She who is centered in the Tao can go where she wishes, without danger. She perceives the universal harmony, even amid great pain, because she has found peace in her heart.

–Tao Te Ching

Introduction

Can there be Chinese feminism in contemporary Chinese art? What kind of identity does the artist produce through aesthetic representation? As women around the globe address existing ideas about feminism, some Chinese artists are examining this multiplicity of concepts through artistic means, revealing both individual and collective responses to rising self-awareness among women and to shifts in modernity and globalization. This essay will argue that a detailed examination of select works of art by contemporary Chinese women artists reveals an ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction of feminist concepts in the twenty-first century. Although a limited study, this analysis illustrates the continued questioning of the performance of gender, sex, and sexuality in the Chinese context and attempts to provide an artistic-cum-social iteration of feminist concepts as embodied through artistic praxis.

In recent years women in China have experienced a critical transformation through fluctuations in China’s sociopolitical environment and through the emergence of feminist dialogues. Since the post-Mao or Reform period (1979 to the present), Chinese scholars, activists, and artists have been engaged in vigorous debates about the roots of female oppression, the nature of femininity, the definitions of woman and human, and the role of the West in Chinese articulations. Lydia H. Liu comments:

Being named as the “other” and marginalized, Western feminists can speak more or less from a politically enabling position against the centered capitalist ideology. By contrast, contemporary Chinese women find their political identity so completely inscribed within official discourse on gender . . . that they cannot even claim “feminism” for themselves.  

Thus the notion of the self in feminist dialogue meets a curious dimension within the Chinese context—the collective aspect of Chinese culture dictates a certain perception of selfhood (or absence thereof) with regard to the mutual social composition predicated on China’s political past. In other
words, it could be argued that China lacks what Julia Kristeva would call a "tradition of individualism" that has been crucial to the development of feminist discourse elsewhere. Over time, and especially during the rise of the Chinese Communist Party or CCP (founded in 1921 and responsible for the establishment the People's Republic of China in 1949), individualism was equated with the "wretched consciousness" of a Western counterpart and was therefore detested and negated. As suggested by Kristeva, this presents a dubious caveat with regard to "the problem of China as a whole and underlines the difficulty in dealing with the problem of Chinese women in particular." How, then, does the art of contemporary China reflect a modernized subjectivity for women?

While this essay includes artistic examples by several artists, work by two woman in particular—Lin Tianmiao (born 1961, Shanxi) and Cao Fei (born 1978, Guangzhou)—demonstrates how a woman's questioning of women's roles via aesthetic means represents a strategic use of feminism to challenge and reconstitute feminist debates concerning femininity and womanhood within the Chinese context. The artists achieve this through a decisive engagement with essentialist and post-structural feminist theories. The essentialist position concedes that there is woman by way of the so-called feminine, thus reverting to the notion of woman identified. I argue that Cao Fei enacts an essentialist disposition through a conversion from human to post-human. The post-structural position proposes that woman is a construct by way of language and culture and that there is no essence of the feminine; I argue this challenge to the female form is embodied through Lin Tianmiao's work. Both artists offer a critique of existing realities in China while establishing an expanded feminist position: where Lin Tianmiao's 2008 body of work Mother's!!! dissects the female form into fragmented parts, Cao Fei's China Tracy (2009) recomposes...
the female figure in the virtual realm. These artists employ the female to reclaim women's experience and in doing so articulate a version of Chinese feminism through art, thereby becoming "makers of meaning, as opposed to being bearers of man's meaning." 7

How do feminist ideas in the visual arts of China acknowledge a Chinese feminism, and what do these works of art divulge about social realities for women in China today? The intention of this examination is to interpret feminist dialogue with Chinese characteristics through the theoretical perspective of art. While contemporary Chinese art affords a certain kaleidoscopic understanding of Chinese society—a motley interpretation of modern times represented through a variety of artistic practices—the work of female artists in particular provides additional insight into the current situation for Chinese women. Like other women working in the field of global contemporary art and advancing the feminist dialogue, Chinese artists are using "visual irony to depict . . . visions of feminist beauty, often involving mothering . . . and women's spirituality" 8 while simultaneously enacting them within conditions unique to China. While Lin Tianmiao's Mothers!!! presents a certain radical aesthetic translation of the matriarchal archetype and the complexity of motherhood, Cao Fei's use of the cyber sphere proposes an unencumbered reality for women, thus redefining conditions of existence (and possibly spiritual essence) outside of ordinary living.

This essay aims to present a careful analysis of specific works of art that demonstrate Chinese feminism by way of context, challenge, and conversion. These terms will serve as the reference points for articulating feminist discussions in contemporary Chinese art, thereby confirming women artists as distinct cultural creators. Recent artworks by Chinese women suggest an extant questioning of woman's consciousness within society—both real and imagined—through diverse aesthetic mediums. Through their artistic praxes, Chinese women are partaking in the spirit of feminism through an exploration of the corporeal world here and now and the fabricated realm of the digital beyond, providing aesthetic expressions of feminist formulations in today's world.

