



## MEMOIRS OF “THE STARS” EXHIBITION

*Text by Wang Keping*

The Stars Exhibition was initiated by Huang Rui and Ma Desheng. The official planning and preparation took place in late 1978. Zhong Acheng, Li Yongcun, Qu Leilei, and others joined. I joined later, eventually becoming a member as well. We were mostly young amateur artists passionate about art. We wanted to make something new, something that, as far as we were concerned, was modern art.

Huang Rui worked in a leather goods factory and also as an art editor for the independent publication, *Today*. Ma Desheng made drawings in the research center of a machinery factory, often contributing illustrations to various publications. Zhong Acheng spent over ten years in the countryside under the Cultural Revolution’s reeducation campaign, and was one of the organizers of the major strike of 1978 involving the intellectual youth of the Yunnan Military Unit of Manufacturing and Construction. He had just been transferred back to Beijing and worked as an interim editor at the magazine *World Book*. His father was the eminent film critic, Zhong Dianfei. Li Yongcun, alias Bo Yun, had just been admitted to the graduate department of art history at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He also served as a member of the editorial board at the independent publication *Fertile Soil*. Qu Leilei worked for China Central Television as a lighting engineer. Independent publications often featured his pen and ink drawings under the pen name “six stones”. His father was the renowned writer Qu Bo. I was in the theater company at China Central Television and published scripts in the independent publications *Beijing’s Spring* and *Fertile Soil* as well. (“Independent publication” refers to non–government sanctioned publications officially labeled “underground illegal mimeograph publication.”)

The exhibition preparations were ready by the beginning of the summer of 1979. Huang Rui and Ma Desheng appealed to Liu Xun, the president of the Beijing Association of Artists, for the right to hold an exhibition.

Liu Xun possessed the courage and knowledge of an astute and seasoned man. Branded a “rightist” in 1957, he spent ten years in jail. Having been through so much, Liu Xun was not easily fazed, and he was unafraid to show his support for a group of young people.

Liu Xun went specifically to Huang Rui’s home to look at the works we had gathered and was very pleased, agreeing immediately to help us arrange an exhibition. The only thing was, the exhibition hall of the Beijing Association of Artists was already booked, so we would have to wait until the next year.

Given the inotability of the political climate, everyone concurred that we could wait no longer, and if there

were no other options, we would hold an outdoor exhibition. We set the date around the same time as National Day on October first.

The location of the exhibition was difficult to choose. There were three options: first, the Xidan Democracy Wall; second, the Old Summer Palace (Yuanmingyuan) on the west side; third, in front of the Fuxingmen Broadcast Building (since Qu Leilei and I worked there, we would be able to help with coordinating). All three locations were less than ideal.

One day, we arranged to meet to see an exhibition at the National Art Museum of China. Unexpectedly, we discovered a little garden on the east side of the museum, and decided on the spot to hold the exhibition there. In order to prevent any governmental interference, we kept it a secret for the time being.

The National Art Museum of China is located in the heart of Beijing. On the east side is a small garden at a busy intersection with non-stop automobile and pedestrian traffic all day long. It was the perfect spot for creating a disturbance. I rode by everyday, inspecting every detail of the iron railings on the east wall of the museum, imagining the exhibition arrangements and thinking about how I could hang up my sculptures.

Mid-September, the weather started to cool down. One day, I suddenly discovered that the place we were going to hold the exhibition had been surrounded by a rope. Over ten workers were uprooting the turf under the iron railing. I immediately notified Huang Rui and Ma Desheng. Together, we hurried to the little garden. Watching the workers labor slowly, we realized that information about our plans had been divulged, and the officials reacted by blocking off the wall.

We had no choice but to find another location. But identifying another site such as this one to hang art for an exhibition in a city as densely populated as Beijing was no easy task.

Little did we know, it was only a false alarm. As National Day neared, they sped up the construction work precisely on the corner plot of land we planned to hold the exhibition. They laid a neat layer of cement grid brick.

On the evening of September 25th, the participating artists convened a meeting at Huang Rui's home to resolve specific items about the exhibition. The exhibition date was set from September 27th to 30th, concurrent with the opening of "National Art Exhibition for the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China" being held at the museum. Transportation was a major problem. Huang Rui said that he could contact a truck and have it pick up drawings from his home on the morning of the 27th and then come to my house to pick up my sculptures. After the meeting, we distributed mimeographed invitations and posters we had drawn ourselves.

On the morning of September 26th, Yan Li and I rode to Haidian District to hang posters at the Exhibition Center, People's University, Peking University, Beijing Normal University, along the entire road. Yan Li was among the younger members of The Stars, and was also a published poet whose work could be read in independent publications.

At night, I started to pack up my sculptures. Big and small, there were twenty-nine in all. The political works included *Silence*, *Pillar of Society* (An eye without a pupil, a nose without nostrils, a mouth without an opening, a head without a brain), *Chain*, *Scar*, *Self Portrait*, *Gun* (Jiang Qing), *Long Live the Great Helmsman*, *Hold High*, *Hypocrisy*, *Breathing*, *Faithful* (Dog). *Idol* ("Portrait of Mao) was also an early work, but everyone thought it was better not to include it.

By the time I arranged everything in order, it was already late and just as I was about to go to bed, Huang Rui suddenly scurried up the stairs furtively, saying, "The truck for tomorrow morning has been screw up, the driver was afraid of trouble. I contacted another driver, but he can only come at night." Huang Rui and I made trip after

trip to move the sculptures from the fourth floor to the truck. When we arrived at the middle school attached to the Academy on the east side of the street the museum was located on, again we had to make several trips to move the paintings and sculptures to a friend's third story dormitory room. This man was also very anxious, and would only agree to keep them for one night. I had a colleague who lived in an old apartment across from the museum and said we could store the works in his home each night, but later he went back on his word.

Someone told Huang Rui that the Xidan Democracy Wall—the most important location—didn't have a single Stars Exhibition poster. The people he 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.

September 27th, 1979 was the first day of The Stars Exhibition. At seven in the morning, we gathered at the high school attached to the Central Academy to move the paintings and sculptures. We started to hang the works in the little garden by the east side of the museum on the iron railings along the wall. We finished arranging everything at 8:20.

The 150 works by 23 artists that hung neatly across 40 meters of iron railing included oil paintings, ink paintings, woodblock prints, and wooden sculptures. Some of the large sculptures were placed on the ground and some paintings were hung from trees. The poets of *Today* composed some short accompanying poems that were also arranged next to the paintings.

The small exhibition space inspired a new found feeling of freedom and joy in us all. The subject matter of the exhibited works and the way they were presented showed an intense sense of rebellion.

The crowds grew quickly. Friends from the April Photographic Society were busy shooting photographs and filming movies. Students from the high school attached to the Central Academy of Fine Arts ran over during their breaks, observing and sketching the works. 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 exhibition. 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 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 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 these works are as good as those on display in international exhibitions."

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 chaotic, 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!"

In the afternoon, Liu Xun, president of the Beijing Association of Artists, also arrived. Upon seeing the exhibition, he said, "The exhibition has new meaning and standards. However, if you had waited for me to make

arrangements for use of the exhibition hall, the results would have been even better.”

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 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.”

Before it got dark, everyone took down their works happily, and placed them in the east hall of the museum where museum guards looked after them.

The first day of the exhibition ended.

September 28th, the second day of the exhibition, again everyone met at seven in the morning to move the art works from the museum and start hanging them. We finished hanging the works quickly. A Cheng helped me hang my wooden sculptures.

