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Their Irony, Humor (and Art) Can Save China

By **Andrew Solomon**;

On Aug. 21, the "Country Life Plan" exhibition was scheduled to open at the National Gallery in Beijing. Though the paintings were indifferent, and had to the ordinary eye no hint of political significance, officials ruled that many failed to show the positive side of life in the People's Republic and were therefore unacceptable: the artists were permitted to hang only about 20 percent of their work. The prime mover behind "Country Life Plan," Song Shuangsong, was furious that the exhibition had been edited. He told friends that on Aug. 25 he would go to the gallery and cut off his long hair, a symbol of his individualistic way of life.

At noon that day, Song, a professional barber, friends and a reporter from Shanxi television all gathered in the exhibition room. As the haircut progressed, chance visitors to the gallery stopped to watch. Song faced first in one direction, then in another, holding a solemn expression for a while, then grinning and posing. After 20 minutes or so, the barber soaped Song's face, produced a straight razor and began to shave him. At that moment, the director of gallery security came in and saw the crowd and cameras. "Who is the authority behind this behavior?" he asked, his face tight with rage. "This is my exhibition," Song said, "and I take full responsibility."

You would have thought, to witness the scene that ensued, that the Government of Deng Xiaoping would be destroyed by this haircut; it was as though Song Shuangsong had been caught holding a bomb rather than a performance. Everyone was thrown out of the room. The doors were secured with heavy chains and padlocks. The exhibition was closed down permanently and immediately. Song was led out roughly between two guards.

One Westerner who strayed into the performance turned to me with a shrug and said: "I guess they really get you if you're fighting for democracy here. Do you think these guys will ever succeed?" He had arrived at the popular Western conclusion that an artist who runs up against the state must be, directly or indirectly, working toward free elections, a constitution and the rest of what we mean when we say democracy.

There is an apparent logic to this conclusion, but it is grounded in a misreading of China and the Chinese. It misses the point that the haircut had in fact been entirely successful. The acts of defiance of the Chinese avant-garde function very legitimately within their system, but are not designed to be interpreted within ours. And the difficulty for the West -- politically, socially and culturally -- is to understand how these passionate advocates have made themselves an integral part of a delicately balanced group enterprise, instead of behaving with what the Chinese would deem coarse Western-style self-interest.

What looks radical often is radical, but not always in the ways you think. In Nanjing dialect, the sounds "i luv yoo" mean "Would you care for some spiced oil?" "What the West does, encountering our art," the artist Ni Haifeng said, "is to think we're saying we love you, when we're only having a private conversation about cooking." Soul of the Avant-Garde

Chinese society is always hierarchical; even the most informal group has a pyramid structure. The "leader" of the Chinese avant-garde is Li Xianting, called Lao Li (Old Li, a term of deference, respect and affection). "Sometimes it's easier to say 'Lao Li' than 'Chinese avant-garde,'" the painter Pan Dehai said. "Both mean the same thing." Li Xianting is now 46 years old, a relatively small man with an eccentric beard and a quality of intelligent gentleness and considered kindness that sometimes borders on radiance. He is a scholar, able to read many characters; he knows the history of Chinese art and is informed about Western art.

Lao Li lives in a small courtyard house, typical of old Beijing; it is the heart of Chinese avant-garde culture. Mornings are off-limits, since he sleeps until lunch, but in the afternoon or the evening you can always find artists gathered there, sometimes 2 or 3, often 20 or 30. Everyone drinks tea; at night, occasionally Chinese schnapps. The conversation can be grandiloquent and idealistic, but more often it is simple and even gossipy: which exhibitions have been good, whether someone is going to leave his wife, a string of new jokes.

Lao Li's house has just three small rooms and, like most courtyard houses, no indoor bathroom and no hot water. But it is a cozy, comfortable place, and once you have arrived and crowded onto the banquettes you can stay for hours. If the conversation goes very late, you can even stay over. Once this summer, a group of us talked until almost 5 A.M.; miraculously, there was room for all eight and we were so tired by then that we slept soundly. If there had been 20 of us, there would also have been room. Lao Li's house is like that.

It's hard to explain exactly what Lao Li does: though he is a fine writer and curator, his main role is to guide artists gently into their own powerful history. He gives them a language in which to experience and discuss their own work. Wherever I went in China, we spoke about Lao Li: his recent essays, whether it was right for one man to hold so much power, whether he thinks himself more important than the artists he discovers and documents, what kind of women he likes, whether he has changed since his travel to the West last year.

"The artists bring him their new paintings the way children bring homework to a teacher," said a member of the Beijing art circle. "He praises or criticizes it, and sends them to their next projects." Artists from every province in China send Lao Li photos of their work, asking for his help. He travels to see them, and wherever he goes he makes slides; his archives document every meaningful artistic effort in modern China. When he finds interesting artists, he invites them to Beijing. Through Lao Li, the art world is kept constantly invigorated with fresh blood.

For all his scholarly accomplishments, Lao Li does not sustain a critic's objective distance, and his detractors fault him for this. His response is always as much empathic as critical, and his pleasure in work comes largely from his sense of moral purpose. Lao Li devotes himself to encouraging those ways of thinking that empower his society. It is an agenda higher than, and different from, the interpretive mission of an art critic.

The artists in his circle define themselves as members of the avant-garde; one gave me a printed calling card with his name and, below, "Avant-Garde Artist." At first, I found the definition bewildering: many of these artists were not, by Western standards, particularly avant-garde. As I talked to Lao Li, I understood that what was radical in this work was its originality, that anyone who cleaved to a vision of his own and chose to articulate that vision was at the cutting edge of Chinese society. Lao Li is individuality's greatest champion. The quality of his singular humanism is to make way for freedom of spirit and expression in a society that, through its official strictures and its internal social mechanisms, does not allow for original thought.