Context
The continued challenge of feminism in its many formations over time and in different cultural contexts must be understood as a multiplicity: "Thus 'feminisms' refers to a variety of activism on behalf of social, political, economic, and personal justice." 9 The notion of multiple feminisms must also take into account differences in class, society, and culture, where even a single term such as 'womanist' (as coined by American author Alice Walker) carries with it certain stereotypical "imperialist connotations" 10 to women both inside and outside the West. Within the Chinese context, issues of class have affected the feminist politics of the early twentieth century; such politics were seen "through the lens of European Marxism's deep suspicion and disdain of 'bourgeois feminists,'" and women who sought to promote greater sexual equality during that time were "frequently faced with the stern criticism that they were lapsing into 'bourgeois feminism'." 11 Writing in 2008,
Louise Edwards notes the term “feminism” was still considered somewhat problematic in China “because of its assumed link with ‘Western’ values.”

The questionable and protean terminology of feminism itself—words such as woman, feminine, gender, and identity—inspires a deeper mode of questioning into the complexities of culture and the unique social circumstances of being human. A historically situated definition of feminism suggests a philosophy that advocates for the dignity, intelligence, and basic human potential of women. As an area of philosophical inquiry, feminism aims to understand the nature of inequality by examining women’s lives through their social performance, cultural subjectivities, and distinctive physiological characteristics. In the West, for example, feminism emerges and is enunciated by key historical moments: the first wave of Western feminism occurred in the 1920s in tandem with women’s suffrage and the right to vote. During the 1960s and 70s feminist movements were concerned with equality and essentialist articulations about motherhood and the female body. Issues of class, race, and sexuality (voices of lesbians and women of colour) were taken up globally during the 1980s and 90s—the African American feminist bell hooks is one example of an outspoken feminist thinker who rose to prominence during this era.

Each of these historical advances in feminist thinking further exposed problematic nuances within the feminist dialogue itself: how do monolithic notions of sexuality influence our understanding of the feminine? Within the Chinese context, the rise of feminism carries additional questions about cultural context. As expressed by Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers in *Women and Chinese Patriarchy* (1994):

> Today, any attempt on the part of Western observers, including feminists, to impose ethnocentric notions of a “superior” understanding or a better moral solution is increasingly rebuffed by Asian feminists, academics and activists, who are battling not only their indigenous patriarchal institutions, but also the universalist assumptions of Western scholars claiming to represent women outside their own cultures.

The discrepancy among Chinese, Japanese, and Korean feminists will not be addressed in this essay, however, it is further reason to proceed with caution regarding themes such as class, national identity, and culture. The problematic nature of sexuality has been systematically deconstructed by Western theorists to reveal that such issues are not only about “the abuse of women as a historical reality, but, equally important, the universality of moral constructs based on Western culture, and the legitimacy of Western agencies or individuals in Asian social practices.” Consequently, we are aware of a certain dissimilitude between feminism in the global context and feminism in the Chinese or Asian context.

The photograph *Angel No. 3* (2006) by Cui Xiuwen (born 1970, Harbin) illustrates the nature of these complicated ideas in visual terms. The image
of a horde of pre-pubescent girls crossing a traditional Chinese bridge exhibits a tentative mood; they stumble toward the viewer with eyes closed, reaching forward as if to grasp something for support. Some of these girls are seen clutching their stomachs (the womb), suggesting a sense of anxiety. Remembering China’s modern past with regard to the sex of offspring, as recently as the 1970s girls were held in such low esteem that they were regularly put into orphanages, killed at birth, or aborted. The title *Angel No. 3* implies these adolescents are not living beings, but, rather, departed heavenly spirits. This photo proposes that the individual lives of women in the Chinese context are socialized and depersonalized in light of the collective nature of Chinese society. While works of art offer an expanded understanding of feminist issues, they also reveal a host of controversies that concern basic definitions of human identity. According to feminist scholar Judith Butler:

> The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only [an] exclusive framework . . . but in every other way the “specificity” of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute “identity” and make singular notion of identity a misnomer.¹⁵

While identity remains a fundamental problem for feminism, so is the very concept of woman. Simone Beauvoir writes, “If I want to define myself, I first have to say, ‘I am a woman’; all other assertions will arise from this basic truth. A man never begins by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is obvious.”¹⁶ By referring to *man* as encompassing the entire species, scholarship assumes a position rooted in the language of the masculine, therefore establishing a dual consciousness that consistently reinforces the allegory of this disparity. The difficulty of femininity itself as examined through critical theory has been tackled by diverse Western thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Jacqueline Rose, and Judith Butler.¹⁷ In her book *About Chinese Women* (1986), Kristeva points out that when truth is given form “as a woman, for example—the ‘truth’ of the unconscious passes into the symbolic order, it even over-shadows it, as fundamental fetish, phallus-substitute, support for all transcendental divinity.”¹⁸ She goes on to suggest that this is a:

