



## The Image of Woman as a Reflection of Change in China

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Due to the Confucian prohibition against exciting the emotions, images of women were not a frequent subject of artistic expression in China.<sup>1</sup> Narrative and landscape subjects dominated with few exceptions.<sup>2</sup> Such attitudes continued until the late Qing dynasty when women, as in the West, became the object of men's gaze: beautifully posed, wearing delicate garments with their tiny feet peeking out beneath their long robes.<sup>3</sup> For example, Wu Jiayou's 吴嘉猷 *Women in the Twelve Months*, done in 1890 and now in the Shanghai Museum, which portrays women in their private quarters at their leisure, each portrait a calendrical illustration.<sup>4</sup> When in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese artists traveled to Europe to train in Western art, they returned home to employ new techniques. Many like Lin Fengmian 林风眠 (1900-1991) represented feminine beauty—sometimes in public, but more often in private surroundings, often nude or wearing diaphonous garments, they sat in a pastel hued boudoir.<sup>5</sup> In addition there is the

exceptional female artist Pan Yuliang 潘玉良 (1895-1977) who returned to Paris after her first foray abroad, where she largely made self-portraits.<sup>6</sup> Things changed considerably under the Communist regime, when due to widespread illiteracy the pictorial arts became a primary propaganda tool to educate the population. Mao's determination to harness the productive potential of women to build a new society, expressed in his dictum 'Women hold up half of the sky', led to the

Figure 1. Wu Jiayou's *Women in the Twelve Months*, 1890. Album of twelve leaves, in ink and colour on silk; each leaf 27.2 x 33.2 cm. Shanghai Museum. After Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century of Crises*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998, pl. 2.



Figure 2. Lin Fengmian, *Nude* c. 1955. Ink on paper 32.5 x 32 cm. Private Collection. After Josef Hejzlar, *Chinese Watercolors*. London: Octopus Books Ltd., 1978, pl. 87.

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presence of women in propagandist art, though they rarely appear in pictures of the founding of the nation or other such policy-making scenarios.<sup>7</sup> In the 1950s when artists were sent to travel the country to learn from the people and to record the various highlights of the provincial areas, artists like Ye Qianyu 叶浅予 (1907-1995) depicted minority women in their native costumes as emblems of the ethnic diversity of China. See for example, Ye's *Miao Dancing Girls*, and *Girl with an Ear of Corn*, done before 1955.<sup>8</sup> It is evident

that Ye also had a knowledge of western style drawing and perspective, which he fused with Chinese brush technique and brilliant colours.

By the 1960s one important change in the Communist artistic agenda was the increased frequency with which women were presented as active members of society. *How Bright and Brave They Look*, a painting by Zhang Jinfeng, is an illustration of a line of a poem by Mao Zedong 毛泽东, 'How bright and brave they look' which illustrates the incentive to mobilise women.

Figure 3 Yen Yungsheng, *United to Win Still Greater Victories*, 1974. Poster. After *Graphic Art by Workers in Shanghai, Yangchuan and Luta*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976, p. 71.



How bright and brave they look shouldering five foot rifles,  
On the parade ground lit up by the first gleams of day  
China's daughters have high-aspiring minds  
They love their battle array, not silks and satins.<sup>9</sup>

The gouache shows young girls wearing garments made from the variegated floral patterns manufactured in communes, practising throwing grenades in a snowy landscape. In the near mid-ground are their rifles, shooting targets and a red flag that flutters in the chilly winter breeze. Though examples are plentiful, I shall mention but three more: one 1974 poster of *United to Win Still Greater Victories*, by Yen Yungsheng, a staff member of the Kanqingze Branch of the People's Bank.<sup>10</sup> Women, as evinced by the image, have been integrated into the national movement: the smiling red-cheeked picture of youth, health and vitality holds a copy of Mao's red book in one hand, and in the other the hand of a steel worker, who in turn holds the hand of a soldier; behind the trinity are a crowd of workers and red flags. The second example by Zhou Xiaoyu and the Shanghai Workers similarly stresses the role of women in modern life. In *Good with the Pen and the Gun* two young women occupy the foreground in large scale: they are leaving the factory after work, one holds a rifle, the other holds a rolled up piece of paper.<sup>11</sup> In the background, other comrades proceed to target practice or carry buckets of paste and brushes, having just mounted the big character posters on walls in the background, which attract the attention of workers. Mention should also be made of a young woman bringing food to her co-workers in a cold and bleak landscape. The composition closely adopts Edvard Munch's (1863-1944) *Scream*, of 1893.<sup>12</sup> Such a borrowing must be intentional, using not only the composition and theme, but also the woodblock technique: the alienation and angst of the capitalist society illustrated by the Norwegian Expressionist is now transformed: it is inclement weather that she must heroically endure to deliver lunch pails to her comrades.

