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(In)Visible Ink: enacting gender and Chineseness in contemporary art

Luise Guest

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Art and Design

Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture

Supervisors: Professor Paul Gladston, Dr Scott East, Dr Diane Losche

13 February 2022

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Some of the material that appears in Chapters 4, 5 and 7 of the thesis informed two peer-reviewed articles, and is cited appropriately in those chapters:
1. '(In)visible ink: Outsiders at the Yaji, the ink installations of Bingyi and Tao Aimin', Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art, Vol. 5, Numbers 2-3, 1 September 2018, pp. 175-191(17). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/jcca.5.2-3.175_1
2. 'Reclaiming Silenced Voices: Feminist Interventions in the Ink Tradition', Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art: 'Reconfiguring the World: The Art of China and its Diasporas', Volume 21, Issue 1, 2021, pp.133-151. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2021.1934781

Candidate's Declaration

I declare that I have complied with the Thesis Examination Procedure.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Keith Guest, whose adventurous spirit, love of art, and refusal to accept the limited opportunities for women of her generation inspired my own journey.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my most sincere thanks to my PhD supervisors, Professor Paul Gladston and Dr Scott East, and to Dr Diane Losche, who preceded Professor Gladston as the lead supervisor and continued to provide helpful advice as a secondary supervisor after her departure from UNSW Art & Design. Their expert feedback and consistent advice provided a supportive platform for the development of this research project. In the period prior to Professor Gladston's arrival in Sydney, Dr Gay McDonald stepped in to provide her support, for which I am very appreciative. I thank each of them unreservedly for their guidance throughout. Most particularly, my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation is extended to Professor Gladston and Dr East, who accompanied me on this PhD journey through to its conclusion, providing wise counsel, helpful suggestions and warm encouragement at every stage of the project. I am fortunate indeed to have been supported by a team of such experienced and generous scholars.

I will be forever grateful to the four artists selected as research participants in this study: Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu generously shared their experiences and ideas during our fieldwork encounters in Beijing in 2017. They continued to kindly respond to my questions via email, WeChat, and, in the case of Xiao Lu, a further recorded conversation in Sydney. I also thank my translator and interpreter in Beijing, Xu Yining, without whose linguistic expertise, knowledge of the Beijing artworld, and diligent transcription, the interviews and data analysis would have been far more difficult. My thanks also to two valued colleagues in Sydney, Suna Xie and Chelsea Juexi Wang, who assisted on occasion with translation of emails to and from the artists, and in a follow-up interview with Xiao Lu.

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Luise Guest, 13 February 2022

NOTE TO EXAMINERS

This study was conducted in accordance with Ethics Approval granted by the Human Research Ethics Approval Panel B: Arts, Humanities and the Law at the University of New South Wales for the period 12-Dec-2016 – 11-Dec-2021. Approval Number HC16812.

Full transcripts of interviews with the artists are not included with this thesis, however, they are available should they be required.

Please note that some of the material that appears in Chapters 4, 5 and 7 of the thesis informed two peer-reviewed articles which are cited appropriately in those chapters:

1. '(In)visible ink: Outsiders at the Yaji, the ink installations of Bingyi and Tao Aimin', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol. 5 (2-3), 2018, pp. 175–191.
2. 'Reclaiming Silenced Voices: Feminist Interventions in the Ink Tradition', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*: 'Reconfiguring the World: The Art of China and its Diasporas', Volume 21 (1), 2021, pp.133–151.

Further published material with an indirect connection to the thesis cited at the appropriate juncture includes articles based on interviews with the artists who are the focus of the case studies, undertaken some years before the commencement of this PhD and its associated fieldwork, and published in online publications and in the Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art. One such article, researched and written prior to this study, and focused on the artist who is the subject of Chapter 6, is:

'Secrets, sorrow and the feminine subjective: Nüshu references in the work of contemporary Chinese artist Ma Yanling', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Volume 2 (1) 2015, pp. 45–63.

Please note also that a professional proof-reader or copy editor has not been used for this thesis – all copy-editing has been completed by the candidate.

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A Glossary of Chinese Terms and Abbreviations

caizhi yishu	材质艺术	material art
chi ku	吃苦	Chinese idiom: to eat bitterness, meaning to endure hardship
wenhua da geming	文化大革命	Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution: socio-political movement 1966-76, aiming to purge 'feudal' and capitalist elements.
dangdai	当代	contemporary, the contemporary era
dao	道	The way, the path: in Chinese philosophy signifying the order of the universe, containing within itself the principles of *yin* and *yang*.
fanyou yundong	反右运动	Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–c.1959)
funü	妇女	Woman
gaige kaifang	改革开放	Reform and Opening Up: refers to Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms from c. 1980
da yue jin	大躍進	Great Leap Forward: An economic and social campaign from 1958-60 that aimed to rapidly transform China from an agrarian to an industrial society.
guannian shuimo	观念水墨画	Conceptual ink painting
guohua	国画	National painting – generally refers to ink painting
guomindang	国民党	Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-Shek (see also KMT or *Kuomintang*)
houxiandai	后现代	Postmodern

Kuomintang	国民党	KMT: Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-Shek (see also *Guomindang*)
wu si yundong	五四运动	*May Fourth Movement*: anti-imperialist, anti-feudal cultural and political movement in response to the Treaty of Versailles, started with student protests in Beijing on 4 May 1919
nannü	男女	Man/woman: refers to the gender-making category theorised by anarcho-feminist writer and activist He-Yin Zhen (1907)
nannü pingdeng	男女平等	Gender equality
wuming hua hui	无名画会	No Name Painting Association: an underground group of artists formed in Beijing in 1969
nüquan zhuyi	女权主义	Feminism – with the emphasis on 'women's rights'
nüshu	女书	A phonetic syllabary or script form devised by rural women in Jiangyong County, Hunan
nüxing	女性	Woman, female sex
nüxing yishu	女性艺术	Women's art
nüxing zhuyi	女性主义	Alternative, 'softer' term for feminism
yi hai zhengce	一孩政策	One Child Policy: strict population planning policy enforced between 1979 and 2015
Zhonghua Renmin Gonghe Guo	中华人民共和国	People's Republic of China (PRC)
qi	气	Literally air, or breath, also refers to vital energy circulating through the body as energy, or life force
shehui xingbie	社会性别	Gender

shiyan shuimo hua	实验水墨画	Experimental ink painting
shu fa	书法	Calligraphy
shuimo hua	水墨画	Ink painting
xing xing hua hui	星星画会	Stars Group: avant-garde group of largely self-taught artists active in the late 1970s and early 1980s
wenren	文人	Scholars of the literati, those who had passed the Imperial Examinations
xiandai	现代	Modern, modernism
xin nüxing	新女性	'New Woman' – term used during the modernising Republican period
yaji	雅集	An 'elegant gathering' of scholars, often taking place in a garden
Zhongguo	中国	China
Zhongguo dangdai yishu	中国当代艺术	Chinese contemporary art/contemporary Chinese art
Zhongguo gongchan dang	中国共产党	Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
Zhongguo xiandai yishu	中国现代艺术	Chinese modern art / modern Chinese art

A Note on the Romanisation of Chinese Names and Terms

This thesis uses Hanyu Pinyin as the Romanisation system for Mandarin Chinese words. Chinese family names are written with surname first and given name second unless an artist has specified otherwise.

ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a critical examination of contemporary experimental ink practices (*shiyan shuimo*) and calligraphy (*shufa*) in the work of four women artists in the People's Republic of China – Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu. The thesis highlights the gendered histories and nationalist legacies of ink painting and calligraphy associated with the literati tradition and with its post-Cultural Revolution reinventions. Three distinct strands of transcultural feminist theory are employed to provide a situated and intersectional interpretative framework: Qing Dynasty anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen's gendering category of *nannü*; Ella Shohat's notion of 'subterranean feminisms' operating in contexts outside Euro-America; and the 'alternative' feminist travelling and translation theory proposed by Min Dongchao. Through this framework the artists' work is considered in relation to the broader discourses and practices of contemporary art in/from China (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu*) and the alignments and tensions of feminist theory and practice across cultures. The analytical methodology, informed by feminist art history and ethnography, is sensitive to the complexities of gendered life experiences of sexuality, fertility, intergenerational relations, domestic labour, menopause and aging, and the position of women artists in unequal structures and systems of power. Considering the four artists' work in relation to these experiences, the thesis provides new knowledge and critical analysis of experimental ink painting/calligraphy and the under-recognised contribution of women artists to contemporary art in the People's Republic of China. The artists' work is interpreted as creating *nannü* spaces, from which women can actively shape practice, concluding that the materiality of their work, alluding to the masculinist history of literati painting, is central to an understanding of its counter-patriarchal force.

PREFACE

This study began to take shape several years before I was accepted as a PhD candidate at the University of New South Wales; its genesis, somewhat surprisingly, lay in my experiences teaching art to high school students. In 2010 I was awarded the NSW Premier's Kingold Creative Arts Travelling Scholarship, for a project that aimed to address the dominance of Western art history in the senior secondary Visual Arts curriculum. My successful proposal involved conducting interviews with contemporary artists in Hong Kong, Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou over a period of six weeks in order to produce resources for Visual Arts teachers and students.

In the process of interviewing more than twenty artists, as well as curators, critics, collectors and gallery directors, I noted an absence of women in curated gallery and museum exhibitions, and in the artists represented by major galleries. Women artists that I met in China expressed cynicism about the male domination of the Chinese artworld, and about how their work was represented in exhibitions within and outside China. I began to ask women about their gendered experiences in the art academies, and with galleries, curators, critics and collectors. As a feminist I was intrigued – and puzzled as to why there was not a broader discussion of these issues.

Over the next five years I returned to China many times to write about Chinese art using vacations and long service leave from my teaching position in Sydney. My initial question in 2010/2011, 'Where are the women?', resulted in a book based on interviews with more than 30 female artists – 'Half the Sky: Conversations with Women Artists in China' was published by Piper Press (Sydney) in 2016. The book project ignited my desire to research this field in greater depth. My PhD candidature began in 2016, by which time I was employed as Manager of Research for the White Rabbit Collection of Chinese contemporary art in Sydney. While my employment there had no direct connection with the PhD study, it provided valuable opportunities for further immersion in the contemporary artworld in China and assisted me to deepen my understanding of the field.

I had become interested in how contemporary artists in China were reinventing and recontextualising traditional art and craft practices as a means of strategically positioning themselves in early twenty-first century discourses of contemporaneity, navigating the

nexus of the local and the global. This characteristic feature of contemporary art in/from the Peoples Republic of China is also resonant with artists' determination to forge a language of contemporaneity distinct from (but related to) the Euro-American influences that had entered China in the 'Reform and Opening Up' (*gaige kaifang*) era of the late twentieth century. Specifically, I wanted to discover how women artists were working with retranslated forms of ink and calligraphy, a genre which had been so significant in bringing contemporary Chinese art[1] to global attention in the work of now-canonical artists such as Xu Bing, Yang Jiechang and Gu Wenda. This interest determined the selection of artists who became the focus of four case studies in this thesis.

Driving the research, then, was a desire to view the work of contemporary artists through interrogatory lenses of gender and aspects of national (Chinese) identity. The artist interviews I had conducted in China between 2011 and 2016 had revealed that Western (Euro-American) forms of feminism were often rejected by Chinese artists, so I concluded that this '(In)Visible Ink' research project might usefully be underpinned by a locally situated Chinese feminism. The research aimed to build on existing scholarship in the field, with a transdisciplinary method and a transcultural theoretical framework, re-examining the significance and meaning/s of the work of women artists working within the conventions of *shiyan shuimohua* (experimental ink painting).

A polyvocal and polysemic theoretical framework comprising both Chinese and Euro-American feminist theory developed over the course of the research illuminates the counter-hegemonic nature of the artists' practice and reflects on the marginalisation of the work of women artists in discourses of contemporary Chinese art. The title of the thesis, '(In)Visible Ink', is a play on words, referring to the use of invisible ink since ancient times by spies, secret agents and detectives. Stories for children after World War II often featured secret documents that could only be read when the paper was held to a candle flame. In my thesis it refers broadly to the notion that women artists have been rendered (almost) invisible in accounts of the emergence of contemporary art after the Cultural Revolution, yet they were present and active, often producing work that speaks to issues of gender and identity. More specifically, '(In)Visible Ink' refers to how the gendered nature of ink painting and calligraphy have been rendered invisible in ink discourse and art histories, including in the emergence of experimental ink practices (*shiyan shuimo*).

My thesis aims to reveal this gendered history and examine the work of women in this field.

The 'enactment' of gender and Chineseness referred to in the thesis title is, firstly, produced by the active agency of the artists in their practice. A second form of enactment is produced through the encounter between artist and researcher, and the subsequent ekphrastic interpretation/critical analysis of their works in this thesis.

In framing this research, I was drawn to the homely metaphors that are characteristic of much feminist research and writing. Weaving, knitting or stitching (women's work) and the knotted string of Donna Haraway's metaphor of a 'cat's cradle' game[2] – are analogies employed in the thesis to explain the development of a knotted/woven feminist theoretical framework.[3] This framework, and a transdisciplinary methodology of semi-structured interviews as primary sources, together with a close analysis of works of art, aimed to create a polyphonic text(ile) comprising women's intersecting voices.

In the chapters that follow, Chapter 1 provides a more extensive introduction to the thesis, its theoretical framing and research methodology and its positioning in the contemporary socio-political context of the People's Republic of China. Chapter 2 takes the form of a literature review that focuses on the history of feminism and feminist art in China and elaborates the feminist theoretical framing of the study. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of encounter with artists in the form of semi-structured interviews as primary sources, and further expands on its theoretical positioning. This primary source data is then 'knitted' together with close analysis of artworks. Four case study chapters follow, examining the work of artists Tao Aimin, Xiao Lu, Ma Yanling and Bingyi through lenses of gender and Chinese identity. The significance of dialogue (*duihua*) recurs throughout the thesis, literally (in the conversational methodology in which the artist interviews became polyvocal feminist encounters) and metaphorically. Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the research findings, proposes conclusions, and outlines opportunities for future research.

The four artists are simultaneously outsiders and insiders in their particular and (still) patriarchal locus of artistic production. Locating them within their context – a Chinese artworld that is now an active agent in the post-Cold War decentralisation of

contemporary art – is a key to understanding their work and its significance. Entrepreneurial creators of an artistic 'brand' on the one hand, and subject to the constricting forces and limitations of a specifically Chinese socio-political context on the other, they operate both locally and globally, and their cultural identity (including Chineseness, gender, class and other identities) is complex. Navigating these antinomies, their work exemplifies the condition of contemporaneity in its embrace of co-existing but contradictory positions. Unravelling these intertwined and tangled threads was the researcher's challenge, and her delight.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: A Gendered Lens

Cat's cradle is about patterns and knots;

the game takes great skill and can result in some serious surprises

(Donna Haraway, 1994)[4]

1.1 A Prologue

This study examines the work of four women artists in/from the People's Republic of China (henceforth abbreviated as the PRC). Grounded in practices of feminist art history and inflected by feminist ethnography, it aims to enrich existing understandings of contemporary Chinese art in its global context,[5] by investigating the work of women artists employing forms of ink painting and calligraphy. The thesis proposes connections between counter-patriarchal art practices (that may or may not be explicitly claimed as feminist) and the contested history of *nüxing yishu* (a term variously translated as 'women's art', 'feminist art' or, even, sometimes, 'feminine art') in China.[6] This chapter introduces the theoretical framing and methodology of the study, and its interrogatory lenses of gender and 'Chineseness'[7] which are expanded and detailed in this chapter and in Chapters 2 and 3. It also positions this research within its field of contemporary art in/from China.

Building on existing scholarship in the field of contemporary art in/from China, the study aims to focus on the work of individual artists as distinct but connected case studies to develop new interpretations of their work, and also to make connections with the broader discussions in the field. Through four case studies, or – given the broader implications of these tightly focused investigations, we might call them 'microhistories'[8] – of Bingyi (冰逸 b. 1975, Beijing), Ma Yanling (马嫣泠 b. 1966, Xiangfan, Hubei), Tao Aimin (陶艾民 b.1974, Hunan) and Xiao Lu (肖鲁 b. 1962, Hangzhou, Zhejiang), the thesis 'knits'

together forms of locally situated Chinese feminism with intersectional feminist theory and aspects of feminist travelling and translation theory. The research aims to contribute to the critical examination of work by women artists in China whose work alludes to Chinese histories of material culture; positioning the artists as intervening, not only in historically masculinist literati traditions, but also in contemporary art discourses in which their contributions have been marginalised. The '(In)Visible Ink' research project aims to contribute to transcultural feminist discourses in relation to these specific artistic practices.

Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu are positioned within the socio-historic and artistic context of the post-Cultural Revolution period in order to examine how gender and an increasingly assertive national identity operate within the Chinese artworld, and how it inflects their work. The study focuses on 'contemporary' art (while recognising the increasingly contested nature of this term, discussed later in this and subsequent chapters) from the mainland of the PRC. The trajectories of feminism and the development of contemporary art are different (although materially and culturally related) in other parts of the Sinosphere such as Taiwan, Macau, Hong Kong and the global Chinese diaspora, and are thus beyond the scope of this study.

In her discussion of a feminist politics of polyphony, Fanny Söderbäck (2012, p.4) asserts, 'We are not sure how to deal with the vague, the multilateral, the horizontal or the polyphone.' One singular feminist voice, she argues, has never really existed: 'There have, arguably, always been a multiplicity of voices, always only feminisms, in the plural' (2012, p.4). This study sought multiple feminist voices from outside the Western theoretical feminist canon to examine these issues, including those of Chinese artists, curators, and critics such as Tao Yongbai, Liao Wen and Xu Hong who were instrumental in a flowering of exhibitions of, and discourses around, women's art in China in the 1990s. Concurring with Söderbäck's (2012, p.8) contention that a multiplicity of voices is essential to a feminist agenda, the study examines the work of the selected artists through a framework comprising intersectional and situated Chinese feminisms.

The research developed as a praxis of transcultural conversations – a series of encounters between the artists, the researcher (with her translator), and the artists' works. The thesis develops and expands upon the initial dialogues with a close analysis and interpretation of

their work. The polyphony of voices that echo throughout the study is drawn from significant Chinese and Euro-American art historians, scholars and theorists in addition to the voices of the four artist participants in a transcultural dialogue with the voice of this researcher. In this contrapuntal layering ambiguities, contradictions, and slippages emerge that create possibilities for new interpretations and richer understandings. In his account of research based on semi-structured interviews with Chinese artists, Paul Gladston (2014, p. 20) argues for 'the productive possibilities of the serial use of interviews in combination with other texts as critical polylogues; that is to say, multi-voiced texts which open up differing cultural-interpretative perspectives'. Gladston further acknowledges the problematic nature of the interview as the primary source of data, and the particular challenges of this method in the context of China.[9] Grounding my interviews with the selected artists in feminist approaches to ethnographic research and semi-structured interviews was important, but so too was triangulating the resulting data with a critical analysis of their works through lenses of gender and Chinese identity. The text of the thesis that results from these research encounters thus comprises a feminist intervention into alignments and disalignments of theory and practice across cultures.

A framework woven from transcultural strands of feminist theory offers powerful ways to understand the work of artists during whose childhood the explicit policy of the state was the denial and disappearance of gender differences. To apply a Western feminist lens alone to the analysis of works by Chinese women artists results in a degree of perplexity at the levels of resistance – even hostility – expressed by many women in China towards the terms 'feminism' or 'feminist'. This is not to discount, and exists synchronously with, the increasing prevalence of 'MeToo' activism – and its suppression – in China, discussed in Chapter 2. The reasons for a resistance to embrace a feminist identification are manifold and complex and will be unpacked throughout the thesis. Briefly, however, an apparently essentialist view of gender articulated by artists who mostly reject a version of feminism that they regard as too 'Western' may be understood from a standpoint that acknowledges, not only their situated experiences, predicaments and insights, but also their intellectual habitus of syncretic Daoism/Confucianism[10] in combination with a persisting Marxist-Leninist dialectic. Their young adulthood was impacted by the rapid social and economic transformation in the Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang*)

period.[11] Their mature practice is influenced by questions of Chinese identity in a period of rising nationalism. Their multifaceted identities as Chinese women – daughters, wives/partners, mothers, artists – continue to transform, just as China continues its transformation.

In brief, three strands of feminist theory from distinctly different traditions are woven together to create a framework through which their work may be understood in new ways. Firstly, the relational, transnational 'subterranean feminism' argued by Ella Shohat (2001; 2002) provides insights into the work of non-Western women artists who often disavow a feminist identification. Secondly, the Daoist/neo-Confucian gender-making *nannü* construct proposed by Qing Dynasty anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen frames the interpretation of the artists' works, in which traces of Daoist cosmology are a significant element. Thirdly, the role of travelling feminist theory and its post-Cultural Revolution translation, adaptation, and transformation in China underpins the placement of the artists in their generational context. In particular, Min Dongchao's analysis of Euro-American feminist theory's travels and translation within Chinese academia provided insights for this study into how 'Western' feminist theory has at times been embraced and at other times rejected by female artists, writers and scholars in China (Min 2005; 2007; 2014; 2017).

The rationale initially propelling the research project was the investigation of female artists whose works have been marginalised in discourses around the revival of ink painting as a contemporary artistic idiom in China. Despite increasingly resolute feminist voices being heard in the PRC and the emergence of feminisms that arise from within, and speak to, the situated experiences of Chinese women,[12] the work of female artists, critics and art historians has too often been side-lined in academic, critical and curatorial discourses, as will be further elaborated in later chapters. Building on the work of feminist scholars such as Peggy Wang, Eva Kit Wah Man, Shuqin Cui, Sasha Su-Ling Welland, Phyllis Teo and Monica Merlin (whose work is discussed in detail in Chapter 2), this study aims to address the relative paucity of scholarly, critical and curatorial attention to the work of women artists,[13] with a particular focus on artworks emerging from a practice that may be understood as feminist or counter-patriarchal (whether explicitly declared or not). It was with the hope of developing new, transcultural interpretations *of*, and an

intersectional feminist perspective *on*, Chinese contemporary art that this research was undertaken.

The '(In)Visible Ink' research project, therefore, is situated within the field of contemporary Chinese art in the twenty-first century context of a globally connected China characterised by an increasingly strident nationalist exceptionalism. The study positions Chinese artistic culture as distinct from the falsely universalising homogeneity of the 'global artworld', which is too often simply a synonym for 'Euro-American'.[14] As Peggy Wang (2020, p.8) points out, the term 'global artworld' is 'understood to be distinctly Western-centric while ripe for contestation'. The study is also positioned within a contemporary context of interdisciplinarity. Almost thirty years ago Donna Haraway (1994, p.66) proposed approaches to science scholarship that broke down old boundaries between disciplines and fields, and between theory and method, suggesting a hypothetical game of cat's cradle as a metaphor for the rich possibilities presented by intersecting theories and methods. This study, too, sought 'a knotted analytical practice' (Haraway 1994, p.69) – a multi-modal method that 'knots' (or, perhaps more fittingly, 'knits') interconnected discourses. In this study, feminist art history, Euro-American and Chinese feminisms, travelling and translation theory are woven together in what Haraway calls a 'constitutively interactive, collaborative process of trying to make sense' (1994, p.69). The problem to which this research hoped to contribute was to 'make sense' of how gender and Chineseness oscillate and intersect in the field of contemporary art in/from China.

Somewhat surprisingly, gender has rarely been foregrounded in discourses around Chinese contemporary art, although artists themselves have frequently made work that critically examines, or less critically represents, issues of gender. This thesis argues that gender –understood as significantly socially and culturally determined – is an appropriate interrogatory lens through which to view the work of women artists. Judith Butler's (1999, p.43) position that 'woman' is an 'ongoing discursive practice' and 'a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end […] open to intervention and resignification' is linked in this thesis not only to gender but also to the 'becoming' and 'constructing' of a Chinese artistic identity. It should be noted that this thesis examines the work of artists of a generation for whom their biological sex and

gender identification were largely unquestioned. As younger artists in the PRC and the broader Sinosphere increasingly question binaries of gender, there are rich possibilities for future research to examine the work of artists who identify as non-binary, as trans women or men, or as genderqueer.[15]

Gender identities, like 'Chineseness', as we shall see in the next section of this chapter, are constructed through repetition and reinvention. They are stylised, often performative, and actively (even if unconsciously) engaged with.[16] As Harriet Evans and Julia Strauss (2011, p.2) argue, gender is a theoretical lens that 'sheds light on, disturbs, and might call into question previous "truths" about Chinese society' within the context of the increasingly rigid interpretations of gender roles that now operate within Chinese society. In China, dominant discourses around gender and feminism reveal a persistent resistance towards Western theoretical positions, despite vocal (and increasingly ruthlessly suppressed) expressions of 'Me Too' activism by a younger generation of women and LGBTQI activists. Oscillating East/West relationships of mutual influence and resistance will become apparent throughout the encounters with the artists, analysed in each case study chapter.

The focus on female artists in this study, and the analysis of their work as counter-patriarchal interventions into a masculinist Chinese art history, is underpinned by the foundational work of feminist art historians. In the introduction to the re-issue of her canonical text 'Vision and Difference' Griselda Pollock noted that feminist art history cannot merely insert women into the narrative, rather, it must critically examine and challenge the gendering of the art historical narrative:

> Token women are merely offered for re-introduction into a canon, whose own construction by exclusion on the grounds of the sex of the artist renders that canon already a gendered and gendering discourse and thus will always position artists who are women as marked, othered as *women* artists. (2003, p.xx)

This study sought to discover how 'artists who are women' are marked or othered in the context of Chinese contemporary art, and how they respond to that signification. The theoretical approach that informed the design of the study recognises the distinct histories of Chinese feminism and argues that considerations of gender are inevitably imbricated with aspects of Chinese identity ('Chineseness'). Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex'

(1949), with its famous claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, was one of the first twentieth-century feminist texts translated into Chinese: its anti-essentialising ideas were influential – and controversial – in feminist academic and artistic circles in China in the late twentieth century (Min 2017). This thesis considers the manifold artistic and socio-political implications of what it means to identify as a 'woman' and as a 'woman artist' – or indeed a 'feminist artist' – in the PRC in the twenty-first century.

Therefore, the interconnecting and overlapping questions addressed in this thesis are, firstly:

> *'How are issues of gender and/or feminism in the work of women artists in/from China imbricated with a (national) Chinese identity?'*

And secondly:

> '*How does the production and exhibition of their work contribute to local and global discourses of contemporaneity in relation to frameworks of gender, feminism and Chinese cultural identity?'*

1.2. Local and Global: Women in a Chinese Contemporaneity

This thesis places the work of four artists who work with ink in a contemporary idiom within the context of current and historical discourses around global contemporaneity and its manifestations in twenty-first-century China. The transcultural dialogic encounters between artists and researcher in this study do not seek to resolve or to 'paper over' the inevitable tensions that arise, but rather to explore and open them out, embracing the discursive complexities, contradictions and slippages of meaning that characterise intertextual transcultural discourse. The research encounters became forms of what Donna Haraway (1991, p.181) poetically describes as 'infidel heteroglossia', a phrase that evokes the powerful energy of intersecting female voices, a cacophony with the potential to undermine masculinist institutions and hierarchies, including, perhaps, those of art history.[17]

In order to situate the artists within the contested history of 'feminist' art in China, Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature in relation to China's feminist history and the development of women's art (*nüxing yishu*) and exhibition practices after the Cultural

Revolution. The methodology applied to the study, explained in Chapter 3, juxtaposes a 'micro' approach, in which each artist is treated as a distinct case study, with analysis of their work informed by feminist theories of intersectionality, feminist art history, the early modern Chinese anarcho-feminism of He-Yin Zhen, and feminist responses to postcolonial travelling/translation theory. Their work is considered more broadly within current discourses that debate the extent to which Chinese contemporary art may be understood as a 'global' phenomenon, as a local variant of the postmodern, or as an as-yet-undefined practice in which manifestations of 'Chineseness' differ over time in response to changing local and global conditions.

Identified in the first instance due to their innovative use of ink and calligraphic text forms, each artist inhabits fluidly shifting and sometimes contradictory realms. The interviews reveal that they move in an intellectual/artistic habitus imbued with traces of Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian thought that will be discussed in detail in subsequent chapters. They grew to adulthood in the period of High Socialism; they participated in a post-Cultural Revolution reform era that introduced postmodernity and re-introduced post-Enlightenment western philosophical thought to China. They are frequently curated into 'feminist' exhibitions of women artists yet at other times they disavow a feminist intention. Shuttling between tradition and innovation, past and present, locality and globality, they operate strategically within a world of collapsed spatial and temporal boundaries. At times, their identity as women is foregrounded in how they speak of their work, and at other times the lens of their practice is focused on their Chinese identity. Each expresses gender and Chineseness as 'identity markers'; their work is shaped by (and shapes) a specifically female Chinese history.

A paradox underlies the work of artists who explore female histories and draw upon specifically female experiences, yet who sometimes claim and sometimes disavow a feminist intention. The thesis addresses the question of whether their work can be understood as a feminist art practice, and what the implications of such a practice in the Chinese context might be. The search for answers to these questions reveals sometimes irreconcilable tensions and contradictions within and beyond the field of Chinese art. This broader, 'macro' issue is considered in conjunction with the 'micro' view provided by the

primary sources of the dialogues with each artist, and the possibilities offered by their material practices for feminist interpretations.

Reinterpreting practices of calligraphy and ink painting, the artists selected as case studies insert their female bodies, histories and subjectivities into what has been historically (in both pre- and post-Mao contexts) a male-dominated field of practice. Further, this thesis positions the work of the four artists in an intellectual and artistic ecology characterised by a re-examination of syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian articulations of Chinese identity which possesses complex relationships to feminism.[18] In order to examine how the selected artists make work that inserts female subjectivities into artistic traditions of ink and calligraphy the study is located, firstly, within a situated historical and contemporary Chinese feminism in dialogue with international feminist theories, including feminist art history. Secondly, the artists are positioned within a genre of revitalised ink and calligraphic art forms, now renewed as a contemporary global practice in a Chinese temporal, spatial and geopolitical contemporaneity. This thesis argues, therefore, that they intervene in the production of theory and practice related to gender and national (Chinese) identity in China.

Terry Smith's (2015) assertion that contemporaneity may be understood as the experience of ways of being in time in which past, present and future times – and places – are simultaneously activated speaks to the unstable, fast-changing Chinese contemporary condition in the twenty-first century in which the artists in this study operate. In the twentieth century, modernity implied the metropolis, the centre rather than the periphery; it transcended locality, emphasised temporality, and became, as Peter Osborne argues, 'capitalism's paradigmatic cultural form' (2013, p.75). In rapidly urbanising twenty-first century China, the mega-cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Chongqing became furnaces within which contemporaneity (*dangdaixing*) and modernity (*xiandaixing*) were forged and now co-exist in a fluid temporal and spatial relationship. Other times, and indeed other places, are always present, liquidly coalescing. Paul Gladston's proposed critical contemporaneity (2020) recognises the distinct influence on contemporary Chinese society and culture of a syncretic non-rationalist Daoist/neo-Confucian aesthetics which diverges from Euro-American post-Enlightenment conditions in viewing aesthetic experience as existing in a mutually reciprocal relationship between

object and subject, mind and body. The work of the artists examined in this thesis bears these markers of time and place, inflected by traces of the literati painters of the Song and Yuan Dynasties, the modernising intellectuals of the May Fourth movement, the 'revolutionary romanticism' espoused by Mao Zedong, the crushed hopes of 1989, the pragmatism of Reform and Opening, and the rise of the entrepreneurial global artist. This is further complicated today by what Gladston (2014, para.5) identifies as the 'ever-more confident assertions of national cultural identity and of the persistence of indigenous traditions in resistance to the perceived iniquities of Western (post)modernity' that are taking place in an increasingly globally dominant China.

Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu emphasise their debt to Chinese history and culture, whilst simultaneously positioning themselves as global contemporary artists. They produce work in expanded fields of performance, new media, installation, and land art practice – they are both locally and globally focused. They are positioned therefore within the contested spatial and temporal realm of the global contemporary, at what Smith (2006, p.693-4) calls 'the dialectical intersection between contemporary art and culture' that 'marks the limits out of which the postcolonial, post-cold war, post- ideological, transnational, deterritorialized, diasporic, global world has been written'. This contemporary layering of earlier, present, and future times and places – the liquid, shifting cultural codex which we all now inhabit – is a feature of the work of Chinese artists who re-examined and transformed indigenous art practices in post-Mao China, and a feature also of the artists discussed in this thesis. Their work is inflected by their assertion of a Chinese artistic and aesthetic inheritance, and by their strategic negotiation of both internal political exigencies and the domestic and global art markets.

The study is underpinned by two significant aspects of Chinese contemporary art: firstly, by the reclamation of autochthonous art and craft practices by contemporary artists, and secondly by the marginalised position of women artists from discourses of Chinese contemporary art as it has been presented in major curated exhibitions, critical accounts and art histories to date.[19] Firstly, the revival and reinvention of fine art and folk art traditions and the use of specifically Chinese material practices has been acknowledged in the accounts of scholars including Gao Minglu (2011), Wu Hung (2012; 2014; 2019), and Paul Gladston (2014; 2020) to be of particular significance. This reclamation of pre-

revolutionary art and craft practices was described by Wu Hung (2012 para. 3; para. 7) in a paper for M+ Hong Kong as 'distilling materiality' and 'translating visuality'; a process in which artists were constructing a new genre of experimental ink (*shiyan shuimohua*) or conceptual ink (*guannian shuimo*) that combined regionalism with contemporaneity.

The artists of the post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde, reviving traditional forms and applying them in new idioms to challenge old binaries between Chinese and Western painting, were attempting to 'challenge the authority of the art establishment'; their aim 'no longer how to Westernize *guohua*, but how to make it contemporary and global' (Wu 2012 para.1). *Guohua*, or 'national painting' refers to ink-wash painting, in contrast to *xihua*, or 'Western painting', which generally refers to oil painting. The two practices continue to be separated in the curricula of Chinese art academies and in exhibitions, despite the hybridised practices of numerous contemporary artists who integrate ink with performance, installation, sculpture, video and other forms of new media. Despite their efforts, and the arguments of scholars such as Wu Hung, binaries between *guohua* and internationalist, global forms of contemporary art practice have persisted.

A full account of the development of *shiyan shuimohua* is beyond the scope of the thesis, but, briefly, from the late 1980s and during the 1990s and 2000s, in the work of Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Yang Jiechang and other significant practitioners the materiality of ink and *xuan* paper, of calligraphy, and/or of bound books became vehicles for the re-assertion of Chinese identity and for opportunities to initiate transcultural dialogues. The reclamation of indigenous art and craft practices from the late 1980s was influenced by teachers such as Maryn Varbanov at the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts and Lü Shengzhong at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where the Folk-Art Studio became the Department of Experimental Art in 2007. Its curriculum, focused on the study and renewal of folk-art forms such as papercutting, woodblock printing and embroidery (Miller 2014, pp.101-121), promoted contemporary interpretations of indigenous traditions.[20] At the same time, as we shall see later in this chapter, there was a growing resistance to the prevalence of Western influences on avant-garde art.

The resulting combinations of Chinese materials and techniques presented in the idiom of global contemporary art practices as installation, performance art or new media is described by Wu Hung as a kind of 'enmeshing' of tradition with contemporaneity in

which 'artists merge traditional forms, ideas and technologies into the broader realm of global contemporary art' (2014, p.331).[21] The nexus of past/present styles, techniques and cultural references constructs a temporal/spatial palimpsest beyond national and geographic boundaries. John Clark (2021) argues this is a distinguishing aspect of Asian modernity. With deference to the continuing influence of syncretic Confucian culture, and to similar rearticulations of tradition in Asia more broadly, we might see it as a specifically East Asian manifestation of contemporaneity that will be evident in the work of the artists examined in this thesis.

An important aspect of this post-Cultural Revolution revival of indigenous art practices was an interest in the culture of the book. Xu Bing, for example, invented 4000 apparently Chinese characters for *Book from the Sky* (c.1987–91)[22] to be carved into pearwood blocks, printed and bound into books as a commentary on the instability of language and culture (Wu 2008).[23] Such explorations of language and writing were influenced by intersecting factors including experiences before and during the Cultural Revolution. Firstly, by the introduction of Simplified Chinese which altered the appearance of the written language. Secondly, the production of *dazibao* propaganda, or 'big character posters' involved a number of these artists in their youth.[24] Wrestling with memories of how language in Maoist China became part of the revolutionary apparatus of the state, according to Geremie Barmé (2012, p.26) artists such as Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda examined the 'empire of signs that had bedevilled so many writers and thinkers in China's twentieth century'. They did so, Barmé argues, with 'an interrogation of and assault on the Chinese character itself' (2012, p.26). Their works presented language as mutable, fluxing, responsive to shifts in the political winds, or alternatively as opaque, secretive and resistant to interpretation – a necessary adaptation to a time in which words were dangerous.

Of equal significance to this thesis, however, is a second aspect of contemporary art in China: the contribution of women artists to the revival and reinvention of indigenous traditions – and, indeed to the traditions themselves – has been insufficiently acknowledged. In the late twentieth century, Chinese artists simultaneously looked to international contemporary practice and re-examined a pre-revolutionary history of literati scholarship, ink painting and calligraphy (Wu 2014, pp.97–99). Historically, however,

women had occupied a marginal place in artistic and literary discourses, constrained by powerful notions of filial duty, self-sacrifice and the equation of femininity with fragility (Weidner 1988). Patriarchal gender roles surrounded such cultural practices.[25] These beliefs supported Confucian social structures and rigid norms that anarcho-feminist writer and activist He-Yin Zhen, in the final years of the Qing dynasty, understood as the confining, subordinating strictures of a gendered category she called '*nannü*' – a theory discussed in detail in Chapter 2 that will operate as a lens through which to understand how the work of contemporary artists in China is inflected with syncretic Daoist and neo-Confucian thought.[26]

The artists examined in this study are thus positioned within the broad history of women practising as artists in China, and within the specific context of feminist (or counter-patriarchal) art practice. Their work is analysed within the genre of 'Experimental Ink Painting' (*shiyan shuimohua*) in which calligraphy (*shu fa*) and ink painting (*shui mo hua*) function as markers of Chinese identity and distillations of traditional material culture (Wu 2019).[27] There are, of course, numerous women artists who work with ink as traditional *guohua* painters, or in a more 'contemporary ink' style using brush and ink on paper or silk. Very few, however, practise as contemporary (*dangdai*) artists in the manner of their male peers of the post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde who began to appropriate, translate and reinvent the ink tradition in the late 1980s, aligning it with an international, conceptually based contemporary art of installation, performance and new media. Further, few of those who do practise in this manner have been included in significant curated exhibitions, biennales or triennials in which Chinese art is presented globally. For example, the 2013 exhibition *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, included the work of just two women and 33 men. A notable exception to this absence includes the 2014 *8th International Ink Art Biennale*, Shenzhen, curated by two women, Fu Xiaodong and Chen Jun, which included works by Duan Jianyu. Critic and curator Pi Li (2014 para.5) noted that it subverted the previously mentioned persistent binary opposing ink painting and contemporary art: 'the distinction between that which is ink painting and that which is not disappears'. Similarly, the first and second iterations of the Wuhan Art Museum's *Ink Art Biennale* in 2017 and 2019 and their associated scholarly symposia included a significant

number of female artists.[28] It seems, therefore, that the ways in which Chinese contemporary art is curated and presented *outside* China are constructing a limited and somewhat distorted view of artistic practice taking place *inside* China.

Through the course of the research, it became evident that complex intersections of gendered and Chinese identity formations were at play in the practice of the artists. Refractions of gender, nationality and class were revealed during interviews with each artist, accompanied by refracted glimpses of Chinese aesthetics, art history and philosophy. The gendered framing of each artist's work is imbricated with other significant aspects of identity and experience particular to each woman. These include, for example, motherhood and daughterhood, the exercise of state control over fertility in the implementation of the One Child Policy, and the experience of menopause in a society that prizes youth and beauty. Other issues that emerged were experiences of social class such as pre-revolutionary landlord class status versus revolutionary cadre and Party connections, and distinctions between rural and urban citizenship. This specificity of experience both connects and distinguishes the work of the artists in the study. Their lived experiences of gender, class, and nationality intersect with particular forms of discrimination and embodied identity formations. In a transcultural study that aimed to avoid falsely universalising the experiences and works of women artists, this recognition of difference is of particular importance and is analysed in each Case Study.

1.3. On The Question of Chineseness

Art is often used as a form of soft power or national 'branding', and concepts of national identity, the nation state, and nationhood are frequently engaged with, questioned and critiqued in the work of contemporary artists. The encounters with artists in this study revealed that gender and other aspects of identity are enmeshed in their work with an identity grounded in Chinese history, language and culture. China's complex territorial histories of dynastic overthrow, and its tendency to deny or minimise local histories prior to the Han occupation of ethnic 'autonomous' zones such as Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet, results in a concept of 'national' identity that is contested and, indeed, mythologised.

The designation of 'China' as a nation state is of relatively recent history, and was not in common use within China (as 中国 *Zhongguo*) until the nineteenth century (Chang, 2001). The Chinese government refers to 中华民族, *Zhonghua minzu* – translated as 'the Chinese nation' – as a marker of the reach of Communist ideology across boundaries of ethnic minority status or disputed territory, a shared heritage that 'suggests the persistence of a bounded, collective unity of disparate ethnicities over time' (Wang 2020, p.36). This notion of a cultural identity, founded in a common language, cultural understandings, histories and ways of life, unbounded by a territorial state or political affiliation, underlies my use of the term 'Chineseness' in this thesis. In her study of contemporary Chinese time-based art Meiling Cheng (2013, p.66) argues that beyond the nation state, Chineseness is a construct in a continual process of constitution and reconstitution, an 'ambiguous, fluid and potentially deterritorialized concept which may be employed by individual subjects – native, diasporic, sinophonic or affiliated by choice – as a multivalent identity marker'.

'Chineseness' as a historically situated discursive construct is employed – and problematised – in various academic fields including art history, literary criticism, critical theory and visual culture. Viewed from a non-Chinese perspective it resists easy labelling. Non-homogenous and in continual flux, it is neither a form of Chinese exceptionalism turbo-charged by the rising global power of the PRC, nor simply a colonialist, Western binary classification that essentialises Chinese artists as 'other'– although this orientalising certainly still occurs.[29] From inside China, 'Chineseness' is often viewed as a more immutable category of enculturation. In 'On the "Chineseness" of Chinese Contemporary Art' Paul Gladston (2007) positioned the term 'Chineseness' and its various meanings within the emergence of a post-Cultural Revolution contemporary art in mainland China that has alternately embraced and rejected Western influences in a post-1989 turn towards an often essentialised Chinese history and culture.

Cultural critic Rey Chow (1998) argues that Chineseness is multiply encoded, subject to a range of complex combinations and intersections of institutional, political, ethnic, class and gender determinations, resisting homogenisation. Cultural Studies scholar Ien Ang (1998, p.225), interrogating diasporic Chinese identity, positions Chineseness as 'an open and indeterminate signifier' and, in a later discussion, as 'a category whose meanings are

not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and re-articulated' (2001, p.25). Art historian Franziska Koch (2016), in turn, argues that artists knowingly and strategically negotiate multiple agencies, geographies and identities, intentionally interrogating notions of essentialist Chineseness. Artists in this study, operating across cultures and exhibiting work outside China, navigate a path between the increasingly essentialist categorisations of Chinese identity promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (henceforth abbreviated as the CCP) and the more fluid and mutable enactments of diverse identities within the contemporary artworld.

In the PRC an assertive nationalism increasingly opposed to Western influence has been emphasised since the ascension of Xi Jinping to the leadership. Public discourses are dominated anew by a revisionist Marxist-Leninist dialectical interpretation of art (Gladston 2020, p.27). Further, the narrowing space for expression under the current dominance of 'Xi Jinping Thought', Gladston argues, results in 'an understandable tendency towards obliqueness of expression and deniability of meaning often imperceptible to outside observers' (2020, p.32). This phenomenon illuminates the often-contradictory stances towards feminist intentionality expressed by the artists in this study. Their acceptance or rejection of the label of 'feminist artist' varies, depending on whether they are exhibiting inside or outside China, or speaking to Chinese or non-Chinese interlocutors, as expressions of feminism are increasingly politically risky (an issue discussed in depth in Chapter 2). This complex and uncertain situation leaves artists to negotiate the emphasis or de-emphasis on Chineseness in their work, with one eye on the global art market and one eye on the shifting political winds that influence the local, Chinese artworld.

Given this complexity, in this thesis 'Chineseness' is positioned as a fluid, dynamic, intentional, sometimes politically or commercially motivated, and sometimes essentialising relationship to Chinese culture and its products, grounded in a (real or imagined) collective memory. I argue that a Chinese identity, like a gendered identity, is constructed and performed: it 'produces that which it posits as outside itself' (Butler 1999, p.xv). Such identities are adopted, shaped, and reshaped by artists who navigate the local and global art market and its oftentimes orientalising demands for Chinese contemporary art to appear sufficiently 'Chinese' – a tension discussed in greater depth in

the following section of this chapter. The analysis of the artists' works explores how they renegotiate continually reconstructed Chinese identities that intersect with expressions and representations of gender. The following section of the chapter locates this study, and the artists selected as participants, within the discourses of the contemporary art that emerged in the PRC after the Cultural Revolution, to examine the persistence of notions of Chineseness in contrast with transcultural exchange and continuing debates around the locality or globality of Chinese art.

1.4. A 'Prop in the Culture of Chinatown'?

As previously discussed, Chinese contemporary art occupies a somewhat ambiguous space in the global arena; its production, display and reception take place in the context of increasingly volatile transcultural contestation that characterises contemporaneity. This section more specifically situates the study within the critical/historical discourses around contemporary art in/from China. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a full account of the complex history of the emergence of contemporary art in China after the Cultural Revolution, rather, I endeavour to show how artists situate themselves in relation to both locally situated and global discourses.

Tensions between Chinese and 'Western' art discourses have characterised Chinese contemporary art in the twenty-first century, just as they did in the early decades of the twentieth when Pan Yuliang returned to China from her studies in Paris to the raised eyebrows of traditionalists (Teo 2016).[30] While artists and intellectuals associated with the 'romantic imaginary' of the May Fourth and New Culture movements of the early twentieth century saw Westernising modernity – and modernist art – as the only possible response to the failures of the Qing state; others, most notoriously Xu Beihong, resisted (Gao 2011, p.35).[31] Gao Minglu (2011, pp.36-41) identifies the modernising project of the twentieth century as a continuum characterised by transcultural dialogue, from the early twentieth-century calls by Chen Duxiu, Liang Qichao and Lin Fengmian for a synthesis of East and West, to the Soviet Socialist Realism of the revolutionary era, to the post-Cultural Revolution '85 New Wave' movement and its accommodation of a range of Euro-American artistic influences. Paul Gladston (2014, para. 9), noting this tendency,

describes modern Chinese art as having 'shuttled uncertainly and inconclusively between a pursuit of modernity and an adherence to tradition.'

Today, in the context of increasingly vigorous assertions of nationalist Chinese exceptionalism by the CCP, complex dialogues between Eastern and Western, local and global, and historical and contemporary sources and influences, are a defining characteristic of much contemporary art from China. Its distinctive qualities have been shaped by a juxtaposition of influences that constructed a situated and specific Chinese modernity, postmodernity, and contemporaneity. This process has been documented and analysed from a range of theoretical and art historical perspectives by Chinese and non-Chinese scholars, whose varying positions are outlined in the Literature Review in Chapter 2. Chinese art is, inevitably, transcultural, despite a tendency on the part of non-Chinese (and sometimes also by Chinese) critics, curators and market forces to define it by its separateness. This tendency was lamented in Hou Hanru's (2010, pp.363–365) argument that Western political propaganda aestheticises Chinese artists as exotic objects. As art historian Craig Clunas points out in his discussion of the work of Yang Fudong, the question of whether to emphasise the global nature of contemporary Chinese art or its Chineseness is always a political one, and there is no definitive answer (1997, p.235). Contemporary art in China is still too often seen in binary terms as demonstrating either internationalism *or* Chineseness, cosmopolitanism *or* regionalism. This paradigm neglects the rich history of transcultural dialogue, trade and cultural exchange that historically informed and enriched both 'Eastern' and 'Western' material culture.[32]

Many Chinese artists in the early twentieth century and again after the Cultural Revolution adopted (and adapted) internationalist modernist (and postmodern) art practices, while others voiced disquiet at the importation of 'Western' visual languages (Gladston 2014; Wu 2019; Wang 2020).[33] Throughout the 1980s artists experimented with influences drawn from Euro-American art and philosophy rather than the Russian influences still prevalent in the art academies, but by the end of the decade artists looked anew to Chinese traditions for inspiration (Wang 2020, p.5). Some continued to develop a practice that had earlier been encouraged after the Sino-Soviet split (1956–66), engaging in a re-investigation and reinterpretation of culturally encoded art and craft practices such

as calligraphy and ink painting, or the use of materials such as porcelain, bamboo, silk and gunpowder, reworked in a contemporary idiom (Gladston 2014; Wu 2019). As Wu Hung (2014, pp.97-99) argues, their examination of pre-revolutionary art history led them to develop a locally situated but globally responsive modernity straddling both Chinese and international contemporary art. These tendencies are of particular relevance to this study, which focuses on the work of artists operating within, and reinventing, Chinese artistic conventions.

It is generally agreed (albeit open to contestation) that contemporary art developed in China after the chaotic period at the end of the Cultural Revolution, the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, and the succession of Deng Xiaoping to the leadership in 1978.[34] The first exhibition by the 'Stars' (*xing xing hua hui*) artist group in Beijing on 27 September 1979 publicly constructed a particular narrative of avant-garde practice.[35] During the early phases of the 'Reform and Opening Up' era transcultural exchange gained greater intensity, evident in the selection of Chinese artists for international exhibitions and biennales. From the inclusion of Huang Yongping, Gu Dexin and Yang Jiechang in *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989, and the presence of Chinese artists at the Venice Biennale in 1993, a complex, multi-faceted dialogue between local and global travelled in both directions – and continues to do so.[36] However, the selection of Chinese works for international exhibitions was not always a positive experience for artists who came to understand they were relegated to a position of subalternity as peripheral, third world figures. Peggy Wang (2020, pp.33–34) explains, 'Chinese artists and critics were quick to realise that simply being included in international exhibitions did not rectify the existing unequal power dynamics undergirding selection and representation.' This was particularly the case in Venice in 1993, where artists who believed that China was no longer a peripheral player in contemporary art were disillusioned and 'decentred from their expected position' (Wang 2020, p.35).

Within China resistance to imported theoretical discourses persisted. A pertinent example is the paper delivered at the 2000 Shanghai Biennale by critic Wang Nanming and cited by Lü Peng (2012, p.35): Wang denounced 'Western hegemony' and artists who sought the approval of international curators by promoting 'an ossified view of Chinese-ness': these works of art, he argued, were 'just another prop in the culture of Chinatown'. In

turn, some non-Chinese interpretations have viewed the emphasis (by both Chinese and non-Chinese artists, critics and curators) on history, tradition and Chinese aesthetics as not merely culturally resistant but as a form of strategic essentialism (Gladston 2014). Paul Gladston (2020, p.3) argues that post-Enlightenment aesthetic modernity has 'persistently appropriated/translated non-Western cultural thought and practice as contributory vectors of potentially transformational alterity' while simultaneously non-Western societies have themselves been engaged in a similarly translational process, creating 'culturally hybrid forms of localized aesthetic modernity'. This dynamic process of appropriation and recontextualisation takes place in a global geopolitical context of increasingly hardening, apparently intractable, and possibly irreconcilable division and conflict, as a newly assertive Chinese foreign policy challenges old assumptions about China's place in the world.

The cultural hybridity resulting from this transnational to-and-fro in combination with Western-centric narratives of Chinese art results in persistent misreadings. Peggy Wang (2020, p.1) argues that one such misreading is that 'the trope of artist-as-dissident has long overshadowed narratives of contemporary Chinese art', with the internationally acclaimed figure of Ai Weiwei as the obvious example. The result is that more nuanced narratives are less visible outside China. Francesca dal Lago (2014, p.77) points out that art historical discourses promote and validate Western contemporary art 'to the exclusion of works created in the rest of the world, an exclusion used to reinforce the primacy of the West's own aesthetic paradigms'. The desire of non-Chinese critics, curators and collectors to see Chinese artists as political dissidents has resulted in the overlooking of significant trends such as the 'dematerialisation of the art object' (Gao 1998, p.39) or, more recently, Wu Hung's (2019) analysis of 'Material Art' (*caizhi yishu*) as a locally situated response to broader international discourses around materiality. Overlooked, too, outside China, are more nuanced examinations of Chinese contemporary art through a socio-political – or even a feminist – lens.

This thesis argues that artists who explore the possibilities of traditionally Chinese materials and forms are enacting an intentional and considered Chineseness rather than a form of self-orientalising, 'not as touchstones of a monolithic entity, but as dimensions of a material language and as bridges over which different cultural identities may meet' (Gao

1998, p.39). This materiality underlines their relationship to Chinese histories and also represents historical and continuing mutually formative artistic, philosophical and socio-economic dialogues between China and the 'West'. Wu (2019, p.37) argues it 'reveals a profound link between contemporary Material Art and ancient material culture', citing Lange-Berndt (2015) on the urgent need for transcultural investigations into how artists from different cultures use materials to address the specificity of their histories and the geopolitics of their regional identity. Peggy Wang's analysis of the work of Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi, who have both been subject to criticism for 'issuing a politicized and essentialized "Chineseness" to cater to foreign audiences' (2020, p.13), concludes that their work has been too narrowly interpreted. They – like the artists in this study – strategically position their work within the international contemporary, but simultaneously resist the homogenising effects of Western aesthetic globalisation.

The following section of this chapter explores the marginalisation of women artists within discourses around Chinese art history and contemporary art. This is followed by an explanation of the choice in this thesis to examine the work of artists who use the culturally encoded material of ink as a strategic intervention into the masculinist art history of ink painting and calligraphy in China.

1.5. Hiding in Plain Sight: Where are the Women?

Chinese contemporary art as a distinct subject of research is enriched by comprehensive historical accounts and critical analyses of the rise of the contemporary avant-garde and its later developments, with numerous significant scholarly contributions that are assessed in Chapter 2. However, as yet there has been insufficient recognition of the contributions of women artists. Acknowledging this scant scholarly attention, Paul Gladston identifies a general lack of criticality and critical theory in contemporary Chinese art, despite 'acts of resistance to the durable patriarchy of Chinese society performed by Chinese women artists' (2014, p.274). Phyllis Teo, similarly, identifies a 'discernible bias in the historiographical system of Chinese art' arising from the patriarchal systems and structures of Chinese society (2016, p.14). This section provides a necessarily brief account of women artists in China, and how their contributions have been assessed by scholars, critics and curators.

The work of female artists in the PRC is often called *nüxing yishu* (as previously noted, a term variously translated as 'women's art', 'feminist art' or, even, sometimes, 'feminine art'). This shifting meaning carries beyond the linguistic into the political economy of the production and reception of works by women artists. There is a considerable body of scholarship examining the paucity of women artists in Imperial China, and on the restoration to the canon of those who had vanished (or had been erased) from the historical narrative. Most notably, the scholarly work of Marsha Weidner, Ellen Johnston Laing, and Irving Yucheng Lo and their collaborators led to a significant exhibition, 'Views from Jade Terrace: Chinese Women Artists, 1300–1912', at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (1988). This pre-modern history is beyond the scope of this thesis, except to point out the well-documented lineage of female painters and calligraphers, and considerable academic investigation of their surviving works, as well as scholarly analysis of Song, Ming and Qing Dynasty works by male artists that depict women in the act of painting, explored in the work of Craig Clunas and Wu Hung.[37] As Weidner (1988) relates, however, in primary sources women painters were generally classified by their roles as wife or concubine, and their biographical details emphasise the names of their husband, other important family members or their teachers, together with anecdotes about their beauty, as well as their virtue and other feminine accomplishments.

In the modernising late Qing and Republican periods, a time in which the 'New Woman' (*xin nüxing*) became an emblem of anti-feudal modernity, a number of female artists including Guan Zilan, Pan Yuliang and Qiu Ti studied abroad (Andrews 2020). They returned to China bringing influences from modernist art circles in Paris or Tokyo to the Western-influenced intelligentsia, particularly in Shanghai. Julia F. Andrews' account of women artists in twentieth-century China explores this early history, as well as the changing roles of women artists after the establishment of the PRC in 1949, and during the reform years that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution (Andrews 2020). Similarly, Phyllis Teo's significant contribution re-examines the significance of Pan Yuliang in the period of colonial modernity (Teo 2016) and Amanda Wangwright's archival research examines how women artists such as Qiu Ti – the only female member of the Storm Society (*Juelan She*) in Shanghai – negotiated issues of gender in Republican China between 1911 and 1949 (Wangwright 2021).

Despite the presence of active, albeit often insufficiently acknowledged, women artists, the post-Cultural Revolution period that saw the re-opening of the universities and art academies, and the emergence of various avant-garde art movements and groups in China, was dominated by men, revealed in Paul Gladston's interviews with key members of four of these groups, the Stars, the Northern Art Group, the Pond Association and Xiamen Dada (Gladston 2013). For example, only two women, Li Shuang and Shao Fei, were actively involved in the Stars group (Smith 2010, p.471). The '85 New Wave' movement (85 *xinchao*) was similarly dominated by male artists.[38] The 1990s, however, saw the rise to greater prominence of women artists and critics, including some who were actively interested in feminism, and a flush of exhibitions devoted to the work of women. However, women who sought to participate in the late twentieth-century phenomenon of 'Experimental Ink Painting' or *shiyan shuimohua* are notable by their absence from the discourse. Recent feminist scholarship, including this thesis, seeks to redress this imbalance.

Chapter 2 will examine in more detail how women artists – and feminist art – have been positioned in the scholarly literature in significant exhibitions, exploring the distinct theoretical positions taken by scholars, critics, curators and the artists themselves. In some accounts women are simply absent, while some have attempted to articulate specifically Chinese approaches to a feminist art practice. Gao Minglu (2011, p.24), for example, argues that work by women artists in China should not be distinguished from work by men; both, he believed, were equally in a crisis of 'reconfiguring social rank and class' within a spatially defined, urban Chinese modernity. Gao's (2009, p.159) promotion of gender unification rather than 'conflict and splitting' is critiqued by Paul Gladston (2014) as based on a selective – and partisan –reading of history, and a reversion to an essentialising East/West binary. Gao's insistence on severing Chinese contemporary art from its global counterparts leads him to the conclusion that feminist analysis is too Western a lens through which to examine their work (2009, p.159). Gao argues therefore that we should 'read Chinese women's art as a particular way of responding to Chinese modernity as a whole' rather than consider it as a separate and gendered category of artistic production (2011, pp.23–25). He developed a paradigm for analysis of women's art as 'Womanist' rather than 'Feminist' (2011, pp.23–24), nomenclature that aligns Gao

with a number of influential critics and curators in China in the 1990s who emphasised the 'feminine' nature of *nüxing yishu*. Gao, however, recognised that it was necessary to find an alternative to the two models of analysing women's art that he identified as either applying (Western) feminist theory, or alternatively viewing women's art as produced purely through personal experience within the domestic, private sphere. Neither of these commonly adopted positions, he argued, took sufficient account of the specifically situated Chinese context, a view with which this thesis concurs (Gao 2011, p.23). Gao's understanding of feminism, however, does not acknowledge the possibilities of intersectional feminist analysis to create a polyvocal feminist lens, nor does he recognise the history of Chinese feminism, or situated forms of feminist theory and practice emerging in China today.

In a genre (the reinvention and transformation of ink and calligraphy as contemporary art) in which women artists, even now, are less likely to be the subject of scholarly analysis or the focus of major international exhibitions, it is time indeed that serious attention was paid, not just to the reasons for this lacuna, and not merely to the restoration of women artists to the narrative, but to the development of a critical analysis of how gender operates in the field, and how artists navigate this contested territory. This study hopes to contribute to this project.

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[1] The terms 'contemporary Chinese art' and 'Chinese contemporary art', while often used interchangeably, possess important nuances of meaning. In this thesis, as indicated by its title, I have generally preferred 'contemporary Chinese art' as it emphasises its contemporaneity rather than its Chineseness. At other times, where the specific Chinese cultural heritage or materiality is the focus, I have used the term 'Chinese contemporary art'.

[2] Donna Haraway's metaphor of 'cat's cradle' in relation to a 'knotted' polyvocality in theory and method was influential in the theoretical framing and transdisciplinary methodology of this study. It is referred to explicitly in Chapter 3. See Donna Haraway, 1994. 'A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies', *Configurations* Vol 2 (1) pp. 59–71.

