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Image [modified]: Peng Wei, Autumn of Tang Dynasty, 2008, ink on paper, 70x39x22 cm.

Female and Feminism: A Historical Overview of Women and Art in China*

Feminilidade e feminismo: uma visão histórica das mulheres e da arte na China

Shuqin Cui **

ABSTRACT

The question of “why there have been no great women artists,” initiated by Linda Nochlin in 1971, elicits different responses from art domains in China. In addition, the notions of feminism or feminist art criticism, translated from English and practiced by Chinese artists, create distinct connotations reflective of different gender conditions. Zhu and Xiao, in their *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*, claim that “Chinese feminisms must remain plural because those concepts represent the changing practical consciousness in response to historical and social developments” (Zhu and Xiao, 2021: 1). Dai Jinhua, a Chinese scholar, views feminism as “the search for different worlds and alternative possibilities other than global capitalism” (Dai, 2002: 29). A historical overview of woman and art in China demonstrates a plurality of female and feminism, and this article shows how alternative responses to Nochlin’s question become possible if one views sexual difference and gender politics as a non-binary system in specific historical contexts.

KEYWORDS

Chinese art history. Gender and Identity. Women's art. Feminisms.

RESUMO

A questão “por que não houve grandes artistas mulheres”, iniciada por Linda Nochlin em 1971, provoca diferentes respostas no campo da arte na China. Além disso, as noções de feminismo ou crítica de arte feminista, traduzidas do inglês e praticadas por artistas chinesas, criam conotações distintas que refletem diferentes condições de gênero. Zhu e Xiao, em seu *Feminisms with Chinese Characteristics*, afirmam que “os feminismos chineses devem permanecer plurais porque esses conceitos representam a mudança da consciência prática em resposta aos desenvolvimentos históricos e sociais” (Zhu e Xiao, 2021: 1). Dai Jinhua, uma estudiosa chinesa, vê o feminismo como “a busca por

mundos diferentes e possibilidades alternativas além do capitalismo global” (Dai, 2002: 29). Um panorama histórico da mulher e da arte na China demonstra uma pluralidade de feminilidade e feminismo, e este artigo evidencia como respostas alternativas à pergunta de Nochlin se tornam possíveis se concebemos a diferença sexual e a política de gênero como um sistema não binário em contextos históricos específicos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

História da Arte Chinesa. Gênero e identidade. Arte de mulheres. Feminismos.

Traditional: the concealed body and erased identity

In a patriarchal society with a literati-dominated art canon, one sees great works of art by women throughout Chinese art history. Their names remain invisible, however. The identities of the women artists are either denied from historiography or concealed behind their male counterparts. The female artists noticeable in the Chinese art tradition belong primarily to two distinctive groups: gentry ladies and elite courtesans. Their works of art extant in the historiography often engage in the personification of bird-flower paintings or poetry. The gentry and the courtesans differ in their manner of personifying natural forms, however. In the brush lines of the courtesans, orchids and rocks appear bold and free, as if the courtesan justifies her body’s inner purity against sexual condemnation and her personal integrity against social discrimination [Fig.1]¹. In contrast, the birds and flowers depicted in the brush strokes of gentry women appear colorful and harmonious, signifying the feminine cultivation and familial status of the gentry body². Thus, both courtesans and gentry women use a visual medium to locate a subject self through their paintings, but the visible personification conceals the body as female subject and gender identity as authorship.

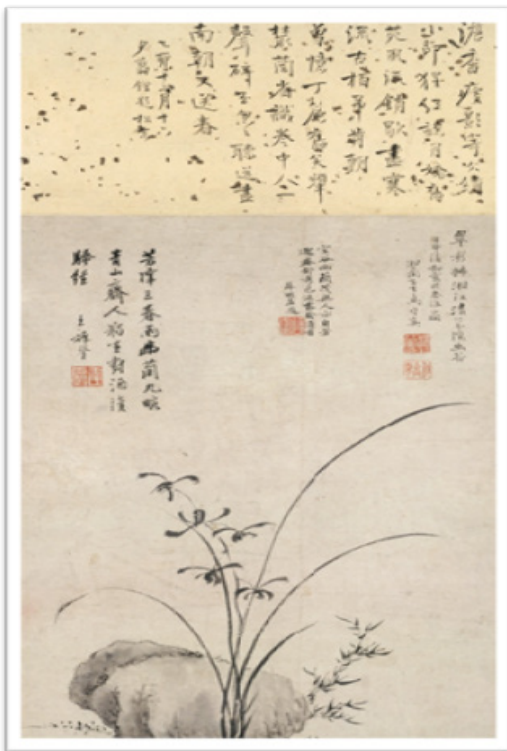


FIG. 1. Ma Shouzhen. *Orchid and Rock*, 1572, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, ink on paper, 70.2x29.2 cm. Author' archive.



FIG. 2. Qiu Zhu. *Women Musicians*, Ming Dynasty, hanging scroll, color on silk, 145x85.5 cm. Author' archive.

