

Koncept čínského ženského umění po roce 2000: Sonda do současného diskurzu

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ABSTRAKT

Tématem diplomové práce s názvem *Koncept čínského ženského umění po roce 2000: Sonda do současného diskurzu* je diskurzivní a tematická analýza vybraného segmentu současného čínského ženského umění, se zvláštním důrazem na to, jak se umělkyně definují a vyjadřují v rámci společnosti, která je stále ovlivněna konfuciánskou tradicí a patriarchálními strukturami. Autorka zkoumá tuto problematiku prostřednictvím případových studií a rozhovorů se šesti mladými umělkyněmi narozenými v 90. letech a na počátku 21. století, přičemž jejich osobní i umělecké příběhy zasazuje do širšího společensko-politického a teoretického rámce.

Výchozím bodem zkoumání se stala výstava *Stepping Out! Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art*, která poskytla cenný vstup do širšího diskurzu. Diplomová práce však čerpá z širší škály teoretických materiálů, včetně feministické historiografie umění, kulturní teorie a současného výzkumu v oblasti čínského umění a genderu. Tyto zdroje jsou doplněny o empirická data získaná z rozhovorů s vybranými umělkyněmi, což umožňuje vícerozměrný pohled na prožívané zkušenosti, zobrazení těla, cenzuru, institucionální překážky a generační proměny.

Práce kriticky hodnotí opakující se témata jako erotika, tělesná autonomie, ženská touha a napětí mezi tradičními hodnotami a současnou genderovou politikou. Pozornost je věnována také tomu, jak se umělkyně vyrovnávají s konceptem „čínsosti“ a do jaké míry jejich tvorbu formují, nebo naopak odmítají, místní omezení i očekávání globálního uměleckého trhu. Zvláštní důraz je kladen na rozdíl mezi tím, jak jsou západní feministické ideály přijímány v čínském uměleckém kontextu, a jak mladé umělkyně tyto externí rámce vyjednávají nebo odmítají ve prospěch lokalizovaných, hybridních či osobních forem výrazu.

Kombinací kvalitativního výzkumu a teoretické analýzy přispívá tato práce k pochopení současného čínského ženského umění nikoli jako homogenní oblasti, ale jako dynamického a proměnlivého prostoru vyjednávání, odporu a redefinice. Zpochybňuje zjednodušené binarity mezi Východem a Západem a zasazuje se o uznání těchto umělkyně jako nositelek kritického poznání, jejichž tvorba odhaluje složité průsečíky genderu, moci, identity a kreativity v Číně 21. století.

Klíčová slova: Čína, ženské umění, feminismus, identita, tělo

ABSTRACT

The topic of the thesis entitled *The Concept of Chinese Women's Art after 2000: A Probe into the Current Discourse* is a discursive and thematic analysis of a selected segment of contemporary Chinese women's art, with a particular emphasis on how female artists define and express themselves within a society still marked by Confucian traditions and patriarchal structures. The author explores this subject through case studies and interviews with six emerging women artists born in the 1990s and early 2000s, placing their personal and artistic narratives within broader socio-political and theoretical contexts. An initial point of exploration is the exhibition *Stepping Out! Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art*, which provided a valuable entry into the broader discourse. The thesis draws on a wider range of theoretical materials, including feminist art history, cultural theory, and recent scholarship on Chinese art and gender. These are complemented by empirical data from interviews conducted with selected artists, allowing for a multi-layered perspective on lived experiences, bodily representation, censorship, institutional barriers, and generational change.

The thesis critically assesses recurring themes such as eroticism, bodily autonomy, female desire, and the tension between traditional values and contemporary gender politics. Attention is also paid to how the artists engage with concepts like "Chineseness" and how their work is shaped by, or resists, both local constraints and global art market expectations. Special focus is given to the difference between how Western feminist ideals are received within the Chinese art context and how young artists negotiate or reject these external frameworks in favor of more localized, hybrid, or personal forms of expression. Through a combination of qualitative research and theoretical analysis, the thesis contributes to understanding contemporary Chinese women's art not as a homogenous field but as a dynamic and evolving site of negotiation, resistance, and redefinition. It challenges simplified East-West binaries and argues for the recognition of these artists as producers of critical knowledge—whose work reveals complex intersections of gender, power, identity, and creativity in 21st-century China.

Keywords: China, female art, feminism, identity, body

They say art is either good or bad, but it has no gender.¹

¹ PHEALAN and RECKITT, *Art and Feminism*, 2001.

OBSAH

INTRODUCTION	1
1 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH	4
2 HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT	8
2.1 CHINESE WOMEN’S ART BEFORE 2000	10
2.2 DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE WOMEN'S ART POST-2000	12
2.3 FEMINISM IN CHINESE CONTEXT	13
3 ART WORLDS AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES	17
3.1 THE CREATION OF CHINESE ART SCENE	19
3.2 GLOBAL ART CIRCUITS AND THE WESTERN GAZE	20
4 THEMATIC LENSES: ART AND THE FEMALE BODY	22
4.1 EROTICISM AND CONFUCIAN MORALITY	23
4.2 CHINESENESS, CAPITALISM, CONSUMERISM, AND THE FEMININE IDEAL	24
5 CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED FEMALE ARTISTS	26
5.1 PROBES: INTERVIEWS WITH ARTISTS	26
5.1.1 Zhou Wenjing 周雯静	26
5.1.2 Chen Weiling 陈韦伶	31
5.1.3 Wen Wen 文雯	36
5.1.4 Rao Linghua 饶凌华	40
5.1.5 Wang Yinpan 王殷盼	43
5.1.6 Tian Yunuo 田雨诺	48
5.2 DISCUSSION: GENDER, ART, EXPRESSION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA	53
CONCLUSION	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	59
LIST OF FIGURES	64
APPENDICES	65

INTRODUCTION

The current landscape of Chinese female art post-2000 is not merely a continuation of historical narratives but a profound transformation shaped by the interplay of cultural and social movements. This investigation aims to explore the contemporary understanding of the evolving identity of Chinese female artists within broader theoretical contexts. The issues they confront, embedded in a patriarchal society, influenced by both traditional Confucianism ethics as well as ideas brought from Western² philosophy and politics, echo the foundational critiques presented by feminist scholars, notably Linda Nochlin, who illuminated systemic barriers in the art world³. A historical context is critical in understanding how contemporary Chinese female artists navigate their identities and artistic expressions against the backdrop of both local and global expectations.

The idea for this thesis started when the author received Chen Weiling's brochure *Take a peek* (偷偷看一眼 *tōu tōu kàn yī yǎn*) from a friend. After spending a decade in China, it was still a surprise to discover a young female artist who is openly, without shame or obscenity, expressing female desire and sexuality. Perhaps due to the fact that the author and Chen are from the same generation, there was an instant connection and understanding for what the artist wanted to portray – regardless of the fact that the two women came from different cultural and social background. The brochure was a beginning of author's studies in the field of Arts Management that eventually led to these lines. After going through more information about Chen, the author discovered a waster number of artists born in the 90s and 00s that had the urge to talk about the “female question” – basically about the restraints that are experienced in different ways of their life on daily basis. The impulse for creating feels like a basic human need to point out unfairness that is perhaps more visible in Chinese society, where due to Confucian tradition, a male offspring is regarded as a blessing, while a female one can be a reason for a divorce, if not for worse⁴. Nevertheless, do we, as Europeans, “Westerners”, have any right to point out on such differences? Aren't there much similar issues in our society, starting with lower incomes for female employees⁵, to near-to-impossible involvement in the state

² The author uses the term *Western* as defined by McNeill: “Atlantic littoral of Europe (the British Isles, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, France and Iberia) plus America. In time, it came to encompass Australia, New Zealand, and all other European overseas settlement.” MCNEILL, *Western Civ in World Politics. What We Mean by the West*, 1997.

³ NOCHLIN, *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, 2021.

⁴ HONG FINCHER, *Betraying the Big Brother: Feminist Awakening in China*. 2018.

⁵ BETTIO and VERASHCHAGINA, *Frontiers in the Economics of Gender*, 2008.

administration⁶, or a basic personal safety shaken by scandals with husbands raping their wives⁷? The frustration over misunderstandings or misinterpretations of the Chinese context and the inequality of perceiving “the communist, totalitarian” artists, who need “our help” to escape the regime that suffocates their freedom of expression, was another huge reason for starting this thesis. It is thus highly personal writing, in which the author searches for answers on how to navigate in the modern, contradictory world full of bias and standards, as a woman, or rather, as a human being. The author believes that this impulse is the common stance for the artists interviewed for the purpose of this thesis.

It is crucial to emphasize that this thesis is not a complex or complete mapping of the current Chinese art scene. Such a piece of writing would need a tremendous amount of work and time, as China is a huge country with extremely different contexts within itself - not only are there regional differences based on the historical context, there are city-to-city situations (in the bigger ones, called *first-tier* (一线城市 *yī xiàn chéng shì*) according to a non-official hierarchical classification of Chinese cities based on factors as income level, population size, infrastructure or consumer sophistication⁸, like Beijing or Shanghai, even in different neighborhoods) rural versus urban environments, and other phenomenons that make it gruelling to make sense of what is going on. The thesis is rather a probe, as the title states, to specific, individual situations of artists who were born later in 90s or early 00s and who create art that attracted the author’s attention. There is a big number of creators that the author reached out to with request for an interview, who did not reply before the deadline of this thesis, as well as even a bigger number of the artists that the author was not able to contact or even the ones currently unknown. As mentioned above, this thesis is also a personal journey of bonding with woman experience throughout the borders and obstacles of seemingly different cultural habits.

For the transcription of Chinese names and terms, the author uses both the Chinese characters and the official Chinese *pinyin* (拼音) romanization system, which is internationally recognized as the standard for transcribing Chinese into languages that use the Latin alphabet. Names are written according to Chinese convention, with the surname first, followed by the given name. Chinese titles of artworks, exhibitions, artistic

⁶ RYŠAVÁ, *Vzbouřené politicky burcuji Česko. Změňte sněmovnu, nejde jen o nás, ale i o vaše peníze*, 2025.

⁷ GOZZI, *Man who drugged wife in French mass rape case told: You'll die alone*, 2024.

⁸ BO, *China Focus: China's second-tier cities battle for top talent*, 2017.

collectives, and places that already have an established English equivalent are kept in English. Titles and names of articles that do not have such an equivalent are kept in the original and accompanied by a free English translation in parentheses.

1 METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This thesis is grounded in a qualitative and interpretative framework shaped by both personal experience and academic theory. Among the most influential conceptual sources is the work of Barbara Pollack, whose sociological analysis of the Chinese art world provides a crucial lens for understanding how female artists navigate institutional structures, market expectations, and geopolitical framings. Pollack's observations — particularly her critique of the dual pressure on Chinese women artists to perform both “femininity” and “Chineseness” in ways legible to Western and domestic institutions—are repeatedly referenced in this thesis and serve as a central interpretative guide. In addition to Pollack, this research draws on the work of Karen Karetzky, Shuqin Cui, and Monica Merlin, whose combined contributions have helped define the critical discourse around gender, representation, and visibility in Chinese contemporary art. Karetzky's writing on the body and taboo, Cui's historical overview of feminist art in China, and Merlin's sustained critique of gender marginalization in curatorial practice all offer valuable frameworks for situating the artists' work within broader conversations on identity and power. Together, these scholars provide the theoretical backbone through which the artists' practices are examined — not as isolated aesthetic gestures, but as responses to deeply embedded cultural and institutional conditions. This thesis also acknowledges the author's own positionality, shaped by long-term immersion in China over the span of more than ten years. The project began with a personal encounter with Chen Weiling's artwork and grew into a broader inquiry informed by empathy, linguistic competence, and lived familiarity with local norms and constraints. Rather than viewing these artists through a purely external or comparative lens, the research is guided by a sense of proximity—emotional, generational, and intellectual—that enables a more dialogic and context-sensitive approach. The aim is not to adapt Chinese experience into Western feminist terms, but to understand how these women articulate their own critiques, hesitations, and expressions from within a particular sociopolitical landscape.

In conducting this research, the author combined academic inquiry with a form of digital and on-the-ground ethnography to gather primary material. Information about artists was collected through social media platforms such as *WeChat*, *Xiaohongshu*, *Instagram* and *Weibo*, where many emerging artists share their portfolios, process images, and exhibitions. The search process also relied on recommendations from friends, chance

discoveries of artworks circulating online, and visits to small galleries and independent art spaces in China. The selection of artists was intentional rather than random: the author reached out to creators whose works engage with themes such as female embodiment, sexuality, and critical reflections on patriarchy. In most cases, these artists were discovered through social media, where their visual language or thematic focus aligned with the thesis' s overarching concerns. Collaboration took various forms. Some artists were identified through personal contacts—friends and acquaintances based in China who introduced the author to artists in their networks. In other instances, the author reconnected with people she had met during her previous time in China, particularly those involved in the art scene. As part of the fieldwork, the author traveled to China in December 2024, where she visited the *Anear* gallery and café in Xiamen. By coincidence, this visit led to the discovery of *Dile Magazine*, a self-published zine that became an unexpected inspiration for selecting additional interviewees. The only in-person interview was conducted with Chen Weiling in Guangzhou. Although the initial plan was to meet in her studio—which doubles as her apartment—logistical constraints led the conversation to take place in a restaurant, followed by a visit to a small gallery that represents her work, including both large canvases and small items like postcards. The remaining interviews were conducted online, as the artists are based across different regions of China, and time limitations prevented more face-to-face meetings. The author's long-term cultural and linguistic familiarity with China—having lived there since 2013 and studied Sinology—allowed her to communicate fluently in Mandarin and understand the nuanced socio-cultural dynamics that shape both everyday life and the art world. This situated knowledge informed both the interpretation of interview data and the sensitivity needed in navigating topics considered taboo or politically sensitive. Importantly, the focus of this thesis is intentionally narrow and specific. It centers on women artists with formal art education whose work often falls outside the bounds of China's mainstream institutional framework. These artists rarely exhibit in major state-run galleries, not necessarily due to a lack of skill or ambition, but because their themes—particularly those involving nudity, female desire, or critique of social norms—do not align with the aesthetic or political criteria enforced by cultural authorities. Much like the Guerrilla Girls' well-known statistic about the ratio of naked women to female artists in Western museums, these Chinese artists face a system in which female bodies may be acceptable as objects, but female perspectives are not. Their marginality—chosen or imposed—offers a compelling lens through which to reflect on

how sexuality is represented, how intimacy is negotiated, and how social structures condition what can and cannot be said through art.

