The Art of Women in Contemporary China

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Both Sides Now

By

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and Zhang Er

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-4102-9
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4102-3

This book is dedicated to the hard-working, talented and courageous women artists whose work fills these pages.

First and foremost, I want to thank Zhang Er for her extraordinary efforts for this study and for her diligence, patience and love.

Special thanks for the support and time of Sahm Doherty Sefton, Martha Lipman, Jinglun Zhu, Maude Guillo and my husband Monroe Karetzky. I would also like to especially thank the following artists for their extreme cooperation and kindness Peng Wei, Xiang Jing, Xing Danwen, Lin Tianmiao, Yin Xiuzhen, Cao Fei, Yu Hong, Chen Qingqing, Chen Ke, Lin Jingjing, Li Xinmo, Gao Yuan, Zhu Hui, Hao Jingban, Hu Xiaoyuan, Xiaoyi Chen, Feng Jyali, Peng Yun, Cai Jin, Sun Shaokun, Gao Yuan, Ma Yanling, Chu Haina, Ma Quisha, Lu Feifei, Xiong Lijun and Chen Zhe.

My extreme gratitude is extended to David Williams and the most excellent White Rabbit Collection, Sydney, Eli Klein Gallery, New York; Chambers Art Gallery New York, Michele Mariaud Gallery, New York; The Ink Studio, Beijing, Beijing Commune Gallery, Beijing; Shanghai Art Gallery, Shanghai, Edouard Malingue Gallery, Hong Kong, M+ Sigg Collection, Hong Kong, and the; M+ museum for visual culture, Hong Kong, Blindspot Gallery, Hong Kong and the Turner Contemporary London.

In memoriam Cui Xuiwen (1967-2018)

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INTRODUCTION

It should have not been a surprise, when in 2016 Cai Guoqiang, the famous artist, curated a show of Chinese contemporary artists in Dubai, he had but two women artists.[1] When asked why his selection included only two women, one who was his ex-studio assistant and the other a member of a two-person team, he responded, "Most women artists may create one work that really stands out, but it is hard to see a methodology behind their works, so that made it difficult for me to select them."[2] Such attitudes pervade the current art scene in China, and Western publications on contemporary Chinese art also greatly under-represent women artists; although some recent studies on gender and art have appeared.[3] The world famous artist Cao Fei reveals the disparity between being a male and female artist in China: "I am quite independent and not really involved in the art circle in Beijing,… When they introduce me there, they sometimes say, 'She is the most important female artist in China'—not artist, female artist."[4] This book seeks to present the art of women in contemporary China to a Western audience. By contemporary, I mean artists who, for the most part, were born in the 1960's and a younger generation born after the 1980's. My methodology was to collect as much art as possible, searching books, published articles, and largely the internet. There are several limitations to the art historical part of this study. The information obtained is admittedly spotty, data on artists who have achieved fame is widely available in digital and print media, however, that of younger and lesser known artists is not. Although their art may appear on the internet, contact information is lacking, so their work unfortunately cannot be represented here. In addition, there are so many artists trained in Chinese art schools that it is impossible to get a fair sampling and only a few are represented in Western media. Artists who have enjoyed success live well, while those who are still unrecognized eke out a living. Some of the high-profile artists have contracts with global luxury designers—BMW, Louis Vuitton, Dior, etc.—to create works of art to turn into products. As for resources, there are few publications in English, and many books, being published in China, are difficult to obtain or use.[5] Moreover, Chinese artists often self-publish, and such catalogues are hard to find. In addition, it is difficult for non-Chinese speakers to determine the gender of an individual by their name, often

writers on Chinese art neglect to identify the gender of their subject, who usually turns out to be male.

This book is unique in its inclusion of poetry by contemporary women whose voices articulate so many of the same concerns as the visual artists. In China poetry was the prime form of artistic expression, it remains so today. Looking at the poetry affords us a different means of appreciating the art of women in contemporary society. Zhang Er has written, collected, translated and edited recent poems by Chinese women written in Chinese, and these will appear in the text along with the art.[6] Zhang Er affirms, "Coinciding with the scant evidence of women's participation in the visual arts in ancient China, less than a handful of important female poets' works have been preserved like Cai Yan (b. between 172-178) like Li Qingzhao (1084-1155).[7] Despite the preservation of tens of thousands of poems by male poets, we know of very few women poets from the classical period. Of these few, most of their known work was lost." Zhang Er has also written an introduction to their work below and short analysis of the poems that appears at the end of each chapter. It is our hope to give voice to art that has not had full expression in the West.

This study is the natural conclusion of more than 20 years of meeting, writing about and curating shows that feature women, but by no means exclusively.[8] My interest began in 1998, when accompanying my friend Zhang Er, we visited a group of artists living by the Ming tombs outside of Beijing. I met the wives of the artists at the art commune and they confided to me that they too were artists. Although at the time I was relatively uninterested in contemporary art, I was intrigued. I asked to see their art, but they whispered their husbands' work was the focus of this visit, and they would not be able to show theirs. I vowed to return the next year and ended up meeting them as a group every year for two decades. This was a group of four recent female graduates from the premier art school, the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing who called themselves the Sirens: Feng Jyali, Yuan Yaomin, Cui Xiuwen and Li Hong. Their manifesto of 1998 in a self-published pamphlet maintained that as artists they should not be viewed as a threat:

> The creation of the Sirens in Greek tales is a typical aesthetic version of a patriarchal society where women are always described as the combination of apparent angels and inner devils. Under the belief that women are the origin of all crimes, female wisdom and the artistic value of feminist arts have long been denied. It's time for change. The image of the all-powerful man, the pattern in most societies, is bound to be abandoned. Women's

> voices will be increasingly heard, and their natural endowments will benefit people of both sexes.