The invisibility of the body and erased female identity in the Chinese art tradition also owes to social space, gender norms, and rhetorical conventions. Housed inside residential gardens or female chambers, the gentry women – daughters, wives, or sisters of scholar-elites – paint and write in the strokes or rhetoric taught by their male mentors. The women’s position in domestic space and the limits of expression imposed by male-dominated classics allow little possibility for the female self as subject and female body as the medium of artistic creation. In a different setting, confined inside pleasure quarters and green bowers, talented courtesans paint, compose and sing to entertain their scholar-clients. The flower-plants they paint – bamboo, chrysanthemum, plum blossom, and orchid – are symbols of four gentlemen, signifying cultivated noble scholars. The courtesans, painting and writing in the visual rhetoric of “gentlemen”, do not strive for self-expression but rather cultivate scholarly-defined rhetoric for the satisfaction of male desires. “The women of the gentry and courtesans”, as Marsha Weidner indicates, “were counterparts to the male scholars whose art theories and practices eventually came to dominate Chinese painting in the Ming and Qing dynasties” (Weidner *et al.*, 1988: 13). In addition to flower-plant practices, figure painting, especially the palace beauty genre, further explains the paradox of a visible female image but invisible female body/identity. The contrast between images of beautiful women in the Tang and Ming-Qing dynasties exemplifies how the traditional genre configures beauty into a visual form that connotes gender and social implications. The standard Tang beauty, for instance, features physically plump and visually elegant noblewomen. Brush lines form a beautiful figure characterized by lavish silk draperies and floral hairdos; facial makeup creates a small, cherry-red mouth and rosy cheekbones. The beautiful Tang woman is a symbol of health and wealth, the visual manifestation of a socially imagined ideal wherein the dynasty showcases its political stability and cultural magnificence. Ming-Qing beauty, by contrast, prefers a lovelorn lady figure, physically fragile and emotionally melancholy. She

is often confined inside a garden or private chamber obsessively indulged in longing for her absent lover. Sitting among the garden rocks and banana plants, this lonely woman holds a fan in one hand, a mirror in the other. “Wrapped in self-containment the individual figure inevitably subordinates all that surrounds her” (Edwards, 1964: 10-11). Languishing yet beautiful, this imaginary female beauty evokes a mood of sympathy, self-esteem perhaps lost or socially suppressed.

Healthy or delicate, the figure of the classical female beauty resides in a gendered social imagination, either visual or literary. In re-reading the genre of female beauty painting, Ellen Johnston Laing finds erotic themes woven into configurations of beauty and locates supporting evidence in poetic literature: “The Beautiful Woman genre of Chinese painting has been consistently misunderstood because important visual clues relating to Chinese social customs and poetry have been ignored (Laing, 1990: 284). In considering how women artists handled beauty figure painting, one realizes that few could be traced in a genre shaped by a male imagination and visual tradition. In Qiu Zhu’s *Women Musicians*, for instance, one first notes the visual conventions [Fig. 2]³. A group of palace ladies inside a courtyard garden are tentatively engaged in a musical performance. The line drawing of the palace pavilion, garden rocks and plants, and elegant gentry ladies with their attendants appears to conform to the conventions of the genre. The female subjects are happily occupied with playing and listening to music. The composition places three musicians at the center, with two viewers watching behind and another at a distance. The playful mood and interactive mode are enhanced by the color spectrum as cold and warm hues complement all the figures and objects in the picture plane. Indeed, these palace beauties are not depicted as lonely and lovelorn; they encourage male desire. While the painting invites us to share the merriment of musical entertainment, the female body/identity and any suggestion of psychological depth remain concealed beneath conventional visual forms.

In sum, there was no lack of great women artists but the female body was concealed from public art scenes and the female identity was hidden behind a male counterpart.

Feminism in the name of modern woman

Although inconspicuous in traditional art, women artists and authored artworks began to appear in the public sphere in the early twentieth century, when China embarked on a nation-building course of modernity and a social-cultural renaissance. The pursuit of modernity in the name of national salvation inspired notions of enlightenment and emancipation evident in the ideal of the modern woman. Nonetheless, the pursuit of female visibility and modern womanhood was driven not so much by women themselves but rather by cultural forerunners and revolutionary activists. In other words, the identity of the modern woman and her image-making in the early twentieth century positions men as intellectual emancipators of women. “Women’s emancipation”, as Lydia H. Liu explains, “was part of larger project of enlightenment and national self-strengthening, coded with either male or patriarchal” (Liu *et al.*, 2013: 7). In response to the social-cultural transition, artists negotiated between *guohua* (national painting) and *xihua* (western style painting). Cultural forerunners on a mission to modernize the nation launched an iconoclastic attack on traditional practices and pushed for modern reforms.

Women artists followed the movement away from tradition and participated in the search for modernity. Their emergence in the modern art scene became possible with the advent of the co-education system, which opened doors for the first time for talented female students to receive a modern art education. Courses on western art and a curriculum consonant with western instruction offered professional training comparable to

that of traditional schools. In addition, official scholarships supported top students for studying abroad in Europe, Japan, and the United States. With professional training gained in and outside China, and with their works included in art exhibitions, women artists were no longer concealed behind their masters and limited to personifying flowers or to crafts. Instead, they (although in small numbers) became beneficiaries as well as signifiers of the historical moment when the female – subject and body – began to play a role in the discourse of modernity and the formation of modern art. The promising picture of women artists actively participating in modernist schools and seeing themselves as new women in pursuit of a modern identity and artistic achievement presents only one side of the narrative, however. This was a historical moment when art education opened to women, and they looked to join in the mission of nation-building. But the woman artist was not only a student to be educated but also a female other to be enlightened. She signified the gender politics of the time, torn between a tradition that regulated woman's social-cultural status and the new call for woman to be modern. Caught between traditional roles and modern ways, women artists struggled to find an identity and mode of expression that could be gender specific.