Just after eight o'clock, A Cheng whispered, “Turn around.”

I turned around, and several police approached.

A Cheng said, “Turn around again!”

I looked again, and saw in the distance, rows of thirty to forty special unit police officers, dressed in white uniforms.

The first people to approach were evidently the leaders. Once everyone was within sight, one of the leaders yelled, “No exhibitions allowed here!”

Everyone became dead silent.

“Take everything down!”

No one moved.

The police officer looked back at the rows behind him, and shouted, “Take everything down, no exhibitions allowed here! Did you hear me?”

Still the artists refused to obey. The police officer was greatly stunned.

Some brave individuals from the crowd asked, “Why are exhibitions not allowed?”

The police officer shouted again, “Leave! Leave if you have no business here! Leave! Leave!” Yelling like he was driving out some chickens.

Crowd, “This is the people’s park, what right do you have to order us to leave? We do not want to leave.”

I continued to hang my sculptures, saying to A Cheng, “Fortunately the police officers start work at eight o'clock.”

The police officer came over and pointed at me, saying, “What work unit do you belong to?”

I asked back, “What work unit do you belong to?”

“We are from the Dongcheng Branch Public Safety Department.”

“We are from the Central Broadcasting Department.”

I purposely emphasized the word “Central.”

“What department do you belong to?”

“We make no distinctions.”

“What are you up to?”

“What are *you* up to?” I retorted.

“Law and order.”

“Propaganda.”

“What is your name?”

“It is written here——Wang Keping.”

Huang Rui went to the front and politely asked, “Why are exhibitions forbidden? We need a reason.”

Police officer, “If I tell you no exhibitions allowed, then no exhibitions are allowed.”

“On whose behalf do you speak?”

“It says here.”

“Take it out to show us.”

“Leave, come with me to the Public Safety Department to see it.”

“We don’t have time, bring it so that we can see it.”

As we were arguing, the distant rows of police officers fell one row short. They were all sitting and chatting on the park benches.

Another police officer interjected, “You will surely fail, I advise you to pack up your things and leave.”

Ma Desheng said, “This is not about advice. If we are breaking the law, you can enforce the law and punish us. If we are not breaking the law, you have no right to interfere.”

A police officer said, “You work in propaganda, don’t you know the Six Clauses of the Beijing Revolutionary Committee Notice?”

I said, “Of course we know it.”

“The notice forbids posting bills, etc. anywhere aside from the Xidan Democracy Wall.”

“This is art work, not bills.”

“‘Bills, etc.’ includes paintings.”

“‘Etc.’ refers only to similar items, and art and bills have nothing to do with each other. Besides, we are not posting them, we are hanging them.”

A police officer said, “Who examined and approved this exhibition?”

“The directors of the National Association of Artists and the Beijing Association of Artists both visited the exhibition in show of their support.”

“Was your exhibition pre-approved?” Hitting the nail on the head with this one remark, the police officer became rather smug.

“What is the problem with our works?”

A police officer, “Well, the public has expressed displeasure of your works!”

Quite a few members of the crowd shouted, “We are the public too, and we think this exhibition is great!”

A police officer, “By holding the exhibition here, you have affected people’s movement and leisure.”

“We have enriched peoples’ cultural lives.”

A police officer said, “Didn’t that man who married a French woman, Tian Li, tell you yesterday that this kind of exhibition couldn’t be held just anywhere in a capitalist country either?”

I was stunned, and shouted loudly, “Precisely. Socialist countries should allow what is forbidden in capitalist countries. Isn’t socialism more democratic and free than capitalism?” After so many years of studying Chairman Mao, my arguments possessed a rather credible ring to them.

An uproar erupted from the crowd. Confrontations with the police were extremely rare at the time.

A police officer said, “A document has existed since 1957 forbidding the unregulated posting of advertisements and publicity materials. Do these count as publicity materials?”

“1957? Ha... Why don’t you brand us as ‘rightists’ first.”

“You better take out documents from the Cultural Revolution, in which case you should execute all of us.”

The crowd grew even rowdier. The few police officers were hopelessly outnumbered, and the officers in white uniforms apparently did not have authority to say anything.

A police officer grabbed Huang Rui and said, “You are the organizer, come with us to the public safety department to discuss this matter.”

Huang Rui and Ma Desheng went with the police officers to a nearby public safety office. The other thirty to forty officers also withdrew immediately.

After an hour, Huang Rui and Ma Desheng returned. Huang Rui said, “The police officers read a huge pile of documents, and I said that none of it had anything to do with our exhibition. One officer insinuated that their orders had come from someone high up.”

We wrote two “letters of protest.” Lu Lin of *Exploration* posted one copy on the Xidan Democracy Wall and we hung the other copy at the exhibition site.

Even more people came in the afternoon, and no one came to interfere.

Teachers and students from the Central Academy of Fine Arts turned out in full force. Yuan Yunsheng and other influential middle-aged painters arrived to offer moral support. Several people said, “You are courageous, and the artwork is good. This is the real art of China.”

Some visitors to our exhibition who had just come out from the *National Exhibition* said, “Your outdoor exhibition really blows away the one inside.”

Ma Desheng discovered that some police officers from the morning had transformed into plainclothes agents by afternoon, mingling amongst the crowds. He purposely walked over and announced, “Have you returned for the art?”

The plainclothes officer awkwardly replied, “What, can’t I look?”

At nightfall, everyone took the works down as before, and placed them inside the east hall of the museum.

After two days of the exhibition, everyone was immersed in a victorious joy. Some speculated that the police would return tomorrow with more forceful tactics, but it was not a major concern for anyone.

It was on this day that China's minister of Culture, Huang Zhen, convened a large-scale press conference with both Chinese and foreign media to announce a conference for individuals working in literature and art that would take place for ten days in October. He said, “Since the Gang of Four was broken up, artists have regained creative freedom. Culture and art are flourishing as never before, and it appears to be a new phase of ‘let a hundred flowers bloom’ and ‘let a hundred schools of thought contend.’ Culture’s spring has arrived...”

September 29th. I rode my bicycle over to the museum early in the morning. I noticed more police officers than usual on some of the street corners and had a bad premonition of things to come. Next I discovered that the exhibition advertisement we hung on the museum was missing. I rushed towards the little garden, and there were only three large bulletins hanging on the iron railing. Several police officers stood there, with their hands behind their backs. The content for all three bulletins were identical. They were written in ink and brush, and stamped on the bottom with two large red seals.

The complete text of the bulletin:

#### Bulletin

Recently, we discovered people hanging posters and holding exhibitions in the park on the sidewalk by the museum, disturbing the public's normal life and social order.

In order to maintain social order, according to the "People's Republic of China Safety Management Punishment Regulations" and related regulations from the "Public Notice" issued by the Beijing Revolution Committee on March 29th, 1979, posting posters, holding exhibitions, hanging objects, and drafting any kind of publicity material are forbidden inside the park next to the museum. Those who break the rules will be dealt with according to the "Safety Management Regulations" and the Beijing Revolution Committee "Public Notice."

East Beijing Polic Department (Stamp)

Bureau of Management of Eastern District for the City of Beijing (Stamp)

Dated September 27th, 1979

I rushed to make a few phone calls. First, I went to the subsidiary high school of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. When I went into the reception office, it was full of police officers, and I backed out quickly. Ambushes awaited elsewhere as well.