[3] Rather than as an essentialising emphasis on the domestic, the metaphors of weaving, stitching, and knitting are employed in this thesis as a reference to the work of the Second Wave feminist artists who sought to bring such practices (including the practices of First Nations artists) from their marginalised position as "domestic" craft practices on the periphery and reinstate them at the centre of contemporary artistic practice. Consider, for example, Judy Chicago's use of embroidery in "The Dinner Party" project (1979), Miriam Shapiro's use of textiles in works such as "Barcelona Fan" (1979), or indeed the work of contemporary artists in China using textiles or thread such as Lin Tianmiao, Yin Xiuzhen or Gao Rong. Therefore, this deliberate evocation of "women's work" is an intentional feminist act of naming which challenges gendered Chinese notions such as *nangeng nüzhi* ('the man ploughs and the woman spins and weaves') by centring the previously domestic at the heart of scholarly and artistic discourse. Another reference to thread, to 'knotting', is developed from Donna Haraway's (1994) image of her transdisciplinary methodology as a "knotted" game of cat's cradle.

[4] Haraway, 'A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies' (Note 2).

[5] 'Chinese contemporary art' is generally translated into Chinese as 中国当代艺术 (*Zhongguo dangdai yishu*). However, it is important to note that the use of the term 'contemporary', a term debated in art historical discourses, is particularly problematic in relation to the art that emerged in the People's Republic of China in the late twentieth century. As Francesca Dal Lago argues in her review of 'Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents', published by MoMA in 2010 and edited by Wu Hung with the assistance of Peggy Wang, the temporal designation of 'contemporary art' as a post-Mao phenomenon relegates all art produced before that time to the status of mere propaganda: 'As far as it derives from political shifts of the same ideological nature as those considered acceptable for the existence of contemporary art in the West—that is, political liberalization—this model of periodization reproduces Euro-American ways of conceptualizing contemporary art and brings to mind the well-known Western teleology of progressive modernity constructed in opposition to totalitarianism' (Dal Lago 2014, p.87).

6 *Nüxing Yishu* (literally, 'women's art') is a somewhat slippery term, which may or may not possess feminist connotations depending on context. The translation of '*nüxing yishu*' as a term encompassing both art made by women in the broadest possible sense, as well as art with a feminist intentionality, continues to be contentious. The term *nüxing* (女性) was a new concept that emerged during Republican China, with implications of modernity as seen in the designation '*xin nüxing*' ('new woman'). The complexity of this translation is discussed by Yan Zhou (2020 pp. 328–329, p.443). It is further discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

[7] The use of the term 'Chineseness' in this thesis is explained in Section 1.2 of this chapter. For its relationship to ink and calligraphy practices, see, for example, Brubaker's discussion of contemporary ink art and its 're-Chineseness', in which he cites Liu Yuedi's (2011) assertion that globalisation and internationalisation 'pushed' Chinese artists to search for an authentically Chinese aesthetics (Brubaker 2014). Also see Paul Gladston's analysis of a 2007 exhibition curated in Shanghai by Victoria Lu, in which he asserted that it intentionally positioned a re-examination and revisiting of the literati tradition as quintessentially Chinese (Gladston 2007).

[8] Peggy Wang (2020) uses the term 'microhistories' in her analysis of the work of artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Wang Guangyi and Lin Tianmiao, distinguishing them from case studies because of their broader implications for the field of contemporary art in China. Popularised in the 1970s in the work of Italian historians such as Giovanni Levi and Simona Cerutti, a microhistory is generally agreed to be distinct from a case study in its aim to examine large issues with a narrowly focused lens, often on subjects of the everyday.

[9] The risks of the interview as the primary method of data gathering in China are discussed by Paul Gladston (2014) and those with particular relevance to this thesis are expanded in Chapter 3. They include the inevitable hesitations and slippages of memory, linguistic and translation difficulties, the differing discursive contexts of the Western researcher and the Chinese artist, and (given increasingly strict limitations upon freedom of speech) the self-censorship that is always possible when a Chinese interviewee speaks 'on the record'.

[10] In China, followers of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism have historically combined their teachings, eventually becoming a form of syncretism. Timothy Brook (1998) positions this layered complementarity as first emergent in the 'ecumenical openness' of the Yuan Dynasty, although he points out that the notion of the Three Teachings as a 'trinity of distinct discourses' dates back as far as the Tang Dynasty (Brook, p.16–17). The emergence of neo-Confucianism in the Song Dynasty resulted in aspects of the distinct teachings of each tradition interacting more dynamically with one borrowing from the other. Finally, in the Ming Dynasty, Brook argues, 'that borrowing had evolved into something like syncretism as expressed in the famous phrase *sanjiao heyi*, "the unity of the Three Teachings" of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci was aware of this trend when he noted that "the most commonly accepted opinion of those who are at all educated among the Chinese is that these three laws or cults coalesce into one creed and that all of them can and should be believed."' Ricci does not use the term syncretism, but the idea of Chinese religions as syncretic may he traced to this observation' (Brook 1998, p.13). For more on the notion of syncretic Daoism/Confucianism as used in this thesis see Timothy Brook, 1998. 'Rethinking

Syncretism: The Unity of the Three Teachings and their Joint Worship in Late-Imperial China', *Journal of Chinese Religions*, Vol 21 (1) pp.13-44. Available from: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1179/073776993805307448 [accessed 2.2.22]

[11] 'Reform and Opening Up' (*gaige kaifang*) refers to the post-Mao economic policies enacted from December 1978, when the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping proposed a platform of domestic economic reform and opening up to economic – and, subsequently, cultural – engagement with the outside world.

[12] Emergent feminist voices in the PRC have been ruthlessly suppressed in recent years, most particularly since the arrest and detention of 'The Feminist Five' in 2015. See, for example, Leta Hong Fincher's examination of this phenomenon in 'Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China' (2018). See also more recent phenomena such as the removal of the Weibo accounts of feminists and prominent female journalists after a wave of nationalist trolling, threats and cyber-bullying, discussed in numerous articles in mainstream media including Helen Davidson, 'China's feminists protest against wave of online abuse with "internet violence museum"', published in the Guardian on 13 May 2021, available from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/13/chinas-feminists-protest-against-wave-of-online-abuse-with-internet-violence-museum [accessed 13.5.21]

[13] It should be noted that in recent years there has been increasing attention to the work of women artists both inside and outside China, including a significant forthcoming exhibition, 'Stepping Out: Female Identities in Chinese Contemporary Art' to take place in May 2022 at the Lillehammer Museum, Norway, and in 2023 at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, Austria. The exhibition, with a catalogue published by Hatje Cantz (forthcoming), includes more than 100 works by 30 artists. See: https://eng.lillehammerkunstmuseum.no/exhibitions/stepping-out [accessed 11.12.21]. Further evidence of growing attention paid to the work of women artists and issues of gender more broadly includes special issues of academic journals e.g., the *Journal of Chinese Contemporary Art* Vol. 6 (1) (2019) and *Positions* Vol. 28 (1) (2020).

[14] There is a significant history of scholarship around questions of globality and locality in other post-colonial and settler contexts as well. See, for example, Ian Burn, Nigel Lendon, Charles Merewether, Ann Stephen. *The Necessity of Australian Art: An Essay About Interpretation*. Sydney: Power Press (1988).

[15] Artists living and working in China who challenge gendered binaries include Shanghai-based Lu Yang and Chen Tianzhuo. See, for example, Sophie Xiaofei Guo's discussion of Lu Yang's ambiguously gendered superhero/ine in the 2013 video work *Uterus Man*, available from

https://courtauld.ac.uk/research/research-resources/publications/immeditations-postgraduate-journal/immediations-online/2020-2/sophie-xiaofei-guo-doubting-sex-examining-the-biomedical-gaze-in-lu-yangs-uterusman/ [accessed 23.12.21] and Petra Poelzi, 2019. 'The Hypercultural Universe of Chen Tianzhuo', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art,* Vol. 6 (1) pp.55–75.

[16] Mari Mikkola (2019) cites Nicholson (1994; 1998) arguing that second wave feminists appropriated the term 'gender' and distinguished it from 'sex' to separate biological differences from socially and psychologically determined ones. Any idea that there is such a thing as a universal gendered experience has come to be seen as exclusionary, however, for example in the work of Audre Lord (1984) or bell hooks (1990), who argue for the intersectionality of gender, race and class. Womanhood and notions of 'femininity' are, therefore, culturally specific as we shall see in the case studies examined in Chapters 4 – 7.

[17] 'Heteroglossia' is a term derived from the Greek and coined by Bakhtin in his early theoretical work on the novel. It refers to tension created by the simultaneous use of different forms of speech (or other signs) within one text (Bakhtin 1981, p.293). Donna Haraway used the term in 'A Cyborg Manifesto', first published in the *Socialist Review* in 1985 and reprinted in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge (1991)

[18] Propositions relating to feminist interpretations of Daoist and Confucian texts, as well as the critique of such classical texts offered by the work of Qing Dynasty anarcho-feminist writer, He-Yin Zhen, are discussed at salient points throughout the thesis, most particularly in the Literature Review that follows in Chapter 2, and in relation to each Case Study.

[19] This absence or marginalisation of women artists is analysed in greater depth in subsequent chapters, but two exhibitions provide compelling examples. *Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2013 presented the work of two women and 33 men. This exclusion was pointed out by Lilly Wei in her review in *Studio International* (Wei 2014). In 2017 the Guggenheim Museum, New York, presented an exhibition of the early avant-garde period in Chinese contemporary art, *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*. It was described by the museum as containing work by 71 'key artists and groups active across China and worldwide whose critical provocations aim to forge reality free from ideology, to establish the individual apart from the collective, and to define contemporary Chinese experience in universal terms' (Guggenheim, 2017). Of the 71, a mere 9 women were considered sufficiently significant. Curator Alexandra Munroe justified this exclusion on the basis that it illustrated the masculinist dominance of the period: 'The few works by women is a reflection of the male-dominated government-run art academies of the

period […]' For more see the New York Times coverage of September 20, 2017: Jane Perlez, 'Where the Wild Things Are: China's Art Dreamers at the Guggenheim' available from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/20/arts/design/guggenheim-art-and-china-after-1989.html [accessed 8.2.22]

[20] The debate about the relationship between contemporary art and folk art in China continues, for example in the *Everyday Legend* research project and its initial, eponymous exhibition at Shanghai's Minsheng Museum in 2016. A multi-year transdisciplinary research project, in which this author participated, *Everyday Legend* sought to understand how contemporary artists might learn from and, in turn, revitalise endangered craft traditions. For more, see: https://www.bcu.ac.uk/art/research/centre-for-chinese-visual-arts/research-projects/everyday-legend [accessed 7.10.21]

[21] This kind of transculturalism was not new. As Sarah E. Fraser (2020, p.61) argues, modernist artists of the early twentieth century such as Pan Yuliang, Pang Xunqin and Xu Beihong 'transgressed the boundaries of ink and oils with technical finesse, erasing media binaries that proved difficult for most Republican-period artists […] in many cases they incorporated and combined techniques from *guohua* (orthodox or national ink painting), oils, and watercolours to forge new artistic territory'. It should be noted, further, that eighteenth-century Qing court art included Sino-European styles, as did early modernist painting and even photography (Wu 2014; Gladston 2014).

[22] In this thesis the dates given for Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (i.e., c. 1987–1991), are those published on the artist's own website, by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and by Wu Hung (2014). However, it should be noted that Zhou Yan (2020 pp. 248–249) contends that Xu finished his work between 1986–1988, then exhibited it at the National Art Museum of China at the end of 1988, and then in the same venue, in *China/Avant-Garde*, in February 1989. Just as there are slightly differing dates for the work, there are various iterations of the work itself in the collections of different institutions including in the Queensland Art Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, Australia.

[23] The significant scholarly work around Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* and its multiply layered interpretations are beyond the scope of this thesis. For recent scholarship, see Sarah E. Fraser, Yu-Chieh Li (eds.). *Xu Bing: Beyond the Book from the Sky*. Singapore: Springer (2020). Note also that there are several versions of *Book from the Sky*, including in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. See: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/77468 [accessed 29.9.20] Another is held in the collection of the Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) in Brisbane. See:

http://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/qag/imu.php?request=display&port=45001&id=4029&flag=start&offset=0&count=20&view=lightbox&PublishOnIMuInternet=Y&CreCreatorLocal_tab=XU%20BING [accessed 29.9.20]

[24] *Dazibao*, or Big Character Posters, were forms of communication, propaganda, protest and denunciation that were used both before and during the Cultural Revolution. They influenced Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda, who each created installations comprised of made-up characters – pseudo-calligraphy.

[25] Generally unacknowledged in the post-Cultural Revolution re-examination of pre-revolutionary Chinese high culture was the masculine and patriarchal intellectual world of the literati. Historically, discourses of masculinity in ancient China were Confucian in their emphasis on social order and duty to the state, and the literary representation of the scholar class as a masculine ideal reflects male desires, fantasies and fears (Song, 2004).

[26] Neo-Confucianism originated in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and was prominent in the Song (960–1279 CE) and Ming (1368–1644 CE) under the influence of the scholar bureaucrat Zhu Xi (c.1130–1200). Its rationalist interpretation of Confucian texts and of Mencius emphasised social harmony and proper personal conduct. Scholars of the Song Dynasty Confucian revival developed the cosmology that influenced neo-Confucian philosophy. They adapted and modified concepts from the *Yijing* (or Book of Changes) and from other aspects of Daoist metaphysics as well as elements derived from Chan and Amitabha Buddhism. Neo-Confucian teaching emphasised social relations in which gendered power dynamics were inseparable from the establishment of a harmonious social order of patriarchal family and state. For more see Robert Foster, 2014. 'Neo-Confucianism'. *Oxford Bibliographies*. Available from: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0101.xml [accessed 2.2.22]

[27] *Shui mo hua* 水墨畫 (literally 'water ink painting') refers to ink-wash painting; *shu fa* 书法 refers to calligraphy. Although there were accomplished women (both gentry and concubines) in imperial China whose skills in painting and calligraphy were recognised and admired, to become a member of the scholarly elite literati – the *wenren* 文人 – it was necessary to pass the Imperial Examinations, from which women were excluded.

[28] Female artists selected for the Wuhan Art Museum Ink Art Biennale included Liu Yi, Hou Shanhu, He Xiaochun, Guo Zhen, and Zhang Yanzi. For more on the Wuhan Art Museum Ink Art Biennales, see the museum website: http://www.wuhanam.com/ [accessed 17.5.21]

[29] Curators Hou Hanru (2010) and Alexandra Munroe (2017) have argued that Chinese contemporary art is still marginalised and/or exoticised in the internationalist arena. Wu Hung

(2019, p.15), on the other hand, argues that a renewed emphasis on materiality in contemporary art in/from China (*caizhi yishu*) 'represents a thoroughly cosmopolitan approach […] and a culturally informed regional approach within global contemporary art' concluding that the artists have 'made an important contribution in opening up a space that overlaps and reconfigures local and global contemporary art'.

[30] I refer to Pan Yuliang as just one example of the many Chinese artists, including Sanyu and Pang Xunqin, who studied abroad in the early twentieth century. Peggy Wang (2020, p.9) cites Gao Minglu's argument which connects the artists of the post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde with their predecessors of the May Fourth movement, including Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian.

[31] Gao Minglu (2011, p.33–42) discusses the continuing debates over Western influence in art and culture from the May Fourth Movement onwards, identifying a continuum between the modernising intellectuals of the early twentieth century and the 85 New Wave.

[32] Transcultural dialogues between China and the 'West' have impacted visual and material culture since the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci made contact with the Ming court in 1601 and subsequently Jesuit priests (including painter and lay brother Giuseppe Castiglione) arrived in the courts of the Kangxi emperor. For more see, for example, M. Marcillo, 2008. 'Reconciling Two Careers: The Jesuit Memoir of Giuseppe Castiglione, Lay Brother and Qing Imperial Painter', *Eighteenth Century Studies*, Vol 42 (1) pp.45–59. In turn, Chinese emissaries travelled to Europe. In the modernising late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many Chinese artists studied in Europe and returned to China bringing ideas and techniques of western art to the art academies and intellectual circles of Shanghai and Beijing. (Teo 2016; Wangwright 2021).

[33] 'Western' and 'Eastern' distinctions are binaries reflecting a colonialist history. And, of course, China is not 'east' of Australia. Similarly problematic, despite the best of post-colonial intentions, are the terms 'global north' and 'global south'. In this thesis I have preferred wherever possible to use the term 'Euro-American' as it is less loaded with historical nuance.

[34] There is significant scholarship re-evaluating the significance of artist groups such as the 'No Name Painting Association' (*wu ming*) who worked clandestinely 'outside' the art system during the Cultural Revolution, and, indeed, the significance of artists who continued to work within the academy throughout this period. See, for example, Gao Minglu's critical re-evaluation of the significance of the clandestine activities of the No Name Painting Association in 'The No Name Group: A History of a Self-Exiled Avant-Garde' (Gao 2007), as well as a continuing series of research-based exhibitions at Beijing's Inside Out Art Museum curated by Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu that examine the historical narratives and ideological construct

of Chinese contemporary art in a timeframe of 67 years since 1949. See Liu Ding and Carol Yinghua Lu, 2018. 'From the Issue of Art to the Issue of Position: The Legacy of Socialist Realism in Chinese Contemporary Art'. *Tate Research Publication.* Available from: https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/socialist-realism [accessed 2.2.22]. The curatorial/art historical intention underpinning this project is elucidated in an interview between Liu Ding and Yang Tiange for *Yishu* (Yang 2017).

[35] Avant-garde art practice emerged across China and was not by any means centred in Beijing. The actions of Huang Yongping and the Xiamen Dada group, or the Pond Society (*Chi She*) established by Zhang Peili, Geng Jianyi, Song Ling and others in Hangzhou are salient examples. Avant-garde artists established groups in cities far distant from Beijing, including Tianjin, Chongqing, Chengdu and Kunming.

[36] Curator and art historian Mia Yu (2021) points out other, less well-understood past and present transnational discourses, including the engagement of Chinese artists with the entangled histories and geopolitical complexities of Xinjiang, Tibet, Manchuria, and now also the Sino-African cultural dialogues taking place as a result of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) policies of Xi Jinping. She cites as an example of the complex intersecting transcultural forces that have shaped and continue to shape the art made in China, the work of Pu Yingwei, a quasi-ethnographic archive inspired by his uncle's work as an engineer in Kenya, questioning 'how conceptual frameworks around imperialism might be updated based on the shifts of power at play today' (Yu 2021, para.11).

[37] See, for example, Craig Clunas' (2017) discussion of the gendered act of connoisseurship in imperial China, including an analysis of Qing images of women painters at work, 'suffused with a particular nostalgia for the culture of the late Ming, and in particular for its educated and elegant women writers and artists' (2017, p.83). Clunas also refers to the first publication of the 'Jade Terrace History of Painting', a collection of biographies of female artists by a woman writer, Tang Souyu, in the early nineteenth century (2017, p.83). Wu Hung's Slade lectures in 2016, 'Feminine Space: An Untold Story of Chinese Pictorial Art', examined the representation and self-representation of women in Ming courtesan culture. 'Feminine Space in Chinese Painting' (2019) further develops Wu's theory of a real or imagined spatial entity, a 'feminine space', represented in Chinese visual and material culture.

[38] It is important to note, in discussions of the lack of visibility of women artists in the emergence of the post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde, that at this time the artists were often self-taught whilst working in factories or other state-controlled *danwei* or had entered the re-opened art academies in tiny cohorts, often after returning from years in the countryside as 'sent down

youth'. In noting the male domination of this period, we must not lose sight of the importance of their critique of both socialist realism and of the pre-revolutionary élite art forms of the *wenren*.

Chapter 2

‘Knitting’ a Feminist Framework: a literature review

The sun and moon without light.
Sky and earth in darkness.
Who can uplift the sinking world of women?
(From ‘Reflections’ c. 1903
by poet, revolutionary, and feminist Qiu Jin, written during her travels in Japan)[1]

2.1 Introduction: ‘knitting’ a polyvocal feminist framework

This literature review and theoretical framing of the study considers the complex historical, linguistic, artistic, and socio-political contexts of what it means to identify as a ‘woman’ and as a ‘woman artist’ – or indeed as a ‘feminist artist’ – in China today. Chapter 1 outlined the objectives and context of this study, which aims to critically examine, through intersecting lenses of gender and Chinese identity, the contributions of women artists to contemporary art in the PRC through specific case studies. The artists whose work is analysed in Chapters 4–7 practise in reinvented forms of ink and/or calligraphy described by art historian and curator Wu Hung as ‘Experimental Ink’ or *shiyan shuimohua* (2019). They are often framed by critics and curators as feminist practitioners, although, as we shall see, at times they disavow any such intention. This chapter outlines the theoretical framing of the study and provides a literature review in order to explore this conundrum. Firstly, the chapter provides some contextual underpinning in the form of a brief history of feminist art and feminist art history. Secondly, it explains how three strands of feminist theory that are not usually connected have been woven together to form a transcultural theoretical framework. Thirdly, the

literature around the history of Chinese feminism, and the late twentieth century development of a category of 'women's art' (*nüxing yishu*) and its somewhat problematic exhibition history is examined.

Feminist scholars have noted the lack of academic attention to the contribution of women artists to the development of contemporary art in China. Recent scholarship in the field includes the work of Eva Kit Wah Man (2011; 2015; 2016; 2020); Phyllis Teo (2016); Shuqin Cui (2016); Sasha Su-Ling Welland (2018); Monica Merlin (2019); Julia F. Andrews (2020) and Amanda Wangwright (2021), as well as that of emerging scholar Linda Pittwood (2019). Their work is repositioning women artists, shifting them from the margins of academic discourse, and a reconsidering their significance to the development of contemporary art in China. However, to date little attention has been paid specifically to the work of contemporary women artists who use ink and/or calligraphy in the experimental manner of internationally recognised male artists such as Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Yang Jiechang, Wu Shanzhuan or Qiu Zhijie, who attracted global attention in the late twentieth century. This study aims to contribute new understandings of how women artists insert a feminist or counter-patriarchal subjectivity into 'Experimental Ink' practices. Its particular contribution is the analysis of their work through a polyvocal and transcultural feminist theoretical framework that intersects with a critical examination of Chineseness, a fluid, performative identity that was discussed in the previous chapter.

The theoretical approach that informed the design of this study recognises the different histories of Chinese feminism, acknowledging that considerations of gender are imbricated with national or regional identity, age, and social class in identity formation. The work of feminist scholars from various disciplines informed the design of the study and the research method of transcultural encounters with artists and their works. Judith Butler's 'Gender Trouble' (1990), for example, dramatically reshaped ideas of gender as performative and culturally determined, a continuing process of enactment, thus challenging the essentialising views of female identity that troubled second-wave feminist theory. The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, now critiqued for its failure to recognise the struggles of non-white and non-Western women, aimed for a universalising and indeed an essentialising idea of womanhood. The utopian notion of a global sisterhood failed to acknowledge that experiences of gender are interconnected with experiences of class, race, culture and sexuality. Mari Mikkola (2019, p.171) cites

Spelman (1990, p.113): 'Since gender is socially constructed and social construction differs from one society to the next, womanhood is culturally specific. Females become particular kinds of women'. Essentialising understandings of womanhood and femininity recur in Chinese discussions of feminism, as we shall see, influenced in part by Daoist and Confucian philosophical traditions, as well as by a post-Cultural Revolution reaction against Maoist attempts to 'de-gender' women in the service of the state (discussed later in this chapter).

Considerations of the social construction of unfixed, culturally specific forms of the feminine suggested that 'Chineseness' as an identity formation might be understood as a similarly discursive practice. Rosi Braidotti's work on the nomadic subject and embodiment poses provocative questions in relation to the identity construction and deconstruction of the postcolonial subject in late capitalism, proposing that 'this subject actively yearns for and constructs itself in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations' (Braidotti, 2011, p.10). In conjunction with notions of a performative Chinese identity, shifting ideas about gender and identity construction informed the design of semi-structured interviews that elicited information about how artists enact an intersecting gendered and Chinese identity by means of their artwork.[2]

Further, this study is informed by the feminist art history that developed in the late twentieth century. The women's movement that emerged in the USA and Europe (and elsewhere, including Australia) in the late 1960s and 1970s – aligned, of course, with other radical movements – prompted the women's art movement that found its way into the academy via the streets and the grassroots consciousness raising of the time. The influential work of many scholars, most significantly Linda Nochlin, Lucy Lippard, Griselda Pollock, Roszika Parker and Maura Reilly constructed a theoretical framework and method for the academic discipline of feminist art history.[3] Parker and Pollock (1981) established a critique of the gendered biases of art history that had consistently ignored or devalued the significant achievements of women artists. Pollock's 1988 'Vision and Difference' served to further define the field. In her 2003 introduction to the revised edition of this pioneering text she distinguished feminist art history from the mere rehabilitation of female artists that had been an essential part of its earliest manifestations – and which is still, sadly, necessary today.

A project of reinvestigation and rehabilitation had begun with Linda Nochlin's provocative question, 'Why Are There No Great Women Artists?' in her essay of the same name (1971). It prompted feminist scholars to seek female artists who had been erased, had their work misattributed to men, and/or had been subject to the limiting gendered obstacles placed in the way of their access to materials, training, and patronage.[4] Pollock argued that such practices of restitution and representation, while important and necessary, will always be insufficient by themselves, and 'will always position artists who are women as marked, othered as *women* artists' (Pollock 2003, p.xx). Feminist art history must do more than re-insert women into the canon. It must, Pollock believed, radically challenge power relations and gendered societal and cultural structures and subjectivities. It is nothing less than a radicalisation of the discipline and 'a redefinition of the objects we are studying and the theories and methods with which we are doing it' (Pollock 2003, p.xxvii). This redefinition, and the development of theory and method that followed the feminist work of rediscovery and re-examination, positioned gender as a legitimate lens through which works of art could be examined.

With third and fourth wave feminist movements that shifted feminist theory towards recognition of the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, class and race, feminist art historians (influenced by – and influencing – global art history) questioned its Eurocentric focus. In particular, writing published around the 2008 *Global Feminisms* exhibition at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum curated by Nochlin and Maura Reilly provides an insight into efforts made by curators to acknowledge what Reilly describes as a 'new internationalism' that aimed to demonstrate the 'interconnectedness and the diversity of women's histories, experiences and struggles' (2018, pp.76-77). *Global Feminisms* included works by women from the non-Western 'periphery', including Chinese artists Lin Tianmiao, Yin Xiuzhen and He Chengyao. This well-meaning curatorial strategy risked making false equivalences between women operating from within vastly different contexts. The stated aim of the exhibition – to demonstrate both interconnectedness and diversity – was critiqued by Angela Dimitrakaki and Roberta Smith, among others, on the basis that the exhibition reinforced a surely unintended universality between women of entirely distinct geographies, cultures and histories.[5] Significant cultural and socio-political distinctions were concealed in *Global Feminisms* by the desire to communicate an ideal of universal sisterhood.

It is the contention of this thesis that no single feminist framework, whether originating from a 'Western'[6], non-Western, or indeed a Chinese source, provides a sufficiently nuanced way to understand the work of Chinese women artists who express ambivalence towards feminism yet produce work that may be interpreted as counter patriarchal. Concepts drawn from Euro-American feminist theory are, on their own, inadequate to the task of interpreting the work of women artists in/from China, who draw, consciously or unconsciously, from China's own long history of feminist theory and activism. The work of postcolonial scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha inevitably inflect the framing of the transcultural dialogues in this study, yet the resulting analysis is not delimited by any one theoretical discourse. Rather, this thesis draws upon developments of feminist travelling and translation theory in the work of Min Dongchao as much as upon Bhabha, Said or Spivak. It is underpinned by the '*nannü*' gender-making construct of Qing Dynasty anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen, and the 'subterranean' feminism proposed by cultural studies scholar Ella Shohat, as much as by the intersectional feminism of Chandra Mohanty or Kimberlé Crenshaw. This thesis, therefore, is grounded in three theoretical frameworks that are not usually woven together. Each framing theoretical 'lens' offers rich possibilities for interpreting aspects of the artists' works; used together they become a powerful interrogatory device capable of revealing surprising nuances of meaning as well as connecting the work of the four women who are the focus of case studies in Chapters 4–7.

Donna Haraway's (1994) metaphor of a 'cat's cradle' of intersecting coloured fibres – boundary-blurring and discipline-breaking theoretical positions and practices – is pertinent to my process of 'knitting', or knotting, theory. Intersecting threads of feminist theory are 'knotted' together in this study because, like Haraway's example, 'each of them does indispensable work for the project of dealing with sites of transformation, heterogeneous complexity, and complex objects' (Haraway 1994, p.63). As Lydia Liu, Dorothy Ko and Rebecca Karl argue in their translation of the work of He-Yin Zhen, the acknowledgement of 'discursive multiplicity in the global making of feminist theory is to allow the analytic categories to play against each other' (2013, p.12). Weaving Ella Shohat's (2001; 2002) postcolonial feminist proposition of a subterranean feminism that operates in non-Western contexts with Chinese anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen's (1907) gender/class category of *nannü*, overlaying these two feminist lenses with Min

Dongchao's (2014) alternate travelling theory enabled just such a useful 'play' of diverse analytic categories.

China's feminist history, which includes the modernising activists of the May Fourth Movement, the state-sponsored feminism of the Mao era, and late twentieth-century Euro-American feminist theory's travels to China and translation into Chinese (as well as more recent situated feminisms), illuminates the well-documented ambivalence of many Chinese women towards 'Western' feminism. The three distinct feminist theories that inform this study, with their different lineages, provide shifting, prismatic views of interwoven relationships between the artists, their work, and the world/s they inhabit and in which their work is seen. Viewed through this prism, the artists' works may be identified as counter-hegemonic interventions into a masculinist tradition of ink and calligraphy.

A singular Western feminist lens such as Shohat's, which is, despite its postcolonial credentials, derived from transnational feminist theory, provides only a partial, blurred illumination of the complex sociopolitical circumstances in which Chinese artists operate. Artists in China experience gender politics within the specific context of the Chinese contemporary art world. Their work is made and exhibited within a (still) patriarchal culture imbued with a history of neo-Confucian discourses around the nature of femininity. They operate within a (continuing) Marxist-Leninist paradigm of the social function of art ('for the people') that paradoxically coexists with their involvement in the global art market. Their work, inevitably, is also inflected with traumatic memories of China's recent past. Yet Shohat's notion of 'subterranean' feminism is pertinent in examining the work of artists who critically examine aspects of gender yet, wary of 'Western' feminism, frequently disavow a feminist intention.

A situated Chinese feminist theory, such as He-Yin Zhen's gendering category of *nannü*, illuminates the syncretic, non-rationalist Daoist/neo-Confucian traces evident in the work of contemporary artists in China. Yet, alone, *nannü*, a concept developed in the febrile, revolutionary atmosphere of the early twentieth century, informed by anarchism and Marxist class struggle as much as by classical Confucian cosmology, is inadequate to contemporary considerations of embodiment and materiality in artistic practice. When we weave the thread of Min Dongchao's 'Alternate Traveling Theory' into this feminist framework, however, it brings the resistance expressed by women in China to (Western)

feminism into sharper focus, positioning their work within the historical context of Mao-era 'de-gendering' and Reform and Opening era 're-gendering' – a process discussed later in this chapter.

Together, these woven strands of theory enable greater understanding of the situated Chinese identity of the '*nüxing yishujia*' (woman artist), a gendered categorisation that emerged in the 1990s in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms and the translation of feminist texts into Chinese. No single feminist theory is adequate to unravelling these complex and sometimes contradictory threads. Knotted together, they become the 'intersecting and often coconstitutive threads of analysis' promoted by Haraway (1994, p.63), with the potential to 'collapse into each other in a knot of extraordinary density.' Their connections and entanglements allow possibilities for interpreting nuances of meaning in the artists' works, and analysis of the interview encounters, that would not otherwise be easily revealed. The strengths and limitations of each of the theoretical positions that underpin the analysis of their work, and the rationale for an interwoven framework, are elucidated sequentially in more detail in the following sections of the chapter.

2.2 Entangled Threads

2.2.1 'Subterranean' Feminism

Postcolonial cultural theorist Ella Shohat's concept of 'subterranean feminism' developed in an unstable post-September 11 world in which 'liberal' theories of multiculturalism were challenged and old Manichaean binaries re-asserted. She aimed to reinforce transnational feminist critiques of knowledge production, fearing that issues of significance to women would otherwise be quarantined in discursive geographic silos that assumed a (Western) centre and (non-Western) peripheries. In her case against 'Eurocentric identity designations' and definitional, disciplinary boundaries of feminist theory, Shohat argues that:

> Any serious analysis has to begin from the premise that genders, sexualities, races, classes, nations, and even continents exist not as hermetically sealed entities but, rather, as part of a set of permeable, interwoven relationships (Shohat 2001, p.1269).

In the context of the violent geopolitical convulsion of the 'war on terror' Shohat's interdisciplinary, multicultural feminism emphasised connections between the academic

study of race, gender, sexuality and postcolonialism. She aimed to rearticulate the feminist struggle as a web of relational connectivity to create a set of discursive practices based on 'personal and communitarian interlocution, an interlocution situated in historical time and geographical space' (Shohat 2002, p.70). The significance of Shohat's work to this study lies in her acknowledgement that a feminist historiography that traces a linear path – from pre-modernity, to modernity, to postmodernity – fails to recognise the involvement of women in anti-colonial and anti-racist movements outside the West as forms of feminism. She argues that the late twentieth-century crisis of modernity helped to shape a different kind of feminism that is not tied exclusively to Enlightenment narratives: 'Multicultural feminists have to disinter stories of survival from the rubble of the master narrative of progress' (Shohat 2002, p.75).

In the context of Chinese feminism, emancipatory movements during the late Qing and Republican periods were certainly aligned to Euro-American modernity, yet the picture thereafter is considerably more complex. Shohat's insistence upon recognising feminism as 'a polysemic site of contradictory positionalities' (Shohat 2002, p.68) resonates with the ambiguous position often expressed by Chinese women towards feminism (Cui 2020). Shohat's critique of a narrative that defines feminism as emerging from Euro-American modernity influenced the design and implementation of this study, as did her acknowledgement that in non-Western contexts sometimes the very word 'feminism' provokes hostility (Shohat 1998, p.19).

Shohat's proposal of a 'subterranean' feminism possessed of the power to shift the tectonic plates of patriarchy is seductive. Yet an intersectional multicultural feminism produced within the North American academy and focused upon women's struggles in the Middle East is somewhat unsuited to the Chinese Mainland context of this study. Shohat's 'relational multiculturalism' does not sufficiently illuminate complex intersections of culture and power in China. Nor is the issue of class and its intersection with gender sufficiently addressed by Shohat's examination of *fin-de-siecle* globalisation. Class is resonant within the Chinese context, both historically in its Marxist-Leninist intellectual lineage and in today's culture in which parentage, family history, and rural/urban disparities of wealth and educational opportunity are ever more obvious markers of wealth and status. Yet class is often barely visible in discourses of contemporary art. Therefore, over the course of this study it became increasingly evident that Euro-

American theories of intersectionality and relationality such as Shohat's, while important and useful, were insufficient alone as an interrogatory lens to examine the work of contemporary Chinese women artists. A deeper investigation of the history of Chinese feminisms was essential to the framing of this research.

2.2.2 *Nannü:* a Modernist Radical Feminism

An examination of the history of feminism in China reveals the significance of an early twentieth-century writer and activist, emerging from the anarchist and socialist movements of her modernising circles in Japan and China. He-Yin Zhen's polemical publications in 1907 dissected the subordination of women in feudal Chinese society and identified a category of gendered oppression grounded in syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian patriarchy that she labelled '*nannü*' (literally translated as 'man, woman' or 'male, female'). Linked to Daoist cosmological notions of *yin-yang* reciprocity, when juxtaposed with subterranean feminism *nannü* provides rich opportunities to understand the work of artists in a habitus inflected by traditional Chinese thought and influenced by the 'Three Teachings' (*san jiao*) of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

Despite their differences, the blending of these teachings over time resulted in a syncretic philosophical tradition in which the relationship between humanity and nature, and the stability of a harmonious social order, are believed to be governed by complex cosmological forces. As the oldest of these teachings, Daoism focused on achieving balance between 'alternating complementary and contrasting ideas such as night and day, masculine and feminine, *yin* and *yang*. Without yin, there is no yang; one must have the other' (Paracka 2012, p.75). Concepts of *yin* and *yang* are deeply rooted in Chinese cosmology. Waxing and waning, destructive and generative, the one always on the verge of transforming the other, *yin* and *yang* embody the natural world and its relationship to heaven:

> Yin and yang constantly complement each other ... transform each other, and transmute into each other, in an ongoing process .... Winter, which is yin, changes into summer, which is yang. Both yin and yang can create, both can destroy (Sjoo and Mor 1987, pp.63-64).

Confucian and Daoist traditions in Chinese philosophy, whilst ascribing value differently to *yin* and *yang*, each see them as integral, generative and complementary parts of a whole, in the mutually reciprocal, dynamic relationship of everything in the universe. Their connection to actual gendered hierarchical power structures continues to be debated, however, both Daoist and Confucian texts explicitly relate *yin* and *yang* to maleness and femaleness. For example, in a text by Han Dynasty Confucian Dong Zhongshu (195-115 BCE) cited by Lijian Shen and Paul D'Ambrosio (2021, para 4) we find:

> *Yin* and *yang* of the heavens and the earth [which together refer to the cosmos] should be male and female, and the male and female should be *yin* and *yang*. Thereby, *yin* and *yang* can be called male and female, and male and female can be called *yin* and *yang*.

There is a strand of scholarship (most significantly in the work of Eva Kit Wah Man) that argues Daoist and Confucian cosmological *yin-yang* relationships may be interpreted as resonant with poststructuralist feminist discourses, or at least as suggestive of complementarity and interdependence. However, there is no doubt that historically they were frequently mobilised to support patriarchal inequities of power between men and women (Saldanha 2021 p.155). It is this connection between non-rationalist Daoism and its employment as justification for female subservience to which He-Yin Zhen directed her critical appraisal of classical Chinese literature and her construct of *nannü.* He-Yin saw the patriarchal subjugation of women as a global phenomenon. Influenced by her anarchist and Marxist intellectual circles, she identified women as an oppressed class. The translation of her theoretical writings into English in 2013 by Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko significantly raised awareness of these early developments in Chinese feminism – and, indeed, aimed towards re-envisioning global feminist theory.

As a founding editor of Tokyo-based anarcho-feminist journal *Tianyi Bao* (*Natural Justice*), He-Yin's theory of gender was informed by her classical education in syncretic Daoist/Confucian precepts and texts that she identified as the source of women's oppression. Liu, Karl and Ko (2013, p.9) explain that in a period of social and linguistic change at the start of the twentieth century, He-Yin, distinct from other early feminist writers, positioned '"woman" as a trans-historical global category –not of subjective identity but of structured unequal social relations' that were 'constituted through scholarship, ritual, law and social and labor practices over time'. He-Yin saw this

systemic disadvantage operating in China in her own period of imperialist capitalist modernity and argued that it was the basis of social organisation globally – everywhere and always.

He-Yin rejected the simplistic oppositional binary of tradition versus modernity espoused by early Chinese feminist writers such as Jin Tianhe, which upheld traditional syncretic Confucian ideas of social development.[7] In contrast, she called for a 'total social revolution that would abolish the state and private property to bring about true social equality and the end to all social hierarchies' (Liu et al. 2013, p.7).[8] She insisted that a past-present temporal structure of ongoing female oppression was underpinned by scholarly knowledge, the apparatus of the state and its legal system, and by the subjugation of women in the Confucian family, such that the mere banning of foot-binding, attainment of suffrage and access to education demanded by other reformers would not free women from oppression (Karl 2012). He-Yin's anarchist feminism emerged from her immersion in a culture of philosophical Daoism – links between Daoist thought and anarchism are well established (Rapp 2012).[9] Her revolutionary circle living in exile in Tokyo in the first decade of the twentieth century opposed nationalism, militarism, superstition, traditional morality, and even the institution of the family, that bedrock of Confucian social harmony and propriety (Zarrow 1988).

In contrast to He-Yin Zhen's contention that women's oppression was legitimised by Chinese philosophy and scholarship, Eva Kit Wah Man (2016) argues that the mutually generative/destructive, complementary forces of *yin* and *yang* are of interest to feminists looking towards non-Cartesian models of embodiment. While acknowledging to some extent its inherently patriarchal – indeed misogynist – subordination of women in relation to dominant syncretic Confucianism, Man proposes that Confucian cosmological understandings found in Mencius' theory of aesthetics form an alternative ontology. The notion 'that all things and processes in the world move towards balance and harmony, even if there are changes and transformations' (2016, p.16) suggests the desire, if not the realisation, for an interconnecting, fluxing and ultimately harmonious relationship between masculine *yang* and feminine *yin*. Judith Chuan Xu, similarly, argues that the mutually reciprocal, non-dichotomous female and male cosmological principle found in the Dao 'offers post-structuralist feminists a new horizon for transcending the patriarchy of gender dichotomy' (2003, p.50). In their view the ideal of complementarity,

equilibrium and harmony achieved by the reconciliation of tension between *yin* and *yang* principles represents a non-hierarchical model of the universe which potentially transcends fixed binaries of gender.

This thesis argues that it is difficult to separate 'the patriarchal paradigm carried out in social relations' (Man 2015, p.29) from a reading of Mencius that suggests a harmonious world view. What results for counter-patriarchal artists such as those in this study is an irreconcilable paradox between the generative complementarity of the *yin-yang* relationship and the lived reality of patriarchal social structures. This *nannü* paradox is made visible in their work, embodied in their material choices as much as their intended themes or subject matter, suggesting a traditionally Confucian belief in the transformational capacity of art, a process in which mind and body collaborate (Man 2016). Yet, a yearning for this integrated relationship between *yin* and *yang* coexists in their work with the (sometimes undeclared) acknowledgement that the Confucian patriarchal authoritarianism that kept women subservient to men is still operative in the contemporary world. A tension thus emerges between the cultural and historically influenced specificity of the artists' works and their responses to feminism – and how they are positioned and position themselves in the global art ecology of curated 'feminist' exhibitions of contemporary art.

Given its grounding in – and critique of – classical Chinese scholarship, He-Yin's theory of *nannü* is a useful lens through which to examine aspects of the work of women artists working with ink, itself an embodied practice profoundly imbued with Chinese spiritual, scholarly and artistic histories. *Nannü* has been employed as an interrogatory lens by other feminist scholars, including Sasha Su-Ling Welland in her ethnographic study of women artists in Beijing (2018), and by Linda Pittwood in her investigation of the embodied feminine in the work of both female- and male-identifying Chinese artists (2019). It proved a valuable theoretical framework for the investigation of women artists working with ink and calligraphic text forms in this study. He-Yin's concept of *nannü jie* (*nannü* class) in its reiteration of symbolic social orders and power structures that include rural/urban divides and the dominant (gendered) narratives of the artworld enriched Welland's analysis of networks of (gendered) relationships in the Beijing artworld during the dynamic, transformational years leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Pittwood's doctoral research links *nannü* with Foucault's theory of 'Biopower' in the construction of

'woman' and 'binary gendered categories of persons' in contemporary Chinese art (2019, p.75). In this study, however, the concept is used differently: He-Yin's (1907) analysis of a female subordination legitimised by Chinese classical scholarship illuminates discernible traces of Daoist cosmology and Confucian aesthetics in the work of contemporary artists. These traces underpin their understandings of gendered relationships of *yin* and *yang*, thus imbricating gender and Chineseness in their work, and hence also inform how feminist or counter-patriarchal art practices are shaped in China.

This thesis argues that gender, class and Chinese identities are inextricably bound together and undergoing a continuous process of reinvention. To view the work of Chinese women artists through a prism of He-Yin's *nannü*, additionally inflected by Shohat's theory of subterranean feminism, is to glimpse new understandings of its seeming paradoxes. Interwoven, the analytic categories construct lived meaning/s for the artist that are communicated to others via the vehicle of their artwork. Contradictions between contemporary feminism and essentialising views of 'womanhood', or between nostalgic assertions of Chinese national identity and a strategic navigation of the global art ecology are brought into a sharper focus. By itself, in the context of a post-socialist, post-globalised twenty-first century contemporaneity, *nannü* will take us only so far – it is, after all, a theoretical framework developed in the context of a modernising, early twentieth-century urban world. Woven together with the intersectional and relational concept of subterranean feminism, however, the complex nature of gendered artistic languages and the push and pull of seemingly irreconcilable positions in which past and present are constantly in play are seen in sharper focus.

2.2.3 Lost in Translation? Feminism that Travels

As historians Dorothy Ko and Wang Zhen assert, Chinese feminism 'is always already a global discourse and the history of its local reception is a history of the politics of translation' (2007, p.463). Therefore, the third interrogatory lens woven into this polyvocal framework is derived from the work of feminist translation scholars, including most pertinently the work of Min Dongchao (2005; 2007; 2014; 2017). In China, a dialogue with a global feminist movement – so active in the early twentieth century, and particularly during the May Fourth Movement – had begun anew in the 1980s and 1990s. In dialogue with Shohat's subterranean feminism and the gendering *nannü* category, therefore, theories of translation inflect the analysis of feminist positionality in this thesis.

Translations of theory from one temporal/spatial, linguistic/cultural locus to another are never unproblematic. In a foreword to a special issue of *Yishu Journal* in 2003, Sasha Su-Ling Welland quotes literary critic Lydia Liu's argument: accounts of the role of theory in the Euro-American feminist movement neglected influences from non-Western sources, 'from Algerian debates about the polities of the female body, from the Chinese land reform movement's use of female personal narrative… That is, how is feminist theory actively and continually created, against much evidence, as a Western thing?' (Liu cited in Welland 2003, p.5). Further, Welland recalls how Chinese feminist Li Xiaojiang expressed deep unease with the imported slogan 'the personal is political', given that in China since 1949 every aspect of daily life, including marriage and family relationships, was politicised by the state. This singular example of travelling theory poses an important question for cross-cultural research: 'When does foreign theoretical locution attract or repel; how does translation involve seduction, rejection, and erasure; and who gets left out of the loop on what occasions?' (Welland 2003, p.5).

These challenging questions underpinned the framing of the bi-lingual, translated and re-translated semi-structured interviews with the artists in this study, and the analysis of the resulting data. During encounters in their studios, and later in interpreting the interview transcripts, I spent considerable time re-examining my own assumptions, reframing the artists' responses in the light of situated Chinese feminist history, theory and practice. However, there will always be misunderstandings and slippages of translation – loose threads, if you like. And there are methodological challenges in using interviews to collect primary research data. Analysing his series of artist interviews in China, Paul Gladston enumerates these:

> […] problems of reconstructive memory, localised discursive limitations on freedom of expression and resistance to extrinsic cultural perspectives, their reception is also open to continual deconstructive refractions of meaning brought about by cultural as well as linguistic translation (Gladston 2014, p.22).

Considerations of the role of translation in transcultural research are foreshadowed, of course, by Homi Bhabha: 'Any transnational cultural study must "translate", each time locally and specifically, what decentres and subverts this transnational globality' (1994, p. 241). It should be noted, however, that Bhabha's deconstructive approach contrasts with the syncretic neo-Confucian approach to transcultural reciprocity that recurs throughout

this study. My particular interest was in whether and how feminist translation theory might illuminate – or, perhaps, further problematise – the previously mentioned theoretical and methodological issues that arise in a study that crosses languages and cultures.

Part of a cross-disciplinarity reshaping research in a number of fields, the theory and practice of feminist translation developed initially in Quebec in the 1980s, where women writers and translators challenged dominant patriarchal linguistic discourses, critically re-examining gender and identity in relation to language. Issues of gender and translation have been analysed by scholars including Sherry Simon (1996), Luise von Flotow (1997), Jose Santaemilia (2005) and Doris Bachman-Medick (2014). De Lima Costa and Alvarez (2014, p.557), position translation as 'central to cultural theory – especially for feminism.' They argue that translation is 'a process of opening up the self to the other'. To work across languages, then, is 'to live in the interstice, to be perennially displaced' (2014, p.557). Bachmann-Medick (2014) contends that the postcolonial theory of Said or Bhabha insufficiently critiques falsely universalising assumptions, and therefore limits engagement with non-Western research subjects/participants. The kind of in-between thinking offered by feminist translation theory – having abandoned ideas of faithfully replicating an original text – provides ways to think about transformation, alterity, displacement, conflict and power.

Problems of translation between English and Chinese and consequent transcultural linguistic slippages were the subject of case studies in Min Dongchao's (2017) 'Translation and Travelling Theory: Feminist Theory and Praxis in China', the culmination of her involvement in the debates around the translation of feminist theoretical texts into Chinese since the 1980s. Min's work examines the conflicts that arose with the first translations of second- and third-wave Western feminist theoretical texts into Chinese.[10] Min (2017, p.2) positions issues of translation as a hidden set of power relations. She problematises Said's (1983) work on theory's travels, pointing out that 'theories from the East and South, from the periphery, have been excluded from theory', arguing that they are often labelled as something other than (lesser than) theory, marginalised as case studies or examples, (2017, p.3). Asking what questions feminist translators should pose in crossing linguistic barriers between cultures, challenging previously accepted notions of 'equivalence' and 'faithfulness', Min (2017) draws on the

concept of cultural 'untranslateability' including the inevitable incompleteness and occasionally irreconcilable contradictions within cross-cultural dialogue that are precursors to constructing shared understanding.

Min's analysis of the impact of translation on feminist theory and practice in China led her to propose an 'alternate traveling theory' linking the dissemination of feminism in China during the post-Cultural Revolution period to the impacts of globalisation and neo-liberalism (Min 2007). She argues persuasively that gender theory (imported from Europe and the USA with the arrival in China of NGOs and university women's studies departments in the 1990s, disseminated by influential diasporic scholars) was initially accepted as it posed no challenge to 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics': in effect, as it entered the academy and the newly established women's studies departments in Chinese universities, feminism was de-radicalised and de-politicised (Min 2007).

The translation of feminist texts from English to Chinese is made more complex by non-linguistic issues of history and politics. Min points out, for example, that the term 'feminism' has a long history in China: it was translated into Chinese at the turn of the twentieth century when it entered China (as '*nüquan zhuyi'* – women's power or rights + ism) along with the suffragette movement. Ko and Wang (2007) point out that *nüquan zhuyi* today has distinctly pejorative associations. The 'softer' translation proposed in the 1990s, and widely adopted in preference, '*nüxing zhuyi*' (femininity + ism), emphasised gender difference rather than women's rights, and implies an essentialising femininity. It reflects a view of 'woman' that uncoupled feminism from political struggle (including class struggle). In the context of a post-Cultural Revolution reclamation of gender distinctions Min (2017, p.44) cites a 1993 interview with the writer Wang Anyi:

> In China women are only now beginning to have the right, the luxury, to talk about differences between men and women, to enjoy something that distinguishes women from men. That is the reason I absolutely deny I am a feminist.

Different terms for 'feminism' and 'gender' appeared, vanished, and reappeared throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in response to cultural and political shifts. In the light of this linguistic slipperiness, Min argues, the figure of the translator must emerge from the shadows, understood as an active agent in the travels of theories and concepts (Min 2007).

'Knitted' together with 'subterranean feminism' and the *nannü* category of gendered oppression, feminist travelling/translation theory became the third influential framework for this study. Powerful in its prismatic relationship with subterranean feminism and *nannü*, the contested history of feminism's travels from 'West' to 'East', carried by the trade winds of globalisation, neo-liberalism and the postcolonial discursive disciplines of the academy, constructs an entangled, polysemic scaffolding upon which interpretations of intersecting relationships and representations of gender and Chineseness in the contemporary Chinese artworld could be built. Having outlined the theoretical framing of the study, the following section places the study within the historical contexts of gender politics, feminism, and feminist art in China.

2.3 Chinese feminism, feminist art, and the politics of gender

The aforementioned 'knitted' framework comprising three distinct theoretical positions is also knitted together with, and underpinned by, the traditions and practices of feminist art history. This section of the chapter will compare particular iterations of Chinese and Euro-American feminism/s and examine how they have manifested in artistic practice and its surrounding discourses in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Feminist theory developed in China at the end of the Qing Dynasty; it accelerated with Western modernist influences[11] during the Republican period and the creation of the *xin nüxing* ('new woman') and became state policy after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Scholar of Chinese gender history Louise Edwards (2000) challenges the misconceived notion that feminism in China began in 1949 – that under socialism, in Mao's oft-repeated but probably apocryphal words, women would finally be acknowledged to 'hold up half the sky',[12] revealing that at the start of the twentieth century the 'woman question' (*funü wenti*) occupied a central role in discussions of modernising China. In discourses around issues of gender in China which inflect forms of cultural production the work of researchers from various disciplines is of great significance: in addition to Louise Edwards these scholars include Harriet Evans, Tani E. Barlow, Dorothy Ko, Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, Fei-wen Liu, Eva Kit Wah Man, Phyllis Teo, Shuqin Cui, Sasha Su-Ling Welland, Peggy Wang, Louise Edwards and Amanda Wangwright. Their work – and that of others where appropriate – is cited throughout this and the following chapter in relation to the development of this study and its theoretical and methodological framing.

2.3.1 *Nüxing Zhuyi:* Chinese Feminism

As women became more involved in the early twentieth-century reform movements that preceded and followed the fall of the Qing Dynasty, they began to demand full participation in public life. By the establishment of the Republic in 1912 women were already visible revolutionaries and suffragists (Bailey 2012). Edward s' (2008) analysis of early twentieth century campaigns for female suffrage reveals a struggle for equal participation in nation-building that differs from Euro-American experiences. The decline of the weakened Qing Dynasty in the 1890s was laid by modernising male reformers such as Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe at the feet of uneducated women. Male feminist writers such as Liang and Jin tended to lament the 'backwardness' of uneducated, footbound women in contrast to the 'liberated' new women of America and Europe (Karl 2012). Perhaps the best-known late Qing feminist was cross-dressing poet Qiu Jin (1875–1907) whose advocacy of dynastic overthrow and female emancipation resulted in her execution by the Qing state in 1907 (Kucharski 2016). In the same year He-Yin Zhen published 'On the Liberation of Women' and 'The Revenge of Women'. Thus, feminist theory in China emerged simultaneously with notions of modernity and a rejection of feudalism, in opposition to decaying imperial state power.

A historical examination of gender discourses in China reveals specific local conditions and situated histories that have shaped contemporary Chinese feminisms. In their translation and analysis of the work of He-Yin Zhen, Liu et al (2013) claim that the birth of Chinese feminism was of a global significance that has not yet been fully understood – and certainly to date there has been little scholarly investigation of the impact of this history on the work of artists.[13] In her published writings in *Tianyi Bao* He-Yin condemned neo-Confucian teachings that positioned women as subordinate; her close textual analysis preceded the Doubting Antiquity School which challenged the authenticity of historical sources during the New Culture Movement.[14] In 'On the Revenge of Women' (1907), for example, she argued that 'the tyranny of men's rule is manifest in the entire scholastic tradition of China' (Liu et al. 2013, p.122). At the same time, He-Yin denounced as equally oppressive the gendered power structures of imperialist, capitalist modernity. Understanding the world from within her own spatial/temporal context, she proposed a radical feminist materialism that re-imagined gendered power relations – globally. Her theory of a gendering category/class of *nannü*

continues to be a significant way of understanding patriarchal systems and structures of power operating in China today.

In a deeply patriarchal culture focused on nation-building, the early feminist movement (espoused for the most part by an intellectual élite who admired American and European modernity) enjoyed little popular support, viewed as unrepresentative of the concerns of ordinary people (Edwards 2008). Min Dongchao argues, therefore, that 'it was not surprising that it lost its momentum when the May Fourth movement fell apart' (Min 2017, p.18). After 1949 the modern *xin nüxing* of the New Culture and May Fourth Movements gave way to the de-emphasis – even repression – of gender difference: 'Iron Girls' – strong women forging the socialist future – were promoted as the ideal female archetype (Zhong 2006). Viewed through a socialist lens, the New Culture Movement was derided as 'bourgeois feminism' and relegated to historiographical obscurity. Feminists were critiqued as an élite unconcerned with key issues of land reform and wealth redistribution (Edwards, 2008). The explicit policy of the state became the erasure of traditional 'feudal' gender distinctions and the equal participation of women in the great socialist project.[15] Feminism (not as the earlier *nüquan zhuyi* but as *nannü pingdeng*, or gender equality) became enmeshed in, but always secondary to, the utopian visions of the Chinese Communist Party. In her cogent analysis of the construction of feminine/masculine ideals in modern Chinese literature, Lydia Liu explains how 'official feminism' became integral to the Socialist state:

> The image of the liberated daughter and the figure of the strong female party leader celebrated in the literature of socialist realism are invented for the purpose of abolishing the patriarchal discriminatory construction of gender, but they end up denying difference to women (Liu 2002, p.150).

This 'denial of difference' became a leitmotif in debates around the translation of American and European feminist texts into Chinese in the later twentieth century. By the late 1970s and early 1980s the gender equality of the previous 30 years was being re-evaluated: while the communist regime had succeeded in 'weaving women into the new economic and social fabric, it also reinforced the political dependence of women upon the state' (Min 2017, p.19). Min's analysis of Euro-American feminist theory's travels to China in the late twentieth century explains how binary notions of gender were

reconstructed rather than dismantled (Min 2017, pp.122-23). The post-1978 Reform and Opening period was characterised by attempts by state-controlled media to return to traditional notions of the feminine ideal; now, however, the ideal woman was required to be well-educated and self-supporting as well as virtuous and selfless (Bailey 2012). In the new model of capitalist consumerism, Dorothy Ko and Wang Zhen argue:

> The robust working-class body of the Iron Girl is scorned by the urban elites as the symbol of Maoist ultra-leftist gender policy that distorted women's supposedly feminine nature and thereby masculinised women. Criticising gender uniformity as a symptom of Maoist statist domination, the urban elites advocate a biologically determined notion of gender difference predicated on an essentialised femininity. (2007, p.470).

The essentialised, even performative, femininity identified by Ko and Wang plays out in various ways in popular culture, influenced by the CCP which controls access to education, health and reproductive policies, and the (notoriously sexist) policies of Chinese workplaces. For example, Leta Hong Fincher's work in bringing the politics of the marriage market – and the term '*sheng nü' (*'leftover woman') meaning an over-educated, unmarried woman – to a non-Chinese readership has raised awareness of the intersection of finance, mass media, and agencies of the state in contemporary constructions of gender in China (Hong Fincher 2014). The reclamation of gender difference that seemed to women a much-desired outcome after the state-mandated gender uniformity of the Mao era is now aligned with the CCP's recent recognition of the disastrous results of the One Child Policy and a new emphasis on the role of women as child-bearers and nurturers.[16]

In recent years, groups of younger feminist activists emerged in China, using social media to organise against issues such as sexual harassment.[17] Their chosen forms of activism, including street theatre and performance art, as well as a presence on social media, distinguish them from an earlier generation who had pinned their hopes on the work of women-focused charities, NGOs, and attempts to influence government policy. These young activists placed feminism firmly back in the political realm and as a consequence the forceful apparatus of the state has been brought to bear to silence their voices (Hong Fincher 2018). By 2015, when the 'Feminist Five' were arrested and detained, a reluctance to publicly espouse the feminist label was a pragmatic form of self-preservation and an avoidance of 'trouble'. 'Me Too' and LGTBQI activists can be – and

have been – detained on charges of 'picking quarrels and making trouble', a crime under article 293 of the 1997 revision of the People's Republic of China's Penal Code that carries a maximum prison sentence of five years.[18]

Today, a situated Chinese feminism reconceptualises its history and critically reconsiders the roots of transnationalism and intersectionality in Western neo-liberal discourses, seeking more authentic expressions of grassroots activism (Liu et al. 2015). Long unrecognised by Euro-American commentators, the history of feminism in China is being re-evaluated by scholars and activists. As yet, however, little scholarly attention has been paid to nuanced analysis of how Chinese women understood and enacted feminist theory in relation to art practice; and few texts produced around exhibitions of women's art in the 1990s have been translated, hence have not as yet impacted discourses outside China.[19] Yet issues of gender are embodied in complex, diverse, and culturally situated ways in the practice of contemporary women artists. The final section of this chapter examines the impact of this history on the work of women artists who emerged in the post-Mao period into a globalising art economy, and how culturally embedded notions of gender shape their work.

2.3.2 *Nüxing Yishu* and Feminist Art

The term *nüxing yishu* (literally 'woman art') sometimes implies a feminist intent, but at other times it conveys an essentialising notion of womanhood, as Monica Merlin (2018) argued in a paper presented at the Tate Modern symposium on gender in contemporary Chinese art.[20] The term, which gained popularity during the 1990s, tends to silo the work of women artists in a separate sphere, marginalising them in the narratives of contemporary art that developed inside and outside China after the Cultural Revolution. Feminist art occupies a problematic position in China. Shuqin Cui, for instance, argues that, despite the pioneering work of feminist critics and curators such as Liao Wen and Xu Hong, 'Few Chinese women artists would welcome the label of feminist art or categorize their work as feminist art even if the feminist dimensions of their work were clearly evident.' (Cui 2020, p.6). Gladston (2020, p.29) provides a possible explanation for this reluctance: 'Any direct alignment with Western(ized) feminist discourses is still widely dismissed by younger as well as older Chinese artists and curators as an abiding colonialist-imperialist imposition.' This is particularly evident in the current atmosphere of increasing Chinese exceptionalism. However, there are additional complex reasons for

this hostility towards feminism, analysed in the work of feminist scholars such as Peggy Wang, Phyllis Teo, Shuqin Cui, Monica Merlin and Sasha Su-Ling Welland.[21] This section of the chapter examines *nüxing yishu* and its exhibition history. As the study is positioned within the field of Chinese contemporary art and its existing scholarship, significant contributions to the field more broadly are also outlined in this section. Firstly, the issue of feminist art in China is framed by the work of influential art historians and critics and positioned within the historiography of contemporary art in China after the Cultural Revolution. Secondly, an examination of feminist artworks, exhibitions and influential texts reveals the opportunity for new scholarship to which this thesis hopes to contribute.