> crude but enormously effective trap for feminism: to acknowledge us, to make us into the truth of the temporal order, so as to keep us from functioning as its unconscious “truth,” formless beyond true, and false, beyond present-past-future.¹⁹

Essentially the female form is as much a selfhood as it is a falsehood for being, perpetuating a tautological inquiry into the fantasy of woman. As argued by Lacan, there is “no Other of the Other,” and anyone who claims to take up this place is an impostor (the Master and/or psychotic).²⁰ These
brief investigative insights into the basic nature of ontology and sexuality disclose the fundamental difficulty we face in describing identity altogether. As further argued by Butler:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established as “prediscursive,” prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts.21

In other words, culture functions as the fabricator of sexual difference. Art has the capacity to dismantle the cultural paradigm through a nuanced reassembly of sex, sexuality, gender, and visual representation; within the realm of artistic creation the sign (body) and its meaning (inference) are re-contextualized and open to re-interpretation. Philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari intended to do away with the body as a
traditional sign altogether, opting for a rhizomatic logic that denaturalizes bodies of all kinds in addition to “denaturalizing sexuality and especially its polarized genders.” This allows for a more versatile vision of gender and identity. While basic anatomical differences between the sexes dictate a so-called fundamental disparity between men and women and propose individualism for the female being by way of her reproductive agency, the definition of female subjectivity becomes increasingly entangled as society at-large imposes certain gestures of conduct upon the “Other” that is woman. A prevailing phallocentric consciousness

. . . occurs whenever the two sexes are represented by a singular—or “human” (i.e. masculine)—model. The feminine is defined only in some relation to the masculine, and never autonomously, in its own terms. It is represented either as the opposite or other; or as a complement; or as the same as masculinity. Feminists such as Luce Irigaray discuss the limitations of speech to describe femininity. She asks: “what is the status of the effects of sexualization on discourse? In other words, is sexual difference marked in the functioning of
language, and how?\textsuperscript{24} [italics hers]. The conundrum of feminism is that it must rely on patriarchal terms to challenge the very notion of patriarchy (which in turn creates a certain contradiction for scholars attempting to elaborate on the subject). As contended by Butler, there still exists a marked difference concerning the fundamental relation between gender and so-called femininity. Sexists tend to claim: “a woman only exhibits her womanness in the act of heterosexual coitus in which her subordination becomes her pleasure,” in opposition to the idea that “gender should be overthrown, eliminated, or rendered fatally ambiguous precisely because it is always a sign of subordination for women.”\textsuperscript{25} Arguably these contradictions are implied through works of art that revisit essentialist notions of body performativity and sexual distinctiveness.

Within the Chinese context the subject of feminism must be understood through a particular historical framework, one that confesses the hidden crisis of patriarchal principles and further failed attempts at definition. According to Western theorists such as Edwards, equality between men and women in China might be understood “as a series of loosely linked issues rather than as part of the broader problem of the resilience of patriarchal structures under socialism or the inadequacy of the CCP leadership.”\textsuperscript{26} China’s history divulges archetypes specific to Chinese culture that inform a modern Chinese feminist perspective, such as the notion of sameness inherent to socialism and its purported “non-difference of the two sexes.”\textsuperscript{27} The position of women in imperial China (understood as the time before 1911), however, was dictated by a dominant ideological mechanism born of cosmological foundations for an elaborate code of subordination going back millennia.\textsuperscript{28} Elisabeth Croll elaborates that this code:

\begin{quote}
held that the universe was composed of two interacting elements, “yin” the female and “yang” the male. The “yin” elements displayed dark, weak, and passive attributes in contact to the “yang” elements which were characterized by all that was bright, strong and active.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

While originally considered complementary oppositions, these features “were soon arranged in a hierarchical relationship juxtaposing superiority to inferiority,” and over time the yin elements “came to stand for all that was negative in the universe.”\textsuperscript{30} The ancient philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC) later incorporated these beliefs into his teachings, claiming an authority on feminine conduct that considered women to be in “a lower state than men [that] can never attain to full equality with them.”\textsuperscript{31} These ideas were handed down for generations, fostering unfortunate systems of segregation, seclusion, and physical control of women (among the most severe being the practice of foot binding and the regulation of the female body vis-à-vis limits put on the numbers and the sex of children). This superior attitude about the potential of yang to govern yin crept into every corner of Chinese consciousness and literary history, creating an ongoing complication concerning sexuality and submission. Sharon Hom writes: “the literature consistently points to the misogyny and authoritarianism of traditional
Confucian ideology and its primary institution of social control.” Arguably, the effort to conceptualize a Chinese feminism must take into account these distinct influences. Feminist scholars such as Kristeva point to the start of the Chinese feminist movement as concurrent with the founding of the bourgeois Republic in 1912: “Deeply influenced by western suffragettes, but coloured as well by the fight against a feudal patriarchal society, this movement called itself nüguan yundong—‘women’s rights movement.’” The rise of socialism in China is also of particular relevance to global feminist knowledge in recent decades. Croll further asserts: “In China the integration of feminism with socialism has demanded that in addition to improving the status of women, the women’s movement also arouses an awareness of class interests and responds to all forms of oppression.” Thus Chinese feminism takes part in global feminism while maintaining its own attributes.

