People who have heard of the legendary Chinese woman artist Pan Yuliang (1895–1977) are often more attracted to the story of an ex-prostitute becoming an international artist than being seriously interested in her artistic accomplishments. Chinese art critic Tao Yongbai points out that “Pan Yuliang has become a household name in China today because of her extraordinary life. People are often more interested in her legendary past, and have little knowledge that she was one of the outstanding woman artists in China’s early Western painting movement.”

Although there have been books written and films made on her dramatic life, in-depth analysis of Pan’s artworks has been scarce and attempted only sporadically. To address the overemphasis on Pan’s life and to situate her within art history, I would like to examine a series of her nude works as pieces representative of the early Western art movement in China that possess distinctive modernist qualities. I will also provide an overview that will help to locate the artist parallel to the sociocultural and political issues of her period.

Pan Yuliang’s childhood coincided with the overthrow of the long-reigning imperial Qing dynasty (1644–1911), when the new Republic of China was still in a state of political disarray. Her dramatic life and career could not be but intertwined with the turmoil and early modernization of China at the turn of the century, and her art evolved within the flux of transformations where the conflicting dichotomies of East and West, tradition and modernity, male chauvinism and emerging feminism co-existed. Pan’s modernist works contain novel sociocultural concepts with which modern reformers strove to replace outdated customs. Wang Lihua, a senior curator and researcher at Anhui Provincial Museum, writes, “Pan Yuliang did not simply synthesize elements of Eastern and Western painting techniques in her works, her personal, difficult experiences are clearly reflected in her art. She expressed and highlighted themes related to her own life as well as common issues and problems that women faced in her time. She is one of the earliest Chinese woman artists who paid close attention to the changing situation of women during the modernizing era.”

Pan Yuliang was born on June 14, 1895 in Yangzhou, Jiangsu province, as Chen Xiuqing, and was renamed Zhang Yuliang when she was adopted by her maternal uncle after the early passing away of her parents. Because of poverty, her uncle sold her to a brothel in the city of Wuhu in Anhui
province when she was in her early teens. On a chance occasion, she met Pan Zanhua, a customs official, who rescued her from the brothel. Pan Zanhua was an advocate for modernity and a member of Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionary league (Tong Meng Hui). He studied at the Waseda University in Japan together with the prominent intellectual Chen Duxiu. Greatly empathizing with Yuliang’s desperate situation, Pan Zanhua took her as his second wife in 1913 and resettled her in Shanghai in 1916 where she learned to read and write. Out of gratitude, Yuliang adopted his surname, “Pan.” Living next to Yuliang’s rented house was artist Hong Ye (1886–1932), who lectured at the Shanghai Art Academy. Hong started teaching at the academy in 1914, when it was still known as Shanghai Drawing and Art Academy (Shanghai Tuhua Meishu Xue Yuan, the previous name of Shanghai Art Academy). Hong was known for his study and teaching of colours, and whose paintings revealed Western influences. Drawn to Hong’s painting activity, Pan Yuliang started taking oil painting lessons from him in 1917, which laid the foundation for her Western-style painting.

As China worked its way towards modernization in the early twentieth century, the Shanghai Art Academy, under the bold leadership of its principal Liu Haisu, took in its first batch of women students in 1918. The school’s proposal of co-education was a response to the educational reforms of Cai Yuanpei, the newly appointed Minister of Education in Republican China. With encouragement from Hong Ye and Chen Duxiu, Pan applied for a place in the inaugural intake of women students at the art academy. Shanghai, the place where Pan’s artistic journey began, was, as a result of the enforced Treaty of Nanjing at the end of the Opium War, one of the first five treaty ports along the east coast of China to open up for international trade in 1842. The presence of large communities of foreigners exposed the residents of Shanghai to many aspects of Western culture, and the Shanghai Art Academy was one of the first Chinese art institutions to advocate Western painting. Liu Haisu, a champion of modern European styles, was among the earliest to incorporate Western life drawing into the academy’s curriculum. Liu’s practice of using nude models in class created
a public outrage, leading conservatives, including warlords and inflexible moralists, to accuse him of being a “traitor to art” and of perverting truth and humanity. This incident reflected an exciting yet uncertain period when modernists were advocating new foreign concepts while conservatives persisted with tradition.