"Idealism?" Lao Li said at one point. "I hope that a new art can appear in China and that I can help it. Pre-'89, we thought that with this new art we could change the society and make it free. Now, I think only that it can make the artists free. But for anyone to be free is no small matter." Some History

"Chinese art rests on three legs," Lao Li explained. "One is traditional brush and ink painting. One is realism, a concept imported from the West at the beginning of this century. One is the international language of contemporary Western art."

The period from 1919 to 1942 brought general disillusionment with traditional Chinese literati, or scholarly, painting; when Mao took power, a heroic style based on the Soviet model became the official language of revolutionary art. It was not until 1979 that the Stars group initiated the avant-garde movement. It was part of the Democracy Wall movement, which brought together social, cultural and political impetus for change. "Every artist is a star," Ma Desheng, one of the Stars group's founders, has said. "We called our group Stars to emphasize our individuality. This was directed at the drab uniformity of the Cultural Revolution."

Artists declaring their individuality, ordinary though they sound to a Western ear, were in the China of

the late 70's completely new and remarkable. The members of the Stars group, who had never trained at official academies, could not show their work, so in 1979 they hung their paintings on the fence outside the National Gallery. When they encountered police resistance, they demonstrated for individual rights.

Between 1979 and 1989, as the Chinese Government was liberalizing, exhibitions of Western art appeared at the National Gallery and students would spend days there. In 1977, the art academies, which had been closed down during the Cultural Revolution, reopened, and young artists began to go through the unspeakably grueling application process, taking their exams over and over again for the few places in the Zhejiang Academy in Hangzhou and the Central Academy in Beijing. In China, even those who railed against society wanted the academic formal training that they felt entitled them to speak and to think. In 1985, five critics, including Lao Li, took out a loan and privately set up Fine Arts in China, a magazine that became a voice for new art movements until it was closed down in 1989. These other critics, who were at least as important as Lao Li, have since either emigrated or lapsed into relative silence.

Many artists at this time, as a sign of their disdain for social norms, gave up cutting their hair. Ignoring the prurient repressiveness of Chinese society, they spoke freely of women, did not conceal the details of their personal lives, told dirty jokes. They sat up at night discussing Western philosophers, artists, poets. Much previously unavailable work was suddenly published, and they read voraciously. Despite their general looseness, however, most had jobs and were painstaking in the execution of their duties. Art they made for themselves, showed with great difficulty and sold only occasionally to "international friends" (the phrase, beloved of artists, is Mao's euphemism for foreign sympathizers).

As artists took up arms against their society's values, they tended to use Western language. Some Western critics, looking at this art, have dismissed it as derivative. But that Western language was powerful in China simply because it had been forbidden; the use of it was calculated and meaningful. The artists of the Chinese avant-garde have no more copied Western styles than Roy Lichtenstein has copied comic books or than Michelangelo copied classical sculpture. They have used Western styles cannily and meaningfully to accomplish artistic ends of their own. The form looks similar; the language is imitative; the meaning is foreign.

The last gasp of the exuberant Chinese art movement came just months before the June 4 massacre in Tianamen Square. In February 1989, the "China/Avant-Garde" show opened at the National Gallery under the slogan "No U-Turn." Ten years earlier, the Stars had fought to hang their work outside the gallery, but now the critics of Fine Arts in China joined with others to put on a monumental exhibition of the most radical work of all the new artists of the Chinese avant-garde, a fiesta of individuality. Many artists thought this show would give their work the official imprimatur it needed to reach the population of China.

The show opened in an atmosphere of naive ecstasy, its symbol the Chinese road sign for "No U-Turn." At the opening, two artists fired gunshots into their installation. Officials, shocked by what they had let loose, closed the exhibition immediately, and the dreams of the avant-garde were left in ruins. Today, some artists have seen "confidential" memos in Government files that say no measures will be counted too extreme to prevent another event like the '89 show.

The closing of the exhibition paralyzed Chinese artists; they were discussing the next step when the June 4 massacre took place. Artists and idealists realized that their influence was being ignored. The critic Liao Wen, who is Lao Li's girlfriend, has written: "Today, surrounded by the ruins of bankrupt idealism, people have finally come to an unavoidable conclusion: extreme resistance proves only just how powerful one's opponent is and how easily one can be hurt. Humor and irony, on the other hand, may be a more effective corrosive agent. Idealism has given way to ironic playfulness since 1989. The way artists think and feel, as well as the way they live, have all undergone a transformation. Now when friends get together, they get business out of the way quickly, and then they are only interested in eating, drinking and having a good time. It is hardly an atmosphere conducive to the serious discussion of art, culture and the human condition. People these days find all that stuff irrelevant."

Some artists emigrated in the period before '89; many others, immediately afterwards. Most of the great figures of the old avant-garde have fled the country; only one member of the Stars group remains in Beijing. And yet the idea of "No U-Turn" goes on. Those who have remained, and those who have come of age since, do make art. Dozens go to Lao Li's house every evening without fail. Purposeful

Purposelessness

Lao Li's taste in art extends more readily to painting than to performance, conceptual work or installation. Of the six categories of painting that he has defined, the most generally accepted are Cynical Realism and Political Pop.

Cynical Realism is very much a post-'89 style. Its primary exponents, Fang Lijun and Liu Wei, and its other practitioners, including Wang Jinsong and Zhao Bandi (who doesn't like to be called a Cynical Realist), all have high-level academic training and are accomplished in photo-perfect figurative painting. Fang Lijun paints men without hair caught in disconnected proximity: one is in the middle of an enormous yawn; one grins at nothing; black-and-white swimmers float in a blank sea. The characters are always idle, sitting or swimming or walking around with complete purposelessness. Using very sophisticated composition and exquisite technique, Fang depicts an absence of activity that seems hardly worth depicting. The result is often funny, lyrical and very sad, a poignant imaging of what he calls "the absurd, the mundane and the meaningless events of everyday life."