A lot has changed since those early days, when these women invited me to their apartments to see their work. Chinese exhibitions of women are growing, several prominent women artists have shows in Europe and the United States; and Western scholars are writing academic books discussing various aspects of the history and an anthropological and social context of Chinese women's art. When I first looked over the vast material I collected, I found several general themes that prevail in their artistic production, although they present them in their own distinctive way. I considered the oft-asked question how the art of women is different from that of their male counterparts. In a world that seeks equality in considering the sexes, it is a difficult question. I thought of the events in my life and how they were reflected in that of the artists I had grown to have as friends or encountered in the sources. I came up with eight chapters arranged in an ever-widening arc around the artist's experience as a woman. The broad topics include *My body, my life,* the representation of the experience of being a woman; *Home and the world*, an examination of the home, household objects and world view; *This is us*, a view of children and other women; *Clothes make the woman*, a look at ancient and modern use of clothing and adornment as a statement of identity; *Social conscience*, that is their responses to political and social issues; *Fantasy* which comprises themes of another worldly existence*; Nostalgia* both personal and national; and *Abstraction*—nonfigurative work and its viability as a medium to express the spiritual. In many cases male artists could be discussed within these categories; but this is not the present goal. Rather, these themes provide several lenses through which we can enjoy the artistic efforts of women and compare their approaches to experiences in their lives, their strategies for dealing with modern society, and expression of their emotions.

In the history of the visual arts in China only a few women's names have been recorded, and they are described as members of their fathers' or husbands' atelier, achieving little in their own name. History also records the names of a few gifted courtesans of the Ming dynasty who had special artistic gifts.[9] They wrote poetry and painted landscapes, figures as well as flowers and bird studies. Using freehand brushwork, subtle coloring, ink and wash, they made small art forms like the album, scroll and fan.[10] Marsha Weidner in her groundbreaking studies examined several women painters from as early as the fourteenth century.[11] When women today look back to traditional pictorial art, it is largely monochrome landscape painting done by literati in an abstract calligraphic style, with the inclusion of poetry or

dedications written on the picture plane. Often scholars were artists. Literati were eminent in Chinese society due to the reverence for Confucius (d. 479 BCE) and his teachings which held that art's function was to inform moral values and not to stimulate the senses and distract from trying to solve important issues that troubled society. It was Confucian ideology, stressing morality and education, that informed the government apparatus for over two thousand years. In addition, commercial art proliferated: painted in muted colors, it illustrated plants, animals (feathers and fur) and themes from literature and history usually in a landscape setting.

During the early decades of Communist rule, beginning in 1949, art was considered an important tool to educate and unify the people in the goal of obtaining a successful society. Among the state artists, women did not play a large role. Russian realistic painters were the models for the propagandist, brightly colored, Western style realistic representations of a happy productive society in the '50s-'70s; Chinese brush painting was considered decadent in its determined avoidance of promoting social goals. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) the focus turned to the present rather than the past, colleges were closed, and all traces of traditional society—its art and monuments—were destroyed, and party dictates controlled the production of art. In 1980 when capitalism and Westernization began to transform China into a modern international power, art gradually became less restrictive but still monitored by the state, as it is today. Although Chinese art colleges offer classes in traditional Chinese brush and ink painting, these are in the minority in a curriculum which focuses on Western figural art. Although the work of Chinese artists of the late '80's-'90's was distinctively Chinese, it was also heavily influenced by the Western art inculcated in the colleges and by the new information about modern art practices in the West. Lately, an interest in restoring Chinese culture which was lost in the Cultural Revolution and in rejecting Western materialist values has led to a new appreciation of art made before the Communist era. All of this means that artists can be divided into two broad generational groups—those that lived through the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath, an era of extreme poverty, limited resources, harsh living conditions, violently enforced conformity and a total lack of freedom. Art, for many of them, maintains its traditional social function as a means of viewing and criticizing Chinese society. It should be mentioned that at that time there also was a greater parity for women and rudimentary social services, along with an attempt to restrict such vices as alcohol, drugs, lascivious behavior, prostitution and gambling. The second group was born after the opening of China to the West in 1980 that led to a flood of Western influences, rampant consumerism, greed, crime and the abandonment of the social services

provided in the past. Moreover, artists born after 1980 are not that aware of the burdens of history, constricted in their knowledge of the past or current events due to rigorous censorship, they are free to consider art for art's sake rather than as a socio-political tool. Born in the coastal cities, they have enjoyed relative prosperity, especially when compared to those living in the rural areas where poverty is more widespread. Artists live in a Communist/socialist state that has embraced capitalism, and art is a commodity but the demand for contemporary art is not strong within the country and access to foreign markets is limited.