After graduating from the Shanghai Art Academy, Pan became the first woman artist in the Chinese Republic to win an official scholarship to study in France. During this period, a large number of Chinese art students flocked to France, particularly Paris, for their studies. The large influx of non-French artists living and working in Paris, which included a small number of Asian artists, led to a generally defined fraternity known as the “School of Paris.” This group of Paris-trained Chinese artists who returned home played important roles as mediators of modern Western art. As Li Chu-Tsing writes, “the period from 1927 to 1939 can be considered as the golden age of Parisian influence on Chinese art.” In 1921, Pan first began her studies in France at the Institute Franco-Chinois in Lyon, and later studied at the École nationale des beaux-arts in Lyon. Pan was transferred to
Paris a year later and studied at the École des beaux-Arts de Paris, where she came under the tutelage of French artists Lucien Simon (1861–1945) and Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret (1852–1929).

When Pan graduated from the École in Paris in 1925, she was awarded the prestigious Rome Scholarship at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome, where she was also taught sculpture, and her student works were regularly selected for the national art exhibitions in Italy. One of her nude oil paintings also won a 5,000 Lira award at the Italy International Fine Arts Exhibition in 1927. It was the first time that a Chinese artist had ever won such a significant art award in Italy, and upon her return to China after the completion of her studies, Pan was invited to teach Western Painting at the Shanghai Art Academy in 1929. She was also appointed Director of the Western Painting department. In less than a decade after her studies in Europe, Pan subsequently held five solo exhibitions in China, in addition to numerous joint exhibitions and collaborations that took place in various cities in China as well as overseas.

Pan's individualized artistic vision of early Chinese modernism is manifested through her distinct representation of the nude. Her repeated articulations of the nude proposed challenges to conservative perceptions of the subject in Chinese art circles. The great master Xu Beihong saluted Pan's valour when he reviewed her works in 1935: “For three hundred years no literati artist has dared tread into the unknown realm of nature’s beauty. . . . in the perilous search for true art, the literati artists have failed . . . save for heroine Madame Pan Yuliang.”5 For the duration of her artistic career, Pan continued to affirm that her nude paintings were her most significant works. In her first publication, Pan Yuliang Oil Painting Collection (1934), nudes are shown to make up a major component of the works done in her early career. Pan indicated that among her earliest works, two nude paintings, Dawn (qingchen), from 1928, and Spring (chun), from 1930, were her most satisfactory.6 During her last exhibition in Paris, in 1977, she told French curator Vadime Elisseeff that she picked her series of Asian nudes for the show because they were her most representative works.7

While Pan had gained artistic recognition with her nude representations, these works created considerable controversy and seem to have made it difficult for her to remain in China. Not having the cultural background and understanding of the nude as an artistic genre, it was generally understood in early twentieth-century Chinese society as the state of being “naked,” and one might have expected Pan to be ultra-sensitive and careful in avoiding public furor over the depiction of nudity. Art historian Sir Kenneth Clark comments that “the idea of offering the naked body for its own sake as a serious subject of contemplation simply did not occur to the Chinese or Japanese mind, and to this day raises a slight barrier of misunderstanding,”8 and indicates that the nude as a genre in art was radical and problematic in the Chinese context.
Although Pan’s fortunate change of fate came from the strong support of the artistic intelligentsia with whom she was associated after her marriage, Pan continued to face various challenges in her artistic career. Pan appeared to have encountered many instances of prejudice and injustice in relation to her gender and disadvantaged background. The article of Pan in *Seven Chinese Painters Who Studied in France, 1918-1960* writes that “Pan wished to dedicate herself to the art education of China but her unusual background made it difficult for her to achieve this goal in the conservative China . . .”9 In addition to being a woman artist in a conservative environment, Pan’s background and her pursuit of the nude in her art stirred disapproval and controversy within arts circles and Chinese society at large.