China’s tumultuous twentieth century witnessed the demise of the dynastic social order and the subsequent installation of the totalitarian Chinese Communist Party which altered every segment of Chinese life. With the newly formed CCP in 1921 as the ruling hegemony, the latter half of the twentieth century experienced significant sociopolitical upheavals in addition to sweeping economic transformations. The women’s movement in the context of China was closely intertwined with Chinese nationalism, which morphed socialism with communism. Under communism there arrived a novel concept concerning equality of the sexes, and women in China were suddenly “more visible than anywhere else in the world. Access to childcare and birth control added to communism’s appeal.” This so-called equality was used to implement new socialist/communist ideas about the subject (i.e. the collective subject) as opposed to the idea of the individual. While these momentous changes inspired increased awareness among Chinese women, certain limitations existed. Lin Chun comments: “The feminist thesis that ‘the personal is political’ was no novelty for the Chinese, yet it orientated psychological conflicts far away from what that slogan clearly implies in a different social context.” In other words, while Chinese women saw the possibilities for personal and political advancement under the burgeoning communist system, the actual milieu of Chinese society did not allow for the individualism of feminism to be expressed in the same way. Perhaps the contemporary feminist slogan for Chinese woman should read “the private is political.”

During the 1970s and 80s a lively debate broke out in China with regard to the CCP’s pronouncements and policies concerning women’s equal opportunity. Where some saw the famous Maoist-era slogan “women hold up half the sky” (funü neng ding ban bian tian) as an honest reference to the new found equalities experienced under the CCP, “there were those who argued that 1949 saw not the demolishing but simply refashioning of patriarchal patterns.” In the same timeframe, however, a prodigious swell
in the creative arts of China exposed new directions for the advancement of culture. Scholars of recent art in China point to 1979 as the genesis of contemporary Chinese art, and during the 80s artists were once again free to create their own style of art after the decade-long debacle of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Wenhua Dageming, 1966–76), a period in Chinese history when agitprop in the form of propaganda art trumped all forms of expression and artists were obliged to adhere to strict cultural norms of production.

Amid the post-Cultural Revolution period, Chinese artists felt a sincere optimism and responsibility for developing China’s artistic environment. This positive energy surged through the decade and became known as the ’85 New Wave Movement. The atmosphere of liberal thought and experimentation that existed at the time culminated in the China/Avant-Garde exhibition held in February under the slogan No U-Turn. Organized by two Chinese curators, Li Xianting and Gao Minglu, and held at the National Art Gallery in Beijing, this show of 293 works by 186 artists from around China presented the latest developments in Chinese art. This exhibit was significant for many reasons, and notably for a certain performance act by female artist Xiao Lu (born 1962, Hangzhou), who, in the middle of the opening celebration:

took out a concealed firearm and shot two live bullets into her own [piece] in the show, an installation that involved phone booths. The performance earned her a brief jail stint and instant fame as a symbol of youthful defiance, particularly since it took place in the months leading up to the student demonstrations at Tian’anmen Square. . . . [her piece] Dialogue could be called China’s first major feminist contemporary work of art.39

This early performative feminist gesture was a milestone moment in the field of contemporary Chinese art, and the title, Dialogue, aptly reflects Chinese feminism’s need to be heard within a new cultural context. The distinct elements of this work—two figures in two phone booths, related but separate—imply a conversation, but that very dialogue is interrupted by Xiao Lu’s violent action and then subsequently censored by the Chinese state. What does this say about feminist discourse at the time?

Recent artworks by Chinese women suggest a continuation of this dialogue. While Chinese feminism experiences a metamorphosis along intellectual and cultural lines, the complexity of China’s sociopolitical paradigm remains an ongoing issue. Some argue that “a lot of women fear feminism, that kind of...
collective call” associated with radical political movements that are suspect in the eyes of the CCP. This mindset fosters a continued sense of reticence among many Chinese women. The distinction among feminist movements, feminist discourse, and feminist art practice creates categorical yet related bodies of knowledge, and the cross-section of these ideas is ripe for additional investigation. Arguably among the boldest forms of provocation disturbing existing patriarchal norms in China is aesthetic praxis. Where previous waves of social movements within the Western context gave rise to a certain feminist history, the Chinese woman as individual is further expressing the feminist narrative through artistic articulation and action.