In this thesis, the author adopts a qualitative, semi-structured interview approach as the primary research method. A questionnaire, which is in the appendix of the thesis,—available in Czech, English, and Chinese—served as the foundation for discussions with the selected artists. It was designed as a semi-structured tool, allowing for both consistency across interviews and the flexibility to explore individual trajectories in greater depth. The author created the questionnaire in Czech and subsequently translated it into English and Chinese to accommodate the linguistic preferences of the participants. The content was informed by prior academic research in art history and gender studies, as well as the author's own immersion in the Chinese art scene. The questions were organized to move from basic biographical information—such as name, age, place of birth, and educational background—toward more reflective prompts regarding artistic intent, thematic focus, and personal experiences. The artists were contacted directly via social media platforms such as *Instagram* and *WeChat* and agreed to participate voluntarily. All participants provided informed consent for the use of their full names, biographical information, and the content of their responses in this thesis. The selected artists predominantly belong to the generation born in the 1990s and early 2000s. The inclusion criteria were based on three factors: (1) generational relevance (born in the 1990s or 2000s), (2) sex (female), and (3) if possible, a thematic link between their artwork and topics of femininity, the body, or feminism. The artists were selected rather randomly, without consideration of institutional affiliation or notoriety. In total, six artists were interviewed in detail (all online, except Chen Weiling 陈韦伶, who was interviewed in person) and included in the case study chapter. In addition, three other artists—Yu Yuling 余玉苓, Zhu Fangyuan 朱芳园 (known as Strong Zhu), and Liu Yanxue 刘艳雪—were contacted and replied to the initial outreach. However, their responses were too short to be considered representative, and none of them agreed to a follow-up phone or video call. Therefore, they are not analyzed in depth in the thesis but are acknowledged here for the record. All interviews were conducted in either Chinese or English, depending on the artist's preference, with some exchanges supplemented by written answers in Chinese and later translated by the author. While the sample size is small and not statistically representative, it offers meaningful qualitative insight into the lived experiences, aspirations, and creative ideologies of a younger generation of Chinese female artists. The primary themes that emerged from the interviews include bodily

autonomy, gender roles, familial pressure, artistic censorship, exhibition access, and emotional vulnerability. These findings are contextualized in relation to existing academic discourse and cultural theory, allowing for both introspective and comparative analysis.

2 HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In April 2023, an exhibition titled *Stepping Out! Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art* opened at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg. It was a very special one – as stated in the booklet accompanying the exhibition – and the first exhibition in 25 years to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary artistic production by women from mainland China⁹. The curatorial team consisted of five curators and associates, and it was supported by an advisory board of four scholars specializing in Chinese art. This exhibition featured a diverse selection of 26 female artists (with the majority being born in the 60s and 70s, only one, Liang Xiu 良秀, was born in the 90s), showcasing both pioneers in the field and emerging talents who are relatively unknown. Over one hundred works were displayed across two exhibition levels, encompassing various mediums, including painting, sculpture, photography, film, performance, and installation. The curatorial team had a tremendous task in front of them: select only a handful of contemporary Chinese female artists that would be presented. It is nearly impossible to track down a compendious list of all the relevant artists, yet there are some sources that are trying to do so, such as websites *Artlinkart*¹⁰ and *chinesenewart*¹¹. The experience of Chinese women is however somewhat resonating within the themes of their work – they include question of identity as a female in the past and present political and historical context, perception of the female body, rebellion against patriarchy, female sexuality, etc. Due to the selection of the artists, which reflects curatorial intent to map the evolving identity and expression of women artists in China. According to the *Stepping Out Booklet*, the artists included were primarily those who use their work to engage with themes of the body, femininity, domestic space, personal history, trauma, and resistance to patriarchal norms¹². Therefore, themes opened at this exhibition are a combination of the ones that has formed a foundation of the Chinese female art bearing critical, deep message. It is however questionable to which extent is such basis influential within the country itself. A success of the later-born artists may be inspirational, yet none of the interviewed younger artists actually mentioned any of their predecessors as an important figure for their work. The influence of the Western and non-Chinese art and ideas are much stronger than dialogue between pioneers and the following

⁹ KREJCI and PENETSDORFER, *Short guide published in conjunction with the exhibition Stepping Out! Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art April 1 – June 25, 2023*, 2023.

¹⁰ *Artlinkart*.

¹¹ *Chinesenewart chinese contemporary artists*.

¹² KREJCI and PENETSDORFER, *Short guide published in conjunction with the exhibition Stepping Out! Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art April 1 – June 25, 2023*, 2023.

generation¹³. This phenomenon might be caused by many factors, the ones that are relevant for this thesis include the fact that while being famous or known in the Western context, the artists may not be as pertinent in China. That, again, can have many causes, such as the sameness of the lived experience that does not bring solution or different point of view - unlike the foreign perspective that can offer a way out of seemingly constant life situation. Another factor for the non-existent communication among the female artists is that there is none association gathering female artists that would not be directly linked to the governmental control. There are associations as the *China Female Artists Association* (中国女画家协会 *zhōng guó nǚ huà jiā xié huì*) or *Chinese Women Calligraphers and Painters Association* (中国女书画家协会 *zhōng guó nǚ shū huà jiā xié huì*), however, those are too official to be functional as well as not appealing to the younger generation. Moreover, being part of a female-only exhibition, not to mention an association, is for some a sign of a low quality art (this phenomenon is further discussed in the chapter 3).

Curatorially, this canon stems from art historical groundwork laid by scholars like Liao Wen, Monica Merlin, and Sasha Welland. Liao Wen's 1995 exhibition *Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art* and her volume *女性艺术: 女性主义作为方式* *Nüxing Yishu: Nüxing Zhuyi Zuowei Fangshi* [*Women's Art: Feminism as a Method*]¹⁴ were foundational in centering feminism as a method in evaluating women's art in China. Welland and Cui have both called out the marginalization of women in exhibitions and academic literature¹⁵. Welland criticizes the notion that women's art is apolitical or childlike, a view perpetuated by curators like Jia Fangzhou, who helped shape the mainstream understanding of "women's art" in the 1990's¹⁶. The canon, then, has been historically male-dominated, institutionally constructed, and framed by both state ideology and commercial appeal—especially toward Western audiences. The selection of the artists presented in the new canon was based on personal experience as material, a kind of "felt knowledge". Artists inclusion often depends on accessibility (online presence, contactability), institutional ties (like art academies), or media visibility. Ma Qiusha's 马秋莎 razor, Chen Zhe's 陈哲 self-harming practices or Tao Aimin's 陶艾民 craft works are deeply embodied, often painful modes of working are, in themselves, alternative canons—

¹³ WU, *Contemporary Chinese art: a history : 1970s>2000s*, 2014.

¹⁴ LIAO, 《女性艺术——女性主义作为方式》*Women's Art—Feminism as a Way*, 1999.

¹⁵ MERLIN, *Gender (still) matters in Chinese contemporary art*, 2019.

¹⁶ WELLAND, *Experimental Beijing Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art*, 2018.

nonlinear, personal, emotional, and material¹⁷. They map out a space of art-making that resists monumentalism or official narratives. Perhaps, this new canon that does not erase women and that offers tactile, vulnerable, cynical, bodily and unresolved approach rooted in oral, visual and textile tradition, refusing to separate “high art” from “life art”, is being constructed nowadays.

2.1 Chinese Women’s Art before 2000

Throughout Chinese history, female artists existed but were often rendered invisible by patriarchal norms, spatial limitations, and literary conventions. In this chapter, the author offers a very brief introduction into the historical context of female art in China, as it is important for understanding the current issues portrayed in the art today.

Two main groups emerged in traditional eras: elite gentry women and courtesans. Gentry women were typically secluded in domestic spaces and produced refined, harmonious works symbolizing feminine cultivation¹⁸. Feminine cultivation in the context of elite gentry women in China refers to the idealized process of refining a woman’s conduct, talents, and moral character in line with Confucian gender norms. According to Susan Mann’s study, this cultivation took place largely within domestic spaces and was aimed at producing women who embodied virtues such as filial piety, modesty, literary grace, and ritual propriety. These qualities were expressed in refined pursuits like poetry, embroidery, calligraphy, and the keeping of family records, all of which served both personal expression and the reinforcement of patriarchal family structures. Mann highlights that these cultural practices were not merely hobbies but markers of moral standing and social legitimacy in gentry households, offering a deeply gendered form of symbolic capital. Courtesans, by contrast, used bold brushstrokes to assert personal and bodily purity amidst sexualized societal roles. Yet both forms of expression masked authorship, hiding the identity of the woman behind male-dominated rhetoric¹⁹. In the early 20th century, the icon of the “modern woman” emerged with China’s shift toward nation-building and cultural reform²⁰. Female artists like Pan Yuliang 潘玉良 used self-portraiture to claim artistic agency, blending Chinese and Western styles. However, their artistic journey was shaped by institutional education reforms, co-education, and the tension between tradition and

¹⁷ KARETZKY, ZHANG, *Both Sides Now*, 2020.

¹⁸ MANN, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century*, 1997.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ CUI, *Female and Feminism: A Historical Overview of Women and Art in China*, 2023.

emerging modern identities²¹. In early 20th-century China, modern identities for women emerged within the broader nation-building efforts and cultural reforms. Unlike the traditional roles that confined women to domesticity and symbolic invisibility, the modern woman became an icon of enlightenment, education, and participation in public life—though this ideal was often defined by male reformers. According to Cui, these identities were not solely emancipatory but reflected a gender politics of the time, where women were torn between patriarchal constraints and the call to be modern, educated, and nationally useful. The socialist era (post-1949) introduced state feminism, where women were celebrated as "holding up half the sky." Yet gender identity was subordinated to collective ideals. Artworks like Wang Xia's 王霞 *Island Girl* and Jiang Yan's 姜燕 *Testing Mother* reinforced political ideology while attempting subtle female inscriptions. It wasn't until the 1980s–1990s, amid economic reforms and global engagement, that distinctly female voices emerged more freely. Artists such as Yu Hong 喻红, Yin Xiuzhen 尹秀珍, and Lin Tianmiao 林天苗 began to explore themes like pregnancy, sexuality, and personal history. Their work often blurred the boundaries between private and public, tradition and modernity. Importantly, they rejected the identification with Western feminism—not out of a lack of engagement with gender, but because their expressions of gendered experience arose from different cultural, historical, and political contexts²². In the early 2000s, several women born before the 1990s further shaped Chinese contemporary art with highly personal, socially provocative practices. Xiao Lu's 肖鲁 iconic 1989 gunshot performance *Dialogue* became a foundational gesture of avant-garde disruption. He Chengyao 何成瑶 exposed themes of mental illness, trauma, and body politics through endurance performances that revealed her mother's institutionalization and her own naked body²³. Chen Lingyang 陈羚羊, born in 1975, offered an unapologetic exploration of menstruation and womanhood. Her *Twelve Flower Months* (1999–2000) featured photographs of her own bleeding genitals framed in antique mirrors, aligning traditional floral symbols with contemporary taboo²⁴. Cui Xiuwen 崔岫闻 blurred lines between documentary and fiction in works like *Lady's Room* (2000), covertly filming hostesses in Beijing's karaoke lounges to critique objectification and sexuality in China's booming urban economy²⁵. Bu Hua 卜

²¹ CUI, *Female and Feminism: A Historical Overview of Women and Art in China*, 2023.

²² Ibid.

²³ GUEST, *Half the Sky: Women Artists in China*, 2016, pg. 143.

²⁴ Ibid., pg. 179.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 17.

桦, trained in animation and digital media, used a pigtailed, red-scarf-wearing avatar to navigate surreal urban dystopias, blending nostalgia, consumer critique, and feminine rebellion. Her alter ego became a fearless visual avatar navigating toxic urban growth, offering commentary on ecological collapse and commercialization of culture²⁶. Cao Fei's 曹斐 virtual avatar *China Tracy in i.Mirror* and her later immersive video worlds explored desire, fantasy, and capitalist alienation in hyper-modern Chinese life²⁷.

This trajectory of gradually emerging female artistic agency, building upon the nuanced expressions and veiled identities of earlier eras, paved the way for the bold and diverse explorations of identity, body politics, and social critique for the female artists in the 21st century.

2.2 Development of Chinese Women's Art post-2000

The early 2000s marked a critical but complex period in the development of Chinese women's art. While pioneering voices, such as Lin Tianmiao 林天苗, Xiao Lu 肖鲁, Chen Lingyang 陈羚羊 and others, had already laid important groundwork in the 1990s, the post-2000 period saw the gradual institutional recognition of women artists and gendered perspectives — though still largely marginal within mainstream Chinese art discourse. As Merlin points out, “gender (still) matters” in Chinese contemporary art, not just as a topic, but as a method of inquiry often neglected in both curatorial and academic spheres²⁸. Despite a historically limited scholarly focus, a number of key exhibitions have pushed gender and feminist narratives into broader visibility since 2000. One significant early event was the *Gender-Difference* exhibition curated by Yang Ziguang 杨之光 in 2009 at the Civilian Film Studio in Beijing's Songzhuang Art District. Rather than framing gender as opposition, the curatorial vision aimed to highlight coexistence and dialogue. This was followed by the *Wo-Men* exhibition, which debuted in Shanghai in 2011 before traveling to San Francisco, foregrounding works by women and LGBTQ artists. That same year, *Half the Sky: Women in the New Art of China* opened at Drexel University in collaboration with the National Art Museum of China. It featured 22 female artists across diverse media and marked one of the first institutional efforts in the U.S. to engage

²⁶ GUEST, *Half the Sky: Women Artists in China*, 2016, pg. 16.

²⁷ KARETZKY, ZHANG, *Both Sides Now*, 2020, pg. 1.

²⁸ MERLIN, *Gender (still) matters in Chinese contemporary art*, 2019, pg. 5.

exclusively with Chinese women artists²⁹. In 2012, the *Secret Love* exhibition at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities in Stockholm expanded the discourse around gender and sexuality further, showcasing provocative and often controversial works by queer and feminist Chinese artists. The exhibition has since traveled through Europe, underscoring growing international interest in gendered Chinese art practices. American institutions continued to play a significant role in presenting Chinese women artists, as seen in *Breakthrough: Work by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists* (2013) at Bowdoin College and *Fire Within: A New Generation of Chinese Women Artists* (2016) at the Broad Art Museum in Chicago. In the UK, the *NOW: A Dialogue on Female Chinese Contemporary Artists* (2018) at the Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art in Manchester was the first British exhibition exclusively devoted to female Chinese artists, signaling a turning point in European engagement with gender issues in Chinese art. These exhibitions, while groundbreaking, also reveal systemic challenges. As Merlin notes, Western curatorial frameworks often rely on reductive narratives—focusing on oppression, gender trauma, or exoticism — thus limiting the interpretative potential of Chinese women’s art. Simultaneously, within the PRC, state control remains a limiting force. For example, the *Jian: Cultural Codes of Gender Violence* exhibition was abruptly shut down in 2015 before it could open, despite featuring balanced male and female representation and aiming to address violence against women³⁰. Thus, the post-2000 period for Chinese women’s art has been marked by a growing presence in global institutions and a simultaneous struggle for recognition and autonomy within domestic contexts.

