

Étude sur la différence et la communauté d'identité dans les images et les portraits

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Résumé En tant que deux formes d'art importantes, le cinéma et la peinture expriment des valeurs culturelles sous forme d'images. Dans cette modalité, la conscience d'identité, en tant que dimension importante de la recherche, est mise en évidence. En distinguant les images et les portraits chinois contemporains, on constate qu'ils sont à la fois différents et similaires en termes de conscience identitaire. La différence montre que les images et les portraits illustrent des caractéristiques culturelles différentes. Les points communs montrent que la "suture" et la "résistance" relevés par les images sont en fait un réexamen de l'identité culturelle, soulignant la position importante de l'identité culturelle dans la recherche artistique actuelle.

Mots clés: Images, Portraits, Identité, suture, résistance

On identity difference and commonality in images and portraits*

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Abstract: As two important art forms, film and painting express cultural values in the form of images. In this modality, identity consciousness, as an important research dimension, is highlighted. In distinguishing among contemporary Chinese images and portraits, they are both different and similar in identity consciousness. The difference shows that images and portraits highlight different cultural characteristics. The commonalities show that the "suture" and "resistance" pointed out by images are actually a re-examination of cultural identity, highlighting the important position of cultural identity in today's art research.

Key Words: Images, Portraits, Identity, suture, resistance

Research on images and portraits must first reject immediate judgements. That is, the difference between the image as represented by film and the image as represented by painting is not only reflected in whether it has the fluidity of time. The reason is that the fluidity of the film itself naturally provides it with the characteristics of communication. In painting, to some extent, the stillness of images is more focused on an aesthetic experience of contemplation. It should be noted that this is not a fundamental difference between the two presentation methods: film can also approach the construction of abstract theory, and painting can also become the messenger of cultural communication. However, here, we must adopt a relatively stable position that is convenient for implementing the universal sense of "film" and "painting" as a specific mode and tool to spread culture or even a file of cultural values that can be preserved. Although this classification may be sweeping, it is a more effective research path for approaching the topic of communication.

Furthermore, explaining how to understand the role and utility of film and painting as tools of cultural communication, Boris Groys, a German scholar, at the beginning of *Unter Verdacht: Eine Phänomenologie der Medien*, offered a unique and compelling view: "cultural value archives" – generally referring to all institutions and facilities that retain cultural memories – have a relationship with reality. As he writes, "In essence, 'reality' is the sum of all things that have not been collected. From this point of view, reality is not primary... it is all that remains outside the

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archives."¹ That is, the relationship between archives and reality is not just the relationship between records and what is recorded but more like a comparative relationship because only when archives are always present is it possible to make a comparison between old and new, which can create history as history. As a result, Groys expanded the content of the "archives". Furthermore, Groys pointed out that the carrier of the archives is hidden behind the archives. Therefore, the carrier itself is impossible to directly observe: "At first glance, it seems that the symbol carrier of the file is located inside the file... [however,] this first impression is misleading. Books are not part of the file, but the words on the book are; linen canvas is not, but the picture is; the machine that plays the video is not, but the moving picture on the screen is."² This conception of archive carriers actually subverts the concept of cultural carriers in the general sense. Through deeper questioning, "submedial space" has emerged: it is the process of history, nature, material, reason, desire, things, even accidents, etc., and these obscure characteristics are closely related to the eyes of the viewer: a subjective speculation.

In Groys's view, secular space and submedial space are incommensurable. Because only in secular space, with books, canvases, computers or video tapes, are such artificial symbols real to people, while in the submedial space, we can only surmise their existence subjectively. This means that we can only touch these artificial and mechanized carriers in the secular space of external reality. At this time, a new question arises: What is the symbolic meaning represented by and carried in these machines?³

The value of Groys's question for the discussion of film and painting lies in the fact that he actually weakened the significance of the carriers of artificial symbols (books, canvases, computers, etc.), turned to the file content itself, and discussed the importance of information worthy of speculation in the submedial space for "establishing files" and "file survival". Based on Groys's position on image research, this paper examines Ang Lee's film images and self-portraits by female artists and captures the cultural code of imagery that integrates historical processes and personal characteristics.

1. Difference: Personal Experience of Images

Ang Lee's early works *Pushing Hands*, *Wedding Banquet* and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* are often referred to as the "father trilogy". However, if only from the perspective of "father/patriarchy", this characterization simplifies and rejects the different compositions that Ang Lee wants to convey. The reason for giving up a perspective around the "patriarchal core" and turning to a larger perspective – "cross-cultural" – is that father is not the most "strong-willed"

¹ Boris Groys: *Speculation and Media: Media Phenomenology*, translated by Zhang Yun and Liu Zhenying, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, January 2014. pp1-2.