**Challenge**

At the outset of the discourse concerning Chinese feminism via contemporary art one must recognize the difficulty that exists in establishing a universal or definitive claim to notions of sexuality and femininity itself. In China, the situation is further convoluted by certain cultural paradigms and sociopolitical histories that reveal injustices toward feminine proclivities. According to Chun, for example, the female part of the post-revolution generation was "trapped in their gender-laden conflicts between the required 'class standing' and their natural human compassion, simultaneously viewed as 'feminine' and politically unacceptable." China must allow for a multiplicity of voices if it is willing to take part in global efforts toward egalitarianism; lamentably, the power of patriarchal rhetoric remains stalwart.

Feminist writers offer resistance to accepted descriptions or portrayals of women and existing tropes of patriarchal discourse. In her book *Gynesis* (1985), Alice Jardine addresses the conflicts between "woman as process and woman as sexual identity" while revealing further insights about the imaginary status of woman as the “symptom of man” and the “subjecthood” of woman who “must be released from her metaphysical bondage.” Speaking of sexual difference in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986), Rose furthers there is no sexual relationship because "woman does not exist," thus her status as an absolute category is false. She goes on to say:

> [a]s negative to the man, woman becomes a total object of fantasy (or an object of total fantasy), elevated into the place of the Other and made to stand for its truth. Since the place of the Other is also the place of God, this is the ultimate form of mystification.

Patriarchal cultures rely on this type of mystification and the mythical construction of the category of woman (the feminine mystical) to maintain phallocentric power. In China, it is precisely the dichotomy between *yin* and *yang*, as discussed earlier, that has perpetuated woman’s so-called submissive role in society. Motherhood especially carries with it divine questions about the mysteries of conception and procreation; that woman comes into play in the sexual relation only as mother, or *quoad matrem*, “is inscribed in the entire philosophic tradition.” Thus *mother* is inherently
a body of signifiers, a veritable nonexistence, and mothers are therefore understood as reproductive instruments and are excluded from typical modes of exchange within the social order. Irigaray argues:

As both natural value and use value, mothers cannot circulate in the form of commodities without threatening the very existence of the social order. Mothers are essential to its (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general). Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so as to change it.47

If mothers are a threat to the normative, then do works of art that address motherhood suggest a disruption of existing beliefs? Notions of motherhood encompass complex issues about sex and the psyche. During the turn of the century, for example, Freudian psychoanalysis introduced a new pretext concerning the development of sexuality and separation from the mother. Jardine goes so far as to say that Freudian thought and “what is generally referred to as modernity is precisely the acutely interior, unashamedly incestuous exploration of these new female spaces: the perhaps historically unprecedented exploration of the female, differently maternal body.”48 Lin Tianmiao’s artwork Mother’s!!! not only explores the female space of the maternal body, it tears asunder the motherly form to reveal the latent power of maternity.

Since the beginning of her career the focus of Lin Tianmiao’s work has largely been the female body (and often her own body). While her art exhibits universal physical awareness, it is also imbued with gender specificity. Lin Tianmiao is well known for her thread-winding sculptural installations, which have also enabled her to address issues related to a gendered experience of the world through her use of supposedly traditional women’s craft materials such as fiber and weaving.49 Lin Tianmiao mixed media piece titled Mother’s!!! No. 12–1 (2008) is a work of art brimming with feminist connotation. This single sculpture is part of a large-scale installation titled Mother’s!!! (2008) that includes additional threaded objects and figurative constructions. Lin Tianmiao comments that as a multimedia work, Mother’s!!! allowed her to focus on inner expression “in a deep, careful, delicate and struggling way . . . [as part of] restoring [her] own self-awareness as a woman reaching middle age.”50 Considering the categorical aspects of this particular artwork—title, composition, and material—provides several possible translations of the feminist voice within contemporary Chinese art. Speaking of feminism, the artist comments:

It was at a rather vulnerable point in my life that I started to seriously think about the issue of feminism. And I did not know where to start. Because in China feminism is an imported idea. We never had the self-awareness to start a feminist movement. And we cannot simply borrow from
America, because we do not share the same history with American women.51

Mother’s!!! demonstrates a distinct challenge to existing ideas about motherhood in China and the fundamental Chinese principle of filial piety. In the case of this sculpture the reverse is true: offspring serve as the cause of the progenitor’s dissolution rather than a reliable system of support. Guo Xiaoyan writes Mother’s!!! alludes to issues of “the female body in relationships of power, along with the relationship of body and time, woman as author, and antagonism toward the body.”52 While Lin Tianmiao and other female artists in China explore their inner lives to express subjectivity through art, feminism in the Chinese context gains an amplified perspective.

