



Alternative Agency in Representation by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists

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Abstract

There have been only sporadic attempts to understand Chinese women's role and influence in the field of visual arts, even though their contribution has been major. This article highlights the significance of women's participation in modern Chinese culture through the works of several contemporary Chinese women artists who have been professionally active in visual arts in the last two decades. Using an interdisciplinary framework, drawing on concepts from theories of feminism, modernism and postcolonialism, this article seeks to understand a culturally specific field in the history of art, and the relationship of various factors that have contributed to it.

Keywords: Chinese culture, Feminist art, National identity, Postcolonialism

1. Introduction: The Achievement of Cultural Modernity in Non-Western Countries

This article examines contemporary Chinese art from a new perspective, which is to engage in a non-patriarchal analysis of the works produced by Chinese women. Discussing relevant socio-cultural issues in the context of contemporary art will illuminate the ways in which Chinese women artists have been marginalized, not only in their native nation but also as "provincial" (Note 1) artists in the international art arena. As artists of a provincial or peripheral culture, various origins in the artistic production of Chinese women have often been overlooked and misinterpreted. In general, the historiography of Chinese art has followed a patriarchal system in which discrimination in relation to one's gender is undeniably present. This article attempts to give a fresh and alternative reading of recent artistic situation in China from the viewpoint of women artists. By exploring the specificities of the less discussed gender, this paper will unmask some interesting and unexpected aspects of encounters in the field of art and the discourse of representation.

An important characteristic of twentieth-century Chinese art was the arrival of "modernism". This article will consider cultural modernity from the perspective of female Chinese artists, and show that they do come up with individualized responses to the original Euro-American phenomenon. The analysis of the artworks of Chinese women partly aims to assess the influence of Western modernism on the development of modern Chinese art. The definition of the term modernism, however, is itself problematic. Part of the difficulty in defining modernism is, from the beginning, it was used to designate European modernism that flourished in early twentieth century and the American post-World War II modernism, generally referred by many as postmodernism. Thus, in the global context, the original formulation of the term has become somewhat ambiguous. The indiscriminate use of modernism to denote various generations and artistic movements in different countries has further complicated the understanding of the term.

The achievement of cultural modernity in non-Western nations often takes place through a conflicting and disadvantaged relationship with the socio-cultural and political thought of their Euro-American counterparts. This article illustrates that the process of a modern art discourse from a peripheral context can be seen as an appropriate adaptation, rather than unoriginal appropriation, of the Western model, with distinct characteristics accredited to its specific national context. To enhance the understanding of this point, the following section is divided into two areas, Asian modernizations and the woman question in Asia, in order to highlight the relevance of this research in the field of artistic representation.

1.1 Asian Modernizations

In the biased perception of the colonial discourse, forms of modernism developed by Asians can only be viewed as inferior, derivative, unoriginal and thereby marginalized. Such negative stereotypes conceal the actual disposition and character of Asian peoples and promote the thinking that Europe still maintains a cultural authority in post-colonial societies. Eurocentric assumptions about race, nationality and representation thus prevent the world from accurately understanding the cultural production of Asia. The consequence of Euro-American culture on non-Western nations is often viewed as a better culture influencing an inferior one. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, “our constructions of world systems is (theoretically) rooted in the ideas of ethics in eighteenth-century Europe - a Third-World historian is condemned to knowing ‘Europe’ as the original home of the ‘modern’, whereas the ‘European’ historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the pasts of the majority of humankind” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p.42). This statement illuminates the complex sentiments and struggles of non-Western artists in their quest for modernism, particularly when they adopt a foreign artistic medium and technique.

Such a position has privileged the Euro-Americans and marginalized the natives. As art historian John Clark points out, “the zone of autonomous cultural energy which drove their [the colonized] adaptations was ignored; their own developments and re-positionings of ‘other’ forms were forcibly concealed beneath the iron mask of Euramerican ignorance” (Clark, 1993, p.2). Clark is referring to the prejudiced view of Euro-Americans that does not take into account the intricate relationship between an artist and his/her sources, and does not consider the reactions and possibilities that evolve during the complex processes of cultural juxtapositions. The Euro-American model of modernism cannot be applied simplistically or with accuracy in a provincial context without impeding the recognition of any originality and new developments in the modernism of peripheral cultures. Measured against conventional Western standards, the modernity that non-Western countries achieved often appears incomplete and lacking.