The Chinese art world of the period was still strictly organized by an order of seniority and its system manipulated by an established group of male players. In China, the legacy of traditional ink painting was dominated by male masters, many of whom were deeply rooted in feudalistic Confucius thinking. Their artistic ideologies, embedded in the dominant Chinese culture, made them especially resistant to modern concepts of Western art. Traditionally, aged masters were highly regarded while younger artists were obliged to follow in the seniors’ footsteps. In this context, Pan’s apparent quick rise to fame not only aroused resentment from other artists, but her modern representations of the nude, along with her outspoken ways, contradicted traditions and piqued conservatives in China. Despite the progress made by modern artists in the early twentieth century, the influence of Western art on Chinese society was limited, and the modernist art Pan practiced was understood only by a small group of Westernized elites.

Struggling within predominantly male and conservative art circles, Pan felt rejected by this restrictive environment. She left China in 1937 for Paris, ostensibly to take part in the Exposition Internationale de Paris, but never returned. Taking into account the elements of non-conformity and individuality in her works, Pan should rightly be honoured as a modern artist of her time. Yu Feng, a prominent woman artist who studied under Pan in the 1930s, defended her: “As a highly innovative artist, Pan has every reason to be ranked with her male counterparts, including Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu.”10 While her innovative works should have been given enduring recognition at a time when intellectuals were advocating modern reforms and pioneer feminists were encouraging women to step forward in society, this did not occur. The narrative of Pan highlights contradictions within the early modernization of China.

In pre-modern China, women were associated with the domestic sphere due to long-established Chinese patriarchal culture, where gender hierarchy had a tremendous impact on women’s lives. The May Fourth New Culture Movement (1915 to 1925) convinced Chinese intellectuals that feudal values had to be discarded and created a wave of feminist activism in urban Chinese cities. Wu Yu, a prominent intellectual from the New Culture
movement, denounced Confucianism and wrote about Western women's increasingly public roles and called upon Chinese women to follow the trend of the West. The increased public awareness of women's problems caused a dramatic rise in women's participation in the early women's movement. Wang Zhen, a scholar of Chinese studies, lists out a few areas in which the influence of May Fourth feminism was felt, one of which is: “educated women with a new consciousness entered the public space, demanding social, cultural, and political changes.”

In the step towards self-definition, early twentieth-century Chinese women artists and writers began to express themselves through personalized works. As a woman artist emerging from the May Fourth generation, Pan's distinct, modern paintings can be seen as articulations of her experiences, intellect, and emotions. Against the backdrop of women as objects of oppression in traditional patriarchal China, her representations of women can be seen as assertions of a Chinese woman's individualism in a new society. While there is no record of her participation in feminist activism, Pan's outspoken ways, outstanding artist career, and leadership roles at various times clearly show that she was a modern woman. She was also well connected with the New Cultural Movement intellectuals, and would have been well informed about the Chinese women's movement. Chen Duxiu, who, as mentioned earlier, was a supporter of Pan, was also the chief editor of the progressive magazine The New Youth (Xin Qingnian) and initiated a column in 1917 that focused on women, “Woman Problem” (nüzi wenti), since 1917.

Although a rising number of women began to receive education, many conservatives only perceived this change as improving women's abilities so that they could become better-equipped wives and mothers. Beneath the uncertainties accompanying the process of modernization, the evolution of the new Chinese woman was associated with conflicting images. In her pursuit of modernity and independence, the woman was expected to maintain a feminine image to avert male anxiety. Chinese studies scholar Barbara Mittler highlights the ambiguous representations of modern women in the Shanghai media in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "Women were considered the agent of modernity—for the glory of China—but at the same time, they were seen and felt to be its most frightening symbol." The political and cultural reformation of this period created great anxieties about men's former privileges and women's new roles and responsibilities.