² Boris Groys: *Speculation and Media: Media Phenomenology*, translated by Zhang Yun and Liu Zhenying, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, January 2014. p9.

³ Boris Groys: *Speculation and Media: Media Phenomenology*, translated by Zhang Yun and Liu Zhenying, Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, January 2014. p11.

character in the three films. Here, *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* provides an illustrative example: The film highlights the hidden connotations of "food" and "sex". With regard to the three daughters, although there is a metaphor of resistance similar to "killing the father", the film's cinematography gives viewers a sense of separation and repression, which actually makes the father-daughter contradiction appear to be separated or dislocated, making it difficult to truly see that opposition occur within the same scene. This style should also be seen as a microcosm of Ang Lee's response to the East-West cultural conflict. Second, in these three works, the image of the father acts more like a fuse for conflict and a representation of the traditional East. The cultural contradictions under this setting are no longer covered by the simple "image of the father". At the same time, the meaning itself also diverges here—from the hidden worries between the father and son or the father and the family to the cultural issues of "self" and "others", "individual identity" and "national imagination" between the East and the West. In *The Third World Literature in the Era of Transnational Capitalism*, F. Jameson mentioned that "the texts of the third world, even those that seem to be about individuals and libido, always project a kind of politics in the form of national fables: stories about individual destiny contain fables about the impact on the mass culture and society of the third world."⁴

Here, a cognitive position pervading the Western discourse system is obvious: the West is used to distinguish sexual desire and subconscious fields from public discourse fields such as class, economy and political power; the East, on the other hand, tends to suppress personal identity with collective identity and implicitly degenerate the private sphere and its related gender or sexual identity. Therefore, this has led the West to overdetermine the desire of the Eastern image and made it enter the "Mask illusion" state: "The West believes that it is male – huge guns, huge industries, large amounts of money – so the East must be female – weak, delicate, poor"⁵.

In the criticism generated by the postcolonial context, the Third World is not only the "Other" in the eyes of Western audiences but also the "Spectacle" in Western vision in the form of myth. The black man with a white mask depicted by Franz Fanon in his work *Black Skin, White Masks* is often described as "an invisible person". Such invisible people have learned the secret of "invisibility", watching and pestering the epistemology of Western historicism with the narrative of minority history. As a result, the opportunity for implicit writing between the two cultures seems to be active: a series of complex global issues, such as gender, class, and race, are constantly presented in Ang Lee's film texts. Here it becomes clear there is a conscious problem that can be researched. We must ask and try to explain clearly whether the "other" logic hidden in Ang Lee's films is different from the above relationship of opposition between the two. In other words, we are looking for a different relationship just to explain the internal mechanism with which Ang Lee's films have won many awards at home and abroad, while the audience composition has undergone many changes. The East and the West, in Ang Lee's films, have

⁴ Fredric R. Jameson, *Third World Literature in the Era of Transnational Capitalism, Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Edited by Zhang Xudong), Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, January 2013. P429.

⁵ [J] Wu Qiong: Intertextuality Gap-The Cross-Cultural Ethics of Mr. Butterfly, *Studies of Literature and Art*, August, 2012.

actually been stitched together quite obscurely. Therefore, what we need to explore is the sewing skills hidden in the "family trilogy" – only from those places of suture can the topology of identity and imagination be revealed.