The role of women forged during the Cultural Revolution remains important in subsequent art. In the aftermath of the late 1970s, Western art again was the inspiration for a series of images. Now women optimistically represent the possibility of artistic rebirth and freedom of expression. Examples include

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Figure 4. Qi Zhilong, *Untitled*, 1998. Oil on canvas, 199 x 61 cm. After *Mahjong Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, edited by Matthias Frehner and Bernhard Fibicher. Bern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005, pp. 150-151.

Wang Hai's 王亥 *Spring* 1978,<sup>13</sup> and Ye Yushan 叶毓山, Huang Caizhi, and Xiang Jinguui's cast aluminum sculpture for the Yangzhi Bridge, in Chongqing,<sup>14</sup> He Duoling's 何多苓 *Spring Breezes Have Arrived* of 1980,<sup>15</sup> as well as the later work by Zhang Qun 张群 and Meng Luding 孟禄丁, *A New Era — Revelation from Adam and Eve*, dated 1985.<sup>16</sup> In this regard, mention should also be made of the recreation of the Statue of Liberty in Tiananmen in 1989. But other artists employed the image of women as a symbol to obliquely criticise the failures of modern society, using ethnic images of women to represent the alienation of the minorities and by extension the failure of state policies as suggested in Ai Xuan's 艾轩 (b. 1947) *Winter or Wasteland*,<sup>17</sup> or Wang Yidong's 王沂东 (b. 1955) *Shandong Peasant Girl* of 1983.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1990s artists trained in the western curriculum and to a lesser extent in *guo hua* or Chinese technique explored several new styles and formats in the arts. The subject of women underwent a number of

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different transformations, some by female artists, and others by males. Far too much art has been produced to discuss more than a few aspects of the works made after 1990. Among the extremely numerous artists who feature women as a subject, only those who treat it as a dominant aspect of their work will be considered. These include the two themes outlined above—idealised images of women as an object of desire, and

images of women used to express personal opinions. Representative of the first group is the most popular artist in China, Xie Chuyu 谢楚余 (b. 1962) his idealised and erotic portrayals of women, commercial in intent, are ubiquitous.<sup>19</sup> He alone will serve to illustrate this category. As for the second group, the number of artists is also considerable. I have chosen seven to briefly mention here. First is Qi Zhilong 祁志龙 (b. 1962)

Figure 5. Liu Jianhua, *Obsessive Memories*, 2003. Porcelain, 25 figures, dimensions variable. After *Mahjong Contemporary Art from the Sigg Collection*, edited by Matthias Frehner and Bernhard Fibicher. Bern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005, p. 257.



