BY ANDREW COHEN

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On a blustery September morning in Paris' Parc Monceau, 62-year-old Chinese-born artist Wang Keping is carving two tree trunks into bold, abstract sculptures. A few children stare with curiosity; passersby who recognize Wang wave or stop for a chat, eager for the chance to connect with one of France's iconic art figures. He lowers his tools, wood shavings covering his blue overalls, and tells a Taiwanese journalist, a French filmmaker and nearby admirers, that the work is for an upcoming exhibition: "Chinese Artists in Paris," organized by the Cernuschi Museum. While I marvel at this émigré celebrity, Wang says, "In France and in Taiwan, my works are well known. But in China, very few people know me . . . I never attended an academy, so I'm not officially an artist there."

Wang came of age during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when all the academies across China were closed, and many students and teachers sent "down" to the countryside (*xia xiang*), to "learn" from the peasants. As official paths to becoming an artist closed, Wang forged his own way, self-taught—a source behind both his initial fame from 1979, and subsequent criticism. Though his later works, produced in Paris, are often criticized as repetitive and lacking vigor, Wang's seminal works are widely recognized for having broken radically free from the shackles of Socialist Realism so soon after Mao Zedong's death in 1976. With innate aesthetic and technical talent, this prodigious sculptor brought daring new forms and content to the stage of contemporary art history.

In the first year of the Cultural Revolution, Wang was an idealistic Red Guard, even participating in the looting and destruction of church artworks. "I really believed Mao was the savior," he says. "Every day we shouted slogans wishing him a long life." By the following year, however, he had become disillusioned: "I saw we were being used and manipulated by the leaders."

Moreover, Wang's family were already accustomed to public criticism, as his father, Wang Lin, had been attacked in 1949 for his novel *Fu Di* ("hinterland"), which gives a negative portrayal of a Chinese Communist Party cadre. Witnessing the years-long ordeal of his father—and the imprisonment of many of his father's intellectual friends over the next two decades—fueled Wang's growing resentment. In 1969, after rebelling against the Red Guards, he was sent to the northeastern province of Heilongjiang for reeducation through hard labor. However, a year later, his mother, Liu Yanjin, a famous actress, used her influence to have him sent to Yunnan Province in the southwest, as a member of an army drama troupe. It was only toward the end of the Cultural Revolution that he returned to Beijing, as a factory worker.

With his theatrical background, Wang found work as an actor at the state-run broadcaster, CCTV, in 1976. He says his mother's acting career had a big influence on him, as did Charlie Chaplin's films—works he had access to as a child when his father served as vice president of the Writer's Association. Although a fine actor, Wang dreamed of becoming a writer, like his father, to tell the stories of his generation. As directors recognized Wang's natural talent for writing, he was soon promoted to screenwriter. Wang's screenplays were critical of the Party. "As playwriting was an art, it should have been free," he says. "Art was all about freedom." He debated with his colleagues about the new direction writing should take, free from the Party line. Nonetheless, his freewheeling screenplays, overtly critical of the Gang of Four and communist society in general, were never produced.

While searching for his artistic niche, Wang found other outlets for his pent up frustration: dancing, music—and women. "During the Cultural Revolution," Wang says, "the only one dancing was Mao. When Mao died, we started to disco and ballroom dance in the park. Westerners brought pop music, and overseas Chinese came with Deng Lijun [aka Teresa Tang] songs, and tape recorders; it was a great sight, watching everyone twisting and shaking. But the police quickly outlawed such activity, considering it antirevolutionary." So dance parties reconvened behind closed doors. That was when friend and colleague, Bai Jingzhou, a stage artist at CCTV, began trading his paintings for cassette recorders and foreign music tapes. "We could hold parties in our homes with music and dancing—and pick up girls," Wang recalls, with a chuckle. With some of Bai's discarded brushes, Wang tried—unsuccessfully—to get in on the action. "I tried to paint, twice, and knew I couldn't be a painter," he says, laughing.

During a brief period of liberalization in 1978–79 known as the "Beijing Spring," Wang recalls a pivotal moment in his life, when two French playwrights visited CCTV and invited him to attend a seminar on French Absurdist Theater, his first encounter with plays from the West. In the works of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco he found validation of his gestating ideas on playwriting. "What I learned from the Absurdists is that there are no rules," Wang says. "All rules can be broken—so I am free as to how I want to express myself." Enthusiastic, armed with new intellectual justifications, Wang tried influencing his CCTV colleagues to produce shows in the Absurdist fashion of the West, but they rebuffed him, saying, "We're Chinese."

