locked me up for three years because of my sketches. They said I was a counterrevolutionary."

In a traditional Chinese practice, several dozen people left comments scrawled in a visitors' book or have written elegant calligraphic testimonies on large sheets of paper. One note read: "Wang Keping, we congratulate you on your daring. Compared with you, the professional sculptors of China are like walking corpses."

Another said: "Have the Chinese people really gone numb? No, I have seen that the Chinese people's spirit is still alive. This is the best exhibition since liberation," or 1949.

The theme that runs through most of Mr. Wang's works is the arbitrary, unfeeling repression of a bureaucracy that has lost touch with the people. At the entrance to one of the pavilions during the exhibition was a primitive head, titled "The Silent One." One of its eyes is blinded, slashed in a geometrical pattern, "so he gets only a one-sided view," Mr. Wang remarked.

The nose has no nostrils with which to smell, and the mouth is plugged up, a fantasy that recurs in a number of pieces.

"The Art Judge" is a disfigured gnarled head bent round a corner with a heart growing on its cheek, "so he can more easily show his loyalty," Mr. Wang said. "In our society only the most ugly people are allowed to judge art."

Another small sculpture, in dark brown wood that could almost be an African carving, is of a misshapen man with mouth agape, his two arms protruding to the side. In one hand is a little red piece of plastic, "Hold High," shorthand for hold high the banner of Chairman Mao.

Ironically, in 1966, at the start of the Cultural Revolution, Mr. Wang himself, along with other self-righteous Red Guards, invaded a Christian church and threw out all the Bibles. He



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"The Silent One," by Wang Keping is in art exhibition in Peking.

burned Western magazines and even denounced Western art as decadent.

Later, Mr. Wang, who is now 30 years old, became a scriptwriter for the Government radio, but found his efforts to write plays ignored, although he still is employed as a writer for the government radio. Eventually he turned to sculpture, though he had few books or models to copy from.

It was an interest he had first picked up as a boy in the city of Tianjin, where his father was a Communist Party member and writer. There he had liked to carve figures and designs on old Chinese seals.

Now Mr. Wang's works are fashioned from whatever bits and pieces of wood he can scavenge around Peking, where lumber of any sort is in short supply. One sculpture is made from a toy wooden gun he found abandoned. The stock has been carved to look like a figure of Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, in a long skirt. The barrel is an extension of her arm, which she is using like a club to beat people.

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