whose entire oeuvre seems to be dedicated to portraits of the heads of beautiful modern ladies dressed in a soldier's uniform from the Cultural Revolution.<sup>20</sup> Aspects of contemporary style are evident in these renderings, despite the faithful recreation of the costume, hairstyle and other details. Qi's works evoke nostalgia for a time that was simpler, when the iron rice bowl and other social programs were available to the masses, and greater equity and camaraderie prevailed. Feng Zhengjie's 奉正杰 (b. 1968) paintings are more contemporary in appearance but also rely on bust portraits. Almond-shaped eyes, whose pupils directed to the outer periphery suggest the figure is seeing things out of focus, are characteristic of his women. The brilliant palette of neon colors conveys the artificiality and commoditisation of society; in this way Feng criticises the new dependence on Western ideas of lifestyle and beauty.<sup>21</sup> Liu Jianhua 刘建华 (b. 1962) has turned to the traditional medium of porcelain and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century ideals of beauty, but his women have no arms or heads.<sup>22</sup> Through the dismemberment and decapitation of the slender and elegant women, Liu alludes to the pollution of the natural environment. Wei Dong's 魏东 (b. 1968) corpulent beauties dressed in a variety of costumes, some partially naked, represent the corruption and licentiousness of the new capitalist society.<sup>23</sup> Compositions crowded by these figures convey the selfishness and lasciviousness of the urban elite, and, like a Christian medieval painter, such objects as over-ripe peaches, hunting dogs, and a sacrificed lamb take on metaphorical meanings. Zhong Biao 钟飙 (b. 1968), who avowedly seeks to catch the evanescent character of urban life, paints chic and sexy young women, perched in precarious postures on the roof tops of sky scrapers. They embody the danger, and the rootless and unstable character of modern life.<sup>24</sup>

Photographers also employ women to illustrate the troubles of contemporary society. Yang Yong (b. 1975) explores the theme of alienation by showing young women alone, in harsh or unnatural light, in places of transit—airports, highways, garages or in hotel rooms which allude to the sex trade and momentary affection.<sup>25</sup> In contrast the photographer Wang Fen (b. 1961) makes urban landscapes that include a wall on which a young girl is perched. We see her from behind and the view she beholds. Each work in this series, which is entitled *On the Wall*, provides a different

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Figure 6. Lin Tianmiao, *Gazing Back - procreating (outdoor)*, 2009. Polyurea, automotive paint, television recordings (author's photo).

city view—Haikou, Guangzhou, Shenzhen. The artist explained that these modern cities are undifferentiated, there is no local culture, just the uniform spread of global modernism, and the teenager, like the new world citizen, is perched uncertainly and disillusioned.<sup>26</sup> A few older artists have taken on specific social problems featuring young women. The photographer Xu Yong 徐勇 (b. 1954) focuses on female prostitutes in his latest works. He has found that despite the all too apparent problems of making a living as a sex worker, prostitutes now come from all walks of life—college educated teachers and such like, because they can earn far more money by these activities, and thereby achieve a kind of economic freedom and power.<sup>27</sup> The highly political team of the Gao Brothers exposes the hypocrisy of the police in their victimisation of teenage sex workers in their paintings and sculptures. In addition they created a hybrid icon based on a big-breasted image of Minnie Mouse with the head of Mao to represent the evils of his administration.<sup>28</sup>

Looking at these works, it seems clear that the function of the image of women in Chinese art has substantially changed since it first became the embodiment of desire at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not somewhat earlier, when Confucian proscription against the sensual portray of women weakened. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the image of women reflected the artistic agenda determined by the state to demonstrate the success of their social policies. Later male artists use the female figure to express more personal feelings—first to express optimism for the future and then to represent disappointment in the numerous problems associated with the rapid march to

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Figure 7. He Chengyao, *99 Needles* 2002 C Print of performance. Li Yongsheng photographer artists Collection, Alpesh Kantilal Patel, ‘Women’, *Yishu*, vol. 12 (2013) no. 2, pp. 60- 67; see p. 62.

capitalism—the destruction of nature, native culture and ethical responsibilities.

Women in China’s contemporary society are still limited by patriarchal values established under

Confucianism. Though they did indeed once hold up the sky, their role in society seems diminished; few women have achieved ascendance in business or politics, and their numbers are decreasing, thanks to the policy of selective abortion. Their situation is reflected in the limited role they play in the art world—whether exhibiting in the upper echelons of museums and galleries or in running the various art institutions.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it is this marginality and their fragility that inspires the male artists discussed above to use women as an image to express their hopes, dreams and disappointments.

