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UNDERTONE

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It's like a feeling of incompleteness, with a sense of satisfaction from partially achieving something, yet also a sense of regret for not fully satisfying oneself with the work. It's also like a feeling of embarking on a journey, where the road ahead is dark and cold, and the destination is not even visible, yet one is unwilling to stop and settle down, afraid of missing out on the scenery. I completed my Bachelor of Visual Arts in 2022, and to my surprise I felt little excitement inside, perhaps because I already knew I would continue into postgraduate study in 2023.

AN OLD MOVIE

An earlier turning point came in late 2021 with a meeting with Dunedin School of Art, sculpture lecturer Michele Beevors. It was a stroke of luck. Although I had already tried using clay to sculpt body parts like hands or feet, I hadn't explored why I was so obsessed with traditional figurative sculpture. When Michele asked if I wanted to pursue it the following year, things clicked into place.

I had no idea what I wanted to do at that time. It was a constant process of discovery through trials and failures in practice. From focusing on myself, sculpting myself and reflecting on myself, I placed myself back into this world to explore my relationship with it.

Everything just happened naturally. The past year's experiences were like rewatching an old black-and-white movie from 30 years ago: I saw the old brick house where I spent my childhood; my grandmother who was always busy running around doing chores; my grandfather who sat silently on the sofa, but got everything under control; my mother who was crying every day after getting divorced; my father who was talented and strategic; and the various women who were like moths to a flame fluttering around him. Since then, 'gender' has been a concept in my mind – very clearly. In a Chinese family under patriarchal ideology, there is nothing more conspicuous than the concept of gender: I am a girl, and one day I will grow up to please men, bear children, serve my husband and work hard to manage the household.

There are voices deep-rooted in traditional culture in Chinese society – such as “It's better to marry well than to study well” and “A woman without talent is virtuous” – which have been echoing in my ears like a spell for decades. For many years, I have been puzzled by a seemingly unsolvable question: In traditional culture, as a woman in China, where should I establish a sense of existence and self-confidence? Is it really that, as women, we are meant to compete with each other as to who can seduce men better; who can bear more children and who can better serve our husbands?

It wasn't until last year, when I read my first English article on feminism for a reading assignment,¹ that I realised, as a woman, that I had never truly understood feminism all these years. And then, my graduation thesis and artwork focused on women's issues, exploring gender inequality faced by contemporary Chinese women in a traditionally patriarchal society. Since I started studying feminism, I have felt like I have found my lifebuoy, helping to integrate all my past confusion and doubts into art practice and expressing them through my artworks.

TWISTED STEEL BAR

Living in a country with a culture and political system utterly different from my homeland, I have been reflecting on the relationship between the individual and society through my life experiences. Although I have been living in New Zealand for nine years, as a Chinese person, I am constantly concerned about the development of my motherland in all aspects. It has been a long time since I last visited China. Still, from what my friends have told me, my hometown has undergone significant changes, with towering buildings, bustling shops, rapid technological advancement and all kinds of material needs being met. People seem to be finally living a life of material abundance and happiness.

However, I am not at all interested in these things. I am more curious about whether every ordinary individual should bear the overwhelming burden of nationalist pride. Where should we place ourselves in the collective? How can we express our spiritual desires and needs?

Under the influence of globalisation, the explosive spread of online social media has made the young generation in China unable to resist the profound impact of foreign cultures. At the same time, they are also influenced by a strong sense of nationalism, which breeds hostility and criticism towards cultures that are perceived as different. This dual social personality is like a giant steel bar being twisted and pulled in opposite directions. I fear that this bar will snap eventually.

As for women in China, where do they stand amidst this cultural wave? Although I have seen more and more young women becoming independent and assertive, I also sense the tension in intergenerational relationships. The so-called excellent quality of being a good wife and mother, passed down for thousands of years, still hangs like a dark cloud over society. Therefore, many women choose not to marry, to escape the fate expected by their parents and elders. They still face multiple questions and criticisms as they continue to live within the scope of social opinion and morality.