The title of the sculpture alone implores us to reconsider the meaning of language as both semiotic agent and definitional trap. By using the singular possessive of mother to indicate something that belongs her, the title Mother’s!!! suggests possession, ownership, and occupancy. Yet the implication of this title and the actuality of the artwork are in conflict. What does maternal ownership mean in contemporary China? Lin Tianmiao’s physical sculpture portrays a single disemboweled figure occupied by a profusion of threaded spheres. While the title announces some form of custody, the actual solitary female appears to be taken over by the abundance of orbs that emerge from her bisected body. This mother is an alienated simulacrum, alone and in pieces; what does she possess in this instance?

By issuing a possessive title for this sculpture, Lin Tianmiao seems to announce that this estranged mother represents a personification of the mother submerged, a victim to a deluge beyond her power. The significance of this sculpture relates to Rose’s notion that “woman does not exist.” In fact, “mother” does not exist either; rather, Mother’s!!! is an attempt to reclaim something for woman. Thus language by way of the title serves as a feminine operation that subverts, where the “attributes of writing are the attributes of ‘woman’”—that which disturbs the Subject, Dialectic, and Truth is feminine in its essence.53 The word Mother’s!!! is followed by three exclamation points. This emphasis is not happenstance; in China, as in
most societies, descendants frequently take the last name of the father. This cultural norm ensures paternal influence in the long run and the production of patriarchy and patriarchal ownership—my children—without taking into account the maternal obligation. Kristeva argues:

[P]atrilinear descent with transmission of the father’s name centralizes eroticism in the single goal of procreation, in the grip of an abstract symbolic authority which refuses to acknowledge the fact that the child grows and is carried in the mother’s body.\textsuperscript{54}

By repeating the exclamation point, Lin Tianmiao conveys the impression that Mother’s!!! must be understood not only as a descriptive pronouncement but also felt as an emotional elation. Is it joy? Or rage? These exclamation points serve as both reminder and emphatic action—while they are open to interpretation, they cannot be ignored. The poesy of their presence claims multiple meanings: “[in] effect, poetic language is the recovery of the maternal body within the terms of language, one that has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law.”\textsuperscript{55} With the title Mothers!!!, Lin Tianmiao consciously disrupts the patrilineal; as articulated by Cixous, “that of logocentric (Western) thinking, privileging the concept, presence, truth, and making possible our idea of paternity, the father/son relation, and the repression of woman.”\textsuperscript{56} Arguably, Lin Tianmiao’s work is a critique of motherhood in China, given the limits on childbirth (and abortion) as imposed by the Chinese state. The work appears to also comment on the general lack of citizens’ rights and the self-governing of personal sexual practices.

In opposition to the traditional yin characteristic of darkness, Lin Tianmiao’s figure is a glowing white. The lower portion of her body emerges from a single piece of cloth while her upper torso has been completely cut off from the womb. Prima facie, the sight of this beheaded and gutted form is slightly horrific, but the image also transmits a sublime calm—the figure is unusually beautiful, almost angelic. Although motherhood is considered a sacred encumbrance, this frightful scene suggests a candid representation of the pain experienced at childbirth and the challenges of motherhood itself. The artist candidly admits: “Giving birth and raising a child is a very stressful and onerous process to me. For many years I did not have the courage to take on this responsibility. When I finally did, it still felt very difficult.”\textsuperscript{57} The mangled Mother’s!!! alludes to this trauma.

Cut-off, swallowed up; on the one hand, the aphasic pleasure of childbirth that images itself a participant in the cosmic cycles; on the other, jouissance under the symbolic weight of a law (paternal, familiar, social, divine) of which she is the sacrificed support, bursting with glory on the condition that she submit to the denial, if not the murder, of the body.\textsuperscript{58}

Lin Tianmiao’s sculpture aptly portrays the burst of glory that is motherhood—the figure is literally exploding with spawn—while
simultaneously revealing the murder of the motherly form. Torn apart, the female carries forth the timeworn tradition of delivery, but only to meet her demise. In the case of this particular artwork, the delivered object (a jumble of spherical bodies but no actual human offspring) suggests a replication of the birthing process but without the ultimate jouissance of mothering. The metaphorical division and splitting of the maternal subject results in the extermination of her being: she is flat on her back, bubbling but lifeless. In the Second Sex de Beauvoir writes: “It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is, her ‘natural’ vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species.”

While this statement asserts the essentialist position, Mother’s!!! and mother nature (in the form of progeny) appear to disfigure the very organism that perpetuates the cycle of life while revealing dependents that actually destroy woman’s life-force.

Conversion
While Mother’s!!! invites our gaze toward a physically mangled female figure, Cao Fei’s digital avatar China Tracy takes our view out of actual existence and into the completely artificial: the virtual sphere of Second Life. Where Lin Tianmiao’s sculpture provides an exploration of the maternal body via concrete materials, Cao Fei’s female archetype—a product of human artistry and digital technology—further questions the versatile definitions of identity and female agency via conversion and reconstruction. China Tracy re-contextualizes the image of woman within the performed imagination and in doing so converts real female subjectivity into a manufactured simulacrum and vice-versa, demonstrating a conversion from the real into the imagined. Cao Fei’s fantasy counterpart suggests a novel realm of twenty-first-century intelligence and the possibility of a new branch of feminist conception: the virtual-female as feminist incarnation that can achieve sensual experience that the actual human female cannot within the constraints of her social context.