Liu Wei and Fang Lijun are always grouped together, artistically and socially. They went to the same academy and have been friends for years. Liu Wei is the son of a high-level general in the Red Army and he usually paints his family. In the eyes of most Chinese, highly placed army officials live well and are happy; Liu Wei portrays "the helplessness and awkwardness of my family and of all Chinese people" in his work. His pictures are hilarious, brilliant and quite grotesque.

"In 1989, I was a student," Liu Wei said. "I joined the democracy movement, like everyone, but didn't have an important part of it. After June 4, I despaired. Now I have accepted that I cannot change society: I can only portray our situation. Since I cannot exhibit in China, my work cannot be an inspiration here, but painting helps to relieve my own sense of helplessness and awkwardness."

Wang Jinsong conveys this message with almost plastic smoothness. Zhao Bandi's work is very subtle, slightly twisted, a series of meticulous and beautifully colored monumental images of people imprisoned and alone at the edge of tedious despair. The Cynical Realist movement is not entirely cynical; the idealism of these artists lies in their portraying a cynicism their society would deny. These works are like cries for help, but they are also playful and roguish, presenting humor and insight as empowering defenses. "I want my paintings to be like a thunderstorm," Fang Lijun said, "to make such a powerful impression when you see them and to leave you wondering afterwards about how and why."

Political Pop is the most popular with Westerners. Its leading figure, Wang Guangyi, loves money and his own fame, and his work has reached prices in excess of \$20,000. He recently rented a \$200 hotel room just "to feel what it was like to live like an art superstar." Wang wears dark glasses even when he is inside, has a long ponytail and is always mentioned by other artists as an exemplar of Western values in China. He is currently at work on a series called "The Great Criticism" in which he plays on the comical parallels between the publicity Mao once negotiated for his revolutionary policies and the advertising campaigns of prosperous Western interests. The names "Band-Aid" or "Marlboro" or "Benetton" are placed against idealized young soldiers and farmers wearing Mao caps.

"Post-'89," he said, "I worry that with people so vulnerable, commerce will harm their ideas and their ability to have ideas, much as AIDS can destroy people's love relationships or their ability to have love relationships. Of course, I enjoy my own money and fame. I criticize Coke, but drink it every day. These contradictions are not troublesome to Chinese people."

Yu Youhan, in Shanghai, paints Mao over and over, usually overlaid with patterns of flowers taken from the "peasant art" the Chairman loved. Mao mixes with common people or sits at ease on a folding chair; sometimes his face is clear, but sometimes there is a flower blocking one of his eyes or his nose. One of Yu's recent paintings is a very pop double portrait: on the left is Chairman Mao, applauding one of his own principles; on the right, Whitney Houston applauds her own music. Both are copied from existing photographs, and the similarity between the two is uncanny. Individualism by The Numbers

Traditional Chinese painters trained by copying their teachers; originality was reserved for old age, when you might make changes so slight that they were almost invisible. The history of traditional Chinese art is a very rich but very slow history. The avant-garde movement goes at breakneck pace.

The artists who engage fully with the question of individuality are perhaps the most interesting in China right now. Paradoxically, the New Analysts Group in Beijing, which currently includes Wang Luyan, Gu Dexin and Chen Shaoping, has decided, as an experiment, to suppress the individual in art. After the '89 avant-garde show, it adopted a resolution stating that members of the group cannot sign their work. Shortly thereafter, it established rules of operation. The artists in the group conceive these rules together, pass them by majority vote and agree to be bound by them.

"Facing the rules, we are all equal," Wang Luyan explained to me. "Individuals must put aside their character for the sake of the group. Since we regard the rules as more important than the artists, we express ourselves in a language of regulations. Symbols and numbers best convey our ideas."

So the New Analysts Group has made up complex formulas to express its interrelationship; its members use these to produce graphs and charts. One recent piece begins: "A1, A2 and A3 are individuals before reaching the set quantity, and also stand for the order of action after reaching the set quantity. A1, A2 and A3 set arbitrarily their respective graph for measuring, i.e. graphs A1, A2 and A3. A1, A2 and A3 share a set quantity, i.e. table A." This kind of deliberately arcane absolutism becomes a playful critique of the Chinese principle of conformity, delivered always in the most serious possible manner. The work, regulated though it may be, is some of the most original work I saw in China. "Originality is the byproduct of our cooperating according to rules on which we have agreed," Wang Luyan said.

Mention Song Shuang song and his haircut performance and these artists shake their heads. "Imagine growing long hair," Gu Dexin laughs, "having hair and clothes such that people in the market or at the bus station could tell you were an artist!" Their individuality is infinitely more powerful because it is camouflaged. When a recent Western exhibition that included the work of Gu Dexin ended, the packers confused Gu's work with their own packing material and his piece was accidentally discarded. "I like for my work to be thrown away," he said. "There is so much art in the world to preserve and study and I don't want to clutter further the history of art." To this, both others nod: nonindividuality here is an almost unconscious impulse, opposite to what Chinese artists see as the appalling self-importance and egotism of Western artists.

Zhang Peili and Geng Jianyi, based in Hangzhou, also play with these questions. Hangzhou is a beautiful city, an ancient capital of China, set beside the famous West Lake. Artists have a more relaxed time there than in Beijing or Shanghai: they are less frequently interrupted by international friends or by local dramas. Most Hangzhou artists are graduates of the Zhejiang Academy, and like Ivy League students who remain in Cambridge or New Haven, they have an ambivalent but affectionate relationship to their old student haunts. In the mode of students, they preserve an emphatic connectedness to abstract principles, but they bring a mature sagacity to these abstractions. They think more than artists elsewhere, and perhaps produce less. When I was in Hangzhou, I lived in the academy, surrounded by students and student work. When I wanted some quiet time to talk to Zhang and Geng, we took a boat for the afternoon and paddled around the West Lake, eating moon cakes and drinking beer and looking at the view of mountains in the distance. In the evenings, we would eat fish and seafood and dumplings at outdoor tables set up in small market streets. Once or twice, we were joined at dinner by the artists' old teachers from the academy. There was, in Hangzhou, an atmosphere of sheer delight in art that was quite different from Beijing or Shanghai.