Chinese contemporary art as a distinct subject of research and scholarship is enriched by comprehensive historical accounts and critical analyses of the rise of the contemporary avant-garde and its later developments in the work of scholars including most significantly Michael Sullivan, Lü Peng, Li Xianting, Gao Minglu, Wu Hung, and Paul Gladston, although, as discussed in Chapter 1, the contribution of female artists has been neglected or marginalised in a number of these accounts. Michael Sullivan's art historical analysis of Chinese modern art, informed by interviews and correspondence with Chinese artists, 'Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century' (1959), and the following 'A Short History of Chinese Art' (1967), introduced the subject to readers in Europe and America. A later text, 'The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art' (1989) is described by Paul Gladston (2020, p.5) as an attempt to develop 'a transcultural understanding of intersecting economies of cultural production', an attempt which in Gladston's view is significant but 'overly speculative'.[22]

Li Xianting, from his active role as art critic and curator within the unfolding artistic dialogues in Beijing in the 1980s, places the development of contemporary art in China as a reinstatement of the interrupted modernisation of the May Fourth Movement. He argues that Chinese contemporary art developed in response to Western influences but has adapted and transformed those influences in 'a cultural dialectic between China and the West marked by a pattern of mutual influence and change' (Li 1993, p.x). Gao Minglu, similarly, connects late twentieth century artists' questions of how to manage Western influences as a direct continuum with their May Fourth predecessors, interrupted by Mao (2010 pp.52–61). In contrast, Lü Peng (2012, p.23) cogently – and more critically –

situates the emergent avant-garde at the end of the twentieth century within the context of globalisation and the consequent ruptures within Chinese society at all levels that 'led to the rise of a peculiar new form of nationalism (statism) among some intellectuals', who vigorously promoted so-called 'Chinese values'. Although they were far from mainstream at that time, Lü (2012, p.23) argues that 'these generally infectious views have persisted to this day'. This back-and-forth between embracing and adapting 'Western' artistic influences and returning to Chinese traditions is a feature of the discourse over the last 30 years. Indeed, in discussing the rise of so-called 'New Literati Painting', Chen Anying (2011, p.61) refers to 'the tendency of Chinese intellectuals to revert to tradition'.

Oscillating and sometimes contradictory views about the nature and significance of the various influences shaping the direction of contemporary art are evident in the work of Chinese and non-Chinese scholars and commentators alike. Paul Gladston's (2014; 2020) position is distinct from that of Gao Minglu and Wu Hung; he argues persuasively that Chinese contemporary art must be understood, not only in relation to China's globalised modernity but also as a resistant assertion of localised cultural identity in a homogenising artworld. Gladston speaks of a 'fluid commingling of otherwise conceptually resistant "modernist" and "postmodernist" discourses and practices commensurate in its seemingly unreconcilable diversity with the factionalism of contemporaneity' (2020, p.16). Examination of the contribution of female artists to contemporary art in China – marginalised in the scholarly discourse – reveals similar forces at play. As we shall see, their work reveals uneasy juxtapositions of resistant expressions of Chineseness with globalist feminist discourses and internationalist art practices.

Peggy Wang (2013), Phyllis Teo (2016), and Shuqin Cui (2016) argue that the work of contemporary women artists was defined by curators and critics – and often by the artists themselves – in essentialising ways. Cui, for example, argues that critical analysis of the work of Chinese women artists who emerged in the 1990s tended to focus on its perceived interiority and emotiveness. She characterises the curation and critical reception of exhibitions of art by women within China in the 1990s and the early 2000s as 'entangled in misconceptions' about feminism and female-ness (2016, pp.4–5). Sasha Su-Ling Welland, from her position as a feminist ethnographer 'at the intersection of anthropology, art history and gender studies' (2018, p.23) concurs with Wang, Teo, and Cui, concluding that women artists at the turn of the century 'found their work contained

within a new domesticating and marginalizing category of *nüxing yishu* (feminine or women's art)' (2018, p.16). This presented – and presents – a predicament for women who did not wish their work to be viewed solely through a lens of gender, as well as for those who were grappling with translated concepts of feminist theory.

Women-only exhibitions in China have often been poorly documented or subject to censorship, resulting in an absence of authoritative scholarship around how women artists have responded to feminist theory and practice. There are, however, some important exceptions. In 1999, curator and critic Liao Wen published 'Feminism as Method' *(Nüxingzhuyi zuowei fangshi* – sadly long out of print),[23] an art historical survey that examined women artists in Imperial, Reform Era and Maoist China, and incorporated a discussion of Western female artists as an introduction to the section covering 1990s China. Thus, as Welland (2018, p.163) argues, she establishes 'Western art history as the road out (*chulu*) of the past for contemporary Chinese women.' In 2002, following a sojourn in the United States, 'No More Nice Girls: Interviews with American Feminist Critics and Artists' included Liao's interviews with notable feminists including the Guerrilla Girls, Lucy Lippard, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (Liao 2002). Artist, critic, and curator Xu Hong's excoriating condemnation of a patriarchal artworld in her 1994 article 'Walking Out of the Abyss: My Feminist Critique' provides compelling evidence of a short-lived but intense Chinese artworld interest in feminism in the 1990s (Xu 2010). [24]

Taking gender as a societal construction and a symbol of unequal relationships of power, artists, curators and critics in China in the 1990s had begun to explore themes and ideas of significance to women (including, for example, sexual desire and childbirth). Cui cites three significant voices in the field of feminist art criticism who each interpreted the rise of *nüxing yishu* differently. Firstly, Liao Wen named women's art as *nüxing fangshi* (female method or approach); women artists, she argued, inevitably made gender-specific work due to the social and cultural constructions within which they lived and worked. Xu Hong, secondly, directly challenged the patriarchal discourses of the artworld, encouraging women to actively fight to make themselves heard. Thirdly, Tao Yongbai took a different view and argued against gender distinctions in art, believing that art was (or should be) sexless. She suggested that both male and female artists should liberate themselves from gendered stereotypes and instead seek harmony and individual freedom

(Cui 2020, pp.6–7), a Confucianist view that contains within it the essential paradox of Daoist-inflected *yin-yang* harmony. Each of these distinct positions arises from a different aspect of late twentieth century China. Liao Wen, for example, identifies the desire of female artists after the Cultural Revolution to retreat from public discourses of socialism into the private sphere (Liao 2007). Xu Hong's position reflects the impact of the women's liberation movement via university departments and the circulation of translated feminist texts in China in the late 1980s and 1990s. Tao Yongbai's focus, in contrast, emphasises Chinese cultural history and a syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian worldview. Tao laments that this 'new stage in the search for female selfhood was initiated by women artists but soon grew into an uncritical craze that itself perpetuated gender biases and constraints' (2020, p.69).

Tao Yongbai's analysis throughout the 1990s and her reflections more recently are particularly significant in this history. In 1991 'A Sacred Song from the World of Women', for example, established a lineage of women artists in Chinese art history. Her later work, developed around a significant 1998 exhibition, 'Century and Woman', focused on re-invigorating individual expression after the collectivism of the Mao years (Xie 2021). 'Moving in Step with the Century: Tracing the Historical Footfalls of Chinese Women's Art', written in 1998 and published in a new translation in 2021, described women artists as 'virtually buried in the historical texts compiled by men, unilaterally obliterated by bias', asking, 'Do women have their own art history?' (Tao 2021). 'Towards a Female Initiative', first published in 1996, revised in 2003, and republished in 2010, proposed a distinctive subjectivity that distinguished the work of women artists as pursuing 'a more perfect human nature' (Tao 2010).[25]

A categorisation of women as more 'sincere', more emotional, more focused on the domestic and the personal appears frequently in the literature of the period and influenced exhibitions of women's art in the 1990s. Their work in these exhibitions was frequently interpreted in essentialising ways. In 1990, for example, the painter Yu Hong co-curated *World of Women Artists* (*Nü huajia de shijie*) at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. It 'was the first to tender a woman's perspective […] unveiling their respective emotional worlds' (Tao 2020, p.67). Liao Wen's 1995 curation of *Women's Approach to Chinese Contemporary Art* at Beijing Art Museum presented the work of thirteen artists and argued a commonality in their work due to their gender (Liao 1995). In March 1998, 70

female artists presented their works in *Century and Woman* (*Shiji Nüxing*), curated by Jia Fangzhou at the National Art Museum in Beijing. In her discussion of this first large-scale exhibition, Shuqin Cui points out that women's work was thought to be characterised by expressions of personal experience and the private domain, a focus on the everyday and the domestic, and by the application of historically female crafts such as textiles. It proclaimed gender difference as a 'discursive rhetoric' (Cui 2016, pp.4-5). The exhibition constructed a narrative around women's art that emphasised a so-called 'feminine' subjectivity of interiority, emotion, and a focus upon the private, domestic world of women.

After this decade of intense debates around women's art, by the early years of this century issues of gender seemed to slip out of sight in the scholarly and critical literature, if not in the work of artists. As Welland argues, 'Discussions of art by women, feminist art, or gender politics within the Chinese contemporary artworld have largely been relegated to the margins of the narrative (2018, p.130). However, artists continued to engage with gender in various ways despite this lack of critical or scholarly focus. Monica Merlin (2019) contends that scholars have insufficiently examined how dynamically artists in China since the 1990s have engaged with gender, explicitly or implicitly, in their work (Merlin 2019, p.6). Cui Xiuwen, for example, was one of only a very few Chinese artists in the 1990s to overtly align themselves with feminist viewpoints. Explaining her rationale for establishing the *Sairen Gongzuoshi* (Sirens Studio – an independent studio founded by four female artists), Tao Yongbai cites an interview in which Cui explained that she decided to open a feminist studio because there were so few opportunities for female artists (Tao 2020).[26] In the first decade of the twenty-first century artists such as Tao Aimin, Ma Yanling, Peng Wei, Chen Qingqing, Chen Qiulin, Xing Danwen, Li Xinmo, and Lin Tianmiao engaged with themes and imagery that may be understood as feminist, and was often interpreted uncritically as such,[27] but it was not until 2012 that one of only a handful of exhibitions to be identified as explicitly feminist in intent, the 2012 *Bald Girls* at Beijing's Iberia Art Center featured works by Li Xinmo, Lan Jing and Xiao Lu (discussed in relation to Xiao Lu's contribution in Chapter 5).

Today, exhibitions that explicitly confront ideas such as gender that the CCP considers 'sensitive' are vulnerable to censorship. For example, curator Cui Guangxia's exhibition *Jian: Cultural Codes of Gender Violence* showing the work of 64 artists (both male and

female) was closed before its opening in Beijing on 25 November 2015.[28] The result of this atmosphere is a 'soft' version of feminism uncoupled from any hint of political activism. In 2017, for example, Ai Lai'er discussed the exhibition she had curated for International Women's Day and insisted that her aim was not to reveal a 'collective female identity' but rather, 'a "hint" towards a non-determinable factor' (Afnan 2017). Ai, like others, perceives a shift from discussions of gender identity to a vague emphasis on qualities of the individual. To be a self-identified 'feminist artist' in China now is to enter politically sensitive territory, but the weaving of themes of gender and Chinese national identity is a continuing mode of curatorial and artistic practice in the work of artists ranging from the established – Lin Tianmiao and Xiao Lu, for example – to the emerging artists of a younger generation such as Liu Xi and Cao Yu.[29]

Despite a history of women's exhibitions in China, and the presence of women in each successive phase of the avant-garde, they were largely excluded from significant exhibitions outside China, which focused narrowly, as Peggy Wang (2021 p.1) has observed, on 'the trope of artist-as-dissident' to the exclusion of more nuanced understandings of contemporary art in the PRC. Shuqin Cui defines the absence of women from the earliest international exhibitions of Chinese contemporary art as a blind spot, 'whereby social-cultural conventions obscured the conception of women's art' (Cui 2016, p.4). Phyllis Teo (2016 p.13), for example, notes the inclusion of only three women among twenty-two Chinese artists in *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century*, curated by Wu Hung in New York in 2006. The absence of women artists from major international exhibitions of Chinese art continues. *Art and China After 1989: Theater of the World*, a 2017 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, for example, included nine women in a line-up of more than 70 artists. The focus on well-known male artists in this exhibition followed precursors that introduced Chinese contemporary art to international audiences. These exhibitions included *China's New Art, Post 1989* at the Hong Kong Arts Centre in February 1993 (shown at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in the same year as *Mao Goes Pop: China Post 1989*), *Alors, la Chine?* at Centre Georges Pompidou in 2003 and *Mahjong: Works from the Sigg Collection* at Kunstmuseum Bern in 2005. They obscured work created by women artists during the same period. Most recently, the 2021 exhibition that opened the Shanghai branch of Beijing's Ullens Center for Contemporary *Art, UCCA Edge*, inexplicably

continued this underrepresentation of women: *City on the Edge: Art and Shanghai at the Turn of the Millennium* featured the work of three women and 28 men.[30]

There are notable exceptions to this absence of women. They included *Die Halfte des Himmels/ Half of the Sky: Chinesiche und deutsche Kunstlerinnen der Gegenwart im Austausch*, Frauen Museum, Koln/Bonn in 1998, and *Breakthrough: Work by Contemporary Chinese Women Artists*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art in 2013, concurrent with the symposium 'Female Embodiment of the Visual World: Women's Art in Contemporary China' (Wang 2013). *Neo-Perception: China's New Generation of Women Artists* at Pearl Lam Gallery, Shanghai in 2015, followed by *Fire Within: A New Generation of Chinese Women Artists* at the Eli and Edythe Broad Museum, University of Michigan in 2017, both curated by Wang Chunchen, focused on retrieving/presenting the work of Chinese women artists. *China Under Construction* at the Deborah Colton Gallery, Houston, Texas in 2008, curated by Maya Kovskaya, was unusual in its selection of women artists, including Tao Aimin. As previously noted, however, there is not yet a body of scholarly writing around these exhibitions.[31]

At the 2007 Venice Biennale's China Pavilion curator Hou Hanru presented the work of four women – Yin Xiuzhen, Cao Fei, Kan Xian and Shen Yuan – which one may have thought would position these and other women artists more firmly at the centre of the discourse. However, given the paucity of women selected for major survey exhibitions, and despite the critical success of these individual artists, and others who followed, women artists have remained somewhat peripheral. Perhaps this is changing. In 2019 at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and at the Smart Museum, University of Chicago, in 2020, *The Allure of Matter* presented the work of five women and 26 men, representing a slight improvement in the gender balance.[32] An exhibition proposed for May 2022 at the Lillehammer Museum, Norway, and 2023 at the Salzburg Museum der Moderne, Austria, will show the work of more than 30 female or female-identifying artists from the PRC, with a substantial catalogue published by Hatje Cantz Verlag.[33] In China, too, there have been a number of recent all-female exhibitions, including *Her Name Her Existence* at the Weihai Peninsula Museum of Art in July 2021 curated by New York-based feminist artist Guo Zhen, showing four Chinese artists and four foreign artists based in China.[34]

Recently there is a renewed interest in gender as a theoretical framework and a method of inquiry in the field of Chinese contemporary art, a scholarly development to which this

study hopes to contribute. Artists of a younger generation such as Liu Xi, Cao Yu, Ye Funa, Tianzhuo Chen and Lu Yang – whether identifying as female, male or non-binary – explore aspects of gendered identities in their work, and a body of critical analysis is emerging as a consequence. Emerging scholar Linda Pittwood, for example, examined the work of both male and female-identifying Chinese artists in her doctoral thesis. 'Inscribing women onto bodies: an encounter with performance, photography and video art from Beijing and Shanghai 1999-2016' (2019) is a gendered investigation of the category of 'woman'. Pittwood's research takes a Foucauldian approach, linking 'Bio-power' with He-Yin Zhen's category of *nannü*, discovering a complex and fragmentary discourse of embodied experience in which female artists both acquiesce and resist the inscription of a female identity onto the body. A further indication of the renewed interest in gendered discourses is seen in recent special issues of peer-reviewed journals, including *The Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* Volume 6 No. 2 'Gender in Contemporary Chinese Art' (2019) and *positions asia critique* Volume 28 No. 1 '(En)gendering: Chinese Women's Art in the Making' (2020). These contributions reveal a commitment to redress previous lacunae in the scholarship, and the contributors to these journals are among the significant voices cited in this chapter.

Where this thesis departs from previous scholarly analysis of *nüxing yishu* is in its focus on women working in the genre of 'Experimental Ink', a genre dominated by practitioners of the late twentieth-century (male-dominated) avant-garde. This distinguishes their practices from those women artists in the 1990s who explicitly emphasised female experiences of sexuality, birth and parenthood in their often-figurative work (Teo 2016, p.22). Building on previous scholarship in the field, this thesis positions their work as a distinct and as yet under-represented category of *nüxing yishu.* Analysis of women artists' subversive applications of calligraphy and other text forms using the culturally encoded artistic medium of ink reveals their engagement with gendered discourses (stated or unstated). They work within a complex social, political, psychological and linguistic context, inflected by a legacy of post-colonial and post-Mao anxieties, as well as by a history of unsatisfactory encounters between western feminists and Chinese women writers, artists and intellectuals. The complex and shifting gender and national identity constructions represented in works by Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu challenge the hegemonic masculinity of the ink tradition, without necessarily explicitly

engaging with (Western) feminist theory. Viewed through a theoretical lens comprising both situated Chinese and intersectional feminisms, the examination of how gendered and variously enacted Chinese identities inform their work opens up new possibilities for interpretation.

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[1] Wang, Yilin, 2021. 'Translation: Poems by Chinese feminist and revolutionary writer Qiu Jin', *NüVoices*. Available from: https://nuvoices.com [accessed 17.3.21]

[2] Judith Butler's (1990) central concept of gender performativity is here applied to other identity formations, including national identity, which are enacted and embodied rather than reflecting some kind of absolute and underlying 'natural' reality. Drawing on Foucault, Butler stresses the physicality of social life, and identity as a process that is unstable, incomplete and continuously recalibrated and renewed.

[3] In an Anglophone context, in the USA, the UK, Europe, and Australia the publication of feminist art and art writing in journals such as 'Heresies', 'Spare Rib', 'Block', 'The Women's Art Journal' and (in Australia) 'Lip' produced new discursive practices that continue to influence and inform feminist art history. For an account of the early development of feminist art history see Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, 1987. 'The Feminist Critique of Art History'. *The Art Bulletin* Vol 69 (3) pp.326–57. 'Lip', an interdisciplinary feminist arts journal, was published in Melbourne between 1976 and 1984. An anthology was published by McMillan in 2013, information available from: https://www.perimeterbooks.com/collections/art-theory/products/the-lip-anthology-an-australian-feminist-arts-journal-1976-1984 [accessed 3.8.20]

[4] Recent work in this vein, developed from the 1970 model of Nochlin and others that prompted the subversive interventions of the Guerrilla Girls, includes the frequently cited Australian data collection of Elvis Richardson's blog and website, 'CoUNTESS: Women Count in the Artworld' (Richardson, 2014). This model continued in 2019/2020 in the 'Know My Name' campaign promoted by museums and other arts institutions, including the 2021 exhibition of the same name at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra.

[5] See, for example Angela Dimitrakaki's critique of Reilly's project for its failure to provide a coherent, transnational, oppositional engagement with the economic forces of global capital (Dimitrakaki 2011). Roberta Smith in the New York Times described the exhibition as a disappointment and the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art itself as 'a false idea wrapped in confusion'. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/23/arts/design/23glob.html [accessed 19.5.21]

[6] The term 'Western' is used here with full acknowledgement of its problematic nature, and the term 'feminism' with acknowledgement that there are many feminisms. In general, the term Euro-American is used in preference to the term 'Western' in this thesis.

[7] For example, in 'The Women's Bell' (1903), often described as a feminist manifesto, translated into English by Liu et al in 2013, Jin Tianhe lamented the lot of Chinese men with uneducated, superstitious, ornamental, unfree wives, thus neatly blaming women for their own oppression.

[8] It should be noted, as Liu et al point out, that the earliest translation of 'The Communist Manifesto' was published in He-Yin Zhen's journal, 'Natural Justice', in 1908 – so it was Chinese feminism that introduced Communist ideology into China (2013, pp.5–6)

[9] Rapp's (2012) analysis of the well-established connections between Daoism and anarchism points to particular Daoist texts as arguably anarchist allegories, citing as evidence the scepticism towards the state found in the canonical texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi.

[10] Min Dongchao provides a thorough analysis of the twists and turns of the transcultural process of translating feminist texts into Chinese. The first translations of Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' into Chinese in the 1980s is usually identified as a key moment in feminism's travels. De Beauvoir appeared to a generation of emergent feminists in China to be a model of what it could mean to be independent, intellectual, and female (Min 2017, p.28) In the first available translation from Taiwan the translator changed the title to 'Women (*Nüren*): The Second Sex'. Min cites Li Xiaojing: 'the word "woman" appeared impressive. It was like a challenge to our society, in which women had got lost in "men and women are all the same"' (Li 1999, cited in Min 2017, p.28). Here Li refers to the often-repeated quote from Mao Zedong: 'The times have changed; men and women are the same'.

[11] Western modernist influences during the Republic included, for example, Lu Xun's challenge to Confucianism in 'A Madman's Diary' (1918), Hu Shih's advocacy of vernacular rather than literary Chinese, and socialist (and founder of the Chinese Communist Party) Chen Duxiu's magazine 'New Youth' which promoted science and democracy. In 1930 Hummel argued that the New Culture Movement was more significant than the overthrow of the Manchu Qing Dynasty (Hummel 1930). Weston's account of its beginnings in Tokyo and the Shanghai concessions after the suppression of the second revolution emphasises the influence of 'The Tiger' magazine, and its inextricable connections to the ideas (and key personnel) of Chen Duxiu's 'New Youth'. In its full flowering at Peking University the New Culture Movement focused on 'intellectual awakening, the forces hindering individual freedom and the relationship between citizens and the state' (Weston 1998).

[12] Whether Mao Zedong ever explicitly said 'Women hold up half the sky' is open to question, but he did say, 'The times have changed; men and women are the same', recorded in a

conversation with young people on 27 May 1965. '时代不同了，男女都一样/ *Shidai butong le, nan nü dou yiyang'*, became a famous political slogan, promulgated throughout China. See Wenqi Yang and Fei Yan, 2017. 'The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao's China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution', *China Information* Vol 31 (1) pp. 63–83. However, under Mao's policies – even despite advances in educational access for women, and the reform of the marriage law in 1950 that abolished concubinage – gender equality was applied more in theory than in practice, an issue discussed by numerous social historians and other scholars. See, for example, Xiaoping Cong, *Marriage, Law and Gender in Revolutionary China, 1940–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2016).

[13] Exceptions to the relative invisibility of the history of early twentieth-century Chinese feminist theory in relation to contemporary art include the work of Sasha Su-Ling Welland (2018) and Linda Pittwood (2019).

[14] The Doubting Antiquity School (or Movement), the *Yigupai*, was a group of critical historiographers in the 1910s and 1920s who cast doubt on the authenticity of narratives of Chinese antiquity and the texts that supported them. For more, see Li Xueqin, 2002. 'Walking Out of the Doubting of Antiquity Era', *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, Vol. 34 (2) pp. 26–49

[15] Mao Zedong's proclamations on 'Women' were later published in 'The Thoughts of Mao Zedong' available from: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/ch31.htm (Mao, 1955) [accessed 10.1.22]

[16] See, for example, a February 23, 2018, article in Science Daily, reporting research from the University of British Columbia in a study co-authored by Yongai Jin of Renmin University: 'China's two-child policy may exacerbate gender inequality'. The research was published as: Yue Qian, Yongai Jin, 2018. 'Women's Fertility Autonomy in Urban China: The Role of Couple Dynamics Under the Universal Two-Child Policy' *Chinese Sociological Review*, Vol. 50 (3) pp. 275–309. The Science Daily article available from: https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/02/180223131904.htm [accessed 27.4.21]

[17] Examples of feminist activism suppressed by the authorities in China include the Shanghai Subway demonstrations against sexual harassment in 2012, the growing area of 'queer feminist' activism drawing on LGBQT activism outside China, (Liu, Huang and Ma 2015) and the arrest and detention of the 'Feminist Five' in 2015 (Wang 2015). The travails of the 'Feminist Five' and their continuing state surveillance were documented by Leta Hong Fincher (2018). The influential social media platform established by activist Lü Pin, 'Feminist Voices', was removed from micro-blogging platform *Sina Weibo* with deep (but not unprecedented) irony on the eve of International Women's Day 2018 (Parkin and Feng 2019). Recently, debate around tennis player Peng Shuai, who accused Communist Party official Zhang Gaoli of

coercing her into sex during their secret relationship in an explosive (and quickly deleted) *Weibo* post resulted in her apparently orchestrated public appearances and a retraction of the allegation. For a full account see: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-09/what-peng-shuais-post-weibo-sexual-assault-allegation/100716422 [accessed 10.1.22]. Draft revisions of the laws relating to the protection of women's rights were before the legislative body in 2021, however, the government maintains its opposition to grassroots feminism and the 'Me Too' movement.]

[18] For details of Chinese criminal law see: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgvienna/eng/dbtyw/jdwt/crimelaw/t209043.htm [accessed 4.2.22]

[19] See, for example, Jia Fangzhou, 'Feminine Discourse of Self-Exploration: A Scan of Chinese Feminist Art', published in 1996 by Beijing's Central Academy of Fine Arts and located in the archive presented by scholar Francesca dal Lago to Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong (Jia 1996) which positioned art by women as a form of essentialist femininity**.** There are some exceptions to the 'disappearing' of women from the narrative in the discourses of Chinese contemporary art and its literature in addition to the work of feminist scholars cited in this chapter. They include Melissa Chiu's (2006) recognition of the significance of Lin Tianmiao, Yin Xiuzhen and Cao Fei. A rare reference to feminist art, and to specific artists such as Cui Xiuwen and Lin Tianmiao, is found in Terry Smith's account of the emergence of the avant-garde (2011, pp.161–162) More recently, a chapter focused on contemporary China in Smith's 'Art to Come' recognises the significant work of several female and non-binary artists (2019, pp.146–148).

[20] As previously noted the translation of '*nüxing yishu'* as a term encompassing both art made by women in the broadest possible sense, as well as (sometimes) art with a feminist intentionality, continues to be contentious. The complexity of this translation is discussed by Yan Zhou (2020 pp. 328–329, p.443)

[21] Other events of note in establishing this discourse include a Tate Modern symposium held on 22 February 2018, 'Gender in Chinese Contemporary Art', co-organised by Tate Research Centre Asia, and the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. The artists themselves appeared to some observers to address theories of gender only reluctantly in relation to their practice, possibly due to the sensitivity of the issue in China. The event was recorded and may be seen on *The Mediated Image* blog at: https://themediatedimage.com/2018/03/ [accessed 6.2.22].

[22] While a number of Sullivan's interpretations are open to question, he was, above all others, consistent in his attention to modern Chinese art over an extended period. His pioneering "Chinese Art in the Twentieth Century" was published in 1959 and introduced the subject to a Western readership. His intimate knowledge of and friendships with artists such as Pang

Xunqin and Xu Beihong (among many others) informed his analysis of contemporary art. As Jerome Silbergeld (2014, p.3.) explains, "This first-hand experience shaped Sullivan's approach to his contemporary subject: not as an abstract or remote object of study but—as it had been with ancient authorities on the subject—by means of personal friendships, intimate observation, and strong emotions tempered by discriminating standards of quality."

[23] Liao Wen's '*Nüxingzhuyi zuowei fangshi*' is often translated as 'Feminism as Method', including by Merlin (2019) and Welland (2018). However, in the bilingual exhibition catalogue, 中国当代艺术中的女性方式, edited by Liao Wen (Beijing Art Museum, 1995), *nüxing fangshi* was translated as 'Women's Approach'.

[24] Originally published in 1994 as '*Zhouchu shenyuan: wo de nüxingzhuyi piping guan*' in *Jiangsu Huakan* (Jiangsu Pictorial) 163 (7).

[25] Originally published as Jia Fangzhou, '*Zouxiang zijue de nüxing huihua*' in *96 Shanghai meishu shuangnian zhan lilun yantaohui lunwenji* ('Collected Essays from 96 Shanghai Biennial Symposium on Theory'), revised version in *Piping de shidai* (*Era of Criticism*) Vol 1. Guangxi: Guangxi Fine Arts Publishing House (2003) pp.138-141. Translated by Lee Ambrozy.

[26] For more, see Tao Yongbai's analysis of this period, referencing a 2012 Cui Xiuwen interview with Schoeni Gallery (Tao 2020).

[27] The work of Tao Aimin, Peng Wei, Chen Qingqing, Chen Qiulin, Xing Danwen and Lin Tianmiao is analysed in Shuqin Cui, *Gendered Bodies: Towards a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2016).

[28] Reasons for the closure of this exhibition focused on gendered violence were never clear, as this New York Times article suggests: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/03/world/asia/questions-follow-closing-of-beijing-art-show-on-violence-against-women.html [accessed 27 May 2020]

[29] The work of Lin Tianmiao, Xiao Lu, Liu Xi and Cao Yu (with many other women artists from the PRC) is included in 'Stepping Out: Female Identities in Contemporary Chinese Art', a 2022/2023 exhibition at the Lillehammer Museum and the Salzburg Museum of Modern Art, interpreted through a gendered, indeed a feminist, lens. The international reference group for this proposed exhibition included the author of this thesis, in addition to Monica Merlin, Sasha Su-Ling Welland, and Shuqin Cui. Associate curators in China include Feng Boyi and artist Liu Xi.

[30] For more see Lisa Movius' review in South China Morning Post, dated 4 June 2021 and headlined 'Good range of 21st century Chinese art, but why is it nearly all by men? UCCA Edge's debut Shanghai show a missed opportunity', available from https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-

culture/article/3136008/good-range-21st-century-chinese-art-why-it-nearly-all-men [accessed 7.6.21].

[31] There have been other exhibitions of work by women artists inside and outside China, including those curated by Julie Segraves in the USA, Binghui Huangfu in Singapore, and this author's curated exhibition *Half the Sky* at Red Gate Gallery, Beijing in April 2016, but these exhibitions did not construct (nor did they intend to) a theoretical framing of gender as a curatorial narrative.

[32] The list of artists is found on the exhibition website: https://theallureofmatter.org/ [accessed 2.2.20]

[33] See Endnote 26.

[34] Guo Zhen's feminist art credentials are declared on her website, accessible at http://www.zhenguoart.com/ [accessed 12.7.21].

Chapter 3

Outsiders and Insiders: Praxis in Transcultural Encounters

Unbinding my feet to pour out a millennium's poisons,
I arouse the spirit of women, hundreds of flowers, abloom.

(From 'Reflections' c. 1903

by poet, revolutionary, and feminist Qiu Jin, written during her travels in Japan)[1]

3.1 Introduction: the 'provocations of otherness'

The previous chapter provided an account of the literature relating to feminist art history and *nüxing yishu* (women's art) in China. It explored feminism's trajectory from the 'add women and stir' method of reinstating women to a masculinist canon[2] to its critical challenge to the structural inequality of the artworld. The practice of feminist art history challenges the very notion of the canon, arguing that deep structural change is required to counter the injustices of patriarchal art historical paradigms. This study, too, aims to move beyond simply reinstating women artists into the narratives of contemporary art in China to inquire critically into how gender operates within the power dynamics of the Chinese artworld and how it is embedded in the work of artists. This chapter outlines the context and design of the study, arguing that a method at the intersection of various disciplines, influenced (as previously explained) by a polyvocal melding of distinct feminist discourses, is appropriate to navigate this transcultural terrain.

This chapter explains the development of the research method, the choice of specific artists as case studies of practice, the decision to employ a method of semi-structured interviews as transcultural encounters, and how data drawn from the interviews was analysed and interpreted in parallel with a close analysis and ekphrastic interpretation of artworks. It provides an account of significant influences from various fields on this

study, including the social sciences, anthropology and feminist ethnography, exploring the development of feminist scholarship in these fields in the late twentieth century. It explains how Donna Haraway's (1988) 'situated knowledge' influenced the design of this research project. The design of the study, like the theoretical framing discussed in the previous chapter, is best described with the metaphor of knitting or weaving, as interwoven threads of theory and method create a polyvocal discourse of women's intersecting voices.

The method of transcultural dialogic encounters between the non-Chinese researcher and four carefully selected artists aims to subvert the dominance of Euro-American versions of contemporary art's historiography. Interpretation of the artists' works is layered with the echoes of their own voices, and those of their various (Chinese and non-Chinese) interpreters, scholars and critics. Intersecting discourses between researcher, artist and interpreter were translated (literally) between English and Chinese, and back again. Roszika Parker's contention that interviews as conversations are 'a means of discovering the complex configurations of an artist's life and work' (cited in Pollock 2013, p.25) became a touchstone for the encounters in this study. Recalling her influence on the feminist art history they jointly pioneered, Griselda Pollock credited Parker with enabling her to shift away from the traditional academic binary between knowledge and experience, understanding that both thought *and* feeling have a place in feminist research practices, 'breaching the rigid separation of knowledge from experience, thought from affect' (2013, p.23). Pollock's explanation of how these early forays into feminist art history used the interview to explore the kinds of gendered experiences that are not usually discussed in artist interviews, including aspects of gender, ethnicity, and class discrimination, are an inspirational model for the methodology developed in this research project.

Transcultural dialogues such as those at the foundation of this study are prone to slippages of understanding, as briefly outlined in the previous chapter. There are innumerable pitfalls for the Western scholar – in this instance, the Western feminist scholar – who conducts research across divides of language and culture, but there are also undoubtedly some advantages to being the outsider, outlined later in this chapter. Such dialogues are unpredictable. The encounters between women in this study at times underlined their

separateness, while at others offered possibilities for new understandings and resonances of meaning to emerge. In Lauren Berlant's lovely phrase, this is 'responding to the provocations of otherness' (2014, p.ix). The historian of early modern China, Dorothy Ko (2005, pp.12–13), argued that to make the 'speaking selves' and 'refracted voices' of women audible, to bring them from the margins to the centre of the discourse, feminist scholars must develop novel approaches to translation and interpretation. Ko's cross-disciplinary approach to her work, situated at the intersections of anthropology, history, and women's studies, influenced this research. Despite the different field in which it is situated this study, too, aimed to centre the voices of women through judicious choices of feminist theoretical framing and method.

Ko's research joined the work of other significant Anglophone scholars of gender in China to illuminate specifically female histories. For example, her radical reconceptualising of the practice of foot binding (2005) argued it was a female-controlled practice. Underpinned, of course, by Confucian orthodoxies and gendered power relationships, foot binding nevertheless actively constructed a gendered identity and what Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng describe as 'an erotics of concealment' (2008, p.1407). The work of Rebecca Karl, Lydia Liu, and Louise Edwards, cited in Chapter 2, overturns previous notions of a longue durée of imperial China's suppression of silenced, cloistered women by examining women's active agency in aspects of their lives. Their work, and that of Hershatter and Wang, also challenges the ubiquity of a 'May Fourth' narrative in which modernising Republican intellectuals and the CCP were believed to have 'freed women (and China) from a backward and stagnant past' (Hershatter and Wang 2008, p.1410). With other significant voices in fields of history and anthropology such as Tani E. Barlow, Fei-Wen Liu, Harriet Evans, Antonia Finnane, Weili Ye, Hu Ying and Susan Glosser their work positions gender as a way of recognising and understanding women's economic contributions and their powerful roles in familial structures and hierarchies. The influence of these and other feminist researchers on this study, in particular, provides a means of analysing the impact of gendered experiences on the work of women artists, illuminating how in turn the artists reclaim agency through their use of the traditionally masculinist materials and visual codes of ink painting.

Fieldwork undertaken during the month of April in 2017 took the form of a series of semi-structured, open-ended interviews in the artists' studios in Beijing, followed by correspondence via email and Chinese social media platform WeChat, rather than the traditional ethnographer's lengthy immersion in the field. This method of semi-structured interview encounters with four carefully selected artists was followed by critical analysis of their work. This method allows the interviewer to vary questions and their sequence when appropriate, to follow interesting trajectories, to seek clarification, and to elaborate and expand upon conversational avenues. It accommodates the emergence of unanticipated and sometimes surprising responses, requiring the interviewer to be flexible and empathic.[3]

Fig 3.1. The author with artist Tao Aimin and a printed book from her 2008 installation, *Secret Language of Women* at Ink Studio Gallery, Beijing, April 2017. Photograph Xu Yining.

The research phase of this thesis developed in an 'in-between' space of translation occupied by the artists, the researcher, and her translator/interpreter. The presence of the researcher and her translator in these dialogic encounters is intentionally made visible: too often in published accounts of qualitative research based on interviews the interlocutor's presence is a 'ghostly absence' (Crang 2003, p.499). Therefore, I make explicit from the

outset my position as a non-Chinese researcher in China, operating with far from fluent Chinese language skills, of necessity working with a translator in dialogues with Chinese artists that shift back and forth between languages. Questions of how a transcultural study of this nature should be conceptualised and realised, including critical issues of ethical research and the methodological parameters of the study, were carefully considered during the first year of the PhD in 2016, when Ethics Approval was granted.[4] In April of 2017, when the fieldwork and interviews were conducted in Beijing, I was employed as a researcher and writer by a private collection of Chinese art. It is important to note, and was made clear to the artists, that this thesis and the research itself were entirely independent of that employment.[5]

As Alexander Freund (2014, p.3) points out, scholars using the interview as a research methodology have made claims for its history dating back to antiquity. He locates it a little more recently, and only partly tongue-in-cheek, as stemming from medieval Catholicism's introduction of the confessional. Gordana Jovanovic's (2011) historical account places its scholarly origins in the early twentieth century when the Chicago School institutionalised qualitative methods including case study research, informant interviews, and a legitimising focus on subjective, personal meaning, shaping the discipline of sociology. We could also look to the ethnographic roots of such qualitative methods in the work of Bronislaw Malinowski, the methodological reflections of Max Weber, or Husserl's phenomenological psychology (Jovanovic 2011, pp.5–6). The twentieth-century construct of the interview that emerged after World War II (whether as scholarly research method or in the form of the modern 'confessional' of reality television) is predicated on a modernist understanding of a bounded self. This construct is challenged by Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, who argue (after Foucault) that 'The interview itself has created, as well as tapped into, the vast world of individual experience that now constitutes the substance of everyday life' (2002, p.9). The interview itself is thus a discursive (and unreliable) construct in which 'truth' shifts back and forth, iteratively built by the dialogue between researcher and participant, sounding a particular warning for translingual and transcultural research such as this study.

The ethical minefield of transcultural research has been well documented in many academic disciplines, of most relevance to this study in the work of Gaetano (2016) and

Liamputtong (2008). Arianne Gaetano's (2016) account of her study of how Chinese women negotiate the fault lines of gendered power relationships highlighted how her position as a non-Chinese researcher influenced the process and the outcomes of her research. The work of Irvine, Roberts and Bradbury Jones on the challenges of conducting rigorous research across barriers of language when the researcher is perceived as a linguistic and cultural 'outsider' (2008) resonated with the challenges presented by the fieldwork for this study – although my own position was more ambiguously positioned between insider and outsider status due to my previous years of researching the work of women artists and conducting interviews in China.

As a researcher operating within a culture and language not my own, I am implicated in the problematic history of interactions between 'East' and 'West', including those of the Chinese and global artworld/s. Therefore, I make my own position in these interactions explicit, writing in the first person at times in this and following chapters when it is appropriate to do so.[6] A multi-voiced writing style is appropriately aligned to feminist research practices – and by extension, of course, to a study such as this which aims to be polyvocal, referencing Fanny Söderbäck's feminist politics of polyphony (2012, p.4). As Carol B. Stack persuasively argues, issues of voice, story and identities of gender, class and race have become ever more complicated and fluid:

> […] we are inside and outside the text, writing it and reading it, questioning its very construction, and searching for discontinuities and ambiguities with the narrative and the larger cultural texts' (1993, p.88).

This study sought such 'discontinuities and ambiguities' through the dialogic patterns of the interview process, in the belief that new meanings are co-constructed and become visible through difficult spaces and ruptures in these conversations. In these encounters between women – Chinese and non-Chinese, artist and writer, researcher and researched – the congruences as well as differences that emerge are a significant element of the study. I was not a disinterested party to these dialogues.

The following three sections of this chapter (Parts 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4) present a rationale for the selection of the artists who became the key research participants, before outlining the theoretical, logistical, ethical, and political/cultural aspects of how the study was designed

and implemented. Part 3.5, 'Translation and Travel: Transit Zones and Transformation', expands on Chapter 2 and its examination of the significance to this thesis of feminist translation theory and feminist theory's travels in China. Finally, Part 3.6, 'Unravelling and Ravelling: Interpretation/s', draws together the threads of the theoretical framing and research method.

3.2 Selecting Research Participant Artists

This study seeks to make an original contribution to the field of Chinese contemporary art history, firstly by understanding how four artists working within the genre of 'Experimental Ink' (*shiyan shuimo*) selected as 'cases' see their practice in relation to historical and emergent Chinese feminisms and to notions of a fluid discursive 'Chineseness'.[7] Secondly, this study builds on existing scholarship in the field with an analysis of their work through lenses of Chinese and intersectional feminism, inflected by postcolonial and post-1989 perspectives. The selection of artists was critical to the success of the study. The field was narrowed by seeking artists using ink whose work focused on, or was influenced by, aspects of gender or female history, or reflected a female-centred and/or feminist subjectivity. The four artists who make up the case studies (or microhistories)[8] in this thesis were selected because, firstly, they work with ink in the manner developed as a contemporary art practice by the post-Mao avant-garde in China. Secondly, each reflects a distinct facet of the intersectional prism of gender and Chineseness that is the focus of the study: their work reveals a diversity of complex identity categories, including beliefs about, and experiences of, national identity that are sometimes inflected by regional, provincial histories and rural/urban class divisions; sexuality; motherhood; daughterhood; menopause and aging. Finally, the artists were living and working in Beijing, and are of roughly the same generation.[9]

Fig 3.2. Xiao Lu in her studio, Beijing, April 2017. Photograph Luise Guest

Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu make and theorise their work through prisms of gender informed by the situated Chinese history of feminism, the travels, translation and transformation of Euro-American feminism in China, and the fluctuating understandings of gender and Chinese identity that were discussed in Chapter 2. Tao Aimin, an artist from a rural background, examines a rural female history and intersections of class and gender, including the little-represented subject of domestic labour. Ma Yanling's performance works focus on mother/daughter relationships and on issues of reproductive rights in China. Xiao Lu's mature works, made during and after menopause, insist on the performative presence of the ageing female body in a global culture in which older women are accorded little value. Bingyi's vast ink scrolls were made after a devastating injury, embodying (literally) her physical immersion in the Chinese landscape using ink, fire and water. They have developed visual language/s of ink that may be read through a gendered lens, employing its materiality and mark-making possibilities in literal and metaphorical ways.

Tao Aimin appropriates the semi-secret *Nüshu* script once used by women in remote villages in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Ma Yanling writes *Nüshu* text on her daughter's clothes or on sanitary napkins in a series of performance works. In place of ink Xiao Lu writes calligraphy using medicinal herbs, or the excretions of her own body from

the *Tui Na* massage that helped her endure the symptoms of menopause. In several performances she pours ink and water over her body. Bingyi creates monumental land-art ink paintings that subtly reference the gestural mark of the calligrapher. Entering the hitherto masculinist discourse of ink painting and transforming its visual 'grammar' and materiality, they represent their lived experience as women.

The strengths and limitations of interview-based research methods are discussed in more detail in the next section of the chapter, but it is important to note here that the process was entered with the understanding that feminist research entails an intentional abandonment of the god-like vantage point and supposedly 'objective' detachment of the traditional academic researcher. Anthropologist Nigel Rapport (2012, p.53), citing his 1987 work, describes the face-to-face interview as 'a to-ing and fro-ing of utterances or responses […] a dialectic, an incremental zigzagging between participants who act as one another's "talking-partners"'. This kind of dialectical, zigzagging partnership was the aim of this study's interview methodology. In encounters with each artist in their Beijing studios and galleries I chose to make my interest in feminism explicit, whilst opening a mutually respectful space in which I could hear and critically appraise their distinct and sometimes shifting positions. At times in this process, I noted disjunctions between the visual language and form of their works, and the words with which they described and discussed them. As they articulated their theories of practice, each artist expressed a degree of ambivalence towards a feminism they perceived as either a 'Western thing' or an unwelcome reminder of the enforced gender neutrality of their early lives, and the lives of their mothers, during the period of High Socialism. This opened up interesting spaces of paradox and apparent contradiction to be further explored.

3.3 '*Duihua*' (Dialogue): Speaking Feminisms

In Chinese, 'dialogue' is translated as '*duihua*'. Informed by Bakhtin's 'The Dialogic Imagination' (1981) and its influence on contemporary translation studies, 'dialogue' in various guises threads throughout the study. It applies to the methodological approach, to interactions between artworks and their audiences, and also to the implications of travelling feminism and translation theory. Xiao Lu's notorious action at the 1989 *China/Avant-garde* exhibition in Beijing, when she fired a handgun into her own installation of two telephone boxes titled 'Dialogue' was intended to represent the

impossibility of communication between men and women. Tao Aimin's installations using the ancient women's script of *Nüshu* examine how illiterate rural women reclaimed their agency to communicate with each other in writing and song. Ma Yanling's performance works using *Nüshu* script began as an attempt to create a dialogue with her teenaged daughter and repair their fractured relationship. Bingyi references classical poetry and writes/paints her own monumental visual 'poems', sometimes in dialogue with musical scores and dance.

In qualitative research dialogue is both a data collection method and also a means by which researcher-participant relationships are examined. In this study, the chosen method of semi-structured interviews is by definition dialogic. Such dialogue is a process of constructing knowledge and building new understandings. Its role has been acknowledged as a vital component of feminist ethnographic research in numerous fields. A reflective dialogic process provides a context in which the power differentials between researcher and researched can be carefully negotiated. The feminist researcher can:

> […] assess how dominant discourses infuse our own understandings of what counts as data and whose voices are privileged in our ethnographic accounts … conflicts of interpretation are revealed and, more importantly, renegotiated in a more egalitarian fashion than is found in traditional social science methodology or in other approaches to activist research (Naples 2003, p.201)

While this thesis has no claim to be 'activist research', conversations teasing out shared and differing understandings of feminism, gender, Chinese identity and 'Western' versus 'Eastern' art histories are crucial elements of this study.

The artists' works represent a dialogue with China's past and with the contemporary discourses of international exchange and exhibition practices, an 'artistic conversation' with history in forms of 'translation, transformation, appropriation and refiguration' of Chinese art traditions (Wu 2014 pp.331–339). Furthermore, the artists were also engaged in an unstated dialogue with both Chinese and Western feminisms, and with Euro-American feminist theory's travelling history of arrival, reception, translation and transformation into China. Min Dongchao (2005; 2007; 2014; 2017) analysed the impact of translation on the late twentieth-century development of feminist theory and practice in China. The dialogues, debates and disagreements between Chinese feminist academics

who translated and analysed Euro-American feminist theory in the 1990s formed a significant contextual background to this study of artists who sometimes claim and sometimes disavow a feminist intention.

The following paragraphs explore in more detail the rationale for semi-structured interviews as a means of gathering data from primary sources. The form of the semi-structured interview allowed the artists access in the participant preparation phase to the broad topics developed for the outline of open-ended questions. Essentially the same questions, in the same sequence, were asked of each artist, providing a measure of validity and reliability when the transcribed interviews were coded and interpreted. This list of questions and topics were presented to the artists prior to encounters in their studios. During each encounter, however, different conversational pathways emerged, and many follow-up questions were asked, in addition to those originally planned.

The choice to use the format of the semi-structured interview is closely aligned with the ethical position of the study: Martyn Hammersley's (2015) belief that an approach that respects all participants and considers their well-being should be the cornerstone of research ethics was at the centre of the preparation for the interviews. Alice Brown & Patrick A. Danaher's (2019) analysis of semi-structured interviews in education research cites the work of Robertson and Hale (2011) on interview relationships in the health field that may be extrapolated to qualitative research in the humanities more broadly: they found that the researcher must establish rapport and credibility, must manage the relationship with the participants, and should be able to integrate the participants' contexts with their prepared questions.[10] In transcultural research projects, in particular, the researcher must be vigilantly self-reflexive, adaptable, and intuitive. As will become clear, the interview was not the only method applied in this study, but this form of data collection preceded the ekphrastic approach to artwork analysis that followed it. As Gina Wisker (2001, p.165) contends, 'Interviews can provide both the detailed information you set out to collect and some fascinating contextual or other information.' In particular, the semi-structured interview format allows the interviewer to expand, ask supplementary questions, negotiate and discuss (Hitchcock and Hughes 1989, p.83). It becomes a richer conversation with the potential for spiralling, iterative dialogue that may even disrupt or expose an unequal relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

Fig 3.3. Artist Ma Yanling signs Participant Ethics Agreement documents, with translator Xu Yining, prior to the first recorded interview. Beijing, April 2017. Photograph Luise Guest

As well as being respectful, flexible, sensitive to cultural differences and linguistic nuances and knowledgeable of context, successful interviews require the interviewer to structure the encounter in such a way that the conversation, when interpreted, throws up significant meaning/s and questions for further inquiry. Steinar Kvale offers two metaphors. Firstly, he suggests that the interviewer is a miner who 'seeks nuggets of essential meaning' (1996, p.3). Secondly, the interviewer is likened to a traveller in an exchange with the interviewee in a shared journey; the interview is thus a meaningful experience for them both (Kvale 1996). Therefore, the interview is modelled upon an everyday conversation between equals. Taylor and Bogdan (1984, p.77) assert that it is vital to acknowledge that the role of interviewer 'entails not merely obtaining answers but learning what questions to ask and how to ask them'. Marcus and Fischer (1986, p.69) stress the importance of the dialogic approach in order that diverse voices emerge from the interview, rather than merely the voice and standpoint of the interviewer. They refer to 'polyphony' as 'the registering of different points of views in multiple voices' (1986, p.71).

Feminist researchers from many fields identify qualitative interview methods as offering the potential to undermine gendered, patriarchal hegemonies within the academy. Shulamit Reinharz (1992, p.19), for example, emphasises that the interview method allows researchers access to people's thoughts and memories in their own words, not mediated through the words of the researcher – an antidote to a history of women's absence from research in the humanities, or (if present in the discourse at all), for having men speak for them. Others, including Rosanna Hertz (1997) and Ruth Behar (1996), focus on the interviewer's reflexivity: she must acknowledge and problematise her positionality. The researcher, actively interpreting what she has heard, is also critically reflecting upon and evaluating her own understandings, her standpoint, and her position within a (transcultural) dialogue.

Reflecting on her own earlier work, Ann Oakley (2016, p.197), for example, admits that she had failed to 'acknowledge the complexity of the interview process, especially in relation to the dynamics of power and the social divisions between women'. However, Oakley's re-consideration of the interview process concluded with a reference to the work of Limerick, who identified something that he and his colleagues named 'the gift'. This 'gift' – of their time, and of their story – is presented to the researcher by the participants. It is within their agency to give or to withhold it. It is evident, though, that the 'giving' to the researcher generally takes place in a context of manifestly unequal power relationships, albeit ameliorated by some counterbalances; Oakley concludes that notions of 'the gift', and of the possibility of friendship between researcher and researched in these complicated social relationships require further study (Oakley 2016, p.209).

In a transcultural study such as this, it is particularly important to acknowledge disparities of power and the possibility of cultural/linguistic misunderstandings. I was concerned about the establishment of a rapport that might blur or minimise the differences between us, with the consequent risk of skewing the data towards what the artists may have believed I wanted to hear. Even apart from issues of trust and appropriate boundaries between interviewer and interviewee, the ever-present possibility of misunderstanding, mistranslation or false assumptions serves to illustrate the limitations of any such dialogue: we enter in good faith but any attempt to 'see' and 'hear' the truth of another is partial at best. Berlant and Edelman (2014, p.x) point out this impossibility:

> […] references taken for granted by one person are foreign to another; historical contexts or philosophical grounds are never fully shared (nor could they be, given the infinite expansion of knowledge that would require); alignments of context or reference take shape simultaneously as gaps, missed encounters, and blockages.

In his analysis of interview-based research methods Thomas Diefenbach (2009, p.876) raises some of their well-explored disadvantages and limitations, including the influence, bias or subjective assumptions of the researcher and 'the sufficiency and reliability of the sources of information, internal validity (truthfulness of the data), selection and grouping, interpretation and presentation of data, external validity (generalisation of the findings), testing of theory'. He cites Patton (1990, p.372) who concludes that 'the human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis.' However, the idea that the common humanity of researcher and researched is a weakness in interview-based research has been forcefully challenged by feminist researchers in diverse fields, including Oakley (1981; 2016) and Taylor (1998) who reject the notion of 'scientific' detachment and the disinterested researcher.

All dialogue presents the possibility of miscommunication, false equivalences, incorrect assumptions and ungrounded conclusions, and a conversation across languages and cultures multiplies these risks. However, it is also true, as Berlant and Edelman (2014, p. xi) argue, that there exists the possibility of transformative understandings, when 'something of the other's language or intellectual imperatives' affects our own. That is when the ground shifts. This study's semi-structured interviews became mutually respectful – although sometimes bewildering, awkward, and difficult – encounters between researcher and artists. Paul Gladston (2014) elucidates the problematic nature of conducting interviews with artists in China, most particularly those that are mediated by an interpreter/translator. These include the unreliability of memory, the conscious or unconscious desire to reframe events in a different light, and the self-censorship of subjects deemed sensitive by Chinese authorities. The transcription process, too, is beset with pitfalls, including the possibility of 'unconscious interpretative reconstruction on the part of the transcriber' (Gladston 2014, p.23). However, these problems also provide opportunities for constructing meaning. The disjunctions that emerged between the apparently feminist work of the artists in this study, and their hesitations in conversation,

were rich sources for analysis. They reveal ambiguities and gaps of understanding, illuminating ways of interpreting their work that would not otherwise have come to light with the same degree of clarity.

A significant aspect of the dialogic process continued after the face-to-face encounters with the artists. Taking place simultaneously with the coding and analysis of the transcribed interviews was the analysis of the artists' selected works. Their visual language of ink, paper, felt or wood, is another 'voice' speaking a different language. The space between the work of the artist and the analysis of the researcher is, like a dialogue, a slowly-building, iterative construction of meaning and interpretation. Close observation of their work revealed that their materiality, visual grammar and conceptual intentionality addressed questions of gender and Chinese identity. This interpretive process was as significant in the study as the encounters with the artists as it opened out new possibilities for seeing their work in relation to existing narratives of 'China', 'Chinese contemporary art', 'Chineseness', 'Chinese contemporaneity' and 'Chinese women'. This section of the chapter has provided a rationale for the semi-structured interview as a transcultural dialogic encounter, while the next section further develops this with consideration of how feminist ethnography and theories of situated knowledge have inflected the study.

3.4 Outsiders, Insiders and In-Between Spaces

Conscious of the risk of positioning the subjects of the study as the orientalised 'other', a body of literature around the complex relationships between researcher and researched – and in particular, the literature around women interviewing women – informed the design and implementation of this study. Ann Oakley's proposal that feminist researchers' interviews with female participants incorporated elements of a transition to friendship based on shared experiences of gendered social structures (Oakley 1981) influenced the development of interviewing methods that were founded in reciprocal connections of trust and empathy, rather than attempting to emulate the data collection of quantitative research. As previously mentioned, however, Oakley's (2016) re-examination of her own much-cited work sounded a warning: the feminist researcher must be wary of creating bonds across divides of language and culture that are more illusory than real.

Changing relationships between the so-called 'West' and 'East' have challenged disciplines such as anthropology and sociology which in the past were understood as being conducted by 'an "I" – understood as having a complex psychology and history – observing a "we" that, until recently, was viewed as plural, a-historical, and non-individuated' (Behar 1996, p.26). That god-like view has been challenged by the recognition of other voices – feminist ethnography seeks to problematise the connection between the researcher and the subject/s of her research, recognising gendered power relationships. The positionality of the researcher must be acknowledged, examined, and made explicit in how the research is written and how the fieldwork and data collection process is represented. To do so is to acknowledge the partial nature of qualitative research, and to accept that, despite all good intentions and reasonable risk-management, the researcher's gender, economic status, ethnicity, sexuality, age or language background may alter the nature of the 'data' collected and in turn its codification as knowledge. The encounters between artists and researcher in this study aimed to embrace the discursive complexities, contradictions and slippages of meaning in transcultural discourse, viewing the research encounters as forms of what Haraway (1991, p.181) described as 'infidel heteroglossia', a powerful polyphony of intersecting female voices.[11]

Like other social movements that emerged in the 1960s, including the civil rights and gay liberation movements, the feminist movement identified the exclusion of marginalised voices within academia, as within society more broadly. Feminist research in the second-wave feminism of the late twentieth-century was sometimes framed as 'giving a voice' to the unheard or the oppressed, and thus producing new knowledge. However, the notion of 'giving' a voice to those perceived as otherwise voiceless risks patronising and 'othering' those who have not traditionally been seen or heard in academic research. Krista McQueeney (2013) argues that rather than privileging the voices of research participants, feminist ethnographers should acknowledge the power relations in which they find themselves and select a methodology that is most appropriate to their field setting. In this study the 'field setting' was the artists' studios, and the method was the recorded semi-structured interview focused on specific aspects of artistic practice and how the artists position themselves self-reflexively within it – they speak for themselves, although of course their voices are mediated through the translation and transcription process, as well

as through the interpretative voice of the researcher. Stitched into this fabric of primary research data, though – to use the sewing/knitting metaphor once again – is an ekphrastic analysis and interpretation of their works, framed by the three intersecting feminist frameworks of 'subterranean feminism', '*nannü*' and travelling/translation theory. The two processes together form a warp and weft of interwoven threads that aim to draw out new meanings, re-positioning the work of these artists within the gendered discourses of Chinese contemporary art.

The history of feminist ethnographic theory and practice over a more than 30-year period is complex; debate about what it is, or could be, continues. This study positions it as a method stressing 'equality, intimacy, dialogue and reciprocity between researchers and participants' (Checker et al. 2014, p.408). A feminist ethnography self-reflexively examines gendered power structures, including those present in the relationship between researcher and researched. What came to be called 'the new ethnography' at the end of the twentieth century was a self-reflexive attempt to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of anthropological inquiry: partial, intersubjective and situated (Haraway 1988, p.593). The work of Haraway and the feminist ethnographers and anthropologists who influenced this study sought to traverse this difficult terrain with sensitivity, understanding that real-world knowledge is not 'discovered' by the researcher, but rather co-constructed, sometimes in fits and starts, through what Haraway (1988, p.593) called the 'power-charged social relation of "conversation"'. Haraway's assertion that situated objectivity connects both subject and object and that situated knowledge requires seeing the 'object' of study (in this case feminist art in China) as 'actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource' (1988, p.593) recognises the complexity of intersectional identities and cultural norms in cross-cultural interactions. Sociologist of gender and sexuality Judith Stacey's 'Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?' (1988) questioned whether its promise of equality and reciprocity was even possible. Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod's later article with the same title critiqued the differences in privilege and power between the researcher and his or her research subjects (Abhu-Lughod 1990). Anne Oakley concluded that 'the complex political and social relationship between researcher and researched cannot easily (or helpfully) be fitted into a paradigm of "feminist" research' (Oakley 2016, p.209). In her 2013 article, 'The Methodological Imperatives of

Feminist Ethnography', Richelle D. Schrock argued that these dilemmas continue to pose a challenge: 'the difficulties of navigating their fault lines still haunt us today' (2013, p.48).

In the fractured politics of late twentieth century global/American capitalism, and the emergence of new forms of feminist theory and practice, Donna Haraway asked, 'What kind of politics could embrace partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves and still be faithful, effective – and, ironically, socialist feminist?' (1991, p.157). Haraway's 'situated knowledge' was significant in epistemological debates that took place within many fields of feminist research at the end of the twentieth century and the early decades of the twenty-first, including ethnography, anthropology, literary criticism, gender studies, the sciences, computer science and cultural studies and hence her influence on a study such as this cannot be overstated. Reflexively dismantling and reconstructing feminist identities, Haraway's work is situated at the intersections of feminist theory and the philosophy of science. Regenerating and reactivating theory, rejecting the romantic essentialism of 1970s radical feminism, her notion of cyborgian resistance proposed a kind of collectivist dream, a dream 'not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia […] an imagination of a feminist speaking in tongues…' (1991, p.181) that aligns with the polyvocal theoretical framing of this thesis. This study required a methodology in which the researcher and the women who are subjects of research enter into potentially transformative dialogues possessing 'infidel' counter-patriarchal possibilities.