Furthermore, there are issues related to time-space lag in the consideration of European-derived modernism in provincial cultures. What might be regarded as modernist in Asia might not necessarily be applicable to or relevant in Europe. With influential factors such as distance, space and time being involved in the process of adaptation, assimilation and translation of Western modernism, the artists’ perceptions and understanding of the term “modernism” in Third World countries would have changed and differed from the original sources. Although the works of modern Chinese artists in the twentieth century followed closely the forms and styles of the West, forms of modernized art works that evinced a Chinese sensibility gradually but surely evolved. When Western techniques or styles were transferred to the Chinese context, they were articulated into a different dialogue, which involved a complex and individualized negotiation process by the artists, such that differentiated and new meanings were generated.

1.2 The Woman Question in Asia

The relationship between modernism and a provincial culture is by nature complex and problematic, and it can be made even more so by involving women as producers of modernism. Given their diverse and distinct historical backgrounds, Asian women do not experience their gender identities in the same way as in the West. Within multifaceted Asia itself, feminists of different nations are attracted to certain issues more than the others, as the nations that make up Asia have very different concerns. For example, while the early women’s movement in India struggled with issues in the domestic sphere, such as dowry death and birth control, the women’s movement in the Chinese Communist regime was more concerned about issues in the public realm, such as land ownership and political participation. The experiences of different women, affected by their specific cultural positions and factors such as class, ethnicity and location, need to be taken into account.

In comparison to the history of Western (white, middle-class) feminisms, which have been explored in great detail over the last decades, the analysis of Third World women’s engagement with feminism is in short supply. In the 1980s, feminists who focused on the struggles of non-Western women rallied for the need to recognize that not all women are white/Western and middle-class, but the experiences of “other” women must be taken into account as well. Feminist Chandra Mohanty questions the notion of an encompassing sisterhood and argues for the rewriting of women’s history based on “specific locations and histories of struggles of people of colour and postcolonial peoples, and on the day-to-day strategies of survival utilized by such peoples” (Mohanty, 2002, p.195).

Studies of Asian women have revealed the existence of a common belief in the inferiority of women in society, which justifies a secondary status imbued in their cultures since ancient times. Not unlike colonized subjects, women in Asian societies have been relegated to the disadvantaged position of the “other”, subjugated by various forms of patriarchal domination. They are therefore subjected to oppression. Besides having to face gender issues at home, Asian women, as the inferior gender in formerly colonized societies, are marginalized in the politics of race and ethnicity across cultures. In this sense, they are “doubly colonized”, that is, by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies. Based in Australia, cultural studies writer Ien Ang, who is of Chinese descent, speaks of her personal experience as being subjected to marginalization and discrimination on the basis of her race. As a woman of colour, Ang points out that Asians are

subjected to being objectified and fetishized in a dominant white society, and argues for the allowance of “ambivalence and ambiguity” in the politics of multiculturalism (Ang, 2001, p.178).

In the field of art, the diverse and complex ways in which women of Asian origins participate in art-making need to be analyzed carefully within relevant cultural and theoretical contexts. Japanese artist Yoko Ono, who has been based in the United States since the 1940s, says that the Oriental woman in the West has distorted images of either “an obedient slave or a dragon lady” (Yoshimoto, 2005, p.126). With the awakening of women’s consciousness in the twentieth century, Asian women artists called for a feminist intervention in art histories through their distinct narratives and artworks. According to art critic Claudette Datuin, these artists, by telling their side of story, are presenting “revelatory testimonies of their struggle, thus presenting an/Other history - one that is not anchored on a catalogue of styles or forms, nor on a linear narrative of masterpieces and masters” (Datuin, 2000, p.16). By presenting their alternative perceptions through various subversive strategies, an increasing number of contemporary Asian women artists are seeking ways to reinstate a voice in the politics of representation.

2. The Reality of Contemporary Chinese Women Artists

Although contemporary Chinese art has received a great deal of attention through a rising number of international exhibitions since the late 1980s, the work of women artists has been notably omitted. Women accounted for a miserable percentage of Chinese artists represented in major art exhibitions that were held during the peak of the Chinese art fever of the late 1990s. Amongst the eighteen Chinese participants in *Another Long March*, held in Japan in 1997, there were only three women artists. In *Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, a large-scale art exhibition in 1999 that included artists from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, only five women were represented, out of sixty-seven individual and group participants. In the travelling exhibition, *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, curated by Wu Hung in 1998, only three women participated out of the twenty-two artists represented.

It appears that female Chinese artists are largely excluded from the rising international recognition that many male Chinese artists are now getting. This has pushed a new generation of women artists in China to explore and advocate a variety of strategies of resistance and intervention in their work. Since the liberalization of the 1980s, a reawakening of women’s consciousness has prompted contemporary Chinese women artists to search for an appropriate artistic language to articulate their thoughts, emotions and experiences. It is thus not hard to imagine why many artworks of Chinese women today are interwoven with the politics of recent theories, such as postfeminism, postmodernism and postnationalism. As we shall see later through a few examples, many attempt to expose, within and between these theories, the subjectivities, tensions, fragmentations and perceptions that have long been suppressed by dominant cultures and systems.

