

**RE-IMAGINE URBAN WONDERLAND: CITY, TRADITION AND
CONTEMPORANEITY**

by

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This study discusses the artistic representation of urban landscape, materials and performing bodies that reflect on the fast urban expansion in China since the late 1990s. Even though Chinese urbanization has incurred a series of social issues, the significance of traditional culture enables artists to explore the harmony and unity of human beings, urban materials and natural environment as an alternative way to redefine the urban antinomies. This demonstrates what Wu Hung defines as the self-orienting power of Chinese contemporaneity in art field and also corresponds Gao Minglu's *Yi Pai* theory that reinterprets contemporary Chinese art from traditional philosophy and aesthetics. From the tradition-based perspective, this thesis argues that the representation of urban human beings and materials can be seen as a way of ritualization and meditation through traditional values, which guides the artist and audience to re-imagine harmony and integration in the urban wonderland space. The artists discussed by this thesis include Zhang Dali, Chen Qiulin, Yang Yongliang, Xing Danwen and Chen Qingqing. They transform their subjectivity into a collective way of ritualization and meditation. The pursuit of harmony or the aesthetic of *Yi*, in this light, is not only to reconstruct the temporal significance of traditional culture in contemporary Chinese art, but also functions as an everlasting way to understand and communicate with the ever-changing world.

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INTRODUCTION

The incessantly transforming urban space explicitly presents the contemporary antinomies throughout China's avid access to domestic modernization and global market. Every day there are the scenarios of destruction and reconstruction, fortune and poverty, encounter and separation, and appearance and disappearance. On its path to be modern and then to be contemporary, the urban transformation in China has been tremendously involved into the global system of capital, production and consumption, which corresponds what Frederic Jameson has called the late capitalist society dominated by the global culture of marketization and commodification. The fast urban expansion has in effect exemplified what some art critics characterized as "contemporaneity". In leading a discussion of contemporaneity in the collection *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, Terry Smith has insightfully summarized that contemporaneity "consists precisely in the acceleration, ubiquity and constancy of radical disjuncture's of perception, of mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them."¹ He emphasizes the contemporary antinomies between globalization's thirst for hegemony and the reconfirmation of cultural differentiation, between modernity's control of time and the temporal

¹ Smith, Terry, "Introduction: the Contemporaneity Question" in Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, pp 8-9.

asynchrony, and between the exploitation of nature and the expansion of urbanization. The tension between the globalization's power of assimilation, and local tradition's resistance to homogenization, has become the critical field for contemporary Chinese artists to express and communicate their sentiment towards urbanization-the hope, love, pleasure as well as despair, hate and agony.

The artistic representation of Chinese urbanization responses to Wu Hung's definition of contemporaneity of Chinese art in Terry's discussion. He indicates the tension between decontextualization and recontextualization because of the engagement of domestic artists into international contemporary art and the recall of cultural roots and historical significance. The wide circulation of contemporary art on global stage, according to Wu Hung, does not "avoid audience's expectation to find Chineseness in exotic, self-orienting forms."² Such self-orientation points to the significance of traditional philosophy and aesthetics in the mind of domestic audience so that artists are able to find alternative ways cope with the urban antinomies based on the particular space and time of China's context. Thus, this study focuses on how the Chinese local artists represent and rethink about urbanization by drawing upon traditional idea and cultural heritage to reconstruct a self-oriented sense of harmony and future.

Meanwhile, the self-orientation of traditional philosophy and aesthetics enables curators and critics to establish tradition-based theoretical structure to reinterpret the meanings of contemporary

² Wu, Hung, "A Case of Being Contemporary: Conditions, Spheres and Narratives of Contemporary Chinese Art" in Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p300.

Chinese art, in particular the conceptual art and performance art since the 1990s. By drawing upon Chinese divination and geomantic practice rooting, Hou Hanru has argued the affinity between contemporary art and traditional culture as a strategic response to cultural Orientalism and Eurocentrism. Gao Minglu has taken a step further by theoretically developing his *Yi Pai* theory to correct the insufficiency of Western categorization of contemporary Chinese art by transforming the significance of traditional philosophy and aesthetics of *Yi* on Chinese contemporary conditions. Synthetically, *Yi Pai* stresses the particular time and specific space of China's contemporaneity and integrates the methodologies of art creation, art critique and art history writing as a whole. It focuses on the interaction of artist, object and special fluidity so that the deep-rooted meaning of *Yi* can be approached and understood. Based on the tradition-based sense of unity, Gao also argues the harmony male-female relationship under the impact of globalization and urbanization. Even though the theorization of traditional aesthetics and philosophy might be at risk to presuppose a sense of harmony, unity and communication beyond the complicated and contradictory urban spectacle, its significance lies in the new perspective, which pays attention to the connection, fluidity and interaction of different spaces as well as the contemporary meaning of traditional culture in the art field.

This study focuses on how the Chinese local artists response to and rethink about the issues of urbanization by drawing up on traditional idea and cultural heritage. The artists I will discuss include Zhang Dali, Chen Qiulin, Xing Danwen, Yang Yongliang and Chen Qingqing. The first two parts focus on the representation of ruins by Zhang Dali's gratify works in Beijing and Chen

Qiulin's video series in Three Gorges region. The reflection of ruins images, according to Wu Hung, indicates the domestic avant-gardeness of contemporary art because it breaks the logic of historical continuity and represents a fragmented contemporaneity in local context. In contrast to the fragmentation in Wu Hung's text, Gao Minglu's *Yi Pai* interpretation pays attention to the interaction of special transformation and Zhang's personal experience with ruins. If Zhang Dali still focuses on the urban violence on human beings and traditional culture, then Chen Qiulin's works based on the context of Three Gorges Dam project in the second part represent her conflicting sentiment and desire through the performance of traditional Chinese opera. Her documentation of the local community and her own performance in the ruins, according to Yi Pai, indicates the collective ritualization of Chinese performance art instead of individual expression of Western performance art.

Compared to the trauma and hope brought by the ruins in the first two parts, the third part will discuss the imagination of fantastic urban wonderland in Yang Yongliang's digital works. Based on the indivisibility of objects and subjects in traditional landscape painting, this part argues that the aesthetic of "unlikeness" or "ambiguity" in Yang's works reflects the unity of heaven and human beings in traditional philosophy as well as the symbiosis of natural landscape and urban materials in contemporary China.

As a response to Gao Minglu's redefinition of Chinese women's art, the final part focuses on the gender concern in urban environment through the works of Xing Danwen and Chen Qingqing. It argues that the absence of global feminist discourse in Chinese women's art indicates a

degendered sentiment of human beings toward urbanization and a utopian solution of sexual suppression in China. In other words, the local gender concern of women's art recalls for the traditional female characteristics in the traditional family-nation order. It does not points to the suppression in the pre-modern China but indeed a harmonious human relationship based on the social unit of family rather than the gendered individual.