The charm of *Pushing Hands* lies in the coupling of various narrative atoms: for example, Xiaosheng's identity is always "gone": he walks out of one "home"/culture and then gradually walks into another "home"/culture, even without knowing where to go. As a result, this ethnic diaspora bears the burden of intuiting the world's patterned differences, cultural conflicts, and divisions of meaning. This dual identity based on "source" and "modernity" makes Xiaosheng wander from the role of "seeking roots/returning" and "leaving/building new". The result is the construction of two worlds: one is the real living space represented by the middle-class apartments in the suburbs of New York, and the other is the symbolic "cultural China" composed of character language, behaviour and multiple symbols. In addition, Ang Lee's cunning stroke is to break the balance of "parallels" between Chinese and Western cultures: the father of the prodigal son who left home, as an uninvited guest in both a familial and a cultural sense, "broke into" the new family of the prodigal son/American stranger; while the prodigal son's choice is always full of doubt, the father can no longer find the same cultural identity as the prodigal son. If we say that the family shown in *Pushing Hands* is still traditional and inwards-looking, then the family in *Wedding Banquet*, on the contrary, is poised outwards: Wei Tong, a real estate developer, Wei Wei, a female tenant, and Simon, who is willing to act as the emotional foil. The image and relationship of these three people have reconstructed the speech strategy of the traditional Chinese circle, which is an adventure of gender and identity. We cannot deny that *Wedding Banquet* conveys not only the crying father and son in *Pushing Hands* but also the so-called "life and death struggle" that F. Jameson delineates between the national state culture of the Third World and imperialist culture. If *Pushing Hands* or *Wedding Banquet* still stay in a narrative state that is concentrated within a single family, then *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* is more inclined to burst out many character relationship networks from a "single" family and to cover and highlight intergenerational contradictions. Here, food is not only a kind of existence but also an opportunity for each family member to reflect on their own living conditions. Through the change in feelings about food, the "Westernized" Jiaqian began to save the loss of traditional family ethics and then returned to inherit the father's value system of "food as a bridge" and "Asian flavour".

It is not difficult to find that *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* makes us feel that tradition is only seemingly traditional, and modernity is also a mode that can be rewritten. More deeply, Ang Lee wants to "disenchant" both the East and the West/tradition and modernity through *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman* so that these two seemingly fixed concept combinations can be transferred and finally come down to "drink, eat, men and women", four kinds of worldwide human – object relations. However, we still have to ask whether "men and women who eat and drink" truly appropriately expresses the status quo and vision of the integration of diverse cultures in the world or whether the meaning exchanged between tradition and modernity can bear cultural values that truly find identification among audiences.

2. Isomorphism: governance of image identity

In 2000, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), created a grand "Asian swordsman craze"; as a global video commodity, this trend has also promoted the prevalence of the "non-American Hollywood" cultural narrative⁶. Therefore, it is necessary to reach a consensus that *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, has attracted much attention from both the East and the West. People have devoted themselves to this imagined "Jianghu" rooted in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), that is, ancient Chinese culture, and have generated numerous interpretations at home and abroad. The analysis of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* will continue to be based on textual reading and ask: How does the West view the Eastern story? It even asks whether the "suture" of the two cultural value systems is successful. A serious discussion of these two issues will ensure the objectivity of attitudes towards identity and cultural influence.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon depicts an "imaginary China" rather than a "real Jianghu". Therefore, if *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is not only regarded as a successful Asian work but also as an experience of dredging Eastern and Western cultures, then the centre of the film text will gradually become transparent – it is not to show China's "reality"/"presence" but to restore the "image" of "cultural China". "Lightness Skill", as an "artistic conception" in Chinese martial arts films, is an aesthetic expression that imagines Chineseness and is also the best example of "disembowelment" that ancient Chinese culture has been striving for. In the film, the most typical and iconographic reconstruction of classical calligraphy and painting is the bamboo forest play. The image of "bamboo forest/mist" is not only reminiscent of the techniques of Hu Jinqun, a Chinese martial arts director, but also embodies the entire Chinese image presentation mode: the meaning of "light" is not only limited to the lightness of the body but also means a "diffuse" situation – the mist is left blank. Different from the meaning of smoke in Western films (in which it always points to capitalist industry, mechanized production, and even plunder), here it is precisely the "white" colour of mist that cleans up the colour/concentration of the scenery, depicts the "white" space of Chinese ink painting, and finally embellishes the dreaminess of the lens grammar. Therefore, if "lightness" in the West is only about weight, then "lightness" in China refers to cultural concepts including "light", "clarity" and "verdancy". Obviously, this fight in the bamboo forest, known as a "classic of contemporary martial arts", has already included the above three elements. If we leave aside the analysis of wire, advanced computer technology and other technical aspects, a more essential question seems to be: What kind of tradition on earth has induced this infatuation with flying over cliffs and walking on walls? This is about the cultural imagination of a "primitive flight desire" and the "Qi/Qi Yun Body". In ancient and modern cultural traditions at home and abroad, we can find traces of primitive desires for human flight, but there are great differences in the cultural presentation of this imagination between China and the West. For the West, flying is mostly dependent on foreign objects. Whether it is ergonomics and

⁶ *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* not only won four awards including the Oscar for "Best Foreign Language Film" in 2001 but also won nearly 70 awards in other film exhibitions and competitions – Christina Klein.

fluid mechanics developed by science or Western witchcraft with supernatural forces, flight must be accompanied by "accessories" – gliders, hot air balloons, witches' flying brooms, and even Peter Pan's transparent wings and Spiderman's silk ropes. Western flying always has "principles" and "traces" to follow. The body has never been invisible, and flight often points to a specific purpose, such as rescue. However, in China's flight imagination, the body is not simply used as the object and tool of "flying" but is homogenous and integrated with "flying". This kind of lightness skill, which is unimaginable to Westerners, is actually closely related to the "Qi theory" in Chinese thought.