Because of their particular situation, contemporary Chinese women artists tend to participate in exhibitions that focus on their gender and/or ethnicity. Since the nineties, a number of art exhibitions and publications devoted to the subject of “Chinese women artists” have increasingly taken place within China. The exhibition *Century Woman*, held at the National Gallery of China in Beijing in 1998, was one of the first comprehensive Chinese women’s art shows. The exhibition’s objective was not simply to provide an overview of recent trends in women’s art practice, heretofore a subject largely neglected by critics and art historians in China, but also, as pointed out by art historian Francesca Dal Lago, “the variety of styles, subject matters and issues addressed; the diversity in media and technical solutions; and the range of insightful perspectives on the role of women in contemporary Chinese society all created a feeling of thriving liveliness rarely found these days within the realm of male artistic production in China” (Dal Lago, 1999, p.23).

Since then, there has been at least one major art exhibition held every year in China that focuses on the category of “women artists”. *Her Presence in Colours VIII: International Women Artists Exhibition* (2008) held at the National Gallery of China in Beijing is a recent example. Concurrently with the growing consciousness of feminist art within China, there is also a gradual trend towards pan-Asian feminist art in the international arena. Exhibitions that focus on the concept of Asian women artists held in various countries include *Text and Subtext: Contemporary Art and Asian Women* (1999), held in Singapore; *Half the Sky* (1998), held at the Women’s Museum in Bonn, Germany; and *Against the Tide* (1997), held at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York, in the United States.

The preference for categorizing Chinese (or non-Western) female artists according to their ethnic and gender identities in international or large-scale exhibitions may be a strategy to counter the general lack of attention to them. However, some writers have argued against this tendency. Adrian Piper is “suspicious” of the “long-term significance” of such classifications. Piper writes, “It coincides too neatly with an interest in difference and otherness in other fields such as comparative literature, history, and anthropology, in which the main subject of investigation is the person, not the artefact” (Piper, 2003, p.241). Joan Kee argues that the rigid categorization of Asian artists according to their gender and race “plays into the hands of the inclusion-versus-exclusion binary opposition long associated with patriarchal and Eurocentric attitudes” (Kee, 2007, p.108). These statements indicate that frequent categorizations of the artworks of non-Western women according to their gender and/or ethnicity in international exhibitions may risk reinforcing the objectification of their “other” status, and that the individuality of their artworks will be overlooked.

Chinese women artists are concerned about the implications of stereotypical categories related to their identities, particularly of being a “woman” and “Chinese” (or “Asian”), or the complex sum of being a “Chinese woman artist”. Active in the international art scene, installation artist Lin Tianmiao speaks of her personal experience, “I am often called a Chinese woman artist. But I would rather say that ‘I am an artist, I am a woman, and I am Chinese’” (Marcoci, 2001, p.46). My interview with prominent avant-garde artist Yin Xiuzhen affirms this sentiment. When asked if she consciously utilizes materials with feminine qualities to highlight her gender and femininity, Yin replies matter-of-factly, “I am an artist who just happens to be female. I do not need materials to highlight my femininity; I use particular materials only because I feel they are relevant” (interview with Yin, 26 December 2008). The accounts from some of the most prominent female Chinese artists indicate that, like all talented artists, Chinese women want their artworks to be appreciated for their essential and individual qualities, and do not wish the interpretation of their artworks to be bound by gender and racial identities.

Feminism, with various specificities of Third World societies, has come to be intertwined with issues of postmodernism. In the construct of a new feminist discourse, transnational exchanges and cultural flows of the new era require an alternative kind of interpretation that involves comparative studies of different experiences. Acknowledging that the “center-periphery” model of structuring the world is no longer relevant in the transnational age, Inderpal Grewal uses the term “scattered hegemonies” to refer to the effects of the mobile capital as well as multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject (Grewal & Kaplan, 2002, p.7). Embracing the idea of transnational feminism, a few blockbuster women’s art exhibitions have been organized recently in the West to reflect the new global imperative.

Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art, presented by the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 2007, aimed not only to showcase a large sampling of contemporary feminist artworks from a global perspective, but also to move beyond the specifically Western brand of feminism, which has been perceived as the dominant voice of feminist art practice. As curator Maura Reilly points out, “rather than treating women in other areas of the world as foreign or exotic, a transnational perspective would allow us to make connections between the cultures and lives of women in diverse places without reducing all women’s experiences to a ‘common culture’” (Reilly, 2007, p.31). Both Lin Tianmiao and Yin Xiuzhen were included in this international feminist exhibition. Another major feminist art exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, curated by Connie Butler for The Museum of Contemporary Art (Moca) in Los Angeles in 2007, included works by a hundred and twenty artists from North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Australia and New Zealand. While *WACK!* invited a few women artists from Japan and Korea, unfortunately it did not include the works of Chinese women artists.

