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Signifiers of Chinese Spiritual Fusion: The Avant-Garde Portraits of Li Shuang

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ABSTRACT

Li Shuang was a founding member of the Chinese avant garde collective, The Stars: a group of socio-politically motivated, experimental artists who aimed to bypass the limitations of social realism through raw, artistic personal expression. She was also their only female member in 1979—and the only one to be imprisoned following a scandalous request to marry a foreigner in 1981. Shuang's contemporary portraits of colorful, dream-like Buddhist figures seem to explore Chinese spirituality, class and gender presentation through folk-religious practices and the melding of the "Big 3" teachings: Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism. In this paper, I posit that Shuang's contemporary portraiture is integral to understanding the zeitgeist of Reformist China in the 1970s through the lens of a shared Chinese spirituality as a unifying social factor. For this purpose, three of Shuang's contemporary artworks (Buddha Under a Blossoming Branch, Dancing Flowers, and Waiting for the Arrival of Yong Tong—*all from 2006) were formally and visually analyzed for relevant themes. Findings suggest that Shuang incorporated aspects of folk religion within the compositions to convey a unifying, revolutionary "enlightened" character across social strata. Furthermore, an artistic exploration of similar themes across classes seems to allude to a sense of equality reflective of Chinese goals for social union in the 1970s.*

Keywords: Li Shuang, Stars Group, Chinese Avant Garde, Chinese Folk Religion, Three Teachings, Wuxing.

1. Li Shuang: Artistic and Sociopolitical Background

Li Shuang was one of the 12 founding members of the Stars Group (*Xingxing huahui*, 星星重含), a collective of untrained–one could say "naïve"–experimental artists who challenged political Chinese orthodoxy in 1979 (fig. 1). Shuang was born in 1957, during Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, to a family of intellectuals. Her father was once imprisoned for 3 months due to foreign art and literature found in his home.

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Figure 1. Yan Li. (1983). *Li Shuang in Front of Her Painting* [Photograph].

Source: Wang and Desheng, 26.

Growing up, Shuang dreamed of attending professional art school, but could only afford to attend the National Youth Theatre as a stage designer (Matias, 2021). After graduating from the specialized high school in 1976, Shuang was sent to the countryside to work for two years (Rui and Desheng 2013, 206). At the same time, in a wider cultural-historical sense, 1977 was an eventful year in Chinese history. Deng Xiaoping returned to power after Mao's death in 1976. In the beginning, Xiaoping's government showed a degree of openness to criticism of Mao's Cultural Revolution, as well as an expanding openness to Western culture which gave rise to important sociocultural movements like the Beijing Spring and the Democracy Wall (Rui and Desheng, 2013).

Two events of art-historical significance took place in 1978. In January, the first exhibition of Western art since 1949 (*Paysages et Paysannes Francais: la Vie Rurale en France au XIXé Siècle 1820-1905*) was held in Shanghai. Notably, the Chinese political zeitgeist around this time has been compared to the Paris Commune, so the success of the exhibition seems to support this enthusiastic bubbling of sociopolitical ideals. In February, an Arts and Crafts Exhibition was held at the National Art Museum in Beijing, pointing to a like-minded interest in folk arts and labor across sociopolitical lines. In March, a new Chinese constitution was adopted, scientific progress was embraced, and the exhibition of 19th century French art was reshown at the National Art Museum in Beijing. According to Rui and Desheng (2013), two of the leading Stars Group members, this progressive momentum continued throughout the year. October 1978 saw the rise of the Democracy Wall—a government-sanctioned movement where people openly criticized the past government through posters and calls for greater personal liberties (Rui and Desheng, 16). It was around this time that The Stars Group was founded by Huang Rui and Ma Desheng, who had met while co-publishing Rui's foreign literature magazine, *Today* (*Jin Tian*), one of the most radical publications of the time (Rui and Desheng, 11), intended for distribution at the Democracy Wall. The reinstated government's political openness appeared to be well-established by November 1978, when Prime Minister Hua Guofeng wrote an inscription for *Tiananmen Poems*, a collection of literary works distributed during the Tiananmen Incident Protests in 1976 (fig. 2)

Figure 2. N.A. (1976, April). *Crowd of Mourners at Tiananmen Square* [Photograph]. Public Domain.