The artists discussed all manifest what Wu Hung has defined Chinese artists as mediators of contemporaneity.³ They internalized the external factors such as urban materials, traditional opera and landscape painting through the visual effects of their art projects as intrinsic intensions to re-imagine and to re-represent urban antinomies between traditional culture and Westernization, between natural landscape and urban environment, and between man and woman. The return of traditional philosophy and aesthetics, in this light, connects the past, the present and future through the seemingly fragmentized urban panorama.

YI PAI: APPROACH THE MEANING OF YI

As a conclusive work of his project to establish an alternative of theoretical framework in writing contemporary Chinese art history, Gao Minglu's *Yi Pai* theory offers a tradition-based methodology to reinterpret contemporary art, in particular the conceptual arts since the post-85' Movement. As Gao would have it, *Yi Pai* is developed as a synthetic theory to subvert the core principle of representationalism in Western art history and its inflexible application in Chinese

³ Ibid, pp301-302.

context.⁴ The structure of *Yi Pai* consists of three elements, *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing* (Fig. 1). The three conceptions derive from Zhang Yanyuan (815-907)'s *The Famous Paintings of History (Li Dai Ming Hua Ji)*, which respectively points to the three key factors of traditional aesthetics to understand the deep meaning of Chinese painting. Comprehensively, the domain of *Li* indicates the principle and subjectivity of the artist; the domain of *Shi* indicates the conceptions based on the environment that the artist perceive; the domain of *Xing* indicates the likeness of things that the artist represents to the audience. For Gao, the three aesthetic domains of *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing* in traditional Chinese art respectively correspond the categories of Western art: abstract art and conceptual art and realistic art, all of which seek to represent the truth in different forms. He argues that the central symptom of Western art history lines in the mutual exclusion of different art styles and theories because each category attempts to establish its hegemony in the exploration of truth.⁵

However, the task of *Yi Pai* is not to go so far as extremely legitimize only one aspect from the ternary oppositions. On the contrary, *Yi Pai* is based on the relations of mutual interdependence, mutual complement and mutual integration of *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing*. On one level, the meaning is encoded through every domain behind the representation of an art work even though the domains would not be read evenly but selectively. More importantly, a deep meaning of *Yi* is created through the parts of the interactive movement in the structure on the other level. In other words, it is important to further explore the domains of “*Li* unlike *Li*, *Shi* unlike *Shi*, *Xing* unlike *Xing*” to

⁴ Gao, Minglu. *Theory of Western Art History: Representationalism and the Turn of Art History*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2016, pp2-4.

⁵ Gao, Minglu. *Yi Pai: A Synthetic Theory against Representationalism*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2009, pp19-24.

grasp the meaning of *Yi* from the peculiarity of Chinese art. The conception *Yi* comes from the aesthetic of *yi jing*, the core subject of all the categories of traditional Chinese art including painting, calligraphy, literature and architecture. It indicates a high level stage for human beings to comprehend the symbolism and significance from a certain relationship among human, object and environment. For Chinese poetics, *Yi* represents the unity of language and image because the readers can imagine the poetic scene indicated by the phrases and metaphors and thus understand the author's sentiment that is infused with the external objects. For traditional garden planning, the stage of *Yi* is approached through the ultimate unity between the nature and man-made materials. Similarly in traditional landscape painting, the artists do not accurately follow perspective principle and draw the natural landscape as they see, but represent a sense of disproportion and fantasy by following what they meditate the universe and understand man's relation to the nature. Clearly, even though the meaning of *Yi* varies in different art categories, it points to the indivisibility of subjectivity, environment and things and the unity between the "self" and the "other". Thus on the one hand, the external objects in traditional landscape painting can be internalized by the artists as well as the audience. On the other hand, the artists usually put themselves in the painting as the observer as well as the object being observed by the audience. In this light, the represented landscape can be understood as the intrinsic world of human's heart, while the subject in the painting is externalized by the environment.

Furthermore, *Yi* is a philosophical approach for Chinese people to communicate with the universe, to understand the truth and to realize a harmonious relationship with the external world.

It is not only an aesthetic category, but also a daily ritual, a particular way of life. For example in public spaces, many Chinese people love playing *taiji* and writing calligraphy with water on the ground. The profound influence of this traditional conception makes it possible to connect the domain of *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing* with contemporary Chinese art. It reconstructs an alternative of Western categorization of contemporary Chinese art. The meaning of *Yi* in contemporary Chinese art does not deal with the representation of truth since the self is unified with the external things, but focuses on such harmony through the spatial fluidity and temporal heterogeneity in contemporary China.