It is generally an encouraging sign that international art exhibitions on women’s art have expanded their scope to include the artworks of women from non-Western countries. However, it seems that women artists of non-Western countries are only beginning to be included in the international art shows on the basis that the exhibition in question is of a “transnational” or “global” nature. Due to the current “transnational” trend, Asian and Third World women artists have been invited because of particular “inclusive” or “all-encompassing” conditions of the exhibition. This raises an apprehension that women’s inclusion may just be temporary. One wonders if, once the fervour for transnational theories is over, will women artists from non-Western nations still be “in”? If this is so, then women’s inclusion may just be another gesture of concession or tokenism, rather than truly appreciating the women’s works for their individuality and innovation.

3. Forms of Intervention by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists

3.1 *The Body as a Site of Contest: Historical Associations and New Interpretations*

Feng Jiali is a contemporary oil painter who creates some of the most explicit images of female sexuality in China. Her paintings deliberately position young Chinese women in particularly aberrant poses, with dramatic, heavy make-up applied on their faces. To highlight the modern virtues of superficiality, plasticity and glamour, her bold and rather disturbing representations of women are further intensified by the gregarious use of fluorescent colours of pink, yellow and lime green, making the viewer uneasy. Feng’s oil painting, *Pink Feathers* (1996, Figure 1), illustrates an oriental woman dressed in a shimmering and elaborate, yet skimpy, costume. Her heavy stage make-up and her exaggerated, tall hat of pink feathers suggest that she is getting ready for an exotic performance. In a typical gesture of Feng, the woman is portrayed gazing at the audience with unwavering, dramatic eyes, as if to confront the onlooker with the validity of her self-representation. Frequently painting skimpily dressed women in bed or in the bath, either to highlight their sexuality or exotic quality, Feng confronts the viewer with frank and challenging self-awareness.

Speaking on her position as a Chinese woman artist, Feng states, “I want to reiterate my position of difference. It is precisely difference that makes our world rich and varied. Even if only within feminism itself, difference is the essence of non-essentialism. Feminism not only calls for basic human rights for women, but for the recognition of their manifest difference” (Feng, 2001, p.71). Feng is one of the frustrated women artists who have experienced exclusion from major international shows. Feng explains, “even today, important international exhibitions like *Documenta*, the *Venice Biennale* and the *São Paulo Biennale* have chosen not to include women artists from China. This is not to say that the

powers there are unjust or unfair. But, rather, because they see with the eyes of white, male logocentrism, they could very well mistake a splendid rainbow for white mist" (Feng, 2001, pp.67-68). Feng adds, "in the Third World, a woman's identity is the equivalent of being the Other's feminine Other – it is clear that a globalized process of justice is needed and also that the realization of this plea is far away" (Feng, 2001, p.69). Because of this reason, Feng and a few others set up the "The Siren Art Studio" in 1997 to promote feminist artistic ideals and raise the spirit of feminism in the field of visual art in Beijing.

Feng's inclination to highlight her "difference" by incorporating exotic costumes and accessories in her paintings seems to contradictorily enhance the desirable aspects of the non-Western woman. Feng's images can be understood from the perspective of the new post-Orientalist discourse. Responding to the didactics of the Orientalist critique, the approach of the post-Orientalists seeks to destabilize the stereotyping of images and identities, and proposes a new Third-World historiography that will also resist nativist romanticisation. Echoing the postmodernist decentring of unitary subjects and hegemonic histories, Gyan Prakash argues that "the new post-Orientalist scholarship's attempt to release the Third World from its marginal position forms a part of the movement that advocates the 'politics of difference' – racial, class, gender, ethnic, national, and so forth" (Prakash, 1990, p.406).

Feng's representation of the "self" for the gaze of others is reactive to the idea that China or the Chinese woman can only be exoticized, eroticized, or politicized to create visual effects for the international community. Her contradictory images, while strategically pointing to her "other" position, also highlight that China has been unfairly regarded as an object reduced to a set of Western-defined recognizable and consumable symbols. Feng seems to be performing the role of the exotic, histrionic, transgender, or abject "other", so as to deliberately overturn derogatory or restrictive stereotypes. Through her deliberately "exotic" and "Oriental" paintings, Feng critiques the dominant practice of representing Asian women as objects of desire by men. Feng advocates that, in addition to self-expression, the modern day woman artist must employ artistic concepts that raise not just socio-cultural but also political questions.