2.3 Feminism in Chinese context

As numerous authors state (Karetzky, Cui, Merlin), feminism as a term and ideology is not widely accepted with female artists in China. Some of them state that there are Western connotations that are not valid within the Chinese context or that there are internalized gender bias connected to the term³¹. For example, Lin Tianmiao 林天苗 found Western feminist interpretations of her work “annoying” and began exploring the subject to form her own understanding; Xiang Jing 向京 resists being called a feminist but still

²⁹ MERLIN, *Gender (still) matters in Chinese contemporary art*, 2019, pg.10.

³⁰ Ibid., pg. 7-9.

³¹ KARETZKY, ZHANG, *Both Sides Now*, 2020, pg. 3.

centers her work around gender, aging, and personal experience; Ma Yanling 马彦玲 and Feng Jiali 奉家丽 express feminism through their art rather than explicit activism³².

The book *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*³³ by Leta Hong Fincher presents a comprehensive and critical analysis of the feminist movement in China, contextualizing it within the broader framework of patriarchal authoritarianism and state control. Hong Fincher situates contemporary Chinese feminism as a resistance movement that directly challenges the state's patriarchal foundations. The movement gained international visibility following the arrest of the *Feminist Five* (女权五女 *nǚ quán wǔ nǚ*) in March 2015—Li Maizi 李麦子 (personal name Li Tingting 李婷婷), Wu Rongrong 武嵘嵘, Zheng Churan 郑楚然, Wei Tingting 韦婷婷, and Wang Man 王曼—for planning a modest campaign against sexual harassment on public transportation. Their arrest unintentionally sparked a global outcry and marked a pivotal moment in China's modern feminist resistance. Hong Fincher further argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views feminism as a subversive threat because of its potential to mobilize widespread grassroots dissent — especially among urban, educated women who are increasingly disillusioned with state-promoted gender norms. President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power is portrayed as emblematic of “patriarchal authoritarianism”, wherein the subjugation of women is instrumental to maintaining social stability and economic productivity. Hong Fincher traces the feminist movement's lineage to early 20th-century revolutionaries like Qiu Jin 秋瑾 and links its modern resurgence to the rollback of gender equality since the economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. While the Maoist state once promoted formal gender parity (mainly for labor productivity), this commitment was abandoned in the post-reform era, leading to a significant gender wealth gap and discriminatory policies. Notably, the state's pro-natalist agenda has been coupled with propaganda urging highly educated women to marry early and have children, leading to the derogatory label *leftover women* (剩女 *sheng nǚ*) for those who remain single in their late twenties³⁴. The feminist movement has also begun intersecting with other social struggles, including labor rights and legal advocacy, creating the potential for cross-class alliances that concern the CCP. The state's fear of such convergence—between feminist, legal, and worker movements—has led to increased repression and the framing of feminists as agents

³² KARETZKY, ZHANG, *Both Sides Now*, 2020.

³³ HONG FINCHER, *Betraying the Big Brother: Feminist Awakening in China*, 2018.

³⁴ Ibid, pg. 17.

of *foreign hostile forces* (敌对势力 *dì duì shì lì*)³⁵. This is a very serious accusation and is employed by the Chinese Communist Party to refer to perceived external threats to political stability and the regime's integrity. However, it can also encompass internal threats, often painting them as foreign or extrinsic to the system. Historically, the term has been used in political discourse to signal awareness of both foreign and domestic risks. Yet, it is frequently leveraged to exploit claims of external danger as a justification for the political persecution of domestic opponents³⁶. *Betraying Big Brother* emphasizes the psychological transformation many activists undergo as part of their feminist awakening. Activists describe their engagement with feminism as deeply empowering, providing a framework to understand and resist their personal experiences of gendered violence and repression³⁷. Unlike other dissident movements that may focus on abstract political ideals, the core of Chinese feminism is grounded in the everyday realities of inequality, making it simultaneously intimate and subversive. While Hong Fincher's work captures the grassroots and activist dimension of contemporary feminism, Zheng's chapter *Feminist Struggles in a Changing China* provides essential insight into the long-term transformation of feminism in China across three distinct historical waves. The first cohort consisted of state feminists from the socialist era, who institutionalized gender reforms through the *All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)*, achieving landmark victories such as the 1950 Marriage Law. However, their integration into the CCP also led to their marginalization and erasure from official historiography³⁸. The second cohort, emerging in the 1990s, included scholars and NGO workers who engaged global feminist theory and developed gender-based advocacy, emphasizing individual rights and autonomy beyond state-defined collectivist norms. Their work—ranging from anti-domestic violence laws to legal reform—benefited from and simultaneously challenged the CCP's reform policies. Despite working within constraints, these feminists created substantial change by reframing “gender” (社会性别 *shè huì xìng bié*) in ways that aligned with international human rights discourses while remaining palatable to the Chinese state³⁹. This reframing often meant shifting the focus from static identity categories (e.g., women as victims or as economic agents) toward a more dynamic understanding of gender as a structure of power and social patterns of inclusion and exclusion—what Criterion Institute describes as moving “from

³⁵ HONG FINCHER, *Betraying the Big Brother: Feminist Awakening in China*. 2018, pg. 20.

³⁶ CHEN, *THE CMP DICTIONARY*, 2022.

³⁷ HONG FINCHER, *Betraying the Big Brother: Feminist Awakening in China*. 2018, pg. 22.

³⁸ ZHENG, *Feminist Struggles in a Changing China*, 2021, pg. 122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 133-136.

counting women to valuing gender patterns" and analyzing how power operates across intersecting identities⁴⁰. The third cohort comprises young feminist activists, such as the *Feminist Five*, who reject institutional channels and organize direct action campaigns through social media. This group is deeply influenced by online culture and transnational feminism, engaging in bold performative protest such as occupying men's toilets and posting topless photos online to raise awareness about gendered violence. They challenge compulsory heterosexuality and openly critique patriarchal values in Chinese society, frequently facing state surveillance and censorship⁴¹.

Taken together, these sources reflect the complex interplay between Chinese feminisms, the state, and transnational influences. Feminism in China is not a unified ideology but a contested and evolving practice shaped by unique socio-political pressures and historical legacies. It is precisely this hybridity—blending Confucian heritage, Maoist egalitarianism, NGO pragmatism, and digital activism—that defines feminism with Chinese characteristics today⁴². Put differently, Chinese women artists have tended to focus less on overt political subversion or direct confrontation with gender hierarchies, and more on navigating their roles and identities within the existing frameworks of gender and sexual relations. The refusal to adopt a feminist identity or to accept feminist interpretations of their work—while simultaneously engaging in practices aligned with feminist critique—remains one of the most striking and complex features of feminism with Chinese characteristics in the contemporary art scene⁴³.

⁴⁰ CRITERION INSTITUTE, *Framing and Reframing Gender: Key Messaging Guidelines*, 2020.

⁴¹ ZHENG, *Feminist Struggles in a Changing China*, 2021, pg. 140-147.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ CUI, *Female and Feminism: A Historical Overview of Women and Art in China*, 2023.

3 ART WORLDS AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

The Chinese contemporary art scene since the 2000s has witnessed a rapid expansion of its institutional landscape, shaped by both state-driven modernization and private entrepreneurial ventures. According to Pollack, Beijing and Shanghai compete intensely to claim the title of China's cultural capital⁴⁴. Beijing boasts two major art districts—798 and *Caochangdi*—that host hundreds of galleries, including *Pace Beijing*, *Beijing Commune*, *Long March Space*, *Tang Contemporary*, and *Platform China*. These areas attract vibrant foot traffic from locals and tourists alike, integrating art with lifestyle spaces like cafes and boutiques. While Beijing lacks strong public museum infrastructure, it is home to *UCCA* (*Ullens Center for Contemporary Art*)—a leading private museum founded by Belgian collectors in 2007—and *Today Art Museum*, backed by real estate mogul Zhang Baoquan. New players such as *MWOODS* and *Sishang Art Museum* fill the gaps left by the state-run institutions, with *Sishang* staging major international exhibitions. In contrast, Shanghai has experienced a museum boom driven largely by government cultural policy. Major institutions include *Power Station of Art*—China's first state-run contemporary art museum; *China Art Palace*—housed in the 2010 Expo building; or *Long Museum*—a \$43 million personal project, showcasing both contemporary and historic Chinese works⁴⁵. In addition to the major art hubs of Beijing and Shanghai, several regional institutions across China have played pivotal roles in shaping the contemporary art scene. As highlighted in Wu Hung's anthology *Primary Documents*, public museums such as the *Shanghai Art Museum*, *Guangdong Museum of Art*, and *He Xiangning Art Museum* in Shenzhen were instrumental in the early 2000s. These institutions managed to strike a delicate balance between state control and curatorial independence, allowing for more dynamic programming and public engagement⁴⁶. Alongside these state-affiliated venues, private museums also emerged as vital platforms for experimental and specialized work. Notable among them are the *Three Shadows Photography Art Centre*—founded by artists in 2007—and the *Zendai Museum of Modern Art* in Shanghai. While these institutions often operate without direct state support, they have carved out essential spaces for research, innovation, and artistic discourse⁴⁷. The growth of China's art market during this period was also significantly fueled by

⁴⁴ POLLACK, *Brand New Art From China: A Generation on the Rise*, 2018.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 165-166.

⁴⁶ WU, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, pg. 398.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 399-400.

commercial actors. *Poly International* and *China Guardian Auctions* became dominant forces in the domestic auction scene, handling tens of millions in sales and elevating the visibility of Chinese contemporary art⁴⁸. Between 2000 and 2008, more than 300 galleries opened in Beijing and over 100 in Shanghai, with global heavyweights such as *James Cohan Gallery*, *Continua*, and *PaceWildenstein* establishing a presence, especially in the increasingly iconic *798 Art District*. Finally, the rise of art fairs and exhibition platforms has further cemented China's place in the global art economy. Events like the *China International Gallery Exposition (CIGE)*, *Art Beijing*, *ShContemporary (Shanghai)*, and *ART HK (Hong Kong)* have positioned the country as a critical node in international artistic circulation and exchange⁴⁹.

However, alongside this institutional and commercial expansion, a parallel development has taken place — one that centers not on formal exhibitions or elite galleries, but on grassroots digital engagement and alternative forms of practice⁵⁰. Since the 1990s, China has witnessed the rise of what international curators describe as the “everyone can curate” phenomenon⁵¹. This shift has been accompanied by a steady transformation of curatorial discourse in response to the fluid dynamics of contemporary art⁵². Rather than adhering to conventional, institutionally defined curatorial models, many artists and cultural producers in China have begun to embrace the broader term “practice”—a move that reflects their desire to resist rigid categorizations imposed by academia or the art market. Concepts such as “locality-based practice” (在地实践 *zài dì shí jiàn*), “social practice” (社会实践 *shè huì shí jiàn*), and “community-based practice” (社群实践 *shè qún shí jiàn*) have gained traction, highlighting a shift toward relational, site-specific, and socially embedded modes of art-making⁵³. These practitioners often seek to blur the lines between curatorial and artistic roles, operating in digital spaces and informal venues, and aligning themselves with collaborative, activist, and experimental networks outside the state-sanctioned circuit⁵⁴. This evolution signals a more decentralized and participatory art ecology, where platforms like *WeChat*, *Xiaohongshu*, and *Weibo* allow artists to connect directly with audiences,

⁴⁸ WU, *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents*, 2010, pg. 400.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 401.

⁵⁰ ZHOU, *Art Worlds as Social Meshwork: Contemporary Chinese Art Practice, Interaction, and Communication*, 2024, pg. 17.

⁵¹ FILIPOVIC, *The Artist as Curator: An Anthology*, 2018.

⁵² SALEMINK, *Global Art in Local Art Worlds: Changing Hierarchies of Value*, 2023.

⁵³ ZHOU, *Art Worlds as Social Meshwork: Contemporary Chinese Art Practice, Interaction, and Communication*, 2024, pg. 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

document their creative processes, and distribute their work independently of traditional institutions. In this sense, the vitality of China's art scene today lies not only in its established museums and high-profile auctions but also in its vibrant, digitally mediated underground — where emerging voices continue to redefine what it means to make and share art in the 21st century.

3.1 The Creation of Chinese Art Scene

The contemporary Chinese art scene has evolved significantly since the 1980s, transitioning from a state-controlled system to a more diverse and dynamic environment. This transformation has been influenced by various factors, including educational reforms, state policies, and the emergence of new art institutions. Clunas argues that Chinese art is an invention of nineteenth-century Europe and North America, as no one before that time saw the objects such as pieces of calligraphy, paintings, sculptures, ceramics and other objects as constituting part of the same field of enquiry⁵⁵. He further stresses the physical, social and religious immensity and variety, distrusting any unifying principles linking the wide range of made things with their contexts and audiences⁵⁶. Gao agrees with this timing and further explains that western modern art models played a reviving role in the weakened tradition in the twentieth century and labels them as a defensive modernity, due to the fact that the concerns of modernity were rooted in a desire for international strengthening in reaction to the impact of western forces⁵⁷.

As Jiang explains, the notion of “art outside the art space” appears almost inherent, shaped by both cultural-historical contexts and political considerations. Culturally, the tradition of literati art exemplifies this tendency — artworks were created, exchanged, and appreciated within the intimate setting of scholarly gatherings. These events were private affairs held in secluded spaces, far removed from public or institutional access, and thus reserved for a select, often elite, audience.⁵⁸ Today, the practice of creating and exhibiting Chinese contemporary art outside of museums and galleries persists, though it is driven by an entirely different momentum and set of intentions. While the *Star Exhibition* (星星美展 *xīng xīng měi zhǎn*) is often cited as a pioneering example of unofficial or politically avant-garde art, it was originally held out of necessity — displayed on the iron fence

⁵⁵ CLUNAS, *Art in China (Oxford History of Art)*, 2009, pg. 9.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 10.

⁵⁷ GAO, *Toward a Transnational Modernity: An Overview of Inside Out: New Chinese Art*, 1998, pg. 16.

⁵⁸ JIANG, *Chinese art outside the art space*, 2018, pg. 111.

surrounding China's National Art Museum in Beijing before being removed by authorities after just two days. It was later permitted to reopen in Beihai Park. In contrast, many contemporary artists who operate outside institutional spaces today do so by choice⁵⁹. This continuation of the legacy reflects a shift toward autonomous, self-determined artistic practices rather than a response to political exclusion.

3.2 Global Art Circuits and the Western Gaze

It is undeniable fact that the global institutions influence which artistic voices are amplified on the international stage. Major Western institutions often select artists based on geographical origin, aligning with their institutional agendas. This practice underscores the persistent imbalance in the global art system, where the English-speaking West maintains cultural and discursive dominance. As art historian David Joselit notes, "the global circulation of contemporary art remains filtered through Western institutions that structure the way difference is consumed and legitimized"⁶⁰. Similarly, Merlin emphasizes that curatorial narratives within Western exhibitions often exoticize Chinese female artists, reducing their work to symbols of oppression or resistance within a narrowly defined political framework and discusses the challenges faced by Chinese women artists in gaining recognition beyond stereotypical representations. She notes that their work is often interpreted through a Western lens that emphasizes themes of oppression and resistance, potentially overshadowing the artists' broader creative intentions⁶¹. Such structures impact not only how Chinese women artists are received globally, but also how they frame their work in response. Building upon this discourse, Li's thesis *Inside Out: Rethinking Contemporary Chinese Art and Global Creative Economy* challenges the Western-centric understanding of contemporary Chinese art in the global market. Li argues that Western narratives tend to celebrate Chinese artists who overtly critique or resist Chinese authority, while those employing abstract or feminist approaches are often overlooked or misunderstood⁶². This selective recognition reinforces a limited view of Chinese art, privileging works that align with Western expectations of political dissent⁶³. Li further critiques the perception that contemporary Chinese art is merely a derivative of Western art, shaped by market demands. She contends that such views neglect the unique socio-

⁵⁹ JIANG, *Chinese art outside the art space*, 2018, pg. 112.