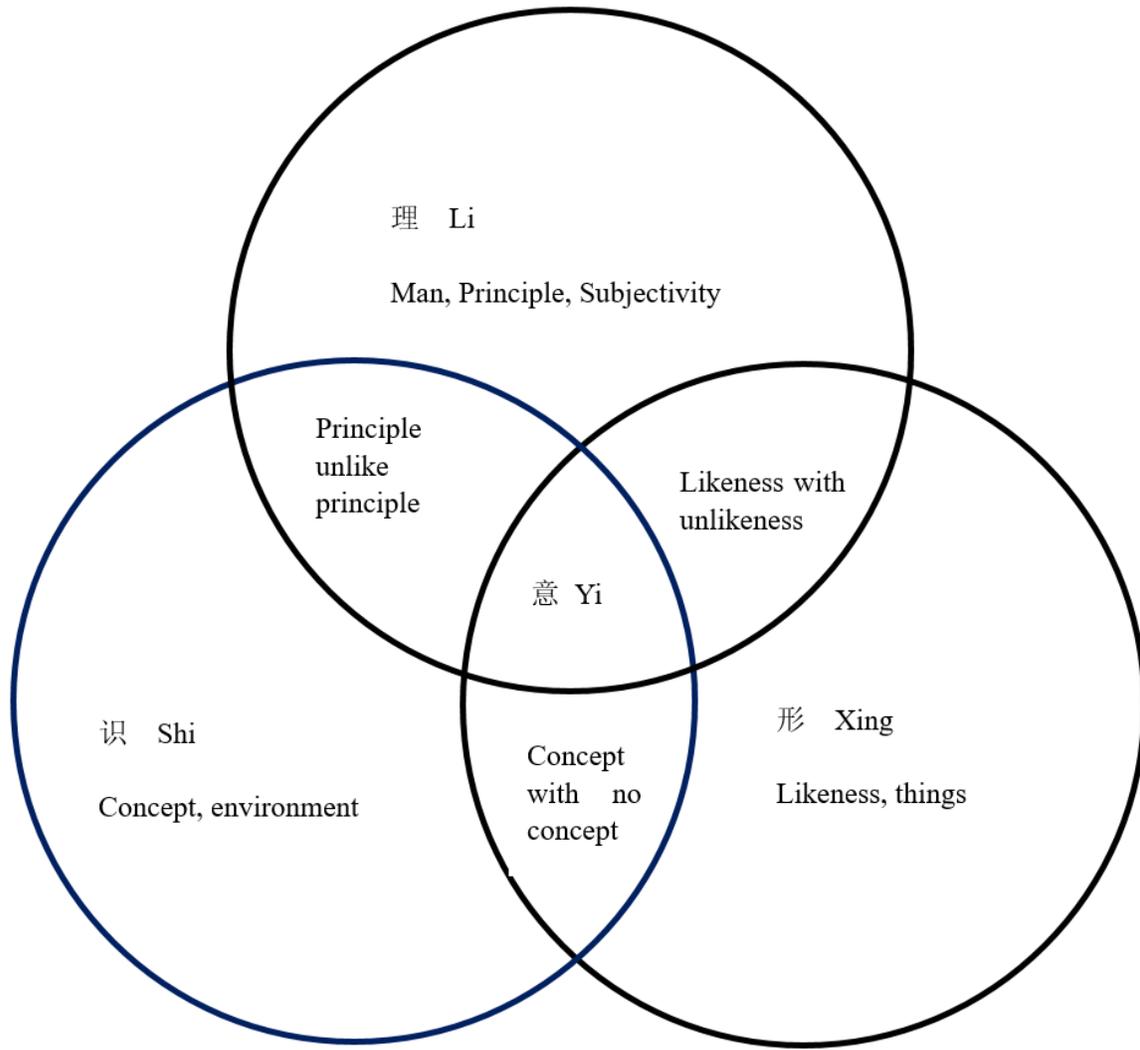


Fig. 1 Structure of *Yi Pai*

In this light, the pursuit of harmony in traditional philosophy and aesthetics provides the artists, curators, critics and audience an alternative perspective to relieve the shock of urbanization, commodification and globalization. Stereotypically for urbanization, it would be presupposed a contradictory relation between the artists who identify with the lower-class community suffering from demolition and the government planners who ambitiously hurry to replace the old landscape

with the new one. Such representation of the warfare in the urban can be relatively exemplified by Zhang Dali's graffiti series (Fig. 2, Fig. 3 and Fig. 4). Apparently by spraying on the ruins a war signifier, AK-47-the tag of a well-known assault rifle gun-Zhang appears to criticize the violence of urban destruction against the inhabitants as well as himself signified by his portrait on the wall. He imagines himself as the deconstructing object because the ruins will be soon transformed into a fresh urban environment with skyscrapers and advanced infrastructures.

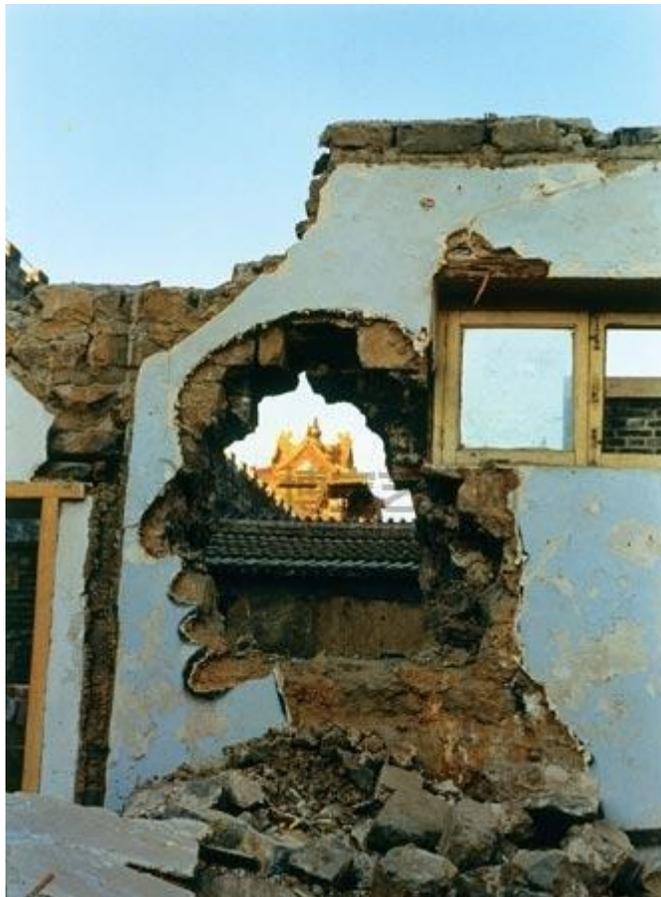


Fig. 2 Zhang Dali, *Demolition-Forbidden City*, from the series *Dialog with Demolition*, 1995.

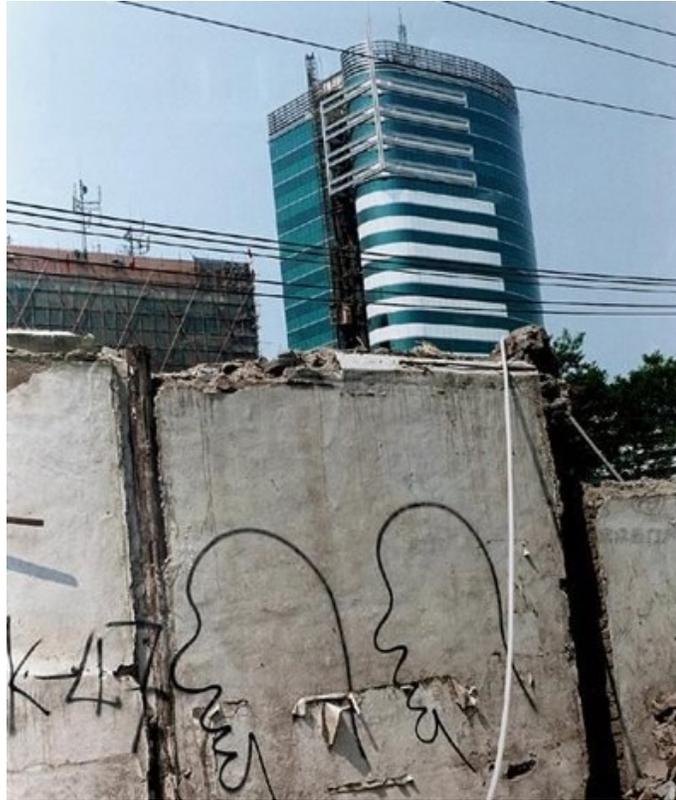


Fig. 3 Zhang Dali, *Untitled No. 1*, from the series *Dialog with Demolition*, 1999.



Fig. 4 Zhang Dali, *National Art Museum of China*, from the series *Dialog with Demolition*, 1999.