Cai Jin is another woman artist who communicates her feminist viewpoints in oil painting, a genre dominated by male artists in China. Like Feng, Cai is also interested in the representation of the female body, but she articulates it through the metaphor of organic forms in semi-abstraction. The imagery of the female nude was considered taboo in ancient Chinese art history. If it were attempted, it belonged to a restricted domain which only male artists could access. The Confucian structure of society dictated that women at every level were to occupy a position lower than men. In addition, women were judged by values imposed upon them, which aimed to reinforce male authority and patrilineal customs. Conventional representations of the female body in modern Chinese literature continue to confine it to traditional female experiences that serve to fulfil patriarchal male expectations. The particular representations and Chinese historical significance of the female body thereby pose it as a sensitive and arduous subject for Chinese women artists to tackle. Because of prejudice, deeply rooted in Chinese cultural understanding, the representation of the female body is potentially contestatory for women.

Working on the *Beauty Banana* series since the early 1990s, Cai has been inspired by the dried and contorted shapes of canna tree leaves, found in her native southern Anhui province. The Chinese name of the canna plant is closely associated with the fruit, banana, or "jiao", which Cai has amusingly adopted for her titles, "*mei ren jiao*" (which means "delicate beautiful woman"). The Chinese words "banana" (*jiao*) and "delicate" (*jiao*) sound alike. The shrivelled leaves of canna plants are represented as decomposed red pulp on Cai's canvas, appearing as if the plant has undergone a metamorphosis into decomposing flesh. Red is Cai's favourite colour, and she revels in its association with the body, specifically, in the form of flesh and blood. Although vegetal in matter, Cai's distorted renditions of the canna leaves in a flesh-like, organic substance suggest a political intention of deconstructing sexual stereotypes. As Francesca Dal Lago has pointed out, the medium of oil is "strongly related to the Chinese male artistic production, and that a dominant, patriarchal kind of ideology is associated with it" (interview with Dal Lago, 22 March 2009). In this viewpoint, Cai has turned to a male-dominated, conventional medium to revise the complexities of her feminine identity.

Rather than seeking alternative forms of artistic expression such as installation, Cai insists on articulating her feminine position in the genre of oil painting. Yet, while working mainly in oil, Cai, has attempted to work her way through male clichés by injecting a personalized flavour into her oil paintings. She achieves this through provocative compositions, feminist subject matter and a creative usage of the material. Cai has deliberately chosen the traditional subject of flower painting to facilitate a deconstruction of conventional notions and the stereotyping of female artistic creation. The traditional association between women and flowers (or plants) in China is provocatively contrasted with the somewhat gruesome distortions in her compositions, suggesting not only a subversive act, but also revealing her individual subjectivity. To further increase the visual association with exposed flesh, Cai has recently applied her raw, obsessive way of painting to the soft domestic objects that usually come into contact with the human body, such as used mattresses, phallic-shaped bicycle seats, cushions and padded slippers. In this way, Cai has attempted to push the boundaries of oil painting by incorporating installation and ready-made objects as part of her artistic strategy.

A rising younger generation of Chinese women artists, born in the 1970s onwards and growing up in the prospering 1980s, communicate their ideas in even more daring and outrageous gestures. Artists such as Chen Lingyang (born 1975) are certainly not afraid to stand up to tradition and defy age-old taboos. Chen is known for her work *Scroll* (1999), in which a roll of toilet paper, rolled out into a strip that measures six meters long by twenty-two centimetres wide, is stained with her menstrual blood. On the day of her menses in October 1999, she drew trails of blood from her vagina with the long strip of paper, forming strange marks, which looked almost like abstract landscape paintings. She then mounted her “abstract landscapes” into scrolls, in the format used for framing traditional Chinese paintings.

The reference to the traditional female body in Chinese cultural representations often connotes difficult or painful experiences, such as childbearing, death from suicide and physical abuse. In her analysis of the novel *The Field of Life and Death*, written by Chinese writer Xiao Hong, Lydia Liu points out that the female body in the novel is “always linked with bleeding, injury, deformation, or death, be it from childbirth, beating, sickness, or suicide” (Liu, 1994, p.48). The impression of bloodstains and clots not only alludes to the suffering feminine body, but carries psychological and emotional afflictions as well. Chen’s *Scroll*, however, seems to override this notion. Unlike ancient Chinese women, Chen not only asserts full control over her own body, but is also unafraid to refer to it in her expression of particular feminine experiences. According to Chinese tradition, a woman’s bodily discharge is considered unclean. The woman who is having her period is actually going through the “ritual polluting” process.