The search for identity and expression is apparent in the self-portraits rendered in oil painting. Among works of self-portraiture by women artists of the early twentieth century, Pan Yuliang's paintings present illustrative examples. When Pan Yuliang left her family in China to pursue art training in Paris, the connection between the female body and modern art meant a painful diasporic experience⁴. Estranged by a spatial dislocation that echoed the split between tradition and modernity, the artist turned to self-portraiture to address a dilemma of identity: woman and artist, or woman as artist. In Pan's work, one often sees the self-subject situated in a private space, confronting us as well as inviting our vision to view her exile from China and survival in Paris. The configuration of this Chinese diaspora

identity finds a visual trope in the hairstyle and dress code of qipao. The languid eyes and unyielding lips reinforce the expression of melancholy. The color hues nonetheless cheer as well as contrast the lonely self in black with a bright-colored green vase, beautiful flowers, white tablecloth and saturated light against a brown background [Fig. 3]. The conception of modernity comes to terms in the self-portrait, as a modern female subject, absent from the Chinese art tradition, assumes a new, western form. For a woman to be modern, Pan's career suggests, one needs to transcend familial virtue and endure the rigors of exile.



FIG. 3. Pan Yuliang, *Self Portrait*, 1941, oil on canvas, 96x64 cm. Author's archive.

Pan Yuliang is not alone. Self-portraits by Sun Duoci and Fang Junbi reflect how a gentry woman can transcend her traditional background to become modern. Self-portraits by Yu Feng and Zhou Liying foreground a Chinese Nora figure in her persistent pursuit of modern identity in the campaign for national salvation and cultural enlightenment[Fig. 4].

Thus the modernist self-portrait of a contemporary woman presents an autobiographical inscription. Moreover, the personal identity and authorship asserted in the self-portrait constitute a claim by women artists for inclusion in modern art history. Although the presence of the self-portraits is undeniable, women artists could not forthrightly claim an autobiographical subject, as autobiographical writing by women was long undervalued. As a result, in the making of the self-portrait, the autobiographical subject too often remained missing or forgotten⁵.



FIG. 4. Yu Feng, *Self Portrait*, 1935. Author' archive.

In addition to self-portraits in oil, other representations of the female body served as indicators of modernity: the nude as the “site of modernity” for the construction of modern national discourse and art formation. The presence of the female nude model in the classroom, for instance, indicates a modern art curriculum, and paintings of the female nude signify an

artist's modern identity⁶. Moreover, the exhibition of the nude implies modern spectatorship. As Chinese artists and critics learned from western art schools, a modern nation calls for modern art, and modern art requires the nude. Beyond acting as a marker of modernity in national discourse and art, the female nude suggests another realm of meaning when the woman artist takes her own body as a model and invests it with her subjectivity. Pan Yuliang was one of a few women artists who consciously searched for self-expression via the visual form of the female nude. In her nude series, one sees a merging of Chinese identity and western form: Chinese faces but torsos in standard European realism. With self as artist as well as model, painting the nude is a process of authorship and representation; it extends the female nude from "site" to "agency" in the context of modernity. The nude offers the artist a metamorphosis of form.

As individual artists struggled to assert a female identity and claim the body for art, female images became highly visible in commercial art or print designs in prewar China. In contrast to modernism with nationalist overtones, rising commercialism featured cosmopolitan fashion and culture popular in urban centers, especially Shanghai. The Shanghai Modern, as Leo O-fan Lee describes it, reflects "an urban landscape where literary publication, filmmaking, fashion, and modern architecture mark the treaty port as familiar but foreign, oppressive but seductive, traditional but innovative" (Lee, 1999). In the art world, "if we expand our vision to include commercial design", Julia Andrews explains, "we discover the existence of a fully cosmopolitan sector within the pluralistic visual culture of prewar China" (Andrews, 2012: 191).

Attractive images of women adorned visual cultural domains such as photography, advertising, print journalism, and art deco. The sexually alluring female body became a site of modernity in its commercial and material cultural forms. In the design of commercial ads, for instance, the body image becomes an integral part of the commodity, thus simultaneously

promoting body and product for market consumption and the consumer gaze. Published in journals or printed on calendars, body images advanced ideas of modern life and female beauty for popular reception. Captured by the camera lens and framed as photography, the body image stood for modern identities: middle-class homemakers or desirable nudes, healthy athletes or film stars. “Without woman – the most visible icon of all the images reproduced – such successful commercial strategies may have never come to life. Yet women, their concrete aspirations and the degree of their identification with the images rendered, appear to have no voice in this narrative” (Dal Lago, 2006: 407-408). Endlessly reproduced in multimedia and advertisements, the visual image of the female body has become a ubiquitous modern icon, the product of an image-making mechanism by which editorial or cultural producers consider how to conceptualize and commercialize modernity.