In 1979, a reversal of political dynamics ensued. The stance of collaboration between Xiaoping's government and the people began to dissolve. Simply put, the Democracy Wall became a site of discord and sociopolitical contention. Though Xiaoping was initially supportive of criticism against the Cultural Revolution, he was pressured by remaining members of the previous government to call for its suppression. Around this time, the Stars Group staged an unauthorized exhibition in Beijing which was a success.

On September 27, 1979, the Stars Group showed their experimental work in the garden outside of the China National Museum, after having their request for an exhibition turned down by the authorities (Zhang, 2012). One of the Stars, Chi Xiaoning, captured the pivotal moment on camera (fig. 3). Their exhibition was shut down two days later (fig. 4). Soon after, on October 1st, the Stars Group, along with hundreds of gatherers, marched through the streets of Beijing demanding freedom of expression (fig. 5).

Figure 3. Chi Xiaoning, *Viewers participate in the Stars Exhibition on September 27, 1979* [Photograph].

Source: Rui, Wang and Ma Desheng (eds.), *A Constellation of Stars*, p. 34.

Figure 4. Chi Xiaoning. (1979, September 28). *On the second day of the Stars Exhibition, many police officers arrive to ban the exhibition* [Photograph].

Source: Rui, Wang and Ma Desheng (eds.), *A Constellation of Stars,* p. 34.

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Figure 5. Wang Rui. (1979, October 1). *The start of the Stars' protest march* [Photograph].

Source: Rui, Wang and Ma Desheng (eds.), *A Constellation of Stars*, 2013, p. 22.

The preface to the first Stars Exhibition acted as a manifesto of sorts for the mission of the Chinese avant-garde and contextualized the artistic ethos of Li Shuang at this time. Namely, they saw themselves as bold, autonomous explorers, willing to face the future with both rational attitude and expressive courage:

> *"We, twenty-three art explorers, present to you some of the fruits of our labours. The world offers unlimited possibilities for explorers. We see the world with our own eyes and participate in it with our brushes and chisels. Our artworks contain various emotions, and our emotions reflect our individual ideals.*
>
> *The years march toward us;* ***there are no mysterious signs guiding our actions****. This is precisely the challenge that life has given us. We cannot remove the element of time; the shadow of the past and the light of the future are folded together, forming the environment in which we live. It is our responsibility to live on steadfastly and remember each lesson learned……"* (Rui and Desheng, 24).

In art-historical terms, one can glean the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement on the artistic ethos of the Stars Group in the use of pattern and in the decorative simplicity of the artist's invitation to exhibit (fig. 6). Another significant aspect of the manifesto claims that "there are no mysterious signs guiding our actions"–potentially alluding to the modern notion of controlling one's fate over traditional beliefs of destiny, signified through divination.

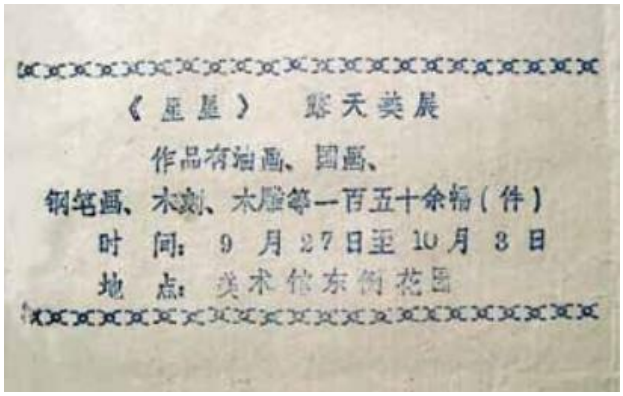

Figure 6. Huang Rui. (1979). *Invitation card of the Stars Exhibition*.