The West often uses "anatomy" to interpret the presence of the body. When comparing the different views of the body between China and the West, contemporary Japanese intellectual history researcher Masuhisa Kuriyama believed that the West focused on muscle tissue and structure, while the centre of China's view was Qi, blood and meridians; this latter view showed the gathering of vitality and relaxation of the body rather than laxity. The two views seem to regard the "body" as the carrier of different states – one, reality and one, emptiness. In fact, these two states are already "enriched" expressions in the cultural traditions of China and the West, but the word "reality" is used in the West, while "fullness" is a more accurate translation in China: "The fullness of Chinese health preserving portraits comes from avoiding the loss of vitality due to outflow and resisting the loss of energy and time, while the autonomy of muscular portraits comes from the ability to act independently and changes caused by independent will and not affected by nature or chance"⁷.

Therefore, Li Mubai's body has changed from an entity to a "Qi" container: the gentle hint of walking through the bamboo sea conveys the hidden state of "internal Qi" rather than fierce muscular strength. This skill in lightness, which keeps the mind as an elixir and lifts the weight as lightly as possible, generating the universal freedom of eyes, heart, qi, body and mind and the "disappearance of anatomical muscles and bodies", is probably the root of the Chinese martial arts spirit, which combines the virtual, the real and the soft to overcome the rigid. In fact, in his first feature film, *Pushing Hands*, Ang Lee has already included a Chinese martial artist. He not only regards Tai Chi kung fu as a physical skill for self-cultivation but also metaphorically implies a whole set of principles of human relations. The real highlights of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are not limited to the expression of individual characters but run through the "qi" of the whole film text, from clothing to furnishings, expression to action, landscape to architecture, and calligraphy to fencing, all of which express the soft and quiet operation of "qi". This is also the greatest charm of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a martial arts film – it creates an artistic conception, shoots an artistic conception, wears an artistic conception, writes an artistic conception, and even hears an artistic conception. Here, the profound cultural density is woven, and the "qi" of literary theory, the "qi" of painting theory, and the "luck (hand, pen, ink)" in calligraphy are also integrated into one work of art. The whole film is filled with "qi", creating a sense of wind and space for imagination. Similarly, the concept of "space" cannot be interpreted in a Western way. Hong Kong

⁷ Shigehisa Kuriyama: *Body Language: The Mystery of the Body from the Perspective of Chinese Culture*, translated by Chen Xinhong, Taipei: Jiuqing Publishing House Co., Ltd., January 2001, P288.

film scholar Lin Niantong talked about the unique space consciousness in Chinese films (especially martial arts films) in his book *Chinese Film Aesthetics*⁸. For the structure and perspective of "space", Chinese films usually continue to extend the level view beyond the space of perspective. Especially in the setting of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the focus of the line of sight is scattered and freer, even suggesting that the audience imagines the scene beyond the edge of the screen and reconstructs a complete freehand brushwork lake from their own understanding of the image. This aesthetic is just like wandering eyes, an abandonment of feelings, swaying back and forth and saying less than what you mean, or how great music has the faintest notes. Furthermore, the "qi" of the internal force of the martial arts body, as the maker of space, connects everything into one by means of existence and movement, making them stick to each other without being thick. At this time, "space" is completely transformed by the dissipation of qi, and the characteristics of qi are also the characteristics of space. The two become a mutually connected sequence – in traditional Chinese paintings, there is no space to be outside the scenery and to control the scenery, because if there were, it would completely negate the atmosphere and flow of qi, thus also erasing the generation of space itself: the image is as vast as a celestial body, and the circulation is not stagnant.

Different from Lee Ang, an independent filmmaker, the group of contemporary Chinese female artists is worth considering. Compared with individuals, a "group" benefits more from its designation in its ability to reflect the perception and trends of a whole era. In turn, this group is also the witness and reflection of the development of contemporary Chinese culture and art. If the textual study of Ang Lee and his works can stay in a more private "sensitivity", then the study of the self-portraits of contemporary Chinese female artists should be more specific and representative, from which to analyse the specific issues of cultural identity and cultural influence.