While popular in commercial and mass cultural realms, the image of cosmopolitan woman was also well-received as a subject by women artists. The images they created, however, reflect artistic exploration more than sexual/commercial attraction. Guan Zilan’s oil series of young women is one example. In her *Portrait of Miss L*, for instance [Fig. 5], one sees subject and form in the Fauvist style, with bold brushwork and high-keyed color patterns, a signature of Henri Matisse or Yasui Sotaro. The intensified color opens up visual possibilities that enable the artist to loosen details to pursue an expressive tone in painting the subject of the portrait, a cosmopolitan icon and a modern woman as indicated by the fashionable qipao, short hair, and a stuffed lap-dog. Because of the beauty of the artist and her colorful works, Guan Zilan attracted viewers and readers with her image enlarged on magazine covers or exhibition catalogues and her works printed on postcards published in Japan⁷. In other words, art and beauty, color and fashion decorate a cosmopolitan modernity where the aesthetic and the popular correspond well with the cosmopolitan norms conspicuous in print culture, media coverage, and art salons.



FIG. 5. EGuan Zilan, *Portrait of Miss L*, 1929, oil on canvas, 90x70 cm. Author' archive.

In sum, in early twentieth-century China the nation and its art underwent a transformation from tradition to modernity. The transition towards a non-western or alternative modernity, as Timothy Mitchell argues, encompasses a process of representation: “this process refers not only to image or meaning making (through practices in the aesthetic and intellectual spheres such as modern fiction and arts), but also to productions of official knowledge (via such social institutions as the education system, museums, mass media, hospitals, and the legal system) and productions of cultural forms in architecture, music and fashion” (Mitchell, 2000: 1-34). When access to modern art education enabled Chinese women to become artists, the practice of self-portraiture and western forms of oil painting allowed the emergence of women’s subjectivity. The subject that self-configured in the name of modern woman and went through the process of breaking away from tradition, could not simply reject conventional

restrictions, however. Patriarchal norms and national politics shift constantly definitions of gender and deploy art making.

State feminism: the image-making of oppressed proletarians and iron girls

When the socialist nation-state replaces modern nation-building in China, woman once again becomes an integral part of social-economic emancipation. Emancipated not to be a female subject, however, but to join a collective entity. State feminism adopts the official slogan of “women uphold half the sky” and the All-China Women’s Federation becomes the spoken apparatus. The presence of women in the domain of public production while constrained within familial reproduction characterizes socialist feminism with a double standard. In socialist body politics, one sees a woman but not her body; it is concealed beneath her proletarian work clothes. One sees gender but not sex; it is hidden behind the official ideology of gender equality. Socialist visual culture foregrounds the female body in its art to signify oppressed working-class sisters awaiting communist emancipation or revolutionary model figures propagating political ideology. Iconography reinforces the idea that women’s emancipation depends upon the collective father figure of the nation-state and that gender equality follows denial of sexual difference. Under the rubric of socialist ideology and its visual rhetoric, images masqueraded the body: “iron girls” in Cultural Revolution posters, humiliated peasant women in ballet performances, model workers in print formats, and central figures in revolutionary model theaters. Taking these figurations as socialist feminist iconography, Tina Mai Chen rightly notes the regulated nature of “women’s emancipation”. “For these women, their agency was located within a state-authored feminism. The represented experiences of [women] models therefore remind us that

women participated in individual, national and international liberation but not, as Marx foretold, under conditions of their own making” (Chen, 2003: 291-292).



FIG. 6. Wang Xia, *Island Girl*, 1961, oil on canvas, 173x84cm. Author' archive.

Although the numbers of women artists trained in the socialist art education system were not small, women's art was barely visible. It is hardly possible to instill the identity of woman artist when art production operates as a collective enterprise. It is equally difficult to pursue woman's art when art serves the interests of politics and mass education. For women artists working within the terrain of socialist political ideology and art aesthetics, the concept of gender connoted collective sameness more than sexual difference. Artists did manage to leave certain female inscriptions on their works, however. Three representative works demonstrate how women artists configured their female subjects to align with political expectations

while also making certain female inscriptions. In her oil painting *Island Girl* (1961) [Fig. 6], Wang Xia created a prototype of the socialist work of art, stressing the gender ideology of woman as upholder of half the sky. The figure that dominates the canvas is a masculinized fishing woman with her body completely shielded beneath her work clothes and her sexuality erased from the visual field. The figurative dominance obscures the beauty of the background painted in the manner of a western landscape: blue ocean, sandy seashore, light-brown houses. Known for her nudes and figure painting, the respected artist had little choice but to subordinate her work to the demands of socialist gender rhetoric⁸.

Jiang Yan's *Testing Mom* (1953) also shows how women artists infused certain feminine gestures into their practice of socialist realism for a mass audience [Fig. 7]. The painting depicts a domestic space with a mother and her two children as figurative subjects. The familial activities are nationalistic, not domestic, however, as the daughter tests her mother's language and writing skills during the national campaign to combat illiteracy in the 1950s. The woman artist, while ensuring that the painting's theme conforms to official policy, marks the work with a female stroke by having the mother figure take the "test" while nursing her baby. The artist thus adds a gendered touch to political life. We find similar evidence in Wen Bao's *Four Girls* (1962), where peasant girls take a break from the work of harvesting. With the application of different color tones and figurative features, the artist captures the girls' differences in age, personality, and feminine features. The artist safely locates them in the zone of agricultural production but expresses female identity free from masculine forms and heavy work clothes. As in these three examples, socialist art and gender discourse emphasized women's participation in political campaigns and economic production. The presence of the strong woman worker in the absence of the sexual female body signified gender equality in socialist China. While obeying the canonical restrictions imposed by prevailing

political conditions, women artists attempted to include certain female touches and gendered inscriptions in their work.