Source: *ibid.*

2. First to be Imprisoned, First to Marry a "Foreigner"

Li Shuang was the only female member of the Stars Group–and the only one imprisoned. In September 1981, Shuang was sentenced to re-education after making her romantic relationship with a foreigner known to the authorities. The artist filed to marry her live-in fiancé, French diplomat Emmanuel Bellefroid—later expelled from China following accusations of anti-government activities. Shuang was imprisoned for two years, during which she read Chinese classics like *Zhuangzi* as a way of coping with ongoing psychological torture. Meanwhile, Bellefroid continued to lobby for her release, until would-be French President François Mitterand met with Xiaoping in 1983. Shuang was released later that year. Shortly after, she moved to Paris, where she would marry Bellefroid, start a family and continue her career as an artist. Shuang's remarkable imprisonment and story of committed love were chronicled in the New York Times (1981, November 13).

Shuang continued to paint in her Southern Paris studio, selling and exhibiting her artwork throughout the world. In 2010, Shuang held and attended a solo exhibition in Beijing. Her artwork has been described by critics as colorful, serene and warm (fig. 7). According to Rui and Desheng, Shuang's compatriots and Stars Group colleagues, Li Shuang's oil painting "reflects a belief in Chinese art as *a spiritual movement from the heart*, while Western paintings concentrate on the scene, or on composition" (Rui and Desheng, 2013; emphasis my own).

Figure 7. *Poster for* "The Butterfly Dream", *Solo Exhibition by Li Shuang* (2010).

Source: ARTLINKART, https://www.artlinkart.com/en/exhibition/overview/a4eaxApq

3. Chinese Spirituality in Li Shuang's Portraits

Because Shuang's artistic style has been described by connoisseurs as "a spiritual movement from the heart" (Rui and Desheng, 207), an understanding of Chinese spiritual currents during the 1970s, can contextualize her compositions. The spirit of optimism and scientific enquiry of the post-Zedong, late 1970s Chinese Reformation era encouraged sociological and anthropological scholarship into Chinese religion. Specifically, scholars were concerned with understanding folk religion as a potentially unifying force of Chinese culture, since sectarian movements had been suppressed by both the Kuomintang and the Communist regime (Goossaert and Palmer 2011 in Yang and Hu 2012, 507). To this end, there was an interest in discerning class-based differences between folk religion (*mijiang zongjiao*; Jin Ze 2006 in *op.cit.*) and elite religious practices, otherwise known as "The

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Three Elite Teachings": Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. Such divisionism proved futile, however, because even elite classes held folk beliefs and religious practices, enmeshed within—or syncretized by—the dominant elite teachings. Instead of discerning folk from elite, attention turned to understanding the nature of Chinese spirituality by separating belief from practice, and practice as communal or individualistic.

According to Tamney (1998 in Yang and Hu, 507), some elements of Chinese folk religion, including ancestor worship, shamanism, and divination can be traced to prehistoric times. Syncretized Buddhist beliefs include the idea of karma and rebirth, accepting Buddha and other bodhisattvas as gods, and the non-denominational practice of Buddhist meditational techniques. The Confucian influence can be gleaned through the concept of *filial piety* and its associated practices. Folk pantheism was organized within a hierarchy headed by the Jade Emperor, a Daoist entity. Likewise, sacrificial rituals to the spirits of sacred objects and places, intended to "change one's luck", relied on geomancy, *feng shui* (based on *Wuxing* or the Five Principles) and the balancing of Yin/Yang (active/receptive) energies in the body.

3.1. Visual Analysis of Folk-Religious Themes in Li Shuang's Portraits

Shuang's portraits from 2006 seem most strongly tied to folk religious themes. Though not much is known about the context of these portraits, background knowledge about the artist's history as an avant-garde Chinese artist and about her strong ties to Chinese spiritual philosophy can inform insights gleaned through a visual analysis of her contemporary work.

3.1.1. Buddha Under a Blossoming Branch

Buddha Under a Blossoming Branch (2006) seems like an effective example of pan-religious integration according to Chinese folk religion (fig. 8). Though the dominant theme appears to be Buddhist in nature, folk elements like numerology—divinatory in scope—and Daoist connections to Nature and the Yin/Yang principle can be gleaned from the composition.