Haraway challenged both the gender essentialism of Euro-American second-wave feminist theory and the narrow emphasis on class structures and labour relations of socialist feminism. For Haraway, theory and practice are indivisible. As a trained scientist, her denial of the researcher's 'God trick' and her embrace of a feminist imaginary in which cyborgian feminists become nodes in a network of interconnections also challenge Western Cartesian binaries of self/other. Of this persistent, systemic dualism which has underpinned the subordination of those perceived as 'other' – women and non-western, non-white people (and, Haraway would add, animals) – she writes:

> Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man (2004, p.35).

This critique of such binaries resonates with (but is by no means identical to) the Daoist metaphysics of *yin-yang* relationships oscillating in a field of universal *qi* energy. It is a critique that, in her early twentieth-century modernising context, informed the similarly activist anarcho-feminist theory of He-Yin Zhen and the gendering *nannü* construct, outlined in Chapter 2, which will inform the interpretation of artists' works in Chapters 4–7. Moreover, Haraway's ability to connect apparently unrelated fields of knowledge challenged the false binary between feminist theory and activism. This is of particular significance in non-Western and postcolonial contexts, including China, where Euro-American forms of feminism may be far from the lived experience of women. Haraway's proposed 'knowledge-making process' initiated by a researcher in a process that is problematised and accountable (Haraway 1991, p.190) influenced the design of this study.

Haraway's situated knowledge has often been associated with feminist standpoint epistemology, however, it avoids promoting a single, authoritative female knowledge. As Sophie Lewellyn (2007, p.308) concludes in her reflection upon her fieldwork with rural women in India: 'feminist researchers inspired by Haraway's work need to remain mindful of the limitations of short-term, observation-based research'. The decision in this study to employ, in addition to the ethnographically inflected case study interviews, an overarching approach grounded in feminist art history, aimed to address those limitations. Interviews recorded in the artists' studios were followed by a process of careful, self-reflexive analysis, providing an opportunity for nuanced cross-cultural understanding (and, of course, misunderstanding, slippages of meaning and, sometimes, intuitive leaps of imagination) aiming to avoid falling into the trap of exoticising Chinese culture or speaking 'for' or 'on behalf of' the artists. Thus the 'conversations', the semi-structured dialogues that took place in Beijing studios in 2017 were active constructors of knowledge, mediated through the interpretive analysis of the artists' works.

In problematising my position as a non-Chinese feminist researcher undertaking transcultural research in China, I draw also upon the ethnographic method and theoretical

framing employed by Sasha Su-Ling Welland (2018) in her study of the pre-2008 Olympics Beijing artworld. Like Welland, but a decade later, I was positioned as an 'outsider/quasi-insider' in an 'in-between space' in that same Beijing artworld for the reasons previously discussed. This notion of the 'in-between' recurs throughout the thesis – in relation to the space between artists and their work; between female artists and a male-dominated artworld; between researcher and researched; between languages and cultures; and between the sometimes intersecting/tightly woven and sometimes contradictory/fraying aspects of the artists' identities.

It is the relationship between researcher and research, the sometimes-fragile understandings that emerged through encounters with the artists in what seemed at times like liminal spaces in between languages and cultures, that are at the heart of this study. Feminist geographer Gillian Rose cites the work of England (1994), Katz (1994) and Nast (1994), all of whom described their positions as between the field and the not-field, between theory and practice, and most pertinently between researcher and researched: 'As this landscape develops its inevitable stress faults, other formations of researcher-researched relations come into view (Rose 1997, p.312). The research itself, together with all its participants, is always engaged in a transformative process: the tectonic plates beneath the feet of researcher and researched move about a good deal more than we might think in terms of shifting power relationships and agency. Sometimes this is because the research participants, or subjects, possess insider knowledge which they can choose – or not – to disclose. Certainly, this was the case in this study, despite the willingness of the artists to reveal important details of their thinking about their practice. Sometimes it is because the researcher asks the wrong question or fails to follow up a particular line of inquiry. Sometimes it is because the research participants assume the researcher already knows or understands something, and it remains unspoken. Sometimes it is simply the unreliability of memory. As Rose makes clear, we are not even transparent to ourselves, although all participants in these dialogues at times behaved as if our agency and self-knowledge was unquestioned. This human fallibility enhances the 'stress faults' in the researcher/researched relationship. At other times, shifts in power relationships occurred because in these dialogues the research participants move between positions of more and less cultural power due to gender or class considerations. Degrees of trust are unstable. In

any authentically relational human experience; power shifts back and forth, is filled with contradictions, and is perceived differently from different standpoints at different times.

As a foreign feminist researcher in China, therefore, albeit one with a prior relationship with the four selected research participants, I was occupying a blurry 'between space'. The question of how relationships between researcher and researched directly impact both research methods and the resulting written texts that construct 'knowledge' has been examined by feminist scholars in various fields. Heidi Nast (1994) points out that in the social sciences, for example, the centrality of fieldwork is necessarily underpinned by this self-reflexivity. She further argues that the feminist ethnographer is positioned in a space of 'betweenness', negotiating worlds of 'me and not-me' (1994, p.57). The researcher is thus always negotiating differences: 'Neither outsider nor insider, we work in a field that is forever, inevitably, politicised but fluxing; its social, political, and spatial boundaries shift with changing circumstances or in different political contexts' (Nast 1994, p.60). The spatial and political boundaries of the four artists who are the subjects of this study are similarly unstable – they are artworld outsiders and insiders at different times and in different modes; feminist at times and denying feminism at others; reinventing and re-articulating their Chinese identities within the context of a global artworld. They construct and reconstruct artistic identities through the materiality of their practice. The fluxing nature of identity in the spatial and historical context of the Chinese artworld became ever more apparent through the course of this study. This section of the chapter has established the influence of feminist ethnography and, most particularly, the work of Donna Haraway on this study's reflexive, open-ended dialogic encounters. The following section examines the influences of travelling and translation theory in relation to situated Chinese feminism and its presence within and beyond the encounters with artists.

3.5 Translation and Travel: Transit Zones and Transformation

The previous section of this chapter concluded that the risks of research across boundaries of culture and language may be negotiated with reflexivity and a willingness to enter the 'in-between spaces' of such dialogues. Prior to commencing this study, as a foreign writer/researcher returning each year to Beijing for a period of weeks or months, I was always the '*waidiren*', the outsider observing a group of women artists, the stranger joining the conversation. Yet the women artists themselves also play complex roles; they

are both insider and outsider, simultaneously embraced within, and excluded from, aspects of Chinese intellectual and artistic life by virtue of their gender. Because of their reclamation of female 'otherness' in their contemporary uses of ink and text, their work may be differentiated from that of other significant artists in this genre, such as those mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, including Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Wu Shanzhuan, or Zheng Guogu and the Yangjiang Group. They move between insider- and outsider-ness, between nostalgia for the Chinese past and acknowledgement of its patriarchal complexities.

The following paragraphs outline the significance of travel and translation – literally, metaphorically, theoretically, and in terms of the travels and translation of feminist theory. They expand on the theoretical framing that was outlined in Chapter 2, focusing on methodology. They explain how linguistic and cultural fault lines between non-Chinese researcher and Chinese artists were navigated in this study. 'Travel' is firstly applied in the most literal sense; to undertake this study, it was necessary to travel between Sydney and Beijing, to traverse the complex geographies of the Beijing artworld and visit the four selected artists in their studios and galleries. Located on the city's farthest edges, in liminal zones between rural village, artistic bohemia and urban gentrification, in places constantly threatened with demolition in the city's never-ceasing reconstruction, experiences here are punctuated by both the familiar and the strange. Familiar smells of oil paint and ink, and familiar methods of artmaking, are juxtaposed with aspects of an art ecology/economy quite different from Australia's, in ways that will be explained in the chapters about each artist. Travel is also a feature of the lives of these artists. They travel for research, including the ethnographic research in remote areas of Hunan Province undertaken by Tao Aimin and Ma Yanling as they investigated the nature and origins of the *Nüshu* script; Bingyi's journeys to mountain regions in Hebei and Anhui Province to create 'land art paintings'; Xiao Lu's period of exile in Australia after 1989 and her return to Australia in 2021. For artists operating within and between a local and global contemporary art ecology, travel inside and outside China is necessary to make and exhibit their work. Travel and translation, of course, are also present in this thesis in the broader, more metaphorical sense of the transcultural experience: the border crossings, shifting self-identities, inevitable mistranslations and liminal zones that James Clifford (1997) positioned as predicaments of our fluid modernity.

The history of contemporary art in China, and its emergence in the immediate post-Mao period, is part of the very long history of transcultural encounters between China and the world, and in modern times between Chinese artists and western curators, collectors, and scholars discussed in previous chapters. Nevertheless, despite this history of (occasionally fraught) collaboration and influence, concepts of outside and inside ('*wai*' and '*nei*') became significant to the framing of the study, which has taken place in a period of increasingly bellicose nationalism from the Chinese government and state-controlled media. As a foreigner in China – a *waiguoren* – yet one with a history of connections and conversations with Chinese artists, my position was complex.

'Travel' also underpins this research in the form of travelling theory. In analysing local feminisms and the artists' gendered language of ink and brush it was necessary to examine how feminist theories had travelled between Euro-America and China, and to understand how these theories were received, rejected or transformed in their new locus. As outlined in Chapter 2, feminist translation theory inflected how this thesis positions feminist theory as it is understood and enacted in China and applied – consciously or unconsciously – in the work of the four artists. Edward Said's travelling theories and concepts (1983; 2000) have been revisited by scholars in the light of the impacts of neo-liberalism and twenty-first-century globalisation and post-globalisation. Said himself stressed the vital necessity of a situated critical consciousness that positioned a moveable theory in the specific context of its production and reception. Bachmann-Medick's feminist translation theory argues for a more specific reclamation of historical contexts and local situatedness (2014, p.122). We live in a time in which distinctions between local and global are increasingly blurred and contested, although the global pandemic that emerged in Wuhan at the start of 2020 will continue to have unanticipated impacts on the free flow of people, goods and ideas. The artists in this study are positioned in an internationally interconnected and interdependent artworld that sometimes diminishes or exoticises works that appear overtly Chinese.[12]

'Translation' is, like 'travel', firstly applied literally and linguistically: the work of a non-Chinese researcher with limited Chinese Mandarin language fluency requires the hiring of a native-speaking translator. Then comes the painstaking struggle to check that questions are correctly translated, listening intently during each recorded interview to understand

the rapid Chinese. Care must be taken to ensure that everything that is being said is translated accurately without omissions (which can occur due to real or perceived cultural or political sensitivities), and, finally, multiple transcription processes as the translation from Chinese to English is checked and re-checked. 'Translation' also underpins this study in the form of feminist translation theory, with particular reference to the risks of falsely universalising lived experiences of gender in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Assumed equivalences, transcultural misunderstandings and slippages of meaning are pitfalls that lie in wait for the researcher here.

The theoretical framing of feminist translation theory was explored in the previous chapter; the focus here is on how these complex relationships play out in practice. We must acknowledge that there are unresolvable tensions within feminisms, and most particularly within feminisms operating within and between distinct cultural contexts, while at the same time being willing to open ourselves to discourses beyond the boundaries of Western thought and practice. Feminist translation theory opens a rich seam of philosophical inquiry in the see-sawing relationship between localism and cosmopolitanism, a continuing and contested discourse in the field of contemporary art from China that influenced both the theoretical framing and the methodology of this study. Linguistic theorist Emily Apter (2005) opens 'The Translation Zone' with a Samuel Beckett-like 'Twenty Theses on Translation'. The first is 'Nothing is Translatable' and the last, 'Everything is Translatable'. Translation failure, she says, is inevitable. Apter's (2007) notion that certain things, including language and the visual language of artworks, or aspects of artworks, will inevitably be lost in translation – or will be, in fact, untranslatable – underlines the risks of undertaking transcultural research but also its opportunities. The struggle to translate must continue, balancing untranslatable alterity against the imperative to communicate across cultural boundaries.

This thesis explores numerous paradoxical relationships – between feminism and its denial; between global and local; between *yin-yang* relationships and the realities of patriarchy; between the irreconcilability yet connectedness of Daoist non-rationalism with Confucian rectitude just to name a few. Another paradox-filled problem is the question of how to 'translate' (and here I refer to the transcultural analysis and interpretation of artworks, not literary texts) from one cultural context to another. Jonathan E. Abel argues

that 'the translator experiences the translated's alterity; and at this limit of identity one text exposes itself to another' (2005, p.148). The process of analysing the artists' works and interpreting their possible meaning/s and significance is positioned in the case studies that follow as a form of ekphrasis. Inevitably, tensions arise between the artists' stated intentions and the reading of the works in the light of feminist theory. These tensions, to some extent, are irreconcilable, but as analytic categories play against each other there are possibilities for new interpretations and understandings to emerge.

In terms of a research praxis, the idea that translation has long moved beyond the merely linguistic and textual and into the cultural sphere of the intersections between disciplines is resonant. In this study, the researcher is not herself the translator (linguistically or textually) but may be said to inhabit the role of the cultural translator. Doris Bachmann-Medick's (2014) argument that translation theory has become an expanded field, drawing upon the work of scholars who refocused theoretical attention on translation as a process, is particularly significant in considering transcultural encounters like those in this study. Recognising its vital role in a globalised world, she proposes 'a (transnational) study of culture as translation studies', celebrating the resulting 'categories of rupture such as translation and transformation' and its 'detours, displacements, breaks, obstacles' (Bachmann-Medick 2014, p.121). Translation, then, is capable of revealing imbalances of power and cultural differences such that possibilities for action (even activism) become apparent (Bachmann-Medick 2012). In this study, beyond the translation of interview questions and responses from English to Chinese and vice versa, the difficulty of translating feminist and artistic concepts and navigating the consequent misunderstandings and clarifications was a large part of the process, as was the 'translation' from idea to artwork in the artists' practices and from artwork to analysis and interpretation in the practice of the researcher. Bachmann-Medick argues, moreover, that as translation turns, it becomes 'a new form of knowledge – a kind of "travelling concept" and a methodologically reflected analytical category' – ultimately, it is 'a model for a study of culture' (2012, p.26).

Recognition of the laudable attempts of feminist scholars to make visible complex structures of power and to write reflexivity into research aside, the study was complicated by the gaps of language and culture between researcher and participants. Gillian Rose's

(1997, p.312) frank discussion of the fraught ambivalences around reflexivity, positionality, situatedness and complex power relationships amplifies arguments previously made by Haraway and others. The power structures of the artworld are quite distinct, and the increasingly tense relationship between a rising China and the 'West' added further complicating background noise to the fieldwork phase and follow-up dialogues with the artists, although thankfully in 2017 the diplomatic relationship between China and Australia was not yet as fractured as it later became. The four artists are confident, well-educated, well-travelled, and as financially secure as the precarious life of an artist can allow. Their work is frequently exhibited, inside and outside China. Further, it became clear during the interviews that their sense of China's increasingly significant geopolitical position, and their strong identification with Chinese history, philosophy and aesthetics, is a vital element of their identity.

The question of power thus became one of voice – who is constructing the narrative, for whose benefit, and whose voice is heard? This is not a clearly delineated terrain, easily mapped and painlessly traversed. Dialogue between women across cultural and linguistic fault lines involves much shuttling back and forth. There are hesitations, and frequent missteps. Yet, despite the inherent risks, and the fact that communication is often impeded by barriers of language and culture, it remains possible for genuine insights to emerge from within the hesitations and slippages – even fractures – of such transcultural conversations.

3.6 Unravelling and Ravelling: Interpretation/s

In the process of interpreting the interview encounters and analysing specific artworks – two distinct primary sources – the possibilities of transcultural feminist theory as the underlying framework become increasingly apparent. The process was akin to pulling apart a knitted or woven textile, examining its separate threads and re-knitting them to form whole cloth. An intersecting framework comprising Shohat's 'subterranean' feminism, the *nannü* construct proposed by He-Yin Zhen and feminist travelling and translation theory is also informed by Eva Kit Wah Man's re-examination of Daoist and Confucian aesthetics (discussed in Chapter 2). While both *yin* and *yang* are considered in Daoist and neo-Confucian beliefs alike to be fundamental reciprocal aspects of the universe, this thesis argues that their dynamic may be understood from a syncretic

Confucian perspective as essentially hierarchical in nature, in spite of the efforts of scholars such as Chenyang Li (2000), Sandra A Wawrytko (2000) and Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee (2006) to argue that Confucianism is compatible with feminism.[13] The non-rationalist cosmological principles of Daoism were adapted by Song Dynasty neo-Confucian scholars to justify their preferred social order, in which the subordination of women was considered essential to the relationships between family and state.[14] Ann A. Pang-White, for example, in her close analysis of the *Nü Sishu* (four books for women) delineates *original* – or, in her view, 'authentic' – Confucianism from *politicised* Confucianism:

> The troubled history of Confucianism has much to do with the symbolic female subordination in the husband-wife relation and how it became entangled with the political symbolism of the ruler-minister relation by means of a politicised reading of the yin-yang metaphysics […] the feminist potential of a de-politicized Confucianism is not totally out of bounds (Pang-White 2016, p. 18).

Yin and *yang* characteristics thus became justifications for the oppression of women. Given that neo-Confucian orthodoxies laid down that ritual propriety and social harmony were predicated on hierarchies of gender and the class distinctions operative in a feudal society, *Pace* Man's de-emphasis of 'the patriarchal paradigm carried out in social relations' (2015, p.29), this thesis concurs with Sin Yee Chan's (2000) view – also acknowledged in the writings of He-Yin Zhen (1907) – that Confucian texts endorse the subordination of women. Han Dynasty Confucian scholar Tung Chung Shu 'converted the complementary and equal relationship of *yin* and *yang* as portrayed in the Book of Changes to a hierarchical relationship of *yang* presiding over *yin*' (Chan 2000, pp.115–16), a hierarchical relationship that is also to some extent implied in the writings of Confucius himself. The oft-quoted *Analect* 17:25, for example (in D.C. Lau's 1979 translation) describes 'women and small men' as difficult: 'if you let them get too close, they become insolent'. Rosenlee (2006, pp.121–22), however, sustains a credible argument that the historical patriarchal oppression of women in China runs deeper than Confucianism as state orthodoxy. Rather, she argues:

> […] the root of gender oppression in China must be sought within the institution of the family where the convergence of these three cultural imperatives reinforced in Confucian familial virtue ethics—the continuity of the family name, filial piety, and

> ancestor worship—serves as a powerful basis for generating, sustaining, and justifying the social abuse of women'.

The subordination of women was thus implicit in the functional societal roles and responsibilities of women in the inner, domestic sphere and men in the outer world, in the relationships within the family and the relationship of the individual to the state. The tension between a Daoist-inflected metaphysics of complementarity and reciprocity in which *yin* and *yang* forces oscillate, potentially transforming one into the other, versus a rationalist neo-Confucian ethics of gendered hierarchical power structures, continues to play out in the apparent contradictions observed in encounters with the artists in this study, as we shall see in each Case Study chapter that follows.

The interviews with Bingyi, Tao Aimin, Ma Yanling and Xiao Lu, and close analysis of their works, reveal the vital importance of these culturally significant ideas – they form the intellectual and philosophical habitus within which the artists live and work. The revival of non-rationalist Daoist philosophy imbricated with syncretic Confucianism is a feature of contemporary intellectual life in China – Confucianism was revived by the CCP to some extent in the 1990s and Confucian values underlie the Party's current emphasis on social harmony (*hexie*).[15] What results for the artists, embodied in their material choices as much as in their intended subject matter, is an impossible paradox. Their work is grounded in their Daoist/Confucian sense of the transformational capacity of art, in which mind and body collaborate (Man 2016). At the same time, they confront the realities of gendered oppression.

This paradox has been observed by other scholars of Chinese contemporary art. In their analysis of the work of female contemporary artist Fu Xiaotong, for example, Gladston and Howarth-Gladston (2017, p.59) argue that her work reflects the history of *wenrenhua* in China – despite its contemporary appearance it is imbued with the history of the paintings produced by the scholar gentry class (the *wenren*) that reached their apogee with the *shan shui* painting of the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties. *Wenrenhua* embodied worldly Confucian values of morality, ethics and propriety but also encompassed non-rationalist Daoist cosmological principles of *yin* and *yang*, in a 'seemingly paradoxical combination of individualism and subservience to rigid social

order redolent of Confucianism's somewhat contradictory appropriation of non-rationalist Daoist thinking' (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston 2017, p.59). Gladston and Howarth-Gladston argue that syncretic Confucian discourses are embodied in the materiality (and lack of materiality) of the work, in a form of presence/absence. A similar form of material embodiment is argued in each Case Study chapter that follows, with the additional thread of gender woven into its fabric.

A yearning for the desired integrated relationship between *yin* and *yang* of non-rationalist Daoist cosmology coexists in the work of the artists examined in this study with the (sometimes undeclared) acknowledgement that the Confucian patriarchal authoritarianism that kept women subservient to men is still operative in the contemporary world. This paradox would not have surprised He-Yin Zhen, who saw *nannü* operating within patriarchy to legitimise the subjugation of women – always and everywhere. *Nannü*, her translators argue, 'signifies not only gendered social relations between man and woman but also, more broadly, the relationship of the past to the present, of China to the world, of politics to justice, of law and ritual to gendered forms of knowledge, interaction, and social organization' (Liu et al. 2013, p.10). The following chapters examine how these same relationships – temporal, spatial and interpersonal – play out in the work of four contemporary artists.

The tension that emerges between the cultural and historically influenced specificity of the artists' works and their responses to feminism (and how they are positioned and position themselves in the global art ecology of curated 'feminist' exhibitions of contemporary art) is evident in the recorded, transcribed interviews. This tension became a continuing leitmotif throughout the process of analysing particular works, and the writing of the thesis. The layering of these distinct theories and frameworks, however, provides new ways to interpret the richness and complexity of the artworks, and to draw inferences and conclusions from the interviews, becoming a transdisciplinary approach for a transcultural investigation.

Scholar of feminist translation theory, Sherry Simon (1996, p.x), asked and answered her own question:

> What does it mean to position translation within cultural studies? It means, principally, that the terms "culture," "identity" and "gender" are not taken for

> granted but are themselves the object of inquiry. They are no longer self-explanatory notions which can be used unquestioningly.

It is the intention of this study to focus an interrogatory lens upon each of these terms in relation to the work of contemporary women artists in China who make explicitly or implicitly feminist works within a genre of artistic practice that was historically – and is still today – dominated by men. They have chosen to make their work in a material and conceptual practice of ink painting and calligraphy that embodies notions of Chineseness and syncretic Daoist/Confucianism. Their use of ink and forms that are derived from, or resemble, calligraphy intentionally reference a past, pre-revolutionary China.

Fig. 3.4. Bingyi in her studio, Beijing, 2013. Photograph Luise Guest

In order to make 'culture', 'gender' and 'identity' objects of inquiry, a theoretical framework and methodology 'knitted' together from situated Chinese feminist theory (He-Yin Zhen's *nannü*) and Euro-American feminism (intersectional approaches including Shohat's 'subterranean' feminism; feminist travelling and translation theory; feminist art history and feminist ethnography) becomes a hybrid, transdisciplinary scaffolding, capable of interpreting the paradoxes of apparently 'feminist' art produced by

women who express ambivalence towards feminism. This polyvocal theoretical/methodological juxtaposition of feminist theories and transdisciplinary methodologies is a transculturally resonant means through which the dilemmas and tensions that played out in the interviews, and which are evident in the artists' work, can be examined. The self-representation, regional and local feminisms and situated knowledges of the four artists in the study – including their sometime denial of a feminist intention –rupture notions of the universality of feminism, or indeed of contemporaneity. This tear in the fabric of theory's travels provides rich alternative readings and understandings of Chinese contemporary art and gender through the four case studies, as the artists respond to the specifically located constraints and to the political/personal/artistic frustrations they experience in a still rigidly gendered Chinese social and artistic milieu.

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[1] Wang, Yilin, 2021. 'Translation: Poems by Chinese feminist and revolutionary writer Qiu Jin', *NüVoices*. Available from: https://nuvoices.com [accessed 17.3.21]

[2] In their analysis of the significance of Joan Scott's 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' (1986) Hershatter and Wang (2008, p.1406) point out the limitations of the 'add women and stir' approach to feminist scholarship. The category of gender, they argue, 'enlarged the project beyond women to gender and beyond a male-female binary to a broader inquiry into relationships of power'. Their field is history, but the examination of power relationships is intrinsic to feminist scholarship more broadly, including this thesis.

[3] See, for example, Annie Irvine, Paul Drew, Roy Sainsbury, 2013. "'Am I Not Answering Your Questions Properly?' Clarification, Adequacy and Responsiveness in Semi-Structured Telephone and Face-To-Face Interviews." *Qualitative Research* Vol 13 (1) pp. 87–106.

[4] See the 'Note to Examiners' for details of the Ethics Approval granted by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Approval Panel in 2016

[5] Between November 2015 and March 2020, I was employed as the Manager of Research at the White Rabbit Collection of Contemporary Chinese Art, Sydney. Three of the artists selected for this study had previously had work acquired by this collection, one had not; these acquisitions long predated my employment there. It was explained to each artist, prior to their

formal agreement to participate in the study, that there was no connection between their choice to participate in this research project and any future possible acquisition of their work, nor would it have any bearing on the possible future exhibition of their works at the collector's Sydney gallery.

[6] Numerous sources illuminate the advantages of using the first person in accounts of qualitative research: Christine Webb (1992), for example, argues against academic gatekeeping in which the 'neutral' third person makes the social element of the research invisible, especially when applied to qualitative feminist research that emphasises the researcher's reflexivity. Kim Mitchell (2017) argues that 'voice' is a socially constructed concept that reflects the author's way of knowing – the subjective experience of the author is implicit in research practices that involve human interaction.

[7] The contested concept of Chineseness was discussed in the previous two chapters. Chineseness is historically situated and continues to be debated. This identity formation is explained by Ien Ang (2001, p.25) as 'a category whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and re-articulated'.

[8] See Chapter 1 for an explanation of my use of the term 'microhistories', modelled on Peggy Wang's use of the term to describe her case studies of artists such as Zhang Xiaogang and Wang Guangyi. These are closely focused on the individual 'case', but yet possess broader implications. See Peggy Wang, *The Future History of Contemporary Chinese Art* Minneapolis, London: The University of Minnesota Press (2020).

[9] Xiao Lu was living and working in Beijing at the time fieldwork was undertaken in 2017. However, in early 2021 she left China and moved to Sydney, having been granted citizenship status when she originally left China for a period of some years after June 1989.

[10] For more see Alice Brown & Patrick A. Danaher, 2019. 'CHE Principles: facilitating authentic and dialogical semi-structured interviews in educational research', *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, Vol 42 (1), pp. 76-90.

[11] 'Heteroglossia', a term derived from the Greek and coined by Bakhtin in his early theoretical work on the novel, is explained in Chapter 1, Endnote 7.

[12] Hou Hanru (2010) and Alexandra Munroe (2017) have argued that Chinese contemporary art is still 'othered' and marginalised in the internationalist arena.

[13] For more see Chenyang Li, *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism Ethics and Gender*. Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court (2000); Sandra A. Wawrytko, 2000. 'Kongzi as Feminist: Confucian Self-Cultivation in a Contemporary Context', *Journal of Chinese*

Philosophy, Vol 27 (2), pp. 171-186; Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation*. Albany: State University of New York Press (2006).

[14] For more, see William Theodore de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart*. New York: Columbia University Press (1981) and Beverly Bossler, *Courtesans, Concubines and the Cult of Female Fidelity: Gender and Social Change in China, 1000–1400*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2012).

[15] The contemporary revival of syncretic Daoist/Buddhist/Confucian ideas and beliefs in China's intellectual and political spheres is a phenomenon beyond the scope of this study. For more, see David A. Palmer and Xun Liu, *Daoism in the 20th Century: Between Eternity and Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press (2012); Jun Deng, Craig A. Smith, 2018. 'The rise of New Confucianism and the return of spirituality to politics in mainland China', *China Information*, Vol 32 (2), pp. 294–314; Peter T.C. Chang, 2014. 'Confucian Pluralism and the Dream of a Harmonious World', *China Information*, Vol 28 (3), pp. 382–404; Richard Wolin, 2015. 'Under Western Eyes: Critical Reflections on the Confucius Revival', *Journal of Chinese Humanities* Vol 1, pp. 259–266.

Chapter 4: CASE STUDY 1

‘Upstairs Girls’: *Nüshu* reinvented in the work of Tao Aimin

‘It shouldn’t have been that we came into this life wrong as girls

Red plums on the tree, a useless branch.’

(Fragment of *Nüshu* poem)[1]

4.1 Reclaiming/Rewriting Silenced Voices

The first of four case studies developed in the previously explained multi-modal methodology comprising interviews with artists and ekphrastic analysis of their works, this chapter examines the work of Tao Aimin (陶艾民 b.1974, Hunan). Data drawn from an interview with the artist in Beijing on 8 April 2017 (and from subsequent conversations via email and WeChat) is imbricated with interpretation of her works using a transdisciplinary method that draws upon feminist art history, as well as upon the work of feminist scholars from a range of disciplines, as outlined in Chapters 2 and 3.[2] The ‘knitting’ of theories of travelling and translation, the ‘subterranean’ feminism proposed by Ella Shohat, and He-Yin Zhen’s feminist dismantling of syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian precepts in her category of *nannü* provide the polyvocal framework for this study. Through this framework Tao’s work is understood as a counter-patriarchal intervention into historical and contemporary Chinese visual culture, most specifically into the revival of ink, calligraphy, bound books and scrolls.

This chapter positions Tao within her Chinese artworld context and examines the nature of her practice, placing her work in dialogue with canonical works of Chinese contemporary art such as Xu Bing’s *Book from the Sky* (c.1987–91). The gendered nature

of her practice is understood as inextricably intersecting with other aspects of her identity including class and Chineseness; formations of identity that construct 'multiple belongings' of the self as subject (Braidotti 2011, p.10). Tao Aimin was selected for this study due to her intersecting identity formations in which gender is imbricated with her rural class background, and because of her immersion in aspects of traditional Chinese visual culture including ink painting, calligraphy rubbings, wood block printing and book binding.

Over a period of several years, Tao Aimin undertook an ethnographic project in which she photographed and video-recorded elderly rural women, and collected the old, weathered washboards they used to launder the family clothes before washing machines became commonplace in rural China. She used these boards initially as found objects in sculptural installations, and later as surfaces for making rubbings and relief prints. Around 2006 Tao discovered the developing research around the ancient female-devised syllabary of *nüshu*, a script used to write *Xiangnan Tuhua*, a dialect found in Jiangyong Prefecture, Hunan Province. *Nüshu* became a significant element of her work at this time, and she has returned to it once again in recent works. Tao employs the calligraphy of *nüshu*, an almost extinct, reputedly 'secret' script – although this is a mischaracterisation, as we shall see – as an integral element of her multidisciplinary work. She thus inescapably references the 'pseudo-calligraphy' seen in works by post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde artists such as Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda.

This chapter situates Tao's work in the context of the major scholarly research around *nüshu* – its history, its multiple and sometimes contradictory interpretations, and its significance in Tao's practice. The chapter positions Tao's work within the contemporary artistic genre of *shiyan shuimohua* and considers it as a radical insertion of female history and subjectivity into this post-Cultural Revolution phenomenon. This section of the chapter is followed by an argument proposing that through a gendered lens 'knitted' from Chinese and Western feminist theory, Tao Aimin's works may be read as a feminist practice, whether explicitly claimed as such or not. Analysis of specific installations positions her work as revealing the contradictions and paradoxes of her intersecting feminine/feminist and urban/rural Chinese (class) identities in a still patriarchal artworld context. As we shall see, Tao's installations reveal a syncretic Daoist/Confucian-inflected

enactment of Chinese identity that intersects with class and gender to reveal past and present power structures.

Despite the focus on female history in the works analysed in this thesis, when interviewed Tao expressed ambivalence about 'Western' compared to 'Eastern' feminism, a not uncommon response from Chinese women artists that has been widely discussed in the literature and was explored in Chapter 2. Tao's views on feminism reflect the complex history of travelling feminist theory and its translation into Chinese presented in the work of Min Dongchao (2005; 2007; 2014; 2017). Despite Tao's expressed ambivalence, her installations are understood in this chapter as feminist, '*nannü*' spaces that embody fluxing *yin-yang* relationships: they explore not only the historical and continuing subjugation of women and the artist's desire to validate their lives and labours, but also Tao's complicated position in the Beijing artworld and her personal connection through her grandparents to Daoist traditions and practices.

Tao inserts a syllabary invented by anonymous, unlettered rural women in the distant past into the rarefied canon of a male-dominated scholarly tradition, thereby bringing an unacknowledged female history into contemporary art practice. Like the *nüshu* writers and composers, Tao acknowledges and challenges the constraints limiting female agency both past and present, including the very anonymity of the original owners of her washboards. In part due to her own identity as a rural woman with familial connections through her grandparents to ancient *Chu* traditions of Hunan Province,[3] and her memories of Daoist divination rituals performed by her grandfather, Tao Aimin saw its possibilities:

> This language is supposed to evolve from oracle [*script*]. But it's different from hierographic, or oracle. It's very unique. The forms are pointed and slanting. It has something to do with Hunan culture called Chu culture, which seeks freedom in wilderness. So the language may have something to do with the tadpole script, or bird script. This language is very singular in form. As for its origin, this is still a moot point. Some say it comes from the embroidery made from local women. There are a lot of legends surrounding it. Lots of versions. But I think because Jiangyong is quite an ancient place … a descendant from the Yao Emperor was born there. There were also a lot of ancient engravings on tomb stones in Daoxian, a place near Jiangyong (Tao 2017).[4]

Investing the lives of rural women with a significance they had not previously been accorded, Tao used their obsolete washboards as artefacts – quotidian ready-mades – in sculptural installations. She also printed scrolls and books from their roughened surfaces. The traces left by applying ink to washboards, and the marks left on *xuan* paper by her act of printing and rubbing them, form images that intentionally recall the rubbings made from stone stele. Tao's installations of these humble objects, with the addition of an essentially unreadable script invented by rural women, contrasts with the 'monumental and universalising estrangements of language and culture by contemporary male artists' (Erickson 2019) exemplified by the major 'pseudo-calligraphy' or 'anti-writing' installation works of Xu Bing, Wu Shanzhuan or Gu Wenda. In contrast, Tao's practice parallels the linguistic creativity of illiterate women living in Confucian-agrarian communities in remote Hunan Province before the 1980s. Fei-Wen Liu (2004, p.245) argues that *nüshu* reveals hitherto unacknowledged aspects of female agency: 'Peasant women, as active subjects, practised *nüshu* […] those practices illuminate the processes by which women construct meaning, experience autonomy, and acknowledge the androcentric impositions made upon them'. In a Chinese visual culture in which images of 'labour' in the twentieth century took the form of heroic depictions of soldiers, farmers and factory workers, Tao's work constructs meaning from her investigation of the private sphere of domestic labour, an aspect of the everyday rarely seen in Chinese contemporary art.

Tao herself is from a rural farming family in Hunan Province. Like the enclosed, footbound 'upstairs girls' (*loushang nü*) in Jiangyong villages who once embroidered *nüshu* texts and sang the canon of bridal laments, she remains somewhat outside the inner circle of those Chinese artists granted the status of intellectuals, the modern-day inheritors of '*wenren*' literati culture.[5] Her path to becoming a contemporary artist required determination and persistence (Guest 2016, pp.162-165). Her work underlines the marginalised status of women in the official culture of the imperial past, and their absence from the historical narratives with which national identities are created and reinforced – and also their relative invisibility in the genre of reinvented ink and calligraphy in Chinese art. Tao's ethnographic research took her to Jiangyong County, a place deep in the mountains near the borders between Hunan, Guangxi and Guangdong inhabited by both Han Chinese and Yao minority people. Tao's choice of *nüshu* script, the written

language of the subordinated, signifies her refusal to be relegated to invisibility, just as its invention at a still-unknown point in the past represented the refusal of rural women to be a silent absence from recorded history. The resuscitation of *nüshu* by academic researchers (and, with perhaps unfortunate consequences, by local tourism authorities) represents a reclamation of female history.

Fig 4.1: Tao Aimin, *The Secret Language of Women*, 2008, 8 x hand-printed books, ink on paper, acrylic cover, washboards, video, 126 x 126 x 31 1/2 in. Image courtesy the artist.

Fig 4.2: *The Secret Language of Women, 014 Volume 8 Text 15* (detail) 2008, ink on paper, hand-made book with *Nüshu* characters on the edge-papers. Image courtesy the artist.

In a number of installations between 2005 and 2008 *nüshu* calligraphy (sometimes almost hidden) becomes a means to represent Tao's ideas about gender, motherhood, female friendship, domestic labour and complex familial bonds. *The Secret Language of Women* (2008) (Fig. 4.1, 4.2), for example, is an installation of eight Perspex vitrines arranged in an octagonal form, surrounding eight old washboards arranged in a radiating circle on the floor around a projected video of women's hands engaged in scrubbing laundry. It evokes 'secret enclosed female spaces and the interiority of women's lives in a society dominated by Confucian precepts' (Guest 2021 p.138). Each transparent case contains a hand-made, string-bound book, like a precious artefact from a museum collection. The markings on their pages, resembling an unreadable text, have been printed from washboards. They feature barely visible *nüshu* calligraphy on their fore-edges. Tao described her intention:

> I wanted to do a large installation. It would be a combination of a variety of media with a well-shaped video with the images and sounds of a lot of hands washing clothes. Around this are scripts from Sanchao [*sanzhaoshu*] books, handwritten. There were nine [*there are eight in the work as exhibited and photographed – this may just be a slip of memory*] books in the octagon. They all include a cover, content, afterword and a preface at the beginning. It's arranged like this in order for people to read. Every one of them is hand-made. And it took me two years to complete them (Tao 2017).

Tao Aimin's washboard installations draw upon long traditions of wood-block printing in China. She navigates strategically between local and global, traditional folk-art practices and 'high' art, just as she knowingly alludes to the gendered history of the ink tradition. As Shuqin Cui points out, Tao Aimin has transformed a quotidian experience (domestic labour) into a female language and 'returns the commonplace not only back to history but to the ink-water art tradition' (2016, 44). Tao's decision to use a female, vernacular script form is transgressive in two ways. Firstly, instead of the Chinese language and its venerable scholarly history of inscription by ink and brush, Tao reproduces a script invented by illiterate rural women. Bringing this syllabary into the sphere of contemporary art, physically enacting it in the form of installations, prints and ink paintings, she insists on its validation – and, by extension, the validation of a non-élite female history. She emphasises the quotidian nature of the washboards and their role in a female material culture, including her selection of texts from the *nüshu* canon to copy onto the printed book pages:

> Every line was an entire line from a *nüshu* poem. Uh...you might have some associations. For example, if the poetry tells the story of a romantic relationship, and the washboard may also be ... like we're chatting while washing clothes, it's very quotidian (Tao 2017).

Secondly, by inserting this script into the male dominated (in China) genres of conceptual installations of found objects and text-based art forms, her exhibited works memorialise female history and communicate aspects of specifically female experience. She 'transfers

the material artifact from domestic place to public space, thereby transforming unseen female experience into a beckoning display' (Cui 2016 p.45). In these works, the washboards from which Tao made prints and rubbings that she bound as books *become* a language that reclaims a female lineage of women's voices. Tao said, '[…] *Nüshu* is a kind of language, and washboards are also a kind of language. I was telling women's stories with two languages' (Tao 2017).

More than ten years later Tao returned to her use of *nüshu* in her 2019 series, 'Sisterhood' and 'Secret Fan', that explore first person narratives.[6] This 'uncovering' of an unwritten history – and a female vernacular – alludes to the hidden history of generations of rural women. The argument presented in this chapter about Tao Aimin's 're(en)gendering' of ink, calligraphy and printmaking traditions in China is underpinned by aspects of Chinese contemporary art in its post-Cultural Revolution development that were discussed in previous chapters, namely the reclamation of autochthonous art and craft practices by post-'85 New Wave' artists, acknowledged to be of particular significance in the entry of Chinese contemporary art onto the global stage (Wu 2013; Gladston 2014). The next section of the chapter positions Tao Aimin's works within this phenomenon of re-invigorated Chinese aesthetic traditions – the revival of calligraphy, ink painting and an 'expanded field' of the book by contemporary Chinese artists in the late twentieth century – that place her work in dialogue with canonical works such as Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991).

4.2 Books, Scrolls and Syllabaries

The phenomenon from the late 1980s and 1990s in which Chinese artists employed materials and techniques imbued with Chinese cultural references such as ink, calligraphy and *xuan* paper was in part a reaction against Euro-American artistic influences that had been enthusiastically adopted by the artists of the '85 New Wave movement. Some saw this as an uncritical embrace of an imported modernity. In an interview with critic and curator Fei Dawei first published in *Meishu* in July 1986 and cited by Martina Köppel-Yang, Gu Wenda accused many Chinese artists of being 'captives of western modernity' (Köppel-Yang 2003, p.163). Gu, who had been encouraged in his re-examination of the artistic and expressive possibilities of ink and calligraphy by Maryn Varbanov, an influential teacher at Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts, was at the forefront of a radical

recontextualisation of these culturally encoded practices. Köppel-Yang (2003, pp.163–164) explained the phenomenon as the artists' reaction to formalist and expressive trends 'aimed at overcoming cultural schemata and conventions, including those of modern consciousness and western modernity'. She argued that their work, simultaneously displaying Chinese national identity and concepts of western postmodernity, was a 're-reading' of Chinese culture. It may be argued that ink painting and calligraphy, so culturally encoded with history and imbued with Chineseness, functions, as Anne Anling Chen (2018, p.438) suggests, as a nostalgic *Nachträglichkeit* looking back to a lost, idealised China, a rewritten past.[7]

A generation younger than the artists who produced works with 'pseudo-calligraphy' or unreadable writing such as Xu Bing, Qiu Zhijie, Wu Shanzhuan and Gu Wenda, Tao Aimin developed her mature practice when the earlier avant-garde works had already been invested with canonical status. Yet debates around the local or global nature of Chinese art continued, inflected by rising nationalism and the CCP's awareness of the possibilities of art as a form of soft power. These debates focused on notions of artistic 'Chineseness' and argued for an authentically Chinese contemporary art.[8] The entangled relationships between ink painting (*shuimo hua*), calligraphy (*shufa*) and contemporary art (*dangdai yishu*) are complex. Pauline Yao (2008) noted this complexity when she argued that, although the medium of ink is the instrument with which many artists expressed their ideas in an expanded practice, yet in the first decade of the twenty-first century they resisted identifying themselves as ink painters because that designation implied conservative, even moribund, practices. Tao Aimin, working within this 'expanded field' of contemporary manifestations of ink, similarly identifies herself as a transdisciplinary contemporary artist rather than as an ink painter.[9]

Nonetheless, Tao's work references historical forms of calligraphy beyond *nüshu* including Oracle Bone Script and Bird and Worm script, as well as traditions of printmaking, bookbinding and ink painting.[10] Her work may thus be positioned within the broad context of 'Experimental Ink' (*shiyan shuimo*), in which calligraphy and ink painting are understood to be bound up with Chinese identity (Wu 2013). Tao also alludes to the genre of 'unreadable calligraphy' developed by the post-Mao avant-garde. *Secret Language of Women* – and other works using *nüshu* – may be said to interrupt dominant

discourses of the continuum of the scholarly ink tradition. Yet Tao Aimin's works are intentionally imbued with Chineseness. On the significance of ink, Tao said:

> Ink to me is something very Chinese. As a Chinese person, I like ink very much. And *xuan* paper. Whenever I see it, I feel very close to it. I want to touch it. I want to use brushes to write on *xuan* paper with ink. This may also be connected to Daoism. The idiosyncrasy of the oriental people[11] dictates men [*Tao used the gender-neutral word 'ren'*] have to be close to nature. These materials come from nature. So, it's quite natural for Chinese artists to use water and ink. It's in their tradition as well as their spirit to do so (Tao 2017).

Tao Aimin strategically entered this arena with found objects associated with female labour and the domestic. By labelling her washboard installations and prints 'books', Tao is entering a politically and artistically contentious space. She has thought deeply about her integration of the materiality of ink and the introduction of *nüshu* with the everyday forms of washboards, and indeed about what exactly defines a language: 'Every line of *nüshu* is poetry about their everyday life, their love, their stories, all kinds of poetry. I think it echoes the washboard, which is also an everyday language' (Tao 2017). Tao Aimin's works are thus simultaneously in dialogue with Chinese cultural history and with the use of books and scrolls by the late twentieth-century Chinese avant-garde, in particular with the canonical works of Xu Bing. She said:

> Xu Bing did Sky Book [*Book from the Sky*] and Earth Book [*Book from the Ground*], but my work is different from his. I think in the fields of washboards and *Nüshu*, I was quite unique […] The book is a symbol of culture. And […] the washboard is such an insignificant object that it might be disposed of at any time. I want to use the book, its pages, which are associated with society, politics and knowledge; bound books are an even more archaic form of books, which symbolise high social status for men. But I want to use the book, a large-sized one, as large as a washboard [...] I want to elevate this insignificant object of women to a cultural symbol. Though they are toiling housewives trapped in everyday chores, I was able to amplify their status to the cultural level (Tao 2017).

To carry out this act of preservation Tao believes she must both symbolically and literally move her chosen objects from the domestic sphere into the art space; she will 'amplify their status' and they will thereby become cultural artefacts, moving from insignificance to significance. One aspect of this 'amplification' when the books were first exhibited was their presentation in vitrines set on plinths, evoking precious objects of cultural significance. In a later exhibition at Ink Studio Gallery, Beijing, the books were opened

and laid out on tables in the gallery facing her installation *Washed Relics No. 2* (Fig. 4.3) with low stools that invited visitors to sit and 'read'. My interview with Tao for this study took place in the gallery, so that we could sit with the eight volumes in front of us and turn their pages.

Fig. 4.3. Tao Aimin, *Nüshu* books in front of *Washed Relics no. 2*, 2014, 168 wooden washboards, fishing line, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio Gallery.

Tao opens up the idea of the book and expands its possibilities of form and content with her use of women's washboards as 'speaking artefacts'. As we have seen, complex factors influenced the late twentieth-century production in China of installations of reinvented calligraphy that took the form of books, scrolls, tablets or stelae. In his introductory essay for the 2006 exhibition catalogue, 'Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art', which included the work of Gu Wenda and Xu Bing (but not Tao Aimin), Wu Hung explained the significance of the book for contemporary art, stating as the guiding premise of his curation that 'intense negotiation' with Chinese cultural history lay at the very heart of the development of avant-garde art in China in the late twentieth century (Wu 2006 p.2). Books, he suggested, could be 'the most dangerous things in the world' (Wu 2006 p.21) – and hence may represent both repressive authority and resistance to that authority. Artists' use of the book, Wu argues, was a recognition of contemporary art

norms and practices and a simultaneous effort to re-engage with Chinese traditions of ink, paper, calligraphy and book binding. Wu's essay, however, does not explicitly acknowledge that the Chinese phenomenon he named 'ink and paper culture' is inextricably associated with the Confucian patriarchal milieu of the literati.

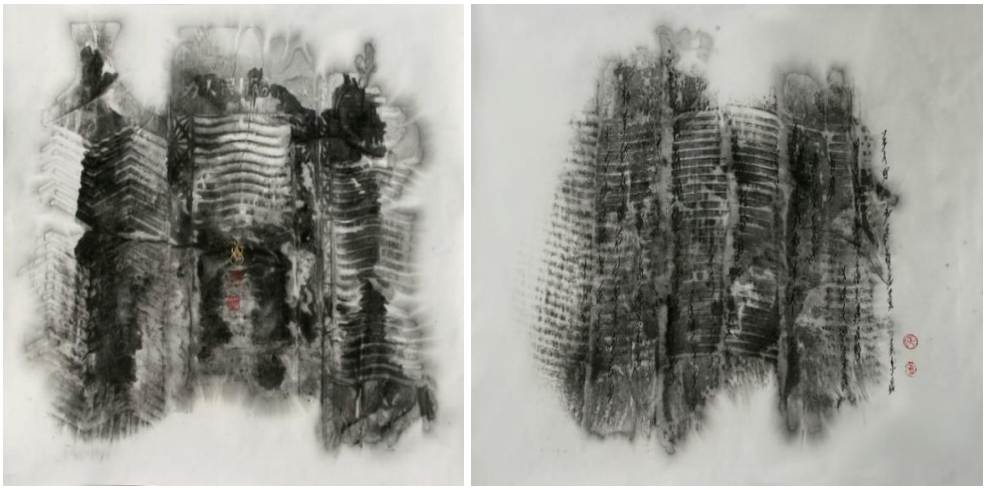

Fig. 4.4 (a) and (b). Tao Aimin, *Women's Book Number 26* and *14*, 2009, ink and paper. Image courtesy the artist.

As we see in Fig 4.4, subsequent works treated the printing/rubbing of the washboards in a more painterly manner alluding more directly to ink painting with its soft washes and varied viscosities, including seals and *nüshu* script suggestive of traditional colophons. Tao Aimin describes *nüshu* as a code, interpreting it as a covert or oppositional subtext when applied in textual installations, mixed media works and paintings (Tao 2017). Further, she revealed that her use of the script emerged from a desire to create a specifically female visual language with which she felt empowered to represent female experience, in a field of contemporary art practice in which the work of female artists has to date been little known.

4.3 *Nüshu* and the Poetics of Mourning

> *'[…] Don't be upset at being married out so young /It is the emperor's decree that women have to leave their villages / Women are like swallows / They fly their own way when full-fledged.'*
>
> *Nüshu* text from a *San Zhao Shu* quoted by Fei-Wen Liu (2015, p.69)

This section of the chapter situates Tao's work within the context of the scholarly research into the history and current status of *nüshu*. Fei-Wen Liu, a significant scholar in the field of *nüshu* research, argues that although it was hardly the 'secret' language of the popular imagination, *nüshu* was able to remain unknown to the outside world for so long because of three specific, and connected, aspects of Chinese culture: 'an androcentric gender ideology, a morally oriented definition of personhood, and the marginalization of sung performances' whereby women were secluded from the public gaze, and their vocal expressions of lamentation were dismissed as trivial and vulgar, unworthy of scholarly or literary attention (Liu 2015, p.2). This dismissal reveals the intersection of class and gender – in China then as now, class distinctions frequently reflect rural versus urban status. Not only was their writing considered meaningless because they were women, but also because they were *rural* women.

Although the origins of *nüshu* remain obscure, it was known prior to the investigations of researchers in the 1980s. Fei-wen Liu (2017, p.234) cites a 1931 text that described the calligraphy which was taught to girls by their mothers and grandmothers as a 'fly-headlike tiny script that no man can read'.[12] Further documentary evidence is found in the 1933 *Survey Notes on Counties of Hunan Province*.[13] *Nüshu* was suppressed during the Japanese occupation, and again (along with other cultural expressions considered feudal or counter-revolutionary) during the Cultural Revolution, before its rediscovery by researchers in 1982 (Liu 2015). In contrast to scholarly scroll painting, *nüshu* often appeared as embroidery on humble domestic items used and worn by women such as fans, handkerchiefs, and hand-woven belts; it is considered possible that needlework inspired the slanting strokes of its characters. It was also written in the *San Zhao Shu* (Third Day Missives) given to young brides by their 'sworn sisters' or natal families.[14] *Nüshu* texts were often sung and chanted in performative incantations that expressed the circumscribed nature of women's lives. Others took the form of bridal laments, ritualised expressions of sorrow sung as a bride prepared to depart her natal village. Liu (2015) explains that singing and chanting these texts was integral to women's lives, whether in daily chores or important rituals like wedding ceremonies. Thus, singing and acting out *nüshu* texts (*nüge*) or bridal laments (*kuge)* were performative, often improvised, creative acts.

We know what the brides of the Jiangyong villages thought about cultural practices around marriage, as original autobiographical texts and letters have been unearthed and analysed by researchers. Zhao Liming and her team at Tsinghua University spent years collecting and translating original documents written in *nüshu*, resulting in the five-volume anthology *Compilation of Chinese Nüshu* (2005).[15] The relegation of the Jiangyong County women to the internal, domestic world, as 'upstairs girls', relieved from the necessity of working in the fields and excluded from participation in the dominant (male) culture, was the basis and motivation for their invention of a specifically female script form with which they could write and speak their experiences and grievances. A few extant examples cited in Liu's (2015) research provide an indication of what the mothers of young Jiangyong brides thought about the system of 'inner and outer', in which daughters were viewed as familial possessions to be given away – or sold – as brides, or as concubines:

> When your sons are grown, they will pay you back
> But when daughters grow up, they won't
> Daughters are like wild birds in the deep mountains
> They fly off when full-fledged (Liu 2015, p.20).

Imperial strictures, even into the late Qing, defined women as necessarily confined to the interior world of the household, out of sight in this inner sphere, 'a necessary counterpart to the outer sphere where men moved about freely' (Mann 2011, p.74) – although the reality was more nuanced at different times than this would suggest. During the Tang Dynasty, for example, women had greater autonomy than during the Song Confucian revival, and during the Ming and Qing dynasties it was possible for upper class women to create influential intellectual and cultural networks (Ko 1993). Confucian restrictions upon women, therefore, were subject to class distinctions; poor women were of necessity forced into the outside world to survive. However, despite these variations in how gender circumscribed the lives of women, the *nüshu* canon of poems and songs performed by generations of women in Jiangyong County 'reflected their construction of Confucian orthodoxies' (McLaren 1998, para.7).

The historical function and significance of *nüshu* have been variously interpreted. Some view the texts as essentially consolatory, upholding the structure of Confucian gender

binaries that confined women largely to the domestic sphere, their feet bound, and their voices silenced except within the seclusion of the women's quarters. Women were referred to as '*nei ren*' ('inside people'). Others, with a degree of wishful thinking, identified the assertive heroines of *nüshu* narrative poems as an early Chinese feminist rebellion against Confucian restraints, positioning *nüshu* texts as a quasi-feminist resistance (Radner 1993; Hu 1994). *Nüshu* has often been romanticised as a form of feminist reclamation in popular culture, such as the 2005 novel by Lisa See, 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan'. A documentary film made in 1999, for example, *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China,* interpreted *Nüshu* as a form of 'resistance to male dominance', and, in a neat acknowledgement of intersectionality, as a parallel struggle to the resistance of *Yao* ethnic minorities to Confucian Han Chinese culture (WMM: Women Make Movies 2005).

More nuanced interpretations, such as the rigorous ethnographic studies undertaken by Fei-Wen Liu (2015; 2017), reveal a more complex picture of women reclaiming a limited degree of agency within the gendered norms of social organisation and androcentric power structures. Liu furthermore examines the vulnerability of *nüshu* to mediation/alteration by researchers, publication demands, and its recent monetisation at the hands of local government tourism authorities.[16] The syllabary was declared a national 'intangible cultural heritage' in 2006 and subject to reinterpretation to conform to government policies. Even the appearance of the script has been subject to change by government authorities in recent years who believed it insufficiently 'artistic' judged by the aesthetic standards of Chinese calligraphy: they have attempted to change *nüshu*'s 'distinct and delicate morphology' in its transition to a cultural heritage tourism opportunity (Liu 2015, pp.199–201). Jiangyong County has become a tourist destination, with a proliferation of '*Nüshu* hotels' and '*Nüshu* schools', marketed in particular to young women.[17] Ironically, it is often promoted in official culture as an acceptably 'feminine' activity.[18] An August 2017 article in China Daily reveals how media reports echo CCP discourses around social harmony, including an emphasis on the 'positive' nature of *nüshu*. Zhao Liming was quoted: 'The words were full of encouragement and positive energy and showed an uncommon open mindedness among the women at the time' (Wang 2017). Fei-wen Liu notes:

> Nüshu in the past gave women a vehicle by which to recount and release their perturbations and transformed their vulnerable being into a resilient and strengthened becoming; it brought them self-worth, preserved their dignity, and won for them social respect (Liu, "From Being"). This power to transform, however, has become a liability now that nüshu is an academic property and writing nüshu has become a government-supervised profession. All this calls for a rethinking of where nüshu, a rural women's endangered expressive tradition, might be heading (2017, p.233).

Indeed, there are stories of female self-sacrifice and rollicking tales of heroism and bawdy adventures in the *nüshu* canon, but also texts expressing profound sorrow. The bitterness often found in the *nüshu* poems and bridal laments is absent from Chinese media accounts, which instead emphasise an essentialising construction of selfless feminine sacrifice, while western media accounts and popular culture emphasise it as either an exoticised curiosity or as a form of feminist resistance due to its reputedly (spurious) 'secret' nature.[19] Both these interpretations are a rewriting and oversimplification of the historical record.

Understandings of the nature, function, and significance of *nüshu*, then, reflect the cultural lenses through which it is viewed – it becomes a vehicle that reinforces particular narratives. Western interpretations such as those of literary scholar Joan Radner (1993) and Sinologist Wilt Idema (2009) have tended to emphasise the perceived 'backwardness' of the footbound, confined woman. Often misreading the degree of agency possessed by women in Chinese rural settings they interpret *nüshu* as an act of feminist subversion, as does Anne McLaren, albeit in a far more nuanced interpretation (1996;1998; 2008). As Fei-wen Liu's research has shown, *nüshu* was not precisely that, although it demonstrates the resolve, resilience, and determination of women in Jiangyong to communicate their own stories in both written and spoken forms of cultural transmission.

Fei-Wen Liu's impressively detailed, long-term immersion in the field found that almost every woman born in Jiangyong before 1949 could sing the *nüshu* songs, learned in their youth (2017, p.234). Citing the work of anthropologist Nadia Serematakis (in particular, her work on the poetics of mourning as a form of female cultural resistance), Liu describes the texts as self-reflective metacommentaries that reveal women's perceptions of life's hardships (2017, p.232). Men in the Jiangyong villages could not read the *nüshu* script. Nor, according to Liu's research findings, did they have any desire to break this female code (Liu 2015, p.18). Writing, long understood to be a male preserve, was an area

in which women were somewhat invisible: 'In this male-controlled historiography, women often go unmentioned, whether as subjects to be recorded or subjects who write' (Liu 2017, p.231). There is a parallel to be drawn here with the relative invisibility of female artists in the canon of modern and contemporary Chinese art. The following section of the chapter expands on this understanding, examining Tao Aimin's semi-ethnographic practice and analysing how her works employ *nüshu* to convey culturally situated ideas about femininity and femaleness.

4.4 Journeying in Jiangyong County

Tao Aimin's practice, even prior to her discovery of *nüshu*, was grounded in her interest in the lives of rural women: 'With camera in hand and notebook in her backpack the artist became acquainted with hundreds of women and collected thousands of pieces of washboard' (Cui 2016, p.44). Tao's subjects belong to two groups and two distinct histories. The first comprises the rural women from many locales, including her village on Beijing's outskirts, whom she interviewed whilst collecting their obsolete washing boards. The second represents a female history: the Jiangyong village women who invented *nüshu* to record their spoken and sung stories, and the elderly inheritors of the script whom Tao Aimin met on trips to the villages where it is now taught to visitors and tourists.

One of Tao's earliest works using washboards as found objects (pre-dating her use of *nüshu)* is *River of Women* (2005) (Fig. 4.5).[20] It consists of an undulating line of washboards, curving from ceiling to floor. On each board Tao painted a portrait of its previous owner. Audiences entering the installation would hear the recorded sound of a washing machine churning, reminding us of the loss of this way of life, and also of the endless, repetitive nature of domestic labour. Maya Kovskaya (2010, para. 1) described *River of Women* as 'an archive of silent histories – the multiple and seemingly invisible realities of the vast majority of women in history, even today, who labour in obscurity until they pass from this world'. Like a library of separate documents, it is a collection of unrecorded narratives in which each painted washboard represents the cover of a book. The process of collecting the boards is as significant as the work when installed. Tao describes it as 'like doing a performance piece' in which she recorded the history of the boards, took photographs of the women, and chatted with them about their lives (Tao 2013).

Fig. 4.5. Tao Aimin, *River of Women*, 2005, washboards, paint, dimensions variable. Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio Gallery.

Tao Aimin's decision to incorporate *nüshu* into her body of work came two years later. In 2007, before *Nüshu* was popularised and widely marketed by the provincial tourist industry, she made an arduous Spring Festival journey to a remote village. She used a recently published book as a guide to find elderly women who retained knowledge of how to write the script and sing the laments. Tao's recall of the voyage emphasises its epic nature:

> There was a big snow in Hunan, one of the heaviest snowfalls in one or two decades. We had to climb mountains. Even though we travelled [with]in Hunan province, it took me three days. I discovered Pume*i* [*Village*] from the book. I took it with me. I looked up the place on the map all the time. And, finally, we found the family introduced in the book. It tells about an old lady named Yi Youqi… She is over 80. I tracked her down with the help of the book […] I asked around. The village is very small. The villagers gave me directions, and I found her. I lived at her house for a week. She cooked me a lot of delicious food. She chanted *Nüshu* for me. She showed me fans and belts with *Nüshu* embroidered on them […] She can write and sing, but she could not create poems (Tao 2017).