However, Chen has taken the liberty to use her “dirty” blood to create an artwork meant for a public exhibition. Furthermore, she has attempted to represent it in the style of landscape ink painting, a revered form of artistic practice in China and a domain that belonged to men. The landscape painting expression requires a kind of engagement with the higher, spiritual and more abstract realm. Women, as intellectually inferior, were kept away from landscape paintings and encouraged to concentrate on flower-and-bird paintings instead. Chen’s outrageous spin on the aged tradition can be taken as an expression of extreme insolence. Not only has she pushed the limits of what is acceptable by participating in the noble tradition in an unconventional way, she is also seen mocking her own ethnic artistic tradition by using something “unclean” to execute the revered subject in Chinese painting.

3.2 Introducing a Feminized National Identity in Art

Since the 1980s, Asia has experienced a spectacular process of economic and social growth. Some scholars have posited that, as key points of discussion in the globalized commercial world, the rise of Asian cities constitutes a formidable influence on a new, homogenized, urban world order. As global capitalism seeks to totalize the world into a nexus of common yet differentiated markets of production and consumption, the ex-colonized or the native is arguably an overdetermined ideological site for working out and contesting the meaning of modernity. Defined negatively in relation to the West’s self-image and also in terms of modernity, the native captures various dimensions of opposition and difference in time-space and socio-cultural constructions that the ex-colonized must confront in their engagement with the globalized situation.

Corresponding to China’s emergence as a world economic power, there has been an unprecedented demand for contemporary Chinese artworks. The rise of contemporary Chinese art constitutes an imminent force that challenges the way in which art outside Euro-America may be interpreted. Chinese artists, curators and art historians are increasingly focused on their inherent cultural qualities as well as their essential differences from the West. Although this has not yet been projected strongly to the international audience, Chinese artists and curators are starting to question the subservient position in art that Third World countries have been subjected to in relation to Western countries. As such, a growing number of contemporary Chinese artists are increasingly concerned about the issue of “Chinese identity”.

The recent economic success of China has caused an upsurge of Chinese nationalism, in which its socio-political representation aims to strengthen the idea of a “Chinese consciousness”. Many contemporary Chinese artists have been engaging with, and seeking inspiration from, their native culture as a way of self-expression and strategy in their art. In part due to their newly claimed center-position in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as to cope with complex and confusing effects caused by globalization, these Chinese artists are perhaps demonstrating a new nationalist (or postnationalist) attitude in their search for and articulation of a Chinese identity in art. For all the celebration of homogenized global culture, transnationalism and cosmopolitan sensibilities, it is evident that Chinese artists are also laying claims to their native cultural identities.

Yin Xiuzhen justifies her continual reflection on Chinese culture: “I was born and raised in Beijing. Chinese culture is very much a part of me and influences me deeply. It’s only natural, not deliberate or strategic, that artists draw inspiration from their own cultural traditions” (interview with Yin, 26 December 2008). In her installation *Desirable Prize* (2002, Figure 2), Yin sewed little fabric jackets for ping-pong (table-tennis) paddles from a selection of multi-coloured and patterned textiles. The fabric jackets fitted the paddles perfectly. Yin placed a real table-tennis table at the exhibition space (Huanyu Art Centre, Beijing) and invited the audience to play ping-pong with her, and with one another. However, when the audience tried to use the wrapped paddles to play, the balls flew uncontrollably in a disorderly and unpredictable way, due to the varied textures of the fabric covered paddles. The significance of the

ping-pong sport, with its elevated status in China, is critical to this work. Reigning as world champions in the field of table-tennis, the sport is also one of China's most prized games and is regarded as a source of national pride. Yin's recreated ping-pong game produced frustration and amusement simultaneously, when the enthusiastic participants tried to excel in the game, but could not, evoking a kind of humour.

Beyond the domestic sphere of the past, various forces of globalism have multiplied the socio-cultural and political roles that have been made available to Chinese women. Chinese women artists are beginning to probe new spaces, both private and public, which are increasingly opened up to them. As such, they are also taking upon themselves a more active role in shaping the new national identity, about which male Chinese cultural producers have been fascinated. Responding in order to challenge conventional systems that attempt to exclude and categorize Chinese women according to certain agendas, Lin Tianmiao has been engaging traditional craft-based techniques to highlight the struggles and oppressions that women continue to face. Like Yin, Lin has time and again resorted to sewing and embroidering to create most of her installations and sculptures in order to construct a particular intervening position. Lin's recurrent reference of needlework points to the implications of traditional power structures to which she has been subjected.