When we review the situation of female artists, it is not difficult to find that they were mostly in a dormant state before the middle and late 1990s. This is because women's bodies in modern times played a "passive role" in the image practice of male painters, making them a fixed part in the history of art concepts.⁹

However, the collective appearance of contemporary Chinese female artists in the 1990s, as a unique landscape of new imagery, largely represents the autonomy of Chinese female artists to express ideas about the body and the establishment of gender awareness. Compared with the body as explored and understood in art by Western women in the 1970s and 1980s, the body in Chinese art is regarded not only as a medium for experience and world expression but also as a symbolic language with social significance and value, which resonates with "corporal politics" and its derivations related to "the integrity or disability of the body". The sensitivity and introspection of Chinese female artists on such issues, which were different from concerns on these themes in the early years, emerged at the end of the century. In response to this phenomenon, art critics such as

⁸ See Lin Niantong: *Chinese Film Aesthetics*, Taipei: Yunchen Culture Industry Co., Ltd., October 1991.

⁹ For the cultural identity of modern Chinese female artists, see Wang Xin and Zhang Fa: *Self Portrait and Modernity Writing of Modern Chinese Female Artists*, published in Journal of Renmin University of China, Issue 2, 2018, P162-170.

Tong Yujie and Liao Wen have analysed women's art from the perspective of social and cultural interaction, that is, the status and plight of female artists within the complexity of China's art history. If the Western, and especially American, feminist art practice shows a direct and fierce confrontation with patriarchal discourse, then in the artistic practice of the multidimensional political concept of Chinese feminist art, dialogue and resistance is a significant feature of Chinese contemporary feminist art.¹⁰

Anthony Giddens, a British sociologist, pointed out a self-confirmation mechanism derived from treatment when talking about the development of the self in *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Times*. Treatment is not simply an individual (subject) passively accepting things; in contrast, treatment needs to include the systematic reflection of the individual (subject) on their life development.¹¹ That is, treatment realizes the necessity and real value of reflection in the skill of self-observation. As a result, "autobiographical thinking" has become the core element of self-therapy. For its author, the self, on the one hand, is necessary to recall past experience as much as possible and handle relationships with this period. On the other hand, it is also necessary to include route planning for the development of future possibilities and modify it in the way the author hopes to be understood to integrate new dialogue and thinking methods into new feelings. Furthermore, when autobiography is established in a nonliteral form, it bears the core elements of self-identity in modern social life. At the same time, the internal reference to the path of self-development is solely based on the life track itself, which originates from the process of integrating the life experience into the self-growth narrative. Therefore, from the perspective of the way individuals construct or reconstruct their life history, the key reference points "come from within"¹².

It should be said that Giddens's discussion on the existing field of modern life brings inspiration for lifestyle and life planning and points out a dimension of criticism and research for the artistic practice of the "body". In his view, the concept of body is closely related to self and self-identity, and it often appears in the context of self-expression and self-shaping, that is, how various parts of the body are mobilized through all the features of the surface (such as clothing, decorative forms, etc.) and according to the conventions within the scenes of daily life. Here, if we say that clothing features and facial modifications can mainly indicate social identity rather than personal identity, they also often play an important role in gender identification, social class and economic status. Then, one of the internal problems that contemporary female artists urgently need to solve when creating images is how to remove the correlation between the system of modern social life and the creation of the body so that the body is freed of this system of meanings and it can at the same time carry out specific self-reflection.

By analysing the female artists Xiang Jing and Cui Xiuwen as representatives, we find that

¹⁰ Tong Yujie: *Chinese Feminist Artistic Rhetoric*, 26 pages, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2011.

¹¹ Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Times*, translated by Xia Lu, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, April 2016. P71.

¹² Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in Late Modern Times*, translated by Xia Lu, Beijing: China Renmin University Press, April 2016. P75.