⁶⁰ JOSELIT, *After Art*, 2012, pg. 43

⁶¹ MERLIN, *Gender (still) matters in Chinese contemporary art*, 2019.

⁶² LI, *Inside out: rethinking contemporary Chinese art and global creative economy*, 2021.

⁶³ Ibid., pg. 5-6.

political and economic contexts that have influenced Chinese art since the mid-20th century⁶⁴. By emphasizing the distinctiveness of “contemporaneity” in Chinese art, Li highlights the importance of understanding these works within their specific cultural and historical frameworks.

⁶⁴ LI, *Inside out: rethinking contemporary Chinese art and global creative economy*, 2021, pg. 7.

4 THEMATIC LENSES: ART AND THE FEMALE BODY

Karetzky underscores how Chinese female artists have used the nude and aging body to dismantle historical taboos rooted in Confucian decorum⁶⁵—particularly values such as modesty, obedience, and restraint. Female artists have portrayed the mature, pregnant, or bound female form — challenging societal expectations around modesty, fertility, and the performance of femininity. These works reveal the body as both a biological and political space, resisting aestheticization and instead invoking discomfort, vulnerability, and endurance. Karetzky further points out that nudity in Chinese art has long been censored, and its resurgence in contemporary women’s art marks a defiant gesture against patriarchal silence⁶⁶. Merlin adds to this discourse by stressing how gender in Chinese contemporary art has been historically marginalized, both in academia and curatorial practice⁶⁷. She also emphasizes that women artists’ works are frequently read through binary tropes of resistance or victimhood, particularly in the West. This framing diminishes the richness and complexity of their work and, crucially, their agency as cultural producers. These narratives often ignore the nuanced engagement with personal experience, domestic life, and emotional landscapes that are central to many female artists’ practices. Thus, chapter 4.1’s focus on eroticism is not about voyeurism or sexual provocation—it is about confronting inherited boundaries on what the female body can express, both socially and symbolically. Turning to chapter 4.2, these embodied expressions must also be seen in relation to capitalism and state narratives of modernity. As both Merlin and Pollack observe, many Chinese women artists navigate a field where femininity becomes a consumable identity — curated for galleries, collectors, and state cultural ambitions⁶⁸. Pollack particularly notes how Chinese women artists are often expected to perform a dual role: to be visibly Chinese and visibly female in a way that aligns with market or political frameworks, reinforcing gendered and racialized expectations within global art circuits⁶⁹.

Together, these sources help ground the thesis’s argument that the female body in Chinese women’s art is not only a site of personal identity but also of ideological negotiation—between eroticism and modesty, between global visibility and local meaning,

⁶⁵ KARETZKY, ZHANG, *Both Sides Now*, 2020.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ MERLIN, *Gender (still) matters in Chinese contemporary art*, 2019.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ POLLACK, *Brand New Art From China: A Generation on the Rise*, 2018.

and between historical tradition and contemporary gender politics. This is precisely why Chapter 4 and its subchapters 4.1 and 4.2 are essential to this thesis as they address core themes that have been consistently explored by Chinese women artists as central tools of expression, critique, and transformation. These topics have historically been marginalized or taboo, yet they re-emerge with force in the works of contemporary interviewed artists who seek to reclaim bodily autonomy and challenge inherited visual traditions.

4.1 Eroticism and Confucian Morality

This chapter seeks to explore the differences in sociological context of narrating nudity or portraying body in China. Eroticism is a universal yet diverse phenomenon. To understand Chinese eroticism, one has at the outset to place it in its cultural context and endeavor to set aside preconceptions - especially that in the West, the erotic is a sin, meanwhile in China, this link between sin and eroticism does not exist⁷⁰. That does not, however, mean that in former times, the Chinese were a sexually liberated people - there were limits stemming from Confucian beliefs, in which a strict hierarchy closely connected to matrimony is a crucial element⁷¹. Nevertheless, matrimony was (and till today still is) perceived as a higher rule that needs to be more or less formally fulfilled, and the presence of concubines in addition to the principal wife was justified by the need to ensure an heir⁷². Even though there are many thought schools that influenced the policy of contemporary China, Confucianism is nevertheless an important constituent of China's political identity⁷³.

As Rosenlee explains moral limits were primarily enforced through Confucian family ethics, which constructed a social hierarchy centered around familial duty, propriety (礼 *lǐ*), and filial piety (孝 *xiào*)⁷⁴. She adds that these values embedded women within the domestic realm (内 *nèi*) and subordinated their identity to roles such as daughter, wife, and mother, where bodily self-expression outside of ritualized femininity was socially discouraged⁷⁵. Although Confucianism does not explicitly condemn sexuality as immoral, it does strictly regulate it within hierarchical kinship structures and the ritual institution of

⁷⁰ BERTHOLET, *Gardens of Pleasure: Eroticism and Art in China*, 2010.

⁷¹ Ibid., pg. 20.

⁷² Ibid., pg. 13.

⁷³ SZCZOTKA, *Influence of Confucianism on the Chinese Political System: A Case of Social Credit System and Socialist Core Values*, 2022.

⁷⁴ ROSENLEE, *CONFUCIANISM AND WOMEN: A Philosophical Interpretation*, 2006.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

marriage. Rosenlee shows how the woman's body was not viewed as inherently sinful, but rather as functionally instrumental—valuable primarily as a means to uphold patrilineal continuity through childbirth⁷⁶. At the same time, women were denied full personhood in the Confucian scheme: they had no independent identity in the realm of public/ethical space (外 wài) and were often rendered socially anonymous—even when they were literate or politically active⁷⁷. This underlying moral framework continues to influence how eroticism and the female body are approached in Chinese contemporary art. Many female artists today deliberately challenge these inherited constraints by using their own bodies in art to reclaim visibility, agency, and emotion. A great example is He Chengyao's famous 2001 performance *Opening the Great Wall*—in which she stripped to the waist in public—evoked national shock, not because of nudity itself, but because the act violated entrenched norms of filial and social propriety, laying bare the tension between bodily autonomy and social order.

4.2 Chineseness, Capitalism, Consumerism, and the Feminine Ideal

The term Chineseness is often used to imply a fixed, essential cultural identity—something inherent and authentic that defines what it means to be "truly Chinese." However, as argued in recent scholarship, including the article *Rethinking Chineseness in Chinese Contemporary Art*⁷⁸, this notion is far from neutral. Rather than being an intrinsic quality, Chineseness is constructed, negotiated, and often strategically performed—especially within the context of global art systems and transnational cultural exchange. In contemporary Chinese art, Chineseness does not reflect a singular truth about culture or identity. Instead, it functions as a discursive tool, shaped by curators, critics, institutions, and even state agendas. As the article outlines, many Chinese artists—especially women—find themselves navigating an identity that is not just defined internally, but externally imposed through Western curatorial expectations, global market demands, and nationalist narratives within China itself⁷⁹. One of the key points raised is the Orientalist framing often used by Western institutions: Chinese art is expected to be recognizable, exotic, and politically readable⁸⁰. Artists who challenge this by using abstract language, global

⁷⁶ ROSENLEE, *CONFUCIANISM AND WOMEN: A Philosophical Interpretation*, 2006, pg. 123.

⁷⁷ Ibid., pg. 128.

⁷⁸ ZHANG, *Chineseness as method*, 2023.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ SHANG, *Orientalism and the Landscape of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 2009.

symbols, or feminist critique often find themselves sidelined or misinterpreted. Conversely, works that lean into traditional iconography, Confucian aesthetics, or visible social critique tend to be more readily accepted. This creates a tension between authenticity and visibility, where artists must balance personal expression with strategic navigation of what is considered “marketable” Chineseness. Therefore, one should view Chineseness as plural and hybrid, not a singular definition. The identity of a young Chinese woman artist born in Shanghai and educated in London may differ vastly from that of a rural-based painter who trained in a traditional academy, as is evident in the interviews in Chapter 4. Yet, both are often expected to embody a generalized “Chinese” aesthetic. This not only flattens diverse experiences but also limits the discursive potential of their work. Within the context of female artists, Chineseness is particularly fraught. It intersects with gendered expectations — both from Confucian heritage and from Western feminist frameworks. Many artists choose to resist simplified labels, positioning themselves as both inside and outside of fixed identities. Their work becomes a site of negotiation between national identity, gendered embodiment, and global reception. In short, Chineseness is not a stable category. It is a moving target — shaped by power, politics, and positionality. For the women artists discussed in this thesis, engaging with Chineseness is not just about cultural representation. It is a process of redefining what it means to be a Chinese woman in art and the world today, beyond essentialist tropes and beyond externally imposed frameworks.

When looking at more current trends, another ideology comes into play - consumerism. There are many representations of women in China, for example tender (嫩女 *nèn nǚ*) and ripe (熟女 *shú nǚ*) women, where the ripe ones are becoming younger and tender by engaging with fashion, cosmetic surgery, and beauty and wellness products and services, as tender femininity embodies the ideal of active consumerism—one that celebrates beauty, sexuality, and personal individuality⁸¹. According to Yang, gender functions both as an economic catalyst driving China’s consumer capitalism and as a bio-political tool used to regulate and reshape women and their bodies in alignment with the state’s political and economic goals⁸². As consumerism becomes deeply embedded in China’s nation-building efforts, gender emerges as a critical resource for advancing both economic growth and national identity formation.

⁸¹ YANG, *Nennu and Shunu: Gender, Body Politics, and the Beauty Economy in China*, 2011.

⁸² Ibid.

5 CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED FEMALE ARTISTS

For the purpose of this thesis, a questionnaire was designed and used for a primary contact with selected artists. The selection was rather coincidental, the main criteria was the age of the artists - as this writing deals with a generation born in 90s and 00s. Another basis for choosing a certain artist for an interview was the form of their art: the thesis only works with artists creating paintings, drawings or object design. Photography, immersive art or performance art is not part of the research, mainly due to the limited scope. The author reached to 15 artists via social media, such as *Instagram*, *WeChat* and *Xiaohongshu* to inform them about the possibility to take part in the research. Eight of them showed interest in participating, this number was later narrowed to six artists, who completed the questionnaire and were interviewed.

5.1 Probes: Interviews with Artists

In the following text, the author summarizes the key information that appeared during interviews (either performed by the author herself or collected from past interviews for various media).

5.1.1 Zhou Wenjing 周雯静

Zhou Wenjing 周雯静 was born in 1989 in Hunan province. In 2014, she graduated from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute with a master's degree and continued her education in Nantes Fine Arts Institute in France, from where she graduated in 2017 with a master's degree. The list of her solo exhibitions includes *Reject Eternity* at Free.Space, Art Expo, Guangzhou, China (2018); *Her* at White Art Space, Shenzhen, China (2019); *Her Whisper* at Ovision Gallery, Paris, France (2020); *The Opposite of the Body* at Ovision Gallery, Paris, France (2020); *Beautiful Bad Things* at Yi Contemporary Art Center, Guangzhou, China (2022); and *The World is Burning* at Santu Gallery, Shanghai, China (2023). The list of group exhibitions is even longer, starting in 2016, with exhibitions in mainland China as well as in France, Korea or Costa Rica.

Zhou focuses on issues such as identity, gender, body, disease, power and the relationship between them. Starting from personal experience, she produces and intervenes in issues such as emotions and objects, power and alienation, individuals and the public, as well as issues related to identity, era, social ethics or geopolitics from a micro-historical

perspective. Her most influential and viral piece of art is called *Women Series-IUD* (女人系列·节育环 *nǚ rén xì liè·jié yù huán*), which she created in 2014 as a graduation work during her postgraduate studies at Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, and it is also her first contemporary art work. When working on the creation, she chose copper, the most typical material for IUDs, and crafted more than 300 pieces in a 1:1 ratio, replicating the shapes of real IUDs that have appeared throughout history till today. Zhou then arranged them, with a touch of irony, on delicate blue velvet, resembling women's jewelry.



Figure 1 *Women Series • IUD* (女人系列 • 节育环 *nǚ rén xì liè • jié yù huán*)⁸³

The inspiration for this work stems from an experience in 2011, when Zhou accompanied her mother to have her IUD, which she had used for over 20 years, removed. Following the procedure, Zhou's mother experienced heavy bleeding that persisted for nearly a month.

⁸³ Eva. 今天，我们想聊聊女性的疼痛和勇敢。Jīn tiān, wǒ mén xiǎng liáo liáo nǚ xìng de tòng kǔ hé yǒng gǎn [Today, we want to talk about women's pain and courage]. 2021.

Initially, the doctor suspected it might be uterine cancer. This event deeply affected the artist's family and prompted her to delve into the study of IUDs. Because of her mother's experience and her empathy as a woman, Zhou Wenjing began to have the "urge to express herself"⁸⁴. The urge has been interrupted by a difficulty in a change of environment: after Zhou moved to France to pursue another master degree, she found herself surrounded with different way of thinking, creating and, naturally, speaking. "I was in the process of breaking down the existing prejudices and then rebuilding a new system"⁸⁵, says Zhou about the time shortly after her arrival to France.

For the first three months abroad, the artist could not create anything. This changed shortly after she visited a museum at the Paris Medical university. The museum exhibits all kinds of clinical instruments from the 19th century: scalpels are beautifully placed in wooden boxes, like silver cutlery, quietly placed there, but the feeling they give to the viewer is stinging, uncomfortable, and violent. That was the impulse for Zhou to create the first work of the *Red Series* (红色系列 *hóng sè xì liè*) called *Scalpel Series* (手术刀系列 *shǒu shù dāo xì liè*)⁸⁶. The scalpel created by the artist is fundamentally based on a 1:1 ratio, drawing inspiration from existing clinical surgical instruments, primarily gynecological ones. What sets this work apart is the inclusion of the instrument's size marked in the style of engineering drawings. When the artist displayed these small drawings pinned to the wall in a white room, a unique sensation emerged, evoking discomfort among viewers. The contrast between the external coldness and internal agony, alongside the rationality of the tool and the strong emotions it provoked, was expressed in a strikingly contradictory manner. "Red carries many metaphorical meanings. However, for me, its primary metaphorical connotation is blood. Bleeding represents a common experience that women encounter at a biological level, including menstruation, childbirth, illness, and injury. In this work, I used a special type of Dutch ink and applied it in a watercolor style. This ink is unique; when highly concentrated, it appears blood red, while when diluted, it transforms into a warm, kitschy pink,"⁸⁷ describes Zhou.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Yi Xi. 在今天，怀孕仍然被理想化、被美化。但其实怀孕根本就不是一个洁白无瑕的过程 | 周雯静一席第 825 位讲者。Zài jīn tiān, huái yùn réng rán bèi lǐ xiǎng huà 、 bèi měi huà 。 dàn qí shí huái yùn gēn běn bù shì yī gè jié bái wú xiá de guò chéng | zhōu wén jìng yī xī dì 825 wèi jiǎng zhě [Today, pregnancy is still idealized and beautified. But in fact, pregnancy is not a pure and flawless process at all | Zhou Wenjing, the 825th speaker of Yixi]. 2021.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.