This is not an overall presentation of a feminist movement or perspective. Indeed, the concept of feminist art is problematic in the West as well, as it segregates women's work from a general artistic context.[12] Moreover, a spate of recent Western academic publications consider the circumstance of being a female artist in China, making sources for this area of inquiry far richer.[13] Another reason the theme of feminism is not a focus of this study is because several of these artists maintain that it is not relevant in China, especially since Mao's dictum that women "hold up half the sky" engendered greater parity for women. At the time this doctrine enabled the revolutionary policy of full employment of women in the workplace and in the political world, though they alone assumed household duties and the responsibility for raising their single child, a policy also dictated by the party. This may have framed the argument for equality of the sexes, but nowadays the situation has steadily degenerated.[14] Ancient traditions persist with the preference for a male child, leading to widespread abortion of female pregnancies detected with the technology of sonograms.[15] Consequently, there is a diminishing number of females being born;[16] an increase in rural abduction of women for childbearing;[17] and an escalation in suicides among women living in the countryside.[18] There also is an undue burden and condemnation of wives who indeed have the misfortune to bear a baby girl. In the urban world, Westernization has revived the glamourous ideal of youthful females: modern offices are filled with beautiful women in their late teens and twenties, leaving a whole generation of 30 somethings unemployable and unmarriageable.[19] Certainly, in the art marketplace the role of women is slight: a recent article presented seven women to watch in the art world, in a country of a billion people.[20] The situation is similar among poets. Thus, the issue at hand is to view from a broad point of view the production of art by women in China, and thereby understand their lives, hopes and achievements.

The title of this work is *Both Sides Now*, which is a resonant one. It derives from Joni Mitchell's song, "I looked at life from both sides now

from up and down and still somehow, it's life's illusions I recall, I really don't know life at all." Here it refers to the female perspective, largely absent in the annals of art production, and finally it relates to the poetry complement included in this presentation of women's art.

Zhang Er, On Women's Poetry in Chinese: Tradition and Current Practices

In a sense, *Both Sides Now* is an exhibition of the devotion of two women editors over the past twenty years to promote the work of contemporary Chinese women artists and women poets who write in Chinese. I didn't foresee that our midnight trip to an artists' village in a suburb of Beijing in the late 90s, the side conversation with the hostess who served the table that evening, or our stumbling into the closet-sized, tucked away studios of women artists would lead to a collection so rich and rewarding. As a poet who writes and publishes in Chinese and is also engaged in translating poetry between Chinese and English, I have served as a ferry woman to help travelers to run their necessary errands, carrying goods and ideas to reach the other shore. The crossing can be smooth, blessed with good weather and calm currents. More often than not, however, eventful happenings are accompanied by trepidation, fumbling, detours, or worse, capsizing. It takes courage, bravery and luck to be successful in border crossing. On the boat with Patricia Karetzky, my friend and mentor, however, it is peaceful. Her patience and persistence, as well as her steady nerve and taking of the long view, have guided our journey to this stop. I am grateful.

A few years ago, *Wings* (Yi), a Beijing poetry journal devoted solely to women's writing, organized a debate on the tradition of Chinese women's poetry. At the time, my position was that there wasn't much of one. Yes, there were a few known women poets in the Classical period. However, amongst the huge chorus of collected poetry, the genuine female voice was shockingly lacking. We had a decadent tradition of a female-persona lyric mode employed by male poets, fully displaying male aesthetic assumptions about how the female voice should sound. The familiar voice in this tradition is one that whines. "She" longs for and complains about a powerful male figure, coyly with an exaggerated femininity. Hardly fashioned out of empathy for an underprivileged and deprived woman, this voice often offered a soft disguise for male authors to vent their own dissatisfaction with rulers, while engaging in narcissistic self-pity. Unfortunately, time and time again, this female-persona style has been treated as the template of

female writing. Any would-be woman poet in order to be accepted had to tailor her voice to fit this aesthetic "standard" of the established genre of female-persona mode. Although impressive in volume, the subsequent surge of women poets in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, rediscovered and published in several recent anthologies,[21] adds very little to the dominant mode of writing. For the most part, these poems inevitably mimic male writing, including the female-persona style lyrics. The originality, urgency and the clearly recognizable individual voice of earlier women masters such as Cai Yan (b. between 172-178) and Li Qingzhao (1084-1155) remain unique cases.

There has been a long debate about the genders of the authorship of the first poetry collection in Chinese, *The Book of Poetry* (Shi or Shi-Jing), which predated the Classical period. The anthology was legendarily edited by Confucius, although the book evidently existed before Confucius' time (551-479 BC). One of the three sections in the book, Book of Songs (*Feng*) consisted of folk songs that were collected by the "agents" sent from the Zhou central state. They serve as intelligence information on the mentality of people in subservient states. It seems the reign of Zhou shared a similar view on folk songs as T. S. Eliot on poetry: to know a people is to know their poetry.[22] The authors of the work were not recorded; the only things we know about them are hinted by the name of the state where their works were collected. In *Feng*,[23] besides many examples of venting, lamenting, and expressing dissatisfaction with the rulers, there are songs for courtship and celebration, and songs which deal with mundane themes. These verses (we no longer have a record of their melodies) possess all the typical features of folk songs as depicted by modern scholarship. Among them, notably, are songs with a distinct female voice, judged not just by their assumed persona, but also by the subject matter. Songs of typical women's work such as picking and gathering fruits, vegetables, mulberry leaves for silkworms, and of weaving, depict possible women singers. The songs about marriage, love affairs, and family relationships also occupy a significant volume of *Feng*. Historically, some scholars have used the existence of the classical female-persona lyric tradition to discredit the hypothesis of possible female authorship. Interestingly, in the awakening of women's poetry writing since the late Ming dynasty, male scholars began seriously entertaining the idea that women had contributed substantially to *Feng*.