Zhang and Geng's identity was transformed after June 4. "Before the massacre, there was so much noise," Zhang said, "a deafening roar of protest. Then the tanks came and everyone immediately fell silent. For me, that silence was more terrifying than the tanks." Zhang and Geng made an enormous painting of a massacre victim, mutilated and bloody, and hung it by night on a pedestrian bridge. "Perhaps if you see someone being killed on the other side of the road," Zhang said, "you will run across to stop the murderers, without thinking. It was like that." Fearful after that, they went into hiding in the countryside, expecting all the time to be imprisoned.

Before the '89 exhibition, Geng Jianyi sent a questionnaire to a long list of avant-garde artists. It went in official-looking envelopes, with a return address to the National Gallery, and purported to be one of the many bureaucratic papers that are an inescapable part of daily life in China. The first questions were standard -- name, date of birth, etc. -- but then "What are your previous exhibitions?" might be followed by "What kind of food do you like?" or even "What kind of people do you like?" Some of the artists understood at once that this was an artist's project and gave creative answers and drew funny pictures, but others, eternally paranoid in the face of bureaucracy, took it seriously and answered every question.

For the '89 exhibition, Geng posted these forms.

"It is not just that our society does not encourage or support individuality," Geng said. "We do not allow for it where it clearly exists." He is now a teacher at the Institute of Silk Technology, where he teaches painting and design. Last year, Geng suggested that instead of teaching technique the staff should teach the reasons behind that technique. He was allowed to outline his proposals to the staff of the school, who, having said they were interested in innovation, rejected them on grounds that they were incompatible with established teaching standards.

Geng has a great lightness of touch and a quality of gentleness. Zhang Peili is much harder, much tougher. And though his work is also often humorous, it has an edge of brutality. "There has always been anger in my work," he said. "I need to make the work, but it does not relieve my anger. It's not like going to the toilet."

Zhang has worked in video, performance and painting. Before the '89 show, he cut up white plastic medical gloves and sent pieces of them to various artists. Sometimes these were caked with red and brown paint. The artists who received pieces of apparently bloodied gloves were horrified and bewildered; more and more of these strange packages began to arrive in their households. Then one day, everyone who had been on Zhang's mailing list received a formal letter, explaining that the gloves had been sent completely at random, that they had spread like a hepatitis epidemic and that the whole matter was now over. No further gloves were sent.

During the Hygiene Campaign of 1991, when everyone in China was instructed on cleanliness, when an absurd and patronizing bureaucratic language was used to interfere with the most personal aspect of people's lives, Zhang Peili did his classic video of "The Correct Procedure for Washing a Chicken." The video is two and a half hours long. It is appalling and fascinating to watch the sufferings of the poor chicken as Zhang repeatedly covers it in soap and rinses it down and lays it out on a board. It is an enormous relief to see the chicken go free at the end of the sequence, but you cannot help suspecting that it will never again be the same chicken. Zhang's flat delivery masks a profound empathy; the ethical manner of these Government campaigns is revealed through such work in all its hypocrisy, shallowness and cruelty.

The installation artist Ni Haifeng lives (in principle) on a rather remote island off the coast of southern China, but he is among the most social figures of the avant-garde scene and is often in Beijing, Hangzhou or Shanghai. Ni is laid back and very humorous, with a broad-ranging if sometimes unfocused intelligence. He is in some ways the freest spirit of all, making art when and as the mood descends, going where he feels like going, a gypsy king in the avant-garde.

Ni receives a salary as a teacher at the Zhoushan Normal School, but has been relieved of teaching responsibilities because in the eyes of his peers he is too weird. In 1987, he began to paint on houses, streets, stones, trees and he covered his island with strange marks in chalk, oil paint and dye. He has said that he wished to reduce writing to the "zero level" where it is without meaning. "When culture invades private life on a large scale," he said, "the individual cannot escape being raped. From this viewpoint, my zero-level writing can be taken as a protest against the act of rape. I also want to warn people of the dangers inherent in cultural rape." An Artists' Village

In China, your housing is ordinarily provided by your work unit; if you strike out on your own, you give up many protective services and must find yourself a place to live, which is both expensive and difficult. Officially, you cannot move without Government permission. Many avant-garde artists therefore work at least part-time in official jobs; others manage to live just past the edge of legality.

One place they live is the village, commonly called Yuanmingyuan, about 45 minutes from central Beijing. Built by local farmers about five years ago, it has dirt roads and a traditional layout -- rows of one-story houses, each with a small courtyard and a tiled roof. There is one toilet shed and one telephone for everyone. Vines grow on some of the houses and screen doors are always slamming. Nearby there are farms and a park. In one direction are the vast grounds of Beijing University and in the other, the Summer Palace itself.

The village is a mecca for Western tourists and journalists. There have been articles in dozens of countries describing the village as the center of the Chinese art scene, because its blend of freedom and

accessibility makes it look like a center to a Western sensibility. The Chinese are not an immediately open people: many of the artists of the avant-garde are secretive, elliptical to the point of obscurity and emotionally inaccessible. In contrast, the artists in the village are an easygoing lot and have a kind of casual professionalism in their presentation of their own work. You can wander along knocking on doors and any of various locals will volunteer to be your guide. It has now reached the point at which some artists say they have no time to work any more.

With one or two notable exceptions -- particularly Fang Lijun -- artists in the village are not particularly distinguished. Many imitate each other, unimaginatively combining Cynical Realism and Political Pop. In fact, when you look closely at the paintings produced there, you feel that most of these artists are only a half step away from jade carvers or other practitioners of local handicraft for foreign consumption. Certainly it is the steady influx of Western money and Western interest that allows the artists to live like this.