Figure 2 *Red Series, Scalpel Series* (红色系列, 手术刀系列 *hóng sè xì liè*)⁸⁸

In 2015, Zhou continued with the *Red Series*, creating *Red Series Wallpaper* (红色系列·壁纸 *hóng sè xì liè · bì zhǐ*), a contradictory piece. Seen from a distance, the print on the wall appears warm and beautiful, but upon closer inspection, one will discover that its content is quite threatening. Zhou covered the stark white walls with pink scalpels, scattering them in a way that completely altered the mood of the space. The contrast between the soft, playful color and the sharp, clinical nature of the scalpels created a quiet tension, making the room feel both delicate and dangerous at the same time.

Zhou kept on working on the *Red Series* and in the following year introduced sculptures of 12 female bodies without heads, hands, legs, or any other parts that symbolize personal and social identity, retaining only the female reproductive parts created from plaster placed in a pool of red ink. As the time passes, the plaster absorbs the ink, starting with a gentle, rose color, then gradually turning into lymph-like features of a hypothetical disease characterized by the formation of white and yellow deposits on plaster surfaces, resembling skin secretions.

⁸⁸ Eva. 今天，我们想聊聊女性的疼痛和勇敢。Jīn tiān, wǒ mén xiǎng liáo liáo nǚ xìng de tòng kǔ hé yǒng gǎn [Today, we want to talk about women's pain and courage], 2021.



Figure 3 *Red Series Wallpaper* (红色系列 • 壁纸 *hóng sè xì liè • bì zhǐ*)⁸⁹

Again, the artist plays with the contradiction of the primarily appealing scene, which only by the passing time drastically changes into a sight that evokes discomfort, suggesting that the integrity of the body is compromised, leading to feelings of pollution and damage. Through the sculptures named *Red Series N°3* (红色系列 N°3 *hóng sè xì liè N°3*), the artist expresses an opinion on pregnancy, which in today's society is often viewed through a lens of idealization and glamorization. However, the reality is that it is not a purely innocent experience and the female body continues to be marginalized by a veil of ignorance. “Throughout this time, I frequently believed that artworks ought not to resemble social reports. Instead, art should possess ambiguity, vagueness, and provoke thoughts,”⁹⁰ explains the artist her understanding of the role of art.

⁸⁹ Eva. 今天，我们想聊聊女性的疼痛和勇敢。Jīn tiān, wǒ mén xiǎng liáo liáo nǚ xìng de tòng kǔ hé yǒng gǎn [Today, we want to talk about women's pain and courage]. 2021.

⁹⁰ Yi Xi. 在今天，怀孕仍然被理想化、被美化。但其实怀孕根本就不是一个洁白无瑕的过程 | 周雯静一席第 825 位讲者。Zài jīn tiān, huái yùn réng rán bèi lǐ xiǎng huà 、 bèi měi huà 。 dàn qí shí huái yùn gēn běn bù shì yī gè jié bái wú xiá de guò chéng | zhōu wén jìng yī xī dì 825 wèi jiǎng zhě [Today, pregnancy is still idealized and beautified. But in fact, pregnancy is not a pure and flawless process at all | Zhou Wenjing, the 825th speaker of Yixi]. 2021.

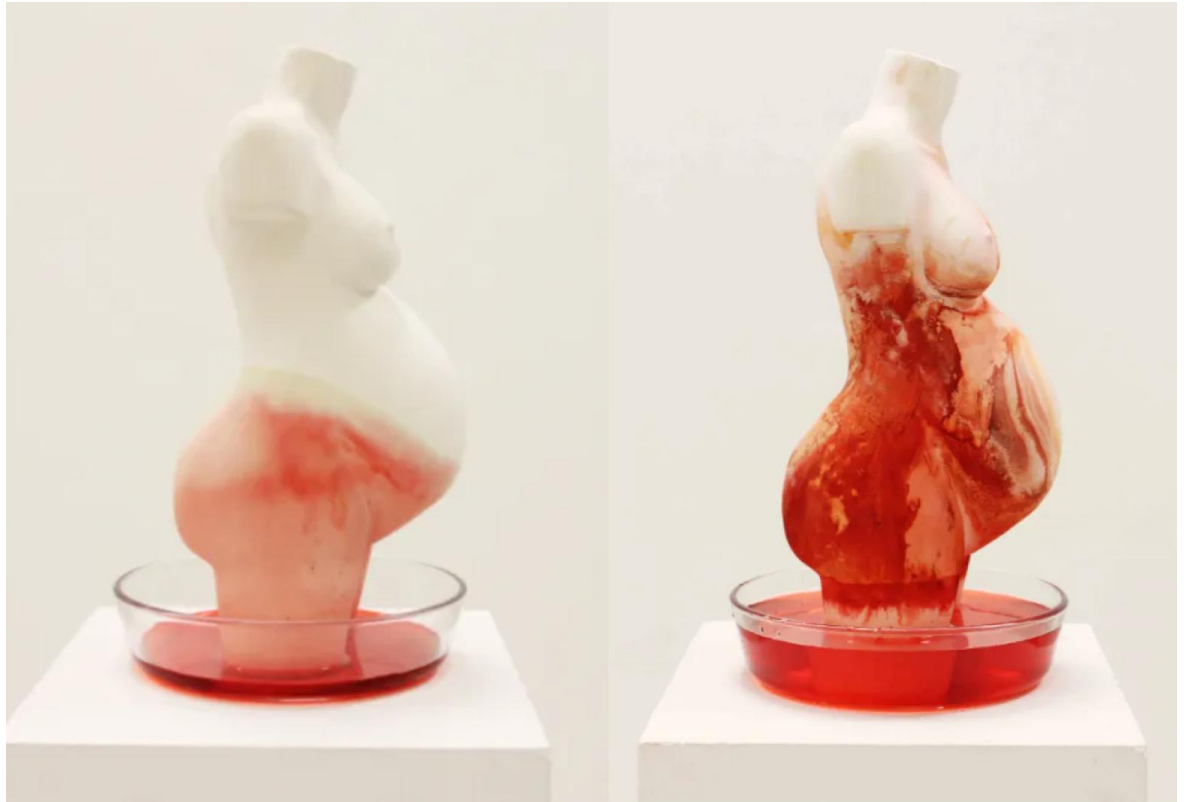


Figure 4 *Red Series No. 3* (红色系列 N°3 *hóng sè xì liè N°3*)⁹¹

5.1.2 Chen Weiling 陈韦伶

Chen Weiling 陈韦伶 was born in 1993 in Puning, Jieyang, Guangdong⁹². The region is characterized by a conservative atmosphere and there is a prevalent mindset that prioritizes sons over daughters, with the belief that having a son is essential for continuing the family lineage. As a result, many couples continue to have children until they have a son they deem satisfactory. Girls born before a son are often seen as unnecessary by their families. Such was the artist's experience as well; her parents divorced when she was just 40 days old. Her father believed her mother was worthless, only capable of giving birth to daughters. Following the divorce, Chen lived with her mother at her grandmother's home, took her mother's surname unlike the usual practice of children taking the father's surname, and had never seen her father. Her grandmother, originally from Guilin, Guangxi, held beliefs that significantly differed from those of the Puning community. From a young age,

⁹¹ Eva. 今天，我们想聊聊女性的疼痛和勇敢。Jīn tiān, wǒ mén xiǎng liáo liáo nǚ xìng de tòng kǔ hé yǒng gǎn [Today, we want to talk about women's pain and courage]. 2021.

⁹² 大人糖. 大人糖 x 陈韦伶：从潮汕「出走」，我用画笔描绘女性的爱欲与自由。dà rén táng x chén wéi líng : cóng cháo shàn 「 chū zǒu 」 , wǒ yòng huà bǐ miáo huì nǚ xìng de ài yù yǔ zì yóu 。 [Darentang x Chen Weiling: "Running away" from Chaoshan, I use my brush to depict women's love and freedom], 2023.

she taught Chen several important lessons that influenced the artist heavily, such as that one can recognize an individual's facial features; however, it is imperative to remain cautious regarding their true character. Should any inappropriate circumstances arise involving an individual of the opposite sex, it is crucial to report such incidents immediately to family members or relevant authorities, such as teachers. Even though vague, these words were the first sexual expressions that Chen heard.

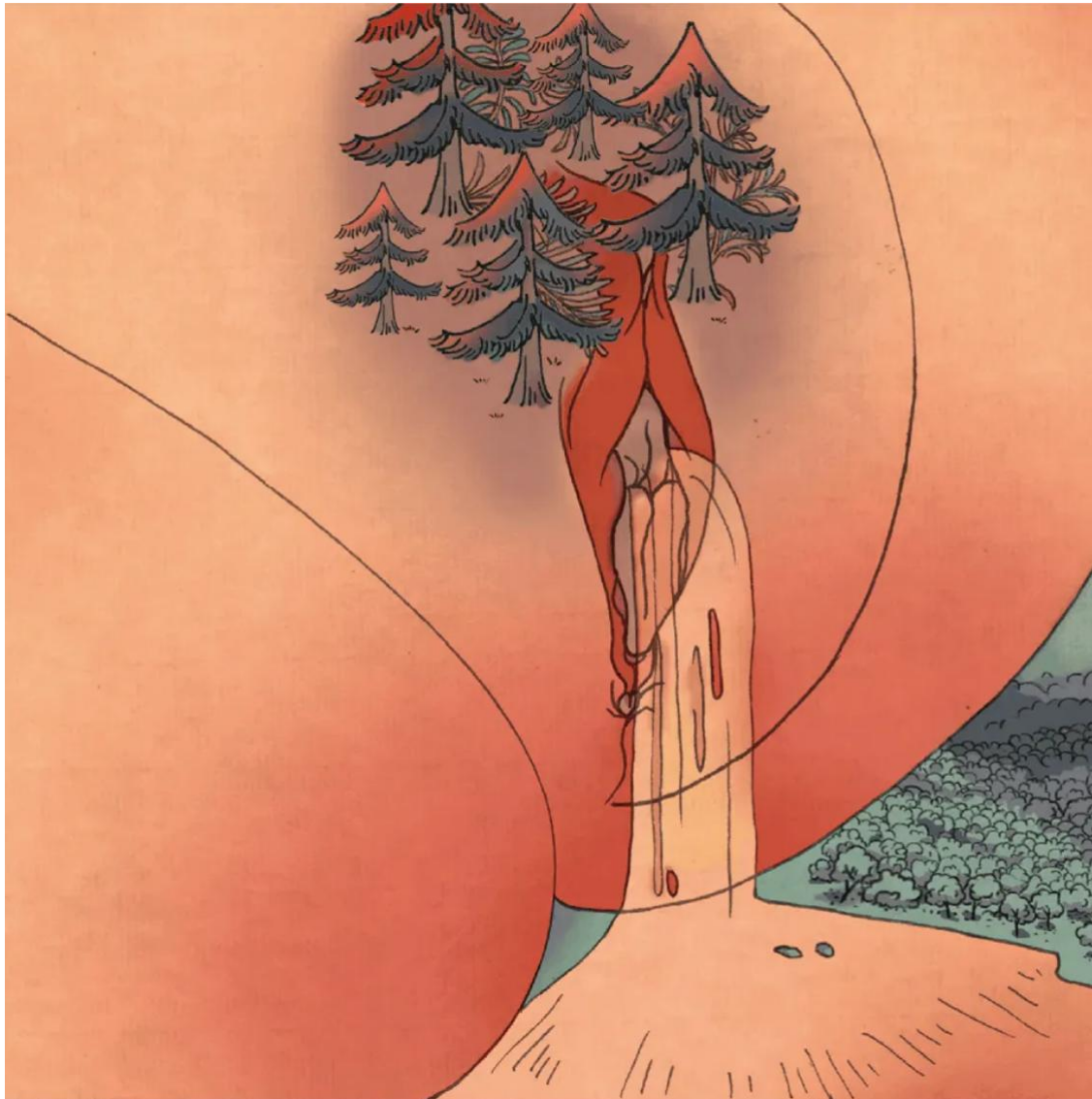


Figure 5 Chen Weiling *Desire Six* (欲之六 yù zhī liù)⁹³

It was not until she matured that she recognized the significant gap in sex education within society around her. Women faced restrictions on discussing sexual topics, resulting in many young women being unaware of their own body anatomy. Conversely, the artist saw

⁹³ 陈 CHEN, 偷偷看一眼 *Take a peek*.

that sex permeates everyday life; people are intrigued and seek to learn more, yet they must navigate the limitations imposed by traditional beliefs, where sex can be referred to in expressions like 翻云覆雨 *fān yún fù yǔ*, literally meaning *to produce clouds with one turn of the hand and rain with another*. After graduating from the Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 2016, Chen's painting style changed drastically, and she began to create works with the theme of female freedom of love and desire, inadvertently acting as a spokesperson for women. Her artwork consistently highlights women's experiences, focusing on the liberation of love and desire present in the female subconscious. She advocates for women to recognize that sex is not a mysterious or solely masculine concept; women too can engage in conversations about sex and revel in its pleasures. Chen has produced over 60 pieces of art-pieces, blending craftsmanship, ukiyo-e, and oil painting techniques. Her style is both delicate and elegant while maintaining a sense of boldness and exaggeration. Additionally, she weaves her reflections on society and life into her work. In a society dominated by male perspectives, women often face "sexual pressure" from various sources. This pressure arises from traditional beliefs that dictate women should suppress their desires before marriage, uphold their chastity, and refrain from sexual activity. Those who do not adhere to these standards risk being labeled as unfaithful and losing societal respect, which is inherently unjust. The artist also aims to point out that the current state of sex education in China is lacking. Many women grow up with a vague understanding of their own bodies and encounter a myriad of confusions related to sexuality. The work *Boyfriend* is quite interesting as it can be considered a challenge to the male-dominated society and also a defense of women's dignity: the word 嫖 *piáo* which means *to visit a prostitute*, has the character 女 *nǚ* [woman] next to it, giving it a derogatory emotional meaning. In fact, not only the word 嫖 *piáo* but many words with a derogatory nature, such as 姪 *jī* [concubine], 奸 *jiān* [to fornicate, to rape], 娼 *pīn* [to be a mistress], 妖 *yāo* [witch, monster], 奴 *nú* [slave] etc., are created using the character 女 *nǚ* [woman], which is very unfair to women. In this painting, Chen shifts the roles by portraying women as the initiators and the ones who find pleasure and enjoyment, with the title underscoring the idea.