Obviously, this reading grasps the binary relation between the artist and urbanization. It would be at risk to reach a dead end, however, to read Zhang Dali's graffiti series from the one-dimensional separation of *Li*, the artist's subjectivity through his own portrait, and *Xing*, the old buildings that are demolished into ruins. Instead, *Yi Pai* entails the rethinking of how the domain of *Shi*, the environment on which the principle of *Li* and the likeness of *Xing* are based, interacts with the other domains and how the triple structure as a whole probes into the meaning behind the violence. It is noteworthy that, throughout Zhang's series, the background behind the ruins are transformative from the treasured building of Forbidden City to the construction site and urban skyscraper then to the building of National Art Museum of China. Rather than paying attention to the transience and instability of the graffiti and ruins, the domain of *Shi* grasps the fluidity of *chang*-literally the environment and surroundings in the spatial transition of Zhang's work. If the background space is fluid and transforming, in other words, the content and form signified by the ruins and graffiti are not unsustainable but frozen and motionless in a certain temporality of time and space. His portrait remains the same but the urban environment keeps shifting through his works. The presence of the artist himself and the expression of his emotion toward urbanization, in this light, is not represented by the relatively static part of *Xing* but instead approached by the mobility of urban space, the incessant movement of *Shi* or *chang*. Zhang's memory of the tradition, experience with the urban expansion and practice as an artist represent his symbiotic relation to the city. In this light, the domain of *Shi* can be understood as both the visual object and the representing subject.

In this light, Zhang's dialogue with city resorts to spatial fluidly in the domain of *Shi* instead of the emotional appeal of the devastating appearance of the ruins as *Xing*. On the other hand, the visualization of Zhang's self-portrait, tag of Ak-47 and ruins can be both static and instable, persistent and unabiding, eternal and vanishing based on how the temporality of *Shi* is located. For Gao, he uses "approach" instead of "represent" to articulate the relation of *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing*.⁶ It is through the spatial interaction among *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing* that the meaning of *Yi* is created, defined and approached. The structure of *Yi Pai* is "the time of spatialization, the freezing form of time" that can be articulated by approaching rather than the representation between art and truth.⁷ The higher level of *Yi* in traditional art is usually phrased as a process of meditation that can be only understood by heart instead of description (*zhi ke yi hui, bu ke yan chuan*). Similarly, Gao argues that the meaning of *Yi Pai* could never be precisely represented by any form of language and image but would be only approached as far as possible.⁸ It is important to clarify that to approach the meaning of *Yi* beyond representation is not to take an agnostic point of view to criticize the representational paradigm in Western art history and meanwhile claim a superiority of Oriental metaphysics. It derives from the aesthetics of traditional ink and wash painting but is not exclusively applicable to certain forms, styles, conceptions and mediums. For the work of Zhang Dali, the meaning of *Yi* is approached mainly through a *Shi*-oriented structure. While the performance of East Village artists such as Zhang Huan and He Yunchang can be read from a *Xing*-

⁶ Ibid, pp66-67.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

oriented perspective given the appeal of body language and the cultural meaning inscribed on the body.⁹

Wu Hung has mentioned that the materialization of ruins and its visualization through painting or photograph roots in the positive attitude towards both actual ruins and fabricated ones from the perspective of European aesthetics while in the traditional Chinese context the visualization of ruins almost does not exist because of its symbolic inauspiciousness and danger.¹⁰ Indeed, the visualization of ruins should be understood as a result of China's collision with the Western powers since the late 19th century. The emergence and development of modern consciousness about ruins can be seen as a process of how traditional China is forced to be incorporated into the global market and colonial system and how the modern nation of China is established and confirmed in the world system of modernity.

In his analysis of the few traditional paintings reflecting on ruins, Wu Hung points to three types of different signs that coincide with *Yi Pai* structure to some degree: "the traveler as an internal viewer; the stele as the object of his gaze and a symbol of the past; and the withered trees constituting a natural environment while heightening the sense of devastation and distress."¹¹ Associated with the iconographic tradition in Chinese art and literature, the three symbols also constitute meanings analogic to the structure of *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing*. In addition, he has further discussed the dialectic relationship between *ji* (current site that is reserved) and *xu* (ruins):

⁹ Ibid, pp60-61.

¹⁰ Wu, Hng, "Ruins, Fragmentation and Chinese Modernity/Postmodernity" in Gao, Minglu and Bryson, Norman, eds., *Inside/Out: China's New Art*. New York: Asian Society Museum, 1998, pp 59-61.

¹¹ Wu, Hng. *A Story of Ruins: Presence and Absence in Chinese Art and Visual Culture*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2012, pp36-37.

Xu emphasizes the erasure of human traces; *ji* stresses survival and display. A *xu* in a strict sense can only be mentally envisaged because it shows no external signs of ruins; but a *ji*, being itself an external sign of ruins, always encourages visualization and representation. The idea of *xu* implies the subjective interaction with a site; but the notion of *ji* embodies the dialectic of nature and artifice. *Xu* lacks physical framing; but *ji* must signal a process through which a specific place or sign is transformed into a trace of the past that expresses its own process of decay. Imagination related to *xu* is by definition temporal and mythical, while *ji* always translates poetic temporality into a spatial and material existence.¹²

In this light, the intentionally reserved and displayed sites by human beings—the Forbidden City, National Art Museum and urban skyscraper—symbolize Zhang Dali’s meditation on the spatiality and materialization of *ji* while the ruins as the visualization of *xu* indicate the temporality and subjectivity. As Wu Hnng indicates, *ji* is also subject to the irresistible process of decay and destruction but the representation of *ji* with an idealized form could restrain and delay this process.¹³ Thus, the represented *ji* in Zhang’s photographs can be also interpreted as a spatial transformation from the natural and traditional to the artificial and contemporary and vice versa. He establishes his communication and interaction with *xu* through his self-portrait on the ruins by imagining himself as the object of destruction and transformation.

¹² Ibid, p63.

¹³ Ibid, p64.

THE RUINS: RITUALIZE THE SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

If Zhang Dali's meditation is based on his dialogue with the booming international metropolis such as Beijing in which the historical materials and cultural treasure are selectively reserved, the performance of Chen Qiulin, by contrast, establishes an internal connection of time, space and values in the underdeveloped southwest hinterland of China. The project of Three Gorges Dam since the 1990s has exerted a huge impact on both the local community and the national economic planning. For the more developed downstream basin of Yangzi River, the construction of the dam, as expected, is able to not only deal with the perplexing issue of flood and drought disaster but also create enormous economic value through the mass production of electricity and a better shipping condition. For the upper area on the other hand, a number of counties and villages, according to the project, were demolished and reconstructed and even worsen a part of regions including some historical sites such as Baidi Town would be submerged by the flood. Thus since the late 1990s, the theme in terms of demolition, displacement, reconstruction and relocation has become one of the most remarkable fields of cultural creation including contemporary art, avant-garde film, literature and also a series of "mainstream-melody" works. Chen Qiulin's hometown, Wanxian, was at brunt of the project. Touched by the radical change-the panorama of ruins in which building sites, inhabitants and traditional culture coexist and interact-Chen created a series of photographs and video works based on her former memory and experience in her hometown with the present spectacle of demolishment. One well-known of her works that this study concerns is *Rhapsody on Farewell* in 2002, a video that documents her

performance of cultural sentiment and the real life of local inhabitant in Wanxian.