In her installation *The Proliferation of Thread Winding* (1995), Lin wrapped hundreds of ping-pong balls with white thread with the help of a group of women friends. While Yin wrapped paddles in textiles to disrupt the ping-pong game, Lin wrapped ping-pong balls with thread to disfunctionalize the purpose of the balls. Yin's and Lin's ways of manipulating the ping-pong sport appear like feminine attempts to destabilize the meaning and role of the highly-regarded national sport. Sports have a role in unifying peoples and glorifying nations. The Olympics, while advocating the spirit of sportsmanship, may be seen as a means of developing a sense of nationalism. Lin explains her work, "beneath the surface of the seemingly feminine activity was hidden an indefinable sense of threat and looming power" (Chambers, 2001, p.15). This statement affirms a certain political undertone of a feminist intervention in her work, and it appears to be in an area that involves national integrity and the mass culture of the Chinese people. It is interesting to observe how Lin and Yin are engaging the issues of nationalism and national culture from their distinct positions as women artists.

The recent intervention of Chinese women artists in the new discourse of nationalism offers a contrast to previous generations of Chinese women who participated in various Chinese nationalist struggles. Chinese nationalism is strongly shaped by a feudal, patriarchal ideology that grants men, who fight for their territory and idealism, the heroic status and the right to dominate. In her analysis of *The Field of Life and Death*, Lydia Liu pointed out that in the situation of war, nationalism enabled the poor rural male to transcend his class status to a new, empowered identity of a protagonist (Liu, 1994, p.58). However, when rural Chinese women wanted to volunteer to join the army, they were first required to reject their female identity by associating themselves with the brothers, before they could be considered for enlistment to fight for the nation. This implies that, by denying their inherent selves as women, the female protagonists would have erased demeanours, perceptions and other qualities distinctive of their female selves, in the pursuit of the "sameness" that the male protagonists propose. In contrast, the earlier analysis of the works by contemporary Chinese women artists reveals that they do not only resist denying their female identities, but have emphasized their "different" and inherent qualities.

The shifting Chinese identity entails great complexities as it not only involves issues of Chinese society today and in its past, but also in relation to the globalized world and its new superpower status, which is particularly influential in the Asia-Pacific region. Parallel to this view, by articulating their specific differences, the assertion of local culture and identity by Chinese artists can be considered a form of intervention in the construction of an alternative, sovereign form of modernism (and postmodernism). The contributions of contemporary Chinese women artists could not be more timely than now, as their alternative perceptions and visual images aim to displace old, conventional ways of interpreting identity, nationalism and modernism. The alternative perceptions, strategies and subjectivities of Chinese women artists thus inject new possibilities, as well as add a feminine value (which for a long time has been overlooked) to the increasingly multifaceted "Chinese" identity in the globalized age.

The mobility of today's transnational situation often results in feelings of being "in-between", of not being able to relate completely with one's native culture or the culture which one is currently experiencing. For Chinese artists, art and identity may no longer be defined simply by gender or a singular culture, but are, instead, hybrids of East and West, masculine and feminine, past and present. The Chinese diaspora has become a major influence on the socio-cultural revolution and modernization of Chinese communities inside and outside the mainland. Prominent Chinese migrant artists often inhabit in an in-between space, straddling disparate cultures and societies. The idea of the individual thus becomes multiple and presenting a mosaic of possibilities. This has prompted these artists to reflect on their fragmented, transnational identities. Qin Yufen (born 1954), a Chinese woman artist who has been based in Berlin (Germany) for the past two decades, often mediates between China and Europe. To articulate a personalized language, she works in a

range of media and employs a variety of techniques that combine her private experiences of Western culture and her Chinese heritage.

In her installation, *Spring in the Jade Hall* (*Yutang chun*; 1995), Qin rearranged a Chinese opera track that was inspired from a Chinese folk tale. It was about a female protagonist who fought against traditions to achieve her ideals. At the spacious courtyard of the National Gallery in Berlin, Qin hung layers of rice paper on more than a hundred washing lines. Loudspeakers were installed between the lines and rice paper, and the rearranged opera music was played faintly throughout the exhibition. Situated in the classical European design of the Berlin gallery, the integration of traditional Chinese aesthetics (opera music and rice paper) with the modern artistic genre of installation unexpectedly blended into a harmonious reality. Qin's art serves to intercede in the cultural interface between China and Europe, the relation between global and local, and the synergies between art and nature. Qin revealed, "I want people to rediscover calmness in viewing my work. I want to put them in a meditative mood in which they can see, feel and breathe the poetry of everyday life" (Qin, 1998, p.30). Through her exploration of delicate and traditional materials, such as textiles, natural fibres and rice paper, Qin attempts to resolve the tensions and predicaments of her specific female experience in transnationalism, immigration and cross-cultural communication.