Figure 6 Chen Weiling *Boyfriend* (男票 *nán piào*)⁹⁴

Chen reveals that at the moment, it is impossible for her to rely solely on her artistic endeavour to make a living; she works in a state-owned company on administrative position. However, her employer does not know that she actively engages in art and Chen keeps it a secret. Due to the fact that the content of her paintings would be labeled as pornographic in China, she keeps a low profile. Nevertheless, her work can be seen at exhibitions in China and beyond; right before the interview, she returned from a small show in a bookstore in Japan and was preparing another one in Shenzhen. “I had to leave

⁹⁴ 陈 CHEN, 偷偷看一眼 *Take a peek*.

the paintings that I brought to Japan there, it was not possible to bring them back to China,” describes Chen an interesting situation. The reason was not technical but political and cultural: without official approval from the Chinese cultural authorities, the works risked being seized or destroyed upon re-entry. “They [the courier services] didn’t dare transport the works back because they hadn’t been cleared by the culture bureau,” she explains. “In the end, we had to fold the canvas pieces and sneak back two by hand. The rest stayed behind.” This situation is not unique. Chen refers to past incidents where books and artworks without official publication numbers (刊号 *kān hào*) were confiscated at art fairs or by the culture enforcement authorities (文化执法 *wén huà zhí fǎ*). Events like Shanghai’s *ABC Art Book Fair* had to shut down due to increasing regulatory crackdowns. In the eyes of these regulators, erotic or gender-themed art—especially self-published, uncensored work—is often lumped together under the vague charge of “obscenity”, regardless of its artistic merit or feminist critique. “They don’t care whether it’s art or culture,” Chen remarks. “If they decide it’s pornography, that’s it—you get shut down.”

Placed within a broader comparative context, Chen’s work resonates strikingly with that of Czech surrealist Toyen, particularly in the way both artists depict women as autonomous agents resisting patriarchal visual regimes. Toyen’s way of expressing images of women as actors in events standing against the established patriarchal model, in which female sexuality is an object of satisfaction of male desire and a tradable commodity⁹⁵. Toyen and Chen both revolt against the repressive puritanism of patriarchal society and embark on a journey towards equality - perhaps not in the form of prophesying an ideal future, but by searching for undiscovered corners of the body and light, in which, in addition to the usual formula "you are what you are", there is "you can be something else"⁹⁶. There are many other female artists that can have such intersections, yet the comparison between Chen Weiling and Toyen feels particularly resonant given the Czech context of this thesis and the symbolic weight Toyen carries in Central European art history. Both artists subvert traditional representations of femininity, not through overt confrontation but by destabilizing the very visual language through which female desire has historically been interpreted and controlled. Chen, like Toyen, refuses to depict women as passive vessels of meaning. Instead, she positions them as subjects of their own narrative, speaking boldly

⁹⁵ BARTLOVA, PACHMANOVA, *Artemis a Dr. Faust, Zeny v českých a slovenských dejinách umění*, 2008, pg. 243.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 243.

through iconography drawn from myth, dream, and erotic subconscious. Their works are not didactic; they resist simplification and instead provoke a slow, unsettling recognition of what has been suppressed. In Toyen's surrealist canvases, the female form often appears fragmented or disguised, challenging voyeuristic consumption. Similarly, Chen's dreamlike, finely ornamented depictions of desire use traditional forms only to betray them—her brushstrokes veil and reveal, seduce and repel. Both artists thus reimagine the body as a site of resistance: not merely in its presence, but in its symbolic excess, ambiguity, and potential for transformation. In a society where female pleasure and autonomy are frequently trivialized or policed, Chen's work—like Toyen's—offers not just critique, but emancipation through imagination. They map inner landscapes where the female body is not a symbol for something else but a realm in and of itself, capable of infinite re-interpretation. This connection also foregrounds a deeper question that runs through the thesis: whether and how transhistorical and transcultural alliances between women artists can be forged—not solely through shared identity or political circumstance, but through shared visual strategies of resistance and reinvention.

5.1.3 Wen Wen 文雯

Wen Wen 文雯 was born in 1992 in Sichuan Province, Chengdu city. She then moved to Shanghai for her bachelors, majoring in Japanese language and after graduating continued her studies in the UK, at the University College London where she gained master in Design for Performance and Interaction. Wen considers 2017 to be the beginning of her artistic career, as that is when she indulged in oil painting, becoming full-time artist in 2020.



Figure 7 Wen Wen *Bruit et Fureur*⁹⁷

That, for the moment being, does not mean that she solely relies on art to make a living, “I find translation or modelling gigs to supplement cost of living,” describes Wen. In the upcoming years, she has an ambitious plan to register a company and apply for funding with art institutions. Wen has the experience of exhibiting both in China (in Beijing and Shanghai, specifically) and abroad (few times in London, one time in Magdeburg), she curates her own solo shows and participate in group shows and she did residency at Goethe Open Space Shanghai. Wen has an advantage of having the experience of living abroad, which gives her not only the language ability to communicate with wider group of curators and space owners, but especially the personal connections necessary to understand wider options of presenting one’s art to non-Chinese audience.

⁹⁷ WEN, *Bruit et Fureur*, 2022.



Figure 8 Wen Wen *Have you seen this call girl before?*⁹⁸

Wen perceives differences between exhibition opportunities for male and female artists: “Most of the decision makers in art industry are male, they tend to favor their male fellows over females. However, when the decision makers are female, you could see a distinct gender difference in the artists they select,” explains Wen the tendency to promote one’s own gender. When asked about feminism, Wen says she proudly describes herself as a feminist in a meaning to resist all kinds of oppression yielded through the lens of gender bias and to transcend via constant struggle and practices of what you believe, namely gender equity. However, she feels that there is a significant difference between *female* and *feminist* artist in China: “If you are a female artist, you could possibly be picturing the female life, but it is not exactly very political. On the other hand, if you are a feminist artist your works could be political. I think for the moment if you are in China, it is just easier to be a female artist because of the political environment in China.” She also specifies the difference between what is acceptable for foreign artists’ exhibitions in the country: “Chinese galleries get their agendas from Western institutions like Centre Pompidou, the Louvre, MoMA, or Guggenheim. If you’re a French feminist artist, you can exhibit in Shanghai at West Bund or mall museums. Chinese collectors follow the Western agenda—so if you talk about gender issues or feminism and you’re from the West, that’s fine. But if

⁹⁸ WEN, *Have you seen this call girl before?*, 2022.

you're Chinese, they just call it a female art exhibition." According to Wen, local feminist discourse is often domesticated or depoliticized, and artists are frequently reduced to gendered labels. "The worst thing is they tag you as a female artist. When they mention your name, they say: 'She's a female artist.'" This type of labeling, she argues, diminishes artistic agency and narrows professional opportunities. Wen describes a phenomenon that Zhang and Karetzky addressed in their writings as well, stating that "serious women poets and artists choose not to label themselves as feminists out of fear that their output will be associated with low quality", and "labeling art as "feminist" can sometimes undermine its artistic value in male-dominated spaces"⁹⁹. Similar observation was pointed out in a book *Artemis a Dr. Faust*: female-only exhibitions were perceived as a sign of lower quality and bared trace of school show. Not only was "feminine" aesthetics associated with decorative art, but also feminine taste acquired in the eyes of left-wing artists and intellectuals the bitter aftertaste of a promoter of the consumer machinery¹⁰⁰. Strikingly, in 1990s Czechia, feminism itself was sometimes perceived as a capitalist anachronism, suggesting that skepticism toward feminist identity in art is not exclusive to the Chinese context¹⁰¹.

When asked about why it is bad to be labeled as a female artist, Wen argues: "Some people find it narrowing their career if they are labeled as a female artist. Even more if you are a feminist artist, you might narrow your scope a lot. The Guerrilla Girls for example, they drew their pieces about the fact that they were somehow denied certain privileges being a female artist. And since they were addressing an issue, they had been categorized as feminist artists, which means that they are not even a contemporary or modern, they are just feminist." When discussing what can and cannot be exhibited in mainland China, Wen stressed out that the smaller the exhibiting space, the bigger the chance they dare to give it a try and put on a surprisingly open show. Such is the case of a space called 一只耳 *Anear*. A mix of coffee shop, bookstore, art space and souvenir shop, *Anear* is also the place where one can buy a magazine called *Dealers* (啲叻 *dīlè*). The owner and curator of the space, Ang Chen 阿昂, is also publishing and editing the magazine, putting tremendous amount of work into each volume. Yet only one copy is on sale and one stays in their space for visitors to list through. When discussing female and feminist art, Ang Chen did not understand what is the essence of the question of this thesis. She simply did not see the

⁹⁹ KARETZKY, ZHANG, *Both Sides Now*, 2020, pg. 5.

¹⁰⁰ BARTLOVA, PACHMANOVA, *Artemis a Dr. Faust, Zeny v českých a slovenských dejinách umení*, 2008.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, pg. 65.

need to address the male-female question from the point of view that is natural in the Western context. Her aim was to look for interesting artists, no matter if male or female, and exhibit their work, or preferably, little objects that cost little-to-nothing to sale in her store. The point was not to grasp and show what the artists are trying to express (if anything at all), it was to sell. Yet it was in this space where Rao Linghua 饶凌华 paintings were presented at a solo exhibit named *Slingshots and Flowers* (弹弓与花 *dàn gōng yǔ huā*). The contradiction here is telling: even in a space indifferent to theory or feminist critique, it is often these very margins where the most powerful gendered expressions take shape. Wen's reflections thus point to the uneven terrain of feminist visibility in China — where visibility, legitimacy, and political risk are constantly negotiated between institutional pressure, market trends, and personal conviction.

5.1.4 Rao Linghua 饶凌华

As with many other artists, Rao used the female body as an indicator of the unequally distributed power; however she feels distanced from feminism. Yet, when she engages with ink and silk, seemingly attempting to converse with tradition, she creates a striking and primitive form of oriental surrealism infused with dark humor and visually jarring oddities. Her artwork portrays fragmented stone statues, hybrid creatures that are part human and part beast, dismembered limbs marked by blood and hair, and raises questions and challenges to societal norms and traditional male perspectives. This subversion of expectations and stark contrasts render Rao's pieces like a series of allegories reflecting the human condition in the East, while also revealing the hidden journey of a woman's growth.

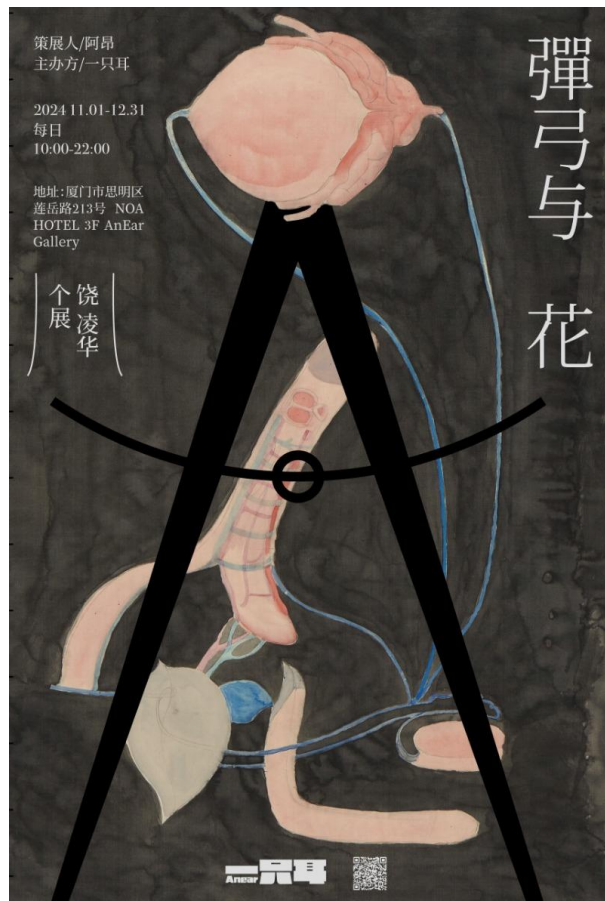


Figure 9 Poster for Rao Linghua's solo exhibition¹⁰²

In the exhibition, the artist aims to emphasize the hidden development experiences of women. The audience can discover that many of these experiences are tied to the physical body, a space where ideology intertwines with circumstances. This theme may have roots in Rao's childhood memories. For instance, she once secretly touched her late grandmother's abdomen when the adults were distracted and realized that her grandmother had no signs of life; she also stumbled upon a drawer in her cousin's room, only to be startled by a collection of cut hair. These poignant and genuine feelings are deeply personal to Rao and resonate within her own experiences. In the paintings, we observe women's peeling hair, lifeless skin, severed, bloodied hands, and dysfunctional sexual organs. In *Slingshot and Flowers*, the artist speaks out against child sexual abuse, depicting male genitals as a disabled slingshot component—implying that things have already fallen apart before any attempt is made to maintain them. Meanwhile, *Siphon No. 1* (虹吸 No.1 *hóng xī No.1*) features a floating head struggling to maintain balance in midair, its elongated tongue reaching toward a piece of raw meat above. This serves as a

¹⁰² 豆瓣同城 (dòu bàn tóng chéng), 2025.

physiological projection of Rao's introverted childhood, reflecting the deep discomfort she felt under excessive adult attention.



Figure 10 Rao Linghua *Siphon No. 1* (虹吸 No.1 hóng xī No.1)¹⁰³

Rao finds the mutation and metaphor of the body particularly compelling. She reimagines the female body as a table, depicting the genitals as an oyster resting on it. She intertwines the concept of the body with that of a servant, one foot planted on a mask that symbolizes traditional religious norms. This imagery may suggest that the former represents a sacrifice of the body, while the latter appears to serve as an allegory for vengeance.

¹⁰³ 豆瓣同城 (dòu bàn tóng chéng), 2025.