"We're part of the post-'89 phenomenon," the painter Yue Min-Jun said to me. "Before '89, there was hope, political hope, economic hope, all very exciting." Yang Shao-Bin, another painter, picked up the thread. "Now there's no hope," he said. "We've become artists to keep busy." Talking to them, you feel that this rhetoric, too, is fashionable and that it sells well. Cynicism is much the fashion in the village, but it is a flattened cynicism, more the stuff of student coolness than of despair. Missing Mao

One thinks of the Cultural Revolution as a terrible time for intellectuals: many were killed, others sent to hard labor in mines, in factories or on peasant farms. But you do not hear in China the tones of horrified disgust that Russians use when they speak of Stalin or the Romanians when someone mentions Ceausescu. In avant-garde artistic circles, there is a love for Chairman Mao that is ambivalent but incontrovertible.

"Even those of us who were opposed were believers, at least part way," Lao Li said late one night over tea. Branded a counterrevolutionary at the beginning of the revolution, he was imprisoned for most of it. "Mao was a very convincing man," he continued, "and we intellectuals felt we were sad figures. In the Cultural Revolution, the people thought only of building a pure and perfect society. I disagreed with their particular idealism and fought against it, and would fight against it again, but I can say without hesitation that there is nothing in our commercialist society today that is equal to it. A misguided idealism is better than no idealism at all."

I went to see the painter Yu Youhan in his mother's apartment in Shanghai, a few rooms at the top of the house that once belonged to his family. His father, a banker, was killed during the Cultural Revolution, and he went through re-education after being denounced in school. But when I probed for anger in him, in the face of these events, he shook his head. "When we reject Chairman Mao, we reject a piece of ourselves," he said. The Hong Kong dealer Johnson Chang, who represents almost all of these artists, said: "It's like an unhappy childhood. You cannot dwell on it all the time and impose it on others, but if you disown it completely, you will be an artificial or incomplete person."

Fang Lijun does not, in general, care to talk about politics, but late one evening we somehow got onto the subject of Mao. Fang's family were once landowners, and they had as bad a time as any during the Cultural Revolution. Fang once said he had become an artist because painting kept him busy at home; he could not go out because everyone felt entitled to attack him if the mood struck. "I will never forget the day that Mao died," he said. "I was at school when they announced it, and everyone broke down immediately and began to cry. And though all of my family hated Mao, I too began to cry, and in fact I cried loudest and longest of all." When I asked him why he had cried, he said, "It was in the program, and we lived by the program." And when I asked him whether he had felt sad, he smiled and said, "That too was in the program."

The Chinese impulse toward conformity runs very deep, and the Cultural Revolution, which Westerners would have found intolerable, had a luxurious quality for many Chinese people, who did not have to consider what to do, what to say, what to think or even what to feel. Surely, I said to Fang, you must look back on that period with horror. "With some horror, yes," he said. "But I am glad to have been through that. I think that younger people are jealous of me. Younger artists are trying to make themselves part of a history that never included them. Do you know, I went on June 4 to Tiananmen Square with a friend? We saw the tanks coming and heard the sound of shots, and he ran away immediately, but I went to the Square. Not to be heroic, but because I was drawn there, because I had to see what was

happening. I've always thought that my friend must regret forever having run away. You cannot run away from the Cultural Revolution either. Maybe it's a very Chinese way of thinking, but I think you can have a happy present only if you have an unhappy past."

Ni Haifeng said: "Of course, many were killed. But many are killed in every era. These people were seized with a kind of fever and could not see that what they were doing was wrong. They gave up a great deal to join the revolution and kill those they thought had to be killed, and that was courageous. I admire that courage." Later, we spoke of Tiananmen Square. "We all demonstrated," he said. "And what happened was terrible. But if it hadn't happened -- then maybe there would have been civil war in China, with hundreds of thousands of people killed. Maybe the country would have fallen apart like Russia. You cannot say absolutely that what happened there was wrong."

The performance artist Liu Anping, branded as a leader of the Hangzhou democracy demonstrations, was imprisoned for a year. "No one at Tiananmen understood or was interested in the principle of free elections," he said. "To be free in how and where we live, what we do -- that's what we really want. We'd like an end to corruption and to be able to make whatever art we like. But China is too big and too difficult to manage for free elections and they would not work here. We are a xenophobic culture. We are nostalgic for the Cultural Revolution because it was so Chinese. We could never accept Western-style democracy -- simply because it is Western. We must arrive at a Chinese solution, and the Chinese solution is never as free as free elections. Nor would we want it to be."

Among the youngest of these artists at 26, Feng Mengbo has an unusually sharp understanding of the relation between Eastern and Western dynamics. Chinese kids today spend much time and money in video arcades, where they play Western games in which they take the part of good guys trying to kill off evil. Feng has suggested that this is not far from the behavior of young people in the Cultural Revolution, who similarly took a stance as the force of good and similarly blew up anyone they thought was bad and similarly got lots of points for killing lots of bad figures.

He has done paintings that are stills from a series of video games he would like to produce, based on Mao's Revolutionary Model Operas. These games brilliantly conflate Western commercial iconography with the symbols of the Cultural Revolution and turn the ethical battles of a tortured society into a series of games. In the eyes of many Chinese, the Cultural Revolution was like a game; interaction with the West is another version of the same game, perhaps a less interesting one.

Most of the artists in the Chinese avant-garde are below the age of 40, and so their relationships to the events of the late 60's and early 70's are passive. Yang Yi Pin, the only member of the Stars group still in China, was the son of a well-placed party member, and when the Cultural Revolution came, he got a position in the army, the safest place to be. Yang stayed in Beijing, doing propaganda paintings for the military and discussing ideology with friends until he recognized the disastrous side of the Cultural Revolution and joined the Democracy Wall movement.

The paintings he does now are enormous black-and-white images of young people, their faces suffused with idealism, walking out of the canvas toward the viewer. They are set in Tiananmen Square, and Mao's portrait, at the gate of the Forbidden City, is always at the center of the picture. They are achingly sad paintings, the color and mood of faded snapshots; they bear witness to a youthful clarity of purpose that seems, in retrospect, to be almost unimaginable.