I went to a few different places, but couldn't find a telephone, so returned to the little garden. I saw Huang Rui. He told me that there were over 50 police officers in the east hall of the museum. Our works had been confiscated, and could not be accessed. No one foresaw that the police would do this. We were caught completely unaware.

I went to a slightly further away research center to borrow a telephone. First, I called someone I knew in the Council of Legal Matters in the People's Congress. He said that the Council of Legal Matters is only responsible for establishing laws, but had no authority to interfere with the specific execution of laws.

I then rode my bicycle to look for the highest prosecutor of the Supreme People's Court Of Prosecution, Xu Yi. She was accustomed to helping victims of injustice. She immediately made a call to the police department to inquire, and the person responsible who was on duty responded by saying that they were very clear on the situation, and that they were going to persist in banning the exhibition. Otherwise, if it spread, it would become uncontrollable. Xu Yi could only express her hope to the public safety department that confrontations would be avoided as much as possible.

Xu Yi then made a phone call to the Ministry of Culture, in the hopes that the Ministry of Culture could offer some support.

Again, I rushed back to the little garden, and ran into Bei Dao. His wife Shao Fei was also a participant in The Stars Exhibition. Bei Dao seemed to be a bit troubled by the situation, saying that over thirty hooligans came, cursing out loud, and physically harassed him. We artists were no match for them.

Amazed, I asked, "Hooligans are usually always opposed to the police, why would they assist the police today?"

Someone told me that the police brought these hooligans, and pointed to an ugly and ferocious-looking police officer who looked like a coach, standing in the back.

Someone theorized that these hooligans were probably cadets from the police academy. But how could these future proponents of public safety be so despicable? A passerby said quietly, "These hooligans arrived early this

morning in a large truck. First they stayed in the Resident's Committee Hall for a while. They may well be prisoners from the Reform Through Labor Corrections Institution."

We could no longer withstand the hooligans' provocations and besiegement, so we had no choice but to all retreat into the museum.

Over fifty police officers formed a human wall in the east hall of the museum, surrounding our works. A few of the old police officers leading the group were self-purported heads of the Dongcheng Branch Public Security Department, and their attitudes were slightly more moderate.

Friends from the April Photographic Society continued taking photographs, the police officers became more and more agitated. Then they discovered Chi Xiaoning making a film on a small movie camera, and became adamant about not letting go of his equipment until he removed the film and expose it. At the end of the intense argument, Chi Xiaoning ingeniously removed and exposed an unused roll of film. Only then were the police officers pacified.

We negotiated with the police officers to allow us to remove our works. The police officers said, "We can give you the exhibition works, but you should first promise not to hold an exhibition here."

We negotiated to remove the works first, and discuss later. Huang Rui said to the police officer, "We won't exhibit here, so give us the works."

The police officers then changed their mind and said, "You should all return to your own homes, we will send cars to deliver the works to each of your homes."

We unanimously and adamantly opposed this. One person yelled indignantly, "You police officers are still using the old tactics of the Gang of Four!"

One older police officer became very agitated and said, "What? Do you realize that I was imprisoned for ten years for opposing the Gang of Four? Those old tactics? ..." He started tearing before he could finish talking.

I said, "I believe that you were opposed to the old cadre of the Gang of Four. Did you see my work opposing the Gang of Four? Why don't you allow a work opposing the Gang of Four to be exhibited?"

The old police officer replied, "It is no use for you to tell me all this. If you have an opinion, relay it to the top."

One person started cursing, "The orders to stop the exhibition came from the top, but who gave the orders to send the thugs?"

The old police officer did not respond. At this moment, the hooligans standing outside the iron railings were still raising a ruckus. They were bullying and pushing a foreign reporter who was taking photographs and abusing visitors who were unhappy about this injustice.

Suddenly, a reporter from *People's Daily*, Da Liu, arrived and immediately started interviewing members of The Stars about what was going on.

When the old police officer discovered this, he whispered some words into another police officer's ears. Afterwards, the second police officer walked outside of the iron railings and shouted, "What's all the noise about? Stop causing trouble! Leave! Leave! Get out of here!"

For a moment, the hooligans were at a loss about what to do. The ferocious-looking police officer barked an order, and the thugs retreated accordingly.

While we were stuck in a stalemate between the two sides, Liu Xun strolled by at a leisurely pace, asking brightly, "What's up?"

Before anyone could give a detailed response, Liu Xun proposed, "It is inconvenient to talk here, let us speak in the museum guest room."

Everyone treated Liu Xun like he was one of their own, immediately following him to the museum's VIP room. Although we were frequent visitors to the museum, it was our first time entering this luxurious guest room.

Liu Xun summoned everyone to take a seat, and listened in detail to everyone's complaints. He consoled everyone by saying, "You should all have a rest while I call the head of the Municipal Party Committee."

After a while, Liu Xun returned to the guest room, and said to everyone, "The leader of the Municipal Party Committee is very concerned about you. Just now, the Municipal Party Committee secretary (also the head of the Bureau of Propaganda), Comrade Liu Daosheng, told me over the phone: 'I hope everyone calms down and solves the problem. We will surely arrange an exhibition for you in the future. Moreover, we can even post an advertisement for you in *Beijing Daily*.' Comrade Liu Daosheng also said he wanted to personally meet everyone to hear our thoughts."

Sitting on the soft sofa, and after hearing this sugar-coated speech, our anger melted away. It was already noon. Liu Xun said, "Let's go home and eat first. How about let's all meet at the Huafangzhai in Beihai Park this afternoon, and talk more then?" Everyone agreed.

When we walked out of the museum, the large group of police officers had already left. Interestingly, the three bulletins in the little garden had also been removed.

At three in the afternoon, most members of The Stars arrived at the Huafangzhai in Beihai Park.

Beihai Park is the largest park in Beijing, and was formerly the imperial garden of the emperor. The Huafangzhai, Pleasure Boat Gallery, was a set of ancient courtyards with elegantly painted beams and engraved pillars. There was a pond in the middle, remnants of lotus flowers, and dazzled with the flickering sunlight. The pond was surrounded by exhibition halls on its four sides. This was the permanent exhibition hall of the Beijing Association of Artists. A different exhibition took place in each building, despite the fact that there were only a handful of visitors at any given time.

Liu Xun was in the meeting room inside the courtyard. He took out an exhibition schedule and wrote the date we had negotiated for an exhibition. He made two proposals: one, immediately transfer to Zhongshan Park and continue the outdoor exhibition; two, wait until mid-October and hold the exhibition at the Huafangzhai.

We agreed unanimously to the second proposal. If we continued to exhibit at Zhongshan Park, it would be as if our exhibition had not been banned, but only transferred. Mid-October would coincide with the National Culture Conference held in Beijing, and it was a good opportunity to make the exhibition known throughout the entire country.

In the end, Liu Xun suggested that we continue storing the works at the museum, but the east hall received a lot of pedestrian traffic, and wasn't too secure, so the museum had already cleared out another storage space for us. Happily, we also agreed to this. After the meeting, Huang Rui and others rushed to the museum to check on the works. Of course, police offices were guarding them. Not a single work was missing or damaged.

We felt as if we had turned a defeat into victory. We were jubilant, running around spreading the good news. The news spread quickly, but the reactions we received were unexpected.

Some people came by to say:

"Oh, no. You sold out."

"You must fight for more than a mere exhibition, but for the right for artistic freedom."

"If The Stars hold another exhibition at Beihai without a clear explanation, your image will suffer."

"You have to clear the misunderstanding, even if it means losing the opportunity for an exhibition."