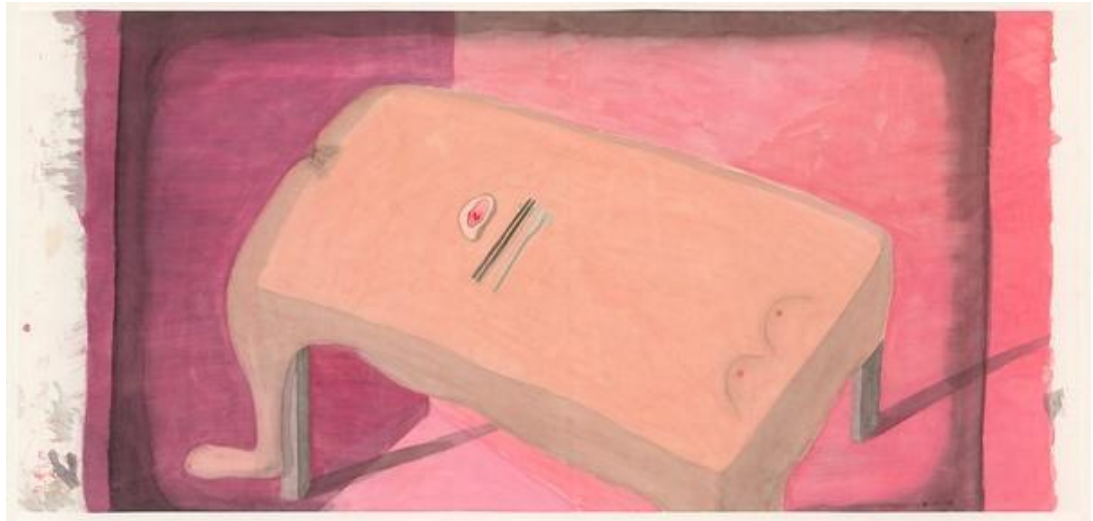


Figure 11 Rao Linghua *Oyster* (生蚝 shēng háo)¹⁰⁴

Rao depicts the disabled and lost organ body, severed from desire. These fragmented limbs, detached from the whole, evoke discomfort and embarrassment, as they force us to confront our own physicality, stirring feelings of disgust and fear. Rao challenges the conventional understanding of life's processes. The harsh realities of existence—such as life and death, love, betrayal, honor, identity, and social issues—are grounded in the material, instrumental, transient, and universally fragile nature of the human body. This reflects the instability and uncertainty of a world filled with others.

5.1.5 Wang Yinpan 王殷盼

Another artists was born in 1997 in Hunan Province, Zhuzhou city. Wang Yinpan 王殷盼 unlike the above mentioned artists, majored in fashion design. She says it is difficult to define a clear time point of when she entered the artistic circles: “I participated an art festival in October 2018, but at that time, I was still working in a gaming company. The works at the art festival were mostly puppet shows and art installations, and it was the first time when I came into contact with more people presenting their own creation. It was a fortunate coincidence. Eventually, I started experimenting with various materials, and it felt like I was beginning to develop my own creations in the process.” The same fortunate coincidence led to the fact that the author and Wang met in the Czech Republic – the artist presented her solo exhibition named *On my way home* in the Blansko City Gallery. In the little over one month lasting exhibition curated by Julia Butorova, the artist created hand-

¹⁰⁴ 豆瓣同城 (dòu bàn tóng chéng), 2025.

sewn strange characters and fantastic objects from found artifacts and items collected from the inhabitants of Blansko.



Figure 12 Wang Yinpan's solo exhibition in the Blansko City Gallery¹⁰⁵

Wang stands out for her extraordinary sensitivity for combining and processing often disparate types of materials using the laborious method of hand-sewing. She describes her art as *fiber arts and puppetry*, and interestingly enough, is keen on returning to the Czech Republic in the future to study more about the puppetry and marionettes, which have a long tradition in the country. Creating is a deeply personal matter for Wang, as she does not imply to express anything universal: “In my projects, I use basically a second-hand items that come from strangers. These items have different meaning for the previous owners, for example, I have received precious red wool socks knitted by someone’s deceased grandmother. When making the puppets, emotions of empathy play a certain role. In the case of the wool socks, I made them into a heart of a doll.” Wang believes that she is not the owner of these second-hand items. Although there is no memory attached to the them, the people who sent their artifacts always share with her what those mean to them. The beginning of recreation started in 2018, when the first person shared her a ballet skirt from her childhood and a pink bunny doll. Till that time, Wang has received quite a few quirky items, such as kitten hair or wisdom teeth. The most precious material that Wang

¹⁰⁵ DAVYDENKO, *Yinpan Wang v Galerii města Blanska*, 2024.

has ever received was a wedding dress that were actually worn at the wedding. Reviving and storytelling around worn second-hand items holds a special meaning for the artist. She aims to convey personal reflections, emotions about life, shared experiences in the world, and dreams through her creations. When discussing the financial aspect of her artistic work, Wang admits that for the time being, she cannot solely rely on her creations to make a living. However, she manages to create commercial projects that are transformed into products as a way of earnings. Wang often takes part in art fairs and festivals (艺术节 *yì shù jié*, 创意市集 *chuàng yì shì jí*), referring to a wide range of art forms including music, dance, film, visual arts, literature, poetry, and is not focused solely on the visual arts, which became increasingly popular in China in the early 2010s. These festival highly differ from a place to place, usually having a catchy slogan that draws attention. Their main purpose is not exhibit art, though, it is to attract as many people as possible and amuse them; different food, drinks and products can be bought, with the art playing only minor role in the whole circus.



Figure 13 Art festival at Donghua University in Shanghai¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ “相约时尚 你我共赏” 第七届东华大学创意市集. " xiāng yuē shí shàng nǐ wǒ gòng shǎng " dì qī jiè dōng huá dà xué chuàng yì shì jí ["Meet fashion, enjoy it together" The 7th Donghua University Creative Market], 2015.

Additionally to these fairs, Wang talks about art space that exist as an opposition to the officially recognized and approved institutions: “Most of the artists I have come into contact with are not art museum artists, so I don’t know much about domestic art institutions. But there are many art spaces created by individuals or a few people, some of which are very small. In addition to big cities like Shanghai and Beijing, Changsha (the capital of Hunan Province, a second-tier city) where I lived for a year before also has several good art spaces created by individuals, most of which are run by women. There is a space called *atheArtSpace*, located on the first floor of an old residential area, which is run by one woman. It has two rooms: the space at the entrance has the saleable works of the current exhibition artists and the products/works of other artists selected by the curator. The other space is used for exhibitions. Although the entire area is relatively small, the exhibitions of artists invited by the female curator always impress me to varying degrees.” Compared to many large art galleries and exhibition halls in China, Wang thinks these small art spaces established by individuals are more able to gather artists who are creative but not in line with the core values of socialism. There are not so many art reviews [supervised by the state] here. Due to the fact that such underground spaces are not supported by the state, they are trying different means of business to keep themselves in black numbers. Similarly as the *Anear* in Xiamen, the two examples from Changsha that Wang mentions have another source of income, either the small souvenir-like items or bookstore and beverage services. The artist describes the shape of the domestic cultural and artistic environment as “not very good”. She names two famous art book fairs and art bookstores from before, the *ABC Art Book Fair* and *Samepaper art bookstore*, that were closed due to strict domestic censorship and reports.



Figure 14 Wang Yinpan *Grandma is always at home*¹⁰⁷

Personally, Wang has not experienced any difference in the exhibition opportunities, but she argues that it might be due to the relatively low number of events she took part in. Nevertheless, she has sensed the unease that female artists experience during the internal social dynamics at art festivals. In the context of the celebratory dinner following the conclusion of an art festival, there is often a notable disparity in participation among female artists, who tend to occupy a minority of the time. Male artists present at such events frequently engage in humor that includes jokes about women, obscure innuendos, and discussions of private matters. Additionally, there are individuals who exhibit an excessive enthusiasm toward the organizers, frequently engaging in toasting¹⁰⁸ and attempting to establish a closer rapport. Wang's observations indicate that this dynamic

¹⁰⁷ WANG, *Grandma is always at home*, 2024.

¹⁰⁸ Toasting (敬酒 *jìngjiǔ*) is a formal and symbolic act of showing respect, building relationships, and expressing gratitude or hierarchy during social gatherings, especially at banquets or celebratory events. The order of who toasts whom, how often, and the phrasing used can reflect status, social roles, or alliances. In professional contexts, repeated and intense toasting can sometimes blur into performative loyalty or even strategic flattery, especially when aimed at hosts or those in positions of power.

primarily occurs at art festivals organized by men. Conversely, the social atmosphere at events hosted by female organizers tends to be considerably more refreshing.



Figure 15 Wang Yinpan *Happy to be 28*¹⁰⁹

Wang would call herself a feminist, in a meaning of more understanding and support for the same sex. Further more, for the artist, feminism allows her to accept the existence of all feminine characteristics, and use what she has to feel, create and connect. Lastly, to be a feminist is about standing together with more women for her.

5.1.6 Tian Yunuo 田雨诺

Roughly about two years ago, a friend shared the piece of art named *Double Happiness* (囍 xǐ), an art installation from the graduation exhibition of the Guizhou University of Fine Arts. It is a drawing with a central focus on a life-sized representation of a woman's face, drawn in a muted, expressive style on a large backdrop. The face appears to be partially drawn in a stylized, almost haunting manner, with features such as the eyes

¹⁰⁹ WANG, *Happy to be 28*, 2024.

and hair visible. In front of the backdrop is a table, adorned with red cloth and candles. At the center of the table is a glass dome containing a doll-like figure dressed in traditional Chinese attire, symbolizing femininity and traditional gender roles. The red ribbons, candles, and other decorations surrounding the figure suggest a ritualistic or symbolic presentation, relating to female empowerment, the suppression of women, or an exploration of traditional cultural norms in modern art. The backdrop includes various Chinese characters, some of which seem to be associated with traditional or ritualistic meanings, such as words for “husband” “father”, “mother”, and other familial or societal roles, perhaps reflecting on the pressures placed on women in Chinese society. The use of red in the scene carries significance, as red is a color often linked with both celebration and taboo in Chinese culture.



Figure 16 Tian Yunuo *Double Happiness* (囍 xǐ)¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ TIAN, *Double Happiness*, 2023.

The author of this thesis looked for the student who created it, finally getting in touch with her through a Chinese version of Instagram, *Little Red Book* (小红书 *xiǎo hóng shū*). The artist's name is Tian Yunuo 田雨诺, she created the work when she was 22 years old. Yunuo was born in Dezhou, a prefecture-level city in northwestern Shandong province and graduated from Guizhou University of Fine Arts in 2023, majoring in sculpture. Shandong province is recognized as the birth place of Confucius, and that is perhaps one of the reasons why Yunuo felt preference for boys over girls in her own family. "After finishing the college entrance exam, I wanted more freedom to escape family control, so I chose a place I was not too familiar with, a bit farther away, to explore more local customs. Guizhou has many ethnic minorities, and I found that very interesting. I wanted to give myself more space," explains the artist what led her to attend an university almost 2,000 kilometers away from home. And it turned out to be a wise choice—after starting the school, Yunuo was discovering new things, like going out with friends instead of spending time with her family.



Figure 17 Tian Yunuo *Does it taste good?* (好吃吗? hǎo chī má)¹¹¹

¹¹¹ TIAN, 好吃吗?, 2023.

Upon graduating, Yunuo created the piece *Double Happiness*, but it was not accepted well at the university: “My work was only reviewed two or three days before the graduation exhibition, and they thought my work was a bit too bold because the topics were quite sharp. Although my advisor recognized my work, the rules didn't allow me to exhibit it. In the end, my advisor helped me sneak it through, allowing me to show it. But after my work became popular, the school had a talk with me, asking me to delete posts, saying they were having a bad influence.” This is a fate of many such works - if a controversial piece of art is exhibited (usually in a small, independent art gallery, such as the ones describe by Wang in the previous paragraph), it can get through the reviews of public bodies. However, once it gets popular, typically online like in the case *Double Happiness*, the responsible offices have to act - or they risk serious consequences. This phenomenon is far from isolated. Similar consequences have historically followed artworks that challenge the status quo or venture into politically or culturally sensitive territory. One illustrative example is the *Jian: Cultural Codes of Gender Violence* exhibition, which was planned for 2015 but was shut down by authorities before it even opened. The exhibition, curated by feminist scholar Lü Pin and artist Li Maizi (one of the *Feminist Five*), was to include works addressing gender violence and female trauma. Even though the exhibit sought to include both male and female artists and avoided overtly provocative visuals, it was deemed too sensitive. As Monica Merlin explains, the exhibition's cancellation reveals the fragility of gender-focused art in the eyes of Chinese cultural authorities and the precarity of using art as a platform for feminist critique within national borders¹¹².

When asked about the purpose behind creating this work, which unlike many others at the graduating exhibition was not purchased, Yunuo says: “My purpose was to speak up. My family has a preference for boys over girls, which influenced me greatly. After going to university, I encountered some artists and their works, and this gave me a deeper awareness of women's issues. I hope that through my work, more people will see and pay attention to these issues.” The painting in Yunuo's piece bears Chinese characters, making it more accessible to the audience that understand them. Nevertheless, the artists believes that her work has an aesthetic value as well. “Even if foreign friends don't understand the meaning behind it, they will still find it visually appealing. But I hope they can also understand the criticism and reflection behind the work.” For Yunuo, the meaning of art is exactly to bring up issues that either minority or majority of people do not see, adding that

¹¹² MERLIN, *Gender (still) matters in Chinese contemporary art*, 2019.

is also what her work is trying to do. After graduation, however, the artist returned to her hometown for what could be called a gap year (摊平 *tang ping* literally meaning lying flat). The concept of *tang ping* — embracing a life without overworking, finding satisfaction in achievable goals, and making space for relaxation — has received widespread praise and sparked a wave of memes. Some have even described it as a spiritual movement¹¹³. While she describes this stage as a kind of emotional and financial recovery, she also expresses hope that she will eventually move to a more art-supportive city like Hangzhou. For now, her work, though not exhibited in major galleries due to its controversial nature, remains a poignant example of how young Chinese female artists use art to navigate and critique patriarchal values, reclaim agency, and spark cultural dialogue — even in the face of institutional silencing.



Figure 18 Tian Yunuo *Not sure* (没想好 *méi xiǎng hǎo*)¹¹⁴

¹¹³ ALLEN, *China's new 'tang ping' trend aims to highlight pressures of work culture*, 2021.

¹¹⁴ TIAN, *Not sure*, 2021.

5.2 Discussion: Gender, Art, Expression in Contemporary China

The artistic practices discussed in the preceding interviews reflect the complex and often fraught conditions under which women in contemporary China engage with themes of gender, identity, and embodiment. Across diverse media and backgrounds, the artists profiled in this chapter share a common concern with the representation of the female body, frequently positioning it as a contested site through which broader issues such as tradition, censorship, and social control are negotiated. Their works not only challenge dominant visual conventions but also engage critically with inherited cultural frameworks, particularly those rooted in Confucian moral traditions, which continue to shape normative expectations around gender and propriety. The emphasis on the body—its vulnerability, fragmentation, regulation, and expressive capacity—serves as a recurring motif. Whether through surgical instruments, reproductive organs, dreamlike erotic iconography, or dismembered figurations, these artists employ bodily imagery to question established hierarchies and articulate forms of resistance that are often implicit rather than overt.

Zhou Wenjing's exploration of gynecological instruments and intrauterine devices (IUDs), for instance, reconfigures medical objects into metaphors for state surveillance over women's reproductive autonomy, echoing the continuing legacy of population control policies. In her work, the female body becomes not only a biological subject but also a historical and political one—scrutinized, shaped, and rendered docile through both physical and symbolic means. Similarly, the plaster bodies in Zhou's *Red Series*—void of hands, heads, or identity—highlight how women's experiences are often anonymized or reduced to biological function within the framework of Confucian patriarchal logic, where familial roles and ritual duties override individual agency. At the same time, these fragmented forms evoke the universal, deeply embodied experience of motherhood—especially during the periods before, during, and after childbirth, including breastfeeding—where the maternal body becomes a site of intense physiological and subjective identity. In this sense, the mother is not just in her body—she is the body.