As a poet, I have always suspected that some of the work in *Feng* must have been composed and sung by women. Who else on earth would understand the difficult relationship between a daughter-in-law and mother-

in-law, and invest so much vindictive emotion in their bickering? Who else would be so enviously affected by a sister's marriage procession? Who else would boast compare a "ripening" beauty to plums, and solicit suitors to declare themselves before the plums fall? Who else would call out repeatedly into a thunderstorm for their beloved husband to return home? Who else would worry so much at the sight of two young sons getting into a boat, afraid they might perish for no particular reason? These narrative voices, unlike that of the female-persona style in the classical period, are self-assured, forceful, and open, with a brilliant quality to their sound. We can hear them wailing, gossiping, laughing, calling, swearing their eternal love, throwing things around, or even setting them on fire when their loved one turns out to be unfaithful! Their anxious steps on the waiting dock reverberated over the millennia. There is not a trace of pinched disguise or passivity, as in the classical mode.

Another piece of indirect evidence comes by way of *Feng* were brought into being. According to a historian from Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE), poems in *Feng* were collected from the provinces by dispatched agents of both genders with government stipends male collectors over age sixty and female collectors over fifty who had no child. The scarcity of women who knew how to read and write—another argument that is often used to discredit the female authorship—is thus moot, as the authors here, male or female, were not writers. They were singers and oral reciters. Secondly, why would the central government send out paid female collectors if not for the explicit purpose of having easier access to female voices in the women's quarters?

I believe that we indeed appear to have a rich tradition of women's poetry in the form of folk songs, dating back at least 2500 years. Once the collecting mechanism for their work (oral verses in the form of folk song) disappeared after the Han dynasty, the woman's voice in classical Chinese poetry recorded in writing diminished significantly. However, that doesn't mean that women stopped composing after Han, only that we no longer have a reliable record of their work.

In comparison with the folk rhymes from my own childhood in the 1960-70s, a closer examination of the folk-song collections edited by Western missionaries and Chinese folklore scholars from the late nineteenth century to early 20th century, reveals a shocking discovery: there are major discrepancies in the level of sophistication of the themes, narrative skills and organization.[24] The earlier collections are obviously much richer in every aspect, which seems to suggest authorship beyond the children at play

who sing them. Perhaps one of the major cultural changes in the first half of the 20th century in China, that of women's education reform and their joining of the work force outside the home, inadvertently brought on this change. Once schooled, women who happened to be gifted with creativity in words, rather than orally composing verses and teaching them to children, would choose to write and publish their poetry.

I would argue that this transition from participation in the creation and dissemination of communal folk songs to individually writing and publishing poetry has ushered a new era in the women's poetic tradition in Chinese. Now we have the names of women poets, their blogs, websites, their recordings, their magazine publications and books. Several recent anthologies collected their work in English translation, side by side with male poets.[25]

However, similar to their counterparts in the visual art world, women poets writing in Chinese still have greater difficulties in publishing their work in comparison to male poets. The situation in mainland China is most apparent. It happens too often that at a poetry conference the stage is predominantly occupied by male speakers, or that an editorial board of a poetry journal composed of entirely male editors, or that an entire issue of a publication contains only male writers. A few celebrity women poets must serve to represent women poets as a group. What a loss of talent! And what a partial view of the world we get if it is only seen from a male perspective! The rulers of Zhou and Han understood this thousands of years ago, yet contemporary Chinese public intellectuals (almost exclusively male) somehow consider insisting that women artists and writers be adequately represented at conferences, art exhibitions, or in publications a "hegemony of feminism.[26] The phenomenon of gender imbalance is either trivialized or legitimized with all kinds of self-serving "theories" fashioned by the dominant gender.[27] It is more than coincidence that research and studies on women poets' and artists' work are scanty and their work considered by the standard male judgment as of less artistic value. No wonder serious women poets and artists choose not to label themselves as feminists out of fear that their output will be associated with low quality. As my co-editor Patricia Karetzky pointed out, in the face of the numerous dire hardships piled on Chinese women, we hope that this publication will provide them a little breathing room, a way to nurture their own creativity in art and poetry. It is a necessary acknowledgment, and also a celebration of their significant contributions to art and poetry in Chinese.