Pan's emotional world is an ambiguous area that Chinese writers continue to have disputes about. There are a number of paintings in Pan's late artistic career that express her vision of motherhood. In relation to her maternity paintings, Lu Rongzhi writes, "Her descriptions of mother's love were even more direct; she repeatedly utilized it as a theme, indicating her deep longing for her mother's love." It is speculated by some Chinese writers that Pan was once pregnant with Pan Zanhua's child but had an abortion.
because she felt a child born from a mother of her background would be despised in Chinese society. Whether by choice or not, Pan never had children of her own in her lifetime. Instead, she chose to lead an alternative lifestyle as a solitary artist in Europe, unusual for a Chinese woman of her period. Pan’s shifting social circumstances, from an orphan, ex-prostitute, and concubine to an art scholar, recognized artist, and professor in China, and finally to a solitary artist in France, could have created problems for her in reconciling personal and professional identities. Are her maternity pictures signs of longing for a mother’s love, or are they an indication of regret for an aborted baby?

It can also be argued that Pan was lonely and conceivably painted these maternity pictures to fill the void of homesickness. She previously articulated a desire for a family life through an oil painting, entitled *My Family* (1931), that featured herself, Pan Zanhua, and one of his sons from an earlier marriage. Yet, *My Family* is different from a typical family representation, because it focuses on Pan Yuliang the artist wielding the paintbrush, while Pan Zanhua and his son are portrayed looking at her painting in the background. It seems to suggest that Pan’s identity as an artist is as important as, if not more than, her familial relationships. Her family is also unconventional in the sense that it includes one of her husband’s sons, borne of his first wife, who was believed to have come under her care only for a period of time. An analysis of her maternity pictures will further reveal that her artistic revelations of motherhood and familial relationships might not be as simple as some writers propose.

In the ink painting *Motherly Love* (1958), Pan juxtaposes the contoured curves of two female nudes around a blanketed baby in a serene outdoor setting. One of the nudes is seated with the infant in her arms while the other kneels forward with her head leaning towards the baby. Their postures establish a certain rhythm as their eyes draw towards the centre where the baby is. In a combination of carefully rendered “pointillist” marks and light washes of delicate hues, the figures blend in with the landscape to achieve pictorial coherence. Despite the physical proximity of the figures, one questions the extent of intimacy in the complex three-figure relationship. Ann Phoenix and Anne Woollett, scholars in the subject of motherhood, write, “Incorporated within the term ‘mothering’ is the intensity and emotional closeness of the idealized mother-child relationship…” Many paintings will focus on the intimacy between a mother and her child, excluding unnecessary figures from the composition. But who is the real mother in Pan’s picture? The expression of the woman holding the infant seems consciously hidden, with the lower half of her face covered by her awkwardly raised left shoulder. The second woman’s face elicits a serene expression but assumes the role of an observer. Uncertainty about the identity of the “real” mother is apparent here.
In several of Pan’s maternity paintings, there are two women figures engaged in the task of child-caring. Some Western paintings have incorporated the character of a nursemaid in the portrayal of motherhood, which makes for a three-figure composition. For example, Mary Cassatt, the great modern artist of the maternity subject, portrays the company of a lady, nanny, and child in *In the Omnibus*. One can differentiate the distinct status of the lady and the nanny by their dress, placement, and demeanour. The element of class distinction, however, is absent in Pan’s paintings. The female figures in Pan’s maternity works are often depicted unequivocally unclothed, which obliterates costumes as markers of class. There are often no attributes such as dress or demeanour in Pan’s paintings to differentiate the “real” mother from another woman, thus either women could very well be the “real” mother.

In another ink painting, *Women in Bath* (1958), Pan portrays a lively toilette in which two women prepare a child’s bath. The interior of the room is delineated with undulating black ink, and the details are filled with brilliant transparent hues. The chubby face of the little girl speaks of a childlike innocence, as she sucks her right index finger in contentment. A plump, older-looking nude holds the girl on her lap in the foreground. The physical component of the nude’s voluptuous body provides a stark contrast to the clothed child. A younger, semi-nude woman watches the duo from the background.
A strange ambiguity of meaning and mood is apparent, with the woman in the foreground looking elusively at the child on her lap. One senses awkwardness in the way she twists her wrist to hold the child, and her sharp red painted finger nails seem to impose a latent prick on the child’s thigh. The expression of the nude in the background is obscure, with the deliberate omission of the depiction of her nose. But one can almost sense a certain disconcertedness, if not detachment, on the part of the second woman as she directs her gaze towards the two figures in front. Despite deploying dynamic compositional elements and illustrating physical intimacy, one senses a certain emotional diffidence in the motherly images.