Chen Weiling's paintings likewise foreground themes of eroticism and desire, yet her strategy diverges from direct confrontation. Drawing from traditional aesthetic forms, her work reclaims visual pleasure while disrupting the male-centered gaze. In a context where erotic imagery by female artists is often subject to accusations of obscenity, Chen's work operates within a fraught terrain, balancing symbolic provocation with coded subversion. Her accounts of concealing her artistic identity from her employer and the logistical

barriers to bringing artwork back into China highlight the practical consequences of institutionalized moral policing—a contemporary echo of Confucian emphasis on social harmony, propriety, and female restraint. Notably, eroticism in her work is not a spectacle but a form of agency, contesting the notion—common in both traditional and contemporary Chinese discourse—that female sexuality must be regulated or erased in the name of social order.

Wen Wen’s commentary on artistic categorization draws attention to the discursive boundaries imposed on feminist expression. She distinguishes between being identified as a “female artist” and a “feminist artist,” noting that the latter is perceived as overtly political and thus less institutionally welcome in mainland China. Her reflections resonate with earlier observations in this thesis about the ambivalence of gendered visibility, wherein women are often allowed space for representation only when they do not challenge prevailing ideological narratives. This is further reflected in Wen’s critique of how Western feminist discourse is selectively legitimized in Chinese art institutions—foreign artists may be celebrated for engaging with gender themes, while domestic artists addressing the same issues are relegated to a marginal, “feminine” category. The tendency to label and depoliticize feminist content echoes the Confucian preference for social cohesion and the regulation of dissenting voices, particularly those that originate from within. At the same time, Chinese state institutions may tolerate feminist critique when it targets Western capitalist systems—but suppress it when it turns inward to interrogate local structures, whether rooted in Confucian patriarchy or socialist nationalism. This selective framing allows the state to host feminism as critique of *the Other*, while silencing its potential as self-critique.

The work of Rao Linghua further complicates the notion of feminist alignment. Although she does not self-identify with the feminist label, her visual language—characterized by surreal fragmentation, bodily mutations, and dismembered anatomical forms—addresses power relations through the lens of corporeality. Her symbolic treatment of the body as broken, hybrid, and unstable interrogates the cultural scripts that assign women fixed roles in relation to family, sexuality, and social status. In this sense, her work speaks to the Confucian emphasis on bodily integrity and filial purity, subverting these ideals through images that resist wholeness, discipline, and idealization.

Wang Yinpan’s artistic practice, while situated in a more materially intimate register, also participates in this broader discourse. Her use of second-hand objects, stitched into puppets and textile installations, evokes a quiet but resonant exploration of memory, emotion, and

loss, often drawn from anonymous domestic materials. Her reluctance to claim a universal feminist message aligns with a broader tendency among younger Chinese artists to articulate critique through tactile intimacy rather than direct political statement. Yet her observations about gendered dynamics at art festivals—where women are sidelined in celebratory rituals dominated by male artists and toasting culture—demonstrate how social hierarchies persist in informal settings, reinforcing gender exclusion in ways that mirror more formal institutional structures. The small, female-run art spaces she highlights offer an alternative model of curation and exchange, where commercial survival is often prioritized over ideological positioning, but where creative autonomy may nonetheless be better protected.

Tian Yunuo's *Double Happiness* serves as a concluding case of the risks associated with visible critique. Her installation, which was only covertly included in her university graduation exhibition and later censored after gaining online attention, illustrates the precarity of feminist expression in educational and institutional contexts. Drawing on personal experience with gender-based discrimination in her family, Tian's work employs ritual aesthetics and symbolic red to reflect on the roles imposed on women in traditional Chinese society. Her use of calligraphic text, visual symbolism, and theatrical staging situates the female subject within a structure of familial obligation and spiritual discipline, both of which are rooted in Confucian ethics. The piece's reception—initial tolerance, followed by administrative censorship—demonstrates how artistic critique is often permissible only within tightly controlled boundaries of visibility.

Taken together, the interviews and artworks discussed in this chapter reflect a range of aesthetic strategies and positionalities through which Chinese women artists respond to gendered social structures. Some embrace explicit critique; others pursue ambiguity or metaphor. Some align with feminist discourse, while others distance themselves from ideological labels. What they share, however, is a consistent engagement with the body as a site of tension between tradition and transformation—between the demands of social conformity and the desire for individual autonomy. Their practices are shaped not only by artistic intent but by institutional, legal, and cultural constraints, including lingering Confucian values, state censorship, and gender-based social expectations.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to explore the multifaceted terrain of post-2000 Chinese women's art, focusing on how a younger generation of female artists navigates identity, expression, and institutional constraints within contemporary China. Drawing on historical, theoretical, and empirical sources—including interviews and case studies—the research has demonstrated that contemporary Chinese women artists operate at the intersection of inherited traditions and evolving global frameworks. Their practices reflect both continuity and rupture with earlier generations, as well as a complex negotiation between personal experience, cultural expectations, and state-defined boundaries of acceptability.

One of the central findings is the persistent relevance of Confucian values in shaping how female embodiment and gender roles are regulated in both public and private life. These moral frameworks, while not overtly enforced in contemporary law, continue to inform cultural attitudes, family dynamics, and institutional gatekeeping—especially in the realms of artistic censorship, sexual morality, and social hierarchy. The legacy of Confucianism is particularly visible in the ambivalence surrounding erotic expression and female autonomy, where traditional ideals of filial piety, propriety, and gender hierarchy intersect with modern desires for self-expression and equality. In this context, artists such as Zhou Wenjing, Chen Weiling, and Tian Yunuo engage the body not merely as an aesthetic subject but as a politically charged site for negotiating memory, trauma, and visibility.

Another contribution of this research is the rejection of a monolithic or essentialized concept of “Chinese women’s art”. As the case studies show, the artists’ backgrounds, media, and ideological positions differ widely. The label itself—whether assigned as a marker of visibility or marginality—is often met with ambivalence. As Wen Wen poignantly states, the categorization of “female artist” can simultaneously open doors and close them, depending on who is doing the labeling and why. This reflects a broader tension explored in the thesis: the double bind of visibility, in which women are permitted to speak, but only in a language that does not threaten dominant norms—be they cultural, institutional, or market-driven.

Simultaneously, this thesis has addressed the influence of consumer capitalism and global curatorial frameworks in shaping contemporary Chinese women’s art. While some artists respond to these pressures by consciously subverting market-driven femininity or Western Orientalist expectations, others engage with them more ambivalently, repurposing

traditional imagery or participating in systems of visibility that can both empower and constrain. The idea of “Chineseness” as critically discussed in Chapter 3.2, further complicates the landscape, functioning not as an innate identity but as a discursively constructed category through which artists must navigate both domestic legitimacy and international recognition. The case studies in Chapter 4 highlight how younger female artists employ diverse strategies—ranging from abstraction to surrealism, intimacy to irony—in addressing these complex issues. Whether through textile assemblage, symbolic painting, or ritual-inspired installation, the artists interviewed in this thesis articulate a shared investment in questioning gender norms, reclaiming bodily agency, and resisting reductive categorization. Their works are rarely overtly political in the Western sense, yet they often carry a subtext of critique, exposing the tension between individual autonomy and collective conformity. Moreover, the artists’ cautious relationships to labels such as “feminist” reflect the localized dynamics of visibility, risk, and institutional control, in which feminist discourse is at once a tool of empowerment and a potential liability.

And yet, beyond theory, this thesis is also a personal exploration—born from the moment the author discovered a booklet by Chen Weiling and found, across cultural and geographic divides, a mirror of her own lived experience. The initial motivation was not merely academic but emotional: a desire to understand how young women in contemporary China articulate their frustrations, desires, and contradictions through art. It became clear that the impulse to create—whether born from alienation, joy, protest, or discovery—is a deeply human one. Through this lens, the research affirms that these artists are not just figures of scholarly interest, but collaborators in a shared feminist dialogue that transcends borders, even when it resists categorization. Finally, this thesis argues for the importance of foregrounding Chinese women artists not merely as subjects of cultural interest, but as producers of critical knowledge. Their artistic practices offer vital insight into how contemporary gender politics are lived, contested, and transformed within China’s rapidly shifting cultural landscape. At the same time, their marginal position in both national and global canons calls for a rethinking of how we define artistic value, representation, and resistance. Rather than viewing Chinese women artists as operating “behind” or “outside” of Western feminist models, this thesis underscores their agency in shaping their own paths—drawing from both local traditions and transnational discourses to articulate alternative modes of visual and political engagement.

Importantly, this research has also drawn attention to the significance of smaller, often overlooked artistic spaces—such as independent exhibitions in bookstores or grassroots festivals organized by women themselves. These intimate platforms, though marginal in the eyes of institutional art history, emerge as vital arenas for feminist articulation and community-building. Their existence points to an alternative infrastructure of cultural production that deserves closer scholarly attention—not only within feminist discourse, but also within fields such as art management and curatorial studies. This perspective reflects a methodological commitment to listening beyond the canon, attuned to the quieter voices that so often carry the most subversive potential.

This thesis does not offer closure. Rather, it opens a door to further exploration: of new voices yet unheard, of transgenerational dialogues still in formation, and of feminist practices yet unnamed. In the end, the “female question” in Chinese art is not a problem to be solved—it is a language to be learned, translated, and continually reimagined. Ultimately, this thesis argues that Chinese women artists are not merely responding to constraints—they are actively producing new cultural grammars through which gender, identity, and agency are being reimagined in 21st-century China.

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LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	<i>Women Series • IUD</i> (女人系列 • 节育环 <i>nǚ rén xì liè • jié yù huán</i>)	27
Figure 2	<i>Red Series, Scalpel Series</i> (红色系列, 手术刀系列 <i>hóng sè xì liè</i>).....	29
Figure 3	<i>Red Series Wallpaper</i> (红色系列 • 壁纸 <i>hóng sè xì liè • bì zhǐ</i>)	30
Figure 4	<i>Red Series No. 3</i> (红色系列 N°3 <i>hóng sè xì liè N°3</i>)	31
Figure 5	Chen Weiling <i>Desire Six</i> (欲之六 <i>yù zhī liù</i>)	32
Figure 6	Chen Weiling <i>Boyfriend</i> (男票 <i>nán piào</i>)	34
Figure 7	Wen Wen <i>Bruit et Fureur</i>	37
Figure 8	Wen Wen <i>Have you seen this call girl before?</i>	38
Figure 9	Poster for Rao Linghua's solo exhibition	41
Figure 10	Rao Linghua <i>Siphon No. 1</i> (虹吸 No.1 <i>hóng xī No.1</i>)	42
Figure 11	Rao Linghua <i>Oyster</i> (生蚝 <i>shēng háo</i>)	43
Figure 12	Wang Yinpan's solo exhibition in the Blansko City Gallery	44
Figure 13	Art festival at Donghua University in Shanghai	45
Figure 14	Wang Yinpan <i>Grandma is always at home</i>	47
Figure 15	Wang Yinpan <i>Happy to be 28</i>	48
Figure 16	Tian Yunuo <i>Double Happiness</i> (囍 <i>xǐ</i>)	49
Figure 17	Tian Yunuo <i>Does it taste good?</i> (好吃吗? <i>hǎo chī má</i>)	50
Figure 18	Tian Yunuo <i>Not sure</i> (没想好 <i>méi xiǎng hǎo</i>)	52

APPENDICES

Appendix P I: Semi-structured questionnaire

Appendix P II: Interviews with the artists

Appendix P III: Chen Weiling - Take a Peek

Appendix P IV: Dile Magazine

APPENDIX P I: SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE

Čeština	English	中文
Účast v tomto průzkumu je dobrovolná a shromážděné odpovědi budou použity výhradně pro výzkumné účely.	Participation in this survey is entirely voluntary, and the responses collected will be used solely for research purposes.	参加本次调查完全是自愿的，收集到的答案将仅用于研究目的。
Otázky Questions 问题		
Celé jméno	Full name	全名
Věk	Age	年龄
Místo narození (provincie/město)	Place of birth (province/city)	出生地（省/城市）
Studium	Studies	学习背景
Jaký druh umění děláš?	What kind of art do you do?	做什么类型的艺术？
Jak dlouho děláš umění?	How long do you do art?	艺术做多长时间了？
Jak jsi se dostala k umění?	How did you get into art?	你是如何进入到艺术圈的？
K čemu se ve svém umění vyjadřuješ?	What do you express in your art?	你的艺术表达了什么？
Uživíš se tím, co děláš?	Can you make a living doing what you do?	做艺术足够养活自己或者满足生活的需要吗？
Vystavuješ v Číně?	Do you exhibit in China?	你的作品在中国展览吗？
Pokud ano, kde?	If yes, where?	如果有，在哪里展览？
Vystavuješ v zahraničí?	Do you exhibit abroad?	你的作品在国外展览吗？
Pokud ano, kde?	If yes, where?	如果有，在哪里展览？
Jak jsi se dostala do uvedených výstavních prostor?	How did you enter the above mentioned exhibiting spaces?	作品是如何进入上面提到的展览空间的？
Vnímáš rozdíly mezi příležitostmi k vystavování pro mužské a ženské tvůrčivost?	Do you perceive differences between exhibition opportunities for male and female artists?	你认为男性和女性艺术家的展览机会是否存在差别？
Pokud ano, v čem spočívají?	If yes, what do they consist of?	如果有，差别在哪里？
Považuješ se za feministku?	Do you consider yourself a feminist?	你认为自己是个女性主义者吗？
Pokud ano, co pro tebe znamená být feministkou?	If yes, what does it mean to you to be a feminist?	对你而言，作为一个女性主义者意味着什么？
Pokud ne, proč?	If no, why?	不认为自己是个女性主义者的原因是什么？
Máš nějaký vzor?	Do you have any idol?	你有偶像吗？
Koho z čínského umění sleduješ?	Who from the Chinese art scene do you follow?	你关注中国艺术界的哪位艺术家？
Proč?	Why?	为什么？
Koho ze zahraničního umění sleduješ?	Who from the non-Chinese art scene do you follow?	你关注非中国艺术界的哪位艺术家？
Proč?	Why?	为什么？
Které instituce v Číně jsou podle tebe směrodatné pro tvůrčivost v Číně?	Which Chinese art institutions are influential for artists in China?	中国有哪些艺术机构对艺术家有影响力？
Jak definuješ úspěch ve své	How do you define success in	你如何定义职业生涯的成功？

kariéře?	your career?	
Jak definuje úspěch čínská scéna?	How does Chinese art scene (professional public) define success?	中国艺术界（从事与艺术相关工作的专业人员）一般如何定义成功的？