Zeng Xiaojun, who helped Yuan Yunsheng paint the murals at the Capital Airport, hurried over to my home from the distant airport, bearing two high-class cartons of Zhonghua cigarettes and saying, “Old Yuan<sup>1</sup> wanted you guys to have this. Old Yuan said you guys have to be tough. Don’t be weak.”

At night, the main members of The Stars held a meeting with the heads of various independent publications in Beijing in Zhao Nan’s home. Xu Wenli, Liu Qing, and Lü Pu of *April Fifth Tribune*, Lü Jiamin of *Beijing Spring*, Bei Dao and Mang Ke of *Today*, Zhao Nan and Lu Lin of *Exploration*, and representatives from *Fertile Soil*, who never revealed their true identities, were all present.

At the beginning of the meeting, the journalists of the various publications expressed displeasure at The Stars’ compromise. Everyone analyzed the current political state of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee: First Secretary Lin Hujia who was a Mao Zedong loyalist as well as a supporter of the President of the People’s Republic of China, Hua Guofeng, and was being attacked from all sides; the newly transferred Secretary of Culture and Education, Liu Daosheng, was slightly more open-minded, and would definitely not get along with Lin Hujia. They went onto say that the Municipal Party Committee was beginning to smell trouble and that is why they gave in a little to The Stars. If The Stars were weak now, it would give them the perfect excuse to back out gracefully.

Journalist of *April Fifth Tribune*, Liu Qing said, “We can’t just take a hit and then be easily appeased by some candy from the authorities. We should pursue whether or not we should have been hit in the first place.”

Liu Qing added, “From a legal perspective, the police department was in the wrong.”

I said, “But we can’t identify a legal clause that would help us either.”

Liu Qing said, “How could that be? The new constitution stipulates: Citizens have the freedom of cultural activities.”

I was overjoyed to hear this, “Really? Wow, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that before.”

Ma Desheng also could not remain seated, “That’s the greatest boost!”

Xu Wenli said, “You really are just a bunch of artists, you don’t even know the constitution.”

I said, “I have several copies at home, but isn’t it just filled with hollow words?”

“The constitution stipulates many things, like freedom of speech, freedom of press, the right to form an association, to gather, to protest... so many. It’s all pretense.”

Xu Wenli said, “If Chinese people are too scared to even demand the rights granted by the constitution, then what hope does China have?!”

Liu Qing then followed by saying, “The constitution is the first law, the foundational law. Presently, the Chinese legal system is not complete, and lacks the corresponding supporting laws to assist the implementation of this basic law. It is illegal for the police to use irrelevant laws to ban the Stars Exhibition. Furthermore, when a specific law is out of line with the constitution it becomes void.”

“Commoners breach the law, so the police arrest them. If the police breach the law, who is accountable?”

“The authorities have always trampled commoners. This time, they should get a taste of their own medicine.”

Xu Wenli stood up, and asked everyone loudly and clearly, “A victorious battle lies ahead, are we fighting or not?”

Mang Ke hurried up and yelled, “We must fight, even if it’s a defeat!”

Borrowing the publicity of the *April Fifth Tribune*, Xu Wenli and Liu Qing suggested a democracy symposium at the Xidan Democracy Wall on October 1st, National Day, to protest the illegal ban of the Stars Exhibition.

We started to have misgivings.

Huang Rui opposed at first, “I don’t agree. Acting in this way will effect our October exhibition. I feel that being able to hold another exhibition is victory. Artists should be able to gain victory through art.”

I opposed Huang Rui’s opinion, “Right now, everyone is looking to us to fight on behalf of the people, and we should have a sacrificial spirit. Merely restoring the exhibition is not a victory, it is only helping the Beijing Municipal Party Committee quiet down public opinion.”

Most people supported my point of view, so I seized the opportunity to rally people behind me, “Merely holding a symposium at the Xidan Democracy Wall won’t have much of an impact. If we’re going to act, we have to act big. We should organize a demonstration!”

Huang Rui was a little anxious, “If we have a demonstration, the exhibition will undoubtedly be cancelled.”

I said, “Not necessarily. There are two possibilities: one, we all end up at the police station; two, the exhibition opens as planned.”

Representatives from the independent publications were also of two different opinions. Liu Qing felt that a parade was a bit extreme, and could actually backfire; it could be held against The Stars. Xu Wenli approved of going all out. In the argument, the radicals had the upper hand.

Xu Wenli raised his arm and shouted, “Everybody, think. We initiate a demonstration, and it’s ‘check’ for us in this game of chess. But my guess is that this demonstration won’t be possible. It’s the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic, so if someone in Beijing wants to have a demonstration, Lin Hujia will be scared. I expect that he won’t have the guts. He will surely pay us a visit to negotiate, at that time, we can force him to admit to wrongdoing.”

There was a burst of cheers. Huang Rui opposed adamantly as before.

Liu Qing said, “Whether or not to hold a demonstration is to be decided by The Stars. If members of The Stars don’t agree to a demonstration, then forget it. We’re just here to support you.”

It was silent for a while.

Huang Rui said, “I don’t agree with having a demonstration. I am not afraid. I am thinking what a shame it would be if the exhibition could not continue. If everyone wants to be reckless, then I’ll join you. I am the head of The Stars, if they are going to arrest anyone, I should be the first.”

A Cheng realized that the outcome was already a foregone conclusion, and slapped my hand heartily. He stood up suddenly to announce, “Brothers, I will take a step before others. Everyone’s opinions are all very reasonable, so I need not say more. I am currently under investigation by the people from the political work office, so I am going to leave first.”

After A Cheng left, members of Stars voted on the demonstration.

With a swift swoop of his large hammerhead-like fist, Ma Desheng said, “Demonstration!”

Qu Leilei smiled and said, “It looks to me like we can have a demonstration.”

The various independent publication representatives also voted on the demonstration. It was agreed upon unanimously.

The decision for the demonstration was resolved, and we immediately drafted the “United Proclamation.”

The proclamation condemned the East Beijing Police Department’s rough and illegal ban of the Stars Exhibition and strongly asked the Beijing Municipal Party Committee to correct the Police Department’s misconduct. It seemed as though if the Beijing Municipal Party Committee did not react according to expectations before nine in the morning on October 1st, we would organize a demonstration.

The meeting ended at two in the morning. Xu Wenli and Liu Qing organized people to copy the “United Proclamation” into big letter posters and to post them on the Xidan Democracy Wall. The other copy was for the First Secretary of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, Lin Hujia, and was delivered to the confidential mailroom of the Municipal Party Committee at 10:45 a.m.

September 30th. The day before National Day, the capital was suddenly bedecked in extravagant decoration.

In the morning, Ma Desheng, Qu Leilei, and I delivered the Stars Exhibition charge against the Dongcheng Branch Public Safety Department to the reception desk of the Supreme People’s Procuratorate in the Legation Quarter in Beijing.

The person in charge, Old Liu, received us. He said that the situation would immediately be relayed to the people above, but also expressed that this case would not be easy to solve. It involved the Beijing Municipal Party Committee. The Supreme People’s Procuratorate had never prosecuted an organ of authority.

Later, the three of us went together to the Xidan Democracy Wall to check to see if the “United Proclamation” had been posted, and whether or not it had been ripped or covered up.

In the most obvious spot of the Xidan Democracy Wall, our “United Proclamation” had attracted quite a crowd. We milled around, listening in on peoples’ discussions.