they challenge the established image convention in their unique way to resist a unilateralist narrative. Therefore, in general, the "resistance" shown in Xiang Jing's and Cui Xiuwen's works has the following three characteristics. First, Chinese contemporary female artists have transformed the "image" itself –expanding "portrait" and "self-portrait" into "self-image". Although this seems to be just a change of vocabulary, in fact, in this process, "self-image" eliminates the oneness and sense of stillness of "portrait", sublates the modern attributes contained in "self-portrait", and emphasizes a cultural signifier that moves with the times, expresses individual positions, and contains the true and variant forms of images. Second, contemporary Chinese female artists have integrated the current situation and methods of the development of Chinese and Western cultures, especially combining the practical experience of western female artists in the previous or even the same era, while inheriting and carrying forwards the theoretical dimension. This makes Xiang Jing's and Cui Xiuwen's works expressive of a very different visual convention from the previous Chinese female artists. Third, based on the above two points, when choosing the content of a "self-image", contemporary female artists seem particularly inclined to present their "private experience", including some daily life conditions, and then raise them to "group consciousness", with the focus on blurring the gender dichotomy through "deformation" or "openness" of female body structure to achieve the pursuit of common humanity. Self-portrait, as a kind of special artistic genre that presents women's body consciousness and gender enlightenment, undoubtedly has a significant meaning as a gendered subject. It should be said that Xiang Jing and Cui Xiuwen, with the help of the autobiography of their bodies and the creation of "no man's land", deconstructed the dichotomy between public and private space in gender. In the genre of self-portraits, contemporary Chinese female artists took the lead in expressing their inner awakening as artists.

3. Image–Suture and Portrait–Resistance: Predicament and Reflection

There is a fact that cannot be ignored in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: its success is not only a symbol of the "soft landing" of Chinese classical culture but also a thorough practice of international capital integration. As a Hong Kong film scholar said, "It is difficult to classify this film (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) as a Chinese or Hollywood film, because the funds mainly come from the international distribution rights purchased in advance by American, Japanese and European companies. These companies include Sony in Tokyo, Sony Classic Pictures in New York, Columbia in Hollywood (buying rights in Latin America and several Asian markets), Columbia Film Asia (based in Hong Kong) and Sony Classic Music. The money for this movie was actually provided by a bank in Paris"¹³.

From financing, shooting, and distribution to entering cinemas, the whole film has always practised a kind of "lightness" skill or flight, which has prompted global audiences to collectively

¹³ Whitney Crothers Dilley, translated by Huang Yuwen: *Understanding Ang Lee*, Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, January 2012, P211. See also Kwai Cheung Lo, *Chinese Face/Off: The Traditional Popular Culture of Hong Kong*, P246, 2005.

escape from the fixed space of the self (geographical space and cognitive space), abandon regional restrictions, fly freely, and achieve independence from national boundaries and cultural barriers. This is the real attraction of "imagining China". For Western people, after facing such antique pavilions and cultural ideals, in addition to a burst of amazement, there is a desire to put themselves into such an exotic atmosphere. This is bound to involve the acceptance of the possibility of global culture. Therefore, as a "flying" martial arts film from the Jianghu, as well as an ancient Chinese video text building an "imaginary space", and as an international cultural minority, this film not only represented Ang Lee as "cleaning up the roots" of self-cultivation but also as trying to achieve a mode of transcultural and transnational dynamic crossing. Because the "unrealistic" skill of lightness that separates the body from gravity is not an international language that can be applied everywhere, neither can it explain the penetration of the film text into Western cultural habits, nor can it be attached to the reproduction of an authentic "Chinese" identity or stay in mixed cultural translation or misreading.

Looking at the works of directors at the same time in comparison with Ang Lee's works, we find that sharp cultural differences are almost everywhere in Ang Lee's early films. As a result, the frequent cultural confrontation between China and the West in Ang Lee's films inevitably suffered some criticism: on the one hand, there were questions whether Ang Lee's treatment indicated a pure Chinese local story that was still not easily recognized and accepted by the West, at least at the end of the 20th century; on the other hand, there were questions whether the emotional experience common to humanity can be truly established only through the collision of two different cultures. The common ground between these two kinds of criticism is also an important issue mentioned in the first chapter: the prosperity of film culture is not equal to the prosperity of communication and influence. Therefore, when reviewing the "father trilogy" of *Pushing Hands*, *Wedding Banquet*, and *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, our viewing focus has changed from internal culture to external culture – this is one of the biggest differences between Ang Lee and other contemporary directors.

A similar predicament also appears in the images created by female artists. Contemporary Chinese female artists have been committed to eliminating dependency on the "canon" to a considerable extent since the 1990s and have purified the visual presentation of women's experience and body images through three important narratives: the autobiographical, the anti-fetishistic and the socialized individual. However, the establishment of this visual system has a strong political meaning of "resistance". In fact, there is a dilemma preventing this system from becoming truly realized. In terms of the basic characteristics of Chinese feminist art in the 1990s, some scholars have made generalizations that are generally summarized as follows: female artists tend to seek creative inspiration from personal inner experience and physical memory, so they pay more attention to the reproduction of emotional and functional experience. Female artists did not devote much energy to the expression of male images but retained interest in traditional handicrafts such as sewing, weaving and daily family affairs¹⁴ to show the invisible body of the mother. Female artists involved in flower metaphors, such as Cai Jin, Li Hong, and even Mao

¹⁴ See Jia Fangzhou: *Women's Art in the 1990s*, in *Art Observation*, No. 3, 1999, pp. 6-7.