This video unfolds in three parts. The first part documents the spectacle of destruction in several sites and the daily life of the relocated immigrants (representation of *Xing*, or the site of *xu*). The fragmentation of the urban life through the fluid, cracked spaces-the old building being demolished piece by piece and the local community being separated from their motherland-freeze a sentiment of “saying farewell” in the small town. Rather than directly delivering to the audience her sadness and despair through a single-track narrative, Chen places her memory and emotion about the city on the opera performance of *Farewell My Concubine* on a stage in the demolished site (reflection of *Shi*, or the heritage of *ji*). The famous repertoire tells a story that when a king and his concubine are besieged by the enemy, the concubine does not want to hinder her lover so she performs sword dance and finally commits suicide to say farewell. Symbolic of the fragmentation of urban life, the episodes of the stage performance are interspersed with the documentation of the local community. On the stage, it is a story of a dead woman; while in her hometown it is the scenario of a dying city, the disappeared memory and the lost history. When the concubine *Yu Ji* kills herself on the stage, the final building is torn down in the destruction site.

Then it comes to the third part, Chen’s own performance with opera costume wandering the hard way amid the ruins (expression of *Li*). As a lost woman, Chen shares the common sentiment with *Yu Ji*, the dead woman who uses her death to express the everlasting love. The combination of the three parts create an interconnection between the traditional romance and the modern city within the same space In other words, the performance as fragments, the city as ruins and the

women as dead bodies, all create a dislocation between a historical continuity and a current temporality in the conversion of between human beings and urban materials. Such spatial and temporal interactions are represented through the fragmentary mismatch of image, words as well as sound effect in the video. For example, the image of deconstructing the old buildings is aurally juxtaposed with the opera song while on the stage the sound of building explosion appears to distract the audience from the performance itself. The use of displaced diegetic sound in this video creates a dialogic fluidity of spaces that is able to integrate the audience into the communication of historical memory and contemporary experience in the indigenous context.

The fusion, interaction and interchangeability of different elements, parts and meanings are not only represented through the visualized agency of the body performance of Chen Qiulin herself but it is ritualized by all the performing subjects in the video. Such collectivity corresponds positively with the category of performance art in China. In his reading of performance art through *Yi Pai*, Gao indicates:

Chinese performance artists do not regard their own bodies as the carrier of “artistic conception” (like European body art in the 1960s) but rather as the product of ritualization and socialization. This category of body is not only associated closely with the context of Chinese contemporary society and art, but also correlates the individual body action with the traditional consciousness of collectivity.¹⁴

Furthermore, Gao distinguishes the category of Chinese performance art from the Western one. Literally, performance art in Chinese is called as *xingwei yishu*, whose meaning literally in

¹⁴ Gao, *Yi Pai*, p62.

English is closer to behavioral art. In order to clarify the particularity of behavioral art in Chinese context, he indicates:

The concept of “behavioral” is not only limited to the body action of individuals. Rather it underlines that the individual should conform to certain code of ethics in a community, which derives from both the collective ideology in Maoist era and the Confucian moralization. The purely individualized behavior is impossible to exist in such contexts; on the contrary, it must be social and must reflect a certain form of social behavior.¹⁵

Therefore, if the performing body is innately endowed with social, cultural, and historical significance, the metaphor of the body performance should not be only correlated to the social critique of immoderate urbanization and political mistake in Chen’s work. In *Rhapsody on Farewell*, the conceptualization of performance is dissolved by the ritualized daily life. The opera singers, workers, and immigrants all perform themselves as the representing subjects. Suffice it to say, the demolition of buildings, the loss of traditional way of life, and the difficulty of artist to dance could not be interpreted one-sidedly as a criticism of Three Gorges Dam project or a resistant force against the authoritarian urban planning of Chinese government. According to Wu Hung, Chen’s video series made in Three Gorges area from 2002 to 2007 reveal her ambiguity, or to be more precisely, her gradually accumulated positive tone toward Three Gorges Project. If *Rhapsody on Farewell* to a great extent reflects a sense of death-disappearance of place and death of women under the violent demolition, her sequential works, by contrast, more positively pay attention to

¹⁵ Ibid, p63.

the new appearance in the old counties and towns which has broaden people's horizon and brought material improvement to local life. "She experienced sacrifice that the dam demanded from the local people, and shared the dream of these people to have a better life in the future...she really means that she was able to recover from her initial despair (as expressed in *Rhapsody on Farewell*) and to transcend ideological prejudice".¹⁶ In her later works such as *River by River* and *Garden*, Chen continues using traditional opera performance to express her double sentiment of sadness and expectation. In this sense, the significance suggested in *Rhapsody on Farewell* is not to document the violence, displacement, and separation caused by the dam project, but rather to suggest a relatively hopeful rebirth through Chen's conflicting sentiment and desire.

Equally noteworthy is the Chinese title of *Rhapsody on Farewell*, *Bie Fu*. Literally, *Bie* means separation and farewell; while *Fu* is associated with a genre of traditional literature. Like poetry and prose, the literary genre of *Fu* underlines rhetoric and rhythm, but it is particular about the use of elaborated parallelism to express emotions through the portrayal of things and environment. Moreover, together with *Bi* and *Xing*, *Fu* is usually regarded as one of the three poetic devices, characterized by parallelism, analogy/contrast, metaphor and object-chanting. Hence, the multi-thread structure, the juxtaposition of different performances and ritualized bodies, and the emotions toward the ruins in the video can be seen as the visualization of traditional literary genre in the field of contemporary art. The form of *Fu*, in this light, also coincides with the mechanism

¹⁶ Wu, Hng, Internalizing Displacement: the Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art in Wu, Hung, McGrath, Jason and Smith, Stephanie, eds., *Internalizing Displacement: the Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art*. Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2008, pp 14-18.

of *Yi Pai* differentiating the principle of representationalism:

It is not necessary to use logical and geometric icons to directly represent the principle and conception.

On the contrary, the nonrepresentational meaning can be approached by the metaphor of daily life images. This is the illumination of *Fu*, *Bi* and *Xing* of traditional literary theory.¹⁷

UNITY AND AMBIGUITY: IMAGINE URBAN FANTASY

If the visualization of ruins reflects the ambivalent sentiment of contemporary Chinese artists towards discontinuity, disappearance, and displacement, then the representation of the magnificent panorama of urban material can be seen as their immersion into newness and rapidity. To this point, the urban representation from the traditional perspective can be positively responded by Yang Yongliang, a Shanghai-based contemporary artist who is remarkable by integrating traditional landscape painting and photograph of urban panorama in his digital works (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). According to Wang Meiqin, the urban images infused into a background of natural landscape, including skyscraper, tower crane, recreational facility, advertisement, company label, bridge, highway, automobile, pylon and pipeline, all signify the artificial spectacle of urbanization which is gradually replacing the natural authenticity. Thus she sees in Yang's digital works strong anxiety about the disappearing landscape and the critical reflection of the unscrupulous expansion of the urban.¹⁸

¹⁷ Gao, *Yi Pai*, p55.

¹⁸ Wang, Meiqin. *Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies: Urbanization and Contemporary Chinese Art*. Oxford: Routledge,



Fig. 5 Yang Yongliang, *Artificial Wonderland I - No.1*, 152*280 cm, giclee print, 2010.