Still undeterred, Wang privately tried his hand at sculpture. Using a rung of hard wood from the back of an old chair, he carved out his first figure: a Red Guard holding high Mao's *Little Red Book*, mouth agape, as though shouting political slogans. "I couldn't produce my plays, so I thought, why not turn this wood into my absurd characters? If you have a strong desire, you can do anything. I had no academy training, so like a baby, I had no limitations." Instead of portraying the Red Guard as a standard Socialist Realist hero, Wang parodied him in a new tragicomic style. The long, thin shape of the chair rung led to Wang's tongue-in-cheek title, *Long, Long Life* (1978), for this slogan-shouting figure.

Using wood meant Wang didn't need to buy expensive, elite art supplies. "I chose wood because it was free," he says, "it was everywhere in front of my apartment." He collected deformed branches that people trashed because they were unsuitable as tinder to stoke the still ubiquitous coal ovens and heaters. These misshapen limbs embodied an essence of his generation—of hope deceived and twisted, but not extinguished. By using these imperfections as integral parts of the sculpture, he could express his feelings about freedom and art as well as his pent-up anger toward the Party—and, he reminds me, trade them for cassette players, to meet girls.

Armed with a Chaplinesque humor and intuitive talent, Wang directly challenged the aesthetic laws Mao had laid down 37 years earlier in his 1942 "Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art," calling for artists to be cultural laborers for society and the state. Sculptors, like screenwriters, subsequently followed Socialist Realist norms. By the 1970s, Chinese art had become a repetitive glorification and deification of Chairman Mao himself.

Radically critical of the authoritarian regime, yet empathetic in his psychological portrayal of the individual's need for a communal sense of spirit and self-censorship, Wang lampooned both leader

(Previous spread)
WANG KEPING working on the sculpture *Jeunesse et Amour Maternel* [Youth and Maternal Love] at Parc Monceau, Paris. Photo by Armand Borlant for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

(This page)
LONG, LONG LIFE, 1978, rosewood, height: 50 cm.
Courtesy the artist and 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.

The resulting cast of nonsensical characters offered a clear insight into the absurd reality of his day, pioneering a sculptural genre one might call "absurd expressionism."

(This page)
SILENCE, 1978, wooden sculpture hung outside the China Art Gallery, Beijing, during the first "Stars Art Exhibition" in 1979. Photo by Li Xiaobin. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.

and follower (himself included), for their blind acceptance of Maoist ideology. Instead of waiting for Godot's salvation, Wang's characters are waiting, just as tragically, for Mao. The resulting cast of nonsensical figures offered a clear insight into the reality of his day, starting a sculptural genre one might call "absurd expressionism."

Wang's *Silence* (1978), a face in which one eye is covered with a patch of carved X's, its mouth gagged with a knot of wood, represents the muted people. "The Communist Party pulled the wool over our eyes, censoring the news; the people couldn't see what was going on. The Party leaders don't want you to see, to talk, or to think." *Silence*'s tortured rendering unmasks the smiling-faced myth of the Cultural Revolution, exposing the raw face of a silenced China, isolated from the rest of the world. Critic Li Xianting, the first to write domestically about Wang back in 1980, recently explained: "His work emerged as a balance between folk art and the absurd. He used a knot in a piece of wood as a symbol for a plugged-up mouth. They were symbolically the same. He transformed folk art into an image . . . that embodied his understanding of voluntary self-censorship."

Wang also targeted the power elite. In *Gun (Jiangqing)* (1979), he sculpted the stock of a wooden toy gun scrounged from the trash heap into the figure of Jiang Qing, Mao's fourth wife, who was in charge of art censorship. She wraps her arms around a rifle, grasping its barrel in hand, enacting a line from Mao's *Little Red Book*: "Every Communist must grasp the truth: political power grows out of the barrel of a gun." Wang explains that "Jian Qing herself was just one of Mao's props or guns—the main culprit was Mao Zedong."

Hypocrisy (1979) reveals another absurdist character, this one with hands covering its face, his cartoon-like eyeball bulging grotesquely through his fingers. In a society in which physical and psychological survival were predicated on turning a blind eye, one can't help transgressing implicit limits by sneaking a peak. This work also refers to the self-censorship of sexual repression. "In the Chinese Communist Party's ideology, [romantic] male-female relationships were considered immoral and capitalistic," says Wang. "For everyone except the leaders."