Figure 8. Li Shuang. (2006). *Buddha Under a Blossoming Branch* [oil on canvas].

Source: artnet, https://www.artnet.com/artists/li-shuang/buddha-under-a-blossoming-branch-2oJEdsmZiO5Zm9O1uTaWRQ2

From the perspective of *Wuxing*, which considers spatial harmony as the product of balanced elemental energies (wood, fire, earth, water and metal), the composition appears balanced in arrangement and subtly expressive in theme. Soft, brown tones—associated with the earth principle—convey a sense of stability within a period of transition, as represented by the powerful blooms of Spring. Though we can appreciate the loveliness of a plum tree in full bloom, the moment is ultimately ephemeral as is the nature of enlightenment, evoked by the Buddha figure at center. Framed within a circle—a figure associated with metal qualities of beauty, precision and helpfulness—the subject in the portrait embodies a Buddha. Their soft, muted expression acts as if a mask representative of the Boddhisattva stance: a being wholeheartedly centered in the eternal present. In this sense, the mask-like countenance aligns with classical non-Western uses of the mask as allusive to commonality and transcendence (Borgatti, n.d.). The figure's rosy eye shadow and floral motifs suggest androgyny as a defiance of pre-established ideas about gender or, more simply, as allusive to the sexless character of Buddha nature.

Shuang's portraits, regardless of the subject's actual gender presentation, feature symbolically female figures with vase-like bodies and mask-like faces that ponder the idea of transcending temporary emotions or situations. Arguably, the idea of a fixed identity or even a fixed reality is risible from a Buddhist perspective, particularly if one also considers Daoist ideas of transience and flowing through acceptance. An enduring Self underlies emotional states or earthly notions of identity. Likewise, the inability of the portrait to capture a fixed representation of self is here bypassed by amalgamating the subject with the shared, transcendent unity of the Buddha figure. The Buddha's elongated earlobes emphasize again her compassionate receptivity according to the Boddhisattva vow. It is said that the Boddhisattva is a Buddha who chose to "stay on Earth" or amongst the living in an earthly sense, instead of fully committing to the quest of enlightenment as many Zen monks did. For lower status women, who generally lacked names and were only referred to by birth order or marriage status, the Buddhist concept of "no ego" seemed almost as if second nature.

The Chinese characters in the bottom right corner of the painting refer to numerology as a ritualistic folk practice and can be understood symbolically as follows:

- Jiǔ (九 9) Longevity and wholeness
- Sì (四 4) Caution and Avoidance
- Shí (十 10) Completion and ultimate balance
- èr (二 2) Harmony and Partnership

Taken together, the numeric sequence supports the Buddhist conundrum of impermanence versus endurance—ideas of ego vs. self—along with Daoist ideas of incompletion in completeness.

3.1.2. Orthodoxy vs. Orthopraxy of Folk Religion

In the 1970s, Reformation scholars continued to study the possibility of a unified Chinese religion, common to all classes. Such a religion would have been inclusive of both folk and elite religions. This idea stemmed from popular beliefs such as the Five Elements (*Wuxing*), a series of life energies associated with qualities, shapes and colors which could be visually and spatially harnessed for increased harmony and energetic flow. For instance, the element of wood is considered expansive and vital; it is represented by columns or rectangles, greens and blues, and the season of Spring. According to *Wuxing,* implementing elements with wood qualities in the home can improve wealth and family functioning. In any case, after multiple attempts to reconcile folk beliefs with the "Big 3", scholars concluded that Chinese folk religious experience was incredibly diverse, so they chose to acknowledge **orthopraxy** as the unifying factor. Some key spiritual ortho-practices included funeral rites and the making and sharing of food.

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3.1.3 Diversity of Spiritual Experience: Elite Classes

Figure 11. Li Shuang. (2006). *Dancing Flowers* [oil on canvas].