Tao's recount reveals that this powerful experience upended her expectations of what she would find there. Here she describes the very old woman, Yi Youqi:

> She taught me a little. She would sing. When there was rain outside, she would build a bonfire. It was still quite chilly in the south during the Spring Festival. So, we sat around the fire, and she sang. It sounded wonderful. It was not bitter or sorrowful at all. It was sonorous and encouraging. Not depressing. Like really opening her heart (Tao 2017).

Tao's narration of her first encounter with *nüshu* emphasises the remoteness of the place, and the utter distinctness of the experience from the everyday life of an artist in Beijing. Hidden away in remote valleys, the existence of *nüshu* had no impact on the existing patriarchal social order prior to the establishment of the PRC in 1949, but for the women themselves it was profoundly important; the *nüshu* writings and songs were social texts that gave voice to women's lived experience and their most powerful emotional responses. They articulated relationships between mothers and daughters, between daughters and mothers-in-law, and between sworn sisters. Fei-Wen Liu argues that, more than just a form of writing, or an oral tradition, they were transformative and strengthening (2015).

Following her initial field trip to Jiangyong County, Tao realised that in combination with the washboards and her video interviews with elderly women the script offered the potential to create a compelling visual language, preserving history:

> This spirit of selflessness, hard work and kindness, this virtue deserves respect... because a lot of housewives are not respected. They leave no names after death. They are not remembered. But through this work, I can print and preserve in history the traces on the washboards which they used, instead of just vanishing; it witnesses the time and women in the past (Tao 2017).

Tao Aimin intends her work to witness and recognise the hard work of women, which she identifies as stemming from 'feminine' virtues: selflessness, kindness and generosity. She does not question the fact that their unwaged domestic labour is necessarily gendered, indeed in her account it is assumed to be an aspect of female virtue. Her recount of hearing the old woman's songs emphasises their positive, 'encouraging' nature rather than their sadness. The women of Jiangyong County and the previous owners of the washboards alike are displaced subjects in Tao Aimin's work. Remote in both time and geographical distance from the artistic and intellectual 'centre' of Beijing, they have been

essentially absent from the discourse. The same might be said in relation to the history of art production in China, where historically – despite the acknowledged achievements of some female court painters and calligraphers – art production as well as appreciation and connoisseurship were essentially male domains (Clunas 2017).

The following section of this chapter positions Tao Aimin's installations as simultaneously 'subterranean' feminist works and as *nannü* spaces. In her reclamation of a female history, her validation of the lives of the mostly illiterate rural women that she filmed and recorded, and in her insistence that artefacts of humble domestic labour themselves resemble 'texts' that may be read, Tao's washboards, imbued with the traces of the women who once owned them, assert women's rightful place in a history that largely erased them.

4.5. Intersections of Gender and Class: feminist readings of Tao Aimin's work

Tao Aimin's works are positioned within the context of a contemporary idiom – the reclamation, reinvention and destabilisation of calligraphy and other text forms – that has hitherto been largely the preserve of male artists in China. The following paragraphs explore Tao Aimin's works as 'subterranean' feminist texts, in which the washboards signify books and Tao's mark-making and application of *nüshu* are vernacular script forms. Imbued with the memory of repeated physical actions, inscribed with scars and nicks left by the physical exertions of women scrubbing, the washboards become a 'language' written in the labour of illiterate women. Their weathered surfaces are a kind of speech, testimonies of women who refused to be silenced.

Tao Aimin is drawn to the Chinese traditions of ink painting (*shuimo hua*) and calligraphy (*shu fa*), yet she sought a female history that would connect her with past generations of Chinese women, a lineage of feminine duty often undercut by subversive wit and determination to speak – and write – their truths. Like many Chinese women of her generation, however, Tao Aimin expresses reservations about feminism. Her ambivalence is evident in the following excerpt from the interview:

> LG: So, you've been using a specifically female historical script as a visual symbol and a form in works that deal with aspects of women's lives. Does this mean that you are a feminist artist?
>
> TA: Uh… I think I'm quite feminine [*very female would be an alternative translation. L.G.*] because I'm a woman and doing woman-related works. I pay attention to women more because I sympathise with them. I'm concerned about

> women as a group; after all women are still at a disadvantage in this society. So, I hope to use my works [*to*] help ordinary women, whether they're families or strangers. [*But*] I don't think feminism is that obvious in me, I'm more interested in the study of anthropology […] (Tao 2017)

Reflecting on how her works are intended as a record of lives that would otherwise go unrecorded, Tao expanded on her discomfort:

> LG: So, in a way it's like creating a memorial, insisting they're remembered. You don't think that makes you a feminist?
>
> TA: I'm fine with it. Call me a feminist if you like. I'm fine with both ways. It's natural. How should I say this? I'm willing to help women. This is how I... It's just that feminism in China is not as radical as that in the West, to resist, to shout slogans, I'm more oriental […] I think [*Western*] feminism is more power-oriented, it's more aggressive. I think I'm more of a feminine feminist.
>
> LG: So, a quieter kind of feminism, a gentler approach?
>
> TA: Yes, there are two translations of feminism. One is more power-oriented, it's more aggressive. I think I'm more of a feminine feminist (Tao 2017).[21]

At this point in the interview, we briefly discussed the two terms widely used for 'feminism'; *nüquan zhuyi* and *nüxing zhuyi* were discussed in Chapter 2. Tao confirmed her preference for the 'softer' *nüxing zhuyi*.

Tao's phrase 'a feminine feminist' echoes the contested reception of feminism's travels and translation, documented by Min Dongchao (2014; 2017) and examined in Chapters 2 and 3. A resistant, somewhat essentialising femininity emerging in the 1980s and 1990s has its origins to a significant degree in hostility to Mao-era gender erasure. Min's study of the debates taking place as feminist theories were translated into Chinese revealed the determination of many women to explore expressions of femininity that had previously been subsumed by an ideal of genderless collectivism, encapsulated in Mao's 1965 statement, 'The times have changed; men and women are the same'.[22] Tao Aimin's resistance to being categorised a 'feminist artist', in spite of her willingness to be curated in all-female exhibitions and the strength of conviction apparent in her work, illustrates the degree of unease felt by Chinese women towards 'Western' feminism and uncomfortable memories of state-sponsored feminism. Yet, despite her wariness of the feminist label, her work resonates with the stance of feminist activists globally,

advocating for the acknowledgement of unwaged domestic labour and the restoration of erased female histories.

Intersections of gender, social class and Chinese national identity take material form in Tao's work. In *The Secret Language of Women* (2008), for example, the class, wealth and education gap between rural and urban citizens in China forms a subtext that underlies its more easily accessible themes of gender and gendered labour. Tao Aimin is familiar with the installations of Gu Wenda, Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, and their use of text, printing and rubbings in the form of large-scale installations and 'memorials'. Examples include Gu Wenda's stone stelae inscribed with 'retranslated' Tang poetry, and Qiu Zhijie's 2007 solo exhibition *Archaeology of Memory* at Long March Space in Beijing's 798 Art District, which incorporated calligraphy and rubbings from various sources in a large-scale installation titled *Monuments*. Pauline Yao (2008, p.78) argued that Qiu created a monument to the everyday, '[…] the realm of the taken-for-granted, the world of continuity and invisibility.' Tao Aimin, too, memorialises the everyday, but she brings to our attention a largely invisible quotidian reality that is rarely found in contemporary art, the 'vulgar vernacular' of domestic labour. When Tao Aimin said of her use of old washboards, 'I want to elevate this insignificant object of women to a cultural symbol', she expressed a belief that she must *transform* their rural female origins in order for these found objects and her use of *nüshu* to be accepted within an artistic context in which the refined calligraphy of the imperial scholarly literati is frequently referenced and appropriated. Tao said:

> I was full of curiosity towards this language, because I thought it a very singular and rare language. And I'm very interested in language in general. Also, it belongs to women. It's related to women and [*ordinary*] people. Like my work of washboards which is also related to women and [*ordinary*] people. I believed these two may have something in common. So, I wanted to go there [*to Jiangyong County*] and see if I can use it in my work, to extract the language into a cultural symbol for women, to elevate it (Tao 2017).

Her use of the phrase 'to elevate it' reveals Tao's awareness that when *nüshu* was discovered it was regarded as an anthropological curiosity, a debased vernacular language written in a script that many considered ugly and unrefined. Liu's research revealed that its spoken and written form was mocked by men as the nonsensical jabbering of women, a meaningless sound: '*yi-a, yi-a'* (Liu 2015, p.18). Paradoxically, however, it is the humble

and distinctly non-élite origins of *Nüshu* that make it the ideal vehicle to convey ideas about female labour and women's lives.

This thesis, then, argues that Tao Aimin's works may be understood as feminist texts in distinct but connected ways: firstly, their very materiality represents the artist's considered choice to reclaim an obscure female history. Tao's use of the washboards is strategic in the context of the Beijing artworld. They allude to the transition of the Duchampian ready-made to become the 'antique readymade' in the work of artists such as Ai Weiwei ('Han Dynasty' urns, wooden stools, temple doors, Qing Dynasty furniture); [23] Mao Tongqiang (land leasehold documents, hammers and sickles);[24] and Yang Zhichao (old notebooks and diaries).[25] They are '*caizhi yishu*' (material art), the designation of a particular genre of contemporary Chinese art highlighted by Wu Hung (2019).

Tao's use of the washboards as printing blocks references the important history of woodblock printing in China, as well as alluding to the traditional practice of making rubbings of stone stelae, appropriations of which are seen in the work of Gu Wenda, particularly in the 'Forest of Stone Steles – retranslation and rewriting of Tang poetry' series (2005).[26] Most significantly, her use of the washboards to print pages that are bound into books alludes to Xu Bing and *Book from the Sky* (c.1987–91). Thus, Tao inserts the daily lives of women into a genre of the contemporary Chinese avant-garde that had been internationally exhibited and widely disseminated in both generalist and scholarly literature. She claims her place within this contemporary idiom whilst simultaneously critiquing the absence of women from its past and present manifestations.

Amjad Majid (2014) identifies Tao's use of the washboards as an excavation of an unwritten history, while Britta Erickson (2019) notes that her work conveys notions of authorship, labour and collective memory. Earlier installations pre-dating Tao's use of *nüshu* script such as the 2006 installation *Washed Relics* (Fig, 4.6), and *Women's Book* (2005), used washing boards as essentially unaltered ready-mades. *Women's Book* features a line of the weathered boards strung together with twine and unrolled across the floor. It recalls ancient volumes made using perforated wood or bamboo strips tied into bundles with silk cords or leather thongs. Each grooved washboard evokes the page of a book, 'written' by the endlessly repeated labour of illiterate women. Bringing these banal objects, redolent with hard and mostly invisible work, into the 'high culture' gallery space, Tao insists on their visibility. This notion of the uncovering of a history of women

is embedded within the materiality of Tao Aimin's complex works. Not only does she allude to shrouded histories of anonymous women in the distant past, but also to her own life as a rural woman with ambitions to move beyond the orbit of her farming family and birthplace. In her work, therefore, intersections of social class and gender are given material form.

Fig 4.6 Tao Aimin, *Washed Relics*, 2006, washboards, installation (detail). Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio Gallery.

A second way in which Tao's work may be connected to a feminist lineage of art practice is in its focus on the domestic. Tao's washboard installations sit within a well-documented body of work made by women that tackles subjects considered less prestigious, inferior, or even repugnant: domestic life, motherhood, and aspects of female bodily experience including childbirth, sexuality, menstruation and menopause. Examples

of such autobiographical feminist antecedents include works by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Nancy Spero, Louise Bourgeois and Tracey Emin. As was discussed in Chapter 2, a number of artists in China in the 1990s explored bodily aspects of female experience.[27] In spite of her reservations about 'Western' feminism, Tao Aimin confronts the undervalued, unrecognised status of gendered labour, juxtaposing social class and gender through the vehicle of her washboards, materials that, as Wu Hung (2019, p.15) argues in his discussion of materiality in Chinese art, function as 'super agents'. Thus, even if not explicitly stated, Tao represents the intersectionality of society's power structures. Tao Aimin's introduction of the 'low' subject of laundry is a radical choice. As Shuqin Cui (2016, p.48) points out, in regard to how little attention has been paid to Tao Aimin's work in contrast to Xu Bing's *Book from the Sky*: 'Artists understand clearly that taking women's history as a subject and working in the medium of the female body might keep them on the periphery of social-cultural and visual historiographies.' In Tao's work it is a stance taken knowingly and deliberately, evident in her statement, cited earlier, that she intended to 'elevate' these humble quotidian objects in order to remember and honour the lives of anonymous housewives (Tao, 2017).

Finally, Tao Aimin's decision to employ *nüshu* calligraphy is as carefully considered as her use of the washboards. When asked to explain the connection between the physical presence of the wooden washboards and the subtle use (on the edges of the printed books in the 2008 installation) of *nüshu* script, Tao Aimin's response reveals her expanded definition of what constitutes 'language':

> You mean the connection between the washboards and *nüshu*? […] The first time it was exhibited, it was arranged in the form of an octagon[*al*] installation. There was a video in the centre, surrounded by books, hand-written Sanchao [*or san zhao shu*] Books […] What I really want to convey was the rubbed images of washboards. It's an abstract language, such as the marks left by those women rubbing clothes against the boards. I used water and ink to rub them off. I am trying to express in the language of the washboards […] (Tao, 2017).

With the phrase 'in the language of the washboards' it becomes evident that Tao Aimin is thinking about language as an expanded field. The *nüshu* texts and songs are a vernacular used within a particular social group of 'insiders', a speech and text form created by the subjugated, so Tao's choice to insert such texts into works of art is a subversive interruption of elite calligraphy. Like the *nüshu* script, Tao's installations reveal a

language of the everyday as well as a self-reflexive meta-commentary. The script she chose is essentially unreadable today, yet it unambiguously symbolises femaleness. Tao used *nüshu* characters on the fore-edges of her hand-made books for their history and symbolism, rather than to convey meaning directly – in *Secret Language of Women* the *nüshu* characters cannot easily be seen, as they appear only on the fore-edges of the pages, but we know they are present. They signify a hidden 'femaleness' with all its associated subtexts: oppression, silence, submission to gendered social norms – but also the determination of women who might be cloistered but would not be silenced.

Fig. 4.7 and 4.8 Tao Aimin, *The Secret Language of Women*, 2008, Ink on Paper, (detail of individual books). Image courtesy the artist.

This thesis argues, therefore, that Tao Aimin's *nüshu*-related installations create overtly gendered *nannü* spaces, and as such exemplify the intersection of her examination of gendered labour with her strongly articulated Chinese identity/Chineseness. The complexities and contradictions of a Daoist/Confucian intellectual tradition are evident in Tao Aimin's installations and mixed media works as she grapples with historical and contemporary constructions of gender, class and Chinese identity. Like the paradoxical construct of *nannü*, which in He-Yin Zhen's critique was framed as a neo-Confucian perversion of fluxing, non-binary relationships between the *yin-yang* forces of non-rationalist Daoist cosmology, Tao Aimin simultaneously reinforces and subverts relationships between masculine/feminine, *yin/yang*, speech/silence and past/present. As

we have seen, *nannü* denotes the interactions of *yin* (feminine) and *yang* (masculine) and is therefore a construct which embodies traditionally hierarchical dynamics between men and women in a patriarchal society. *Nannü*, in He-Yin Zhen's critique, upholds neo-Confucian ideals of social harmony, filial duty, and familial organisation while simultaneously embodying a non-rationalist Daoist cosmology. As Gladston (2020, p.4) notes, '[…] neo-Confucianism is itself, as a syncretic combination of Daoist, Buddhist and Confucian thought and practice, neither culturally/discursively pure nor unchanging'. In Tao's work these opposing but non-binary elements are implicitly understood as dynamic, fluid and inter-related reciprocal forces.

Tao's decision to create an octagonal structure for *Secret Language of Women*, and to make eight books, alludes to the eight trigrams associated with Daoist cosmology, divination and the *Yijing* or 'Book of Changes' since the Song Dynasty. Tao said:

> My grandfather was a Daoist priest to a certain extent. He would draw figures to interpret some phenomena. He grew up in the Hunan culture which is quite mysterious. For example, if there was a fish bone stuck in my throat, he would get a bowl of water and help me "melt" the bone away with his signs. He would also write some funeral orations. In Daoism, after death, about where the spirit would go, they are quite detached. My grandfather would calculate the exact time when he would die. They are quite detached about death. So, there's also a temporal element in my work. [...] I take a special interest in mysterious signs and scripts. (Tao 2017)

The eight trigrams are associated with natural phenomena, with the points of the compass, with the four seasons, and with heaven, earth, mountain, marsh, thunder, wind, water and fire (Nielsen 2014). Tao uses this symbology intentionally, believing it to be deeply embedded within her own familial, cultural and national identity. The materiality of her work – *xuan* paper made from mulberry bark, ink made from carbon, the wood of the washboards soaked in water for generations – these too represent the wholeness of the universe. Just as He-Yin Zhen was both highly critical of, and at the same time inescapably enmeshed in, her early twentieth-century Daoist/Confucian-inflected patriarchal habitus, so too Tao Aimin both subverts the Daoist-inflected literati intellectual tradition and is pulled towards it. Tao explained the connection:

> *Yin* and *yang* are related to life and death. It's like the Eight Diagrams [*Trigrams*] with *yin* and *yang* coexisting, the heaven and man coexisting. *Yin* and *Yang* can convert to each other. So, in my hometown, they would make the Eight Diagrams with *yin* and *yang*. My grandma could do it from a very early age. They use the

> image to predict the future. There is *yin* on the one side and *yang* on the other. My *Nüshu* work was originally arranged in the Diagrams' image as well. So, it's connected to the local culture (Tao 2017).

The concept of *nannü* retains its cosmological Daoist conception in which 'everything under heaven' is in a constantly fluxing relationship to everything else, yet paradoxically *nannü* is also the hallmark of female subjugation under enforced Confucian patriarchal orthodoxies. Tao Aimin's work reveals a similar paradox. It is seemingly feminist in its aim to restore a hidden history, yet the artist insists that her work should be viewed through an anthropological rather than a feminist lens due to her discomfort with 'Western' feminism. However, a theoretical framework comprised of *nannü*, Shohat's subterranean feminism, and the illumination provided by feminist travelling/translation theory reveals Tao's work to be the kind of alternative feminist critical discourse proposed by Fanny Söderbäck (2012, p.4): 'a multiplicity of voices, always only feminisms, in the plural'.

4.6 'Secret' Scripts and 'Speaking' Women

The ways in which the *nüshu* script was interpreted by scholars in the late twentieth century and re-interpreted for the twenty-first include the consciousness of circumscribed opportunities, the silencing of female voices, the retrieval of female experiences and analysis of relationships between mothers and daughters. It reveals a myriad of hardships that are especially gendered, all of which are evident in the work of Tao Aimin. Her work is text-based, narrative and dialogic, as is *nüshu*. It is ritualised, performative, and memorialises otherwise anonymous women, as does *nüshu*. Just as the *nüshu* texts function as forms of validation and female resilience, so too Tao's work constructs a lament, yet paradoxically finds strength in the retrieval of the previously hidden histories of invisible women. *Secret Language of Women*, for example, represents the historical and continuing subordination and silencing of hard-working women – yet also their refusal to be silenced.

Tao Aimin's work may thus be read as occupying a hitherto 'secret' female space, providing insights into a female line of transmission that connects past and present. It is a space in which the artist (whose mother and mother-in-law used similar washboards for much of their lives), and the lives of the rural women who once owned these specific worn washboards, are not separate but aligned. It is a space, too, in which the 'upstairs

girls' of the *nüshu* villages are present again, in the form of *nüshu* poems written on the fore-edges of each book. He-Yin's *nannü* framework argued that the subjugation of women is the primary division in the global economic and social order, and the source of all other forms of exploitation and oppression. It was their femaleness that kept the daughters of Jiangyong County illiterate, enclosed, footbound, and freed from manual labour in the fields. And it was female resourcefulness, and the relationships between mothers and daughters and 'sworn sisters', that enabled *nüshu* to flourish as a parallel written culture.

Given her disavowal of a Euro-American feminism that she sees as adversarial – 'shouting slogans' (Tao 2017) – Tao's works may be read as 'subterranean', polyphonal feminist texts that intentionally position women's histories at the centre of the narrative and validate their uniquely gendered experiences. This is not to diminish their power, nor to suggest that they are, somehow, insufficiently feminist, but to frame them within their situated Chinese context, in which feminism and policies of gender equality have been closely associated with Marxism-Leninism, and therefore retain associations with a complex and often traumatic past. This view underlies Tao's assertion:

> I was not intending to confront male society. All I wanted to do was to improve their status, their selves. Because I am also a woman. And this is not limited to women. It is also connected to anthropology, to human beings, men or women. It's a study of the entire human race rather than rebelling against male society (Tao 2017).

Tao's views on feminism reflect the complex and still-contested history of travelling feminist theory and its translation into Chinese. And as Fanny Söderbäck argues in proposing a feminist politics of polyphony, feminism is continually resurrected and reinvented: it is this 'very multiplicity of voices and agendas that are necessarily integral to feminist thought' (2012, p.4). This contrapuntal discourse includes the dissenting voices and contradictory or paradoxical positions that have been revealed throughout this and the following case studies. Therefore, recognising the limitations of Euro-American contemporary feminist theory, the addition to the theoretical framework of the Chinese concept of *Nannü* offers a more nuanced reading of Tao's body of work. This chapter has argued that Tao's installations embody the fluxing *yin-yang* relationships of Daoist philosophy and are also imbued with its paradoxes. They explore the historical and continuing subjugation of women while to some extent romanticising their labour as

'selfless devotion' and as an expression of an essentialised femininity. They reference the canonical works of artists such as Xu Bing, but also allude to the marginalised position of women in this art historical narrative. They recognise the longstanding class divisions between rural and urban citizens in China yet insist that the washboards as found objects must be 'elevated' by the actions of the artist, becoming 'books', if they are to be worthy of installing in the museum.

In her body of work employing *nüshu* and washboards Tao Aimin creates *nannü* spaces that represent unrecorded lives, including those whose exclusion from education prompted them to invent a script with which to communicate their gendered experiences of daughterhood, sisterhood, marriage, motherhood, widowhood and lifelong labour. Echoing this rediscovered history, Tao Aimin's gendered found objects, juxtaposed with her use of culturally encoded materials such as *xuan* paper and ink, together intervene in contemporary art discourses that have tended to exclude female participation. Unable to claim an inheritance from the patrimony of Chinese calligraphers and ink painters by virtue of her gender, Tao inserted a female lineage from remotest Hunan Province into contemporary art.

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[1] Fragment of a *Nüshu* poem in Cathy Silber, 'From Daughter to Daughter-in-Law in the Women's Script of Southern Hunan'. In Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel and White (eds) *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*, Boston: Harvard University Press (1994) pp.47–68

[2] See Chapters 1 and 2 for references to the influence of feminist art history on the study. Chapter 2 explains the construction of a transcultural polysemic feminist theoretical framework comprising situated Chinese and intersectional feminisms. See Chapter 3 for references to how the study has been influenced by feminist ethnography.

[3] During the 1st millennium BC, the city of Changsha was the centre of the southern part of the Yangtze River valley state of 'Chu'. Chu culture has been connected to ideas about Shamanic religious rituals which included ecstatic states and 'poetic lamentations' (Cook 1999, p.169). The isolated rural villages of Jiangyong County where *Nüshu* originated are also connected with the culture and language traditions of the Yao ethnic minority.

[4] Unless otherwise acknowledged, all quotes from Tao Aimin are drawn from the initial semi-structured interview in Beijing in April 2017, conducted in Chinese with the assistance of translator/interpreter Xu Yining, or from subsequent emails and WeChat messages.

[5] The term 'literati culture' (*wenren wenhua*) became widely used only in the late 20th century, but its origins can be found much earlier – almost two millennia, in fact. In Stephen Roddy's Oxford Bibliography introduction, he explains that *wenren wenhua* includes 'the "four arts" (*siyi*) associated with cultured, literate males (*wenren*): music (especially the *qin* or *guqin*), the game of *go* (*weiqi*), calligraphy, and painting, as well as poetry and lyrical essays (especially *xiaopin*) associated with them.' (Roddy, 2019) Available from: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0169.xml [accessed 1.2.22]

[6] Works from Tao Aimin's 'Sisterhood' and Secret Fan' series may be seen on the website of Ink Studio Gallery, Beijing: https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/68-tao-aimin/ [accessed 31.07.21]

[7] Anne Anling Chen (2018, p.438) cites the work of Rey Chow (1995, p.145) in relation to the perceived nostalgic, period Orientalism of the films of Zhang Yimou, abounding in what Chow calls 'ethnic detail'. The term *Nachträglichkeit* refers to Freudian 'afterwardness', a kind of belated, retrospective attribution of meaning (often sexual or traumatic) to past events, a deferred action or a rewriting of memory with the terms of the present. Here it refers to the past/present oscillation often seen in Chinese contemporary art, the 'conversations with history' referred to by Wu Hung in his account of Chinese contemporary artists' use of traditional Chinese materials and techniques (2014, pp.331–339)

[8] For example, the conference entitled 'Aesthetic Narratives: Chinese Abstract Art' that took place on December 25, 2006, at the Today Art Museum in Beijing discussed the perceived tensions between an authentically Chinese art and internationalist modernist and postmodernist tendencies (Gao 2011, p.372)

[9] Chen Anying (2011), pointing to a division between 'New Literati Painting' and forms of contemporary art that became stronger in the 1990s, argues that the rediscovery of literati art has the potential to reconcile the disjunction between modernity and tradition in China. He does not, however, recognise the masculinist nature of the literati *wenren* tradition.

[10] See, for example an exhibition at Egg Gallery, Beijing, in 2017: http://en.eggartgallery.org/?page_id=17880 [accessed 27.9.20]

[11] 'Oriental people' rather than 'eastern people' is the translation provided by Xu Yining in the English transcript of the recorded interview. Tao Aimin used the term '*dongfang*' (东方) which may be translated either as oriental (without the loading of pejorative colonialist associations) or, simply, as eastern. Tao Aimin described herself as '*dongfang de*' (东方的).

[12] Zeng Jiwu (ed.) 湖南各縣調查筆記 [Notes on the Investigation of Each Hunan County]. Hunan: *Heji yinshuasuo* (1931).

[13] See Jack F. Williams, 1974. *China in Maps 1890-1960: A Selective and Annotated Cartobibliography*. East Asia Series Occasional Paper No. 4, Michigan State Univ., East Lansing, Asian Studies Center. Available from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED120042.pdf [accessed 7.7.21].

[14] Girls in the Jiangyong villages were paired in childhood in sister-like relationships (*jiebai zimei* 结拜姊妹) that were expected to last for life. See an explanation in Nicola Foster, 2019. 'Translating Nüshu: Drawing Nüshu, Dancing Nüshu', *Art in Translation*. Vol 11 (4) pp. 393–416

[15]Zhao Liming. 中國女書合集 (Compilation of Chinese Nüshu). 5 vols. Beijing: *Zhonghua shuju*, (2005).

[16] See for example the 'Hidden History of Business Podcast' episode entitled 'Commercializing History: The Murky History of Nüshu and Chinese Tourism' (2016) which examines recent developments. 'Academics have compiled a Nüshu dictionary, a school has been opened to teach the language and the Ford Foundation is donating $209,000 to build a museum to preserve the remaining third-day books and embroidery. A Hong Kong company has invested several million yuan for the construction of roads, hotels and parks – all aimed at exploiting Nüshu's growing fame.' Podcast available from: http://hiddenhistoryofbusiness.com/index.php/2016/02/18/episode-35-commercializing-history-murky-story-nushu-chinese-tourism/ [accessed 22.6.20].

[17] For representations of *nüshu* in tourism, mass media and popular culture see, for example, a BBC Travel story examining *nüshu* and tourism opportunities from October 2020, available from: http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20200930-nshu-chinas-secret-female-only-language [accessed 13.11.20] and an article by Yin Yijun published by Sixthtone (August 22, 2018) focused on the inheritors of the script, available from: http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002805/the-last-guardians-of-chinas-women-only-script [accessed 13.11.20]

[18] See, for example, Yin Yijun's 2018 article (link in Endnote 18) examining the status of the script: 'In 2006, *nüshu* became one of the first traditions to be added to the nationwide intangible cultural heritage system. Under the system, practitioners are given "inheritor" status, entitling them to monthly subsidies in exchange for preserving the tradition through education, research, and cooperation with local publicity departments.' (Yin 2018, para.17)

[19] Ilaria Maria Sala, who researched *nüshu* in the 1990s and attended the first academic conferences on the subject, expresses her irritation at the idea that gained currency 'that *nüshu* was a secret language that for centuries women used to communicate their sorrow to other women'. See https://qz.com/1271372/what-the-worlds-fascination-with-nushu-a-female-only-chinese-script-says-about-cultural-appropriation/ [accessed 13.11.20]

[20] Monica Merlin's conversation with Tao Aimin about *River of Women* may be found at https://www.tate.org.uk/research/research-centres/tate-research-centre-asia/women-artists-contemporary-china/tao-aimin (Tao 2013). This work《女人河》is also alternatively entitled 'Women's River' in English.

[21] See Endnote 12.

[22] Mao's phrase, 'The times have changed; men and women are the same' (*Shidai butong le, nan nü dou yiyang*' 时代不同了，男女都一样）was recorded in a conversation with young people on 27 May 1965. It became a famous political slogan, promulgated throughout China. See Wenqi Yang and Fei Yan, 2017. 'The Annihilation of Femininity in Mao's China: Gender Inequality of Sent-down Youth during the Cultural Revolution'. *China Information* Vol. 31 (1) pp. 63–83

[23] See, for example, the discussion of the use of antique furniture in Owen Duffy, 2018. 'Ai Weiwei's furniture sculpture: Radical ambiguity and the function of critique' *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol 5 (1) pp. 77–91

[24] Li Xianting's essay about Mao Tongqiang's work 'Tools', 'The Forsaken Sickles and Hammers', may be seen on the artist's website, available from: https://www.maotongqiang.com/tools-1 [accessed 1.11.20]

[25] Yang Zhichao's collection of old diaries and notebooks was shown at the Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney, in 2015 as 'Chinese Bible'. Information available from: http://sherman-scaf.org.au/publication/yang-zhichao-chinese-bible/ [accessed 1.11.20]

[26] One iteration of this work by Gu Wenda (of which there are several) may be seen on the artist's website: http://wendagu.com/installation/forest_of_stone_steles/forest_of_stone_steles03.html [accessed 1.11.20]

[27] Shuqin Cui (2016) examined the work of Tao Aimin in the context of Chinese female artists making deliberate choices to confront such subjects at this time, including Lin Tianmiao, Cui Xiuwen, Xiang Ling, Yu Hong, He Chengyao and photographer Xing Danwen. See also discussions of the 'Sirens' group of four artists including Cui Xiuwen (Karetsky 2010), or Xiao Lu's participation in the 'Bald Girls' available from: http://www.bald-girls.net/en/genv.asp [accessed 4.8.19]

Chapter 5: CASE STUDY 2

Rituals of Ink and Water: the embodied performances of Xiao Lu

Heaven as father, Earth as mother, yin and yang as warp, the four seasons as weft.

(The *Huainanzi*, c. 139 BCE)[1]

5.1 Two Gunshots in Beijing

> '*Dialogue* is quite simple. If I say it was done for the sake of love, men would not stand for such an interpretation' (Xiao Lu, 2017).

This chapter examines the work of Xiao Lu (肖鲁 b. 1962, Hangzhou, Zhejiang). It is the second of four case studies developed through the multi-modal theoretical framework and transdisciplinary methodology outlined in Chapters 1 – 3. Through this polyvocal feminist lens Xiao Lu's work is interpreted as a response to patriarchal Chinese art histories, gendered experiences in the artworld and contemporary expressions of misogyny. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Beijing on 4 April 2017 and in Sydney on 2 February 2019. This case study critically positions Xiao's work as a counter-patriarchal intervention into the ink tradition, situated within, and influenced by, current and historical Chinese aesthetic, philosophical, political and cultural social contexts (including histories of feminism).

Xiao Lu was selected for this study due, firstly, to her performative use of ink as a material that embodies notions of Chinese identity and East Asian visual culture, and, secondly, due to her complex positions in relation to feminism. Xiao has been associated

with feminist art practice, an association she has sometimes embraced and at other times denied, since 1989. Xiao Lu's incendiary action at the opening of the China/Avant-garde exhibition at Beijing's National Art Museum (then called China Art Gallery) when she fired a handgun at her own reflection mirrored in her installation *Dialogue* was inevitably interpreted as political, despite the artist's later denials. Xiao Lu's work, like Tao Aimin's, has frequently been curated into feminist or quasi-feminist exhibitions of 'women's art' both in and outside China. At times Xiao has acknowledged a feminist intention, while at others she has disavowed a feminist identity. In an interview with Monica Merlin for Tate (recorded in 2013 and published in 2018), for example, she said, 'So when Xu Juan – the curator – came to me and said she had chosen three of my works – *Dialogue*, *Sperm* and *Wedlock* – for the [*Bald Girls*][2] exhibition because they showed a feminist consciousness, I simply admitted that I had not thought about feminism when I created them. But she said, "It doesn't matter. I can write about them from a feminist perspective." And I said, "Sure, write on!"' (Xiao 2018).[3]

When Xiao Lu was asked in the interview for this thesis whether she would consider herself a feminist artist, given how consistently she has explored gender and gendered life experiences in her work, her response indicated something of a change in her thinking subsequent to her work with 'Bald Girls':

> I think it's only a label given by other people. They can define me in whatever ways they want. Many people expect me to admit myself a feminist. [But] I think artists are different from theorists and sociologists. We think in entirely different ways. Why do I say this? In 2012, I took to studying feminism and bought a lot of books. Before that, I had only made works with materials that touched me in life, but contemporary art needs a kind of theory or symbol [...] I once intentionally read books on feminism, but they are only conducive to my knowledge of the world; I was not able to do any feminist work based on what I read. Because I can't make art with a concept in mind. Later I realised that I'm the kind of artist who can only make art with which my body and heart are connected. The concept does not help at all. You can call me a feminist artist if you like, if my works present feminist features, I'm fine with it. I don't refuse any label, but I must respect the way I make art (Xiao 2017).

This chapter analyses four recent performances, together with data drawn from several recorded interviews with the artist.[4] Xiao Lu's choice of ink and water in these works connects her to the Chinese scholarly tradition of *shui mo* and *shu fa*. It also positions her within the contemporary post-Cultural Revolution genre of 'Experimental Ink' (*shiyan*

shuimohua) that has been discussed in previous chapters. Operating within the same field as some of the significant male figures of her generation (with whom she exhibited in China/Avant-garde at the National Art Museum in 1989), Xiao's fluidly performative identity is expressed as a form of strategically enacted 'Chineseness'. It embodies on the one hand a self-aware, constructed persona directed towards non-Chinese audiences,[5] and on the other hand a profound identification with Chinese culture and history. Furthermore, Xiao Lu consistently articulates her adversarial relationship with the critical narratives that attempted to define her after 1989. The oscillating to-and-fro between a feminist identification and a more ambivalent position over the course of Xiao Lu's oeuvre indicates a self-reflexive and enacted self-construction in which the artist grapples with aspects of identity formation.

Xiao's use of ink and her own body in recent performance works are positioned in this thesis as a gendered variant on the post-Cultural Revolution genre of performative calligraphy and *shiyan shuimohua*, a genre hitherto dominated (with very few exceptions) by male artists. As discussed in Chapter 1, the artists who became internationally known for their re-imagining of calligraphy in the late twentieth century, including Xu Bing, Gu Wenda, Yang Jiechang, Wu Shanzhuan and Qiu Zhijie, were operating in a well-defined cultural space. In the arena they occupied, ink painting, calligraphy or the use of other identifiably Chinese materials and techniques (such as bound books and references to inscribed stelae), connect them with Chinese history and national identity, and simultaneously with an internationalist contemporary art practice, well-accepted globally. Access to this cultural space is more problematic for women due to the patriarchal nature of this history and Xiao Lu's performances with ink and water reflect that tension. Her work must also be positioned within the context of the history of performance art (*xingwei yishu* or 'behaviour art')[6] – and often violently punishing body art – that emerged in the post-Mao period (Berghuis 2006; Cheng 2013; Gladston 2014).[7]

As previously explained, post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde artists explored the contemporary possibilities of historically Chinese (or more broadly East Asian) art and craft forms. By the start of the twenty-first century the act of painting and writing with ink and brush had assumed new forms including performance art, animation, installation and video. Sarah E. Fraser (2020, p.60) argues, in relation to the practice of artists such as Xu Bing and Qiu Zhijie, that such works are 'part of a larger shift in ink performativity,

particularly since the 2000s, as global networks and exposure of Chinese artists at international biennales render intermedia and performativity as powerful methods to pursue alternative directions for ink culture'. This thesis proposes that one of these' alternative directions' is the insertion of a female, counter-hegemonic (and sometimes a feminist) embodiment into the discourse.

Xiao Lu's work with ink intervenes in the long Chinese tradition of scholar painters and calligraphers, as it simultaneously enters the arena of the globalised contemporary artworld. Her thoughts about the Chinese genealogy of her work were vividly expressed in our first encounter, which took place in a room Xiao had designed specifically for her daily practice of calligraphy, copying classical poetry with ink and brush onto *xuan* paper. She spoke of the physical and emotional experience of writing and painting with ink, noting the influence of this practice of calligraphy on her later performance works, and acknowledged the significance of Daoist philosophy expressed through working with ink in more directly performative ways (2017).

It is further argued in this chapter that Xiao Lu's body of work is reflective of He-Yin Zhen's construct of *nannü* in so far as her actions and choices of materials simultaneously reinforce and subvert syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian relationships between *yin* and *yang*, masculine and feminine, light and dark, youth and ageing, and Eastern and Western dichotomies. For Xiao Lu, grappling with intersecting Chinese and gender identities, these are not oppositional binaries, but rather reciprocal forces understood by the artist as fluxing, interrelated allusions to Daoism – forces that, like *yin* and *yang*, possess the capacity to transform each other. An intersectional feminist lens acknowledges how gender and Chineseness at times coalesce and at other times separate in her artistic practice: works with an apparent feminist intent sometimes align with, and sometimes paradoxically contradict, statements made by the artist. Furthermore, in Xiao Lu's mature works gender is imbricated not only with her identity as a Chinese artist, but also with her experiences of ageing as a woman in a patriarchal society. Her physically challenging performance works allude to these gendered realities, to Chinese philosophical traditions, and to global manifestations of durational performance art.

In the following sections of this chapter, firstly, Xiao Lu's complicated relationships to feminism and to contemporary art in China are explored and the legacy of her notorious action at the China/Avant-garde exhibition in 1989 is examined. Secondly, analysis of *Yin*

Yang Calendar (2013-14) (Fig. 5.2) proposes an argument that Xiao Lu's work may be understood within the polyvocal feminist theoretical framework explained in Chapter 2. In particular, He-Yin's insistence that relationships between patriarchy, imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and the subjugation of women represented a global problem – always and everywhere – inform the analysis applied in this study to Xiao Lu's own conceptualising of her gender identity as an essential category of 'woman' that informs her practice.[8] Thirdly, with reference to two significant performance works, Xiao's use of ink and her own body is positioned as a female-gendered variant on the genre of performative, unreadable calligraphy and *shiyan shuimohua*.[9] This reconsideration of Xiao's work is supported by data drawn from interviews with the artist, and through analysis of *One* (2015) (Fig. 5.3) and *Ren/Human* (2016) (Fig. 5.5). Finally, analysis of *Suspension* (2017) (Fig. 5.7), positions Xiao's work as intervening in the literati tradition and argues that her re-engendering of ink language emerges from a counter-patriarchal intention, whether explicitly declared or not.

Fig. 5.1. Xiao Lu, *Dialogue*, photographic document of her 1989 performance at China/Avant-garde, National Art Museum, Beijing, photograph on aluminium, 90 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Firstly, we must critically examine the continuing significance of those gunshots in 1989. Xiao Lu occupies a complex and contested space in the history of contemporary art in China. The contestation is due partly to the multiple and often contradictory interpretations of her action at the China/Avant-garde exhibition at the National Art Museum in Beijing in February 1989, and partly to her contentious 2002 reclamation of her authorship of this iconoclastic act. Her dramatic action resulted in the (at first temporary, then permanent) closure of the exhibition and the subsequent arrest and brief detention of the artist and her companion, artist Tang Song. Xiao's action brought her instant and permanent notoriety. It was an act that transgressed cultural norms – the illegal possession and firing of a gun, the seeming self-aggrandisement of a young, unknown (female) artist in the presence of China's most respected (male) figures of the avant-garde, and the deliberate intervention of a violent performative act, although performance art had been expressly forbidden by the authorities. Xiao's installation (her graduation piece from the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts) and its violent live-action component were almost immediately co-credited by critics to Xiao Lu and Tang Song (later the artist's lover), as if it were somehow inconceivable that a female artist alone could have conceived of and carried it out.

Hang Jian and Cao Xiao'ou (2010), for example, in an account originally published in *Meishu* in 1989, attributed the work to both artists; as did influential critic (and co-curator of China/Avant-garde) Li Xianting, firstly in a 1989 text for '*Meishu Shilun'* ('Art History and Theory') first translated in 2010 (Li 2010), and later in an interview with *Art Asia Pacific* (Cohen 2010).[10] The catalogue for the touring exhibition *China Avant-garde* in 1993 – 1994, an important historicising documentation of Chinese art and culture in the 1980s and early 1990s, explicitly credits both artists as authors of this 'happening' despite acknowledgement in the accompanying text that the installation was Xiao Lu's work (Noth et al. 1994, pp.310–311). Thomas Berghuis (2006 p.91) likewise cites two authors of the artwork. In his comprehensive history of contemporary Chinese art Wu Hung (2014 p.87) also attributes the work to the collaborative partnership of Tang and Xiao, describing them as damaging 'their own installation', contradicting other accounts such as that of his co-curator Gao Minglu (2011). Jonathan Goodman recorded Xiao Lu's statement that in 1989 Tang Song was 'merely an acquaintance' and had no influence on her decision to fire the gun into her installation (2009, p.26). In the previously cited

interview for Tate in 2013 (published in 2018) with Monica Merlin, Xiao Lu explained how her intentions were co-opted and (mis)represented by others in the context of unfolding historical events:

> According to this theory [*that women artists make work from a subjective emotional standpoint*], *Dialogue*, which was born out of a woman's emotions, is simply worthless. The same work, however, is deemed extremely meaningful and valuable when Tang Song added his political and social interpretation, saying that it tested the flexibility of Chinese law and so on. It is the same piece of work – created at the same time and at the same exhibition – but if you change the way you talk about it, suggesting that it does not involve politics or social impact, the work suddenly becomes worthless. This is the context for Chinese contemporary art. And if it is made by a woman, it is deemed to be worth even less (Xiao 2018).

In her examination of the performative female body in Chinese contemporary art Shuqin Cui (2016) provides a thorough analysis of the work, the artist's intentions, and the sequence of events. Xiao Lu's work, one of a mere handful by women among the 300 or so selected by the curators of *China/Avant-garde*, centred on her experience of abuse (not revealed until many years later) at the hands of a trusted authority figure. She fired the gun 'to explode her private nightmares in the public space of the national museum' (Cui 2016, p.114). Cui's account of the ensuing authorship controversy explores the silencing of a female voice within an established discourse, a 'collision between female silence and the male discursive voice' that, even now, dominates the ways in which artworks are judged and how they are interpreted in China (2016, p.115–116). Analysis of Xiao Lu's recent performance works in this chapter reveals a continuing frustration and anger, albeit expressed with greater nuance.

An analysis of *Dialogue* as feminist in intent has consistently been dismissed by the artist, who insists on autobiographical subjectivity as its primary intention. In a second interview for this thesis Xiao Lu recounted the pressure she had experienced to claim the work as a political gesture, and to accept that her action would be credited equally to Tang Song (Xiao 2017). To some extent the confused and contradictory accounts surrounding Xiao's 1989 action stem from her understanding of feminism as a purely theoretical, intellectual lens, devoid of emotion or subjective 'authenticity'. In the encounters that took place for this study, in 2017 and 2019, Xiao Lu consistently identified her work as spontaneously stemming from an essential 'authentic' femaleness, rather than as intentionally 'feminist': 'I'm the kind of artist who can only make art with which my body and heart are

connected' (Xiao 2017). Asserting that women possess intuition, and a sensitivity that is lacking in men, Xiao Lu agrees that her work is gendered, and suggests that it has been misread by the male art establishment in China. In 2009, for example, she told Jonathon Goodman:

> Feminist art has not yet formed a movement in China; it is still in a marginal condition. The situation of female artists in China is, speaking about my personal case, a major factor in the misreading of works. This is because the right to speak about art in China is mainly controlled by men, and judgment about the value of art created by women, and the explanation of art created by women is still largely in the hands of men (Xiao Lu, in Goodman 2009, p.28).

Xiao Lu's notion of a feminine 'body and heart' connection as opposed to a more purely intellectual male modus operandi may seem problematically essentialising when viewed from a Western feminist standpoint, but it must be understood within a post-Mao popular and intellectual culture in which gender distinctions were reclaimed in response to previous state policy. This issue was discussed in greater depth in Chapters 2 and 3 and has been widely covered in the scholarly literature of a number of disciplines, from sociology to film studies, and from literary criticism to gender studies. Fengshui Liu (2014), for example, positions it in her ethnographic study of Beijing youth as a process of de-gendering and re-gendering, a historical process quite distinct from western neo-liberal constructions of femininity or girlhood.

In the analysis of works by Xiao Lu that follows later in this chapter, this notion of 're-gendering' is framed as the artist's explicit response to patriarchal and misogynist artworld discourses. Xiao Lu's evident belief that to make 'feminist work' a theoretical framework would have to be artificially overlaid onto her artworks, thus rendering them inauthentic – 'phoney' as she told Merlin (Xiao 2018) – was articulated in each interview. While the well-trodden ground of her 1989 work and the controversy that continues to surround it is not the focus of this thesis, which instead examines Xiao Lu's more recent performance works, the ways in which *Dialogue* has been interpreted and reinterpreted over time illuminate the paradoxes and apparent contradictions that complicate responses to feminist art in China.

Xiao Lu's uncompromising use of her body in often viscerally uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous performances requires a re-examination of what a feminist practice might look like within a contemporary Chinese context. Xiao was the focus of

considerable hostility for her attempts after 2000 to reclaim her authorship of *Dialogue* (Xiao 2010; Gao 2011). The contradictory nature of the attribution and analysis of this work (and the 'truth' of the matter remains even now shrouded in controversy amid the unreliable memories and varying agendas of witnesses) is an indication of the persistent misunderstandings of the contribution of women artists to the field of contemporary practice in China. In particular, it reveals shifting understandings of works that may be interpreted as having a 'feminist' intention.

Xiao Lu's performance works from around 2011 illuminate the gendered nature of how the ageing process is represented in visual culture, and how post-menopausal women are viewed in society. As a woman of middle age maintaining an active practice of intensely physical performance works, Xiao Lu has openly discussed her relationship failures, childlessness, and distressing experience of menopause.[11] Her first venture into the practice of calligraphy with alternative forms of ink was a series of actions in 2011 titled, collectively, *Changes*, for which she daily copied out Tang Dynasty poems in calligraphy using the liquid dregs from the medicinal tinctures that were relieving the physiological and psychological impacts of menopause:

> I was feeling quite unwell in 2011, when I turned 50. I did the Tang poetry that year when my body was undergoing very uncomfortable changes […] When you look back at the past works, they may reflect a particular condition at a certain period of time ... the crisis of romantic relationships ... I wanted to have a baby badly, but I was not able to ... it was complicated. At that time ... looking back, I was not well, really in a mess, physically and emotionally […] Chinese medicine ... why I used it ... Chinese medicine is bitter, but love letters are beautiful and bitter … it was about an inexplicable feeling that I had. Sometimes I feel Chinese medicine is like love, it can cure illness. But sometimes you feel love can also be bitter, and sometimes it's beautiful; it's like the medicine, it can cure diseases, but it's bitter … all of a sudden, I realised the medicine can be a very good material to express yourself, so I applied the Chinese medicine [*instead of ink*] (Xiao 2017).

From the gunshots of 1989 to the mature works discussed in this chapter, Xiao's work consistently develops from a subjective and deeply felt motivation:

> If you look at my work, you can see, my inspirations always came from feelings of my body and my life situations. Female artists, especially me, have been influenced greatly by the situation of my life, the change of my body, my emotions and my ideas about the world … I need to follow my heart while I am creating my work, and I don't want to use a concept to frame or limit my creation, as I believe one's ideology and understanding about life keep changing. I don't know how my work

> will change in the future. Only one thing I need to be sure, that when I make a work, I need to keep my mind empty without any concept and allow my feelings and inspiration to lead me to the destination (Xiao 2019).

In the above excerpts from encounters with Xiao Lu in 2017 and 2019, we see her struggle to explain how complicated emotional/psychological/physiological states are represented in her art practice. Key elements in her approach to her subsequent performance works are revealed – in particular, the notion of a difficult catharsis: 'it can cure diseases but it's bitter'. In the following sections of the chapter this *yin-yang*, bitter-sweet element of Xiao's performances will be analysed in relation to the twin influences of feminism and Daoism. Her work is positioned as exemplifying the kind of dynamic reciprocity that Paul Gladston (2020, p.34) positions as 'the active manifestation of *qi*, whereby the cosmos moves cyclically away from and towards harmony through interaction between actuality and potential'.

5.2 A Calendar of *Yin* and *Yang*

Fig 5.2 (a) and (b). Xiao Lu performing/creating *Yin Yang Calendar*, December 2013 and January 2014, Guangzhou. Images courtesy the artist.

Xiao Lu identifies the first time she used ink and water in a performance work as December 2013, the first iteration of her work *Yin Yang Calendar*.[12] She had been reflecting on the alignment of Western and Eastern influences and philosophies in her own work and in Chinese art more broadly:

> *Yin Yang Calendar*. This was the first time I used ink and water. This work is from December 28, 2013, to January 5, 2014. The curator asked me to do the performance on an everyday basis in the exhibition hall with an audience watching. So, I chose this period of time which spanned the Spring Festival, during which *yin* and *yang*

> calendars misalign. It took me nine days. The ink I splashed was made into a *yin* calendar (Xiao 2017).

In this work, Xiao Lu compares the ancient Chinese (*yin*) lunar calendar with the Western Gregorian (*yang*) solar calendar. She later created a second version, shown in the Singapore Biennale of 2016, which consists of two vertical black and white panels displayed side by side, representing the two calendrical systems. Each was arranged to begin on 1 January 2016, and had magnets that could be moved forwards, day by day, on each calendar. In Xiao Lu's symbology the lunar and solar calendars represent, respectively, femaleness and maleness. They occupy the same physical and temporal space, yet their paths are separate.

This chapter proposes an argument that this work and *Dialogue* (1989) exist in parallel. *Dialogue*, with its two separate phone booths occupied by male and female figures and the red telephone hanging off its hook between them represented the divergent masculine/feminine binary that Xiao Lu suggests in a more allegorical form in *Yin Yang Calendar*. When Xiao Lu fired her pistol in 1989, the bullet holes that shattered the mirror at the centre of her installation opened up a symbolic space, a lacuna surrounded by shards of glass representing notions of masculinity and femininity and their different understandings of the world. It appears to rupture notions of Daoist *yin-yang* reciprocity. It also, of course, represented the artist's symbolic self-destruction. Xiao Lu intended *Dialogue* to convey her despair at the impossibility of communication between genders. It was an act of violence in response to the voicelessness of a young woman whose trauma had been erased. In contrast, each version of *Yin Yang Calendar* represents the unrealised desire for union and harmony between *nan* (male) and *nü* (female) and simultaneously an acknowledgement that under gendered, patriarchal power structures that operate to limit and constrain women, this desire is impossible to realise.

From this point onwards, a consistent theme of flux and fluidity, a liquid materiality, is evident in Xiao's work. For a collateral event at the 2013 Venice Biennale, for example, she presented papers stained with the fluids discharged from her body during Daoist *Tui Na* massage therapy, juxtaposed with sludge dredged from China's Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal. Xiao had proposed a performance in which she would cover her body with this toxic mud and swim naked in Venice's polluted Grand Canal as a form of self-purification, a proposal promptly vetoed by city and church authorities. Ever the taboo-

breaker, Xiao did it anyway. This work, *Purged*, according to Xiao Lu an act as spontaneous as her gunshots in 1989, presents something that is generally hidden, or defined as mad or bad, and certainly unwelcome in the public sphere: a naked woman, no longer young, ignores the judgement of others, which no longer matters to her.

> I don't know why, but I suddenly began to do those society-themed works after the menopause. It's not that I had an epiphany; it's more of a physical change. I suddenly became sensitive to things that I was not interested in before … I still have feelings to be made into art. Maybe it has something to do with hormones. In the past, I was kind of enchanted and trapped by the spell of feelings in my work. After the age of 50, after a period of mess ... [*even though I had been]* trapped in this spell for a long time in the past, this spell has failed to control me. After the age of 50 ... I suddenly realised that in the past, I could not get on with men, thinking that they could not understand my work. Now it's different. Not only can I understand how they perceive my previous creations, but also [*I understand*] works created by men. Maybe women think in ways more similar to those of men after the age of 50 (Xiao 2017).

Here again we are confronted with Xiao Lu's sense of immutable gender difference. In part the origins of this belief lie in the artist's memories of Mao-era gender erasure in the period of High Socialism into which she was born. As was discussed in earlier chapters, Min Dongchao's (2017) summation of the travels and translation of feminist theory in China in the 1990s revealed the determination of many women to explore expressions of femininity that had previously been forbidden, subsumed by an ideal of genderless collectivism. Sally McWilliams (2013, p.163) examined the contradictory manifestations and social origins of performative femininity in contemporary China 'at the intersections of global market capitalism, nationalism, and heteronormativity'. Inflected by nostalgic imagery of the feminine ideal from the imperial past, from early twentieth century modernity, and from the 'iron girls' of socialist realism, all intersecting with the new visual culture of twenty-first century consumer desire, Chinese women today experiment with how to perform femininity in the context of neo-liberalism.

Xiao Lu's performances embody these contradictions – a melancholy awareness of illness, mortality and the temporality of the body is juxtaposed with a courageous resistance to these forces, even at times a kind of exultation. Standards of beauty are cruel, youth is emphasised in popular culture, and in China unmarried women over the age of 27 are described as *sheng nü* (leftover women).[13] As an unmarried, childless woman, Xiao Lu is unusual in China, where less than two percent of the eligible

population lack a spouse/partner or children (Zhou, Verdery and Margolis 2019). Rather than this being a source of shame, however, Xiao's performances are uncompromisingly honest, confronting audiences with a raw truthfulness. Speaking of *Purged*, Xiao says:

> I exposed my body. At that time, when the work has been shown, a lot of male audiences and critics said bad words to me. They said, 'why do you do this, if you want to bare your body, your body should be beautiful and young'. I think a lot of these comments were from their male and masculinist point of view towards women and women's bodies […] I did hesitate when I plan it, as I really don't know how to do this. I was nearly 50 years old, and my body wasn't slender or young. Yet, at that time, I believe this is the best way for this work, and my principle about my art is nothing can stop me from finding the right way to express my work, while using my naked body is only a method (Xiao 2019).

Xiao Lu enacts femininity, and simultaneously challenges the judgemental gaze in which only youth and beauty are valued, a gaze under which post-menopausal women become invisible, or abject. She invites the gaze of the audience and turns it back towards them in discomfiting ways. Xiao pays careful attention to her appearance and costuming in each performance: her hair is often died red and/or blue with fingernails painted to match. Flowing robes suggestive of Chinese traditional *Hanfu* dress enhance a sense of ritual.[14] We might see this careful costuming as a performance of the kind that Anne Anling Chen (2018, p.419) names 'ornamentalism'– a 'vast and tenacious history of Oriental female objectification [that] is refracted through the lenses of commodity and sexual fetishism'. While Xiao is clearly not intentionally presenting herself as an object for the male gaze, nevertheless, this presentation is implicit and almost inescapable in any public performance by a woman. Furthermore, many of her post-2011 performances were created and viewed outside China; therefore the implications of an orientalising consumptive gaze are inevitable. Nonetheless, Xiao performs the role of a woman reclaiming her agency in a space of her own devising. She insists we acknowledge her presence, her experiences and her authority to speak. In the following section of the chapter two performances employing ink and water are analysed as forms of 'writing' that subversively insert a female presence into the lineage of the literati.

5.3 Writing 'Woman' into the Discourse: rituals of ink and water

One (Fig 5.3) is a performance that took place at the Valand Academy of Fine Arts in Gothenburg, Sweden, on 5 September 2015.[15] A small audience watched as Xiao Lu entered a white space and stepped onto a large sheet of *xuan* paper over an underlay of

felt. In the video documentation of the performance, we see that she wears a long white skirt and shirt that, given the ceremonial nature of the proceedings, recall the robes of a priestess or shaman. She carefully mixes black ink and water in glass vessels, then pours the mixture into a bucket. Abruptly, without warning, she tips the ink over her head. It immediately covers her face, hair, and clothing with the viscous black liquid. Watching the video, we sense the shock experienced by the audience at this violent act of self-erasure. Xiao Lu then repeats the action with a second bucket containing clear water that washes away the ink and reveals her face. The diluted ink now soaks and stains her clothing and the felt and *xuan* paper beneath her feet, like the soft clouds of ink wash in a literati painting. The traces of her actions left behind on the paper and felt thus resemble an ink painting. A transformation has taken place. Xiao Lu has been (literally) immersed in the materiality of *shuimo hua* – although here the ink is applied without a brush. As Xiao articulates, the materiality of ink itself, a culturally determined visual and symbolic code, is the impetus behind her work: 'For thousands of years, [*the*] Chinese would use water and ink to draw paintings, so I thought of using these two materials, the most original materials to do *One*' (Xiao 2017).

Fig. 5.3 (a) and (b): Xiao Lu, *One*, 2015, performance at Live Action 10, Valand Academy of Fine Arts, Gothenburg. Image courtesy the artist.

One is quite distinct from well-known, frequently exhibited conceptual works produced by Xiao Lu's peers of the Chinese avant-garde such as Zhang Huan. In *Family Tree* (2000), for example, calligraphy was repeatedly inscribed over his face, which is gradually obliterated by the weight of Chinese history, duty and tradition in the form of a written text.[16] Although Xiao, too, is initially obliterated, vanishing beneath a cascade of black ink, the subsequent pouring of water reveals the artist in an almost baptismal ritual of rebirth. The work is triumphant, a reclamation of self. A text accompanying the video documentation of the work reads:

> *'Ink is Yin*
> *Water is Yang*
> *Yin and Yang*
> *Becoming One is the Way of the Universe.'*

Xiao Lu's reference to the most significant Daoist text, the *Daodejing*, attributed to philosopher Laozi, reveals her recognition that her intervention in the ink tradition is imbued with Daoist philosophy. In the first interview for this study in 2017 she explicitly acknowledged its impact on her work:

> The Chinese grow up reading Zhuangzi. I did not intentionally study Daoism, but it's imbued in our characters. I read an assortment of books for inspiration, including Laozi and Zhuangzi, and what comes to be finalised [*in the work*] is more of a representation of what goes through my mind (Xiao 2017).

The 'Way' of the Dao emphasises correlatives as the ebb and flow of the forces of the world: *yin* and *yang* as a rhythmic relationship, not as opposing binaries. In a translation of Verse 42 of the *Daodejing* (in D.C. Lau's 1963 translation), for example, we find:

> The way begets one; one begets two; two begets three; three begets the myriad creatures.
>
> The myriad creatures carry on their backs the yin and embrace in their arms the yang and are the blending of the generative forces of the two (Lao Tzu, p.49).

One reveals an artist grappling with the ambiguities and contradictions of her position. *Yin* is believed to embody the feminine (that which is turned away from the sun) while *yang* (that which is turned towards the sun) is its complementary masculine opposite force. *One* thus encodes notions of masculinity and femininity in the materiality of

Xiao's practice; the ink is *yin*, embodying the essentially female, while the water is the male *yang*. Her body is immersed in the mixture of the two substances and emerges as if purified. Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth Gladston (2018, p.123) argue that *One* and Xiao Lu's subsequent performance entitled *Ren* (Fig. 5.5) possess an 'intentional relationship to traditional Chinese thinking and practice; in particular that associated with Daoist notions of cosmic reciprocity signified by the now internationally recognised yin-yang symbol.' Their analysis of *One* as an 'intervention' with the principles and practices of literati *shan shui* painting and as a 'challenge to its traditional masculinist order' (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston 2018, p.125) distinguishes Xiao's work from a simply discursively legitimised feminist action. Xiao's use of ink in an almost hallucinatory, trance-like state, they argue, connects her to traditions of painting characterised by a 'spontaneous non-rationalist reciprocity between artists and nature and between artworks and viewers' (Gladston and Howarth-Gladston 2018, p.126) thus emphasising her connection to this Daoist/neo-Confucian tradition as well as to a gendered identity and/or a feminist performativity.