Cao Fei works in an array of multimedia, and she is one of the most active female artists of her time, among those born in the 1970s who follow in the wake of the first-wave, well-known names of Lin Tianmiao’s generation. Within the virtual realm, Cao Fei navigates the immaterial with a digitally rendered female figure that represents a cisgender post-human possibility. (Cisgendered describes a person whose gender identity corresponds with the biological sex assigned at birth). She experiences her cissexual nature vis-à-vis the gendered identity of her avatar. Cao Fei’s online participation reflects the imperfectability and disunity of our evident life; hence the Internet affords an alternate reality for the artist. Her use of the Internet to express and explore post-human subjectivity resonates with a new generation of (Chinese) netizens who escape to the Internet on a regular basis precisely to realize greater autonomy unrealized in the corporeal world. Cao Fei offers online visitors to her RMB City—a fully rendered urban space of her own design in Second Life (which harbours RMB City)—the ability to appropriate animal appearances and deity archetypes while navigating this fictional realm.
The demure *China Tracy*—a tall, slim, fair-skinned, and fairly Western looking female—embodies an idealized physical version of a woman. *China Tracy* is a female avatar created for the digital sphere; she courts our gaze inside the abyss of the electronic realm. This alone creates an unusual paradigm with regard to feminist dialogue. As suggested by Irigaray:

> Woman has no gaze, no discourse for her specific specularization that would allow her to identity with herself (as same)—to return into the self—or break free of the natural specular process that now holds her—to get out of the self. Hence, woman does not take an active part in the development of history, for she is never anything but the still undifferentiated opaqueness of sensible matter, the store (of) substance for the sublation of self, of being as what is, or what he is (or was) here and now.

*China Tracy*, however, presents a curious dimension within the context of Chinese feminism: she exists out of the self (and out of China) while simultaneously confirming and contradicting the very nature of her being since she inhabits a virtual (i.e. non-substantiated) realm. She is a fictitious symbol who stands on her own footing; *China Tracy* does not inhabit a society controlled by men, where, as suggested by Xu Hong, women often find themselves suspended “in a state of confusion somewhere between person and object.” While the avatar *China Tracy* interacts with other avatars in Second Life, the avatar does not have to reveal its true identity; nor do the suitors. These bizarre encounters within virtual reality make sexual identity seem arbitrary and irrelevant and appear to be material (or virtual) articulations of Butler’s theories.

Considering one’s “second life” realized through the Internet as a co-production of existence with computers and digital technology, Cao Fei’s *China Tracy* proposes a curious version of Chinese feminism via aesthetic means. In a post-de Beauvoirian landscape she brings the ontological approach of *becoming woman* to the next level: "de Beauvoir had written..."
from the vantage point of an existentialist humanist: ‘on ne naît pas femme, on le devient’ (one is not born woman, one becomes woman)”[italics hers]. While China Tracy remains unborn and exists in the digital sphere to partake in sensuous human experiences, she is simultaneously a virtual manipulation created by a female artist—her existence is a double illusion, a veritable Deleuzian "organless body" that abides within the schism of the formulation between human and automation. This notion of the unreal in sexuality as discussed by Irigaray suggests that women must enter into a “masquerade of femininity”[italics hers] in order to become woman and identify as woman. Does this explain in part the artist’s choice to remain cisgender in Second Life?

Where sexuality encompasses one area of feminist discourse, the dubious authenticity of identity seems to inhabit another. Speaking of embodiment, Jardine writes: “The process of representation, the sorting out of identity and difference, is the process of analysis: naming, controlling, remembering, understanding.” Through her animated avatar, Cao Fei examines all facets of this symbolic representation. By naming her digital avatar China Tracy—a possible play on language and sexuality as it relates to the American comic hero Dick Tracy—the artist has imparted an East-West dichotomy that suggests the contemporary neo-cultural paradigm of the Internet and the hybrid nationless realm of the virtual. Her title is also in English, which indicates that her primary audience lies beyond China’s cyber Great Firewall. By assigning existence to this female representation while navigating the dense environs of RMB City and Second Life, Cao Fei as China Tracy can exert control over her destiny within the beyond while the artist remains within the categorical confines of the non-virtual world. The symbolic and psychological exchange between the real (Cao Fei) and the unreal (China Tracy) yields a process of remembering; China Tracy can go outside the limits of the ordinary while the artist cannot. Within her virtual dimension, China Tracy is free to encounter and negotiate reality on her own terms; she can partake in intimate cyber love affairs, swim naked in a sublime digital ocean, or navigate the sky as a magical flying mechanism, thus embodying a novel gender performativity unlike what can be encountered in the actual world.