At three in the afternoon, the core members of Stars and various heads of independent publications convened a meeting at Liu Qing’s home. A little past four o’clock, Liu Xun and a middle-aged person suddenly knocked on the door.

In low spirits, Liu Xun said, “The Municipal Party Committee received your letter, and is very concerned with this case. The Association of Artists has already arranged for you to hold your exhibition at the Huafangzhai in mid-October, but you still want to stage a demonstration. This is very bad.”

Over twenty people squeezed into Liu Qing’s small, two room home. Add onto that people’s internal heat, and it really felt as though an explosion was about to take place.

Liu Xun sized up the number of people present apart from The Stars, and didn’t say much after that.

All eyes were on the middle-aged man. We thought he would reveal some of the intentions of the Municipal Party Committee, except he didn’t say a single word. Everyone quickly figured out that he was only a low-ranking secretary.

Representatives of the independent publications could no longer hold back, and fired the first shots:

“If the Municipal Party Committee is truly concerned with this case, why doesn’t it express it as much?”

“This incident can’t be solved by simply granting us an exhibition hall. First we need to clear the right from wrong!”

“Is it legal for the police department to use such rough tactics to ban the ‘Stars Exhibition’?”

“If the ‘Stars Exhibition’ was illegal, you should show us the clear corresponding legal clauses.”

“If the Municipal Party Committee committed no wrong, why can’t it accept investigation?”

Liu Xun listened wide-eyed, and the middle-aged man seemed a little nervous.

With an ulterior motive, Liu Xun asked non-Stars members present in the room to introduce themselves.

When the heads of the “underground publications” introduced themselves one by one, the middle-aged man seemed even less at peace.

In the end, Liu Xun dispensed a few more words of advice and aware of their uselessness, and said: “Fine, we will relay your opinions to the Municipal Party Committee.” The two people left in a rush, squeezed into a little car, and left.

It was evident that the Municipal Party Committee had no intention of admitting wrongdoing. Everyone started discussing plans for dealing with this.

Several people speculated that the Municipal Party Committee would try to deliver an ambiguous answer at nine in the morning the next day as a delay tactic to get past National Day. Even if this happened, we wouldn't overdo it. We would consider it a victory, if even a small victory, because party leaders did not yet have the habit of admitting wrongdoing. However, if the Municipal Party Committee refused to do something about it, we would firmly carry out plans for a demonstration.

Everyone discussed the main principles for the gathering and demonstration slogans.

Liu Qing suggested that the demonstration slogan be, "Fight for political democracy, fight for artistic freedom!"

I said, "Fight" should be changed to "Demand" to roll more easily off the tongue. Everyone agreed.

The slogans of the demonstration were:

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!

We chose Huang Rui, Xu Wenli, Bei Dao, and Lü Pu as frontline commanders.

The second line of command was composed of Wang Keping, Liu Qing, and Mang Ke. If the first line of command got arrested, the second line of command would take over.

The course of the protest was established as: starting from the Xidan Democracy Wall, going along Chang'an Avenue, past Tian'anmen Square, then making a right turn at the south entrance of Wangfujing, ending up at the Beijing Municipal Party Committee building.

After the meeting, Xu Wenli pulled me aside and said, "Keping, come to my home. There are big brushes and paper at my home, come and write some big characters. I am not good at big character writing."

I was aware that he had a deeper intention. He didn't expect many Stars members to participate in the demonstration. In future investigations, it was very likely that the responsibility would be pinned on their "underground publication." Afterwards, this actually happened. The charges in the court hearing for both Liu Qing and Xu Wenli included instigating and participating in the Stars Exhibition demonstration.

I rode my bicycle and rushed over to Xu Wenli's home. I found the brush and paper, and cut the paper according to the dimensions of the red banner cloth. I wrote the ten large characters "Demand Political Democracy, Demand Artistic Freedom."

October 1st, 1979, the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. It was the first time in almost ten years, since the 1971 Lin Biao Incident took place, that the government held a National Day parade. Today, we wanted to initiate the first non-government organized demonstration in thirty years. I woke up from bed early and organized and destroyed some letters and notes. I also cleaned out the paper scraps in my pockets. When I left home, I left my house keys behind. I didn't ride my bicycle, taking the bus instead to Xidan.

It started to drizzle, but still there were many people surrounding the posters at the Democracy Wall. I saw people from the independent publications, and asked them if the Municipal Party Committee had issued a response. They all said no.

Someone came to announce that the people from *Beijing Spring* had not reached an unanimous decision, and would not be participating in the protest. Also, *Fertile Soil* would only be participating under the name “Art Group.”

We started gathering at 9 sharp. There were not many people from The Stars present. Most people were enthusiastic participants in democratic movements and general observers. The most comprehensive turnout came from foreign journalists stationed in Beijing.

When we erected the banner before the Democracy Wall, I was greatly shocked. The big characters that I had written the night before had been changed to “Demonstration to Uphold the Constitution.”

I asked Xu Wenli, who responded, “Last night, we analyzed the situation, and concluded that the possibility of a demonstration was very great. For the sake of not overly provoking officials and striving to win the support of the more liberal factions within high-level government, we changed it to ‘Demonstration to Uphold the Constitution.’ What you wrote is still on the backside. People will still be able to see it during the protest.”

I thought this must have been Lü Pu’s idea. Lü Pu was always very firm when it came to handling affairs. He was particular with strategy; his father was the chair of the China Association of Musicians, renowned composer Lü Ji. He had a clearer understanding of the upper-level factions of government.

At 9:10, a police motor tricycle arrived and parked for a while before turning back and heading east.

At 9:15, Xu Wenli stood in a high place and announced the beginning of the demonstration. Five to six hundred people crowded around. Ma Desheng gave a speech on behalf of The Stars. Huang Rui read aloud the charge The Stars filed against the Dongcheng Branch Public Safety Department regarding the illegal and rough ban of the “Stars Exhibition.” Afterwards, Xu Wenli and Lü Pu spoke on behalf of independent publications. The public was aroused and broke out into applause every now and then.

After the speeches, Xu Wenli announced the start of the demonstration and read aloud the six principles of the gathering, emphasizing in particular, “If you encounter someone who tries to cause a disturbance, you must not fight back if you are hit, or talk back if you are cursed at.”

Going along with a sudden burst of slogans, a few hundred leaflets were tossed into the sky. The banner was positioned towards Chang’an Avenue. Following this, the crowds pushed eastward. Not far from the starting point, the number of people in the protest had already reached a thousand, mostly young people who heard about the protest and rushed over joined by ordinary passersby.

Propped on his pair of crutches, Ma Desheng walked at the forefront in the center of the marchers. Huang Rui, Xu Wenli, Lü Pu, and Bei Dao were spread out, leading the marchers. Qu Leilei carried a sign with a slogan. Gan Shaocheng and Zhu Jinshi did not want to reveal themselves in public, but nonetheless were swept along with the masses. A few other Stars members participated as well, but they kept their distance from the main procession.

When the vast and mighty protest procession arrived at Liubukou, a few hundred police officers suddenly rushed out, lining up along Chang’an Avenue. They blocked the road in a frenzied atmosphere of violence.

A few shouts, and the marchers in the procession scattered in chaos. Several people climbed into trees to watch the ensuing battle. The surrounding crowds of onlookers also dispersed quickly. In an instant, the

thousand-plus marchers were reduced to twenty or thirty people.