Fig.6 Yang Yongliang, *New Moon*, 140*140 cm, giclee print, 2012.

However, Wang might have overlooked the indivisibility of images in traditional landscape painting, or the symbiosis of *Li*, *Shi* and *Xing*, because in her text the natural landscape in Yang's digital project is merely regarded as the passive background on which the urban images can be extracted and interpreted as the critical reflection on the immoderate urban expansion. The urban images should not be understood unilaterally as negative substitution of the natural; instead, it is significant that the power of urbanization, commercialization, and globalization is being actively incorporated and integrated into the totality of the traditional perspective. Not surprisingly, the first glimpse of his works would be a series of standard landscape paintings, which can be appreciated and evaluated from the perspective of traditional aesthetics. It is true that the symbolic

representation of social transformation and urban upheaval can be dug out through a closer look from part to part and detail to detail. But it does not suppose that the reading of images should be decontextualized from the philosophical system of aesthetics and values represented by the traditional landscape painting. Indeed, any extremity of one position between part and whole, or between image and context, is deviated far from the symbiotic relation of traditional particularity and global universality within the metropolis such as Shanghai. It is possible to find a gleaming aura of harmony for the audience standing at an “appropriate” distance from the visual objects of urbanization. The images such as the pylon-like tree, the skyscraper-like monument, the highway-like river are thus endowed with a significant natural unity, which presents the audience a poetic wonderland of human civilization.

Such likeness of urban images corresponds exactly with the beauty of ambiguity in traditional painting and the principle of “unlikeness” in the structure of *Yi Pai*. The ambiguity of urban images does not illustrate an irreversible process of substitution and loss of nature and tradition, but a relation of mutual replacement and transformation between natural objects and urban images. It is communication instead of conflict, infusion instead of deviation, and cohesion instead of explosion. This alternative interpretation of Yang Yongliang, in this sense, returns back to the philosophical principle of *zhong yong* or *zhong he* (the

middle way). It should be clarified that the principle does not necessarily indicate a moderate position between binary oppositions without inclination or adherence. It rather underlines the significance of negotiation and interaction between the self and the others and between subjects

and objects to approach a stage of harmony. As Gao has stated, the symptom of representationalism is indeed a result of the battle among different subjects of theory, form, and style in order to win the hegemonic status to suppress, conceal or transform others.¹⁹ The Confucian ideal of harmony, rather than uniformity, by contrast, creates foundation to read landscape painting as well as Yang's works through two illuminations. For one thing, new meanings can be created through the ostensibly contradictory images, symbols, and subjectivities which do not substantially remove and substitute each other but interdependently keep interacting in the domain of ambiguity and unlikeness. For another thing, the pursuit of harmony in art is a manifesto of the highest stage that Chinese ancient scholars have long stressed--the unity of heaven, earth, and man--in the core domain of traditional philosophy. Just like the emotional expression through things and environment in traditional literature or the coordination of artificial landscape with nature in traditional garden, the natural-urban landscape pattern in Yang's works thus creates a panoramic garden wonderland in which the man-made urban materials and the natural environment are unified and endowed with poetic and literary meanings.

Furthermore, by incorporating traditional legends, Yang seeks to reconstruct the traditional utopia--an ideal place without struggle, suppression, and separation--within the urban wonderland space. In particular, he is obsessed with the utopian narrative of *taohua yuan* (Peach Blossom Colony) by Tao Yuanming (365-427), the most famous recluse poet in the Jin Dynasty. Yang imagines and represents the reclusive scenarios within the virtual spaces (Fig.7). This reestablished

¹⁹ Gao, *Yi Pai*, p33, p119.

ideal world breaks up the distinctive boundary between the traditional utopia and the urban spectacle. The dark face of urban expansion is alleviated to an ambiguous panorama when traditional figures appear in the city and endow the urban materials with the traditional values of idealization and harmonization. So by establishing a connection between traditional conceptions and the contemporary urban images, Yang implements the traditional aesthetics and literati beliefs with modern language and digital techniques. As a rendition of both Chinese history, mythology, metaphysics, and the current sociocultural situation, his works build an urban wonderland as well as an ever-changing spectacle of history. Yang studied traditional art since his childhood, the influence of which is seen in the form of his art: a sense of traditional aesthetics can be clearly perceived in terms of media and concept, although it is brimming with a strong sense of postmodernism. In 2016 Yang participated in the exhibition *ShanShui Within* (literally, within waters and mountains) in Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art which involved representative contemporary artists such as Xu Bing, Qiu Zhijie, Xu Hong and Wang Dongling. According to the curator Miriam Sun, the discussion of contemporaneity would be visually represented through the mediation and reflection of water and mountain:

While it may bear the title *ShanShui Within* (with “*ShanShui*” referring to mountains and waters), but it is not the landscape commonly portrayed in ancient Chinese paintings and scrolls. Waters and mountains will instead be featured as a poetic representation, a spiritual refuge from worldly life, a channel for Chinese people to communicate with the universe, and a hometown for every delicate, untutored, and loyal Chinese heart. The way that these artists transmit the messages pouring out from

their own egos, blending internal mental subjects with the external physical world, shall therefore be the primary focus of the upcoming and awaited event. This, in turn, allows for the subtle instinct and infinite imagination portrayed in the artwork to present in full the undefined reflection, interaction, and intermingling of Chinese tradition and contemporary art.²⁰

In particular, Yang's work *Artificial Wonderland* at the exhibition not only represents an indigenous cultural identity and its contemporary reflections but also establishes a communication between the local and the global based on the fluidity of natural landscape and urban space. The natural landscape derives not exclusively from traditional landscape painting but also from the photographs that Yang takes in Norway and Iceland. By transforming Western landscape into wash and ink painting, Yang is able to represent an interaction between a localized global nature and a globalized concern of urbanization.



Fig.7 Yang Yongliang, *The Peach Blossom Colony*, 85*321 cm, giclee print, 2012.

²⁰ Sun, Mariam, the preface of *Shan Shui Within* exhibition, 2016.

WOMEN'S ART: TRANSCEND THE FEMINIST DISCOURSE

The concern of sexuality and gender is another widely-focused issue when the women in city are presupposed as marginal to bear the urban violence. Indeed, women's art, or the art exploring gender identities, has been considered as a domain of heterogeneous contemporaneity in Chinese art world. For Gao, women's art as a part of contemporary art, can be understood as neither the expression of purely personal experience nor the representation of the global feminist community. Refusing to claim a resistant, radical and subversive feminist discourse as the essential aspect of Chinese women's art, he rather argues that women's art should be incorporated together as a particular way of responding to Chinese modernity as a whole.²¹ On the one hand, the subjectivity of both Chinese men and women has been suppressed and concealed by the collective discourse of the communist government. Gao uses his private communications with artist couples such as Wang Gongxin and Lin Tianmiao, Song Dong and Yin Xiuzhen, Zhu Jinshi and Qin Yufen to argue the gender alliance in the harsh sociopolitical environment. On the other hand, both men and women are confronted with the contradictions of urbanization and globalization. Therefore with respect to the reflection of urban issues, the experience and meditation of the Chinese women should not be primarily gender-specific, but rather socially collective: it is the family instead of gender identity that mainly takes the brunt of the social transformation.