FIG.7. Jiang Yan, *Testing Mother*, 1953, 113.6x64.6 cm. Author' archive.

FIG.8. Zhou, Sicong, *Sunrise & Sunset*, 1982, ink and color on paper. Author' archive.

In the early transition from the Mao era to post-socialist China, works by Zhou Sicong (1939-1996) and other artists began to take woman as the central subject, handled with female consciousness⁹. Her series *Yi Women*, especially *Sunrise and Sunset* (1982) [Fig. 8], introduces two women of Yi ethnicity. The female bodies, with heavy loads of firewood on their backs, occupy the foreground of the canvas. The weathered face of the older woman, the bare feet of the younger one, together the women's distant gaze, suggest the harsh environment these ethnic women endure and sustain. The rock hill that the figures stand and sit against fills almost the entire canvas,

leaving little room for the subjects and viewers to breathe. Women's art as a case of innovation and category of analysis did not gain visibility until the 1990s, when social-economic changes in China and increasing interaction with the world finally prepared the stage for the emergence of women's visual art in contemporary China.

(Post)socialist feminism and self-identity search

The social-economic transition from an insular socialist state to a post-socialist entity in the 1980s mobilized China into the global community. Since then, the market driven economy and China's authoritarian political structure collide yet cooperate, creating a post-modernity with Chinese characteristics. The condition of "global post-modernity", in Sheldon Lu's explanation, reflects the "latest stage of postmodernity and postmodernism across the world beyond its original Euro-American confines . . . China has become a chief generator of such transnational postmodernity and has thus revised the Western model" (Lu, 2001: 4). The transnational exchange includes not only the material transaction between the poles of perception and reception, but also a discursive exchange between the local and the global. Chinese contemporary art, women's art in particular, needs to be viewed in the context of social-cultural circumstances as well as from the perspective of gender.

At the close of the twentieth century, a flourishing of contemporary art took place in China. Art exhibitions, avant-garde movements, and experimental works gradually drew attention worldwide and received historiographical documentation. One sees, surprisingly, relatively few women artists among their male counterparts with works on view in exhibitions. Thus from the very beginning the contemporary art scene has been a male-centered and market-driven enterprise. The absence of Chinese women from exhibition spaces and art criticism does not imply

their non-existence, however. As male counterparts discovered profound subjects and the art market embraced China's avant-garde, woman returned to herself, searching for self-identity and the expression of female experience. "Once women attempted to use personal experience and 'women's perspective' to interpret this century, women's creative works were not only different from male artists, but also different from the work of any former era of women. Therefore, this singular practice embodied 'women's art' and the advance of these concepts composed the topical content of 'women's art' and its 'post-modern' overtones" (Jia, 2010).



FIG. 9. Yu Hong, 1966 Six Month Old in Xian, 1999, oil on canvas, 100x100 cm Author' archive.

Self-awareness and female consciousness led to the realization that after ceasing to be the modern woman in the early twentieth century, or the "equal half" in the socialist era, woman needs to become an autonomous subject. Artists, subjective and independent, intuitively turned to the female body and experience as a source of artistic creation. In terms of subject

matter and formal innovation, women's visual art appeared unmatched in modern art history going back to early twentieth-century China. Yu Hong's oil painting series *Witness to Growth* [Fig. 9], for instance, re-positions woman as artist and subject by situating a personal coming-of-age narrative against social-political history, thereby fusing the personal and political. Yin Xiuzhen's installation, *Yin Xiuzhen* (1998) [Fig. 10], claims a self-identity by inserting personal photos of her at different ages into the handmade cotton shoes, fabric icon of the social-historical past. Liu Manwen's self-portraiture series, *Ordinary Life* [Fig. 11], locates a troubled self against familial relations and social-cultural confinement; Liu uses mirror reflection and spatial articulation in the search for self-expression. Liu Hong's female nude, *Self-monologue* (1997), by concealing the face and head of the female figure with red cloth, dislocates the individual from public display to a private realm, where a monologue unfolds within the inner self. In these examples, we see the artist searching for a female-self from either a social-political history that has suppressed her historical position or from a psychological realm that supports personal expression.



FIG. 10. Yin Xiuzhen, *Yin Xiuzhen*, 1998, mixed-media installation with ten pairs of shoes and ten chromogenic prints. Author's archive.



FIG. 11. YLiu, Manwen, *Ordinary Life*, 1993, oil on canvas, 162x130 cm. Author' archive.



FIG. 12. Cai Jin, *Banana Plant No. 68*, 1995, oil on canvas 160x150 cm. Author' archive.