While it is impossible to categorize the poetry into specific subject areas, poets included in the collection concern their work with similar life conditions as visual artists. For example, their themes include their body and personal life; the home and the world; children and other women; social and political issues around them. They write in styles either abstracted or realistic, narrative or pseudo-narrative, and they often shift between these strategies. Spiritual imagination mixes with reality, and with fantasies. Nostalgic and diasporic moments happen to people who are displaced and or unacknowledged in time or space. These works are complicated, breathing, hissing, teary eyed or mirthful, just like life itself. They push boundaries, assert their space in time, and open minds to unseen possibilities. We include their names in Chinese and phonetic spellings, as well as their short biographic notes in the endnotes, to facilitate possible future research and outreach to these women poets.

We realize that these are not the only possible selections which could represent the significant work of living Chinese women artists and poets writing in Chinese. The most obvious omissions are women poets who have been canonized in China, anthologized, earned significant recognition on the international stage, and have seen their individual poetry collections translated into major Western languages. For example, poets such as, Zheng Min, Shu Ting, Zhai Yongming, Wang Xiaoni, Xia Yu and Lan Lan are among those omitted. I admire them deeply and have learned a great deal from their work; some of them are my friends. But given the limited scale of this selection and its context, I believe readers would be better served by seeking out their individual poetry collections, or an anthology which has devoted significantly more pages to their work than we can offer in this book.

It would more than please us to see other presentations of Contemporary Chinese women's artwork and poetry out in the world.

CHAPTER 1

OUR BODIES, OUR LIVES

In this first chapter, the most obvious theme of female art is considered—the physical reality of being a woman: the experience of menses, childbirth, abortion, childlessness; the genetic and emotional link between mothers and progeny; and the frank realization of the effects of age. Unlike the typical male gaze which projects an idealized female beauty, women view themselves with a cautious eye. Many women artists show the naked body, which is particularly startling in China. Since ancient times, Confucian mores required that women cover their bodies and not act in lewd and distracting ways. Even today, the naked body is still eschewed. So, by using their bodies, real bodies, these artists challenge the prejudices and the shame of showing themselves as they actually appear. Lucy Lim wrote in 1996,

> From the very beginning of Chinese pictorial art, the female was represented not as a real person but as a product of male construction, depending on the gender ideology of the time, but rooted in the patriarchal ethos of the Confucian age. Moving from the ideational representation of the exemplary woman to the palace lady to the deserted woman and culminating, in the final stage, as an anonymous visual metaphor, the female image has remained a signification of masculine power and superiority in Chinese society.[28]

When representations of women became frequent in early medieval China, the ideal of female beauty was that of a nubile slender adolescent. The only exception was in the mid-eighth century when, with the rise of two exceptional women in the court—Empress Wu (d.705) and Yang Guifei (d.756), the style briefly gave way to a more full-bodied feminine ideal. With the return of male totalitarian authority in the 10th century, the slender epitome of the youthful archetype returned and has remained the paradigm for over a millennium. In all these permutations, women were dressed, fully clothed in long-sleeved, silken robes with long sashes, ribbons and scarves. Nudity was not acceptable. Even today, those that bare their bodies are subject to opprobrium. One of the first artists to do so was Xing Danwen in 1994-96.[29]

Naked women and their biological processes are still taboo subjects in China.[30] Traditionally, Chinese women are made to feel that the menstrual cycle is polluting. In rural China women are forbidden to enter sacred temples or holy places when menstruating for fear of befouling them. The occurrence of menses is considered a failure in the constant effort to conceive a male child; it was the one act by which a wife or concubine could improve her status in the family. During menstruation women were removed from intimate relations until her purity was restored. Still the cultural apprehension towards menses is in force but now there are a variety of Western-style products that can help to sanitize the experience, seemingly giving women parity at the cost of denying their natural chrono-biological cycles.

The visual artwork chosen for this section is clearly influenced by Western modernism and avant-garde traditions in its choice of media and visual language. Some apply these tools to comment on sexist cultural traditions and discriminating practices towards women, wanting to shock the viewer. Zhang Er avers that although the women poets also focus on the body—celebrating, questioning, and pondering the carnal self, they work within the Chinese poetic and philosophical traditions, where the distinction of self and its environment is permeable and blurred. The generational confrontation between mother and daughter, she explains, often mirrors internalized self-torment secondary to societal oppression and becomes a form of self-reflection and musing upon the human condition in the cosmos.

Our True Bodies: Views of Women by Women

This first group of artists shows women, often themselves, as they actually look, quite unlike the slender adolescent ideal. Feeling shame at being less than physically perfect is an emotion felt worldwide, generating international industries that manufacture products aimed at artificially enhancing one's appeal. This is all the more true in times when a woman's appearance is a key to her success. Unrealistic aspirations of physical beauty have haunted women for millennia. In addition, in dealing with the onset of maturity and menopause, women must accept getting older, being beyond child-rearing and no longer an object of desire.