Source: Art Salon, https://www.art.salon/artwork/li-shuang_dancing-flowers_AID140427

The orthopraxy of Chinese spirituality can be gleaned in *Dancing Flowers* (2006) if visually analyzed according to *Wuxing* (fig. 11). The subject is a female Buddha, albeit with an earthlier disposition as markers of social status suggest. For instance, the woman can be judged as from the elite class due to the *fengliu,* or courtly elegance and refinement, of her robe. The rosy hue of her attire is, in a sense, a tempered version of the fire element, associated with passion, illumination and fame—which she would have had as a noble. Likewise, the crown of her head is bright and glowing, we can assume that she has attained enlightenment–or that the representation alludes to an idealized, enlightened self. Soft greens, radiant yellows and calm, bamboo beige abound in the composition, alluding to the vitality of wood. Her figure resembles a vessel, like the ones behind her, and she completes the sequence of vases to become the fourth. According to *Iweiyi: Flowers and Delivery Gifts in China*, a business in Shenzhen's Futian district, the number four (四 sì) is associated with caution and avoidance due to its "phonetic similarity" with the word 'death' (pronounced 'sǐ' in Mandarin). However, in this spiritual context, death appears to be metaphorical. Buddhist philosophy speaks of ego death – the standstill of egotistic striving – as the ultimate path to enlightenment. A darker aspect of this idea is that, as a woman of means, she would be less prone to strive for survival if her means are already met. Daoist ideas of eternal incompletion are alluded to in the background, as one vase is essentially a careless moment away from hurling towards the ground. The allegorical potential of the "shattering vase" also harmonizes with Buddhist ideas about the fleeting nature of enlightenment. However, the bamboo in the vase, suggestive of yin-within-yang and yang-within-yin, point to a more flexible definition of enlightenment, as one where full awareness naturally ebbs and flows. The geometric alignment of the vases is harmonious with Confucian principles of logic and rationality.

3.1.4 Diversity of Spiritual Experience: Humble Classes

The orthopraxy of folk religion can be gleaned, perhaps most "purely" or directly, in Shuang's *Feeling Joyful for the Arrival of Yong Tong* (2006; fig. 12). While not much is known about the personal or social context of the portrait, arguably earthly specifics are less relevant than the experience portrayed. The powerful earthy energy of this portrait seems to emphasize the strong Yin elements of humble Chinese femininity. For some spiritual context, in the *Yi Jing ("The Book of Changes")*, an ancient Chinese divination system written by King Wen in 1000 B.C., the *bagua* or trigram for the concept of Yin is signified by the element of earth (fig. 13).

Figure 13. Kau Jun. (1800-1899). *The "Venerable Gentleman," Wearing Traditional Costume, Holding the "Eight Trigrams" and "Yin and Yang" Symbol* [Watercolor].

Source: ARTSTOR, https://jstor.org/stable/community.36637951.

When a trigram for one of the elements combines with another, it forms a hexagram—the symbolic depiction of a querent's situation, with transformations in any of the lines as indicative of a life change. When two earth trigrams combine, they form *K'un* or Hexagram 2: "The Receptive", essentially the archetype for a purely Yin situation. According to Protestant missionary James Legge, who translated the *Book of Changes* in 1899, "The Receptive" signifies dependability and "receptive devotion". This hexagram is also known as "The Field". Whomever receives Hexagram 2 in their consultation is advised to act in the manner of Earth: receptive, dependable, fertile -- essentially following the principle of *wu wei* or non-action.

Figure 12. Li Shuang. (2006). *Feeling Joyful for the Arrival of Yong Tong* [oil on canvas].

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Source: Art Salon, https://www.art.salon/artwork/li-shuang_feeling-joyful-for-the-arrival-of-yong-tong_AID1057929