Expansive thematic issues centered in women's artistic creation further reinforce the legitimacy of women's art as a visual genre and gendered perspective. Subjects such as female pregnancy and nudity, once invisible, come to occupy the center of the canvas. Yu Hong's *Twenty-Eight Years Old, Being Pregnant* (1994), Song Hong's *Fear of Birth* (1995), Xing Danwen's *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995), and Feng Jiali's *Pregnancy is Art* (1999) all take the pregnant body, especially the nude body, as the subject and the medium to explore the significance of female experience in ways new to Chinese art history. Related to the issue of pregnancy, female sexuality also becomes a central concern. Zhang Xin's *Three Conditions* (1992), Cai Jin's *Banana Beauty* (1995) [Fig. 12], and Liao Haiying's *Love* (1995) express female sexuality through flower-plants as medium and material. The shape of the flowers and the texture of the plants are personified as sexual allegories through which the intimate experience of menstruation, pain, and life/death find female expression in terms of visual abstraction. In contrast, Shen Ling's oil painting series *Men and Women* (1999-2002) explores female sexual desire through discursive subversion and visual eroticism. Re-positioning woman as the sexual subject rather than the object, the series reverses the conventional notion of the gaze and foregrounds female sexual pleasure over male desire. The intended reversal also occurs in Cui Xiuwen's early oil painting series, *Rose and Mentha* (1996-1997), where the artist radically translocates the male body into woman's sexual other, to be played with or gazed at. Her video project *Ladies Room* (1999) uses a hidden camera to capture private moments of sex workers in a restroom. The spatial juxtaposition of private and public on the subject of prostitution extends female sexuality from personal expression to social-cultural concerns. In addition, her *Angel Series* explores the thematic issue of teenage pregnancy through the visual medium of photography, a subject unspeakable in Chinese sociopolitical history and hidden from the camera [Fig. 13].



FIG. 13. Cui Xiuwen, *Angel No. 4* (2006), photograph. Author's archive.

Women's artistic experiments involve not only controversial issues but also wide-ranging mediums and materials. The play of innovative imagination frees women's art from conventional norms of traditional painting or modern learning and opens ample possibilities: in installation or sculpture, photography or video, performance or multimedia. Women artists who incorporate materiality in the field of installation art, for instance, demonstrate how crafts or weaving can become a process of art-making. Li Xiuqin's large-scale rock and wood sculptures, *The Journey of Life* (1997) and *The Gate of Life* (1998), offer a vision of life through the form and substance of the materials dominating the site. Shi Hui's soft sculpture series, *Nest*, *Chains*, and *Knots* (1995) [Fig. 14], by contrast, finds expressivity in weaving and crafting via fiber or threads. Jiang Jie's wax sculptures of infants and the fetus uncover the brutality of China's one-child policy and the vulnerability of the victims, as implied by the sheer frangible materiality. Lin Tianmiao is well known for her novel use of materials, especially cotton threads. Her

early work *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995) displays a bed with an oversized black hole, penetrated by needles [Fig. 15]. Stretched from the center and connected to the bed are uncountable balls hand-wrapped with cotton threads.



FIG. 14. Shi Hui, *Knots 3*, 1995, installation, 270x800x120 cm. Author' archive.

FIG. 15. Yu Hong, *1966 Six Month Old in Xian*, 1999, oil on canvas, 100x100 cm. Author' archive.

The radical art practice that might reasonably be defined as feminist art or the call for a feminist reading is rejected by Chinese women artists themselves, however. One views herself as an artist equal in terms of quality of work and creative talent with her male counterpart. A gendered pronoun indicating female or woman artist would render her secondary and insignificant. In the mind of the Chinese woman artist, claiming

herself as a female other suggested inferiority in creative capability and marginalization in the social hierarchy. Unlike in the west, where feminist rhetoric took sexual difference as its core thesis and gender politics as a political strategy, women and art in contemporary China did not appear oppositional to either social-political conditions or the conventions of mainstream art. In other words, Chinese women artists were interested not so much in political subversion or gender confrontation as in the negotiation of positional difference *within* rather than *against* the system of gender or sexual relations.

To deny of a feminist identity and reject feminist readings of artworks, while engaging with feminist practices, remains a compelling aspect of feminism with Chinese characteristics in the art world. The phenomenon represents a lingering paradox asking for serious consideration of feminism in plural forms and under China's gender-political conditions. Against a post-socialist landscape, where western concepts of feminism remain a translated vocabulary and China's dynamic economy complicates gender politics, the question of how to read women's works of art from the perspective of gender is perplexing. Resistance to feminism and feminist identity occurs for different reasons, reflecting Chinese social-cultural-gender conditions as well as problematic English translations. In a transnational flow of theories and discussions, with English as "theoretical language or discourse" to be translated into Chinese via a mode of "translingual practice," the notion of feminism, especially Chinese feminism, as Dorothy Ko and Wang Zhen argue, "is always already a global discourse, and the history of its local reception is a history of the politics of translation" (Ko and Wang: 463). The translation of conceptual understanding thus involves interpretations and negotiations between source language and target language, or guest language and host language, in Lydia Liu's terms. The meanings translated from the former into the latter, as she further explains, are not so much "transformed" but rather "invented" against the local social-cultural and linguistic environment (Liu, 1995: 26). The translingual practice in the

domain of woman and art demonstrates how theoretical terminology encounters linguistic limitations as well as connotative ambiguity when translation crosses different languages. In other words, the flow of feminism between two different linguistic boundaries prompts discursive inspiration on the one hand, and obstacles to perception on the other.

Further reference to the phenomenon of women's art comes from comments made by Chinese art critics. In response to the introduction and translation of global feminism in China, distinct voices from the field of art criticism have addressed the issues of women's or feminist art in China. Art critic Liao Wen, for instance, views women's art as a female mode. She sees in the artistic practices of women gender-specific differences in terms of the questions they choose, the responses they create, and the media they employ for visual/rhetorical expression. Moreover, the differences are social-cultural constructions. Although attuned to female intuitive ideals and emotional expressions, however, the female mode is not subjective enough for woman to see the world and to practice art from the position of individual subject and the perspective of gender difference.