Gladston and Howarth-Gladston critically examine resonances and differences between rationalist-idealist, poststructuralist, and syncretic Confucian thought and aesthetics in the context of historical and continuing transcultural dialogues, translations, and appropriations between China and the 'West'. Their analysis focuses in part on questions of feminism and feminine identity, which they view as spectral in the context of contemporary China, in addition to the shifting cultural significances of 'techne' – a term derived from the Greek τέχνη, meaning the practice of art or craft – which has an etymological relationship to Indo-European terms for 'weaving'.[17] Gladston and Howarth-Gladston's critical analysis resonates with the examination of materiality in this study, in particular the analysis of the culturally encoded material of ink. The focus of this thesis, however, is on the notion that identities (of gender in all its complexity, imbricated with Chineseness) are enacted through artistic practice as a resistance to and divergence from the structures and systems of patriarchy, whether they be Confucian or global and transnational.

This thesis argues that *One* may be understood as Xiao Lu's construction of a *nannü* ritual in which 'the ink and water poured over her body represent the mutually reciprocal cosmic forces of feminine/masculine, *yin-yang*, light/dark, and a yearning for their desired

unity' (Guest 2021, p.144). If the ink represents literati traditions of male scholarship and *shan shui* painting, then in Xiao Lu's transformative reclamation the water washes it away to reveal the woman, still standing. Xiao Lu thus renders a Chinese cultural tradition as an act of female embodiment. The artist herself takes the place of inkstone, brush and *xuan* paper. It is both a homage and, as Gladston and Howarth-Gladston (2018) posit, a critical intervention with the tradition. Xiao's performance also references the more recent, post-Cultural Revolution artistic practice of Experimental Ink Painting. The sweeping gesture, with brush as extension of arm and hand, was reinvented as a marker of Chinese artistic identity by post-Mao contemporary conceptual and performance artists in China. The body in their works, Majid (2014) argues, is both self and subject, with ink as the unifying medium of expression. Sarah E. Fraser (2020, p.59) argues, further, that 'The body and its interaction with brush and paper have always been a factor in the performance of ink'.[18] Xiao Lu's violently spontaneous act of self-immersion links her simultaneously to traditions of Daoist 'drunken calligraphy' such as the inherently performative 'wild cursive' script of Tang Dynasty calligrapher Zhang Xu (675–759)[19] and to the performative practices of artists such as Qiu Zhijie, Wu Shanzhuan, and Zheng Guogu and the Yangjiang Group.

The notion of the transformative potential of ink art for contemporary artists resonates with the work of Eva Kit Wah Man (2015; 2016; 2020), whose analysis of Mencius' transformative aesthetics was discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. As Gladston and Howarth-Gladston (2018) explain, *One* is significantly associated with a rationalist/non-rationalist Chinese philosophical tradition. Man proposes an intersection between a poststructuralist feminist rejection of Cartesian dualism and syncretic Daoism/Confucianism, an indivisibility of mind and body (albeit a body gendered male, in the context of Confucian patriarchy). *Yin* and *yang* as female and male forces within the universe represent polarities, but Man (2016, p.15) points out that in Daoist texts they 'do not exhibit any real opposition or antagonism; they are only opposite insofar as they are complementary. There is neither tension nor hostility between these terms.'

In response to the co-option of Daoist cosmology by neo-Confucian scholars in the Song Dynasty, however, He-Yin Zhen argued in 1907 that the *nannü* category was 'the foundational material and metaphysical mechanism of power in the organisation of social and political life in China' (Liu et al. 2013, p.21). It was designed, she posited, to create

and support systems of power and control based on the distinction between male and female. Given the phallocentric past and present of Chinese art and culture, this thesis suggests that tension and hostility are inescapable (and, indeed, acknowledged in Confucian philosophy), and the consequent paradoxes are an inevitable aspect of the dual nature of Daoist non-rationality, and thus essentially irreconcilable. I propose an argument that *One* reveals 'the unresolved tension, and indeed the violence, that He-Yin Zhen understood Daoist and neo-Confucian patriarchal philosophies to reinforce' (Guest 2021 p.144). In its very simplicity Xiao Lu's performance is a representation of this oscillating *yin-yang* tension – and of the re-emergence, as the ink is washed away, of the erased (silenced) woman.

In 'On the Revenge of Women' (1907), He-Yin identified 'instruments of men's rule over women' as embedded within the very language itself, and ever present in classical scholarship (Liu et al. 2013, p.105). In this discursive tradition female subservience was seen as ordained by nature, although this subordination, as pointed out in Chapters 2 and 4, was more nuanced than it might appear.[20] It illuminates Xiao Lu's essentialising belief (a result of her experiences of *nüxing yishu* and its critical reception in the 1980s and 1990s as much as her immersion in syncretic Daoist/Confucian philosophy) in the vast difference between work made by women and work made by men. Male artists, she suggests 'think big' and have to make work 'about society and politics to show their masculinity' whereas women, in contrast, make work grounded in authentic, unmediated emotional responses and 'for the sake of love' (Xiao 2017). She reiterates a distinction between the intellectual approach of male artists, their inclination towards theory and outward-looking 'big ideas', and the interiority and 'truthfulness' of her own works, echoing the inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) worlds of the Confucian social structure:

> In contrast, the detailed, personal and emotional inclinations of women are looked down upon. This value results in the underestimation of women's works. *Dialogue* is quite simple. If I say it was done for the sake of love, men would not stand such an interpretation. A great work must be imbued with a great thinking. They could not accept a great work without a great thinking. I think, if I count as a feminist, here is the root [...] anyway, I am quite an authentic person, I'm always telling the truth. I could have made up some theory to explain my work, but I'm quite clear about what it was that moved me to make the artwork in the first place […] So, I think men and women are really different. They think in different ways (Xiao 2017).

Fig 5.4. Xiao Lu, *One*, 2015, documentation after performance at Live Action 10, Valand Academy of Fine Arts, Gothenburg. Image courtesy the artist.

One may thus be understood as a site of intersection between the female body and subjectivity and the impact of *nannü* social structures which continue to constrain women today. At the end of the performance Xiao's ink-soaked discarded clothes are left behind. Together with the splashed, ink-marked felt and paper. they remain like shadowy *shan shui* paintings. Absent the body, they become 'traces of the *nannü* category that rendered women largely invisible and absent from public discourse, the body "swallowed up" in the words of He-Yin Zhen' (Guest 2021, p.144.). We might see this performance as an act of self-erasure that conveys a sense of the precarity of the physical body, and indeed the ephemeral nature of gender and cultural identity. Yet this thesis proposes that the ink that is poured and splashed over Xiao's body signifies a post-menopausal fearlessness, a resistant, embodied interpretation of the aging of a woman that began with the 'Writing Tang Dynasty Poetry' series (now entitled *Changes*), for which she used, instead of ink, the medicinal herbs with which she was treating her symptoms of the menopause.

A related work, *Human* (*Ren*) (Fig. 5.5), was performed the following year at the Kylin Centre of Contemporary Art, Beijing. When the audience entered the white-walled, concrete-floored space they found it occupied by a ladder and a tall, transparent Perspex vessel, about twice the height of an average-sized person. Clad in black, Xiao Lu enters the space and begins to pull the top of the vessel towards her. Using her body as a counterweight; she creates the two diagonal strokes of '人' ('*ren*' meaning human, people, or person) with her body and the vessel (later emphasised by the synchrony of black ink and her black robe). As buckets of water are tipped into the open top of the vessel the physical strain is evident in Xiao's tensed raised arms and facial expression. There is silence except for the sound of pouring water. Finally, black ink is poured into the vessel from a glass bowl; it rises in cloudy, thread-like swirls towards the surface. The video documenting the performance reveals that at that point in the proceedings the vessel had already started to leak. Water seeped and then quickly gushed from its sides even before the ink was poured into it, and puddles of liquid spread across the gallery floor – an unintended but not altogether unwelcome event.

Ren creates an allegory that may be read in various ways. We may understand it as signifying, for example, the weighty influence of the collective consciousness versus the solitary individual, or the weight of the ostensibly gender-neutral 人 ('*ren*') supported by the physical strength and endurance of a woman's body. We might also read in this image of a heavy container filled with ink the historical weight of China's élite literati, the *wenren*, those men (and it was only men who were eligible) who had succeeded in the gruelling Imperial Examinations, counterbalanced by the weight of Xiao Lu's solitary female body. Xiao, who began to study calligraphy as a child when her mother hired famous teacher Chen Peiqiu to teach her the *Wang Xizhi* style, has continued to study and practise each day in the room she created in her house in Beijing for the specific purpose of practising calligraphy – although she emphasises that this is quite distinct from her performance practice (Xiao 2019).[21]

Xiao Lu makes intentional, explicit reference to Daoist thought in both *One* and *Ren* through her choice of ink and water, and black or white clothing, alluding with considerable understatement to the complexity of these ideas. She said:

> *Yin-yang* is black and white, so it's a kind of *yin-yang* in the cultural sense … To put it another way, *yin* and *yang* are imbued with culture. But it's quite profound. It's not easy to grasp (Xiao 2017).

Fig 5.5. Xiao Lu, *Human 人 (Ren)*, 2016, documentation of performance at Kylin Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, ink, water, Perspex. Image courtesy the artist.

While Xiao Lu speaks of the Daoist principles of non-binary reciprocity between *yin* and *yang* – the combining of earthy, pungent, 'feminine' ink with cleansing, 'masculine' water – her performances may equally be understood as a representation of the gendered categorisation of He-Yin Zhen's *nannü* category. He-Yin saw the reinterpretation of Daoist cosmology by patriarchal – indeed misogynist – neo-Confucian scholars, in which ostensibly mutually reciprocal forces of *yin* and *yang* were twisted into punitive forms, as a 'profoundly disabling and constraining social order built upon, and enabled by, the continuing subjugation of women' (Guest, 2021 p.147). In *Ren*, the desired reciprocity

between these elements is interrupted as the ink and water pour out onto the floor of the gallery space like blood seeping from a wound – or from a womb. Therefore, in *Ren* the *nannü* construct by which women were defined as 'other' – *yin* to the masculine *yang* – is reframed, becoming a dialogue between the materiality of ink and water (so indelibly associated with Chinese history and culture) and the artist's body. As with *One*, when the artist leaves the space, a black puddle of ink is left behind as a trace of a Chinese materiality and, perhaps, a reminder of the female embodiment the audience has just witnessed.

The following section of the chapter analyses a performance in which Xiao Lu continues to experiment with the culturally encoded possibilities of ink and water. It proposes an argument that her body of work may be understood through a feminist lens as both a subversion of historical traditions of *shui mo* and *shu fa* and simultaneously an insertion of her female body into the avant-garde genre of *shiyan shuimohua* (experimental ink painting).

5.4 Suspension: Feminist readings of Xiao Lu's work

Suspension (Fig 5.6) was a 2017 performance at Skovde Art Museum, Sweden, in which Xiao Lu, dressed in a white robe, stood on sheets of *xuan* paper beneath suspended blocks of frozen ice and ink as they began to melt and drip. In the video documenting the performance, the constant percussive sound of liquid dripping onto the paper is quite loud, and Xiao Lu uses her voice in a performance for the first time. As she caresses a block of frozen ink which drips down her dress, she utters soft sounds, ululations that gradually become louder, like cries of anguish. Ink runs down her arms, her face, into her hair and down her gown. Later, as she stands under a block of ice, the sounds become more akin to singing, and then sighing. The melting liquids mix as they splash onto the ground, creating traces that become a painting. Xiao Lu identifies this work as evident of the maturation of her practice as she continued to refine how to use water and ink as material elements in performance works, minus the traditional brush:

> Traditionally, [*the calligrapher*] would write on *xuan* paper with a brush. In the beginning, I abandoned the use of [*the*] brush. I did not use the brush in *One* and *Suspension*. I used *xuan* paper, but I didn't use a brush. Instead, I used my body […] In this work, I was inclined to use the natural element in Chinese culture… In Chinese culture, there is a connection between nature and the universe. I can't explain it very clearly, this connection […] so I discovered something in Chinese traditional culture to be used in my art and breakthroughs are made (Xiao 2017).

Fig 5.6 (a) and (b). Xiao Lu, *Suspension*, 2017, frozen ink and ice, performance and installation. Images courtesy the artist

This notion of 'connection' was particularly evident in *One*, where the sudden unexpected drenching of the artist is explosive, and quite shocking. We see her indrawn breath as the black ink hits her head and face, providing a visceral connection between the physical experience of the artist and the audience watching, whether present in the room or watching the video documentation. The connection between artist and materials in *Suspension*, however, appears more strategic. Her intention to evoke concepts of *yin* and *yang* through the materiality of ink and water, and the change of its physical state from solid to liquid is unambiguous:

> […] like *Suspension*, you see, in *Zhouyi* [*The Book of Changes*], there's a kind of change, an unknown change, so when I was doing [*this*] artwork, if the angle of the ice changes, the result would be different (Xiao 2017).

When Xiao Lu retrospectively analyses her body of work, she turns often to a gendered discourse that echoes the somewhat essentialising terminology around feminist theory that arose in Chinese art and intellectual circles in the mid-1990s (discussed in detail in Chapter 2). Xiao, as we have seen, identifies gendered characteristics in her own artmaking, including an explicitly articulated emphasis on emotion and subjective experience, in opposition to the 'objective' framing that she identifies in the art of her male peers:

> This can also be seen as a characteristic of women. You see, when men make art, they stick to their original plans, but women do not make art for art's sake, they do it out of consideration for their own feelings (Xiao 2017).

The revealing element of Xiao's response is her contention, firstly, that women make 'authentic' art in different ways and for different reasons than men. This belief was reiterated when she asserted in this and subsequent conversations that now, post-menopause, her attitude to her work is more like that of a male artist (Xiao 2017; 2019). Xiao Lu expanded on the difference she observes between male and female artists in China:

> Because in this society, males tend to think big. Put it this way, men also fall in love and have their personal feelings, but in Chinese culture, men are ashamed of talking about their personal feelings. In society, men have to talk about society and politics to show their masculinity. In contrast, the detailed, personal and emotional inclinations of women are looked down upon […] So, I think men and women are really different. They think in different ways. Maybe they are constituted like that by the society. They cannot allow themselves to do it. Their sub-conscious suppresses this intention. Women, on the other hand, are not required to shoulder such responsibility, so they can be more authentic (Xiao 2017).

Xiao Lu's refusal to accept the erasure of her agency in creating *Dialogue* in 1989, her persistent attempts to reclaim her intentionality, may be interpreted as a feminist reclamation of authorship (albeit not necessarily in Western discursive terms) and a refusal to be silenced. Her insistence on continuing to use her body in ways that are primal and often uncomfortable for audiences, and her insertion of herself and her body into the language of contemporary manifestations of ink art (generally understood to be male, as we have seen) is of considerable significance. Thus, *Suspension* and Xiao Lu's recent performance oeuvre may be interpreted as intentionally gendered works that emerge from a feminist intention, albeit not necessarily declared as such. As interventions into the literati tradition, they are quietly subversive acts.

The long cultural history of the literati, imbued with patriarchal Confucian ideals of the powerful role of the scholar/bureaucrat, did not easily welcome women into the scholar's circle. Chang Tsong-zung and Gao Shiming (2016, para. 8), in a curatorial text expanding on the benefits of collaboratively appreciating ink art 'under the sky' in a renewed version of the traditional literati connoisseur's garden, admit:

> […] Whatever their occupation or social circumstance, the literati were of the same 'class' (here referring to those sharing a similar worldview) of the learned that constituted the cultural critical sector as well as those wielding power in office.

Xiao Lu's body of work, whether she explicitly claims a feminist intention or not, insists upon her entry into the scholar's garden. Her insertion of her female body and subjectivity into the hitherto male-dominated contemporary art discourses of ink and calligraphy is an intervention in both the literati *shu fa* and *shui mo* tradition and its contemporary, avant-garde manifestations, further analysed in the next section of the chapter.

5.5 A Radical Calligraphy of the Body

Xiao Lu states that her performance works develop from her life experiences and her psychological and physical state: 'I think, the first half of my life is like *yin-yang* in reality, and I'm now living an unrealistic *yin-yang* life' (Xiao 2017). The implication of this somewhat ambiguous statement is that her younger self was pushed and pulled back and forth between her desire for autonomy and agency, for recognition of her worth as an artist, her desire for love and acceptance, and to fulfil gendered norms (to be a 'good woman' in the Confucian sense, and to have a longed-for child) which resulted in much unhappiness, documented in her autobiographical 'novel', 'Dialogue' (Xiao 2010). Later in our 2017 encounter she spoke of the post-menopausal sense of being freed from this desire, identifying the works discussed in this chapter – *One, Ren, Yin Yang Calendar* and *Suspension* – as exemplifying the sense of liberation that followed the emotional, psychological and physical distress of the menopause.

Xiao Lu's work intervenes in an already gendered 'ink language', challenging its assumed masculinity in a variety of ways. Her mature work, beyond the notoriety she attracted in 1989 at *China/Avant-garde* and the opprobrium that followed her attempts to reclaim her authorship, is positioned in this thesis as an expression of the reality of inhabiting a female body and the memories held within that physical body. Her choice of Chinese ink as a material to be used in performance art followed – and was followed by – a series of works made with, literally or metaphorically, fluids redolent of the body, symbolic of sexuality, illness and ageing and even of rebirth.[22] Many works – including her ill-fated attempt to procure sperm donated by fellow artists with which she could self-inseminate in *Sperm* (2006) – have involved liquids of various kinds, including ink and water in *One*

(2015), *Ren* (2016) and *Suspension* (2017); liquid medicinal herbs (*Writing Tang Dynasty Poetry*, now titled *Life Changes*, 2011); mud from the Hangzhou/Beijing canal mixed with the water of the Venice Grand Canal (*Purge*, 2013); and the waters of the Pacific Ocean off the eastern coast of Australia (*Tides*, 2019). This thesis argues, therefore, that Xiao's materials embody the physical experience of femaleness, its insistent lunar cycles, its hormonal rhythms, its fluids and secretions, its inconvenient leakiness, its *yin* nature. To live in a female body is to live under the judgemental gaze of others and to navigate the restrictions of patriarchal power structures. In Xiao Lu's recent works, such as *Coil* (2018) and *Skew* (2019), which was performed in and is dedicated to Hong Kong, that patriarchal power structure is more explicitly identified as the authoritarian Chinese state.

Xiao Lu's use of ink, however, is distinct from fluids in other works as it makes a claim on a material imbued with associations of imperial China. Performance art using ink is not new, as we have seen, yet the meanings attached to its materiality are distinct in Xiao Lu's recent post-menopausal performances. Xiao Lu's use of ink and water in the performance works analysed in this chapter encodes all these experiences, and the bitter memories that are written on and in the body. It is, therefore, this thesis asserts, a radical calligraphy without the brush, a language without words, and a feminist embodiment.

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[1] See H. Roth (trans.), *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early China*. New York: Columbia University Press (2010) p.241. The *Huainanzi*, a text compiled by scholar bureaucrats in the court of Liu An, King of Huainan, in the 2nd century BCE summarises Western Han philosophy. Its account of the workings of the universe are expressed in a Daoist framework; however, it integrates many different schools of philosophy.

[2] *Bald Girls* was initially envisaged as an exhibition by three artists at the Iberia Art Center, Beijing, in March 2012, featuring works by Xiao Lu, Li Xinmo and Lan Jing, curated by Yong Xian, however, the Bald Girls took up a more activist position beyond the exhibition itself. Their website, created in 2012, states, 'Bald Girls has evolved from an exhibition into an idea and has become a base for the promotion of the development of cutting-edge feminist art, founding the Bald Girls website and journal to serve as an outlet and a medium for the voice of female artists in China. It marks the public appearance of Chinese avant-garde feminist art with a spirit of independence and freedom.' See http://www.bald-girls.net/en/genv.asp [accessed 27.11.20]

[3] Xiao Lu's statements in the recorded interviews for this thesis revealed a more ambivalent position in relation to polemical feminist artwork (2017). Her public statements have been equivocal – as an example, media reports about an exhibition exploring gender inequality entitled 'Jian, Rape: Gender Violence Cultural Codes', scheduled to open at Ginkgo Space, in Beijing's Sanlitun-Gongti district on 25 November 2015, but closed by authorities before it could open, quoted Xiao Lu on the rarity of feminist art exhibitions. For more see: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/feminist-show-closed-in-china-before-it-opens/ [accessed 27.11.20].

[4] Interviews were recorded with Xiao Lu in Beijing in April 2017, in Sydney, and in Sydney in February 2019. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, in each case with the assistance of a translator and interpreter – Xu Yining in Beijing, and in Sydney, Chelsea Juexi Wang.

[5] Asked about differing responses to her work '*One*' in China compared with Europe, Xiao Lu said, 'I think the work received positive responses in Europe, because it's not traditional water ink. It's represented in quite a contemporary form in a straightforward way. Of course, they saw a Chinese performing and they were quite quick to grasp the idea of *yin-yang*. In China, the work was uploaded on the internet. *Suspension* also received a positive response, because China is looking for an outlet for contemporary water ink. Some artists were surprised that I involved myself with water ink as well, with such a shocking performance […] But I think Chinese have references to make when watching me perform, westerners are just referring to the big Chinese identity' (Xiao 2017).

[6] While '*xingwei yishu*' is often translated into English as 'performance art' or 'behaviour art' – or even more broadly as 'time-based art' (Cheng 2013) – it is important to note that this translation is somewhat contested. Zhou (2020, p.121), for example, prefers the translation 'action art'.

[7] The nature and history of performance art in China is further discussed in Chapter 7, with reference to the significant scholarship in the field, most notably the work of Thomas Berghuis (2006), Gao Minglu (2011), Meiling Chen (2013), Wu Hung (2014), and Paul Gladston (2014).

[8] See Chapter 1 for a more detailed explanation of He-Yin Zhen's theory of gender relations as translated and analysed by Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko (Liu et al., 2013)

[9] For a discussion of this genre, see the exhibition catalogue 'Shu: Reinventing Books in Contemporary Chinese Art' (Wu 2006) For a consideration of how few female artists have been curated into international exhibitions of this contemporary reinvention of *guohua* the selection of only two women, Duan Jianyu and Xing Danwen, into the 2013 'Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China' at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is a salutary example, discussed in previous chapters. See Lily Wei's analysis available from:

https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/ink-art-past-as-present-in-contemporary-china-metropolitan-museum-of-art-review (Wei 2014) [accessed 25.7.21]

[10] See, for example, the interview with China/Avant-garde curator, influential critic, editor of *Meishu* and deputy editor of *Zhongguo Meishu Bao*, Li Xianting, in Art Asia Pacific 71, in which he describes *Dialogue* as a joint creation of Xiao Lu and Tang Song, available from: http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/71/OffThePageLiXianting [accessed 25.7.21]

[11] Xiao Lu has openly and frankly discussed the nexus between her personal life and art practice with this author (2017; 2019) and others, including Monica Merlin (2018) and Linda Pittwood (2019)

[12] The early years of the twenty-first century saw a growing interest both inside and outside China in how contemporary artists were working with ink and ink-like materials. Further interest was sparked by events in 2007 including the Third Chengdu Biennale, focused on contemporary ink painting. Subsequent academic and critical symposia and panel discussions included an Asia Society Hong Kong event on 23 May 2011 entitled "The Future of Contemporary Ink Painting". In 2013, the same year that Xiao Lu first used ink in a performance work, a major exhibition mounted at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, 'Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China' attempted to reflect the breadth of artistic practice. 'The catalogue included a section entitled 'Beyond the Brush' examining how artists explored aspects of Chinese tradition in materials ranging from porcelain to video. Artists selected for the exhibition (which attracted some controversy due to the lack of women) included Ai Weiwei, Gu Wenda. Qiu Zhijie, Song Dong, and Xu Bing. The exhibition provides evidence of a growing international interest in discourses around experimental ink practices at this time.

[13] Leta Hong Fincher's (2014) research on the intersection between the marriage market and the burgeoning real estate market is a salutary example of the pressures on women in China to be both financially successful and conform to an ideal of subservient femininity.

[14] *Hanfu* refers to historical clothing styles worn by the Han people, currently undergoing a resurgence in fashion with young people in China, in part prompted by social media and also no doubt as a result of rising nationalism. Flowing, layered clothing somewhat resembling aspects of *hanfu* is worn by a number of female artists in China, including Xiao Lu, Bingyi and Ma Yanling. For a discussion of the implications, see, for example, Yan Zhang, 2008, 'What is Going on in China? A Cultural Analysis on the Reappearance of Ancient Jili and Hanfu in Present-Day China', *Intercultural Communication Studies*, VII (1), pp.228–233

[15] Xiao Lu's performance work *One* in September 2015 should be seen within the context of a continuing Chinese and international interest in contemporary ink discourses. For example, on 5 October of that year Sotheby's Hong Kong 'Contemporary Ink Art', offering (relatively

traditional) works by Gu Wenda, Liu Dan and many others resulted in sales of 31,068,750 HKD. See https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/2015/contemporary-ink-art-hk0585.html [accessed 15.5.22]. A similar sale at Christies Hong Kong the previous April that had included works by Yang Jiechang, among others, was described as bringing "fresh and exciting perspectives to the tradition of Chinese paintings". For more see https://www.christies.com/features/Christies-Hong-Kong-Spring-Auctions-Chinese-Contemporary-Ink-5919-3.aspx [accessed 15.5.22]. Aside from this flurry of interest in the art market, further curated exhibitions explored how artists were working within and beyond ink traditions. One such example was "Ink Remix: Contemporary Art from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong". Curated by Sophie McIntyre and including video and installation works by 35 artists the exhibition travelled round several Australian galleries in 2015. When shown at UNSW Galleries it was described in promotional material in similar language to that used by the auction houses: 'Contemporary ink art has emerged as one of the most significant and ubiquitous artistic trends in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and over the past decade has attracted increasing attention from the media and the international art community. Acclaimed as "the new Chinese art", some of the world's most prominent museums and galleries, including New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Saatchi Gallery in London, have staged major survey exhibitions of ink art.' See https://artdesign.unsw.edu.au/unsw-galleries/ink-remix [accessed 15.2.22].

[16] Zhang Huan's work *Family Tree* (2000) documents his instruction to three calligraphers to inscribe his face with a constant stream of text over a whole day until the final, ninth photograph in the series shows his face completely blackened.

[17] For more on the distinction between *techne* and *episteme* see the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/episteme-techne/ [accessed 13.1.22]

[18] It must be noted that the process of reinvention and innovation of ink that we see in the post-Cultural Revolution avant-garde, in the guise of breaking free from artistic predecessors, is not new. As Fraser (2020) clarifies, it has a long history. She points to Dong Qichang's treatise synthesising Song and Yuan Dynasty painting, and to Shitao who, in his c.1700 treatise entitled 'Enlightening Remarks on Painting' 'expounded on his philosophy of breaking free from the limitations of painting schools' (Fraser 2020, p.60).

[19] For a discussion of performative traditions of calligraphy including Zhang Xu's 'drunken calligraphy' see Li-hua Ying, 2012. 'Negotiating with the Past: The Art of Calligraphy in Post-Mao China' *ASIANetwork Exchange* Volume 19 (2) Available from:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277107374_Negotiating_with_the_Past_The_Art_of_Calligraphy_in_Post-Mao_China [accessed 29.1.22].

[20] It should be noted that female subservience and subordination was not always the lived experience of women in Chinese history, as at various times women possessed greater autonomy, agency and freedoms. As Wasserstrom and Cunningham (2018, p.28) point out 'Women had very different experiences depending on the time, place, ethnic group and social class in which they were born'. Other sources include Dorothy Ko's historical investigation of women in 17th century China (1994), her analysis of foot binding that revealed its cultural complexities and nuances (2005), and Susan Mann's (1997) examination of women in the eighteenth century that revealed women as agents of the Confucian patriarchal order, not merely its victims.

[21] Xiao Lu's body of work in calligraphy and ink painting is less well-known that her performance practice, which the artist insists is the primary element of her practice. Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston have provided an insight into her ink practice. See Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston, 2019. 'Xiao Lu: Dis-/Continuing Tradition"' *TAASA Review – The Asian Arts Society of Australia Journal*, Vol 28 (3) p.22

[22] The materials Xiao Lu used prior and following *Yin Yang Calendar* (2013–2014) and her first use of ink include the sperm she had hoped (unsuccessfully) to collect from Chinese artists (*Sperm*, 2006); alcohol (red wine in *Drunk Performance*, 2009, and Chinese white spirit or *baijiu* in *Holy Water*, 2017); the dregs of Chinese medicine (in *Writing Tang Dynasty Poetry*, now called *Life Changes*, 2011); mud from the Hangzhou Canal and the water of the Grand Canal in Venice (*Purged*, 2013); the Pacific Ocean off the east coast of Australia (*Tides*, 2019) and blood-red liquid in a performance in Hong Kong during the anti-extradition law demonstrations (*Skew*, 2019) are just a few examples of Xiao's consistent use of fluid materials in her work. See more information about these works on the artist's website: http://en.xiaoluart.com/index.php?c=category&id=13 [accessed 29.7.21]

CHAPTER 6: CASE STUDY 3

From Silence to Speech: Mothers and daughters in the work of Ma Yanling

'Daughters are like wild birds in the deep mountains/ They fly off when full-fledged.'

(*Nüshu* poem)[1]

6.1 Reconfiguring Motherhood

This chapter analyses the performance work of Ma Yanling (马嫣泠 b. 1966, Xiangfan, Hubei) with a particular focus on the significance of mother/daughter relationships in the construction of gender. It examines her close focus on the experience of motherhood in a society of remembered trauma, and analyses her complex relationship to gendered identity, feminism, and Chineseness. Two semi-structured interviews were recorded with Ma Yanling in Beijing on 4th and 8th April 2017. Ma was selected for this study due to her emphasis on gendered experience, and to her expression of a situated feminism focused on relationships between women, mothers and daughters most particularly.

in China, the construction of motherhood operates within the confines placed upon it by the state, whether that is in the policing of the One Child Policy until 2016 or, once the policy's catastrophic implications became clear, in the pressures placed on women today to have two (or more) children. Ma Yanling's performances, often incorporating text written on the body, give expression to her complex relationship with her only daughter, taking place within this context of state control, social transformation, economic upheaval and large-scale personal reinvention. Positioning these relationships as a subject worthy of artistic consideration, Ma's use of ink (and ink-like) materials and her choice to write

text using the *nüshu* script that was explored in depth in Chapter 4 connect unstable social and familial relationships with Chinese cultural identity and a situated Chinese artistic history. Analysis of her work through this prism reveals how gendered histories and discourses of nationhood inflect a contemporary art practice.

This case study is informed by recent scholarly inquiry into changing mother/daughter relationships in China, most specifically the ethnographic work of Harriet Evans (2011). Ma's collaboration with her daughter in a continuing series of performance works after 2005[2] exemplifies the significant changes in the construction of parent/child relationships in China in the twenty-first century revealed by Evans' research. Evans' extensive fieldwork, conducted in Beijing between 2000 and 2004, found profound shifts in ideas about motherhood, and in discourses around appropriate relationships between mothers and daughters. These changing beliefs, she argues, are a result of the move away from collectivism towards the individualism and aspirational drive that characterise late capitalist social organisation, even in an ostensibly socialist society.

Ma Yanling's work makes visible the emotional intensity of relationships between mothers and daughters, in contrast with representations of self-sacrificing motherhood more commonly seen in both art and popular culture – in China and globally. A significant body of scholarship including the work of Louise Edwards (2000; 2007; 2008; 2010) and Leta Hong Fincher (2014) considers manifestations of the changing self in China, examining aspects such as sexuality, personal ambition and materialism, as well as gender and expressions of femininity.[3] Film scholar Huili Hao's study of mothers in post-Socialist Chinese film[4], for example, revealed that cinematic archetypes included a feminist paragon, the 'Consistent Mother', that emphasises positive bonds between mother and daughter (Hao 2009). Ma's performance works, critically examining the unrealistic ideal and its consequent psychological struggles by both mother and daughter, must be seen within this fluid, transformational social context.

Motherhood, like gender itself, may be understood beyond the biological as a constructed selfhood and a performance; it is layered with cultural, social, economic, political and aesthetic implications. Previous case study chapters argued that Xiao Lu's performances employing ink, ice and water, and Tao Aimin's references to *nüshu* calligraphy, may be read as (generally undeclared) feminist insertions into the male-dominated canon of *shu fa* and *shui mo*. This chapter argues that Ma Yanling similarly deploys references to Chinese

traditions of ink and calligraphy, and the female script of *nüshu*, in performances that call attention to women's oppression within the gendered structures of familial relationships. As Zoe Meng Jiang (2019, p.39) argues, 'the codes of motherhood and daughterhood are integral to the larger discursive formation of gender'. The interdisciplinary analysis of Amber Kinser, Kyrn Freehling-Burton and Terri Hawkes (2014), for example, reveals how mothers creatively construct, establish, reinvent and reaffirm multiple and fluid identities.

The reconfiguration of mother/daughter relationships in China has taken place against a backdrop of trauma. In imperial China, patriarchal familial relationships were underpinned by Confucian notions of duty and female subservience that continued into the late Qing and early Republican periods. After 1949 these gendered social norms were dramatically disrupted through successive political campaigns that attempted to replace familial with collective loyalties; today, relationships between mothers and daughters may be read as discourses of intergenerational trauma. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, individuals were untethered from previous constructions of political, religious, clan and gender identity, reconstructed as 'new social subjects tied to the collective and the state' by various means (Evans 2011, p.169).

During the Mao era (most particularly during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution)[5] Evans (2011, p.173) argues that attempts to 'shift the focus of filial piety away from the parent-child relationship to the socialist-citizen/Party-state' reproduced obedience equivalent to Confucian social strictures. While the repressive nature of these relationships may indeed be similar, the ends were not the same: during the Cultural Revolution, in particular, traditions such as Confucianism were repudiated. The dismantling of collectivism and reconstruction of self-interested, aspirational individuals after 1978 precipitated an ongoing crisis continually dissected in mass media and scholarly discourse, often framed as a crisis of moral decline. Yunxiang Yan (2021), for instance, argues that Chinese understandings of western individualism as a form of selfishness assisted widely held perceptions of moral decline in contemporary China. The generation of women born, as Ma Yanling was, at the start of the Cultural Revolution, experienced the detachment of their own mothers from previous Confucian-influenced notions of 'the good mother', in addition to trauma resulting from social upheaval after 1949 and the violence and chaos of successive political campaigns. They in turn have had

to reinvent their own mothering in a period of social change, aiming towards a 'grammar of emotional expressivity that they felt their mothers had lacked' (Evans 2011, p.176). Trauma experienced both at the hands of the state such as the tribulations of her family during the Cultural Revolution, the strictures of the One Child Policy, and as more private forms of suffering, were disclosed in several interviews with Ma Yanling. Her lived experiences of daughterhood and motherhood became a recurring theme in our conversations.

Ma's performances, often undertaken in collaboration with her own daughter, explore issues of menstruation, sexuality, government control of fertility, and the complexities of motherhood within patriarchy. They employ an often overtly 'feminist' idiom and imagery, although Ma's expression of feminism does not necessarily align with current Euro-American discourses of feminist theory and practice, a tension that is analysed later in this chapter. Ma's use of *nüshu* script in these performance works is distinct from Tao Aimin's: whereas Tao's work focuses more closely on gendered labour and the hidden histories of rural women, Ma's intention is expressed as a form of feminism pertaining to the here and now, exploring issues in relationships between women, and between mothers and daughters, that play out in the contemporary world but are always shadowed by the past.

Considerations of mother-daughter relationships are not unprecedented in the work of contemporary women artists in/from China. Yu Hong's 'Witness to Growth' series, for example, records the birth and growth of her daughter juxtaposed with newspaper and media representations of current events. A series of performances by He Chengyao reflects on her difficult relationship with a mentally ill mother, and some recent work by Lin Tianmiao considers the relationship between the aged, frail mother and the adult daughter.[6] Beijing-based figurative painter Yan Ping has made the subject of mothers and infants her major theme for the last 30 years.[7] Transdisciplinary artists Ma Qiusha and Cao Yu, similarly, have made works exploring motherhood, as has sculptor Liu Xi.[8] Furthermore, and reflecting the ethnographic work of Harriet Evans, Zoe Meng Jiang argues that works by Ma Qiusha, Qin Jing and Huang Jing Yuan illuminate how younger women confront their mothers' socialist histories from post-socialist perspectives (Jiang 2019). Ma Yanling's work should be seen within the context of these examples; however,

this chapter will argue that she contributes a distinctly different view of motherhood to the discourse.

Ma Yanling began to work as a performance artist, while maintaining her painting practice, in the early years of the twenty-first century. Inhabiting the Beijing artworld, with its network of close connections, Ma was well aware of the work of other female performance artists, including He Chengyao and Xiao Lu. She had reacted with shock and recognition to Ma Qiusha's work *From No.4 Pingyuanli to No.4 Tianqiaobeili* when it was shown at UCCA in 2011.[9] In this video work, a monologue spoken with a razorblade in her mouth, the younger artist laments the life of the only child generation and the unbearable pressure placed upon her by her mother. In a previous interview Ma Yanling revealed that this work had prompted her to critically reflect on herself as a mother, feeling great anxiety over her relationship with her only child.[10]

Chapter 6 is structured in four sections following this introduction. The first positions Ma's work within the history and contemporary re-examination of the *nüshu* script and its function as a mode of communication between women and a form of lamentation. The second examines Ma Yanling's travels to Jiangyong County, her direct encounter with the script in its place of creation, and the influence of syncretic Daoist/Confucian traditions on her work. The third analyses the implications of an unfortunate encounter between American feminist artist Judy Chicago and Chinese women artists in which Ma Yanling was peripherally involved, arguing that her work may be understood as a feminist practice and a distinctly situated response to issues confronting Chinese women. The concluding section analyses how Ma's use of the *nüshu* script as a symbolic device reifies a rural female history, becoming a metaphor that embodies aspects of the contemporary world of a woman artist in China.

6.2 A language of lamentation: *Nüshu*, mothers and daughters

The nature and origins of the ancient 'women's script' of *nüshu* were examined in detail in Chapter 4. This chapter's focus is on the script as a vehicle with which Ma Yanling communicates maternal sorrow. Anthropologist Fei-Wen Liu tracks the history of *Nüshu*'s development as a 'genre of lamenting', citing a letter believed to date from the eleventh or twelfth centuries written by the earliest known *nüshu* figure in the literature, a concubine who had been sent to the Imperial Palace:

> […] My tears are flowing even before I begin.
> I'm Hu Yuxiu from Jingtian Village.
> Writing a letter home,
> To my parents, to whom I wish good health.
> (Liu 2015, pp.34–35)

Like the ritual bridal laments that were an expected feature of wedding ceremonies in the Jiangyong County villages, there is something carefully performative, albeit immensely touching, about this letter. The performance of sorrow (or its pictorial representation, in 'Scar Art' or Cynical Realist painting, for example), became a feature of Chinese art in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution,[11] and as we shall see in the analysis of her works that follows, sorrow and regret underpin much of Ma Yanling's melancholy body of work. This thesis argues that Ma's work is distinctive in giving expression to maternal sorrow, guilt and fear, an inevitable accompaniment to the experience of motherhood to which too little attention has been paid, and one which bears specific features in the Chinese context.

Ma Yanling's unhealed bitterness is evident in her work and was explicitly articulated in interviews prior to this study (Guest 2015). In several conversations with the artist that preceded this study, Ma had spoken about tragic histories of Chinese women both before and after 1949.[12] Ma's parents and grandparents suffered during the Anti-Rightist campaign (1957–c.1959) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Ma participated in the uprisings of 1989 in her hometown of Xiangfan, Hubei. Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky (2015) argues that Ma Yanling's disaffection from the Socialist state, and her hostility towards recent Chinese history, provides an explanation for the nostalgia so evident in her paintings, which often refer to the film culture of Shanghai during the 1930s and feature their glamorous, but often tragic, female stars. An even more distant history of Chinese women, the *Nüshu* written and oral culture of Hunan Province, proved equally compelling to Ma:

> The inner struggle of women. It was the struggle from women's heart, and woman-to-woman relationships. And mother-to-daughter relationships. At the very beginning, I did a performance about women themselves and their internal struggles. Then it evolved to the performance art with my daughter. This is how it developed. Personalised […] *Nüshu* is limited to women, like a code. A code of sisterhood. Only women can read it. Because it [...] women at that time were illiterate. They invented

> [*it*] themselves. Women invented the script themselves. These characters [...] men cannot understand them. Women created [*it*] themselves, so men cannot read them. If women have sorrows at heart, they tell each other, like sobbing, chanting, like this. They communicate between themselves. Mothers also taught their daughters. It was inherited in this way. Women taught women. Mothers taught daughters. Inherited. (Ma 2017)

A key phrase in this excerpt is 'sorrows at heart'. For Ma Yanling, *nüshu* texts represented 'a private domain of fantasy and self-assertion, consolation and misery' (McLaren 1996, p.384). Somewhere between oral and written culture, they were intended to be chanted aloud, even when they were written into *San Zhao Shu* or embroidered onto fans or belts. 'Bridal laments' were identified by McLaren and other early *nüshu* scholars such as Gong Zhebing and Zhao Liming as ritualised, cathartic expressions of sorrow. Women who were expected to suffer and endure in silence instead invented a way of speaking their pain, anger and distress, revealing stoicism and courageous acceptance. As a way of 'speaking bitterness' (*suku*), Ma Yanling's performances fulfil a similar function. Articulated by the departing bride to her parents and sisters as a formal part of a village wedding ceremony, the sung bridal lament was a well-understood performative genre. Its appeal for an artist whose work was already focused on the sorrows of women throughout China's history is unsurprising. Ma's performance works (*xingwei yishu*, translated as 'behaviour' or 'action' art) are discursive spaces in which the anguish and struggle of the mother-daughter bond can be expressed in acts of catharsis.

Relationships between mothers and daughters were at the heart of *nüshu* cultural practices in Jiangyong County, Hunan, prior to the 1980s, most particularly prior to 1949. As discussed in Chapter 4, *nüshu* writings and songs are best understood as social texts that enabled women to speak their lived experiences within the confined spaces available to them in a Confucian patriarchal agrarian society. Through written and spoken/sung texts they were enabled to articulate powerfully emotional responses to such experiences as the pain of separation from parents and birthplace, the difficulties of marriage, the joys and sorrows of relationships between mothers and daughters, daughters and mothers-in-law, and female friends ('sworn sisters'). These experiences are all covered in the extant texts and in those recorded more recently by anthropologists. Fei-wen Liu, for example, cites the 'autobiography' written in 1988 of a *nüshu* writer named Nianhua, who was born in Tangxia Village in 1907:

> Who knew that my younger daughter had a malicious heart…
> She did not wish to stay home to serve her mother.
> She let her mother stay alone, like a solitary bird,
> Let her mother lead a life as cold as frost on the snow (Liu 2017, p.239).

Nüshu, then, is more than just a form of writing, or an oral tradition – Fei-wen Liu positions these texts as cathartic, transformative and strengthening (2015).[13] Ma Yanling, who learned of its existence when the first books about the women's script of Jiangyong County were published in China, identifies strongly with this interpretation (2017).[14] Indeed, she credits her discovery and use of *nüshu* as saving, or 'curing' her relationship with her daughter, Wang Bingmi. In two interviews with Ma in Beijing in 2017, and in subsequent email correspondence, this central mother/daughter relationship recurs as a constant theme:

> LG: So, at the time that you started to think about the possible use of *nüshu* in your own work, I imagine that it was this idea of the mother-daughter relationships that you found most personally relevant and compelling?
>
> MY: Yes, yes. It was the communication between myself and her [*Ma's daughter*]. She was only a small girl in her teens. She was rebellious. She was not able to communicate with me. [*But*] through this performance we did together, we were able to talk with each other, to communicate with each other. Like we were able to touch each other's hearts […] She ran away from home, she was about to drop out of school. She did not want to go to school. You know? So I took her with me to do an on-site performance together. It was something like a cure. To cure her of her restlessness in her teenage years. I was unable to communicate with her. Whatever I wanted to tell her, she would refuse to listen. She refused to listen to anything you said. She was very rebellious. It was a very serious matter. [*But*] through this performance, we were on very good terms with each other. [*Afterwards*] we had a very good mother-daughter relationship. She would talk to me about her secrets. *Nüshu* influenced my life. It helped me. It was like a cure. Working with *nüshu* healed my relationship with my daughter (Ma 2017).

Ma's interpretation of performance art as curatively cathartic is by no means unusual and often features in discussions of the post-Cultural Revolution works of East Village performance artists in Beijing such as Ma Liuming, Cang Xin, He Yunchang, Yang Zhichao and Zhang Huan. In Shanghai, the *M Group* staged iconoclastic events in which performers were bound and beaten by mobs of naked men, described, somewhat romantically, by Gao Minglu (2011, p.217) as expressing the helplessness and wounded

spirit of artists 'straddling cultural epochs and influences'. Thomas Berghuis (2006) similarly positions Chinese performance art as a form of ritualised exorcism of post-Cultural Revolution trauma, and a reflection of the shock of emerging into a global late-capitalism in which everything is marketised: 'The body under stress was particularly useful to many of these artists who started to use their own body/flesh as the medium of a new art practice that would enable them to visualise and embody their critical stance inside Chinese society and within the Chinese art scene' (Berghuis 2006, p.10). Ma Yanling, however, is suggesting more than this: she alludes to her imaginative – and somewhat romantic – conclusion that it was something inherent in *nüshu* itself, as a script form unique to women, that imbued it with a kind of healing power. She also identifies its inherent sorrowfulness as a performative genre of lamentation that resonated with her own life experiences. Fei-wen Liu's conclusion that writing *nüshu* allowed women to 'create their own discourses', connected them to wider social networks beyond the immediate family, and provided 'access to the spirit realm in the form of worship verses' is exemplified in Ma's performance works (Liu 2015, p.41).

Ma Yanling's daughter, Wang Bingmi, is her artistic collaborator in several works referencing *nüshu*. They enact a private psychodrama that has much to tell us about motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship in China, and moves from the particular to the broader experience:

> I learned about *Nüshu* which existed in Jiangyong Hunan, but I wanted it to be different from *[writing*] characters. I wanted to turn it into my artwork, to turn *nüshu* into my own artwork. So, I resorted to performance art. To do *nüshu.* Because [*of*] the connection between women, you know? […] Here's what happened. When I did the live performance with my daughter [*here it was unclear whether Ma referred to the first performance in 2005, or the second in 2006*], many people were moved. A mother was moved to tears. They understood. Because the relationship between me and my daughter, the confrontation, the liberation – they understood. When we were doing the live performance, a mother kept sobbing. Because she had the same issue with her daughter. The relationship with her daughter was so bad that they could not live together anymore. When I finished, she told me, crying, that she understood my work (Ma 2017).

Ma Yanling revealed that she deliberately did not learn the meanings of the *nüshu* characters for some time, wanting to distinguish her performances from anthropological or linguistic studies (2017). For Ma, the characters were symbolic markers rather than bearers of semantic meaning. They signified femaleness and all that it entails. By writing

this little-known, localised script onto the bodies of her collaborators – and onto sanitary pads in a 2007 performance piece – Ma is engaging in a form of translation or inter-semiotic transposition, an ekphrasis in reverse. Rather than translating a visual image into language, she takes an indecipherable historical script form invented by, and known only to, women in a remote rural locale and insists on its contemporary meaningfulness to audiences within and beyond China. The untranslatable becomes, in this context, translatable after all.[15] We don't need to read the words to know the intended meaning: the lives of women, and women's control over their own bodies, have been circumscribed, confined, constrained and subordinated to the desires of men, whether that be the husbands and fathers of Jiangyong County or the patriarchal Socialist state.

Fig. 6.1 (a), (b), (c). Ma Yanling, *Nüshu – Light*, 2006, documentation of performance at North Gate Theatre, 798, Beijing. Images courtesy the artist.

The first work in which Ma Yanling invoked *nüshu* in 2005 was developed with her daughter, then aged fourteen. At the exhibition '*Centuries of Chinese Characters'*, held at the China Millennium Monument in Beijing, they used their bodies to physically shape the forms of *nüshu* characters in choreographed movements. In 2006, in *Nüshu – Light* (Fig. 6.1), performed with her daughter at the North Gate Theatre in the 798 Art District[16] Ma further developed the application of *Nüshu* as a ritual symbolic language, as the following excerpt from the interview transcript reveals:

> I wrapped her up in a piece of cloth. She was like an infant, wrapped up in cloth. I wanted to give her more love, hoping she would not grow up and leave me. So, I put her in white cloth. She was standing under the spotlight, wrapped up in cloth. And I wrote *nüshu* on the cloth in black ink. I wrapped her up whole […] While I wrote, she resisted. She wanted to tear the cloth up. She felt she did not want to be wrapped

> up, [*she wanted*] to get out. So, I wrote, she tore up the cloth. She did not need the confinement. She did not need to be indoctrinated with tradition. She wanted fresh air (Ma 2017).

Ma thus represents in poetic metaphor the most emotionally fraught relationship in her life – that with her daughter. In this she is connected to the mothers and daughters of Jiangyong County, who were separated not by a twenty-first century teenager's bid for independence, but by a system of filial rules and obligations that, as discussed in Chapter 4, sent young brides to their husband's families, in most cases never to return.

Ma Yanling's 2006 performance powerfully examines the conflicts and tensions embedded in the mother/daughter relationship – most particularly in the context of the pressures on both parent and child caused by China's now-abandoned One Child Policy. The act of silently wrapping the child evokes both the swaddling of an infant and the restraint of a straitjacket, while the act of writing on the child's garments – or in later performances directly on her skin – symbolises the parent's desire to control the narrative, to 'write' the child into the desired future. One may also read it as an act of 'writing gender', signifying how daughters are trained by their mothers in how to 'be' women. As historian Dorothy Ko reveals in her analysis of footbinding (2005) daughters are enculturated into discourses of a culturally determined femininity. The silent struggle of the daughter to break free of the wrapped fabric symbolises the well-documented bitterness of China's only child generation, so cosseted and yet so pressured to succeed.

In further collaborative works with her daughter and niece in 2013 and 2014, Ma wrote on their bodies in *nüshu* script and then wiped it away, erasing a female history from their very skin, echoing the ephemeral bridal laments sung by the daughters of Jiangyong County as they prepared to leave their natal families. These works suggest that women of every successive generation are forced to 'rewrite' and reinvent themselves in the face of powerful, patriarchal social forces. In China's recent history women were, firstly, 'de-gendered' as Socialist 'iron girls' and then 're-gendered' in more recent revivals of Confucian values that happen to suit changing political and economic priorities. Shengwei Sun and F. Chen (2015), for example, observe a revival of the old, patriarchal concept of '*nan zhu wai, nü zhu nei*' that established separate spheres for men and women in which men managed the external sphere while women were relegated to the interior and domestic world. Neoliberal rhetoric and the economic reforms that have transformed

Chinese society since the 1990s influenced how the media promotes traditional gender ideologies and paradigms of the 'feminine', resulting in a discriminatory labour market, the sexualised commodification of women's bodies and a diminished cultural valuing of women.

Ma learned about *nüshu* when she read a book recounting its discovery:

> MY: I found it really touching at first read.
>
> LG: Touching because?
>
> MY: Because it...it...it was communication between women. They were not understood by patriarchal society. After all, it was [...] like us female artists today, doing art, unlike male artists, who do not have much difficulty. Because women have babies, right? They have families, unlike male artists who have nothing to care for and can irresponsibly venture out. Women have to shoulder the responsibilities. So they have a lot of miseries at heart. These miseries echo with mine (Ma 2017).

Fig 6.2. Ma Yanling, *500:1 Women's Script,* 2007, artefact from performance. Image courtesy the artist. (Note: The words *Nü Shu* are written on the pad in *Nüshu* script)

The ‘miseries at heart’ that Ma Yanling refers to here are focused on fertility and motherhood, as well as on female resentment towards men who ‘irresponsibly venture out’. These themes recur throughout her performance works. In a 2007 performance, *500/1 Women’s Script* (Fig. 6.2, 6.3, 6.4), Ma wrote *nüshu* characters on sanitary pads and handed them to the female members of her audience, with, as she vividly recalls, mixed responses. Instead of ink, she splashed cinnabar (a Chinese red pigment traditionally used in lacquer ware, and associated with alchemy) across a long scroll on which she had written in *Nüshu* characters, and walked on it with bare feet until the whole area was covered with red.[17] The symbolism, at first sight an unsubtle reference to the (even now) taboo subject of menstruation, was also intended to critique the long lasting personal and social consequences of the One Child Policy and the control exercised by an authoritarian state over reproductive rights, a cause of misery for Ma, whose relationship with her only daughter was troubled. The ‘500’ in the title refers to the estimated number of ova released by a woman during her reproductive lifetime. Ma explains:

> In my time in China, women of childbearing age were only allowed to have one child, so I only have one only daughter. In the 40 years since the 1980s, the natural fertility function of Chinese women has been controlled by policy. This important period will become a landmark event in the long history of Chinese women’s development, just like the previous small feet. A memory of the history of female injuries. The intuitive expression of "Female Book 1/500" [*an alternative translated English title for the work*] is that the female egg is useless, let it disappear with the menstrual blood (Ma 2019).

Intentionally employing objects that are often viewed (even in their pristine, unused state) with disgust Ma Yanling enters the territory of the female abject, replete with the fear of blood, birth, and vaginal secretions. In explaining her decision to present the audience with sanitary pads and require female audience members to arrange them on the stage, Ma said:

> Sanitary pads are for women’s menstrual period. They symbolise the continuation of lives. But [...] the sanitary pad is a medium, for blood [...] it’s quite private. We were invited to Japan by a performance art festival. We did a live performance. I gave out the pads to women. You know? I did not give them to men, only to women […] Some women opened the pads and put them in a line on the floor, leaving them there. The women’s feelings towards the sanitary pads [...] they are also a medium between women, [*between*] myself and herself. They put the pads onstage. I would write *Nüshu* on them with red *[according to the artist, although some of the images she provided show black*] paint. After I finished, they would take it away. Even some

> men wanted one. But I said no, no way, because this was peculiar to women […] I would give them away after writing. Like a gift (Ma 2017).

Menstrual and vaginal imagery has long been employed by feminist artists emerging from Euro-American second wave feminism such as Americans Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneeman, and British performance artist Cosey Fanni Tutti. In China, Chen Lingyang's 1999 work *Twelve Flower Months*, a series of photographs of her bleeding genitalia recalling traditional Chinese paintings of flowers, has been widely exhibited and discussed.[18] In the first interview for this study on 4 April 2017 Ma Yanling cited the work of Judy Chicago and Georgia O'Keeffe as especially influential on her thinking about feminist art practice (2017).[19] *500:1 Women's Script* challenges the audience to consider what menstrual blood implies, as she presents them with sanitary pads that now signify pages of a book, texts that reveal how a woman's bodily autonomy, including her control over her own fertility, has been, and continues to be, policed by a patriarchal state.

Ma Yanling's use of *nüshu* calligraphy as an integral component of her performance practice recognises the continuing silencing of female voices within patriarchal structures – in the artworld and in society more broadly. She makes a connection between the subordinated conditions of the rural women of Jiangyong County in the past, and the conditions within which female artists operate – at a significant disadvantage – in the still patriarchal Chinese artworld today. Her work honours the creativity and resourcefulness of women who, denied literacy, invented a syllabary and taught it to their daughters in a continuing line of inheritance. Asked whether, and how, *nüshu* script still has relevance today, Ma said:

> Of course it's relevant. After all it's a Chinese script. It's peculiar to women. It's women's code. It needs interpretation. To what purpose? This communication between women is the thing that matters the most. Even to realise communication between women from now and the past. *Nüshu* still exists today. Why do I use it in my works? Because there is a connection, like a spark. We can communicate. The communication between women. This is the most important thing to me […] There is a connection between then and now. People from there, women from there, get to know this world, perceive things around them, with this code, *nüshu*. It was because of *Nüshu* that I went to Jiangyong. Without this medium, I would not have gone there. I would never have gone there in my lifetime.
>
> LG: So why, then, is it important for women to develop codes of communication from woman to woman? Why does that matter?

> MY: Because women were neglected. They were disadvantaged. They had no voice. To say nothing of the situation in the west, in China, women were disadvantaged. They had no rights to speak, right? They had no rights to speak. So, they were not able to tell their stories, like what we are doing now, communicating. Women at that time were not able to communicate like this. They were only able do so through secret whispers (2017).

Later, however, Ma Yanling acknowledged that in today's world in the Jiangyong villages *nüshu* belongs in the past and has become somewhat ossified: 'People now want a new life. The past is the past. The script is no more than a kind of inheritance. *Nüshu* is useless' (Ma, 2017). While it may no longer be a living language, it yet has great metaphorical significance for Ma as a vehicle by which women can overcome barriers of language and culture to communicate (2017). Her notion of 'secret whispers', so poetically expressed, underlines the function of *nüshu,* both now and in the past, as the speech of those who refuse to be silenced. Its poems and songs are written in a script and spoken/sung in a vernacular used only within a particular social group of 'insiders', women who were 'outsiders' to the written language by virtue of being denied literacy.

Nüshu is not, strictly speaking a language, but rather a syllabary with which otherwise illiterate women could write their local dialect, *Xiangnan Tuhua*. However, it can be argued that, just as Tao Aimin (2017) believes her found objects – old washboards – became 'a kind of language' with which silenced women could communicate, so too Ma Yanling's performances 'speak' an embodied language of women. They explore the complexities and conflicts in relationships between mothers and daughters, a subject often treated, in art and popular culture alike, with a sentimental gloss. This thesis proposes an argument that the work of women artists (outsiders, as we have seen, at least to some extent, in discourses of contemporary Chinese art) who insert themselves into genres of contemporary art practice previously dominated by men, could be described as a heteroglossia, applying intersecting text forms with the potential to undermine masculinist institutions and hierarchies.[20] That revolutionary potential, however, in both the case of *nüshu* and the case of contemporary art practice, is qualified and contingent, as will become clear.

Fig 6.3. Ma Yanling, *500:1 Women's Script,* 2007, July 27, 2007, Tokyo Takadanobaba Theater. Image courtesy the artist.

Nüshu script embodied bonds of sisterhood, yet ultimately did not threaten the patriarchal order: 'On the one hand, *nüshu* literacy allowed Chinese peasant women to construct female-centred social networks across villages; on the other hand, it embodied their frustration or helplessness in failing to sustain such relations after marriage' (Liu 2004, p.7). *Nüshu* was a speech and text form created by the subjugated; and while it may be positioned in the work of Western *nüshu* scholars such as Joan Radner (1993), and in popular culture manifestations such as Lisa See's 2005 novel 'Snow Flower and the Secret Fan' as a subversive feminist subculture, the reality (as was discussed in Chapter 4) is less romantic.[21] Given the Confucian constraints of life in an agrarian community, in contrast with the literary and artistic possibilities open to gentry women in the Ming and Qing periods, Liu (2004, p.279) argues that *nüshu texts* were 'limited to domestic and interpersonal exchanges; there is no evidence that *nüshu* writers ever attempted to cross the line to public discourse'. It was a female-exclusive form of communication, with an emphasis on lamentation and the expression of suffering, marital difficulty, the loss of parental and sisterly bonds and the experience of powerlessness. In a similar way, Ma Yanling's *500:1 Women's Script* may be read as a subversively feminist work due to its challenging of taboos around menstruation, yet it underlines the inescapable reality of the

authoritarian power of the Chinese state to control female fertility. Ma's work, too, is an expression of lamentation.

Fig 6.4. Ma Yanling, *500:1 Women's Script,* 2007, July 27, 2007, Tokyo Takadanobaba Theater. Image courtesy the artist.

6.3 Renegotiating Chineseness

Ma Yanling continued to use *nüshu* script and the device of tearing away clothing and writing directly on the skin of her young female collaborators in works such *Woman's Book (Nüshu)* (Fig. 6.5) performed in Beijing in 2014. The work is encoded with complex, even contradictory, meanings of repression and violence. Red script evokes a bleeding wound, and the ripped fabric may alternatively be read as a woman tearing free from social constraints or as a signifier of sexual violence. *Woman's Book*, like the works previously discussed, thus exemplifies the paradoxes of the gender-making category of *nannü*, positioned by He-Yin Zhen as the source of female oppression in China (Liu et al. 2013). The consolatory notion of a balanced and mutually reciprocal *yin-yang* duality in syncretic Daoist/Confucian cosmology and ethics that Eva Kit Wah Man (2015) argues as

a potentially alternative feminist ontology is juxtaposed with the lived reality of structurally enforced and internalised misogyny in Ma Yanling's melancholy performance works.

Fig 6.5. Ma Yanling, Woman's Book *(Nüshu)*, Performance, 2014. Image courtesy the artist.