4. Conclusion

4.1 *What Lies Beyond?*

Whether they seek unconventional artistic expressions or turn to traditional genres, the examples of Chinese women artists demonstrate that they address core issues about gender and representation, and their works open up detours not only in the Chinese context but also within an increasingly relevant movement of global feminism. The work of contemporary Chinese women artists reveals particular qualities related to their feminine experiences, which usually cannot be detected in their male compatriots' works. While some of the female artists have not been deliberate in advocating an overt feminist discourse, their mere desire to transcend male clichés and their determination to articulate their particular positions and the complexities of their own lives parallel that of a feminist art discourse. The work of Chinese women artists as analyzed above, with their investigation of various socio-cultural and political issues, constitutes essential tenets of the feminist movement. While manipulating formal components of accepted artistic language, performing their multiple selves in different ways, at times eliciting irony and ambiguity, a destabilization of the status-quo is apparent in the work of Chinese women artists.

Since September 2008, the world has undergone a serious economic downturn. The collapse of large United States-based financial organizations has caused a severe economic recession around the globe. Like everything else, the general art market has suffered a decline in the global financial crisis, and even the fever over Chinese art seems to have cooled. Contemporary Chinese artworks used to attract art collectors and bidders from all over the world to big-scale art auctions held in the region of Asia. However, due to the economic crisis, sales of artworks in the region have dipped drastically. In response to the unusually quiet art market in Shanghai, Wang Jie, chief representative in Shanghai for the Sotheby's, has pointed out, "unlike the former overheating phenomena, the contemporary art market of China is undergoing an adjustment phase and becoming more rational" (Wang, 2009, pp.26-27).

Given the economic downturn, many art galleries that promote contemporary Chinese art have suffered losses, and some have been forced to close down. A large number of these galleries are private-owned and run by foreigners. It may be an interesting time to anticipate what the Chinese authorities and art institutions will initiate at this time. There are reasons to believe that the Chinese government is ready to take art beyond what it is now. Modern Chinese history has shown that many critical art movements are linked to national development, issues and crisis. Art and politics in China have always been intricately related. This shows that the Chinese political authorities have always taken the significance of the arts and culture seriously. Often, this is closely associated with the issues of national pride and integrity. China's new status as a world power should make its government even more concerned about its cultural development.

The initiation of Chinese cities' biennales, such as Shanghai Biennale and Guangzhou Biennale, demonstrates a gradual policy of liberation by Chinese authorities and their rising enthusiasm for promoting contemporary art. Although some art historians and critics (including Francesca Dal Lago, as revealed during my interview with her) think that the biennales are not representative of what contemporary art is, they can be considered an encouraging and a groundbreaking step for the Chinese authorities. Unlike individual Chinese artists, one can presume that the Chinese government has more concerns and reservations about promoting unfamiliar and foreign art forms, in particular, modern Western art forms. Thus, while individual Chinese artists have been quick to embrace various Western expressions since the opening up of China in the eighties, the authorities have taken longer to accept and officially endorse these art forms. This is understandable, especially when contemporary art has evolved into a much more complex state. Despite the world economic downturn, the Chinese economy has been considerably resistant to its negative effects, as compared to many other countries. With many foreign and private art galleries closing down in the mainland, the action of the Chinese authorities at this time will reflect their actual support for contemporary Chinese art. It is thus interesting to

observe how contemporary Chinese art may develop during this period, with the exit of many foreign art galleries in China.

4.2 The Potential of Chinese Women Artists

The current economic predicament may be a pertinent time for Chinese women artists to play a more prominent role in the Chinese as well as international art scene. China has increasingly become more conscious of its national (and cultural) identity and representation. The work of contemporary Chinese women artists, with their alternative perspectives and individualized expressions, can be considered a timely intervention. Their questioning of existing, predominant socio-cultural categories has brought about some fresh perspectives to the politics of representation in the art discourse. Chinese women artists are also injecting new possibilities into the changing Chinese identity. With their particular individualized works and aesthetic sensibilities, Chinese women can help to inject fresh perspectives into the weakening market of contemporary Chinese art. The recent decline of the American economy and the rising influence of China, centred on the Asia-Pacific but achieving a global reach, give an added challenge to the already wavering Euro-American cultural hegemony, which for a long time has defined modernity. This helps to create a more favourable environment for the usually marginalized Chinese women artists to speak forth from their distinct positions. This is a timely opportunity for Chinese women to re-emphasize their distinctive viewpoints against dominant artistic languages, both within China and overseas.

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Notes

Note 1. The term "provincial" is obtained from Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000). Europe is often referred to as the centre or the model for developments of modernism elsewhere. From this viewpoint, the modernized arts and cultures of previously colonized or Third World countries can only assume the status of peripheral or provincial forms.



Figure 1. Feng Jiali.
Pink Feathers, 1996.
162 x 130.3 cm, Oil on Canvas.
(*Art AsiaPacific* 2001, Issue 31, p. 67)



Figure 2. Yin Xiuzhen.
Photograph of the installation, *Desirable Prize*, 2002.
(Picture by Yin Xiuzhen).