Yiyun, more or less grafted a kind of repeatedly entangled, unclear, sticky and sensitive body experience into the process of reconstructing flower images. The private life experience and nostalgia for a retro style quite firmly controls contemporary Chinese female artists in the internal spirit of creating an image and in both the processing of graphics and the establishment of the theme. However, when we look back at Georgia O'Keeffe's situation – whose flowers were seen as a kind of imitation of sexual reproduction, we can find that the misreading of Chinese women's art is by no means accidental.¹⁵

Therefore, for contemporary female artists who try to express their own group's artistic characteristics in an autobiographical or direct naked way and use the flag of "anti-fetishism" to question or even directly challenge the popular assumption that "artists naturally refer to men", the key question becomes "how should women artists intervene or even rewrite art history in the form of naked or deformed self-images". For this problem and its related extension, enlightened thinking still comes from the radical feminist art historian Griselda Pollock. In her paper *Viewpoint, Voice and Power: Feminist Art History and Marxism*, Pollock accepted a Marxist interpretation of the mode of art production¹⁶. Then, she put forward the idea of overcoming the myth of the creative genius and argued that the transformation of writing in art history was essentially an unordered observance – we should decompose it into creation, criticism, style influence, image source, exhibition, trade, training, publishing, symbol system, public and other parts; in other words, we should try our best to regard art as social practice.¹⁷ However, the images and fields selected by female artists still face significant restrictions to their positive evaluation. For nearly three hundred years from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century, women's artistic practice needed to exclude nudity and could only be confined to still life and landscape paintings. From this point, it can be inferred that the habit of taking flowers as metaphor not only comes from the specific visual reference given to women by traditional culture but also to a certain extent implies their vision of breaking the social order. In fact, through repeated descriptions of flower patterns and the characteristics of flowers as representative of reproductive

¹⁵ As for flower images, O'Keeffe made a declaration in an exhibition catalogue in 1939: "You think I think about them and watch them like you – I'm different from you". However, O'Keeffe's understanding through negation comes from negating not only men but also women. See Wang Xin: *How to Practice "Resistance" - Individual Narration and Art History Narration of Chinese Contemporary Female Artists*, published in *Art Research*, 2018, Issue 4, p86.

¹⁶ Marx pointed out in his *Critical Outline of Political Economy* that artistic products are produced for consumption. Therefore, the production of his work of art is expressed in the following formula: 1. Create materials for consumption; 2. Determine the way others will consume it; 3. Create the object in the form that originally existed to meet the needs of consumers. For details, see Li Jianqun: *How Feminism Intervenes in Art History -- A Preliminary Study of Pollock's Feminist Art History Theory*, published in *World Art*, February 2007, p98.

¹⁷ Griselda Pollock: *Feminism's Intervention in Art History*, cited from [America] Linda Nochlin: *Loss and Recovery - Why There Are No Great Female Artists*, translated by Li Jianqun, etc., Beijing: China Renmin University Press, November 2004.p4.

functions, women challenge simple imitation. To a certain extent, contemporary Chinese female artists have achieved an intervention into the Canon, the writing mode of traditional art history.

Griselda Pollock defined the word Canon in her book "Differentiation Canon: Feminist Desire and Art History Writing" as "not only the supposed attributes of the included text, but also the position of a text because it belongs to an authoritative collection". Therefore, the repositioning of the canon is fundamentally still an authoritative act of class struggle and the rationalization of social function. At the level of social education, the canon also plays a considerable role defining the cultural heritage created by original talent. Although this evaluative system fluctuates frequently according to the special interests of history, Kenneth Clark, an art historian, still recognizes that talented artists can make their personal experience universal by incorporating the spirit of the times into their own works, which confirms the fact that artists participate in the establishment of the canon. As a result, the records of female artists have been excluded from meeting the conditions for inclusion for a long time, and their cultural heritage cannot be formed retroactively in the practice of art history, which will inevitably lead to impoverishment. For the self-portraits and visual practice of contemporary Chinese female artists, through reconstructing the body as a female or as a common human being through various image transformation technologies, these artists explode ideas about the male canon.