Ten years after their first performance Ma Yanling and her daughter travelled to Jiangyong County to learn how to read and write *nüshu* in a more formal way. Her experience was different from Tao Aimin's. Significant tourism development had taken place in the area, with the construction of *nüshu* hotels and *nüshu* classes marketed to a target group of young women interested in this female-focused intangible cultural heritage. In post-1949 China, written and spoken language has been, and continues to be, controlled by the state; in its re-branding as Intangible Cultural Heritage *nüshu* is similarly 'reinterpreted' and controlled by local authorities. The way that Ma Yanling

described her travel to this place, so far from Beijing, resembled an account of a great adventure, albeit with some disappointment at her discoveries:

> We took a train there […] The Jiangyong railway was at a very remote place, quite a distance from the downtown area. When we got there, it was already dark, quite dark. We couldn't see the city. It was very remote. So, we got off the train [...] there was only one train going there every day. It was night when we arrived. It was extremely dark. So, we took a taxi to go there, because that place was unknown to us. We were in a mood of adventure. We were very excited to see the birthplace of something with which we had made art for ten years. And the darkness increased our excitement […] We had wanted to explore. We had not done any research on this. We did not want to. We wanted to encounter something unexpected to justify its sense of mystery. This is why we went there […] I wanted to experience it in the flesh (Ma 2017).

Ma's description emphasises the remoteness of the places they visited, and its distinctness from the urban lives of the artists. To some extent, she and Tao Aimin each found what they were seeking, but they were also forced to recognise that whatever authenticity the original script possessed when it was discovered by researchers is lost. Now 'largely dispossessed from its community of practice' (Liu 2017, p.243) we might ask whether women's voices are silenced once again. Ma Yanling expressed her thoughts about this:

> Woman's value, woman's spirit. This is what it inherits. It's no longer a mere [*form of*] writing. Because no one can read it now, and the government has organised classes to teach it. It is too deliberate. It is not like women in the past who needed a sense of freedom to liberate themselves, so they learned the script voluntarily. It now has become a travel product (Ma 2017).

Despite her recognition of its institutionalisation, the experience of being present with her now-adult daughter in the place where this script form developed gave Ma Yanling a tangible sense of connection with the women of the Jiangyong villages. The act of writing, too, the physical gesture of forming an unfamiliar script, provided a link between past and present. Yet at the same time, Ma's awareness that it has become a 'travel product' serves as a warning not to romanticise the past, nor be nostalgic about previous versions of female identity and overly simplified, essentialising versions of female culture. It also exemplifies the performativity of Chineseness when Chinese cultural history is commodified – and its darker chapters sanitised – at the hands of the CCP and local authorities.

The following paragraphs analyse Ma Yanling's work in relation to the continuing influence of Daoist cosmology and notions of *yin-yang* relationships that inflect gendered discourses of all kinds in China, and in relation to notions of a performative Chineseness. Traditions of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism are significant elements in Ma's practice, as they are in the practice of many artists, writers, cultural producers and intellectuals in China. Daoism, in particular, provides a compelling philosophical framework that, at times consciously and at other times unconsciously, influences Ma's thinking in relation to gender and power relationships:

> My hometown, Mount Wudang, is the 'mecca' of Daoism. I once surmounted the top of Mount Wudang. Daoist unity is about both women and men. This is how I understand it. The Shaolin Monastery only has men. But Daoism accepts both men and women. They co-exist in the same world; women are not excluded. The great law has its own pattern. It's also about the relationship between men and women […] I'm from Hubei. Mount Wudang is in Hubei. Daoism also promotes minimalism. This minimalist concept influences my work (Ma 2017).

Ma Yanling stresses the female history of *nüshu* and its semi-secret, coded nature as primary reasons for her interest in using it. She uses the term 'inherited' to describe the passing on of the script through generations of women, invoking suggestions of a genetic inheritance, as well as wealth and cultural heritage (the women in Jiangyong with a familial lineage to past generations of *nüshu* writers are often called '*nüshu* heiresses' in translation into English). Ma speaks of *nüshu* as something essentially Chinese:

> I think it runs in the blood. It is in your blood. They are quite connected. Traditions, *nüshu*, calligraphy, they are all in our blood, in our Chinese blood. I learned Western art, oil painting in college, but when I tried to apply something in my performance, *nüshu* and ink wash painting popped up of its own accord, spontaneously […] They are connected with us (Ma 2017).

Although Ma Yanling's performance works are often viewed through a lens of global feminist art, and her work is curated into exhibitions positioned as 'feminist',[22] this thesis also analyses them through the intersecting prism of gender and 'Chineseness'; they are thus positioned more securely within their own temporal and spatial context. The notion of Chineseness as a defining marker of cultural identity and shared histories recurred in interviews with both Ma Yanling and Tao Aimin as something 'inherited' – like *nüshu*. When speaking of their use of ink as a primary material, each artist separately and

spontaneously used a variant of Ma Yanling's phrase, 'in our Chinese blood' (2017). This might suggest an essentialising form of national identity – even a kind of self-orientalising – but as this thesis has argued, 'Chineseness' is a fluid discursive construct, shaped in different ways in different contexts and for different purposes, its meanings constantly negotiated and reshaped. (Ang 1994, pp.72–79).

As proposed in Chapters 4 and 5 the use of ink and calligraphy in contemporary art is culturally encoded with Chinese artistic and literary histories, a form of 'recomposed memory' (Chen 2018, p.438) that yet also functions with a present-day criticality. It is read very differently inside and outside of China. Anne Anling Chen (2018, p.438) cites the work of Rey Chow (1995, p.145) on how such cultural identifiers risk becoming a form of Chinoiserie for Western audiences 'because of the pastness assigned to the Chinese by Anglo modernity.' In Ma's *nüshu* performances, intended for Chinese audiences with their own deep knowledge of the cultural context, the significance of using this vernacular female script form is understood as a counter-patriarchal statement. The problematically unfixed but powerfully felt identity of Chineseness intersects with Ma's identity as a woman of a generation who experienced the traumas of the Cultural Revolution and its attempted erasure of gender difference. Ma is thus in a constantly renegotiated process of remaking her identity as a feminist artist, a Chinese artist, a mother and a daughter.

6.4 After Lugu Lake: Feminist readings of Ma Yanling's work

Previous sections of the chapter examined Ma Yanling's performance works as translations – or transpositions – of a *nüshu* canon of enacted gendered suffering and endurance, imbued with elements of a performative Chineseness. The following section positions the artist within the context of Euro-American and Chinese feminisms, and within the history of *nüxing yishu* (women's art). Her work is interpreted as a feminist intervention into Chinese conventions of performance art (*xingwei yishu*) and experimental ink painting (*shiyan shuimohua*) that is inflected by travelling and translation theory. Ma's earliest works revealed her interest in performance practitioners from outside China such as Marina Abramović and the work of American second wave feminist artists such as Judy Chicago. As previously discussed, she had begun to explore the artistic possibilities of the female *nüshu* script at the turn of the century and was further encouraged when Judy Chicago arrived in China in 2002 for the *Long March*

Project: A Visual Walking Display. Chicago's visit to Lugu Lake in Yunnan, home of the matriarchal *Mosuo* ethnic minority, prompted Ma Yanling to ponder the possibilities of feminist art practice. She realised that *nüshu* linked Chinese women of the contemporary world with ancient female histories and ritual practices. It was at this point, Ma says, that she began to seriously consider using *nüshu* in her work (2017).

The *Long March Project: A Visual Walking Display* planned a series of art events and exhibitions at different sites along the route of Mao's historically significant march with the Communist forces to Yan'an in 1934. For the two curators, Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie, this gave form to their interest in socially engaged practice, and also represented an attempt to reinvigorate Mao Zedong's 1942 call, in his famous speech at Yan'an, that art must 'serve the people'.[23] They discussed their curatorial imperative as a return of art to its audience, locally, away from 'the trap of the global market and the maze of mutually determinant relationships that it implies' (Lu Jie and Qiu Zhijie 2018, para.1). They hoped to shift the focus of Chinese art away from the seductive promises of the art market towards an examination of themes prevalent in global contemporary art, including post-utopianism, post-colonialism and gender politics. Lu Jie said, 'Even as everyone was rushing to Documenta, the Venice Biennale and international museums, we were planning to go back to the countryside' (Maerkle 2007, p.9). Their aim was nothing less than the creation of an authentically Chinese contemporary art that drew from China's history and from global contemporary art practice.

However, it was not the project's Socialist credentials but the diametrically opposed expectations between women that resulted in conflict and dismay. A struggle over contending visions of feminism emerged from the outset. The curators invited Judy Chicago to China to work with selected female artists and women from the *Mosuo* ethnic minority community. The original proposal for the women's component of the Long March Project was for twelve female Chinese artists to participate alongside Chicago in Yunnan at Lugu Lake – an 'intangible cultural heritage' tourist destination, not unlike the Jiangyong villages – in a collaborative work entitled, *If Women Ruled the World.* The project was made more difficult by language barriers and cultural misunderstandings, resulting in the conflicts that have often frustrated Chinese women in their dealings with Euro-American feminists. Tensions ran high as the participating selected artists (each of whom had presented a proposal for consideration) addressed their concerns about gender

in China, and how they perceived that it was misunderstood by the American feminist artist (Maerkle 2007).

These tensions were also articulated in two interviews with Ma Yanling for this thesis a decade and a half later. It took several conversations and follow-up emails and WeChat messages to unravel the sequence of events. Ma had submitted a proposal for consideration by the curators. She was not one of the twelve artists ultimately selected, but her proposal was exhibited, along with others, in the form of a prayer flag at the guesthouse location, '*Qidi Shanzhuang*' in 'Exhibition B' at the Lugu Lake site. Her planned installation was not realised. Ma, however, was clear about the significance of Chicago's visit to her work:

> Coincidentally Judy Chicago was to do a project about women. She invited female artists to participate. In China. I thought, to do things about women, we had to start to study women ourselves. There was this coincidence. I was interested in *nüshu* from a remote village of Jiangyong, Hunan. It clicked with the project …
>
> … Judy Chicago brought to us the outside world, information, which we had only limited access to through magazines. We could only read a few foreign art magazines. So, she brought us new information, new approaches. So, I chose to do this performance. A whole new concept (Ma 2017).

Ma's proposal for *If Women Ruled the World* was an installation entitled *News Stand Program* in which she would replace the beautiful female models on 100 magazine covers with images of men, adding the 'Long March – A Walking Visual Display' title and logo, a male avatar and some *nüshu* text. The altered magazines were to be displayed on the newsstand outside Scitech Mall on Jianguomen Street in Beijing (Ma 2019).[24] It was not until three years after this significant event that Ma finally had the opportunity to incorporate *nüshu* into her performance at Beijing's Millennium Monument that was discussed in the previous section of the chapter.

Ma Yanling is sometimes ambivalent when she speaks about feminism and feminist art, however, her painting and performance work has always focused on women's lived experience. In a second interview, Ma Yanling expressed her concern that 'Western' forms of feminism, which she described as 'shouting slogans', betray a kind of weakness, a hidden fear that women and men are not, after all, equal:

> LG: Do you think that feminism in China is different than feminism in the west? And I'm interested in what you think is specific to a Chinese kind of feminism?

> MY: I think they are quite different. The difference is big. After all, Chinese women are confined to China. The so-called outward communication, news, articles, social media posts online, like Wechat for instance, as long as it's about the feminist movement, it's all been blocked. We're not allowed to speak up. But feminists from the West can parade in the street, and gay people can marry, openly, lesbians, but they cannot do so in China […] I think the difference results from lack of communication. There is no connection between women from the West and women from China yet. If there's communication, feminism would be relevant. I think women are alike. Because we are all women.
>
> LG: So, you don't think that if these ideas were to be unblocked in China, that a Chinese kind of feminism would need to be different from western feminism?
>
> MY: I think they would be more similar despite the cultural differences. To be exactly the same would be difficult. At least, we can understand each other. Why do I use *nüshu*? *Nüshu* is the best language for women to communicate. Whether you are from the West or from the East. You need to communicate. To allow our heart to be close. They may have different worries, but they can exchange with each other equally. But the problem is we cannot exchange at present...feminism from the West and from China...there are cultural differences. We need to communicate (Ma, 2017).

And, on the continuing relevance of *nüshu* as a metaphor of communication between women, Ma said, 'It is still the case today. It is still necessary for women to have a code of their own' (2017).

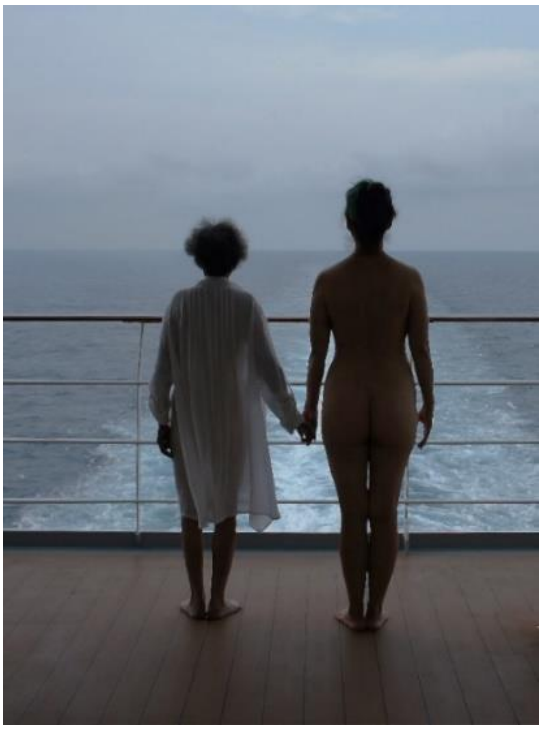

Fig 6.6. Ma Yanling, *Nüshu – The Pacific Ocean*, 2017. Image courtesy the artist.

Ma's belief in the primacy of female communication – between generations and across barriers of age, culture or language – is evident in a recent performance work and its documentation. Undertaken on the occasion of her mother's 80th birthday, it was carried out in a spirit of healing and reconnection. In *Nüshu – the Pacific Ocean* (2017) (Fig. 6.6) Ma and her mother performed a private ritual on the deck of a ship. In information provided by the artist, Ma explains:

> On my mother's 80th birthday, we went on a cruise together. When the ship was sailing into the high seas in the Pacific Ocean, we made this artwork on the deck.
>
> I have been living in Beijing for more than 20 years. My mother, living far away from me, has not had the opportunity to be so close to me for decades. We spent eight days eating, sleeping, and spending time together. My mother was 80 years old. What has she experienced in her 80 years of life? How many sorrows, joys and farewells? How many ups and downs? […] During the time we stayed together, we performed this work. For her, she had no clue about my art, not to mention what performance art is. She didn't ask me about the meaning of the work, but if I needed her help and cooperation, she had no hesitation. What is art? It doesn't matter to her. What does matter is her beloved daughter. Language was unnecessary, and we didn't even communicate about it beforehand.
>
> When we were performing the work, we were hand in hand, heart to heart, and embracing each other tightly. She knew I loved her the most. The calm and deep Pacific Ocean is vast, like the love between the mother and the daughter, unbroken and everlasting (Ma 2017).

Ma Yanling does not explicitly identify this as a 'feminist' work, nevertheless, it may be read through a feminist lens. Ma positions the mother/daughter relationship at the centre rather than, as so often, as peripheral to male/female relationships. Furthermore, Ma's use of her middle-aged body and the frail older body of her mother in this work is transgressive in a similar way to Xiao Lu's performance in Venice, *Purged* (2013). In 'The Second Sex', so influential to Chinese feminists in the late twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir argued that the body is 'our grasp upon the world and the outline of our projects' (Beauvoir 1991 [1949] p.66). The not-young female body is almost invisible in global visual culture, to the point where it is often viewed as abject and fearful. It is, essentially, taboo. Ma Yanling's collaboration with her mother is a form of embodiment, emphasising the primacy of experience through the body and in connection with other bodies, challenging Cartesian mind/body duality in favour of a phenomenological (or indeed a Daoist) world view.

In *Nüshu – The Pacific Ocean* Ma Yanling physically and symbolically connects her own body with the mother who gave birth to her as together, hand-in-hand, they experience the vastness of the natural world, looking out to the horizon across the ocean. Hence, she challenges traditional (Western) binaries of culture/nature and subjective/objective, by creating a ritual that is private yet also documented; highly personal yet also in a real sense universal; physical yet also cerebral; lonely yet connected; influenced by Western philosophical traditions of phenomenology yet also imbued with syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian cosmology.

In her account of embodiment in feminist philosophy Sara Heinämaa (2017, p.185) writes:

> All our experiences flow in time. They pile one upon another and motivate one another, forming complex temporal wholes that can be described and analysed by the phenomenological concepts of sedimentation and habituation.

Nüshu – The Pacific Ocean takes place in time, in a specific location, but, like Heinämaa's 'complex temporal wholes' Ma implies a greater and more significant temporality of interconnected life cycles and the inevitability of age, decay and mortality. In the apparently simple image of two women standing side by side we read the bodily, emotional and psychological connectedness of shared experiences of pregnancy, birth, parenthood, separation, grief, aging. Ma creates a *nannü* enactment imbued with both awareness of mortality, and with knowledge of continuation. She brings the interior, private world of women (*neiren*) into the exterior, public world. That the work takes place on the deck of a ship on the high seas represents aspects of the essential female for Ma Yanling, given the generally understood connection between water and the feminine *yin* principle. The work thus references not only cycles of birth and death but also connections to the cosmological sphere, just as the references to washing in Tao Aimin's work, the literal use of water and ice in Xiao Lu's works, and – as we shall see in the next chapter, waterfalls in Bingyi's – signify fluxing and interchangeable aspects of *yin* and *yang*.

6.5 Rewriting Motherhood, Re(en)gendering Calligraphy

Ma Yanling's use of the unreadable calligraphy of *nüshu* in several performances recalls avant-garde artists' appropriation of the form of big character propaganda posters

(*dazibao*), in nonsensical pseudo-calligraphy. She thus engages with the 'contradictory legacies and burdens of tradition' (Barmé 2012, p.34), albeit employing a distinctly female legacy that brings a less well-known history to the fore. Yet Ma, like Tao Aimin, also intervenes in these 'legacies and burdens', establishing a gendered visual language to represent issues and ideas of significance to women. With her intentional allusions to the work of feminist artists, Ma Yanling alludes to menstruation, fertility, childbirth, and the impact of China's (now abandoned) One Child Policy. Her work explores how women are constrained by patriarchal controls exerted within the family and by the authoritarian state. Like Xiao Lu, she uses her body (and the bodies of her daughter, her mother, and other collaborators) as a representation of female fears and desires. Her particular focus is on fraught relationships between mothers and daughters, caught up in a transforming society in which intimate relationships have been reinvented. Through her use of *nüshu* script in these works Ma rewrites narratives of motherhood, and re(en)genders the masculinist Chinese history of calligraphy.

Ma Yanling's works may be understood as spatial and temporal constructions that recall He-Yin Zhen's notion of *nannü* in both its positive and negative connotations. Daoist-inflected notions of the mutually reciprocal, back-and-forth relationships between *yin* and *yang*, old and young, male and female and (in this instance) mother and daughter, are present in Ma's work just as they are in the work of Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu. On the one hand she celebrates these fluxing relationships, and the primal bond between mother and daughter. On the other hand, her work acknowledges the violence wrought by patriarchy on this bond. When examined through a framework of Western and Chinese feminisms, Ma Yanling's work may be read as a feminist intervention into, and transformation/translation of, the literati ink tradition and the heavily masculinist genre of durational performance art (*xingwei yishu*) in post-Cultural Revolution China. Unusually, given the hesitance and ambivalence so often expressed by Chinese women artists when asked if they consider themselves feminist practitioners, Ma Yanling had no such qualms:

> I think so, yes. Because I am a woman after all. I did woman-themed works, and I have my own opinions […] First of all, you're a woman, right? It's unchangeable. When you're demanding equality between men and women, you are already at a disadvantage. As a feminist, or as a woman...Let's drop the "ism" first – as women, we use a female language, from a female perspective, with a female heart, to see the world, to make art, what else can we be? You are already a feminist. Right? This is so simple. I don't know, I don't understand why other people are demanding equality

> between men and women. What you are doing is comparable to what men are doing. You're speaking out, as a woman, then you're equal [*with men*], right? You don't need to stress the point that we're demanding equality, because that way you are still in a disadvantaged position. This is how I see it (Ma 2017).

What appears as ambivalence on Ma Yanling's part in relation to 'demanding equality between men and women' is best understood in relation to Min Dongchao's (2005; 2007; 2014; 2016; 2017) work on how Euro-American feminist theory was received, translated, understood, rejected or transformed in China in the 1980s and 1990s. However, Ma Yanling is more receptive to an identification as a feminist, and as a feminist artist, than others in this study. Her statement: 'If there's communication, feminism would be relevant. I think women are alike. Because we are all women' (Ma 2017), is evidence, despite her perceptions, stated in the interview, of the adversarial nature of Euro-American feminism, of the influence of a woman-focused second-wave iteration of feminism. Ma returned often in our conversations to this perceived 'alikeness' of women. Her ideas recall the universal sisterhood that second-wave feminists dreamed of/hoped for – albeit while ignoring the impacts of class and race – an ideal and unattainable form of sisterhood in which female gender alone would trump all other identities.

Ma Yanling's works in collaboration with her daughter and her mother reveal a 'shift in the affective meaning of motherhood' in contemporary Chinese culture (Evans 2011, p.179). The desire for intimacy and communication within this most primal relationship extends to a belief in the possibility of transhistorical and transcultural communication between women. Ma's idealistic hope for connections between women across divides of culture and language, and across the generational divide, was evident in our two encounters in 2017. Reminiscing about the cathartic experience of making art with her daughter, she also suggested that these performances represent communication between the past and present through the medium of *nüshu*, and communication across barriers of language and nationality: 'This communication between women is the thing that matters the most' (Ma 2017).

Ma's use of *nüshu* as a symbolic device reveals her desire to place female history and language at the centre of her practice. Her performance works reveal complex, changing discourses of mothering in contemporary China. Highly personal, they yet possess a wider significance. Referencing the historical Chinese female vocal performance form of the

'bridal lament'[25] Ma brings into view the speaking selves of women whose refusal to be silenced resulted in their invention of an entire written syllabary. She suggests that past and present experiences of Chinese women, and their subjugation in social structures designed to benefit men, are connected. She thus references a gendered contemporaneity in which the past over-writes the present, and vice versa, becoming a palimpsest. Ma Yanling's works make connections between a past, enclosed, interior world of women and her own contemporary world; she recontextualise the extant *nüshu* texts to reveal – indeed, to embody – a different 'hidden inner world' – that of the mother, the daughter, and the artist, grappling with self-individuation in contemporary China.

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[1] Line from *Nüshu* poem cited in Fei-Wen Liu, *Gendered Words: Sentiments and Expression in Changing Rural China*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2015) p. 20.

[2] Ma Yanling also works as a painter and is known for portraits of women (including Shanghai film actresses of the 1930s and Hollywood movie stars) that contrast glamour with melancholy. Her painting practice is discussed in Luise Guest, 'Secrets, sorrow and the feminine subjective: Nüshu references in the work of contemporary Chinese artist Ma Yanling', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Vol 2 (1), 1 March 2015, pp. 45–63.

[3] See, for example, Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys (eds). *Celebrity in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press (2010); Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds). *The Politics of Dress in Asia and the Americas.* Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press (2007); Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds). *Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation.* Abingdon, Oxon., New York: Routledge (2000), and 'Issue-based politics: feminism with Chinese characteristics or the return of bourgeois feminism' in: D. Goodman (ed). *The New Rich in China.* Abingdon, Oxon., New York: Routledge (2008) pp. 201–212. See also the work of Leta Hong Fincher on socio-economic factors affecting Chinese women in *Leftover Women*, London: Zed Books (2014).

[4] While the term 'post-socialism' is generally applied by scholars such as Katherine Verdery, Sharad Chari, and Jill Owczarak to former Soviet and Eastern European states after the decline or collapse of socialism, it refers in this thesis to China after the first phase of the Reform and Opening Up period (*gaige kaifang*) and in particular to Chinese society after Deng Xiaoping's famed 'southern tour' in 1992. Post-socialism in China, or – as it is described by the CCP – 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', refers to the tensions between the vestiges of a centrally planned economy and the neoliberalism of the 1990s, described by Arif Dirlik as a 'condition of ideological contradiction and uncertainty' (Dirlik 1989).

[5] The Great Leap Forward refers to the campaign between 1958 to 1962 which aimed to reorganise China's population into large rural communes and to develop labour-intensive forms of industrialisation. The hasty implementation of the program in combination with a series of natural disasters and crop failures, and the withdrawal of Soviet support resulted in a famine in which it is estimated that between 20 and 40 million people died of starvation. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) was a ten-year period of social and political chaos and turmoil in which Mao Zedong unleashed the masses (and youth in particular, in the form of the Red Guards) to reassert ideological purity and his control over the Communist Party.

[6] The figurative painter Yu Hong examined the mother/daughter relationship in her autobiographical 'Witness to Growth' series, which she began in 1999 after the birth of her daughter, during a period of intense interest in feminism and feminist art in China (discussed in Chapter 1 and 2). For more see Yu Hong's Witness to Growth: Historic Determination and Individual Contingency' (Przerwa 2003). Works relating to motherhood by Yu Hong, He Chengyao and Lin Tianmiao are discussed in Luise Guest, *Half the Sky*. Sydney: Piper Press (2016). For further discussion of Lin Tianmiao see a discussion of *Mothers!!!* (2008) shown at Long March Space, Beijing in 2008 and at Asia Society New York in 2012 (Chiu 2012).

[7] Painter Yan Ping was to have her first solo exhibition outside Mainland China, at Galerie Huit, Hong Kong, in 2020. It was disrupted first by the social unrest in Hong Kong and then by the global pandemic. The author interviewed Yan Ping via a Wechat video call in 2019 for a commissioned catalogue essay (as yet unpublished). Her work may be seen at https://yanping.artron.net/works?cyear=allyear [accessed 28.2.21]

[8] For a discussion of the work of Ma Qiusha, Cao Yu and Liu Xi, see Luise Guest, 2020. 'Eating Bitterness: Mourning, Memory and Motherhood in the Work of Three Chinese Artists', *4A Papers*, Issue 9 available from: https://4a.com.au/articles/eating-bitterness-mourning-memory-motherhood-in-the-work-of-three-chinese-artists [accessed 18.12.21]. Ma Qiusha's work is also analysed from a Foucauldian perspective by Linda Pittwood (2019).

[9] For information about Ma Qiusha's performance work see: https://ucca.org.cn/en/exhibition/curated-song-dongma-qiusha-address-wang-shang-sleuthing// [accessed 28.3.21].

[10] He Chengyao's work, including *Opening the Great Wall* is analysed by Sasha Su-Ling Welland in her account of gender operating in the Beijing artworld prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Welland 2018, pp.206-235). Ma Yanling described her astonishment and shock in witnessing Ma Qiusha's eight-minute single-channel video *From No.4 Pingyuanli to No.4 Tianqiaobeili* in an earlier interview with the author in 2013, prior to the formal interviews undertaken in 2017. An account can be found in Luise Guest, *Half the Sky: Conversations with Women Artists in*

China. Sydney: Piper Press (2016). A discussion of the mother/daughter relationship in this work may be found in Michael Young, 'Great Expectations', *Art Asia Pacific*, Issue 98, available from http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/98/MaQiusha [accessed 3.9.19]

[11] For further discussion of the post-Cultural Revolution 'Scar Art' phenomenon, and of the Cynical Realist painters, see the accounts of Gao Minglu (2011), Wu Hung (2014) and Peggy Wang's (2020) analysis of the work of Zhang Xiaogang.

[12] See Endnote 2.

[13] Fei-Wen Liu (2015, p.20) provides a compelling account of how '*kuge*' or 'crying songs' give poetic voice to the sadness felt by a young bride, often containing 'sentiments of sorrow, grief, and protest at the separation that resulted'. She explains that the expressions of such sentiments are in themselves a powerful force for overcoming grief and vulnerability.

[14] Ma Yanling could not remember the name of the book that led her to *nüshu*. Quite possibly it was Gong Zhebing (ed). 女書:世界唯一的女性文字 (*Nüshu: The World's Only Women's Script*). Taipei: *Funü xinzhi* (1991) or Gong Zhebing. 女性文字與女性社會 (*Women's Script and Women's Society*). Wulumuqi*: Xinjiang renmin chubanshe* (Xinjiang People's Publishing House) (1995).

[15] Emily Apter's examination of the class politics of language and translation in her 2013 book 'Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability' dismantles notions of linguistic equivalence and positions difference and incommensurability – 'the untranslatable' – at the centre of her argument, as she revealed in an interview focused on her editorial work on the 'Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon', an English edition of the French 'Vocabulaire européeen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des Intraduisibles' edited by Barbara Cassin (Bertacco 2016). Despite the argument that linguistic untranslatability stems from perhaps insurmountable differences in thought resulting from irreconcilable cultural difference, the production of this dictionary suggests the possibility of a utopian concordance. So too, we might see the deliberately untranslated *Nüshu* script written by Ma Yanling in various performance works as her idealised communication between women across time and culture.

[16] The 2017 interviews and following email correspondence involved much discussion of dates as there was some confusion over this aspect of the documentation of her work. Ma Yanling initially dated this work during the recorded interview as taking place in Beijing in 2005. It seems most likely, however, that it was in 2006, in an event noted in the very thoroughly researched PhD thesis of Pui-Yin Tong: '30 April- 3 May 2006: "Dashanzi International Art Festival": "Transborder Language 2006" Body/Environment is the theme of "Dashanzi International Art Festival" in 2006. The festival is held from 30 April 2006 to 3 May 2006 in the 798 Art District. 10 live performances are held during the festival curated by Shu Yang …

[The Great Tang] Dou Bu, Finni, Guo Wei, Jia Yuming, Liu Ning, Ma Yanling, Shi Mingzhong, Shu Yan, Song Chen, Wan Xiang, Yuan Hongbin and Zhao Xiaochu The Great Tang group consists of 10 performers from diverse backgrounds (artists, curators, designers, cameramen, dancers, students, web designers, along with over ten performers and musicians from the Beijing Youth Shaanxi Opera Academy). The group performs a work involving the different group members show-casing their talents and inviting audience to interact with the artists.' (Tong 2015).

[17] Cinnabar, an ore of oxidised mercury, was used since ancient times for its vibrant red hues – the pigment derived from it is generally known as vermilion, while cinnabar refers to the mineral itself. In China, vermilion pigments have been used since the Song Dynasty for colouring lacquer-ware. It has Daoist and alchemical associations of transformation and the creation of elixirs of immortality. A recipe for one such potion cited in an early twentieth century scientific paper about Chinese alchemy instructs: "Take three pounds of genuine cinnabar, and one pound of white honey. Mix them. Dry the mixture in the sun. Then roast it over a fire until it can be shaped into pills. Take ten pills of the size of a hemp seed every morning. Inside of a year, white hair will turn black, decayed teeth will grow again, and the body will become sleek and glistening." See more in Tenney L. Davis and Lu-Ch'iang Wu, "Chinese Alchemy" (1930, p.233). Cinnabar was also used in the past – and is still used today – to make ink sticks for writing calligraphy and for ink painting. It seems likely that Ma Yanling was making reference to all these associations in selecting cinnabar as her red pigmented material, in addition to its associations with blood.

[18] Chen Lingyang's photographic series was exhibited in Beijing at various times, including at the Three Shadows Photography Art Center in 2011. It has been widely discussed, including in an essay by art critic, theatre director and cultural theorist Zhao Chuan (2013). 'Twelve Flower Months' is also analysed in the work of Guest (2016) and Pittwood (2019).

[19] A reading of Georgia O'Keeffe's extreme close-up images of flowers as representations of the vulva persists, despite the artist's strenuous denials and recent attempts to open her work to more complex, less gendered readings. See, for example the Guardian review of Tate Modern's major survey exhibition of her work which quotes the curator's desire to open O'Keeffe's paintings to more complex, less gendered readings. A discussion of the exhibition is available in this Guardian review: https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/mar/01/georgia-okeeffe-show-at-tate-modern-to-challenge-outdated-views-of-artist [accessed 20.3.21].

[20] Explained in Chapters 1 and 3, the term 'heteroglossia' was used by Donna Haraway in 'Cyborg Manifesto'. It was first published in the *Socialist Review* in 1985 and reprinted in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge (1991). Derived from

the Greek and coined by Bakhtin in his early theoretical work on the novel, 'heteroglossia' refers to tension created by the simultaneous use of different forms of speech (or other signs) within one text (Bakhtin 1981, p.293).

[21] As Fei-wen Liu (2017, p.242) concludes, '"Writing a piece to lament my misery" is a stock phrase often heard in nüshu and nüge. Nüshu together with nüge in fact show us a lot about common miseries of women's lives, whether they have lost their family (especially their male relations – fathers, husbands, or sons), lack natal backup (i.e., having no brothers), or must deal with unsupportive affinal kin (especially mothers-in-law), unfilial sons, daughters, or daughters-in-law. These miseries might result from irresistible macro-sociopolitical chaos, such as warfare and its corollary, conscription, or from women's structural vulnerability within the Chinese patriarchal agrarian context, where they lacked resources, knowledge, or skills to sustain themselves, or were deemed an "untitled object" to be claimed when outside their affinal and natal domains.'

[22] Ma Yanling has been curated into explicitly feminist exhibitions, including the Beijing, Hangzhou and Taipei iterations of an ongoing exhibition project curated by Irish artists Fion Gunn and Niamh Cunningham and supported by New York-based organisation the Centre for Pacific Affairs. 'Intimate Transgressions' examines the impact on women of war and gendered violence. For more about the Beijing exhibition see this 2015 Global Times article: https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/949287.shtml [accessed 28.3.21] and this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IemWt6z_pTg [accessed 28.3.21]

[23] For a translation of Mao Zedong's talk at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art on May 1942 see https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm [accessed 17.12.21]. In reference to Mao's famous speech about the socialist significance of art and culture, it should be noted that Xi Jinping's speech on 15 December 2021 to the Federation of Chinese Literary and Art Circles urged artists to be patriotic and to respect the leadership of the Party: 'The fundamental position of socialist literature and art is from the people, for the people and of the people.' See 'Xi Focus, Xi Jinping on Strengthening Chinese Literature, Art' *Xinhuanet*, 17 December 2021. Available from: http://www.news.cn/english/2021-12/15/c_1310374091.htm [accessed 17.12.21]

[24] Ma Yanling's participation is confirmed by the list of artists whose proposals were not selected on the Long March website. In 'Reports from the Road' for Site 06, Lugu Lake, on the Long March Project website, there is a list of 'Realised Works' and an addendum that reads: 'Proposals were also submitted by Cai Jin, Chen Mingming, Chen Yu, Fang He, Feng Jiali, He Chengyao, Li Hong, Li Rui, Li Yuying, Ma Yanling, Mu Zi, Qiu Yanli, Tao Xiaoyi, Xiao Xiaolan, Zeng Hui, Zhang Qiongfei, Zhang Xin, Zhang Yingzi, Zhao Biqin'(2002), Available

from: http://longmarchproject.com/s6report-lugu/ [accessed 26.8.19]. Details of Ma Yanling's proposal were confirmed in a series of emails between the author and Ma Yanling in August and September 2019.

[25] *Nüshu* scholar Fei-wen Liu has examined the nature and significance of the bridal lament in rural southern China, which she describes as a ritual providing all the participants – the bride, her interlocutor and the audience – with a cathartic, emotionally transformative experience that facilitates identity reconfiguration and 'often delivers sentiments of protest against patriarchal social institutions' (2015, p.178). Further, she argues that this tradition of vocal lamentation, often improvised at the ceremony, is 'powerful in its immediacy and capacity to challenge the society's gender system and hierarchical status quo' (2015, p.179). It should be noted, however, that the form of the bridal lamentation is not restricted to the *Nüshu* villages of Jiangyong County in Hunan Province: folk rituals around weddings took a similar form elsewhere. For more see Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2008).]

Chapter 7: CASE STUDY 4

A Trespasser in the Yaji Garden: Bingyi's poetics of ink

When yin and yang go wrong, heaven and earth are hugely disturbed.

(Zhuangzi)[1]

7.1 Painting-as-Performance

This chapter examines the work of Huang Bingyi (冰逸 b. 1975, Beijing), hereafter called by her preferred single name, Bingyi. Bingyi works with ink, often on a vast scale, in Chinese landscapes of historical significance. Her practice challenges conventional delineations between painting, installation, land art, performance art, and theatre. Like the previous chapters focused on Tao Aimin, Xiao Lu, and Ma Yanling this fourth and final case study was developed using the transdisciplinary method and multi-modal theoretical framework explained in Chapters 1 – 3. When viewed through this interrogatory lens Bingyi's work, at first glance less obviously gendered than that of the previous three artists, may nevertheless be interpreted as a strategic insertion of her female body and transnational subjectivity into the scholarly ink canon of the literati and their contemporary successors.[2] It is an interruption of the genre intended to examine, not only binaries of gender and national identity, but to pose questions about the relationship between humans and the natural world in the Anthropocene.

Bingyi was selected for this study due to her experimental use of ink as a medium, as well as her complicated relationship to feminism and feminist art: the semi-structured interview with Bingyi that took place on 7 April 2017 in Beijing revealed that she is adamantly counter-patriarchal yet denies a feminist intention or identity. Her relationship

to the Beijing artworld is similarly complex: she is neither quite insider nor outsider. This liminality, or sense of trespass, is partly due to the fact that Bingyi left China after high school and travelled to the USA for college, ultimately being awarded a PhD in archaeology and art history from Yale University. Returning to China, never having been trained as an artist in the rigorous Chinese academic system, much less in traditions of ink painting, she nevertheless began to paint and exhibit her work. Additionally, the multi-dimensional, transdisciplinary nature of her practice sets her apart, even in a Chinese contemporary art context where it is not uncommon for artists to work across multiple media. Bingyi identifies as artist, cultural critic, educator and activist and also cites her scientific background and business success; she works across disciplines including poetry; costume and interior design; musical composition; architecture, and filmmaking. This places her in a much smaller category of polymaths. Her art historical and literary scholarship is often acknowledged, for example by Wu Hung in his catalogue essay for the 2013 exhibition 'Ink Art: Past as Present in Contemporary China' (Wu 2013), although her work was not shown in the exhibition.

Bingyi's self-taught status is unusual in China, where painting traditions passed from master to student are venerated, and where *guohua* continues to be separated from *xihua* ('Western painting', generally meaning oil painting) in art academy curricula. She therefore occupies a complex outsider/insider position that she refers to as a 'self-ecology' (Bingyi 2017) which sets her somewhat apart in the Chinese art world. It is important to acknowledge, however, her élite academic background and the consequent confident assertiveness with which she has approached exhibiting her work on the international stage. Since *Cascade* (Fig. 7.1), her first major ink installation commissioned by Wu Hung for the foyer of the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago, she has continued to exhibit in China, the USA, Europe, and Australia. Her work is multi-disciplinary, theatrical and performative, owing as much to historical performance and land art practices as to the expanded field of painting. Positioned in a liminal, transnational space between Chinese and Western cultural discourses Bingyi is a suitable subject for this transcultural study.

In this chapter Bingyi's work is framed, in part, by He-Yin Zhen's gender-making *nannü* construct. He-Yin's critique of syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian *yin-yang* reciprocity identified it as underpinned by, and reinforcing, structural patriarchal misogyny. As

explored in previous chapters its traces are visible in the work of contemporary artists, including Bingyi's. Syncretic Daoist/Confucian traditions imply the transformational capacity of art, working through both mind and body (Man 2015, p.32). In relation to these traces, discernible in Bingyi's embodied, performative ink works, this chapter examines Eva Kit Wah Man's (2015; 2016; 2020) arguments proposing Daoist/Confucian theories of aesthetics as an alternative, feminist-aligned ontology opposed to Cartesian dualism (previously discussed in relation to the work of Xiao Lu and Ma Yanling). The interplay of non-rationalist Daoism and legalist Confucianism, it could be argued, is itself a kind of *yin-yang* oscillation; historically, syncretic Confucianism absorbed and 'translated' Daoist precepts to support the ideal of an ordered, harmonious society predicated on hierarchical filial relationships. Man acknowledges that Confucian ideals of harmony and reciprocity co-existed with the subordination of women under patriarchal social structures, yet she argues that the emphasis on mind/body union is compatible with feminist (and postmodern, poststructuralist) critiques of the dualism inherent in Western philosophy and the post-Enlightenment separation between art and life (Man 2015; 2016).

The belief that the Daoist ideal of complementarity and equilibrium is achieved by the rapprochement of tension between *yin* and *yang* (Ma 2009), so fundamental to Chinese ideas about universal harmony, is manifested in historical and contemporary Chinese art practices, and informs current discourses around a specifically Chinese modernity and contemporaneity. Gladston (2020, p.7), however, argues that 'oblique and elusive modes of Daoist and Buddhist-inflected counter-authoritarian criticality that are inherent to a syncretic historical neo-Confucian aesthetics' place contemporary art in/from China in a more complex transcultural discourse. This thesis proposes that the ideal of *yin-yang* reciprocity, impossible under patriarchal structures and systems of power, represents a paradox in the work of the artists in this study, who grapple with aspects of their gender and Chinese identities.

Interpretations of Daoist/Confucian philosophy inflect Bingyi's stated desire to be 'free from gender' – yet simultaneously to be recognised as a woman operating in a gendered discourse – and to be free from other binary discourses including national identity (Bingyi 2017). This chapter will propose an argument that Bingyi is both intellectually attracted to, and simultaneously critical of, the Chinese philosophical/spiritual/cultural traditions that inflect her practice, producing a perhaps irreconcilable ambiguity. Her counter-

patriarchal stance, juxtaposed with her resistance towards a feminist identity, produces works of material and conceptual complexity, echoing paradoxes inherent in the *nannü* category that include a yearning for *yin-yang* reciprocity and the simultaneous recognition that, under patriarchy, it is impossible. Man's argument in favour of a feminist interpretation of Confucian aesthetics may at first seem to contradict He-Yin Zhen's adamant position in relation to the constraining, deforming effects of *nannü* gendering upon female agency. However, Man's assertion that Confucian aesthetics are an appropriate feminist model – she likens, for example, Irigaray's views on embodiment with the Chinese belief in mind/body harmony – is moderated by her acknowledgement that female creativity is not an essentialist proposition, something inherent in the category of 'woman', but rather a social construction (Man 2020, p.39). The complementarity described in the *Daodejing* may *appear* to offer 'a new horizon for transcending the patriarchal gender dichotomy' (Xu 2003, p.50) but in reality, this thesis argues, it is always and everywhere undercut by women's lived experiences of the world. Interpretations of Bingyi's work in this chapter reveal the continuing influence of non-rationalist Daoism and Confucian legalist ethics that are paradoxically expressed through her stated desire to be free of all constraints of identity, including gender. Drawn to and simultaneously repelled by aspects of the Chinese literati artistic tradition, Bingyi brings it into dialogue with aspects of Western art history and philosophy. Her work is thus a transcultural discourse.

Chapter 7 is structured in five interconnected sections following this introduction. The first positions her work within contemporary approaches to the Anthropocene inflected by Chinese philosophy and Buddhist/Daoist cosmology. The second positions Bingyi within the contemporary expanded field of painting and the genre of reinvented and recontextualised ink painting that developed in China at the end of the twentieth century. The third examines the materiality of Bingyi's works and their locations in remote landscapes as a form of embodiment, arguing that Bingyi's sheets of fibrous *xuan* paper, buckled and mottled by the application of ink and water, are a metaphor for her own skin. Thus, the physicality of her practice and its associations with the notion of *qi* (as breath and spirit, or essential being, of the artist) connect her practice with Daoist/Confucian aesthetics. The fourth proposes an argument that Bingyi's conscious intrusion into gendered literati traditions may be interpreted as a feminist act of re(en)gendering ink

painting, viewed through lenses of Shohat's theory of subterranean feminism and He Yin's critique of the patriarchal subjugation of women. The chapter concludes with a summary of the argument that Bingyi's work represents a specifically female energy and embodiment, in contrast to the masculinist history of the conventions of ink painting in China. Her works, and her own reflection upon her practice, mirror the essential paradox of *nannü* in which oscillating, fluxing *yin-yang* relationships seek balance and equilibrium but constantly teeter on the brink of entropy, reflecting the destructive impending chaos of the Anthropocene.

7.2 Ink and the Anthropocene

Like Tao Aimin, Xiao Lu and Ma Yanling in previous chapters, Bingyi's work is at once a homage to, and subversion of, traditions of literati ink painting, which were, as we have seen, imbued with a Daoist/Buddhist-inflected worldview and, in literati *wenren* culture, a neo-Confucian sense of propriety and gendered social relationships. It is also, of course, a reference to an Eastern tradition that, when read by audiences both inside and outside China, invokes simultaneously a nostalgic version of the past and a recontextualised present-day China. Ink painting functions, therefore, as previously proposed in Chapter 4, as a form of nostalgic Chineseness, a kind of *Nachträglichkeit* signifying a lost idea of China.[3]

Bingyi transitioned from expressionist-influenced, figurative oil paintings to work with ink on a monumental scale. Her academic background as a North American-educated art historian and scholar of the Han Dynasty[4] informs her work with both Western and Chinese literary and philosophical allusion, just as her earlier science and technology studies influenced her to explore methods of applying paint to paper that would allow her to work on a vast scale. Bingyi acknowledges the historical significance and symbolic materiality of the ink medium. but her particular interest is in how it can be applied in a contemporary manner to micro and macro interpretations of the cosmos. Her work, although influenced by traditions of *shan shui* painting, represents a departure from the conventions, methods and pictorial syntax that traditionally governed Chinese ink painting. Wei Xing (2011, p.69), for example, argues that her painting:

> […] carries no obvious evidence of brushwork, no traces of *cunfa* (the Chinese term for methods of painting line and texture, which has dominated the discourse of Chinese painting since the Song dynasty), and that Bingyi has no interest in building distance or space in the picture plane. The artist uses ink as a substance in tandem

> with chemical reactions in accordance to the movement of earth, wind, and moisture, but not as a practice that connects every mark to the history of Chinese painting.

Wei proposes that Bingyi's work, unlike literati painting, is a commentary on 'the relationship between water and ink, turning the actual medium of the painting into the subject of the painting', arguing that her practice of travel and in-situ performative painting is less to do with the *shan shui* tradition than with a metaphysical examination of entropy (Wei 2011, p.69). However, this notion of entropy is in fact quite consistent with the Daoist teachings that underpinned Chinese painting traditions: in the canonical texts attributed to Laozi and Zhuangzi, reality is understood as 'a dynamic system in which constant change and erratic complexity harbour an enigmatic principle of patterned regularity and regeneration' (Girardot 1983, p.xii) whereby everything in the universe is in a process of constant change and flux: this flux, interpreted as *yin-yang* forces, is the underlying subject of Bingyi's work.

Therefore, her work may be read as a contemporary response to, and recontextualisation of, the three cosmological realms of syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian thought: the interconnected triad of '*tian di ren heyi*' (or '*tianren heyi*') refers to the union of heaven, earth, and humanity, in which humans endeavour to live in harmony with the cosmos.[5] Like other artists (within and beyond China) who position their work as a response to pressing issues of the Anthropocene, Bingyi's immersive works ask us to reflect on the relatively insignificant, but too often destructive, presence of humanity within the delicately balanced ecological systems governing the planet. Bingyi positions herself *in* nature and *of* nature, thereby dismantling nature/culture binaries and embodying an aspirational *tianren heyi*. Paul Gladston (2020, p.135) cites Chang Tan: this '"undoing of the binary between nature and culture" [is] characteristic of neo-Confucian literati culture and […] implicitly critical of urbanisation and modernisation.'

Rejecting restrictive binaries of gender, as a Western-educated, highly cosmopolitan artist, Bingyi is also inclined to reject stereotypes of Chineseness. Yet this too is somewhat paradoxical. In her analysis of the contested place of ink painting in the field of contemporary art Joan Kee (2010, p.91) noted the (Western) tendency to align works of particular practitioners with Western models of painting such as Abstract Expressionism, thus cutting them adrift from their cultural situatedness. Kee argued that certain ink works by Gu Wenda and Yang Jiechang gained standing because they could be invested with

characteristics considered essential for them to be classified as contemporary art, a consensus in which contemporaneity is understood to be a 'spatially and temporally fragmented condition' (2010, p.92) and which therefore created a new contemporary ink canon.[6] Chinese artists must be strategic, she suggested, in order to convey sufficient Chineseness to appeal to the international market, but not so much cultural specificity as to alienate that market – to be considered contemporary, a Chinese artist is required to 'obscure the socio-cultural particulars of the context that enabled the artwork's emergence' (Kee 2010, pp.93–94). This 'obscuring' of cultural specificity is articulated by Bingyi in a different way, as a refusal to accept limitations upon and assumptions around her practice, and a determination to challenge what she perceives as false binaries between Eastern and Western art and culture (Bingyi 2017).

Equally conversant with Eastern and Western art history and aesthetics, Bingyi denies that her work is a direct response to traditions of *shan shui* ink painting, despite her production of vast ink 'scrolls' in the mountainous landscapes so beloved of the literati. In an interview with the author in 2014, reproduced in 'Half the Sky' (Guest 2016) she said:

> The set of values of *shan shui* are rotten and decadent and indulgent because it's been repeated over and over again. To really give life to *shan shui* you must use a much larger question to reinterpret it. All those ethical and aesthetic questions have been asked so many times before. The reason people say I have given life to ink painting is because I am not really dealing with ink painting at all. I am dealing with the biggest, most perpetual problems that any species has to ask itself […] That is what makes these paintings relevant and what makes them meaningful' (Bingyi in Guest, 2016, p.91).

The 'perpetual problems' that Bingyi refers to are, firstly, the relationship between humanity and the natural world, and, secondly, the Buddhist notion of detachment, both of which are discussed later in this chapter in relation to specific works inflected with Daoist and/or Chan Buddhist cosmological references.

Bingyi's monumental ink installations place her work within the field of 'contemporary ink' and 'new literati painting' (*xin wenrenhua*) – specifically within the category identified by Wu Hung as 'experimental ink painting' (*shiyan shuimohua*). But they may also claim to be both land art and performance art, positioning Bingyi's work within the contemporary 'expanded field' of painting. There is a lineage to be drawn between Bingyi's 'land art' ink paintings and the experimental work of the Chinese avant-garde in

the late 1980s and 1990s, including that of Zao Wou-ki, Gu Wenda, Xu Bing, Yang Jiechang and Zheng Chongbin. Employing ink as a viscerally performative medium, however, Bingyi's ink installations and performances may be conceptually differentiated from the work of other significant artists in this genre of art production. The use of fire as a component in several works relates to serious physical injuries suffered by the artist – she is quite literally embodied in her works as a performer, refusing to accept limitations of gender, nationality or injury/health. Bingyi's complex and occasionally hostile relationship with her artistic patrimony is echoed by her ambivalent relationship to feminism, discussed later in this chapter.

7.3 An Expanded Field of Ink Painting

The following section of the chapter positions Bingyi within the expanded field of painting that emerged in Western art in the latter half of the twentieth century. The transcultural expanded field within which Bingyi operates, inflected not only by East Asian traditions of ink painting but also by American high modernist Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock and land artists such as Robert Smithson and Walter de Maria, is identified as a process of aesthetic translation akin to an ekphrastic text. Bingyi herself described her work in an interview for 'Half the Sky' (Guest 2016) as 'like Walter de Maria inverted' – but rather than bringing the landscape inside as in the case of de Maria's *Earth Room* (1977) her material practice takes place *in* the landscape, making art in nature.

The concept of the expanded field developed from Rosalind Krauss's (1979) influential essay, in which she attempted to define and combine the parameters of sculpture, architecture and landscape art. Following the demise of easel painting in Europe and America after World War II, and the addition of non-painterly elements that saw the act of painting 'mingling illicitly' with other media and traditions such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking and performance, the practice of the painter was radically transformed and boundaries were collapsed (Titmarsh 2017, p.13). From critic Harold Rosenberg's characterisation of the canvases of Jackson Pollock and other painters of the New York school as 'arenas in which to act' in his article 'The American Action Painters' (1952) to the Gutai artists in Japan, from Georges Mathieu, Michel Tapié and Yves Klein in France to the 'combine' paintings of Robert Rauschenberg and his collaborations with Merce Cunningham's dance company, the 1950s and 1960s

revealed that the materiality of paint could become a performative medium. And so too it was in China. Gao Jianping cites Michael Sullivan's somewhat problematic argument that the notion of painting-as-performance in China predated the post-war emergence of action painting in America: 'The idea of a painter performing before an audience was virtually unknown in the West before the twentieth century. It was not uncommon in China, however' (Gao 2010, p.123).[7] Gao further argues, more convincingly, that this performative aspect of Chinese painting and calligraphy is imbued with Daoist philosophy; beneath the accepted, everyday practice of calligraphy as a public pursuit there existed a more fundamental, more spiritually connected aspect. Gao quotes passages from Zhuangzi that describe the 'kind of freedom' that lies beyond merely knowing 'how to' do something – a spontaneity, harmony and joy emerges from the Dao (Gao 2010, p.125).[8]

Fig. 7.1. Bingyi, *Cascade*, 2010, Smart Museum, University of Chicago (detail of painting and performance). Image courtesy the artist.

Bingyi referred to freedom at several points during the interview; her use of the term imbricates its Daoist inflection with her stated interest in the ancient Greek notion of *ataraxia* (ἀταραξία) referring to a state of equanimity free from disturbance or anxiety (Bingyi 2017). It indicates a desire to free herself from strictures, rules or limitations (including those of gender and nationality) that might otherwise inhibit her sense of her

own unique position within the Chinese – and indeed the international – artworld. Yet her work is nevertheless embedded within a continuing tradition, a lineage of gestural and performative ink painters. *Ataraxia* is connected with the concept of 'detachment' in Buddhist and Daoist thought. In an earlier interview with Bingyi she said, 'I am dealing with detachment. So now it [*my painting*] has a completely different meaning' (Guest 2016, p.91). Rather than the Stoic avoidance of human attachment that the word suggests in English, Chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi* advocates a form of resilience: it acknowledges that human attachments are inevitable (and, indeed, required by Confucian observance of filial piety and other social norms); yielding to them rather than worrying over their possible consequences brings contentment (Wong 2006). One can be self-reflexively aware of the joys and sorrows of the human condition and simultaneously recognise the ceaseless flux of the universe; this acceptance brings solace. This desired state of mind, a cultural translocation of two distinct philosophical traditions, underlies Bingyi's ink works conceptually and materially.

Bingyi's land-art scaled ink paintings are also positioned, however, within the contemporary genre of reinvented and recontextualised ink painting – which, it may be argued, is likewise an expanded field. The breaking of boundaries and conventions is a recurring theme in the 2017 interview with Bingyi. For example, discussing the multi-disciplinary nature of her practice:

> What if a human being is capable of doing that thing, this kind of control or technicality and go beyond every boundary? We assume that a performance artist can't paint or is not supposed to be painting, otherwise he would be a painter. We assume that all these boundaries exist […] So, with all of that, I think my biggest interest is to precisely pose all these questions to the human mind, not only to transcend the boundary but also to actually *be* the act itself […] So I just went from medium to medium because I assume no boundary, no boundary could ever limit me (Bingyi 2017).[9]

Bingyi describes her transdisciplinary, site-specific production and exhibition of vast ink paintings as stemming from a flow of energy that results in 'essential transcendental communication amongst all things' untrammelled by outmoded conventions of practice (Bingyi 2017). Her phrase 'to be the act itself' recalls the Confucian theory of music expounded in the *Analects* and cited by Eva Kit Wah Man (2015, p.30), who argues that Daoist/Confucian aesthetics offer an alternative to masculinist western models and in particular to the 'masculinist orientation' in which form is linked with maleness and

matter with femaleness.[10] Further, Man (2015, p.31) argues that a feminist interpretation of the Confucian view in which everything in the universe is dynamically inter-related, with body and mind engaged together, challenges the (Western) mind/body binary in which the body has been relegated to the feminine – irrational, emotional, unstable, incoherent and irrational. Daoist/Confucian aesthetic theory implies, rather, that art is a transformational process, working through both mind and body (*qi*) to achieve harmony and equilibrium. We may recall, however, that Donna Haraway (1991, p.302) had argued for a far more extensive dismantling of binaries, proposing that through a feminist lens, 'dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised are all in question ideologically'. Like Confucian aesthetics, Haraway's challenge to previously unquestioned dichotomies offers the possibility of transformation. Similarly, Bingyi's description of her process suggests that her experience of painting-as-performance is physically and spiritually transformative:

> I could say that I can hear that [*nature is*] singing to me – and that is *not* a metaphor. I could feel how each creature is speaking to each other and vibrating according to each other, dancing to each other. I could feel like the whole world is coming through my body, through this kind of practice […] (Bingyi 2017).

The following paragraphs analyse how we might understand *Cascade* (2010) (Fig 7.2) and *The Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountains* (2012) (Fig 7.3) as works within the expanded field of painting that synthesise these culturally resonant influences. In these works, Bingyi challenges boundaries between Eastern and Western painting, and between painting and performance. *Cascade* was commissioned as a site-specific ink painting to be installed in the high-ceilinged, curved foyer of the Smart Museum at the University of Chicago. Once installed, the painting resembled an enormous waterfall flowing upwards towards the vaulted ceiling. The work juxtaposes conventional aspects of ink painting with references to land art, installation art and painting-as-performance. Bingyi, who had begun painting only in 2008, used ink for the first time to produce this work:

> Bingyi: I asked to make the original in oil, but it was recommended not to do that for feasibility reasons – too heavy, too expensive, too hard to deal with – everything. So that was my first ink painting ever. So, if you ask me what training I had I would say it was the purest form of ideas. So, *Cascade*, it indicates a waterfall flying away from this vault […]
>
> LG: So, it was really a response to the site?

> Bingyi: Yes, it's a response to the space, to the architecture. So that shows the nature of me as the architect. As the builder of spaces. I build spaces. And to say that you see this as a spatial activity as opposed to, um, the making of a painting, as is the norm. So how many people really perceive this act of painting as a spatial activity? So, the boundaries of the medium are very specific. There is a process. You could see this as process art and as performance art. You can see it as performance art, much of my activity is performance art. You could see it as meditation, as a spiritual act. It is the purest form of painting itself in action [...] (Bingyi 2017).

Bingyi positions her approach to painting within the discursive tradition of the historical and contemporary expanded field. She defines it not only as a practice in which the conventions of painting are elastic, absorbing temporal, spatial and sculptural elements, but also as a practice of painting informed by Daoist ideas of the incorporation of body and spirit (*qi*) in the act of wielding brush and ink. Wu Hung described *Cascade* as resembling a waterfall within a cavern: 'The artist imagines the concave space where the painting is installed as a great cavern which can also symbolise a cosmic sphere of infinite dimensions' (Wu 2011, p.66). In Daoist *yin-yang* relationships water is often (although not always) considered a feminine *yin* correlative, as is, with more obvious sexual imagery, the idea of the cave, cavern or cleft.[11] Therefore, despite the absence of obvious figurative elements or overt vaginal imagery in Bingyi's painting, references to the female body are present in an encoded form.

To create a work on this scale, Bingyi found expert *xuan* paper makers in Anhui Province to make large quantities strong enough to withstand her dramatic processes of ink application. She commandeered a basketball court-sized space in the restored ancient village of Xiuli, in southern Anhui Province, to lay out enormous sheets of paper. Working at night, using car headlights to illuminate the working space, Bingyi poured, dripped, splashed, sprayed and brushed ink onto the paper with movements that appeared spontaneous but were, she says, choreographed and deliberate, informed by her deep knowledge of the chemistry of ink and paper (Bingyi 2017). Bingyi identifies herself as a designer and creator of spaces, like an architect, but also sees her work as a spiritual practice. Her phrase 'the whole world is coming through my body' applies to her method of producing the artwork in nature, but also, literally, to her own female body; it activates the work and embodies the aforementioned Daoist references to feminine *yin* forces. The installation of *Cascade* in Chicago encompassed an opera production with performers,

musicians, an original score and libretto, and costumes designed by the artist: the painting was thus (re)-activated by performing bodies.

Fig 7.2. Bingyi, *Cascade*, 2010, ink and household cleaners on rice paper, 20 x 13 m. Exhibition view at Smart Museum, University of Chicago. Photograph Gao Jing. Image courtesy the artist.

Bingyi's journeys to remote mountain regions to create paintings align her practice with Song Dynasty scholar painters seeking solace in the mountains, and also with Euro-American land artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer. Bingyi spent a year travelling to different locations seeking the ideal site. The final choice of Xiuli Village in the Huizhou area references the early Qing Dynasty Xin'an school painters, also known as the Four Masters of Anhui, who emphasised the importance of painting *en plein air* and were celebrated for their paintings of Huangshan (Yellow Mountain).[12] Wei Xing (2011, p.75) connects Bingyi's methods very directly with these artistic antecedents:

> As an artist who is willing to travel vast distances in search for inspiration, Bingyi selected the home region of the Xin'an school not by accident, but by choice. Bingyi chose to work in the same spirit as the Xin'an masters because notions of style and technique are not her primary concern. Her goal is to cultivate an intellectual connection to painting as an act, and to build a transcendental understanding of the problematic nature of history.