I stood in Yang's studio and looked for a long time at those shining, almost implausible faces rising above the collars of their Mao suits; then, turning away, I saw a small black-and-white photograph -- a very young Yang Yi Pin, wonderfully handsome in his army uniform. I saw in those eyes too the unthinking self-assurance of young people ready to save the world. "I believed in it all so ardently," he said. "And then there was the Democracy Wall, and the Stars." We stood looking at his paintings. "That was my youth," he said. "I didn't understand what I was doing; now I'm sorry that I did it -- but how happy I was then. I couldn't give it up, nor would I."

Jiang Wen, 30, China's leading young actor, is directing for the first time. He has chosen to adapt "Fierce Animals," one of the best-selling novels in China last year. Echoing a sentiment that I heard many times, Jiang said: "People in the West forget that that era was a lot of fun. Life was very easy. No one worked; no one studied. If you were a member of the Red Guards, you arrived in villages and everyone came out to greet you and everyone sang revolutionary songs together. The Cultural Revolution was like a big

rock-and-roll concert, with Mao as the biggest rocker and every other Chinese person his fan. I want to portray a passion which has been lost."

I had dinner at the apartment of Wu Wenguang, a film maker who recently completed a documentary called "My Life as a Red Guard." For the film, he found five men who had once been Red Guards, interviewed each of them at great length, then edited the footage to show the curious mix of nostalgia and shame and pride and anger that these men felt about their own history. He allowed their description to show how that history had shaped everything that followed in their lives.

It was a good dinner, with an interesting assortment of guests, including Zhou Bandi, the Cynical Realist painter; a director who had just finished doing the first productions of Sam Shepard in Beijing and would soon open his adaptation of "Catch-22"; Ni Haifeng, and various others. I asked Wu Wenguang what he had thought of these Red Guards, whether he had felt disdain for them or horror at the role they had played in the murderous history of their era.

"Look around this table," he said. "We're all at the cutting edge of new thought in China. We're the avant-garde, the ones who are pushing toward the next wave, believers in democracy, helping to build China into a better society." I nodded. "How can we feel disdain or horror?" he said. "If we'd been born 20 years earlier, we would have been Red Guards, every one of us." Old-Timers

In Shanghai, I visited Zhu Qizhan, who, at the age of 102, is widely regarded as China's greatest traditionalist pen-and-brush painter and one of the country's greatest scholars. "In my youth," he said, "I studied oil painting also and it touched and influenced my work, especially the strong colors. I would say of the West that Chinese artists can use it, but for Chinese purposes. A Chinese man can ignore Western art, but he cannot ignore Chinese art. And if he sets out to mix up both forms and both kinds of meaning, he will be neither fish nor fowl."

The Chinese painting tradition is a form based on the principle of escape. Literati painting raises the viewer's soul to new heights. Perhaps the greatest difference between Chinese traditional painting and avant-garde art is that traditional painting takes you away from your problems; the avant-garde work forces you to look at them. Zhu Qizhan's eloquent and remarkable pictures command the respect of younger artists, but they demonstrate how much a departure, both in form and in meaning, the work of the younger avant-garde represents.

The vogue for realism began in China in 1919, and it thrives today. The work of the greatest realist, Chen Yifei, is by Western standards too hackneyed for greeting cards. Chen has emigrated to the United States, but the meticulous craftsmanship of his paintings of young girls in turtleneck sweaters playing the flute still exerts its powerful fascination, primarily on Asians -- in Hong Kong, his work can fetch \$250,000.

I went to see Yang Feiyun, a portraitist of Chen's school. His women, without flutes, have the photographic sharpness and plastic smoothness to which Chinese academic training aspires. "I was influenced most by Botticelli, Durer and Leonardo," Yang said. "Perhaps in the West it is too late to have a fresh response to this work, but for me it was easy and natural. Until recently, this work was unknown here. My work is contradictory to Western taste. I cannot accept the Western way of rejecting the past, or even of rejecting your own past, of starting anew all the time. The pursuit of perfection is more important than choosing many ways. People have said that art has no limit, but this is true only when art stays in its own hemisphere. When West and East meet, art does have limits." Why Gilbert And George?

In recent years, there has been increasing openness in China to exhibitions from the West, which are accepted so long as the West pays for them. For about \$25,000, you can take the upstairs rooms in the National Gallery for a month and, subject to certain approvals, you can hang whatever you like. Since Robert Rauschenberg broke the ice in 1985, there have been a few one-man shows sent by obscure artists with sponsorship from their own governments, a few international student projects, a big Rodin exhibition which opened in June.

Gilbert and George, British avant-garde artists, have made a point of exhibiting their enormous, brightly colored, highly politicized photo montages internationally. Their Moscow show in 1990 is still discussed in Moscow artistic circles. That exhibition was organized by a very savvy and enterprising Englishman named James Birch; when it ended, he said to G & G, "Where next?" And they said, "China!"

So Birch began organizing. Of course by the time of the Moscow show, Russia was in the throes of glasnost and perestroika and the decision to show art that, even in the West, has provoked hostile comment for its cultural, political and sexual radicalism -- some of it highly homoerotic -- fit with a general agenda of "nothing's too extreme for us." In China, many things are too extreme, and the decision of the Chinese Government to host an exhibition of Gilbert and George seems at first glance to be startling.

Though the Chinese officials were won over in part by Birch's charm and enthusiasm, other factors carried the day. First was Chinese greed. Not only did G & G and their London dealer, Anthony d'Offay, rent the gallery, but they also promised to bring Westerners for the opening, stage banquets and television presentations and pump money into the local economy.

Second was Government blindness. "You don't imagine," said Lao Li in an amused voice, "that these officials understand what this work is about? It's famous from the West, and that's as much as they know." Third was the need to appear open before the Olympic Games site was chosen, not out of an interest in Western approbation per se but because the Olympics would result in great wealth. Fourth was a "what the West says doesn't affect us" mentality that discounts the influence of anything foreign. And fifth was that the Chinese knew that by running the opening they could control the media image of Gilbert and George.