The facial features as well as the massive physique of the woman carrying the child in *Women in Bath* bear an uncanny resemblance to Pan herself. This feature has led some writers to think that possibly Pan desired to be a mother. As Jia Defang of Anhui Provincial Museum writes, “Pan was a delicate and sensitive person, many of her paintings depict scenes of parental love, conveying to the viewer a sense of longing for motherhood.” The painting first appears as a delightful domestic scene, with its effervescent colours and decorative rendering. Yet a few signs of incoherence embedded in Pan’s images signal the involvement of more complicated issues.

It appears to me that the woman in the background stands in for a third person’s perception, where one can observe the mother-child relationship from a safe and detached perspective.

Pan’s particular construction of the maternal image is unusual. The “extra” figure in her compositions and the elusive expressions of her motherly figures reveal psychological and emotional inhibitions. French feminist Julia Kristeva has referred to psychoanalytic terms like “displacement” and “sublimination” in the exploration of the maternal body. Her writing suggests that the maternal body is constantly split between a relationship to the infant and her personal desires as a woman, and that she is primarily a “subjective social and speaking being.” Kristeva’s perception resists conventional stereotypes of maternity. Following this line of thought, Pan’s nude maternity figures might be seen to negate the usual social and symbolic aspect of motherhood, and to bring out a subliminal meaning of the maternal body instead. While attempting to express the intimacy of the mother-child relationship, some of her paintings simultaneously reveal detachment, revealing her ambivalence towards maternity. Entrenched in such a conventional feminine genre might be unexplained personal issues for the artist in traversing her psychological and emotional desires. Pan frequently explored this theme of motherhood in both her oil and Chinese ink paintings, demonstrating her deep interest in as well as her uncertain attitude towards the subject. In understanding Pan’s maternal paintings, one needs to carefully consider her particular personal and social circumstances.

One needs to think beyond the idea that Pan is simply fulfilling a desire to be a mother through her art. Pan’s background as a concubine, a second wife of another woman’s husband, signals a subjugated position not only in society, but also in the private context of the home. According to Chinese sources, when one of Pan Zanhua’s sons (borne by his first wife) moved to Shanghai, Yuliang took up the task of caring and providing for him. Despite initial rejection from the boy, Pan persevered in her role as a stepmother, or “second mother,” as the boy addressed her. The painting My Family was possibly inspired by Pan’s short-term mothering of the boy. In their research on stepfamilies, Margaret Robertson and Donna Smith write that, in general, “There is often a high degree of tension and disagreement in a stepfamily, certainly at first, about who really belongs to it, usually accompanied by conflict and confusions of loyalty.” While Pan was trying to fulfil her duties as a “mother” to her competitor’s son, she was likely to have faced initial rejection from the boy and her subjugated position as the concubine in the Chinese domestic context of the time relegated her to a position not unlike that of a maid.

Her role as a “second wife and mother” in her marriage would have added to the complexity of her identities as a modern woman and an independent artist. According to psychologist Jane Ussher, motherhood was and continues to be defined as the highest route to physical and emotional fulfilment and as essential for all women. This view has encouraged frequent romanticization of motherhood and of mother-child relationships.
While the mother-child theme was (and continues to be) regarded as an appropriate expression of women’s femininity, embedded in the ostensibly docile genre could be delicate issues that intertwine with Pan’s individual psychological and emotional desires. Pan’s images of women in intimate maternal roles seem to promote ideals of feminine images that would not have been perceived as conventional. Instead, they have generated more complex meanings.