This thesis argues that the 'problematic nature of history' informing Bingyi's work – both Chinese history in a broad sense and in terms of the particular history of ink painting – is its patriarchal foundation, and a (not unconnected) looming environmental catastrophe. Without academic training in ink painting, Bingyi extends its pictorial language and conventions with 'painting as an act' in her vast scrolls of *xuan* paper, building on the innovations of earlier proponents of experimental ink painting. Ink is applied, not with brushes, but often with re-engineered machinery and appliances that blow, pour, drip and spray ink (and sometimes other fluids like household cleaners) onto the paper. These works are less connected with the embodied expertise of brush strokes in the canon of successive master painters than with her interest in forging a spiritual connection to the forces of the universe – including human ingenuity and technology – in order to (obliquely) examine these layers of past and present. It is a shifting, kaleidoscopic kind of contemporaneity.

Cascade was inspired by a Buddhist temple named *Zhihuihai* (The Ocean of Wisdom) in Beijing's Summer Palace, which Bingyi's research discovered had similar proportions to the Chicago museum space.[13] The work refers to elemental forces of wind, fire, mountains, earth and water. In an earlier interview (Guest 2016, p.96) Bingyi had revealed she also intended to reference human and animal DNA, reflecting her interest in science, and in Buddhist/Daoist cosmological considerations of the place of humanity in the universe:

> Humans are such an arrogant, blind group of creatures that we forget how minimal, how primal, how limited we are. We keep taking and taking from the world, but we forget that we are not here to take […] Why are we here? At a species level, in the eye of the universe, what are we? Are we dust? Are we marks? Are we traces? Whatever we may be, we are not the centre of the earth (Bingyi, 2014, in Guest, 2016).

A subsequent ink work, *The Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountains* (sometimes translated as *Gestalt of the Wind*) (Fig. 7.3), commissioned for the church of Saint John the Evangelist in Berlin in 2012, was produced in an even more dramatically elemental fashion. In a remote mountain location in Zhejiang Province Bingyi began to burn sections of her previous paintings. Laying fresh paper down on the surface of a rural road she started painting as ash and burned scraps of paper fell and mixed with the ink of the

new painting. This work references a famous Yuan Dynasty handscroll, *Dwelling in Fuchun Mountains*, by Huang Gongwang (1269–1354).[14] Saved from being burned as a funerary offering it is now in two unequal sections: one is held in the Zhejiang Museum, Hangzhou, the other, together with other treasures removed from mainland China in Chiang Kai-Shek's 1949 retreat to Taiwan, may be seen in the National Palace Museum, Taipei. Bingyi's work, too, was divided in half. She was dissuaded from her original intention to burn half the painting like an offering, coming to believe, as she communicated in an email to the author on 22 April 2020, that artworks 'have their own will and lives that are beyond our intentions'.

Fig 7.3. Bingyi, *The Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountains*, 2012, 2.65 x 160 metres, installed in St Johannes Evangeliste Church, Berlin. Image courtesy the artist.

Like *Cascade*, the referents for this work are both Eastern and Western, historical and contemporary. It alludes to the history of *shan shui* painting, the civil war in China, and to continuing tensions between mainland China and Taiwan. Its siting in Berlin alludes to wartime bombing, and the post-war division of that city into east and west. Its conceptual complexity references geology, geography, the geopolitics of war and the creation of nation states, together with natural forces of weather, wind, fire and water. These last are embedded within its very materiality – *xuan* paper is made with grasses and mulberry bark and requires vast amounts of water in its fabrication, while Chinese ink is derived

from carbon and gum arabic. Its mix of ink and water, and contrasting lightness and darkness, reference *yin-yang* relationships. Its method of production once again places Bingyi into the expanded field of painting-as-performance, as the following excerpt from our encounter reveals:

> Bingyi: Almost time is lost in counting what has happened because of the research […] Can you just measure the time it takes to make the work? Of course not! It takes time to document the weather, figure out the climate, measure the humidity and so on. The most time-consuming is to understand the nature of paper, and weather, and the local context […] We burned ashes. We burned a lot of paintings to ashes. We burned a lot of paintings and spread the ashes, and as the ashes go, they form the shape of the painting. I just paint according to the ashes, so the idea is that we will burn the painting over and over again until there is finally only one chunk of ash left.
>
> LG: So, what is the significance of the burning? Is it a ceremonial gesture, a funerary gesture?
>
> Bingyi: No, it's about reversal of time, you know, like we all try to resist time, right? So, with this resistance of time each painting is kept intact, we're so afraid of losing them, but what if the burning of the painting is larger than the painting itself? (Bingyi 2017).

The act of burning previously completed paintings, with the new painting taking shape according to patterns made by fire and falling ash, then the pouring, spraying and splashing of ink onto paper to create the 160-metre-length work represents a negotiation with the practice of painting that is 'larger than the painting itself'. The process is fraught with danger, including the risk that the entire new painting will be destroyed if the fragments of burning paper set fire to it:

> And then, over time, the ash would just go off, or it becomes part of this painting process. I don't care. If it gets stuck [*in the wet ink*] that's fine, if it doesn't, that's OK. But that's the shape of the wind, right in there. And that's it (Bingyi 2017).

Thus, we see that Bingyi's expanded field represents a translation of artistic practice – from West to East and from East to West. In *The Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountains* we see an intersection between the artworlds and histories of the West (Euro-America) and China. This is not a one-directional influence, but rather a mutual imbrication of cultural histories. Bingyi's cosmopolitanism, material choices, and conceptual references characteristic of a Chinese approach to materiality characterised by Wu Hung as *caizhi yishu*: they allow her to 'bypass the East West dichotomy to make works that were both

culture-specific and globally relevant' (Wu 2019, p.15).[15] Given Bingyi's academic background and her immersion in Chinese classical literature, this hermeneutic approach to building her aesthetic in a manner congruent with a translated text is unsurprising. Her dissertation required her to translate classical texts from Chinese to English, and to operate within and between two languages. Similarly, her work reveals the culturally specific condition of her Chinese identity and history, translated through an interpretation of the works of American post-war painters such as Pollock, Kline and Frankenthaler, and land artists including Smithson, Heizer and de Maria. At the same time, the scale and gestural physicality of her ink paintings recalls the works of Chinese painter Zheng Chongbin from the period in the mid-1980s when he stayed in Buddhist temples in Zhejiang Province and laid large sheets of paper on the floor to create installations of ink painting.[16]

The transcultural art historical references in Bingyi's work are interpolated into a re-contextualised language of ink painting in a manner not dissimilar to the translation of an ekphrastic text – a translation of a visual image into a textual form, but here reversed – a shared semiotics with the potential to reveal the interplay of power structures both past and present. Bingyi's references to ink works both historical and contemporary, as well as her frequent literary and philosophical allusions, underline the fact that she enacts her artistic identity within pre-existing discursive context/s. Ilan Kapoor (2003, p.577), for example, examines postcolonial agency and discursive authority, identifying a paradox that, it may be argued, applies to Bingyi's processes of 'translation': the postcolonial subject, 'acting within an imposed discourse or tradition, but still subverting its representational codes' produces new and unanticipated sites of meaning. Kapoor (2003) cites Homi Bhabha's 1995 conversation with W.J.T Mitchell in which Bhabha expanded upon his notion that agency is a kind of translation possessing a specific kind of authorisation. This chapter argues that the act of translation in Bingyi's ink paintings – her artistic agency – is just such an iterative, repeated form acting within the parameters of existing discourse.

In his argument for the use of translation theory in analysing relationships between text and images, Lawrence Venuti (2010) points out that the ekphrastic text is transformative – interpreted from cultural and social standpoints that differ from those of the source material, thereby exposing the very particular social and cultural conditions of the

original. The 'translation' from one spatial, temporal and cultural locus to another may thus be said to rewrite the original text. This chapter argues that what is (perhaps unintentionally) exposed and 're-written' in Bingyi's 'translated' expanded field of painting, which references and reinvents both its Western and Chinese manifestations, are the gendered patriarchal structures and systems that underlie each of these artistic and philosophical traditions. Just as Min Dongchao (2014; 2017) documented the tensions and slippages of the translation of western feminist texts into Chinese, and their consequent transformations, Bingyi's works create an 'alternative' feminist art that draws upon its situated Chinese history. As the artist's body is physically engaged in her site-specific production of enormous ink paintings, she actively re-genders the language of ink as feminine, thereby also revealing its exclusionist, masculinist history. Bingyi's insertion of her body and subjectivity into ink painting conventions, long gendered as a male visual language, thus becomes an act of feminist 'translation'. Her approach, grounded in an intellectual and spiritual habitus of Chan Buddhist, Daoist and Confucian cosmology imbricated with Western philosophy and art history, constructs an embodied, re(en)gendered language of ink painting.

7.4 Skin and Ink: the injured/scarred body

In 2009, Bingyi suffered serious burns in an accident when a candle flame set her clothing alight – in the following years she endured multiple operations and skin grafts.[17] Her choice of fire as a medium, together with ink and water, is not unconnected to this experience. The visceral, embodied physicality of Bingyi's practice and its associations with the notion of *qi* (referencing the breath, spirit or essential being of the artist) connect her work with a Daoist intellectual tradition, but also possess a deeply personal resonance of pain, scarring and healing. Bingyi's sheets of xuan paper, mottled with ink and water, resemble skin, an injured epidermis that is stained and marked. As she began painting *The Shape of the Wind in Fuchun Mountain* sparks and ash from burning paintings flew into the air around her while worked, she says, suggesting a cathartic engagement with the source of her earlier injury (Bingyi 2020).

It must be acknowledged that both ancient Chinese and mid-century American discourses around painting-as-performance were overwhelmingly masculine.[18] Bingyi inserts herself physically into a tradition of embodied gestural painting in which the performing body was previously assumed to be male. We might think firstly, for example, of Hans

Namuth's film, *Jackson Pollock 51*, which constructed the mythic image of the artist as masculine and heroic, the solitary genius at work. More relevant, perhaps, are the photographs of Helen Frankenthaler staining vast canvases on the floor of her studio, although Bingyi is inclined to reject any such association with the mid-century abstract painters (Guest 2016). Rather than take a feminist position in relation to her intervention into a masculinist tradition, Bingyi said:

> You know, what I am ultimately interested in is freedom… free from assumptions, free from age, free from gender (Bingyi 2017).

Bingyi's reference to freeing herself from limitations of gender will be examined at a later point in this chapter, but the notion of freedom in relation to the artist's use of her body is resonant, given the Western art historical canon of representations of injury, age, illness and infirmity. From images of the crucified Christ to Andy Warhol's stab wounds as depicted by Alice Neel,[19] the injured body was generally depicted as an object of pity. Bingyi is more dispassionate. She had examined bodily trauma directly in an oil painting, *I Watch Myself Dying* (2009), in which the artist's body lies on an operating table. An alternate 'self' hovers over her like the soul leaving the body.[20] The painting is one of a series of works entitled 'Skin', referencing nineteenth-century paintings by Thomas Eakins of surgical procedures. Bingyi explained the connection between these figurative paintings and her ink practice:

> In 2009, the same year [*as the commission to make Cascade*], I did a show at Pearl Lam called 'Skin'. And I argued that there are only two unities in this world: there's me or I, and there's you. There's no he, she, or they. So 'skin' is the boundary between you and me. So, the whole thing is about that (Bingyi 2017).

Bingyi suggests here that skin is an entirely permeable boundary between the 'I', the self and 'you', the other, an idea founded in Daoist/Confucian aesthetics and the non-binary understanding of the body espoused by Mencius in which barriers between you and me, mind and body, outside and inside, and sense and sensibility collapse: a 'radical rethinking of the connection among reason, the body and ethical-political issues' (Man 2016, p.16). She also represents the literal reality of the vulnerability of human skin, a membrane between the self and the external world that can be so easily breached.

With Bingyi's decision to use fire her works entered the realm of allegory: *xuan* paper and ink are likened to skin and flesh through the medium of the artist's gestures and her movements around paper laid out on the ground. *Xuan* paper appears fragile yet is extremely strong. It absorbs washes of ink, buckling yet retaining its fibrous structure. Its mottled, striated appearance, in which subtle gradations of ink wash contrast with dramatic black splashes of undiluted ink, symbolises the apparently contradictory fragility and resilience of human skin and bone. This metaphorical, painterly 'skin' thus represents both a boundary and a connection – a connective tissue if you like – between artist and audience. Rather than emphasising frailty, or narrating the effects of political or personal trauma, Bingyi emphasises resilience and catharsis. Freedom from constraints, whether they be of physical incapacity, gender, age, or from her 'self-taught' artist status, is a hallmark of her intentionality.

Fig 7.4. Bingyi, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (detail), 2013, ink on paper, 2000 x 320 cm. Image courtesy the artist.

After 2009, Bingyi extended the metaphor of scarred skin into representations of the damaged, fissured surface of the earth, examining geological time and space. In *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (2013) (Fig. 7.4), developed through extensive research into

mining operations in Essen, Germany, the forces of tectonic shifts, intense compression, the weathering of wind and water, fluctuations of temperature in a time of climate change, hidden subterranean processes that erupt onto the earth's surface: all these are represented by the forces that Bingyi uses to apply ink and water to her paper. The work was made on enormous sheets of paper laid out on a narrow, winding road on Sanqing Mountain, Jiangxi Province. The paper itself is a product of the earth – grasses and fibrous tree-bark– and the ink (made from carbon) is diluted with water. Thus, the five Chinese elements (*wude*) of earth, metal, fire, wind and water are present in her very materials. In Daoist cosmology these are said to connect natural phenomena and to represent the five internal organs of the human body.[21] The more literal autobiographical imagery of *I Watch Myself Dying* here becomes a lament for the Anthropocene.

The next section of the chapter explores the conundrum revealed by Bingyi's refusal to participate in 'that discourse' (i.e., feminism), while producing work imbued with traces of other discourses, including Buddhist/Daoist/neo-Confucian philosophy: Bingyi is immersed in, yet critical of, both historical and contemporary ink art traditions, in part due to their patriarchal associations. Disavowing feminism, she asserts a desire to be free from all considerations of gender. This thesis argues, however, that it is nevertheless possible to read Bingyi's works through a gendered, and indeed a feminist lens, and that to do so reveals rich interpretations that offer alternative meaning/s. The (subterranean) feminist possibilities of 'regeneration' and 'reconstitution' (Haraway, 1991, p.181) seen through a lens of *Nannü* are discussed in the following section in relation to two works, *Wanwu* (2013) (Fig. 7.6) and *Epoché* (2014) (Fig. 7.7).

7.5 Trespassing in the *Yaji* Garden: feminist readings of Bingyi's work

This chapter has argued that Bingyi's 'land art' works, positioned within an expanded field of painting, assert the presence of a counter-patriarchal subjectivity within a historically masculinist discourse of literati painting. The following section of the chapter further examines her work through a lens of gender.

The *yaji* in imperial China refers to a gathering of scholars who met, often in a walled garden, to play chess, listen to music, read and write poetry, and appreciate ink painting and calligraphy. Bingyi's re-gendered ink oeuvre sits uneasily alongside this historical convention, although in conversation she positions herself within a revived *yaji* space. As we have seen, Bingyi moves between insider- and outsider-ness. Her evident desire to

acknowledge and participate in Chinese cultural traditions with artistic peers coexists with her frank acknowledgement of their patriarchal complexities. At the historical *yaji* gathering ink painting and calligraphy were generally presumed to be male pursuits – and so, too, as Craig Clunas persuasively argues, the act of *looking* at paintings, of connoisseurship, was gendered male (Clunas 2017).

In Chang Tzong-zung, Qiu Zhijie and Gao Shiming's proposed revival of the *yaji* as a 'yellow box' model of curatorial practice suited to the exhibition of Chinese artworks, a challenge to the western curatorial paradigm of the white cube, they neglected to consider its historically exclusionary aspects. Indeed, Chang Tzong-zung (2017, para.1) points out that 'both European and Chinese cultures have a tradition of 'semi-private' exhibition practice: in Europe it is the salon, in China the literati gathering [...] In these gatherings, participants must be invited or at least be part of the same inner circles. Strangers are not usually welcome, nor do they have the right to demand entry'. The implied assumption of a naturalised, 'essentialised' Chineseness in a recreated *yaji* gathering is similarly problematic: Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston (2017) argue that the proposed revival of the *yaji* as a contemporary curatorial methodology is by its very nature essentialising. Yet despite its contentious and perhaps self-limiting nature, Bingyi herself used the term '*yaji*' in relation to her practice, describing herself as a member of a 'postmodern' literati sharing paintings and poetry on social media (Guest 2016, p.95). The contradiction, for a woman artist, is clear; historically these gatherings (almost entirely) excluded women.

A certain nostalgia for literati culture is not uncommon among Chinese artists and intellectuals, but it glosses over the fact that in imperial China access to knowledge and culture was dependent upon gender and social class. Today, as we have seen in previous chapters, the structures and systems of the Chinese artworld, and in particular the genres of contemporary ink painting, still tend to exclude women.[22] Aware of this inconvenient truth, Bingyi is placed in a complicated position of 'in-betweenness'; she is both inside and outside histories of ink and calligraphy, inside and outside circles of contemporary scholarship and artistic practice, inside and outside feminist theory. She speaks of her work as feminist, but then rejects the intention:

> Bingyi: It's a very feminist act in the feminist context but I'm not arguing for feminism, I'm arguing for life and death.

> LG: Yeah. But I also think that, in your actions, in your work, you really are inserting yourself into a male history, a male Chinese history?
>
> Bingyi: Yes.
>
> LG: And that, in itself, would you agree, is subversive?
>
> Bingyi: Everything I do is, by nature, subversive. Therefore, I'm most subversive about Buddhism, you know, by copying their sutra I'm declaring that I'm only using it as an instrument. It's a distance that I carefully maintain from dominant discourse […] I will do anything to remain independent and untied down and unlimited by any kind of framework (Bingyi 2017).

The ambition that Bingyi articulates here, to remain unlimited by all frameworks – whether of gender, nationality or philosophical/religious affiliation – is difficult to sustain, even if it is temporarily possible to defy such strictures. Bingyi agreed that although she herself defies categorisation she is still limited by others' assumptions:

> You're assumed to be this and that, you have to be in the category but once you don't fit that category you don't fit, period. And it's just group conformity, in large, being many times over. So, there are people who are very fortunate because they're thorough, that's what I mean. Unique. They're so unique that no boundary could ever limit them anymore (Bingyi 2017).

Fig. 7.5. (a) and (b). Bingyi at work on *Wanwu* on location, Longhu Mountain. Images courtesy the artist.

While Bingyi's desire for a 'thorough' uniqueness that transcends boundaries is clearly articulated, her work responds to an existing already-gendered discourse. As producer/artist/performer Bingyi disrupts the gendered tradition of Chinese scholarship and the lineage of the literati with an energy born equally of her particular, situated experience and her transcultural education. Bingyi thus inhabits, or performs, the role of the scholar painter, enacting a dialogue with Chinese traditions of ink painting. But she simultaneously contradicts this role-play with the nature of her practice: her use of tools such as leaf blowers and other machinery re-engineered to apply ink to vast sheets of paper intentionally removes scholarly associations of the brush. This is a disruption at least as significant as the scale and physicality of her works. The mechanical nature of the ink application would appear at first to contradict the emphasis in Bingyi's work on the 'natural', organic world, but this would be to construct a false binary. Bingyi's interest in science and its applications together with explicit references to Daoist and Buddhist cosmology in *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* (2013) and Greek philosophy in *Epoché* (2014) complicate notions of 'naturalness' as well as of national and gender identity.

Fig. 7.6. Bingyi, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis*, 2013 (installation view) ink, xuan paper, 2200 x 280 cm x 6 pieces. Image courtesy the artist and Ink Studio Gallery.

A work that aims to explore the matter and the rhythmic processes of the universe, *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* (2013) (Fig 7.6) comprises six scrolls of handmade *xuan* paper, each 2200 centimetres in length. Painted at Mount Longhu in Jiangxi Province, considered one of the birthplaces of Daoism and the site of many important Daoist temples, it illustrates the influence of Daoist thought on Bingyi's work and also reveals its paradoxical nature. The Chinese title refers to the 'ten thousand things' mentioned multiple times in the *Daodejing*; ten thousand is, of course, not intended as a literal number but rather as an expression of the uncountable and infinite, everything in the universe that can be observed and named.

Like other works, the development of *Wanwu: Metamorphosis* was shaped by interactions of biology, physics and chemistry as ink and water encountered the absorbency of the paper, impacted by evaporation, gravity, wind, insect life, humidity, rain, heat and sunlight. These natural forces, usually invisible, or at least ephemeral, are left behind as traces in the variations of ink viscosity that stain the paper, subtle tonal gradations, marks of the ink's flow, and pools or ripples of darker ink. Bingyi thus reveals the tension between order and chaos, the ten thousand things of the Dao that 'carry *yin* on their backs and embrace *yang* in their front, blending these two vital breaths to attain harmony' (Shen 2003, p.115).

In 2014 Bingyi produced a work that further developed the themes of *Wanwu*, in a more dramatically performative process. She was commissioned to create a large-scale work for the terminal of Shenzhen Bao'an airport. She dropped 500kg 'bombs' of ink mixed with oil onto canvas laid out on the airfield from a helicopter, an act that is both painting and performance, documented in video. The title of the work, *Epoché* (ἐποχή *epokhē*), refers to a state of suspension, alluding to an ancient Greek philosophical tradition in which the refusal to make definitive judgements brings about a state of '*ataraxia*', or freedom from anxiety. In modern Phenomenology the term was used by Husserl, referring to the suspension of judgement in favour of direct experience of phenomena. Bingyi sees this state of 'non-judgement' as representing freedom from the bounds of social convention and patriarchal, neo-Confucian gender roles; in doing so she aligns the Greek origins of the term with Daoist and Buddhist philosophy. Beyond Husserl, connections between Daoism and western philosophical phenomenology have been the subject of recent

scholarly inquiry.[23] This intercultural dialogue takes flight – literally and metaphorically – in *Epoché*, a work in which artist, machine and the materiality of ink become as one.

The work is an act of catharsis, and an expression of Daoist ethics, the interdependent notions of *ziran* (naturalness or spontaneity) and *wuwei* (non-action or non-interference) found in the *Daodejing*.[24] Bingyi describes it as an 'anti-gesture' of stillness:

> I was most interested in anti-abstract expressionism, kind of anti-gesture. So, I wanted a helicopter so that I could hang myself off the helicopter and paint. So, it's a very physical direct kind of act […] I could bomb [*by*] myself (Bingyi 2017).

And in a later exchange of emails on 22 April 2020:

> I just go up there and drop the bomb […] In the middle of the air, up thousands of meters, one has to resist the urge to move around and to splash. It takes far more energy to take no action and not to be expressive up there in the air, which means the biggest power lies in being still.

Fig 7.7. Photograph documenting the performance work *Epoché*, Shenzhen Bao'an Airport, 2014. Image courtesy the artist.

Although *Epoché* took a month to realise, the finished work, measuring 25 square metres, was removed from the airport terminal after three days (Bingyi 2017). This controversial

project, known colloquially online as '*mo dan'* (ink bomb), with its evocation of violence and acts of terror, did not resemble the kind of ink painting with which the public was familiar. It made audiences uncomfortable: 'Too dark. Too black' (Bingyi 2017). Like Bingyi's previous works, in *Epoché* the falling ink was impacted by wind and gravity. The artist is present, embodied in the final painting together with her hovering, exoskeletal helicopter, in the traces and sweeping marks of ink that remain, despite the absence of the brush and its gesture.

7.6 Enacting a *Yin-Yang* Paradox

Although Bingyi does not explicitly reference feminism in her work, nevertheless the (socially constructed) female body is directly, physically present in Bingyi's performative practice – and present as a trace or memory in the exhibited paintings. Bingyi's actions, and therefore her works, are gendered by virtue of her self-insertion into a male tradition, and by her oblique references to the reciprocity of *yin-yang* relationships. The disconnect between this much-desired universal harmony and the reality of women's experiences in a patriarchal social order creates the paradox found in He-Yin Zhen's *nannü*: it represents a yearning for this kind of transcendence in which *yin* and *yang* function as mutually reciprocal, transformative equal forces – a reciprocity that in the world of gendered bodies, gendered subjectivities and gendered social relations will always be out of reach. As we find in Zhuangzi, cited by Saldanha in 'Against Yin and Yang: the dao of feminist universalism' (2012): 'When *yin* and *yang* go wrong, heaven and earth are hugely disturbed.'[25] Bingyi's poetics of ink, enacted in wild mountain landscapes or dropped from the air to the earth, construct an embodied language with which she wrestles with significant questions of fragile relationships between humanity and the natural world.

Bingyi's painting-as-performance, operating in an expanded field bridging Eastern and Western conventions, was explored earlier in this chapter; we now come to what Wei Xing (2011) refers to as the 'problematic nature of history', which includes the masculinist scholar culture of imperial China, and the continuing patriarchal nature of the Chinese artworld. Chapter 2 outlined the essentialising understandings of gendered identities and 'women's art' (*nüxing yishu*) that underpinned curatorial and critical narratives in China in the 1990s and 2000s and that still operate today, to some extent. Perhaps at least in part due to this problematic history Bingyi, like many Chinese women artists, is reluctant to unambiguously claim a feminist identity:

> I understand the difficulty of the female struggles. I just refuse to participate in that discourse, that's all, because I have my own discourse […] I understand your discourse, but I have my own discourse, therefore I don't need to use your discourse. But that doesn't mean I'm not arguing for women, I'm not arguing for men. I'm arguing for all humans, all human rights and all human beliefs. I, especially, am arguing for talents, female talents (Bingyi 2017).

Bingyi separates feminism into two parts – a (Western) discourse which she does not believe applies to her, and a social reality with which she is all too familiar. Bingyi pointed out that due to her education and her relatively privileged position, she is an exception to the limitations that still hinder women in China: 'I could always say that I am very fortunate, but the general condition is still pretty dark,' and, 'The entire Chinese art world is male. Why is that surprising? It's not surprising!' (Bingyi 2017). Her desire to be 'free from gender' (Bingyi 2017) is seen in the context of her experience as an artist returning from a North American education to live and work in the still highly gendered Chinese art world – and, indeed, returning to a broader society in which gender distinctions are more than ever enforced in both government policy and popular culture. as outlined in Chapter 2. Bingyi's desire to be liberated from the deforming confines of gendered expectations and behaviours recalls Donna Haraway's hope, expressed in 'The Cyborg Manifesto':

> We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution could include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender (Haraway 1991, p.181).

Bingyi's utopian dream is also an allusion to the Daoist notion that *yin-yang* relationships are not only reciprocal but also transformative: *yin* can become *yang*, and vice versa. As Judith Chuan Xu argues, the non-dichotomous cosmology of the Daodejing and its insistence upon the 'mutual complementarity of the cosmic forces of *yin* and *yang* as the Dao in action' offers feminists alternatives to essentialist or biologically determinant binaries of gender (2003, p.50). This thesis, as previously stated, argues that such propositions do not sufficiently acknowledge patriarchal structural inequities that operate (in China and globally) to limit and define women – and other marginalised groups. Bingyi herself acknowledges that she is constrained by gendered assumptions as she is surrounded by others who accept them without question (2017). It is, however, important to acknowledge the significant influence of various interpretations of syncretic

Daoist/neo-Confucian philosophy on the work of Bingyi and the other artists whose work is analysed in this study, as the reinvestigation of these philosophical positions continues to inflect discourses of contemporary visual and literary culture in the PRC.

Despite Bingyi's performative, idiosyncratic and self-devised methods of applying ink to *xuan* paper, and her insistence, evident in the interview transcript, upon distancing herself from other practitioners in this field, she yet aligns herself in significant ways with the scholarly traditions of *shui mo* and *shu fa* and their philosophical underpinnings while simultaneously posing a challenge to its elitist history. Her references to the garden of the *yaji* reveal its central conundrum – the elegant gatherings of the literati scholars were explicitly designed to exclude those beyond the garden wall. Bingyi's work forcefully asserts her right to participate. Therefore, Bingyi's work is positioned in this chapter as an assertion of a specifically female energy, or *qi*, in contrast to the masculinist history of the conventions of ink painting in China. Her works mirror the essential paradox of *nannü* in which oscillating, fluxing *yin-yang* relationships seek the balance and reciprocity denied by the constraining forces of patriarchy.

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[1] From the volume of *Zhuangz*i translated by Martin Palmer, published by Penguin (Chuang 2006, pp.236–237)

[2] In comparison to Tao Aimin, Xiao Lu and Ma Yanling, Bingyi employs less explicitly gendered themes or imagery. To date her work has not generally been considered in relation to feminism and is clearly distinct from the more obviously gendered tropes associated with the *nüxing yishu* of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Yan Zhou, for example, includes her work in a chapter focused on what he designates as 'The Way of Ink' (2020, pp.407–412), rather than in a section examining feminist art for this reason. Pace Zhou, this thesis, however, contends that Bingyi's work may be understood as a gendered insertion of a female embodied experience into the masculinist lineage of the élite literati painters.

[3] The relevance of the term *Nachträglichkeit*, referring to Freudian 'afterwardness', a kind of belated, retrospective attribution of meaning (often sexual or traumatic) to past events, a deferred action or a rewriting of memory with the terms of the present, was explained in Chapter 4, Endnote 9.

[4] Bingyi earned a doctorate in art history and archaeology from Yale University in 2005 with a dissertation on the art of the Han Dynasty. Her CV is available from: http://www.bingyi.info/about/cv/ [accessed 28.12.20]

[5] See, for example, Jana S. Rošker's analysis of the important work of philosopher Li Zehou in reframing the concept of *tianren heyi* through a lens of western philosophy including Kant and Marx (2018, pp.72–90).

[6] Joan Kee cites Wu Hung's analysis of a series of works completed over a number of years by Yang Jiechang, *100 Layers of Ink*. In these works, the repeated application of layers of ink renders the mark of the brush and evidence of the artist's hand invisible, thus revealing Yang's intention to create a new field of ink painting (2010, p.92). For Kee, Yang's 'refusal' of the idiom of the brush-mark is evidence of the 'post-medium condition' of contemporaneity, and, despite his use of *xuan* paper, it reveals the absorption of Chinese contemporary artists into an international art mainstream (Kee 2010, pp.92–93). Yang Jiechang has lived in Germany since his participation in *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris in 1989. The contested issues of contemporaneity and globality, and the vexed question of whether they can be universalised, are discussed at greater length in Chapter 1.

[7] Sullivan's argument may be refuted by instances of painters in Europe working in public even if the practice may not have always been so intentionally a public performance. Some were very definitely intended to be performances of painting in the contemporary sense, however. One such example is the practice of the English Romantic painter, Joseph Mallord William Turner, whose habit was to finish, as well as to varnish, his canvases in front of crowds gathered at the Royal Academy on 'varnishing day'. See, for example, the c.1840 painting by William Parrott, entitled *Turner on Varnishing Day*, which is believed to show Turner in his top hat working on *Mercury and Argus*. Available from: http://collections.museums-sheffield.org.uk/view/objects/asitem/search@swginvno$$CONTAINS$$CGSG00741?acc=CGSG00741 [accessed 19.3.21] An evaluation of the competitive and reputation-enhancing impact of Turner's painterly performances may be found in Leo Costello, 2009/10. '"This cross-fire of colours": JMW Turner (1775-1851) and the Varnishing Days reconsidered'. *British Art Journal* Vol 10 (3) pp. 56-68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41615110?seq=1 [accessed 19.3.21].

[8] This approach to calligraphy is perhaps best exemplified by the famous 'drunken calligraphy', known as 'wild cursive', of Tang Dynasty calligraphers such as Zhang Xu and the monk Hai Su, known as 'the crazy Zhang and the drunk Su' (Yangsheng and Chan 2019). Their wild, spontaneous writing, sometimes using their own hair, was a reference to the legendary Daoist Eight Drunken Immortals. In contemporary art, this approach has been enacted in the 'After

Dinner Calligraphy' performance events of Zheng Guogu and the Yangjiang Group, in which leftover food and drink was mixed with ink for the performative writing of calligraphy. See, for example: https://blindspotgallery.com/exhibition/after-dinner-shu-fa-hong-kong-2012/ [accessed 16.4.20] It forms part of a masculinist history of calligraphy which by its very nature excluded women as it exalted a drunken abandonment of propriety which would never have been acceptable female behaviour.

[9] Bingyi preferred to be interviewed in English rather than in Chinese, turning to Chinese only when a concept proved difficult to explain in English. Her turns of phrase have not been edited or changed. Excerpts from the interview are quoted verbatim with occasional very minor edits or clarifications as addenda in brackets.

[10] Man does acknowledge, however, as He-Yin Zhen argued emphatically in 'On the Question of Women's Liberation' (1907), that in practice the reinterpretation of Daoist thought by Han Confucian scholars emphasised the patriarchal gendering of *yin-yang* and thus they provided themselves with a convenient justification for the subordination of women.

[11] Saldanha's analysis of the relationship between Daoism and post-structuralist feminism quotes this passage from Ryden's 2008 translation of Chapter 6 of the *Daodejing*:

The gully's spirit does not die
She is called ''the mysterious cleft''.
The gate to the mysterious cleft
Is called ''the root of heaven and earth''.
Weaving on, continuously existing
Use of her shall never end. (Saldanha 2012, p.153)

[12] Artist and collector Huang Binhong believed that direct contact with mountains and water were a vital source of artistic inspiration. Huang (1865-1955) was not a member of the Xin'an School, as such, but rather a 19th and 20th century painter, connoisseur, collector and scholar who admired and emulated them. See, for example, Claire Roberts, 2012. 'Metal and Stone, Brush and Ink: Word as Source in the Art of Huang Binhong'. *Portal Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies, Politics and Aesthetics in China Special Issue* (UTS e-Press) Vol 9 (3). Available from: https://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/journals/index.php/portal/issue/view/178. [accessed 23.1.21].

[13] This connection was revealed in an earlier interview with Bingyi prior to the fieldwork for this thesis. See Luise Guest, 2014 (republished 2017).'Between Heaven And Earth: Bingyi's Meditative Ink Paintings'. *The Culture Trip*. Available from: https://theculturetrip.com/asia/china/articles/between-heaven-and-earth-bingyi-s-meditative-ink-paintings/ [accessed 2.4.20].

[14] For more information about Huang Gongwang and the handscroll, see the website of the National Palace Museum, Taipei. https://www.npm.gov.tw/exh100/fuchun/en_02.html [accessed 2.4.20]

[15] Here Wu Hung was not referring to Bingyi specifically but making a general comment about how Chinese artists make works that he nominates as 'material art' (*caizhi yishu*) in the exhibition he curated for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Smart Museum, University of Chicago, in 2019/2020. Information about the exhibition and its theoretical background available from: https://theallureofmatter.org/ [accessed 21.7.21].

[16] Zheng Chongbin told Lisa Claypool about his transition to work on a very large scale: 'I was painting on paper surfaces that were about eight to ten feet tall to engage with the space of the temple. I considered the work an installation' (Claypool 2011, p.46).

[17] Bingyi explained this series of traumatic events to the White Rabbit Collection when *I Watch Myself Dying* was acquired in 2009. Information is available from: https://explore.dangrove.org/objects/345 [accessed 16.7.21]

[18] Previous chapters explained how literati painting and calligraphy in imperial China were essentially masculine pursuits, with women excluded from the Imperial Examinations that produced the ranks of scholar bureaucrats. See, for example, Clunas (2017). The New York school was notoriously male and misogynist. See, for example, Carter Ratcliff's 2020 essay, 'Lee Krasner: The Unacknowledged Equal' published by the Pollock-Krasner foundation, available from: https://pkf.org/ratcliff-essay/ [accessed 21.7.21]

[19] Alice Neel's 1970 portrait of Warhol after he was stabbed by Valerie Solanas is in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art. See https://whitney.org/collection/works/2887 [accessed 16.7.21]

[20] *I Watch Myself Dying* is held in the White Rabbit Collection, Sydney. See the collection database, available from: https://explore.dangrove.org/persons/284 [accessed 22.10.21]

[21] See, for example, Shan Chun, *Major Aspects of Chinese Religion and Philosophy: Dao of Inner Saint and Outer King*. New York: Springer (2012), p.72. For Bingyi the work is an embodied experience of the Daoist 'three treasures' (*sanbao*) that include the artist's *jing*, or essence, *qi*, or breath, and *shen*, or spirit (Pregadio 2016).

[22] The exclusionary nature of the contemporary Chinese artworld, curatorial practices, art criticism, and, in particular, the genre of contemporary, avant-garde manifestations of performative ink practices was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

[23] See, for example, Kwok-Ying Lau, 'The Pre-objective and the Primordial: Elements of a Phenomenological Reading of Zhuangzi' in *Daoist Encounters with Phenomenology*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

[24] For a discussion of the interconnecting forces of *ziran* and *wuwei*, see, for example, Karyn Lai, 2007. 'Ziran and Wuwei in the Daodejing: An Ethical Assessment' *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* Vol 6 (4) pp. 325–337.

[25] Saldanha refers to the volume translated by Martin Palmer, published by Penguin in 2006 (Chuang 2006, pp.236–237)

CHAPTER 8

Thesis Conclusion

'As women, we use a female language, from a female perspective, with a female heart, to see the world, to make art, what else can we be? You are already a feminist.'

(Ma Yanling, 2017)

Fig 8.1, Xiao Lu, *Human (Ren 人)*, 2016, documentation of performance at Kylin Center of Contemporary Art, Beijing, ink, water, Perspex. Image courtesy the artist.

8.1 Towards an 'Infidel Heteroglossia'

The '(In)Visible Ink' research project addresses and expands upon discourses of gender and Chineseness in (and around) the work of women artists in China. It aimed to extend upon existing scholarly investigations of the contribution of women artists to

contemporary art in the PRC, a field of investigation within the broader study of contemporary art in China which this thesis argues has to date been quite limited in its scope. Specifically, the study aimed to inquire critically into how gender operates in the power dynamics of the Chinese artworld, asking how it is embedded in the work of artists, and how it intersects with often-essentialising Chinese identity formations.

The central proposition of the thesis is that contemporary women artists in China, while not necessarily identifying their practice as feminist in Westernised discursive terms, have nonetheless employed significant Chinese artistic traditions to represent female histories and gendered, embodied experiences. This proposition was examined through four discrete, but interconnected case studies of artists selected for their complex intersectional identities of gender; Chineseness (including regional Chinese identities); intergenerational relationships; age and social class, and for the commonality of their use of ink and/or text/calligraphy in works ranging from printmaking and painting to performance, installation and land art.

The case studies focus upon artists who subvert or reinvent ink painting conventions, long gendered as an (almost) exclusively male visual language. The study engaged in intersectional and situated Chinese feminist readings of artworks, informed by primary sources – dialogic encounters with the artists. A methodology influenced by feminist ethnography took the form of a series of semi-structured interview encounters in the artists' studios, juxtaposed with close analysis of their work. Their sometimes-transgressive ink works, interpreted in this thesis as acts of counter-patriarchal appropriation and translation, insist that the genre identified by Wu Hung (2014; 2019) as 'Experimental Ink Painting' (*shiyan shuimohua*) accommodates and makes visible female histories, experiences, and subjectivities.

The focus on a specific genre of artistic practice – the reinvestigation of ink painting and/or calligraphy as an experimental, contemporary (*dangdai*) art practice – has to date been little examined in relation to *nüxing yishu* (women's art), therefore it provided an opportunity to develop close studies of the work of particular artists. One of these, Xiao Lu, has been the subject of considerable scholarly and critical investigation.[1] Another, Tao Aimin, has been the focus of feminist scholarship in the work of Shuqin Cui and Sasha Su-Ling Welland. As yet, the work of Ma Yanling and Bingyi has not been critically analysed in this degree of depth. Furthermore, the focus of this study on

'Experimental Ink Painting' (*shiyan shuimohua*) provided an opportunity for connections to be made between the work of the four in relation to feminist art practices in the PRC, aiming to build upon the existing scholarly discussions of their work.

The study proposed that forms of locally situated feminism operate to re-invent and re-invigorate the artistic conventions of ink painting and calligraphy – conventions that were historically (in both pre- and post-Mao contexts) a male-dominated field. The initial challenge of the study was the development of a method and theoretical framework with which to engage with the complexities of artistic praxis in contemporary China. Existing feminist or postcolonial discourses proved inadequate alone for a transcultural study of this nature. A deep understanding of the work of the selected artists in relation to the research questions regarding the role of gender and Chinese identity in contemporary Chinese art demanded an interrogatory lens comprised of several distinct aspects of feminist theory and practice. Therefore, three strands of Chinese and Euro-American theory not usually seen together were interwoven as a transcultural theoretical framework enabling the study to engage with the work of the selected artists at a deep level. This framework revealed intersecting relationships between the artists' work and the intellectual/philosophical and socio-political context within which they make and exhibit their work. This habitus is informed by the artists' experiences of a Chinese contemporaneity that includes the revival of Daoist cosmology and Confucian aesthetics, the scholarly history of ink painting and calligraphy, the emergence of *nüxing yishu* in the 1990s and its problematic position today, the persistence of Marxism/Leninism in 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics', and the continuing influence of the post-Cultural Revolution artistic avant-garde.

Like Donna Haraway's (1994, p. 69) metaphorical game of cat's cradle – a game that 'takes great skill and can result in some serious surprises' – this study, too, sought a 'knotted analytical practice' in order to come to fresh understandings of the oscillations and imbrications of gendered and Chinese identities in the field of Chinese contemporary art. At first seemingly unconnected, the three distinct discourses that were selected intersect and overlap. Constructing a polyvocal feminist interrogatory lens, the early 20th-century Chinese gendering construct of *nannü* developed by He-Yin Zhen was woven with the alternate feminist travelling/translation theory proposed by Min Dongchao, and with Ella Shohat's postcolonial, intersectional notion of a 'subterranean' feminism

operating in the global South.[2] Knitted (or knotted) together they echo Haraway's (1994, p.66) metaphor of a cat's cradle of 'interknotted discourses'. Apparently distinct analytic categories formed a prismatic, shifting view of the artists and their work that accommodated apparent contradictions and allowed for richer interpretations. There were indeed many 'surprises' along the way, not least the realisation of the persistent influence of syncretic Daoist/Confucian beliefs in the work of each artist that significantly informed their responses to feminism.

Theoretical strands that alone seemed somewhat insubstantial and thread-like became, when stitched together, a lacy analytical net capable of bearing the weight of interpretation – surprisingly strong, like a spider's woven gossamer, but with sufficient spaces to allow for the inevitable emergence of ambivalence, enigma, ambiguity and even contradiction. As Lauren Berlant (2011, p.685) argues:

> […] any social theory worthy of its ambition requires a space for enigmatic, chaotic, incoherent, and structurally contradictory attachments […] There is no cure for ambivalence. This is what it means to move within an object world.

The complex conditions of contemporaneity require space for the incoherent, the enigmatic, the paradoxical and the contradictory. Together, in encounters in artists' studios and in my encounters with objects, the four artists and this researcher were jointly navigating the ambiguous spaces of the contemporary Chinese world, and the socio-political and cultural habitus of the Beijing artworld in particular.

The dialogic interview-as-encounter was selected as a methodology appropriate to this study as it aimed to centre the voices of women in the discourse. As outlined in Chapter 3, feminist research is understood to be premised on the rejection of the god-like vantage point and dispassionate, supposedly 'objective' detachment of traditional academic research, in which too often in the past women, people of colour, and other marginalised individuals were spoken about rather than spoken with. Chapter 3 of the thesis argued that a feminist approach to the semi-structured interview-as-encounter offers the potential to contribute to the ongoing project of inserting women into the discourses of the humanities and challenging traditional disciplinary boundaries. Dialogue, as Tullio Maranhaõ (1990) positions it, is a complex process of collaborative construction and meaning-making that both weaves together and holds tension. It is a process that renders the 'speaking selves'

and 'refracted voices' of women audible (Ko 2005, pp.12-13). The dialogic encounters in this study therefore aimed to contribute to what Fanny Söderbäck (2012, p.7) describes as an 'experimental space where feminist voices can be articulated […] a cartography that reveals the points and lines where tension and dissent happen and change occurs'.

The aim, then, was to develop a method for the study in which Donna Haraway's (1991, p.181) notion of 'infidel heteroglossia'– a polyphonic and polylingual discourse embracing complexity, ambiguity and contradiction – allows for the possibility of new feminist knowledges to take shape within the interconnected but factionalised (and regionalised) conditions of contemporaneity. Here, in the border zones of feminist research, there is mutual recognition of the otherness of the other, yet a grasping nevertheless for the co-construction of meaning/s. The complex relationship between the self and the other afforded by this method offered rich possibilities for interpretation.

An early twentieth-century Chinese feminist theory – He-Yin Zhen's analysis of the power structures that created binary gender categories in which women were inevitably subordinated – was woven into the warp and weft of the theoretical threads that frame the study. The gendering category of *nannü* with which He-Yin critiqued the role of classical Chinese scholarship in Confucian social relations illuminated aspects of the artists' works which have not previously been identified or analysed in this degree of detail. The analysis of my encounter with each artist – and, indeed, the encounters with their works that followed the fieldwork in Beijing – acknowledges the differences, the contradictions, the occasional misunderstandings, and the paradoxes that result from the situated knowledge of the artists in relation to that of the researcher.

Each encounter, and the consequent ekphrastic analysis of specific works, became an instance of practice from which it was hoped broader conclusions could be drawn in relation to the field of contemporary art produced by women in/from China. The thesis, therefore, examines how performative and multi-layered constructions of Chinese identity ('Chineseness')[3] intersect with female histories and complex feminist, counter-patriarchal and 'feminine' identities in the production and exhibition of the artists' work. The analysis of the data drawn from interviews intersects with the close reading of their works to build a discursive framework that encompasses the artists' 'subterranean' feminist intentions (whether declared, ambivalent, undeclared or denied), their intentional

allusions to historical and contemporary Chinese visual and material culture, and the imbrication of their work with a non-rationalist Daoist philosophical tradition.

The interviews revealed that for the artists, the conceptual and material focus of their work fluctuates around a scaffold comprised of deeply felt but sometimes contradictory identity formations. Apart from gender, national and/or regional identity, age, and social class these also include reverence for China's cultural and artistic history; the sometimes essentialising notions of femininity embodied in the term *nüxing yishu*; interest in non-rationalist syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian poetic sensibilities; and sometimes, too, more radical interpretations of feminism. To further complicate these issues of identity and context the artists position themselves within the global art arena of curated exhibitions outside China, as well as within the distinctive Chinese art ecology. The discursive play between these sometimes-competing analytic categories is continuously undergoing a process of renegotiation and reinvention.

8.2 Gender and Chineseness in a local/global contemporaneity

The work of women artists using ink and/or calligraphy, working within and/or pushing against artistic conventions, and employing materials that are inextricably connected with an identity of 'Chineseness' in both historical and modern contexts, has been as yet little studied as a specific field of gendered practice. Since its emergence in the late twentieth century, 'Experimental Ink Painting' (*shiyan shuimohua*) appropriates, recontextualises and reinvents ink painting and calligraphy. The '(In)Visible Ink' project hypothesised that the work of women artists would differ in significant ways from the work of their male peers in this field, responsive to gendered discourses and embodied experiences within the conditions of twenty-first century contemporaneity.

The research project further hypothesised that an examination of the contemporary ink painting, installation and performance works of female artists in the PRC would reveal a shift in the practices of the 'Experimental Ink' genre that could be interpreted as counter-patriarchal – even feminist – appropriations and translations. The study therefore aimed to develop more complex understandings of the nature and significance of this genre of contemporary art in/from China, illuminating the previously neglected contributions of women artists to its development. The close analysis of the four artists selected as instances of practice revealed that contemporary women artists in China, while not necessarily identifying their practice as feminist in Westernised discursive terms, have

nevertheless employed the significant Chinese materiality of ink and contemporary adaptations of the artistic traditions of ink painting and calligraphy to construct a gendered visual language with which they represent how female histories, subjectivities and embodied female experiences exist under patriarchal power structures that operated in the past, just as they continue to operate today, to subordinate and marginalise women.

Therefore, the study examined how the construction of national and regional (Chinese) identities that are imbued with Buddhist/Daoist/Confucian references intersect with complex feminist or counter-patriarchal identities in the work of women artists in/from China. Further, the thesis posed the question of how the production and exhibition of work by the four focus artists contributes to local and global discourses of contemporaneity in relation to gender, feminism and Chineseness, arguing that the use of ink, text, and culturally or politically encoded found objects in their work (washboards and sanitary napkins, for example) comprise a gendered visual code that may be interpreted in distinctly different ways inside and outside the PRC. The historically inflected medium of ink, imbued with references to both the literati painters in Imperial China and the avant-garde of the late twentieth century, has been co-opted in their work as a vehicle to represent culturally situated female histories and gendered experiences.

Over the course of the study, it became increasingly evident that the four artists position themselves strategically within both local and global artworlds. Their use of ink and references to calligraphy identify their Chinese inheritance for audiences outside China, which might be viewed by some as a form of cultural resistance (Gladston 2014, para. 24), even a form of self-orientalising.[4] Yet the interviews revealed that the artists view their practice as driven by complex relationships to aesthetic and philosophical traditions of pre-1949 China, as well as to internationalist contemporary art practices. These relationships are sometimes aligned with, and sometimes antithetical to, their explorations of gender. Furthermore, analysis of the artists' work and the interview data revealed that the gendered framing of each artist's work is imbricated with significant aspects of identity and experience particular to each woman. These specific identity formations have been analysed in each of the four case study chapters. The thesis draws a conclusion, discussed in the following section, that in their work the materiality of ink becomes in and of itself a feminist praxis.

8.3 Ink Art as a Feminist Praxis: Conclusions

The study positions the work of the four artists as embodied responses to the dominant discourses of the continuum of the scholarly ink tradition in contemporary art in/from China, and an appropriation/translation of the post-Cultural Revolution idiom of Experimental Ink Painting. The result is a linguistic, visual, and material intersectionality that is argued in this thesis to be translational – and transformative. This thesis argues, therefore, that women artists working within this idiom of *shiyan shuimohua* comprise a distinct – and as yet little studied – category of *nüxing yishu*.

The tradition into which the artists insert their female sensibilities, experiences, subjectivities and (literally, in several instances) their bodies, is the history of literati ink painting (*shuimo hua*) and calligraphy (*shu fa*). This Chinese history, redolent with Confucian scholarly masculine privilege and power, was discussed in previous chapters. Geremie Barmé (2012, p.4) points out that, 'For the Chinese world, the past is not a foreign country; many of the major issues related to ideas and culture, thought and history remain on the agenda of political and social change today.' Chinese artists using the medium of Chinese ink understand its historical and contemporary permutations and possibilities, and the myriad cultural and political meanings embedded in this material.

Viewed through an intersectional feminist lens this thesis proposes that the work of Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu constructs a visual and material language that places women – their life experiences and their position in unequal structures and systems of power – at the centre of the discourse. Their works of performance art, land art, installation and painting push against the traditional boundaries of these forms. In doing so they enter a space from which women were once almost entirely excluded. This power shift permits a reading of the artists' work as a critique of patriarchal power structures both past and present, whether the artists themselves explicitly claim or disavow (Western) feminism. The case studies in this thesis reveal that, within the constraints of how *nüxing yishu* operates in the Chinese artworld and its (still) patriarchal structures and systems, the four artists – and, it might be suggested, contemporary women artists in China more broadly – are engaged in a continuous process of identity negotiation, oscillating between identities as feminist and/or 'feminine'; local and/or global; Chinese and/or cosmopolitan practitioners.

The artists' use of ink is of great significance. It becomes a metaphor for bodily fluids; for menstruation and sex; childbirth and lactation; illness and death. It signifies processes of flow: the transfer of *qi* energy, air and water through the porousness of skin. It represents the permeabilities and possibilities of being human. Their use of ink is also a culturally encoded embodiment of Chinese identity, laden with complex histories of long distant and more recent suffering, as well as weighted with an aesthetic and philosophical Chinese cultural history. Tao Aimin and Ma Yanling, for example, enter this space with *nüshu* – a calligraphic script form invented by rural women. Traces of gendered embodiment are visible in their work through the materiality of ink, *xuan* paper, and quotidian found objects ranging from wooden washboards to sanitary pads. This materiality constructs allegories of daughterhood and motherhood, domestic labour and sexuality. Each artist alludes to specific gendered experiences. Tao Aimin represents histories of domestic labour and filial obligation. Xiao Lu references the female body, fertility/infertility, and processes of aging and menopause. Ma Yanling explores the melancholy of motherhood. Bingyi's work, less obviously gendered, examines the intersection between self and other; her vast sheets of *xuan* paper symbolise skin – the membrane between her internal selfhood and the external world of the Anthropocene.

The study revealed that their work is indeed distinct from that of their male peers. Their adoption of ink and (in the case of Ma Yanling and Tao Aimin calligraphic text forms) in which identities of gender and Chineseness are enacted and embodied is a kind of reclamation, inserting women into a previously masculinist historical and contemporary discourse. This is by definition a subversive position, whether the artists intend it to be so or not, and whether they explicitly articulate it as such or not. In their work, therefore, ink painting (with all its historical associations of the masculinist power structures of the Chinese imperial court and its literati *wenren* culture), becomes a feminist praxis, embodying feminism's counter-patriarchal intent in its very materiality. Similarly, the ekphrastic analysis of their works in this thesis, informed by the primary sources of the studio encounters, enacts a feminist praxis that echoes Griselda Pollock's (1988) insistence upon critically examining the gendering of the art historical narrative, aiming to address the marginalisation of female artists from the discourses of Chinese contemporary art and establish the significant role of artists working with ink and calligraphy as a distinct category of *nüxing yishu*.

8.4 The Contribution of the Thesis to the Field

This study operates within existing discourses in the field of Chinese contemporary art and builds upon previous scholarship. The case studies in this thesis contribute in-depth analysis of four artists, Bingyi, Ma Yanling, Tao Aimin and Xiao Lu. Although their work is represented in the literature to the limited extent previously outlined, the case studies in this thesis represent a closer focus upon their work through an interwoven, transcultural theoretical framework. Furthermore, the ekphrastic analysis/interpretation of selected artworks, positioned within the broader discourses of contemporary art in the PRC, is illuminated by semi-structured interview encounters with each artist. These primary sources are a crucial element of this study, building upon previous analysis of the practice of women artists in the PRC through a comprehensively theorised framework that acknowledges, extends upon, and critically qualifies existing feminist discourses and allows new readings of their works.

The unique approach in this study, incorporating *nannü* with other elements of both Euro-American and Chinese feminisms, is the emphasis, not only on *nannü's* usefulness as an analytic category of refractions of gender and class (past and present), but also its illumination of the continuing influence of syncretic Daoist/neo-Confucian cosmology in the work of the four artists. Emerging in part from the emphasis in this study on culturally encoded materiality, *nannü* opened up new ways of interpreting the continuing – and paradoxical – presence of the mutually reciprocal push and pull of *yin* and *yang* that is visible as traces in their work, and which is explicitly acknowledged in the interviews. Eva Kit Wah Man (2015; 2016) had previously developed this area of investigation with her theory – critically examined in the work of Paul Gladston (2014; 2019; 2020) – that Confucian aesthetics and non-rationalist Daoist cosmological phenomenology offer possibilities for feminist scholars of the visual arts. While acknowledging the significance of Man's work, this thesis concludes that the work of the artists examined in Chapters 4–7 reveals irreconcilable tensions between *yin-yang* cosmological relationships and the continuing reality of systemic oppression of women under patriarchy.

In particular, this thesis concurs with recent feminist scholarship in its explicit recognition that there can be no single, singular feminist discourse. As Fanny Söderbäck (2012, p.3) indicates in 'The Politics of Polyphony': 'We are not sure how to deal with the vague, the multilateral, the horizontal, the polyphone.' She further points out that women who were

largely absent from the discourses of second-wave feminism (including non-Western women and women of colour, among other categories of subalternity), 'those women, albeit marginalized, have of course always offered alternative discourses, critical discourses, discourses from the margins' (Söderbäck 2012, p.4). Throughout the course of fieldwork in China in 2017 and the consequent processes of research, analysis and thesis writing, it became increasingly evident that neither existing Euro-American intersectional feminist theory nor Chinese feminism/s alone were sufficient to establish culturally just understandings of the nature and significance of the artists' works and their contribution to discourses of contemporary Chinese art.

Therefore, this study develops the existing analysis in the field, including Man's identification of the relevance of Daoist/Confucian discourses; Pittwood's Foucauldian analysis of gender in Chinese contemporary art; Welland's unpacking of gendered discourses in the urbanised China of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century; Cui's analysis of the gendered body in historiographies of sexuality and female experience, and Gladston and Howarth-Gladston's analysis of Chinese contemporary art with respect to syncretic Confucian discourses and artistic practices under conditions of contemporaneity. It proposes a systematic extension of the existing broad, differentiated and transcultural analysis of contemporary art by Chinese women.

A strength of the '(In)Visible Ink' research project is the attention it draws to the potential for the scholarly examination of contemporary art practices in China through intersecting lenses of gender and Chinese identity. These close, contextually informed readings of the work of women artists whose practice is engaged with experimental (*shiyan*) applications of ink and/or text enrich our understanding of the ink tradition in its contemporary guise. The four case studies provided a generative source of data drawn from both the recorded interview/encounters and the subsequent analysis of artworks, enabling conclusions to be drawn in relation to their work as a counter-patriarchal art practice that inserts female histories and women's lived experiences into the historical and contemporary discourses of ink painting. The work of each artist bears traces of the essential paradox of *nannü* in which oscillating, fluxing *yin-yang* relationships seek an equilibrium that patriarchal structures of power deny. The thesis has established that the work of each artist, examined through lenses of situated Chinese and Euro-American feminist theory, reveals

intersections of identity that have contributed to the expressive and conceptual possibilities of their work in the genre of experimental ink art.

Further, the analysis of the practice of the four women examined in this study has demonstrated how the materiality of ink is used in their work to represent female subjectivities and embodied experiences of sexuality, fertility, menstruation and menopause, motherhood, labour, injury and ageing. They may thus be said to reclaim the genre as a feminist space of embodiment within which women actively shape – and are themselves shaped by – the discourse. In conclusion, therefore, this thesis argues that, analysed through lenses of gender informed by transcultural feminist theory, their work, understood as a distinct category of *nüxing yishu*, expands the discourses of the ink tradition and of Experimental Ink Painting (*shiyan shuimohua*).

8.6 An Epilogue: Final Thoughts

There is, of course, much more work to be done in the field of contemporary Chinese art in relation to the contribution of women artists to the discourse. The interviews with the artists in this study, juxtaposed with readings of their works through the prism of a transcultural feminist theoretical framework, reveal that their gender identities intersect with aspects of Chinese identity, allowing for rich interpretations of their work that may in the future be applicable to the scholarly investigation of other artists, and indeed other artforms. In this investigation of a small number of highly focused case studies I hope to have demonstrated the valuable opportunities afforded by the close attention to gender and identity/identities in Chinese art.

Future research focused on artists working with ink and calligraphic text forms who live and work in the PRC beyond Beijing, or more broadly in the Sinophone or diasporic world beyond the PRC, may well reveal different issues and distinct artistic practices in relation to gender and Chineseness. Studies investigating the work of artists from more diverse backgrounds or geographies, from different generations, or those from the Chinese diaspora are urgently needed. Similarly, it would be valuable to compare the findings of this study in relation to gender, feminism, and Chinese identity with a study of women artists working in a more traditional idiom as ink painters on paper or silk.

It should be acknowledged, too, that differing socio-political contexts and cultural/discursive/material conditions may yield different conclusions to those articulated here. It is envisaged that future research will usefully examine the impact of feminism and issues of gender on the work of younger artists, and in particular will investigate its impact on male-identifying, non-binary, genderqueer or trans artists. Finally, this study has opened up important questions of the influence of syncretic Daoist/Confucian philosophy and aesthetics on the work of Chinese women artists which could be fruitfully developed in future research inquiring into how this influence intersects with an increasingly nationalistic global Chinese presence.

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[1] The work of Xiao Lu has been analysed by Gao Minglu, Wu Hung, Jonathan Goodman, Shuqin Cui, and Paul Gladston and Lynne Howarth-Gladston. The contribution of these scholars is discussed in Chapters 2 and 5.

[2] The rationale for the development of a polyvocal theoretical framework of 'knotted' Chinese and Western feminist discourse is explained in Chapter 2.

[3] An explanation of how the contested term 'Chineseness' is used in this thesis is found in Chapter 1, Section 1.2. The way this identity formation is manifested in the work of the four case study artists is best represented by Ien Ang (2001, p.25) as 'a category whose meanings are not fixed and pre-given, but constantly renegotiated and re-articulated'.

[4] Gladston (2014, para. 24), for example, argues that 'The use of readily recognisable signifiers of Chineseness by contemporary Chinese artists, however, is not open to interpretation simply as a sign of separatist cultural resistance. It has also proved to be a significant selling point for contemporary Chinese art on the international art market; one that can be understood to pander to the orientalising abstractions of non-Chinese buyers who often remain profoundly ignorant of Chinese culture and history. It is therefore possible to view the use of readily recognisable signifiers of Chineseness by contemporary Chinese artists simultaneously as a form of cultural resistance and of commercial self-orientalisation.' This thesis argues, further, that forms of a continually renegotiated Chineseness are imbricated with the construction of gender identities and enacted through the visual and material language of the artists' works.

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