The exhibition was opened on Sept. 3 by the British Ambassador and the Chinese Minister of Culture with a high level of pomp. About 150 people had come from the West; a myriad of high Chinese officials flocked to the event. The British got in touch with Lao Li, who was given invitations to distribute to artists, but the Chinese avant-garde deplored the tolerant enthusiasm that officials exhibited toward Gilbert and George. At the opening banquet, someone looked at them at the head table and described them as "a pair of blockheads among the rotten eggs." In the eyes of the Chinese, the circumstances of the opening almost defeated the meaning of the work; it had the same ring of hypocrisy that might be noted if Mother Teresa came on a good-will mission and spent her whole visit with Donald Trump and Leona Helmsley.

Nonetheless, what G & G did in choosing to exhibit in China was groundbreaking. Unlike most Western artists who exhibit in the third world, they insisted on showing new work. They also made a point both of hanging the exhibition and of speaking at the opening and at the many banquets associated with it and of giving interviews everywhere. They insisted that cultural activity can speak not only within its own culture, but also beyond it.

Most Chinese artists have seen Western contemporary work primarily in books. In the painter Ding Yi's studio, I leafed through a volume called "Western Modern Art" that included a reproduction of one of G & G's monumental color photomontages, reproduced as a scratchy black-and-white plate two inches square. You could not find in that reproduction any of the power or drama of the work. During their tour, Gilbert and George said repeatedly: "Our art fights for love and tolerance and the universal elaboration of the individual. Each of our pictures is a visual love letter from ourselves to the viewer." What higher message could there be, really, for Western art now in China? "I think," Lao Li said, "that what is important in this work will get through to the people who are interested in understanding it." The opening was only like bad static. East Meets West

"The West tends to equate civilization and modernization and Westernization," Zhang Peili said. "But it is only in this modern period that the West has arrived at new ways before China has. In past eras, we were the more advanced civilization." Westerners who visit China casually often dismiss Chinese work as derivative. "We must as artists solve the problems of China, even if they're boring for the West," said Wang Yin, a painter. Lao Li added, "Contemporary Chinese art is no more Western than Picasso's work is African or the Impressionists' pictures Japanese."

The extent of Western freedom -- that natural corollary of democracy -- is a subject of constant discussion among the Chinese. Gu Wenda, who now lives in New York and is a leader of Chinese art abroad, told me: "In China, I made exhibitions that the authorities would not tolerate. I used made-up characters, and they told me my work had inappropriate political meaning, something about a code for political secrets. In New York, I did exhibitions with Chinese medicines and used a powder made of human placenta. And the authorities told me my work had offensive religious meaning, talked about abortion, and sometimes they didn't let me show."

The Chinese are amused by Westerners' inability to understand their cultural standards. One evening in Hangzhou with Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi and other friends, we got onto the subject of two women from their school who were "like unsellable goods from an old department store." Both had found happiness with Western boyfriends. Zhang and Geng described having dinner with the family of one of the boyfriends, whose mother kept whispering that she'd never met a girl "so beautiful." "Our next big export," they said, "will be the ugliest women in China. They can all marry attractive rich Americans." Then they put me through a sort of quiz. "Look there," they'd say. "One of those women is pretty and the other plain. Can you tell which is which?"

Despite the insatiable appetite of Chinese consumers for Western products, the West, in the eyes of the Chinese, doesn't really count. I had dinner one night with the wife of an artist. She said, "You know, my husband would be furious if I went out for supper with a Chinese man." "But dinner with me doesn't matter?" I asked. "No," she said. "Of course not."

I was similarly struck by the availability of The International Herald Tribune, by the fact that many people get the BBC World Service, by the tolerance for the Gilbert and George show. At first, I supposed that this represented a real loosening of ideological barriers; it was only later that I understood that it was possible because the West doesn't count, that for ideas to appear as an import from the West cannot really affect anyone, whereas for something much slighter to appear in a Chinese forum -- a haircut, for instance -- could trigger a revolution.

China officially ended its isolationist policies in 1978, but the isolationist mentality lives on. "We were so cut off for so long," Zhang Peili said, "it's as though you are in a dark room and suddenly the curtains are opened. You cannot see the view, because your eyes are still adjusting to the light."

The Shanghai artist and critic Xu Hong said: "People speak all the time of mixing Western and Eastern influences, as though it were like mixing red and blue ink to paint pictures in purple. They do not think of what it means to understand these two cultures and to try to incorporate their different ways of thought." Every artist I met explained why his work was really not as Western as it looked. "And how can it be Western?" asked Zhang Wei, a university teacher who lives in the village at Yuanmingyuan. "Of course, we have come of age in the era of the so-called open-door policy, but we all understand that it is at best a door-ajar policy. And we know that that door will never really stand open, that people will never be allowed to pass back and forth through it as they choose."

Lu Shengzhong studied folk art at the Central Academy in Beijing and his specialty is paper cutting. Traditionally, a rural woman should be able to cook, sew and cut paper; Lu Shengzhong tells of old women who, having lost all other facilities, can do nothing but cut paper and who express themselves with their elaborate narrative paper cuts. He is a master paper cutter, author of several books on the subject. In his recent work, he has limited himself to the single form of the "universal man" and he cuts it over and over in different sizes, always from red paper, to create mystical enormous installations in which you feel connected through some primal force to all the variety of humankind. Lao Li dismisses such work. Many Chinese resent the West's enthusiasm for material that looks so Chinese but is so connected to Western thoughts. It is as though Lu Shengzhong has prostituted himself and the culture, has given something to the West that they should not have, has sold something off too cheap and without enough grounds.