Pan showed a preference for depicting the act of mothering in public spaces, such as in *Motherly Love* as discussed above. Pan’s painting *Mother and Child at the Beach* (1961), portrays an unclothed mother lying uninhibitedly in a beach setting as her baby leans forward earnestly to latch on to her breast. The task of breastfeeding, normally carried out in private spheres in Chinese context, is seen through a sensual engagement of the unclad mother with her young in a public space. Chinese mother’s concepts of nursing young children in early modern China were still embedded in traditional Chinese cultural context. While breastfeeding was the common nursing practice in Chinese society in the past,\(^4\) breastfeeding in public would have been considered embarrassing, let alone a nursing mother being in a state of complete nudity.
Women and girls in pre-modern and even early modern China were largely confined to domestic spaces. Elizabeth Croll writes that it was common for girls “to be almost entirely confined to their households whether they be the large gentry-style court yarded compound or the humbler three-room peasant dwelling.” Growing up in an era where the experience of girls and women were bound up with gendered definitions and restricted allocation of space, Pan’s repeated representations of naked mothers with their young in public spaces suggest a departure from established Chinese notions of women’s behaviour. Contrary to traditional notions of the nude as “depraved” and “anti-Confucian,” her predilection for depicting mothers as naked in the public seems like challenging conventional beliefs as to what is suitable and dignified as art produced in a traditional Chinese artistic establishment. Perhaps influenced by the May Fourth feminist movement, Pan’s representation seems to transmit an allegory of a woman’s (or a mother’s) desire for freedom, autonomy, and access to the public sphere.

Pan’s personal life and experiences evolved within the flux of transitional periods in both Eastern and Western civilizations. As discussed above, the May Fourth movement resulted in the start of women stepping out into the public sphere to receive education and to work. For Pan, the breakaway from her oppressed past could have happened only in societal transformations where old, embattled feminine social spaces were being challenged. With more women entering the workforce, the issues of household responsibilities, mothering, and motherhood would be considered as potential sites where early Chinese feminism could challenge and work toward. In relation to social changes, Pan’s ambivalent maternity pictures could be reflecting the anxiety about modern women’s shifting identities as well as reconciling the differences between her private experience of the family and that of her viewers. The occasional uneven character of her maternal representations might be understood as an effect of her multiple and complex identities, shaped by her changing gendered self-identification. Although contradictorily at times, Pan’s unconventional images could be seen as attempts to construct new perceptions of the independent, modern woman.

The life and work of Pan offer an occasion for the analysis of sociocultural specificities experienced by early twentieth-century Chinese women artists, particularly those who sought inspiration from Europe. Polarized between two extreme positions, Pan’s narrative exemplifies that of a modern Asian artist who faced a dilemma between choosing the influx of modern Western culture and bearing the burden of one’s tradition. Facing challenges as a woman of underprivileged background, Pan withstood enormous social pressure in reconciling her changing feminine identity as an artist. Given the prescribed notions of femininity and artistic vocabularies available to women of her era, there was neither an easy nor obvious strategy to follow in the representation of the nude. The approach of shuffling between East and West allowed her to gain new insights into both traditional and Western art, while she differentiated, filtered, and naturalized elements that were relevant to her. On the basis of this understanding, she achieved a new way of being modern.
Primary sources on Pan Yuliang’s life and work are very few. The remaining documents on her are in the possession of various people, including surviving family members (referring to her husband Pan Zanhua’s descendants), and institutions like the Anhui Provincial Museum in China and the Cernuschi Museum in France. There are some disagreements about the details of her life even among researchers. Most of Pan’s biographical information has been generously provided to me by the Anhui Provincial Museum in China. Special thanks to its senior curator and researcher Wang Lihua for granting me an interview on the subject of Pan Yuliang.

According to Jia Defang of the Anhui Provincial Museum, the painting


20 While there is no material evidence to show this, Pan’s painting My Family, completed in 1921, coincided with the boy’s (Pan Zanhua’s son) period of stay in Shanghai, upon which Chinese writers such as Shi Nan have speculated. See Shi Nan, Huahun Pan Yuliang (Changchun: Shi Dai Wenyi Chubanshe, 2003).


22 Wang Zhen,


24 Pan was appointed the Director of the Western Painting Department at the Shanghai Art Academy in November 1929, played a role in the founding of a few art associations in early twentieth-century China, was elected the president of the Chinese Overseas Artist Association in France in 1945, and led a team of artists to petition the Kuomingtang Government for Japan’s return of plundered Chinese art works (during the Sino-Japanese war) in 1945.