Due to the thousands of years of influence of Confucianism in feudal China, today's gendered cultural environment lacks the nurturing ground for feminism to thrive. Groups and individual feminist artists in post-socialist globalised China have striven for equal gender status, refusing to renounce their feminist identity. As a result, they are often regarded as marginal and alternative.² Contemporary Chinese art has many hidden corners that need to be discovered and unfolded to convincingly address gender issues.³ Female artists exploring women's issues are few and far between, and many of them have interrupted their careers to become wives and mothers. Moreover, the widespread appreciation of outstanding contemporary artworks – such as *99 Needles* (2002) and *Opening The Great Wall* (2001) by He Chengyao, and *Your Body* (2004) and *Open* (2006) by Xiang Jing – are still facing obstacles from traditional cultural stereotypes about female bodies and sexuality.

A traditional culture undergoing development is like a set of armour. While it protects every individual, it is also heavy, clumsy and restricts the freedom of the body and soul for those who want to run bravely. I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity to choose to live in another country, to understand, adapt and embrace different cultures and social systems, and to re-examine and reflect on my own identity while questioning established norms. At the same time, I have become more and more aware that I need to continue practicing art, because I still have unresolved issues related to feminism and female status in China. I yearn to keep exploring and searching for answers.

WRITTEN IN THE STARS

I remember when I was young, there was always a traditional daily hand-torn calendar hanging on the wall of my home, filled with the blessings and curses of the superstitious elements. It felt like the fate of one's entire life was written on it. Every day, my grandmother would tear off a page, ritually discarding the past and welcoming the present.



Figure 1. Traditional daily hand-torn calendar from China.



Figure 2. Loaded kiln with clay body pieces, ready to fire.

I have always believed that materials carry potent messages and are crucial to art. In this way, I have chosen to use this traditional hand-torn calendar as my primary material, hoping to find a connection to my childhood memories. Although this type of calendar is no longer popular amongst younger urbanites who believe in taking control of their own lives, I want to convey the impact of destiny into my works and empathise with the fates of Chinese women entrenched in tradition.

Initially, in my Bachelor of Visual Arts project, I attempted to make papier mâché sculptures using the calendar pages. However, fellow ceramic artist Bronwyn Gayle, with whom I shared a studio, encouraged me to incorporate ceramic elements into my work. Her art practice involved a unique saggar-firing technique, using layered paper and cardboard coated with clay slip, in which she then fired her work, together with other organic materials. I was fascinated by this process, and the clay boxes she used, which turned into ceramic layers resembling paper after firing. Also inspiring was the work of Bahamian-born American artist Janine Antoni, who practices feminist performance art and sculpture, often utilising her own body. Antoni's *Saddle* (2010) is a cowhide mould of the artist's body in a kneeling position.

As a result of her influence, I cast plaster moulds of my body and made many body parts, then tore off the calendar pages, coated them with clay slip and layered them onto the body models. This created greenware made of a mixture of clay and calendar paper, which I then fired in an oxidation environment at 1200 degrees Celsius. The calendar turned to ashes in the kiln, leaving only the paper-thin ceramic body fragments, which, in tandem with intervals of negative space, represented a body profile.

The final piece featured three women wearing traditional red wedding headscarves made from collaged calendar pages. The bases were made using the same method as the sculptural forms. Through the hollow bodies of these vulnerable figures, I reveal the fate of Chinese women, just like my grandmother; whose fate seemed predetermined from the day she got married.



Figure 3. Eva Ding 囡 (nān), 2022, ceramic, metal, magnet, paper; wood and fabric.
 Three female figures are represented in standing, bending and sitting positions.
 Dimensions: standing: 600x1750x600mm; sitting: 800x1400x600mm; bending: 600x900x700mm.

Eva Ding is currently studying her honours degree in sculpture at Dunedin School of Art. Her art practice focuses on the Chinese women's gender status in cultural traditions as well as in the development of the globalised modernity. Her process of approaching Feminism reflects her intersected identities as an immigration living in New Zealand for nine years.

- 1 Catherine Grant, "Fans of Feminism: Re-writing Histories of Second-wave Feminism in Contemporary Art," *Oxford Art Journal*, 34:2 (2011), 265-86.
- 2 Cui Shuqin, *Gendered Bodies – Toward a Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016), 6-7.
- 3 Monica Merlin, "Gender (Still) Matters in Chinese Contemporary Art," *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 6:1 (2019), 5-15.