Lin Tianmiao (b. 1961, Shanxi Province) has made numerous replicas of her naked, middle-aged, paunchy body and placed it in various intriguing installations. [31] In the six-part series *Looking Back* (2009), Lin presents a headless, nude, rotund female. The life-size sculpture, made of pale polyethylene and coated with white automotive paint, appears in a number

of situations, including posing in front of a mirror, equipped with enormous wings and suspended from the wall of a brick building; and in *Gazing Back: Procreating* (2009), she squats in a yard filled with white polyethylene eggs in assorted sizes. (Plate1) Here, the woman has a video monitor projecting the image of an open eye for her face. The analogy between animal husbandry and human reproduction is clear. Not a few of Lin's works feature a pregnant female: the series entitled *Mother* (2008) has 16 parts, each dedicated to the headless pregnant form surrounded by eggs all wrapped in white silk like a cocoon.[32] In a further exploration of the stereotypes of women and their role in society, Lin created *Focus,* a series of gigantic self-portraits printed in colossal size, black and white photographs. For these, she digitally erased signs of personal identity, showing herself monk-like, bald and unadorned. Sometimes the face is partially obscured by variously sized white balls wrapped in thread, or hundreds of yards of thread issue from the back of the banner plaited like a thick braid of hair. Permeating Lin's works are the persistent themes of the self and the body; her projects examine the body from inside and out and from different perspectives. Recently she has been working with skeletons—bird, animal and human, which she wraps in luxurious polychrome silken threads[33]. In 2018 she exhibited a new style of art for *Warm Currents* which shows the internal circulatory system using an aluminum frame, stainless steel, glass and pink liquid.[34]

Jin Lingzi[35]

These Days

It's been raining these past few days
These past few days I can't sit nor stand
I shower again and again in the rain
Wash myself again and again these past few days
Finally, a white skeleton is washed clean

I painted again and again on the skeleton
Finally painted a few organs
Finally painted a coat of human skin

[Translated by Zhang Er and Cleo Li-Schwartz][36]

Using her own naked body and that of her elderly mother, **He Chengyao** (b. 1964, Sichuan) memorialized her mother's difficult life and her many sacrifices in performance pieces, which were the earliest enacted by a

woman[37] (Figure 1.1). In these works, she reaches out to connect with her mother,

> *Mama and Me* was created in the summer of 2001. After "Opening the Great Wall," I returned to my hometown to see my mother. When I arrived, she sat quietly on a stool at one side of the courtyard, half naked and playing with a rotten apple. I stood behind her and also took off my top. That was the first time my mother and I ever had our picture taken together. The photo allowed me to squarely face my family's history of insanity that I had carefully hidden and avoided for so long, to reaffirm the family line that connects me and my mother, and to partially satisfy a yearning of more than thirty years to support, touch, and embrace her.[38]

Pregnant out of wedlock, He's mother was a social pariah who endured torment under the Cultural Revolution. In this way He recognizes her mother and the past generations' pain and suffering. "I feel that the works I do are for my grandmother, for my mother, not for myself. . . I feel they are speaking through my body and I have to speak for them. They don't have the opportunity."[39] In *99 Needles,* she re-enacted the forced medical treatment her mother received for her mental disorder—the local bare-foot doctors restrained her and subjected her to an aggressive therapy of acupuncture. For her *Public Broadcast Exercises* (2004), He wrapped her own body tightly with white tape with red blood-like splotches*;* she then performed the regulated calisthenics that used to be required of all citizens to promote health[40] (Figure 1.2). Restricted by the tapes, He found the exercises were very painful. These and other performances are clearly a remonstrance of the ways people in China are treated today—subject to ideological conformity and a lack of social freedom. He's enduring physical pain directly conveys the artist's feelings to the viewers, encouraging them to examine these forces on their own lives.

Figure 1.1 He Chengyao, *Mother and Me*, 2001, *Voice of the Unseen*, photograph.

Figure 1.2 He Chengyao, *Public Broadcast Exercises,* 2004, photo of performance

Ming Di[41]

Sea Leaf

The sea is a tree
and the fish, the fish are leaves
that waft in the water.

Mother—she belongs to the sky
and my father, she says, to the earth
as she's a believer,
and he, she says—is not.

From where I was born, Hubei, China,
I don't know what it is
to be a believer but I see many fish fly

toward the sky
each night. Some fall back
to the earth, some stay there longer.
The firm ones form a Big Bear that brightens

the April night.

But look down, Mother, look into my eyes,
you'll see many more stars—
they're trees, trigger points of pain
on my retinas.

[Translated by the author]

Showing an aged body was important to **Tao Aimin** (b. 1974, Hunan), a prolific multimedia artist involved in many projects. The photographs she took for *Through Her Fingers* are nude snapshots of her landlady, Wang, a 97-year-old woman born in 1912. Wang has bound feet. Tao shows her taking a bath, struggling to change her underwear, combing her hair and relieving herself. Tao avers that this daily life is not one anyone would care to see, but to her it is living history:[42]

> Women's history can be seen through an old woman who spent her whole life washing (clothes) and confined to the home. That is why I wanted to document her, as she is part of a disappearing generation. But I think I am different from male artists, who just drop by a remote village, take photos of some old ladies with bound feet and then take off again. I explored the subject in far greater depth, as I lived with the old woman for six years and gained a comprehensive understanding of her life.