Discussing his artistic exploration of nudes and the female body, Wang explains, "I love and admire women; a woman's nude body is art. Besides, I liked to do anything that was forbidden at the time—this call to carve was also an inspiration to carve women's bodies. It was a kind of flirtation with danger, because many people with similar opinions and behaviors were jailed—charged with producing and proliferating pornography."

His colleague Bai once brought his friend Zhang Zhizhong from the Beijing Foreign Language School to Wang's home—a little eight-meter-square room. When they saw his sculptures hanging on the walls, they asked who had made them. "I told them I did," Wang says. "They didn't believe me at first. Then they said I was out of my mind, that I had to stop trading them . . . my work was a national treasure."

Word of Wang's talent spread quickly. By 1979, he teamed up with a group of like-minded artists who named themselves the Stars Group. One early admirer of Wang's work was the painter Yuan Yunsheng—known for his controversial mural (because of its public depiction of nudity) at the newly built Beijing Capital Airport (1979). Yuan fatefully introduced Wang to Qu Leilei. "My old friend and teacher, Mr. Yuan Yunsheng, told me he knew a very good woodcarver," Qu explains, "and that I had better go see his work." Qu took Ma Desheng and Huang Rui, the organizers of the upcoming Stars exhibition, to visit Wang's home. The Stars believed every artist to be a unique individual, shining with hope amid the drab night of Maoist conformity. Together they turned to modernist art as a means of individual expression.

Huang explained the importance of this encounter, "Meeting Wang was a windfall—he was proactive, noninstitutional; and in addition to his focus on political and social issues, his sculpture had great form and technical precision."

Stars co-founder Ma describes Wang as having been "the soul" of the group. Ai Weiwei, yet another former Stars group colleague, tells me: "We had never seen this kind of sculpture before; woodcarving. . . dealing with the wood's natural character. It was different from the Party's art; it had its own language and forms, different from anyone's art, academic or nonacademic. In art history there are individuals who don't belong to a period of trends, or taste, or even language. Wang Keping is such an example."

Wang was among these dissident artists who made history on September 27, 1979, by hanging their works in the street, on the iron fence surrounding the prominent state-run art museum, the China Art Gallery (now the National Art Museum of China). It became known as the "Stars Art Exhibition." They timed it to upstage the official propaganda exhibition, "The National Art Exhibition for the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China," being held inside the art gallery. After two days, the authorities forcibly closed the Stars show. However, in an unprecedented response a few days later, on the 30th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, the Stars staged one of the first nongovernment-organized demonstration since the founding, to protest the heavy-handed closure of their show. Over 500 marchers, including diplomats, fledgling prodemocracy groups and foreign

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journalists, rallied for individual and artistic rights.

Ma, propped on crutches, led the unofficial artists and protestors through a heavy rain. They marched from Xidan Democracy Wall down Chang'an ("Eternal Peace") Boulevard, to the Beijing Municipal Committee building, the protestors growing to one thousand strong. Wang says with pride, "I was holding the banner, 'We Demand Artistic Freedom.'" Wang and Ma were prepared to be arrested. "Someone had to do this," Wang says. "We had to be pioneers."

One of the foreign journalists in attendance was Marie Holzman from AFP. She recalls, "They were very brave. There was no freedom. Wei Jingsheng was in jail. The first democracy movement was completely suppressed. Ma Desheng made a short powerful speech and then left. We all left. We didn't stick around. It was scary."

"The Stars exhibition made a big sensation in society," Wang says. "The public and Chinese artists talked a lot—it was reported in the West. But the authorities said nothing." On October 19, the *New York Times* ran an article on the event. The exhibition was soon given quasi-official status when it was reopened November 23—this time inside a gallery, the Huafang Studio next to Beihai Park.

Wang's politicized sculptures were the highlights of both shows. There was absurdity but no ambiguity in his work—he was blatantly criticizing the late leader and Maoism itself. "Stars as a whole," Li recounts over 30 years later, "had a very broad and strong political impact. But Wang's was the most politically significant—moreover, it was easy to get. So when the most common of people would see his works, they quickly came to regard him as a soldier."

One of Wang's works, *Idol* (1979), a synthesis of Mao and Buddha carved in a smooth textured, red-colored wood, was so confrontational that the group decided not to show it in 1979, fearing not only for Wang's safety but for that of the group as a whole. Instead Wang strategically waited until the second Stars show to display the piece. With the help of their old friend, Jiang Feng—a rehabilitated revolutionary artist who was then chairman of the National Artists Association—they opened the exhibition at the China Art Gallery in 1980. As reform was gaining momentum, it proved to be an opportune time to show the groundbreaking sculpture.

