

## A Brief Introduction to Beijing's Stars (*Xing Xing*) Art Group

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At the end of the 1970s, ideological control was loosened in China after the disastrous ten years of the Great Cultural Revolution and a string of political struggles. Deng Xiaoping's (邓小平) willingness to reform emerged. Against such a historical background, there was a grassroots surge in the circles of Chinese modern literature and arts in Beijing. In 1979, an art movement featuring the Stars (*Xing Xing* 星星) Art Group, the first avant-garde group since the establishment of People's Republic of China, took place in Beijing. There were many similar events from July to September in that year. For example, five young artists from Guizhou Province and one painter from Sichuan Province displayed their works at Xidan Democracy Wall to express their aesthetic ideas. They wanted to take this chance to break through the limitation that art must serve politics and bring the right of artistic expression back to individuals. A group of young Beijingers launched an exhibition under the name of the 'No Name Painting Association' (无名画会) in June 1989 with the support of the Beijing Artists Association (北京市美术家协会) who provided the exhibition venue. Obviously some room for self-expression in China since the end of Great Cultural Revolution was appearing. Another group of young Beijingers launched another grassroot art group, Stars Art Group, in early July that year. They took a more avant-garde position, displaying their works on the wall outside of the National Art Museum of China on 27 September. The exhibition attracted a large audience of professionals in art circles. Three days later, however, on 30 September, Beijing Public Security Bureau banned the exhibition as a disturbance of public order, posting an official notice. After discussion, the artists marched from Xidan Democracy Wall to the building of the Beijing Municipal Committee of the Communist Party on 1 December. Policemen guarded the route to maintain the order. The marching team announced a slogan, 'We Want Artistic Freedom'. After a negotiation between the municipal officials and the members of the Stars Art Group, the party committee agreed that the demands of the artists were partially justifiable. They instructed the Beijing Artists Association to provide a venue for the Stars Art Group's exhibition. The march lasted three hours and ended peacefully. As the venue was already booked for another exhibition, the Stars Art Group's exhibition was scheduled at the end of November. Because of the two extra months, the Stars Art Group artists had more time to prepare. They summarised the feedback from the audience to the outdoor exhibition and took the time to produce more work. Some new members joined them, so the delayed exhibition was more diverse and more individualised. The delayed exhibition was launched at Painting Zhai Fasting (画舫斋) at Beihai Park, an exhibition space for the Beijing Artists Association. The exhibition was held for three extra days. The art event had a huge impact in China. Overseas media also reported this breakthrough with astonishment.

When it came to May 1980, the Stars Art Group began to prepare a second edition. But the Beijing Artists Association said they were unable to make the final decision. After some effort, the artists invited Jiang Feng (江丰), the head of the National Artists Association (全国美术家协会), to visit a member's home to view their new work. Jiang Feng did not offer his opinions immediately as to whether he was for or against them. Shortly after that, he arranged an exhibition at the National Art Museum of China for the Stars Art Group in August 1980. It was a rapid development for an outdoor exhibition to enter the museum in eleven months. It showed that the long-oppressed energy resulted in great support from various parts of society for the new cultural experiments of the time. The exhibition was a huge success, attracting more than 10,000 people a day at its peak. The audience left much feedback. The atmosphere was enthusiastic. From the outdoor exhibition in September 1979 to the delayed exhibition in Painting Zhai Fasting in November 1979, then to the exhibition at the National Art Museum in August 1980, three exhibitions over two editions by the Stars Art Group in-

spired a trend of individualised, free art creation, with their influence reaching out across China.

But the applications for any following exhibitions were all rejected. It was because the idea of a political movement in China, its rise and fall, was still experienced through the mindset of class struggle. Meanwhile, the door to the outside world had been opened. People moved to the west through various means, such as studying overseas, visiting or attending exhibitions, and marriage. Almost all the key members of the Stars Art Group moved overseas between 1981 and 1986.

The paintings displayed for the three exhibitions, plus the works made in the following years by the key members of the Stars Art Group, were mostly bought by westerners. There were many overseas exhibitions for their works, including the Stars Art Group Avant-garde Art Tour Exhibition in 1985, launched jointly by the New York Municipal Government and Vassar College, and the Tenth Anniversary Tour Exhibition of the Stars Art Group, launched by Johnson Chang (张颂仁), a Hong Kong art dealer, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and France. The most recent exhibition for the Stars Art Group was the Twentieth Anniversary Exhibition in a Tokyo gallery in 1999. As a market operation, they all sold their works at individual exhibitions taking place in galleries in the west in order to support themselves, which is understandable.

During the forty-odd years from 1979 to the present, the diversity of China's modern arts has resulted in many individualised and creative ideas, seen in installations, performance art, computer art, and even body painting. It feels quite sentimental to take a look back at the Stars Art Group. How many people can still remember their work? The audience for the Stars Art Group's exhibitions at the time were mainly Beijingers and a few outsiders living in Beijing. What people got was its spirit disseminated via various information. But history is history. With the passing of time and social transformation, things will become clearer. Many friends in art circles today would like to see the work because back then they only heard about them. The opportunity came in 2000 when Yan Li (严力), a member of the Stars Art Group, happened to meet Norman Spencer, an American who loves Chinese films and art, at a Chinese film event in New York. When Mr. Spencer heard Yan Li telling him about the Stars Art Group, he asked why there was no introduction to it in books about Chinese modern art. He was told that the history of the Stars Group was a forbidden topic in China for a long time. In the next year, when Mr. Spencer was teaching English in Ningbo City, China, for two months, he visited Yan Li, who was visiting his family in Shanghai. After reviewing the materials about Stars Art Group that Yan Li had, he proposed a book project and an oral history project. The book, *Things are Symbols of Themselves*, was co-edited by Yan Li and Spencer and published in 2005, with a preface by Spencer. The oral history project, using audio tapes, with the members of Stars Group was executed by Zhao Yanying (赵燕英), an independent producer in Beijing. After editing the book, Yan Li met Haibo (海波), the curator of the White Canvas Gallery (艺事后素现代艺术博物馆) in Nanjing. Haibo planned to launch a retrospective exhibition of the Stars Art Group. After two years of hard work, they collected more than seventy paintings produced between 1979 and 1982 by a dozen of the Stars Art Group members. The exhibition was launched at Beijing Today Art Museum in 2007 with an album, *Origin Point*, published at the same time. It includes an interview with Mr. Spencer. There was no other exhibition of the original works of the Stars Art Group after the 2007 event. There was a document exhibition for the fortieth anniversary of the Stars Art Group launched at Beijing OCAT Institute in 2019. Meanwhile, Huang Rui (黄锐), the organiser of the Stars Art Group, collected materials from the members and published a more complete history of Stars Art Group, *Stars 79-80*, in 2019.

Yan Li, December 2020 in New York