However, Paul Gladston has fiercely criticized that such totality reflected by male-female

²¹ Gao, Minglu, "Particular Time, Specific Space and My Truth": Total Modernity in Chinese Contemporary Art in Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy, eds., *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, p158.

unity not only conceals the difference, struggle, and suppression between men and women but also idealizes the patriarchal totalitarianism throughout Chinese history. As a part of his project of deconstructing the exceptionalist vision of history and culture in redefining the contemporaneity in China, Gladston's critique stands on a universal discourse of sex, sexuality, and gender to argue the persistence of men's dominance in the patriarchal system regardless of the Western history or the gender order in the Third World. Therefore for Gladston, Gao's assertion that men and women are indivisible from each other on the condition of contemporaneity, in effect masks the domination of patriarchal system in both private and public space on the one hand and imposes a gender equality on the nation that passively results from the challenge of urbanization and globalization on the other. Gladston thus even assets the complicity of total modernity with the authoritarian ideology:

Seen from a critical postmodernist point of view, Gao's claim that the Chinese conception of modernity has supported a totalizing engagement between contemporary Chinese art and Chinese society can be interpreted as a highly questionable attempt to establish cultural difference at the expense of the glossing over of pronounced tensions that clearly exist between contemporary Chinese art and the PRC's prevailing social-political order: including, among other things, the persistence of strong governmental controls on freedom of public expression that severely curtail the critical agency of all contemporary Chinese artists, and, as previously discussed, the persistence of a patriarchal order that continues to overwrite the identities and experiences of Chinese women artists. Although Gao may not have intended it, he can therefore be understood to have effectively aligned himself with the dominant

ideological authoritarianism of the CCP.²²

It might be biased from a perspective of Western gender deconstructivism to argue such a complicity of Gao's exploration in Chinese context. Probably for Gao, the unity of men and women, on the one hand, derives from the principle of traditional philosophy, such as the interaction and integration of yin and yang, which does not necessarily dislodge female's space out of the family order. On the other hand, this assertion of male-female harmony can be seen as a part of his project to deconstruct the symptom of Western dualism in the reflection and rethinking of contemporaneity. Joining such debate about the role of gender space and women's art, this section will analyze several remarkable women artists whose works might be labeled as feminist representation by Western curators and scholars and then further explore the relation among women's subjectivity, feminist ideology and the historical context of sex and gender in China. However, I argue neither for a discourse of feminism as a part of the global feminist community nor for a primary gender complicity in contemporary Chinese context. Instead, I suggest that by creating art works based on their personal memory and experience, Chinese women artists are able to transform and sublimate their individuality into a collective sentiment concerning about family space and social environment.

Chen Qiulin's *Rhapsody on Farewell* has offered an entry to rethink about the relation among female subject, female space and the public environment of urban destruction. What does the

²² Gladston, Paul. *Deconstructing Contemporary Chinese Art: Selected Critical Writings and Conversations, 2007-2014*. Springer, 2015, pp51-52.

female body represent in the spectacle of ruins? The answer can be a reminiscence of Rey Chow's term "primitive passion" to define the relation between spectators and the visual objects that stimulate a sense of imagination, anxiety and belonging with respect to the fate of the nation.²³ For Chow, the maternity, suffering, persistence, or desire of the female body could draw the spectators closer to identify with them and thus imagine the greatness and suffering of the motherland during modern history. From this point, the visualization of the ritualized female body in Chen's video presents the audience an entry point of primitive passions. When the home--the safe space of Chinese female in the family order--is broken by urban violence, there is anxiety about the cultural crisis. Therefore, the exposure of female body and female materials such as costume, mirror and make-up in the public space, can be understood as the stimulation of passionate imagination about the instability of gender space within traditional family order. Whereas in *I Exist, I Consume, and I am Happy* (Fig. 8), there is a metaphor for the commodification of female body in the global market. On the other hand, the artist herself, however, appears to be enjoying the pleasure brought by the contemporary consumer culture--a sexual passion of being admired for, being sought after, and being dreamed of by men. It thus corresponds to Chow's observation that women are both active and passive agency that pursues modernity through pain and pleasure.

²³ Chow, Rey. *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press. 1995, part 1.



Fig.8 Chen Qiulin, *I Exist, I Consume, and I am Happy*, 2003.

Similar to Yang Yongliang's imagination of urban wonderland within a vital space, the performance of Xing Danwen puts her focus on the splendid urban environment. In her well-known Urban Fiction series, Xing herself performs as distinctive female characters in different stories that occur in urban spaces (Fig. 9 and Fig. 10). The characters she performs share the similar loneliness with others varying in sex, race, age and class: they are all isolated from each other by the visible or invisible wall in the urban space, thus unable to feel, observe, and communicate with each other. Similar to the unity of subject and object in traditional landscape painting discussed in last section, the common stage of urban life can be a manifestation of the inseparable association between the environment and the individual. If it is necessary to determine a perspective of subject, the position of viewers can be regarded as an imaginary site for the production of subjectivity. Like

watching a film, the spectators are provided with an omniscient perspective to observe what the characters fail to see in the isolated spaces. In other words, the artist, characters, and materials become the objects to bear the gaze, imagination, and emotion of the audience. The various characters function as the mirror images for the audience to identify with, which means that the spectators are able to plug themselves into the stories happening in urban environment. In this sense, the subject of spectator can be also conversed into the object. In the scenarios of whether daily routines or events such as wedding, suicide, murder and car accident, the viewers could identify with the characters; so Xing Danwen herself can be identified with either by any female character or even any human beings in the urban.

The transcendence beyond men/women dichotomy and object/subject boundary thus opens the artist's imaginary space to the audience. The common stage of isolation and loneliness of every individual could stimulate people's desire to interact, communicate and exchange emotions with others. In reality, however, such spiritual demand does not produce open interaction but is ironically transformed to individual's imagination on what happens to others behind the walls created by the concrete forest. The imagination can be either prosaic or dramatic based on the expectation of the imagining subject, which means that everyone engaging in the imaginative fulfilment of self-identification is able to be a director or an actor. To imagine the others is thus to reflect on the self. In this light, *Urban Fiction* series can be just regarded as the visualization of such fantastic practice in the imaginary space, which, through the power of visual objects, has obscured the boundary among the artist, audience, and fictional characters, further enabling the

communication and identification of urban sentiment of individuals. In this sense, her panorama of urban spaces positively responds to the unity of object and human prevalent in traditional landscape paintings.



Fig.9 Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction*, 2004-2005.



Fig.10 Xing Danwen, *Urban Fiction*, 2004-2005.