In a different milieu, feminist art critic Xu Hong does not shy away from feminism as she makes male-dominated art discourse the target of her criticism. In her feminist manifesto, "Out of Abyss: A Letter to Women Artists and Critics," Xu questions the voice and rhetoric that dominates the art world through mainstream discourse and hegemonic power. She argues that regulatory systems including philosophy, language and images are constructions of the interests of the dominant gender. To make woman's voice heard, Xu Hong encourages the woman artist to participate actively in contemporary art experiments and to express her own voice in terms of the language of woman herself. In contrast, art critic Tao Yongbai calls for a transition from "a minor self to autonomous subject" and from "female consciousness to human freedom". Her suggestion of human freedom beyond gender difference speaks against a feminist notion of dichotomies

and proposes ultimate harmony between human and nature, and between men and women. Tao believes that the ultimate value of women's art lies not in the sex of the artist but in the pursuit of individual artistic freedom; art itself is sexless, and to put forward women's art solely as the product of a patriarchal history invariably results in a kind of loss.

In a social-cultural context where sexual difference and gender relations were subordinated to the overarching discourses of either art tradition or authoritarian nationalism, woman as subject and feminism as an approach remained outside the mainstream. Considering the prevailing gender conditions, we might suggest that there has not been a feminist art movement in contemporary China since the 1990s but rather a women's art experiment that searches for self-expression and visual articulation from a woman's perspective. The female self, long absent from the art tradition and later subsumed by social-political ideologies, underwent progressive transitions since the 1990s: a personal search for a means of self-expression inscribed with female experience, and the individual pursuit of subjective practices endowed with female agency and artistic values.

Beyond female and feminism

Women artists and their works have moved beyond a search for self-identity search to pursue diverse subjects in varied media, progressing simultaneously in the Chinese as well as in the global art landscape. What we have been witnessing are emerging artworks created either by well-established artists or by a talented new generation. Interestingly, feminist practice remains active even as the feminist label is rejected. Jiang Jie's recent massive sculpture-installation, *Over 1.5 Tons (Dayu yidunban)* [Fig. 16] invites as well as intimidates the desire for a feminist reading. A phallic-shaped dying monster, wrapped with colored lace and snagged by iron hooks, appears in its impotent sexuality and despairing masculinity. The

female sculptor, through her selection of subject and material, creates a feminist art practice both alluring and repulsive. In other words, the phallic imagery no longer signifies desire or symbolizes power but rather points to an impotent, vulnerable, and fragmented body: the phallus in its death throes. Its survival and constancy depend on a special sculptural form and material support, created as well as manipulated by the female artist¹⁰.



FIG. 16. Jjiang Jie, *Over 1.5 Tons*, 2014, epoxy, iron, 1000x4000x4800 cm. Author' archive.

Lin Tianmiao, an artist known internationally for her installation and video productions, has never ceased to experiment with various materials and media. Her exceptional works centralize daily life objects, often domestic ones, wrapped with cotton or fabric threads or penetrated

by needles. Because of the everyday subjects and feminine materiality, her art has often been classified as woman's or feminist work, a label she has consistently rejected. For Lin Tianmiao, the individual artist and the materialization of expression are more important than any category of identity. The solo exhibition of *Systems*, which opened at the Rockbund Art Museum in Shanghai in 2018, is a case in point. The artworks in this show strike public visitors and art critics as a breakthrough in material innovations. Beyond the materiality of cotton thread the artist experiments with glass, liquid, and mechanical installations to examine critical and dialectical relations between the individual and the collective, the personal and the public domains.

Yu Hong, another prominent artist known for her figurative oil painting, presented her debut virtual reality work, *She's Already Gone*, in 2017. Her boldly transgressive work crosses different visual mediums, from oil painting to virtual reality, as she experiments with possible combinations between fine art and digital technologies. The thematic concerns remain centered on female experience regardless of the medium, as *She's Already Gone* overviews a woman's life through birth to old age. Unlike her early works that foreground a personal story against social-political history, the virtual reality project bridges the personal with the social and art realism with virtual reality, opening up an unconventional crossing between a painterly world and cyberspace. In addition, by creating the personal and historical through a VR medium, Yu Hong invites the audience to simulated experiences in a three-dimensional, computer-generated environment. Viewers don goggles to wander through a virtual world seen from different perspectives. The added sound and moving images translocate female narratives from framed canvas to three-dimensional space and from figurative stills to animated characters.

The transitions and innovations by established women artists represent only a partial picture of the world of Chinese women's art nowadays, as younger generations are contributing their images and voices to the

contemporary art scene. Diverse subjects and multimedia articulations defy any simple categorizations. Peng Wei (b. 1974), for instance [Figs. 17-18], conjures classical Chinese ink painting with various materials and media. Female torsos wrapped with rice paper and ink painting, for example, link the traditional to the contemporary, ink/brush painting to three-dimensional sculpture, and the female body to historical settings. With ceramic and glass as primary materials, the emerging young artist, Liu Xi (b. 1986) [Figs. 19-20], is seeking fresh interactions between technology and aesthetics, sculptural form and materiality. In her hands, ceramics are (re)shaped into various winding curves and flowing lines through meticulous and traditional porcelain mechanics. The floral and vulva forms speak for the artist's view of female sexuality and a woman's voice.



FIG. 17. Peng Wei, *Autumn of Tang Dynasty*, 2008, ink on paper, 70x39x22 cm. Author's archive.