POSTSCRIPT

An inquiry into the portrayal of women by women reveals more down to earth renderings of the female body, in comparison to the uniformly glamorous images made by male artists. These also reveal female artists engagement in the struggle of self-investigation through the means of the self-portrait. Here are naked Cui Xiuwen 崔岫闻 escaping her cocoon of toilet paper, or working with an alter ego engaged in a number of social problems;<sup>30</sup> a menopausal Lin Tianmiao 林天苗 recreating her middle age form in a number of media; Chen Lingyang 陈羚羊 photographing images of her biological menstrual processes or portrayins herself rolled in a ball perched above the roofs of skyscrapers in a nocturnal urban view entitled *Twenty-fifth hour*, the mythical time when she says she can only be herself; Yu Hong 喻红 chronological documentation of her life from childhood to pregnancy; He Chengyao 何成瑶 whose performances are based on recreating her mother’s suffering by re-enacting painful acts on her own body,<sup>31</sup> to mention a few salient examples. **RC**

University Press, 1996); and ‘The Representation of Women in Medieval China: Recent Archaeological Evidence’, *T’ang Studies*, vol. 17 (1999), pp. 213-271. Again, in the late Ming women were depicted as objects of desire, see Irving Yucheng Lo, ‘Daughters of the Muses in China’, in *Views of the Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists 1300-1912*, edited by Marsha Weidner et al. (Indianapolis: Indianapolis Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 41-52 for the role of courtesans as inspiration; for a discussion of female artists in the Ming dynasty see Ellen Johnston Liang, ‘Wives, Daughters, and Lovers: Three Ming Dynasty Women Painters’, pp. 41-53 in the same volume. Artists such as Tang Yin 唐寅 and other Zhe schools painters of the Ming focused on female representations, see Richard Barnhart, et al., *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997) see pp. 208-209, p. 224.

- For the allure of the foot in ancient and modern China see, Patricia Karetzky, *Femininity in Contemporary Women’s Work from China, Korea and the USA: If the Shoe Fits . . .* (UK: KT Press ebook, 2013).
- Wu Jiayou d. 1893 in Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *A Century of Crises* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1998, pl. 21. These are four leaves from an album of twelve, in ink and colors on silk 27.2 x 33.2. See also <http://arts.cultural-china.com/en/77Arts7214.html>. A native of Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, Wu Jiayou was good at portraying characters, and achieved fame in Shanghai by painting for the *Dian shi zhai hua bao* 点石斋画报 (Dian Shi Zhai Illustrated Newspaper), which featured society items and current affairs. See also <http://huntingtonarchive.osu.edu/Exhibitions/5000years/indx/in/inchinptg2.html>.
- See the artist’s website Linfengmian.net for ample examples of beautiful women in boudoirs, <http://www.linfengmian.net/art/index.htm?detectflash=false&>.
- Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 203; see also [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/photo/2006-11/14/content\\_732470.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/photo/2006-11/14/content_732470.htm).
- For example they are absent from *Mao Zedong’s Declaring the People’s Republic from Tiananmen Square* by Dong Xiwen 董希文, see Sullivan 1996: pl. 28 in contrast to Luo Gongliu’s 罗工柳, *Tunnel Warfare*, 1951, Sullivan 1996: pl 30 or Bai Tianxue’s 白天雪, *Learning to Sing Revolutionary Songs*, 1950; Sullivan 1996: pl. 32. <http://arts.cultural-china.com/en/77Arts4108.html>. Ye Qianyu (1907-1995) was a well-known cartoonist in China. In 1954, a prominent artist, he appointed head of the Chinese Painting Department at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. In 1981, he was appointed Vice President of the Research Institute of Chinese Painting, and elected as Vice Chairman of Chinese Artists’ Association, Member of Standing Committee of Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles, and member of the National Committee of CPPCC. Many of his works were published such as *A Supplementary Biography of Mr. Wang, Unofficial History of Xiao Chen Staying in Beijing, Traveling Sketch, Collection of Qianyu Sketches*, etc. His representative works include *Indian Dancing Gesture, Autumn of Summer River, The Great Unification of Chinese Nations, Summer, First-class Wool and the Liberation of Beiping*, etc. See also Joan L. Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting 1949-1986* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1987), pp. 94-95 describes how he was abused by red guards.