Therefore first and foremost, what Xing has concerned about in *Urban Fiction* series is her loneliness, isolation, and depression as a human being, rather than as a woman. The subjectivity of her performance as different female characters, in other words, is not accounted for by the physical difference but by the emotional sameness. In this sense, her experience in the urban environment is collectively shared by both male and female audience and further sublimated into a transcendent human relation beyond sexual difference and gender identity. On the one hand, the visually beautified urban spectacle in her series represents the massive material progress that urbanization has brought to Chinese urban citizens. On the other hand, urbanization has established the invisible wall everywhere that alienates urban individuals from each other.

In my interview with Xing Danwen in September 2016, she straightforwardly repudiated the label of feminist artist even though a number of her Western friends would like to categorize her

works with political discourse of feminism every now and then.²⁴ It is undeniable that in her works there is a concern about the problems that women are being confronted with, such as sexual discrimination in the work field, women's health and infant care. Xing admitted that she did not consciously involve such female concerns into her recent works until more and more curators and critics began to read her works from a feminist perspective. In fact, there was an absence of patriarchal suppression throughout her growth in her family in which the female members were much more dominant quantitatively and discursively than male.²⁵ Thus it was not surprising to her that there was even a waning of masculine power in her clan.

In contrast to the unconsciousness in Xing's experience and creation, the gender critique of Chen Qingqing represents the vulnerability and suppression of contemporary Chinese women within the urban environment. Her use of realistic penis model in her installation work *La-La-La* (Fig. 11), for example, constitutes a penis jungle replete with fragments and remains, the visual impact of which reveals the suppressive masculine power in the patriarchal city. However, the solution for her to deconstruct the gender hierarchy is not to align with the Western feminist community but to seek the specialty of Chinese women. Instead, she expresses a nostalgia for the merit characteristics of Chinese women in the premodern period by using fiber materials to represent the beauty and persistence of traditional women (Fig. 12). The traditional characteristics of Chinese women such as loyalty, persistence, kindness and tolerance, according to Chen Qingqing, should be the key for Chinese women to survive and to maintain their significant role

²⁴ Personal face-to-face communication in 2016.

²⁵ Ibid.

in the family-country order. Such nostalgia for femininity in traditional context indicates the sense of harmony not only between men and women but also between the individual and the nation, and between human beings and the environment as a whole.

In summary, the works of Chen Qiulin, Xing Danwen and Chen Qingqing all represents the absence of gender ideology in contemporary Chinese art. Women artists express their subjectivity through concerns about urbanization based on their personal memory and experience. It is noteworthy that the reconstruction of individuality and heterogeneity associated with gender reflection has indicated two turns of contemporaneity in gender field distinct from the Western context. For one thing, the representation of women's art is not universally represented as a political appeal of gender discourse but locally transformed into a collective sentiment toward the influence of urbanization and globalization. The sentiment transcends not only the feminist discourse against gender hierarchy but also the boundary of nation, race, class and space. For another thing, the strategy to overcome the gender hierarchy and binary oppositions between male and female is not turned into a gender deconstructivism such as queer theory in the West but seeks the possibility of reconstructing the traditional order of family and the gender role of women within that space.



Fig.11 Chen Qingqing, *La-La-La*, 107*41*43cm, 2006.



Fig.12 Chen Qingqing, *Xi Shi*, 185*180*8cm, fiber, 2007.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has demonstrated how the traditional philosophy, aesthetics and values contribute the reinterpretation of artistic representation of urbanization in contemporary Chinese art. Even if the global cultures, conceptions and life styles are exerting a strong impact on China, for many

Chinese people traditional culture functions as their spiritual hometown to understand the universe and truth, to lead a harmonious way of life and to relieve the challenge of urbanization and globalization. Thus, the tradition enables contemporary artists to re-imagine and re-represent an alternative urban spectacle, and provides art critics a perspective to explore the meaning of unity and symbiosis through the interaction of human beings, social context and urban objects. On the one hand, native artists engage themselves in the category of world contemporary art by visualizing and representing common urban scenes such as demolition, social mobility, concrete forest, loss of natural environment, and the class or gender suppression. On the other hand, such universality of urban representation is endowed with indigenous meanings associated with both traditional values, philosophical aesthetics and particular modern concerns in the local context. The artistic language to represent urban lives and spaces is insightfully characterized by Gao Minglu that the urban materials and landscape are a “mix of personal memory, historical memory, cultural memory and locality”.²⁶ The meditation on ruins, the poetic perspective of urban materials and the reconstruction of “Chinese women” away from discursive masculinization and feminist politicization, as this thesis has discussed, all suggest the power of recontextualization and self-orientation in the reconstruction of contemporaneity of Chinese art. For Wu Hung, it leads the audience to grasp locality of contemporary Chinese art that is simultaneously constructed in different spaces. The interaction of spaces-urban space, political space, cultural space, gender space and individual space-according to Gao Minglu, creates the meanings of *Yi* that functions an

²⁶ Gao, Minglu. *The Wall: Reshaping Contemporary Chinese Art*. New York: Albright Knox Art Gallery, University at Buffalo Art Galleries, 2005, p212.

alternative system of art history writing from Western categorization. Thus, the active participation of Chinese artists in the global categorization of contemporary art can be seen as a native endeavor to universalize its characteristics without compromising to the hegemonic discourse of modernity or postmodernism. In particular, the artistic reflection of urbanization closely corresponds to the conception of “glocalization”, which emphasizes the power of both globalization’s thirst for hegemony and its mutation when a local socio-cultural context seeks to reestablish and reconfirm the subjectivity itself by transforming the global power into its own. In his conclusion of visualization of the glocalized city in China, Zhang Yingjin asserts that:

The multiple possibilities-some of them contradictory to one another-that globalization has engendered remind us that disappearance is only one aspect of the process. Reinscription...is an effective means of re-localization, reconstituting subjectivity and reclaiming historical agency. In conclusion, I would contend that, even if a postnational, “borderless world” may be theoretically imaginable, the local will inevitably find ways to reinscribe itself-by asserting its difference in the face of its predicted disappearance, if not already its pronounced death-in the transnational, transregional spaces within the hegemonic discourse of the global.²⁷

The artists who engage themselves in the meditation and reflection of urban issues can be read from such a “future-past continuous tense”. On the one hand, they meditates on themselves as both subjects and objects and imagine themselves as to be either destructed or reconstructed. The representation of destruction at present points to the re-imagination of urban utopian in the future-

²⁷ Zhang, *Screening China*, p312.

the reconstruction of memory, the harmony of man and nature and the ideal relation of men and women in Chinese society. Thus, the traditional philosophy and aesthetics reconnect the past, the present and the future. Such connection creates an imaginary space for the audience in terms of what might disappear or reappear in the process of urbanization and how to collectively construct an urban wonderland in the future picture of Chinese urban. On the other hand, the disappeared cultural entirety in the imaginary prophetic vision is able to regain itself when the traditional culture is endowed with temporal meanings to reinterpret urbanization in contemporary Chinese art. From this perspective, Chinese urbanization does not destine the irreversible death of body, tradition, and nature but a process of negotiation to establish a human wonderland.

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