A voice of nationalism is part of the persistent, strong Chinese rejection of the West. The Chinese, competitive always, will take from the West whatever they can put to their own use. "Western culture reigns," Lao Li said. "In a past era, Chinese culture was the highest. Right now, the West is in a state of decline and China in a state of ascendancy. Soon, we will cross paths. We all accept that Western modern language is the international language of art; that is because the West has the most economic and political power right now. But that will all change." Gu Wenda said simply, "If China had been the strongest after World War II, artists of the West would use my language and not I theirs." A Dangerous Idea

In the artists' village at Yuanmingyuan, everyone calls Yan Zhengxue the Mayor. At 49, he is older than the others and has been in the village longer. Yan does not look particularly like an artist; he has short hair and ordinary clothes. His big ink paintings are decorative and traditional; his manner, unassuming.

On July 2, Yan took bus line 332 from central Beijing to Yuanmingyuan. He tried to get off just as the conductor closed the door and a minor argument ensued. The conductor was aggressive and Yan was

annoyed. At the next stop, the conductor deliberately closed the door just as Yan tried to exit and so Yan was carried to the last stop, where the conductor accused him of having taken items from his money bag and summoned the police. The area is under the same police jurisdiction as the village, so the three policemen who came all recognized Yan Zhengxue as the Mayor. He recognized them as the policemen who had closed down an exhibition that artists in the village had tried to mount. Yan said he had never touched the conductor's bag, but the police pulled him out of the bus, beat him and threw him on the ground. Some local residents stood watching, too afraid to interfere.

Then the police dragged him to the station and beat him with electric night sticks. "I did not fight back," Yan said, "but only kept asking, 'Why are you beating me?' But they didn't stop." We were talking in Yan's small courtyard house in the village and he produced photographs of himself, beaten, burned, covered in blood and oozing blisters. "They hit my groin repeatedly," he said, holding out a particularly grotesque photo. "The electric sticks burn badly. They told me to kneel down, but I refused and then they beat me even harder. They said: 'If you vomit, you will clean the floor with your tongue. We know who you are. Artist, who made you Mayor of the village?' " Then they asked him to sign a confession that he had stolen from the bus conductor, and when he refused, they beat him unconscious and dumped him, at midnight, outside the station. At 4 A.M., one of the local residents wrapped him in a blanket and took him to a hospital, where he was treated for severe beating, bodily injuries and loss of hearing.

A few days later, one of the village artists recounted this story to Wang Jiaqi, a lawyer who ordinarily works in a Beijing real-estate firm. "I came to Mr. Yan and told him this fierce event violated the law. Our central Government does not like such petty police violence. I suggested that we bring a lawsuit."

Yan asked artists to sign a petition protesting his treatment. Fang Lijun was among the first of the Yuanmingyuan artists to sign; Lao Li kept a page of the petition at his home, asking those who visited to sign as well. Some Chinese journalists agreed to write about Yan's lawsuit. As publicity spread, Yan got hundreds of letters from victims of similar violence. "Some asked how to bring a suit; others warned me that I would meet with a 'sudden accident' if I didn't take care."

Wang submitted papers to the courts. "They agreed to hear our case. We won't get any money, I don't think, and the police won't be punished, but if we can get them to admit that they committed a crime, that will be something. I avoid speaking publicly of human rights and democracy. It's too dangerous. I work on individual cases in legal terms. The Chinese people have no idea of using law to protect themselves; they imagine that laws exist only to constrain them. We want to stand against that."

As we talked, I flipped through the snapshots in front of me, showing Yan Zhengxue's injuries in horrible detail. "It's funny," I said, "that I am in China to write about art and about artists and that I have found myself listening to a story about civil rights and personal freedom. It almost belongs to another project."

"This is a story about art and about artists," Yan said. "The police hate me because I am an artist, disobedient, free in what I do. They resent their lack of control over this village, these unregistered people living here without work units, without schedules, with Westerners wandering through. I was a natural target. We want to live quietly," he went on, his voice lower, "away from politics and commerce. We don't want art to die in the hands of the Chinese people. In this country, you can seek money, have women, drink -- and as long as you are registered in a unit it's O.K. But to be an artist" -- he gestured at his big ink scrolls -- "this is a problem."

"Because he is a strong individual, Mr. Yan was beaten badly," said Wang, "and as an individual he is not simply accepting this."

I thought of the response to Song Shuang's haircut, which I had in fact seen that afternoon, and understood that the radicalism of Chinese artists does not lie in the explicit content of their works. There is less danger in the specifics of Lio Wei's images of helpless, awkward officials, in Fang Lijun's disconnected lost youths, in Wang Guangyi's portrayals of Western consumerism, in Feng Mengbo's video games or Zhang Peili's videos than there is in the simple fact of all these people holding visions of their own and undertaking to express them.

"Whether we win or lose," Wang Jiaqi said, "I hope we will give to people this idea, that they can protest, that they can find a way to stand up for what they believe, so that they can live as human

beings." I thought again of Song Shuang's haircut and I understood then why it had generated so much anger and I saw in what terms it had been a success. I saw that even this self-important event was, in its way, far more dangerous than a simple car bomb. So long as art can assert its own danger, it succeeds. For this whole concept of individuality, this humanism of which Lai Li is the epitome, is something almost unknown in the People's Republic. And if the idea of it were to penetrate to the vast population of that country, it would lead them to self-determination. That would be the end of central Government, of control, of Communism -- it would be the end of China. With luck, this struggle between humanists and absolutists will never stop: for either side to win absolutely would, in fact, be tragic. Injustice is terrible, but the end of China is also something that no one wants, neither Deng Xiaoping nor Lao Li and his circle.

Photos of Chinese artists works (GUEORGUI PINKHASOV/MAGNUM, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. BOTTOM: CLAUDIO ABATE.; HAUS DER KULTUREN DER WELT, BERLIN, GERMANY. TOP CENTER: NEW ANALYSTS GROUP. OTHERS: HANART T Z GALLERY, HONG KONG.; PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUEORGUI PINKHASOV/MAGNUM, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)