FIG. 18. Peng Wei, *Hibiscus and Egret*, 2006, hand scroll, ink on paper, 180 x 140 cm. Author's archive.



FIG. 19. Liu Xi, *Summer Time No.1*, 2017, Porcelain, 52 x 46 x 6 cm. Author' archive.

FIG. 20. Liu Xi, *Nirvana No.4*, 2014, porcelain 90x45x33 cm. Author' archive.

Lei Ziyi (b. 1994) juxtaposes geometrical forms, lines and colors to create abstract forms which remind viewers of cubism. The abstract art invites viewers to read and interpret, as it utters personal expressions. The collaged and bended forms represent a bodily structure, where desire or despair is enacted by the guiding lines. The shape of an eye or body part, serving as signifying system, explores the tangled relationship between female self and outside world. Artistic creation moves further toward multimedia dimensions, and *Late Night Savage* by Liu Wa and Yang Bo stands out as striking evidence. A multimedia work foregrounds three wild plants – tumbleweed, sunflower, and camel grass. The plants as central subjects are located separately at former nuclear sites in the United States, the former Soviet Union, and China. The young artists in their debut exhibition conjure film images, a soundtrack, vocal music and painting to explore how the

wild plants speak to the contaminated environment savaged by humans. Multimedia in form and addressed to the environment, the work reveals the critical issue of human-non/human interaction as a channel for revelation.

In sum, from the female art students in the early twentieth century to the full-fledged woman artists of the twenty-first, it has taken a century for the Chinese woman to take a subject position and have her works receive attention. With this progress, women's art as a category of study is becoming more expansive and variegated. The question is no longer "why are there no great women artists?" as Linda Nochlin asked in the 1970s, but rather relegation of great women artists from public space and art canons. As the historical framework sketched here shows, Chinese women artists have constantly negotiated their positions in art history and contributed to the art canons throughout the course of China's search for modernity. The dynamics of female and feminism in gender construction and the art canon can only partially explain the history of woman and art in China, however. The search for a female identity and a feminist art practice proceeds in relation to the social-political conditions of the nation-state, the availability and control of public exhibition space, and the shifting reception by viewers and critics.

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Notes

- * This article is a revised and extended version of my two published works: "Introduction: Why (En) Gender Women's Art" and "The (In)visibility of the Female Body in an Art Tradition: A Historical Framework". (CUI, 2016).
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- 1 For works of art by gentry women, see Wen Shu, Qiu Zhu, Ma Quan.
- 2 Qiu Zhu was the daughter of Qiu Ying, one of the four renowned painters of the Wumen School in Ming-Qing times. As a child, she watched and learned painting from her father. Beautiful ladies were one of her favored subjects, handled with subtle details, bright colors, and fine brushwork. Source from The Palace Museum: http://www.dpm.org.cn/www_oldweb/English/E/e9/01-01.htm
- 3 Pan Yuliang's biographical narrative entails different versions. That she was sold to a brothel at age 13 and her freedom later bought by Pan Zanhua remains a popular account. After graduating from Shanghai Art School, she traveled to France for further training supported by an official scholarship and her husband's sponsorship. After her death in Paris in 1977, her collected works went to An Hui Museum in her hometown. Readers in general have shown more interest in her personal story than in the significance of her work, which deserves a space in modern Chinese art history.
- 4 The subject and genre of self-portraiture by women artists in early twentieth-century China has begun to attract scholarly attention. Publications on the recovered history can be found in Tao Yongbai and Li Shi, *Shiluo de lishi* (the lost history) and Xu Hong, *Nuxing: meishu zhisi* (considerations on women's art). A significant curatorial exhibition and material collection, *Self-Portraiture: Women's Art in China, 1920-2010*, ran from 12-17-2011 to 2-20-2012, organized by The Central Art Academy. The exhibit presented a historical retrospective of the genre from the early twentieth to twenty-first century, with a large number of important works by several generations of women artists.
- 5 The presence of a nude model in a classroom of the Shanghai Art School in 1920 stirred controversy and sensation; it marked the start of modern art training. Pioneering figures of the western school in early twentieth-century China, such as Liu Haisu, Xu Beihong, and Lin Fengmian, all painted nudes as a sign of their commitment to modern art and the pursuit of identity.
- 6 After graduating from Shanghai Art College in 1927, Guan Zilan (1903-1986) moved to Tokyo, Japan, for further training under the mentorship of Fujishima Takeji. She became a popular figure in the art circles of both Shanghai and Japan because of her Fauvist style art. A solo exhibit was organized for her in Shanghai, 1930.
- 7 Wang Xia is well-known for her figurative oil paintings. She painted *The Standing Female Nude* (1960) before *The Island Girl* (1961). The popularity of the latter was due to its incorporation of the art politics of the time, a view of the working body of the female as visually strong and politically appropriate.
- 8 Zhou Sicong (1939-1996) and her professional life reflect a generation of women artists that made the transition from socialist to post-socialist China. Trained within the socialist system yet embracing the coming of a new era, Zhou produced work that ranges from academic realism of the 1960s to peasant-worker-soldier art of the 1970s to critical realism of the 1980s. Important and prominent, Zhou Sicong's art has yet to receive the attention it deserves
- 9 See my article, "Over 1.5 Tons: Subversive Destruction and Counter-Monumentality to the Phallic Archetype(Cui, 2021).
- 10 Museum webpage of the exhibition: <https://vimeo.com/552680689>.

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