The sculptor **Xiang Jing** (b. 1968, Beijing) also explored the less than ideal image of a natural woman who is out of shape, overweight and bald; but her sculptures are of colossal proportions.[43] Xiang made two colossi—one, measuring two 2.6 meters tall, leans back, with her legs spread out in front of her, ankles crossed, arms resting on her thighs. Slumped in the chair, her body is relaxed, her bald head is bent and her face with its clear blue eyes has a meditative gaze. Despite her size, this humble figure displays an unromantic view of womanhood (Plate 2). She does not appear sick, and yet she elicits thoughts of patients who have endured chemotherapy. The clinical way the body is exposed—sitting in a chair passive but expectant—triggers the sense of shame, humiliation and isolation brought on by the medical experience. Xiang explained, "I want my art to awaken the sensibility of each onlooker, to awaken his body, so that his body can experience the sculpture. That's why I really want people to stand right in front of my sculpture, to face [it]."[44] To be even more provocative, she calls the piece *Your Body* and the area of the genitals is shaven, slightly reddened and at eye level. Xiang's relationship to feminist art is complicated, she

seeks to not be identified with the "movement," but being a woman is an essential part of her creative process and a major theme in her work.[45]

Creating giant size internal organs is a recent activity for **Yin Xiuzhen** (b. 1963, Beijing) who has made many kinds of art over her long career. Yin employs her favorite medium—old clothing which her team collects from a particular location, washes and sorts according to color. With a metal frame as an anchor, Yin then fashions the oversize sculptures. In this series she has made grand-scale replicas of a red heart (*Engine* 2008), a blue brain (*Thought* 2009) and stomach (*Digestive Cavity* 2015) (Figure 1.3-1.4). The sculptures are so large viewers can enter them, walk about or sit and rest. The materials are quite meaningful for Yin, who feels at odds in this consumerist society. Today's values contrast greatly with those of the Cultural Revolution she experienced growing up, among them the value of thrift. In that poor economic environment, the yearly outfit her mother sewed for her and her sisters was quite precious. Yin's use of old clothing has many meanings; first they are material evidence of history; second, they reflect the lives of the individuals who wore them. In addition, as Yin is concerned about ecology, the reuse of these materials is an important statement. Her use of garments in her precise anatomical reconstructions is particularly witty for she utilizes whole garments, sometime with sleeves, collars, and pockets hanging out askew. The clothing retains its attached belts, buttons, and other adornments; there is no attempt to disguise it. From a distance the grand size, shape and the beautiful patterns created by the sewing of the various garments together are coherent; but, upon close inspection, one receives a good laugh—it's only laundry. Her most recent sculpture *Digestive Cavity* has a new innovation, Yin has embedded into the textiles shards of the highly-prized porcelain vessels from the Jingdezhen kilns, these too she sees as reflections of peoples' lives.[46] Yin's works are a memorial to the fragility of human existence with their use of cast off clothing, broken ceramics and views of the inner parts of the body. In true communist style, she employs individuals' worn out garments to make a collective work of art.

Figure 1.3 Yin Xiuzhen, *Digestive Cavity,* 2015, clothes, metal, porcelain fragments (800 x 601cm) (image courtesy of the artist and Turner Contemporary, London)

Figure 1.4 Yin Xiuzhen, *Digestive Cavity*, 2015 (image courtesy of the artist) (detail)

Ma Lan[47]

A Bridge

A bridge burning, from the chest
Along two kidneys, run to the belly button
Bridgehead is a fire of prosecution
Bridge trail is the water of revenge
Nobody knows that winter is crying
Tears cover the riverbanks

A bridge flees from existential questions
Just one time it lost a hand
My hometown teams up with a hungry tiger

A bridge misread another bridge's word
Some fish look at the bridge inside the bridge

My blood escapes the old home, because my little girl stands
behind me. Whether Zhuangzi dreamed a butterfly
or a butterfly dreamed Zhuangzi
Eventually, we push down the dream

A bridge saturates a river
So many springs it feels lonely
What a shameful life, water and fire
break their bone at the same time

Doesn't matter, after thousand years
We are strangers crossing the bridge

[Translated by the author with Zhang Er]

Pregnancy

The state of pregnancy inspired several artists. As part of her ongoing autobiographical pictorial journal, the gifted painter **Yu Hong** (b. 1988, Xi'an) depicted her changing appearance in her art. She documents her years as a child to adult. When she became pregnant, she marked the gradual effects of pregnancy on her naked body—the pale watercolors and the delicate drawing elicit feelings of tenderness and imminent maternal care.[48]

In contrast is the brutalist image of **Feng Jyali** (b. 1963, Chongqing) who achieved notoriety when she had herself photographed naked at a very late stage in her pregnancy.[49] Using dark scrawl-like characters, she had inscribed on her belly the Chinese words for pain, abortion, miscarriage, morning sickness, deformation, and high blood pressure.[50] Feng's writing externalized the fears of the pregnant woman, achieving a catharsis in writing them on the outside of her belly. Early in her career, in 1995 **Xing Danwen** (b. 1967, Xi'an) made a triptych from a series of photographs of a nude pregnant woman near the end of her term. *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, like Xing herself, shows the pregnant woman in a domestic interior with portraits of Chairman Mao Zedong, a national flag, posters and other paraphernalia from that era [51] (Figure 1.5). There is nothing romantic in these harsh, and seemingly spontaneous, partial views. Shot from an awkward angle, the figure is standing askew in the photos. This odd perspective, with a close-up but fragmentary view of the subject, alludes to the chaos of that time.[52] **Zhu Hui,** a multimedia artist made two digital films recreating the development of the first cell as it continuously splits to form the fetus and then gradually morphs into a grown woman. Using Disney like *Fantasia* imagery and inspiring music, the brilliantly colored forms unfold like a kaleidoscope, mutating into ever increasingly complex shapes. Beginning with the splitting of the cell, the body parts, in a constant ballet, emerge one organ at time. Ironically, this whole process is virtually unseen by those who are pregnant and left to wonder about the astonishing developments of life unfolding in their bellies.