- Ross Terrill, *Mao’s Biography* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 326.
- See *Graphic Art by Workers in Shanghai, Yangchuan and Luta* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), p. 71.
- Ibid., p. 10.
- <http://www.edvard-munch.com/gallery/anxiety/index.htm>.
- For Wang Hai’s *Spring* 1978 see Sullivan 1996: fig 21.7, p. 221.
- For Ye Yushan, Huang Caizhi, and Xiang Jingui’s cast aluminum sculpture for the Yangzhi Bridge, in Chongqing, see Sullivan 1996: fig 16.15, p. 168.
- He Duoling *Spring Breezes Have Arrived*, done in 1980, see Sullivan 1996: fig. 22.10, p. 237.
- Zhang Qun and Meng Luding, *A New Era—Revelation from Adam and Eve*, dated 1985 see Sullivan 1996: fig. 24.4, p. 257.
- For Ai Xuan’s *Stranger* done in 1984, see Sullivan 1996: pl. 76.
- For Wang Yidong’s *Shandong Peasant Girl* of 1983, see Sullivan 1996: pl. 72
- Xie Chuyu see <http://artist.artmuseum.com.cn/hisArtistWorksList.htm?artistId=460>; so popular are his images, he had to copyright his works.
- Richard Vine, *New China New Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2011), p. 26.
- Ibid., p. 27. For Feng Zhengjie work, see also feng\_zhengjie [http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/feng\\_zhengjie.htm](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/feng_zhengjie.htm).
- Ibid., p. 50. For Liu Jianhua’s work, see also Liu Jianhua <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?1487>.
- Ibid., p. 203. For Wei Dong’s work, see also <http://www.artnet.com/artwork/425969260/119094/wei-dong-the-pastoral-song.html>.
- Ibid., p. 202. For Zhong Biao’s work, see also <http://www.artscenechina.com/chineseart/artists/zhongbiao.htm>.
- Ibid., p. 138. For Yang Yong’s work, see also [http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/yang\\_yong/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/yang_yong/).
- Majong: Contemporary Chinese Art from the Sigg Collection*, edited by Bernhard Fibicher and Matthias Frehner (Bern: Kunstmuseum and Hatje Cantz, 2005), p. 230: ‘The heart of a teenage girl is also divided by a wall. In a phase of psychic and physical change she is full of curiosity, yearnings and desires but at the same time these impulses are typically unfocused. Against a background of monotony in Chinese cities in a state of drastic change and thereby looking at their characters, the pale outline of the girl riding on the wall and looking at the world suggests disappointment, unfocusedness, and a fluctuation between hope and uncertainty’.
- Patricia Karetzky, ‘Xu Yong’s This Face’, *Yishu*, vol. 10, no. 6 (2011), pp. 59-66.
- Patricia Karetzky, ‘The Gao Brothers: All the World’s a Stage’, *Yishu*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2007), pp. 61-67.
- Xu Yong, ‘Walking Out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critique’. In *Chinese Contemporary Art Primary Documents*, edited by Wu Hong, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), p. 193; see also Tao Yong Bai 陶咏白, ‘Toward a Female Initiative’, in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, edited by Hu Wung (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), pp. 194-195.
- Patricia Karetzky, ‘Cui Xiuwen, Walking on Broken Glass’, *Yishu*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2010), pp. 18-33.
- Alpesh Kantilal Patel, ‘Women’, *Yishu*, vol. 12 (2013) no. 2, pp. 60- 67; see p. 62.

NOTES

1 See Laurence Sickman and Alexander Soper, *The Art and Architecture of China* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 53 for a description of the Confucian aversion to employing inappropriate subjects for artistic depiction. See *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender* edited by Chenyang Li (Chicago: Open Court, 2000) for a discussion of the limited role of women

outside the home. For a discussion of proper Confucian narrative themes in China, see Julia K. Murray, *Mirror of Morality: Chinese Narrative Illustration of Confucian Ideology* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007).

2 In the Tang Dynasty, when women enjoyed unprecedented visibility, see Patricia Karetzky, *Arts of the Tang Dynasty* (New York: Oxford