"At that time nobody dared challenge Mao," Holzman says. "It was surprising to see the face of Mao mixed with an evil Buddha—keeping an eye on you without benevolence, rather malicious and aggressive. That was very impressive; people were put in jail for much less than that. He was brave enough to do that sculpture, which was very beautiful, and present it to the public at such a sensitive time."

However, Wang insists he wasn't being brave. "I made *Idol* simply to express my anger," he says. According to Huang Rui however, "It became the first artwork depicting Mao from an individual's personal perspective, creating an enormous influence on the history of Chinese contemporary art." Though Wang paved the way for future generations of artists to use Mao's image in art on their own terms, he feels no connection to these later works. The "Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign" of 1983–84 marked the end of the first round of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. A year later, amid an artistic and intellectual brain drain, Wang moved to France with his French wife, who had been teaching at Beijing University.

Some critics now say Wang's work lost its edge when he moved from China. Wang simply shakes his head: "In Paris, my work got better; it evolved, and I developed a stronger personal style—which is most important to me—to have my own style. When I was in China, I wanted to fight the central authority. After I came to France, my opponent changed; now I wanted to fight the trend of art in today's world."

Ai, who visited Wang in Paris in 1999, is now known for his conceptual installations. About Wang he says: "He believes his hand has to touch the work itself; [its] quite classical . . . He doesn't really have that much temptation to understand other contemporaries . . . He remains on the outside." Working from his small studio on the outskirts of Paris, Wang also emphasizes his personal touch. "I carve

(Previous spread)
WANG KEPING holding a poster above his head, which reads "Demand for Artistic Freedom," as he marches in protest October 1, 1979. Photo by Li Xiaobin. Courtesy 10 Chancery Lane Gallery, Hong Kong.

(Opposite page)
Interior of **WANG KEPING**'s studio in Paris. Photo by Armand Borlant for *ArtAsiaPacific*.

"In Paris, my work got better and I developed a stronger personal style—which is most important to me—to have my own style. When I was in China I wanted to fight the central authority. After I came to France, my opponent changed; now I fight the trend of art in today's world."

each piece single-handedly. In my life, I also live solitarily. It's never easy for an artist to be free, whether inside or outside China—it's hard to be free from money, hard to be free from what the market wants you to do, and what the public wants you to make," he says, heating up tea in a dented saucepan. "To go your own way, is never easy. To have your own voice, your own forms, your own language, to tell your story."

There are many bird sculptures perched about his studio; bird and branch, he says, complement each other like yin and yang. "I like the very simple figure and silhouette of birds, which are very close to the shape of the branches. The bird is a symbol of liberty. I like the birds of [ink painter] Bada Shanren [1626–1705 CE]. Several simple strokes, with a proud and solitary posture—really great." Between abstract and figurative, Wang's flightless birds exist on the limbs of solitude.

Back in Parc Monceau a couple of days later, I watch as the two tree trunks start to take form. In one of the abstract shapes I can discern a nude woman, and in the other a woman holding a round object. I remember Ai saying, "[Wang's] mind was very concentrated: work and women. Women were a temptation, which itself became a form—this also shows in his work."

Sure enough, Wang confirms this notion. "Wood is sexy," he says. "Stripping away bark is like undressing a woman." He chips away on the trunk, and two knots turn into the nipples of large carved breasts. I'm reminded of the knot in *Silence* 30 years earlier and ask him what happened to the anger that informed his earlier work.

"I don't feel the anger anymore," he says. "It's over now; I'm not going to aim at anyone in particular. I have an inner resistance to the globalization of the art market. I fight it by being simple and being natural in my artwork. It's hard for an artist to change society. I want to create artworks that reflect my own mood."

When I remind him that he and the Stars Group did help change society, he answers, "I was able to help change society because it was a very special time, due to special, historical circumstances. It would be a mistake to think that alone an artist could have such an impact on society. At the time there was an empty space, and not many were willing to fill it. Now people like Ai Weiwei are doing this job, so I don't feel there's a special need to go get involved again.

"I am still out of the mainstream," he muses. "The French mainstream museums like conceptual artworks, while society likes its artists dead. Maybe in 50 years I'll be in a museum." Standing outside the Cernuschi Museum, he rubs the transformed knot-cum-breast of the larger-than-life nude he sculpted. "The Chinese government still refuses to buy my work. They don't consider me an artist."