Figure 1.5 Xing Danwen, *Born with the Cultural Revolution*, 1995, C-print (image courtesy of the artist)

Infertility

The failure to have a baby has stimulated other women to express their frustration in their works. In medieval China, a woman's sole function was to bear children to continue the family line. The ability to produce male heirs determined a woman's place in the household and failure to do so was considered extremely unfilial and severely punished. **Sun Shaokun** (b. 1980-2016, Hebei)[53] draws upon this experience in a two-hour long performance: on the petals of pink lilies, using her fingernails, she drew couples having sex. [54] According to the artist, if we want to have a deep and real relationship with nature, then we also must expect not only deep love but also much suffering. In other works, Sun uses photos of her face as a canvas, creating astonishing images. In one, her face emerges from a pile of black rice, which is commonly considered a symbol of fertility (Plate 3). Then, she digitally inscribed phrases on the rice, which can be seen with magnification; they explain why people have died, how they died, and the responses by government authorities. She asks, "When can we have rights? People have no rights to be in Beijing, if they come from somewhere else. Everyone needs rights as a people … The government can take land; they even take babies."[55] Sun also created performance art using her body in sexually explicit ways, interacting with articles of nature to suggest the theme of love and suffering that, in her view, are inevitable and intertwined.[56]

To comfort herself in her childless state, **Xiong Wenyun** (b. 1955, Chongqing)[57] invented a doll named Kongkong, a name taken from the Buddhist *Heart Scripture: Se ji shi kong kong ji shi se*, or "Colour is Emptiness, Emptiness is Color", which Eastern philosophers say is demonstrated every time a prism splits invisible light into a rainbow.[58] Xiong Wenyun created Kongkong as a way to address the disappointment of childlessness, writing, "Kongkong made it possible for me to go through all the feelings of motherhood."[59] Imitating the interaction of mother and child, she cares for the doll, dressing it up, brushing its teeth, playing with it, and photographing it in everyday situations, taking it everywhere. Xiong also makes paintings and installations using it; sometimes in a satirical way, like her work *Doll Kongkong, UN* where the participants are brightly colored figurines seated at a congress.[60] Another work captures Kongkong's many identities and accompanying costumes—pirate, sailor, general, Santa and more. (Plate 4). It is through this shadow life that Xiong exposes so many of the hypocrisies of society.

Suffering infertility and divorce, **Gao Yuan** (b. 1962, Taiwan) turned to the Christian icons of mother and child she saw in a small church in Sienna.

She recreated the composition using homeless migrant workers and their babies who live on the outskirts of Beijing's ring roads.[61] The babies, capable of standing, are held in their mothers' arms looking very much like a Chinese Madonna and Child (Plate 5). From the beginning, Gao wanted to suggest themes that represented a spectrum of geographical places and periods of time. To represent the diversity of China, Gao selected mothers of infants from 12 different provinces. In this way, each epitomized a different terrain and culture, as China for its thousands of years has been an uncertain union of a rich variety of regional traditions. Each province boasts its own language, local history, monuments, agricultural and industrial products, cuisine and ideals of beauty and fashion. Furthermore, each mother is distinguished by a different body type, physiognomy, hairstyle and manner of dress. In addition, their personalities, expressed through posture and pose, range from diffident to confident, cheerful to impassive. The theme of time, an important issue in this work, occurs in several different ways. Gao inscribed one of the 12 Chinese zodiacal signs on each of the naked bodies of the infants using the Photoshop computer program in the studio. These zodiacal symbols represent the 12 months of the year as well as the 12-year cycle. In addition, the roundel format may be read as a lunar or solar disk, suggesting the time it takes for the heavenly bodies to move across the sky. What is more, the varied settings that frame the compositions convey temporal qualities: the sky, which dominates three-quarters of the compositions, depicts the various times of day ranging from dawn to night. There are cloudless noon skies, night storms, russet sunsets, and industrial hazy urban mornings. Yuan believes these works have brought peace and fertility to some of her patrons.

In 2015 **Tao Aimin,** whose work was discussed above, presented her performance entitled *Ova:* sitting on the ground with hundreds of chicken eggs in front of her. She used a calligraphy brush and ink to inscribe a Chinese character on each egg (Figure 1.6) [62]. She explained how when she was pregnant, she dreamt of a basket full of cracked chicken eggs, which she took as a bad sign. Soon after, her pregnancy ended prematurely. In the performance, Tao Aimin copied the diary she kept during her pregnancy, writing one character on each egg in the secret women's script Nushu, comprised of 700 characters used only by women that she found in Jiangyong County near her hometown in Hunan Province.[63] As Zhang Er explains,