Artwork title, simple dress and earthy tones depict the subject as the folk archetype of a mother. Similarly, the mask-like element of the woman's face is particularly prominent in this portrait, emphasized through boldly shaded contours not unlike Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein. As a whole, *Feeling Joyful for the Arrival of Yong Tong* impresses the viewer as an exploration of folk beliefs and traditional characteristics of gender. Shuang's characteristic vessel-like women once again emphasize Yin/Yang principles, while the mask-like appearance of the face suggests emotional restraint and Buddha nature. As the combination of fire red and metal white, the soft intensity of the rosy hue, seen through the lens of *Wuxing*, seems to preferentially evoke the state of kind enlightenment characteristic of Shuang's subjects. Compartmentalized rectangularly, almost in the style of a hexagram, the rosy hue signals the temperance of strong emotion. Likewise, the shape of the background itself, allusive to earth, supports the idea of Yin. In lieu of typical symbols to denote enlightenment, Shuang appears to have expanded the Self through spatial means, by establishing a parallel between the female body and the earth itself, since the woman's body appears to either merge with—or dissolve into—her immediate environment. In a sense, her *Self* as identity gives way to the formless experience of mindful awareness; of the body as a vessel of experience, where disposition flows like bamboo, both flexible and grounded. In essence, the "self" has been banished in the portrait as the woman becomes an iconic representation of the Buddha. Like in *Buddha Under a Blossoming Branch,* the sociocultural aspect of this experience is poignantly enhanced by the fact that traditionally, Chinese women did not have personal names. The title of the work, the simplicity of her dress and her mask-like visage reflect this egoistic extinction.

Another parallel between *Feeling Joyful for the Arrival of Yong Tong* and *Buddha Under a Blossoming Branch* is the use of numerology to underscore thematic aspects of the portrait. In contrast to the latter, however, where the numbers have been rendered through Chinese writing, the current portrait features simplified, Western-style numbers to depict a divinatory message of auspiciousness. According to *Iweiyi: Flowers and Delivery Gifts in China*, these numbers have folk-symbolic value applicable to gift-giving practices. For instance, arrangements with two (2; 二 èr) types of flowers or gift-giving in pairs symbolize harmonious relationships, care and connections. Likewise, arrangements with five (5; 五 wǔ) different flowers or elements convey harmonious offerings, while gifts with 19 (十九 shíjiǔ) elements express hope that loved ones achieve aspirations and personal growth. These meanings seem to have been taken into account by Shuang in the "Yong Tong" portrait, since the number two, faithful to its intrinsic meaning, has been repeated twice, while the numbers five and nineteen have been repeated thrice, for augmented auspiciousness. Though not included in the numeric divination, the number three (3; 三 sān) can be considered as representative of the bamboo next to the woman. Two bamboos appear to embrace while one remains stoic though nearby; their entwinement suggests dutiful family ties in line with Confucianism. In Daoist terms, the proximity of the bamboo to the woman seems to establish a parallel between the bamboo and the experiential flexibility of human existence, communicating the idea of Humankind as Nature itself.

4. Discussion

The idea of folk religious beliefs and practices seems to be prominent in the contemporary work of Chinese avant-garde artist Li Shuang. Formal and visual analysis suggest Shuang's folk-religious approach as supportive of spiritual commonalities between folk and elite classes, encouraging considerations of equality through shared beliefs. Numerology and vase forms as the embodiment of the Yin principle seem to emphasize ideas of receptiveness, enlightenment, and unity as the symbolic "Buddha self" transcends class and gender.

On a poignant note, one can analyze purchasing trends related to Shuang's analyzed works as silent "proof" of issues of related to Chinese division of class. Though they explore similar themes and were painted in the same year, *Dancing Flowers* sold at Sothebys for € 17,985.61 (USD 28,000) in 2008, exceeding the upper limit of USD 25,000, while *Feeling Joyful for the Arrival of Yong Tong* sold much later, in 2022, for € 1,283.44 (HKD 10,710.00 at Christies). The argument could be made that these trends point to a depreciation of folk values, though conversely, the might emphasize just how clearly class-based experience of shared beliefs has been represented by Shuang in both works, reminding the public as to why she was once one of the Chinese avant-garde's brightest stars.

5. Conclusion

Li Shuang continues to push the boundaries of contemporary Chinese spirituality and culture by incorporating visual signifiers from the "Elite 3" and folk religion through myriad configurations. Her ideas explore the commonalities of spiritual beliefs rooted in compassion, through compositional arrangements, visual and numeric symbolism and a color application suggestive of the principles of *Wuxing*. In this sense, Shuang's portraits can be read visually as archetypes of specific spiritual practices and manifestations.

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