China Tracy can be understood as a feminist intimation that reformulates the Lacanian organization of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic. This affords a new understanding of Chinese feminism as demonstrated through aesthetic embodiment—through her conversion from human to virtual representation, woman is able to constitute independence outside the ordinary. Cao Fei’s China Tracy suggests that female participation in cyberspace has the potential to transform contemporary feminist theory in China: her virtual presence throws off the shackles of male supremacy preserved for centuries by the patriarchy; however, she is simultaneously a cisgender avatar that remains invested in the category of the feminine. China Tracy redefines presence within the here-and-now of representational forms and their carnal reception, and she stands as a powerful symbol of the re-ordering of existence and presence in today’s world.
Chinese feminism through the visual arts illustrates distinct considerations with regard to identity, sexuality, and the traditional *yin* agency. The ongoing effort to conceptualize Chinese feminism within the context of China’s past coupled with its latest artistic reverberations “resonates historically with many earlier struggles to figure out how to find accord between imported and domestic beliefs relating to politics.”68 Women in China have been dealing with issues of equality and injustice for centuries; concern over women’s issues is not a novel development by any means, and, according to Kristeva, “the role of women and, consequently, that of the family, have a particular quality in China which is unknown in the monotheistic West.”69 The post-reform period in China presents its own set of issues with regard to values and ideologies found “within the matrix of nationalism.”70 As suggested by Edwards:

Chinese scholars explaining their reluctance to embrace the f-word usually frame their discussions around the importance of resisting hegemonic ‘western’ concepts and of the need to create an indigenous Chinese understanding of the women’s movement. Feminism is often described as being inappropriate for Chinese conditions.71

As the feminist dialectic expands across class and culture into the twenty-first century, women artists will continue to constitute their subjectivities through aesthetic praxis and performativity. The development of feminist ideas in contemporary Chinese art acknowledges a certain understanding of Chinese feminism as works of art by artists such as Lin Tianmiao and Cao Fei reveal relevant issues facing women in China now. Elaborating upon the global canon of critical feminist theory, Chinese feminism embodied via contemporary Chinese art suggests modern reverberations of feminist interests. Chinese women artists claim their agency through art—no longer viewed “as tools for China’s modernization and reform,”72 these women are crafting an original and rousing vision of feminism in the present day.

Feminism as a series of movements has been and continues to be established through the direction of critical thinkers, writers, and artists who produce this dialectical understanding through investigation and creativity. As argued by Elizabeth Grosz, “[f]eminist theory must exist as both critique and construct . . . [and] should consider itself a form of strategy.”73 In this regard, contemporary artworks by Chinese women can be viewed as strategic constructions that provide an extended version of the feminism dialogue. What are the stakes of this claim when doubts about the very nature of feminism’s *particuliary* remain? Does the feminine always signify a bifurcation from the whole of phallocentric humanity, therefore perpetuating timeworn patriarchal difference with regard to gender, the very
fundamental gesture of patriarchy itself? Do existing feminist constructs accurately address the extensive mystification of “Otherness” that is woman, and what does this mean for the “Other” that is the Chinese woman?

While many theoretical questions remain, contemporary art has the potential to address (and redress) these issues in uncommon ways, revealing a world of creativity and possibility for woman that surpasses the familiar tropes of language and timeworn patriarchal systems. Women artists will continue to use their art “as an expressive means of influencing the consciousness of everyone . . . to permeate the social construction of reality and to create a human reality.” By every account the complexity of feminist discourse and our collective human consciousness is further confronted through the diversity of aesthetic work being done by women artists in China today.

Notes

4. Ibid., 111.
5. Ibid.
6. The definition of post-human in the framework of this paper is that of postmodern philosophy and contemporary art’s reinterpretation of what it means to be a human being (not to be mistaken for a hypothetical “future being” who exceeds human capacities by our current standards). In contemporary critical theory, the post-human perspective seeks to reconceive the universal nature of human existence.
9. Ibid., 1.
10. Ibid., 2.
12. Ibid., 208.
14. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 37.
20. Rose, Sexuality in the Field of Vision, 56.
25. Butler, Gender Trouble, xiv.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.


34. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China*, 3.


37. Ibid., 66.


43. Ibid., 183.

44. Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, 72.

45. Ibid., 74.

46. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 102.

47. Ibid., 185.


50. Ibid., 19.


59. The French term jouissance means enjoyment in terms of rights, property, and sexual orgasm. Poststructuralist philosophy has developed the sexual sense of this term in complex ways, denoting an excessive kind of pleasure linked to the splitting of the subject involved.

60. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 524.

61. The online platform known as Second Life is at http://secondlife.com/.


65. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 141.

66. Ibid., 134.


70. Edwards, “Issue-based Politics: Feminism with Chinese Characteristics or the Return of Bourgeois Feminism?,” 299.

71. Ibid.