When Mary Kelly, a Western feminist artist, was asked "what is feminist art", she countered: "What is the problem of feminist art practice?"¹⁸ In fact, through her artistic behaviour, Mary explained that the status of women should not be determined by physical differences but by personal experience. In her work series "Post-Partum Document"¹⁹, Mary not only exhibited the things used by her new-born son and his paintings but also showed the development of the relationship between mother and son through this event, which also echoed her special personal experience. On the one hand, this series intends to say that the correction of gender bias is necessary, but it does not present this criticism as a traditionally negative behaviour. In this composition, Kelly is involved in the content analysis of works by female artists or expressions of feminism through the social composition of cognitive power relations, the mechanisms of male power, gender differences, and the role played by cultural expression²⁰. On the other hand, this series also demonstrates a "dual structure" in the mode of consideration, adopted by Griselda Pollock in the analysis of visual arts: First, as a specific practice, visual arts have their own material, composition, and combination of related discourse, as well as their own password and rhetoric. Second, to understand the meaning of the work, we must consider its interdependence with a series of other discourses and social practices. Therefore, the way to truly transform the

¹⁸ Griselda Pollock: *Feminism's Intervention in Art History*, quoted from [America] Linda Nochlin: *Loss and Recovery - Why There Are No Great Female Artists*, translated by Li Jianqun, etc., Beijing: China Renmin University Press, November 2004.p6.

¹⁹ This exhibition was held at the London Contemporary Art Society in the mid-1970s.

²⁰ Griselda Pollock: *Feminism's Intervention in Art History*, quoted from [America] Linda Nochlin: *Loss and Recovery - Why There Are No Great Female Artists*, translated by Li Jianqun, etc., Beijing: China Renmin University Press, November 2004.p7.

paradigm of art history is far from just adding women and their images and history to existing categories and methods. At the same time, we should also pay attention to the implications of class in the word "women" itself. In the strategy to crack the complex relationship between class and sex, we must resist an absolute male-centred unilateral narrative.

However, it seems that acceptance of the gender consciousness established by showing extreme rather than normal physical relations and experiences, such as "generation of local identity" and "interaction of individual collective experience", is still a challenge faced by Chinese contemporary female artists. Jin Weihong, a female art critic, identified this problem and raised corresponding doubts. Jin Weihong's position is based on the recognition of the knowledge system and discourse rules of male society, but this is an attitude deeply mired in paradox. The soil of feminism and the cultural environment on which its visual representation depends is still provided by the artistic concerns and rules established by male society. Therefore, "the current feminist art falls into a hermeneutics, so it also lacks profound connotation. From the expression of most female art, the explanation is more than the artistic expression itself...This makes its appeal become a narrow outlet, and also makes its connotation smaller. It becomes an art with weak caring ability. It seems to be rebellious and sympathetic, but actually it is a small-scale activity in the spiritual field, Moving"²¹. At the same time, Jin Weihong responded to Linda Nochlin's analysis of "whether a universal and exclusive 'femininity' can be established," and the former further referred to "femininity" as "a lack of desire for cultural construction in feminist art, placing oneself too much in the position of being persecuted...sometimes treating universal problems as special problems"²². Jin Weihong then drew the attention of artists to some problems that are not exclusive to women but belong to human beings. Therefore, as an internal category of the same logic, women's problems cannot exceed those of human beings.

When we summarize the identity problem faced by Ang Lee's films and contemporary Chinese female artists' self-portraits, the following two paradoxes may appear: For Ang Lee, and even the wider group of Chinese film directors, the more cultural scenes that Ang Lee experiences, the more his personality mixes, and the more cultural collisions that will be transmitted in the films, the broader the international market and communication of the films will be. For female artists, the more they express portraits as works that have universality instead of considering gender differentiation and the more they pursue a kind of abnormal identity expression by hiding everyday life scenes, the more optimistic the audience of these self-portraits. Consequently, it will be easier to equate these artists with the generation of contemporary concepts such as "avant-garde". However, through "stitching" and "resistance", these films and portraits both still require us to ask whether cross-cultural images and self-portraits can fully shoulder the "universal value" contained in images of the human body and whether this universal value can completely liberate the gender restrictions on female artists²³ with enough strength left over to participate in

²¹ Jin Weihong: *The Dilemma of Feminist Artistic Circumstances*, published in Art Guide, No. 3, 2011, p54.

²² Ibid.

²³ See Wang Xin: *On the Origin and Flow of "Body Image" of Contemporary Chinese Female Artists*, published in Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science Edition), 2022, Issue 3, P77-83.

effective "multilateral negotiation" in the war for world cultural roles.

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