Tian'anmen was densely visible from where we were and this time, it was probably our turn to "give blood." I forced my way past the right pole of the banner and walked to the front right. Yang Jing of *April Fifth Tribune* was holding the left pole (later on, Yang Jing was also arrested and upon conviction given a heavy sentence).

Step by step, the protest procession marched toward the police officers' line of defense. Not a sound came from the marchers. Our footsteps spurred on our heartbeats. The police officers across the street also looked nervous: a ferocious battle, imminent crisis.

Suddenly, from within a group of onlookers standing on a distant part of the sidewalk, came the shout, "Charge!"

The commander stopped before the police officers, and the entire procession stopped.

A few seconds of silence allowed the situation to pass in peace.

One police officer yelled, "Where are you going?"

Xu Wenli answered, "Beijing Municipal Party Committee."

Police officer, "You are forbidden to cross Chang'an Avenue, make a right turn, and walk along the subway line."

The commander acknowledged the order, and the police officer made a path for him to walk through. The procession turned north towards Xinhua Street. The masses that had just scattered suddenly crowded around again following the procession southwards.

The procession turned eastward on Qiansanmen Avenue. This time, the vast and mighty procession committed yet another misstep: more than ten little vehicles of foreign journalists and various embassies stationed in Beijing tailed behind the procession. Aside from journalists, many foreign exchange students, foreign experts, and diplomatic personnel also joined the ranks of the procession. The Minister-Counselor of the French Embassy, Claude Martin, mingled quietly in the crowd.

All along the way, the police officers set the traffic lights green so that the procession could pass quickly. When the procession walked by Qianmen, passing vehicles and people all stopped to watch the excitement, and at once, it seemed like a sea of people.

The Beijing Municipal Party Committee building was up ahead. Everyone proposed that we stop for a while, and have the commanders lead everyone in shouting some of the slogans at the building. We only saw the human heads rock and sway inside the few hundred windows of the big building.

When we arrived before the Chinese Communist Party Beijing Municipal Party Committee building, we erected the banner on the platform in front of the building. I intentionally let "Demand Political Democracy, Demand Artistic Freedom" face outwards.

Ma Desheng, Xu Wenli, and Lü Pu again delivered inspiring speeches.

Ma Desheng started with, "Citizens, compatriots...," and spoke on everything from art and politics, to The Stars and housing. His speech proved powerful in agitating the crowds.

Xu Wenli appealed to the public by expounding at great length on the present-day evils of the Chinese Communist Party from a political perspective.

Lü Pu was good at theory and used Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong's speeches to attack the bureaucratic system.

When the speeches ended, the first line of command represented the group and entered the Municipal Party Committee building. The second line of command stayed outside to maintain the procession.

Mang Ke rallied the crowd into a procession in singing “The Internationale,” “In Union There Is Strength,” and “The .” A few Municipal Party Committee personnel stood to one side, without opening their mouths. Mang Ke rushed over to them and yelled loudly, “These are revolutionary songs, what kind of social–class sentiment is it if you don’t sing?!” These people could not help but start humming along.

Less than one hour later, the representatives exited the Municipal Party Committee building. They said the receptionist for people seeking an audience with the higher–ups received them. The visit was documented, but they refused to discuss any issues.

The first and second lines of command discussed the kind of response they wanted from the Municipal Party Committee, but it did not seem feasible. Our gathering had already achieved the goal of staging a demonstration. There was no need to drag it on.

Xu Wenli made the announcement for the procession to disperse.

The demonstration had ended peacefully.

But afterwards, I heard some people talk about the internal situation, and it was a bit breathtaking:

On September 30th, when Lin Hujia saw the “United Proclamation” of The Stars and the “underground publications,” his anxiety spread like a flame. He immediately summoned Liu Xun, pounding the table while reprimanding Liu Xun and instructing him to go at once to dissuade The Stars from staging the demonstration. At the same time, Lin Hujia immediately issued a report to Chairman Hua Guofeng.

Yet, when Liu Xun saw Lin Hujia again, Lin Hujia said complacently, “If they want a demonstration, let them have a demonstration.”

On the morning of October 1st, after the demonstration started, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Political Bureau conducted an emergency study on how best to deal with the situation at hand. Two opinions were put forth, one supported repressing the demonstration, the other opposed it. The conclusion was a compromise: If they continued to make a scene, then they would start making arrests.

The Political Bureau relayed this to the Beijing Municipal Party Committee, and the Beijing Municipal Party Committee relayed this to the Municipal Public Safety Department. The people at the public safety department reported back immediately, “These people just disbanded.”

After October 1st, Huang Rui and Ma Desheng wanted to contact Liu Xun, but it was very difficult to locate him again.

No long after, Beijing hosted the National Culture Conference. In the opening address, Xia Yan criticized The Stars, saying, “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. Instead, they all focused on the demonstration.”

Zhou Yang, the leader of the culture and art world prior to the Cultural Revolution, however, spoke during the National Culture Conference and said: the Stars Exhibition had talented people and should be protected.

There were also cultural representatives from all over who criticized the ban on The Stars Exhibition.

One day, we ran into Liu Xun at the museum and asked whether we were still allowed to hold an exhibition. Liu Xun expressed that he no longer had the authority to decide. He also said, “You notified all the foreign journalists stationed in Beijing about your demonstration. Various major publications around the world and television stations reported on it; the negative impact was too great. Furthermore, there are those who continue to write articles about you...”

On October 16th, the Beijing Municipal Middle People's Court had a public trial of Wei Jingsheng, but the news was supposed to be secret. As a matter of fact, a secret trial was to be held before the verdict was publicly announced. The authorities instructed Chinese Central Television to issue the news after the trial.

The day before the trial, the news bureau of China Central Television wanted someone from the light engineering department, and coincidentally, it was Qu Leilei's turn. Qu Leilei received the news, and secretly told Ma Desheng. Propped on his crutches, Ma Desheng hurried to notify people at *Exploration* and *April Fifth Tribune*. Zhao Nan immediately took a portable tape recorder that Wei Jingsheng once used and gave it to Qu Leilei on that same night.

The next day when the trial began, they announced "The public trial of Wei Jingsheng for counterrevolutionary activities," but the only observers present at the time had all been pre-chosen by officials. Qu Leilei turned on the portable tape recorder in his bag and left his open bag next to the audio amplifier. All of Wei Jingsheng's responses throughout the entire trial were recorded.

Right after they left the courtroom, Qu Leilei immediately handed over the portable tape recorder and cassette tape to Zhao Nan. That same night, Liu Qing transcribed the tape and again onto a big-character poster. He posted it on the Xidan Democracy Wall the next day. The massive crowd was jampacked together.

Wei Jingsheng received the severe sentence of fifteen years for calling for democracy, a verdict that made one's blood boil. Wei Jingsheng's convincing argument in court immediately aroused strongly sympathetic responses in China. Internationally, his trial also caused a large shake-up. The US State Department issued a statement. Human rights organizations of different countries also initiated different movements in support.

The big-character poster of Wei Jingsheng's trial was quickly torn up by plainclothes police officers. Liu Qing organized people to print it onto flyers to be distributed at the Xidan Democracy Wall.

One day, one of the brave flyer distributors was arrested by the police. Liu Qing strode boldly forward to the Beijing Public Safety Department to vindicate the person who had been arrested. The police station freed the young fellow, but it was the beginning of over ten years of life behind bars for Liu Qing.

Day after day, the weather got colder. One windstorm, and it was winter. Occasionally, Huang Rui and Ma Desheng still tried to find Liu Xun.

On November 20th, we received a notice from Liu Xun. Suddenly, we were permitted to exhibit at the Huafangzhai. The exhibition dates were from November 23rd to December 2nd, a total of ten days.

On the morning of the 21st, we borrowed a pedicab and immediately began transporting paintings and sculptures. We started arranging the works in the afternoon. Just as we were hanging works, the person in charge of Huafangzhai, Old Tang, came over and said: The *Beijing Daily* refuses to publish advertisements for The Stars Exhibition. We immediately sent someone to find *Beijing Daily* reporter Da Liu to ask for help.

We finished arranging the works on the morning of the 22nd. At 1:30 in the afternoon, Liu Xun arrived. Liu Xun inspected the works closely, and raised an objection to two accompanying poems, as well as two of my sculptures, *The Moralist* and *Art Judge*, suggesting that it would be best if we did not incorporate them into the exhibition.

*The Moralist* is a bloody male reproductive organ developed into a bust, symbolizing licentious politicians who often promote the most beloved scholars of classical ethics. *Art Judge* is an extremely ugly bust, like the ugliest but often most beautiful judge. The six necessary principles are carved on the corner of its mouth, alluding to Mao Zedong's "Six Standards."

Liu Xun advised me to take them down. He tried to explain that he wasn't trying to conduct an inspection and that he was only expressing his own opinions for us to consider.

Huang Rui and others all advised me respect Liu Xun's opinions. I said that if I was allowed to insist on my own opinion, then I would stand firm on keeping the works in the exhibition.

The exhibition opened on November 23rd at 9:00 in the morning. Few people showed up on the first day. Old Tang nonetheless animatedly ran over to say, "In the morning, we sold over 500 tickets! Your exhibition is a success! The exhibitions here usually only sell a maximum of 70 to 80 tickets a day and sometimes, only three or four."

In the afternoon most of the independent publications and friends from the Democracy Wall had showed up. Everyone was celebrating victory. Someone said, "This is the first time since the founding of the People's Republic of China that a group who revolted was victorious."

November 24th was the second day of the exhibition. More visitors arrived. An American journalist came in the morning. We asked her how she found out about the exhibition and she responded strangely, "*The People's Daily* published an advertisement for your exhibition today!"

We were shocked and overcome by a frenzy of joy.

November 25th, Sunday. In the morning, over 1,700 tickets were sold. In the afternoon, over 4,000 tickets were sold. Old Tang went from a state of happiness to concern. He speculated that in the future, there would be even more people, and safety measures would have to be taken.

A member of the audience said, "Why don't workers, peasants, and soldiers attend the exhibitions organized by the museum expressly for their benefit and yet, this exhibition, which was not meant for workers, peasants, and soldiers, has ironically attracted many of them?"

A few people told me that upon visiting our exhibition, people from their universities, factories, and offices started making large, handmade advertisements for the exhibition themselves, posting them in their work or school units to appeal to others to attend.

After a few well-known art-world figures saw the exhibition, they said, "Without seeing your exhibition, we simply admired your rebellious spirit; after seeing your exhibition, we have even greater admiration for your artistic skills."

In the afternoon, United Press International journalist, Irene Mosby, came to conduct an interview. Before leaving, she said, "In 1974, I attended the first avant-garde outdoor art exhibition in the suburbs of Moscow in the Soviet Union. I really admired their courage. Now, we know that there are such artists in China as well. The standard of the works in this exhibition is a bit higher. Your mistake was getting ahead of the party leaders."

Artist Bai Jingzhou accompanied a few graduate students from the art academy secretly doing work on the modernist school. After they saw the exhibition, they said to Bai Jingzhou, "This group of people are not only unafraid of causing a stir, they can also produce astonishing works. With brave people like them, even us less brave people can bask in a little bit of the glory."

When the exhibition hall closed, a few friends crowded around and gave us some warnings, "Keping, watch out, don't keep talking to foreigners." "Be careful, there is no dearth of plainclothes police here." "Do you know what these foreigners are here for? When the time comes, you will end up being a scapegoat!"

November 30th, the fourth day of the exhibition. At noon, Liu Xun notified us that in the afternoon, there would be a symposium inside the meeting room in the Huafangzhai courtyard. Some figures from the art world as

well as representatives from news agencies hoped that we would be able to provide some self-criticism during the event.

In the morning, the entire meeting room was full of people. Liu Xun delivered a few opening remarks before allowing people to speak freely. The people who spoke in the beginning all praised The Stars profusely.

Sun Kexiang, a graduate student of the Central Academy of Fine Arts Art History Department and the chair of the Student Association commented systematically on the unique significance of The Stars Exhibition in Chinese modern art history. He said, "I think Wang Keping's sculptures reach the standards of the great masters. This is not only the view of one person, there are many professors at the academy who believe this."

Liu Xun knew the purpose of the symposium, so quickly summarized a few statements and asked a journalist from the Xinhua News Agency to speak. The Xinhua reporter was obviously antagonistic. The first thing that came out of his mouth was the question, "Foreign journalists have endowed The Stars with a few emblems of distinction, naming them dissident artists, underground artists, rebel artists. May I inquire, do you accept these designations?"

I said to Huang Rui quietly, "I am a dissident artist" and prepared to stand up to respond. Huang Rui hurried to restrain me and said, "Don't, don't!"

Li Yongcun quietly said, "Brother, don't. It's a trap. You can't acknowledge anything! Let me respond." Li Yongcun stood up, "First, I don't think that dissidents exist in China like those in Eastern European Socialist countries. We artists, including those independent publications, all possess the spirit of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. We oppose the bureaucrats who oppose reform and liberation. We can't be considered dissident. Neither can we be labeled dissident artists. Second, regarding underground status, perhaps it is a misnomer or mistranslation. We are amateur artists, sculptors, and unofficial professional artists. Third, regarding our status as rebel artists, from a certain perspective, we are rebelling against old traditions."

The Xinhua journalist interrupted angrily, "Tradition should be inherited!"

I yelled, "I am a rebel artist!"

The Xinhua journalist asked in a stern voice, "Do you still believe that the October 1st demonstration was in accord with the party?"

Huang Rui wanted to harmonize the atmosphere, and said, "The demonstration did have some negative effects, but if the Beijing Municipal Party Committee had been willing to admit wrongdoing, it could have been avoided altogether. The responsibility was not all ours."

The Xinhua journalist advanced hungrily, "*April Fifth Tribune* and others from that group are unrelated to The Stars Exhibition. Do they have ulterior motives for participating in the demonstration?"

Huang Rui was firm but gentle, "They were supporting us."

I asked the Xinhua journalist, "May I ask, after you conduct this interview, will you report information according to the facts?"

The Xinhua journalist said, "Of course. We are trying to refute those foreign journalists. This kind of information is only for foreigners."

Ma Desheng was unable to keep silent any longer, "So Chinese people won't be able to read it then? Attention journalists! Why have only foreign journalists reported on The Stars Exhibition? Never mind if they write something right or wrong. May I ask, where are all the Chinese journalists? Why is the Xinhua News Agency afraid of reporting on such a major event for the Chinese public...?"

The forum ended on bad terms and information that the Xinhua journalist had prepared to report had been

aborted.

Early winter was still warm. A whole slew of days saw pleasant weather. More and more visitors came to the exhibition. A group of high-level cadres also mingled into the crowd. One day, Liu Xun saw me and laughed, saying, "After Municipal Party Committee secretary Liu Daosheng saw the exhibition, he said that there wasn't anything unexhibitable about these works. Furthermore, he indicated that in the future, a park for young people to freely hold art exhibitions could be opened. Comrade Daosheng also said, 'I know Wang Keping's father. He is a writer in Tianjin who was an eminent figure in the 1935 Student Movement in Beijing.'"

December 2nd, the final day of the exhibition. Some visitors complained that it was even more crowded than a public bus. Old Tang told us they sold a total of 8,100 tickets that day. He speculated that, including the invited guests and those who got free invites through friends, at least 9,000 visitors walked through the door that day.

Ticket earnings were equally impressive, but as per custom, none of it went to the artists. We didn't want to fight over it. The many volumes of visitor guest books we walked away with were our greatest reward.

In March 1980, the official publication, *Meishu* (Fine Arts) published an article by the young editor Li Xianting on The Stars Exhibition. This was the first domestic commentary to introduce The Stars (not counting internally circulated documents that were critical of The Stars).

Early in the summer of 1980, The Stars held a meeting and agreed to establish a "Stars Art Society" and register officially with the Beijing Association of Artists. This time, the main members of The Stars were: Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Zhong Acheng, Li Yongcun (Bo Yun), Qu Leilei, Wang Keping, Ai Weiwei, Yan Li, Mao Lizi, Yang Yiping, Li Shuang, Shao Fei, Zhu Jinshi, Gan Shaocheng, Yin Guangzhong, Zhao Gang, and others.

When we discussed plans for the 1980 exhibition, everyone decided to conquer the National Art Museum of China. Zhong Acheng's father Zhong Dianfei was branded a "rightist" in 1957, and was therefore Jiang Feng's friend in adversity. The first time we held an exhibition, Jiang Feng had already expressed support. This time, we would let A Cheng do the bidding and try our luck that way.

To advance rapidly, we would have to rely on A Cheng's single strike. A Cheng undertook the great mission and paid a visit to Jiang Feng. Jiang Feng was not one to Favoratism, and said neither coldly or warmly, "Let's see your new works first."

Everyone quickly gathered a group of new paintings in Huang Rui's home. My sculptures were difficult to transport, so remained in my house. One day, Jiang Feng drove his little automobile first to Huang Rui's home to look at the paintings, and was very satisfied with what he saw. Afterwards, he drove to my home. The others rode their bicycles and arrived at the same time.

I arranged the sculptures I was preparing to exhibit one by one onto the table and invited Jiang Feng to have a look. Jiang Feng was full of enthusiasm and nodded repeatedly.

Momentarily stupefied, Jiang Feng said slowly, "I will mention your exhibition request during the next board meeting of the Association of Artists. But the vulgar works, the works that are too abstract, can't be exhibited."

Right before Jiang Feng left, I suddenly took out the wooden carving *Idol* (portrait of Mao Zedong), and asked Jiang Feng whether it could be exhibited. Jiang Feng stared at "*Idol*" for a long time, his expression stern. The people present all looked at each other in blank dismay, believing that we had committed a blunder and fearful that we might have agitated our chances for an exhibition. Who would have guessed that without disclosing any feelings or uttering a word, Jiang Feng simply turned around and walked away. We understood immediately what he was thinking but couldn't say.

Not long afterward, Jiang Feng sent someone over to notify us that the Association of Artists approved our exhibition at the museum. The specific time would be arranged for us by the museum.

We waited for a long time with no response. Huang Rui and Ma Desheng contacted the museum again. The museum's attitude was extremely reticent. They used the excuse that the exhibition halls were already fully scheduled, that that re-scheduling would be difficult. We inquired whether we could use the two large exhibitions halls on the third floor that were vacant throughout the year. At first they said someone was inside mounting paintings. Then, the museum told us they cleared out one room for us to exhibit in. Huang Rui and Ma Desheng were grateful, as usual.

The exhibition date was set from August 20th to September 4th. On August 16th, *People's Daily* published an advertisement for us in an eye-catching section.

Two days before the exhibition opening, we rode the pedicab to transport the exhibition works to the museum and started arranging them. I transported *Idol* over as well and locked it inside a crate, temporarily keeping it inside.

This time, Jiang Feng was on holiday in Beidaihe. The museum staff knew that Jiang Feng had previously inspected the works, so only bothered to take a brief scan, barely asking any questions.

The exhibition opened at 9:00 in the morning on August 20th. The visitors rushed to the third floor. I took *Idol* out of the box and placed it in a pre-designated spot that happened to be in the center of the exhibition hall, where a portrait of Mao Zedong usually hung. All at once, a large audience gathered and stood in tacit understanding. A few foreign journalists shot photographs incessantly.

The chief of the museum hurried over. Staring at *Idol*, a blank look came over his eyes and he left immediately to ask for instructions. Floor by floor by floor, he inquired for directions on how to deal with the situation. It is uncertain on which floor he finally got to rest.

The Stars' works were unconventional, which was like a breath of fresh for the Chinese people, who had been sealed off for dozens of years. The exhibition quickly caused a stir in Beijing. Approximately 5,000 visitors came each day. When the visitors finished looking at the exhibitions, they were always sad to leave, causing the exhibition room to be crowded beyond capacity.

The museum was also concerned about safety. On August 24th, they cleared out the opposite exhibition hall on the third floor. We were allowed to move some of our works into the other space so that the crowds could spread out.

A rare and moving sight appeared before the museum gates each morning: a few hundred people would line up to purchase tickets. The museum felt that ticket profits were considerable, and unexpectedly proposed extending our exhibition by three days, until September 7th.

September 7th was a Sunday. Museum staff told us that on the final day of the exhibition, they sold over 9,000 tickets. In sixteen days, over 80,000 visitors came, breaking museum exhibition records by a long shot.

At the time, Bei Dao had just been transferred to work as an editor at *New Observer*, one of the more influential bi-monthly national publications. Bei Dao added fuel to the fire by commissioning articles on The Stars published in the September 10th issue of *New Observer*. Among the articles were old writer Feng Yidai's "Joyful Exploration" and Li Yongcun's alias A Man's "The Continuation of the Street Exhibition," as well as six photographs, including one of *Idol*. This action expanded the influence of The Stars nationally. The Propaganda Department of the Communist Party Central Committee was enraged those articles. Bei Dao was discharged soon afterwards.

The success of The Stars Exhibition caused the panic among high-level figures in the art world and an attack was immediately launched at Jiang Feng.

Jiang Feng hastily returned from Beidaihe. Once back in Beijing, he came under attack. He visited the exhibition at the museum, and was extremely displeased with us. He said that we exhibited some paintings he had originally disapproved.

Jiang Feng was subjected to continual attacks due to his support of The Stars Exhibition. He suffered severe mental and physical injuries. Indignantly, he departed the world two years later, on September 30th, 1982.

It got warmer but occasionally turned cool again; starlight is not the first light of morning. The Stars were fortunate to find a gap in a period when the upper ranks of the Communist Party were engaged in a power struggle. But not long afterwards, the political terrain became even more callous. Deng Xiaoping came to power and immediately banned the Xidan Democracy Wall. Democratic activists were detained in succession. Next, a critical film campaign was launched against the film, "Unrequited Love." Again, it was a dim period for both the literary and art world. Never again were The Stars able to shine.

During The Stars Exhibition, two visitors left messages that struck me as particularly profound:

*I hope that when the stars descend, it will be a sunny morning.*

*When night arrives again, will stars still appear in the sky?*

*Written in 1989*

*Revised in 2007*