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Development Dilemma of Feminist Art in China

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Abstract

In the 1980s, Western feminist art was introduced to China, and Chinese female artists began a series of feminist art practices. However, in recent years, the development of feminist art in China seems to have become problematic. Based on this, this study aims to identify the developmental dilemmas of Chinese feminist art using qualitative research methods. The findings reveal that the development mode of feminism, public prejudice against feminism, the lack of feminist art theories, the gender imbalance in the art world, and the mentality change of female artists are the main reasons for this predicament.

Keywords: Feminist Art; Contemporary; Dilemma; China

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1.0 Introduction

In today's world, gender equality has become a global hot topic, and the Western feminist movement has played an essential role in promoting gender equality. Rooted in the pursuit of social, economic, and political parity between the sexes (Brunell & Burkett, 2024), feminism has evolved through four waves. From its initial focus on legal equality, the movement gradually expanded to encompass broader issues of social and cultural justice. However, feminist scholarship has been criticizing how it usually focuses on the experiences of middle-class white women in the West, often ignoring other groups that are marginalized (Yuan & Wu, 2021). Until the 1980s, the diversity of female experiences—shaped by race, class, sexual orientation, and ethnicity—became a big topic, particularly through the activism and theorization of Black feminists (Garry, 2011). In the 21st century, with the help of the Internet and social media, feminism has evolved into a global, decentralized movement that extends into politics, economics, education, and culture.

The formal involvement of Western feminism in the field of art occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminist art is dedicated to *“dealing with issues specifically relating to women's identity and experience and made from a female point of view... aimed at giving women a just place in the world, especially in the art world”* (Chilvers, 2009, p. 231). Organizations like the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (LACWA) played an important role in this process by supporting activities like exhibitions, publications, and public dialogue (Nochlin, 2021). Over time, feminist art diversified thematically—moving beyond gender equality and bodily representation to engage with politics, power structures, race, war, and death.

In contrast to the rapid development of feminist art in the West, the progress of female artists in China has been comparatively slow, fragmented, and constrained. In Chinese art history, only a handful of ancient women artists are documented, while the vast majority have been excluded. Scholars have referred to this marginalization as an “absent history” (Tao, 2016). The modernization of women's

art education improved the status of female artists, but political upheavals and wartime propaganda limited individual expression. It wasn't until the 1978 Reform and Opening Up period that Western artistic styles and concepts entered China, challenging ideological constraints. Freed from a singular focus on politically sanctioned themes and methods, artistic creativity started to bloom. Female artists began to shift their perspectives toward the Other, society, and the world at large, thereby enriching the conceptual and thematic dimensions of feminist art in China. Even though there are more and more women in the Chinese art scene, many contemporary female artists maintain a deliberately ambiguous—or at times overtly negative—attitude toward feminist art. Discussions related to gender politics are often avoided, and the identity of a “feminist artist” is frequently disavowed (Lu, 2024). This has made it hard for feminist art to develop in the Chinese context.

2.0 Literature Review

A substantial body of scholarship and critical commentary has engaged with the development of feminist art in China. Especially, a lot of critics have been pretty positive and hopeful about the rise of feminist art in the late 20th century. For example, in the opinion of feminist art critic Xu Hong (2005), the artistic activities of Chinese women in the 1990s were the most diverse since the 20th century. The historian of Chinese contemporary art, Lu Hong (2013), has also pointed out that some of the young Chinese female artists of this period have begun to try to surpass the male artists, giving people a refreshing sense of experience. However, Chinese art historian Lü Peng (2011) argues that compared to men, the position of female artists in art history, like their position in real social life, remains secondary. In addition, Dr. Jiang Hui (2012) also believes that most Chinese female artists' art practices during this period were blindly following and borrowing from Western feminist art. Art critic Tao Yongbai also pointed out that due to excessive indulgence in the emotional world of the self, the works of most Chinese female artists at the end of the twentieth century lacked humanistic concern and had significant limitations (Tao, 2009).

With regard to feminist art in 21st-century China, numerous studies have highlighted the challenges it faces in terms of development. According to scholar Li Guohui (2015), in China today, the concept of “feminism,” especially feminist art, still makes many people feel uneasy and fearful, and this uneasiness and fear often comes more from women themselves. Art critic Tao Yongbai (2015) further attributes the emergence of this phenomenon to women's sense of inferiority to their own gender and their attachment to men under the long-standing patriarchal rule. At the same time, female artists are eager to eliminate this dependence and break away from male domination, thus giving rise to the strange phenomenon of “Chinese female artists denying their identity as feminist artists while practicing feminist art” (Y. Zhang, 2020). In addition, the mixing of female art with feminist art isn't uncommon in China. In critic Tong Yujie's opinion, female art is essentially art named by biological sex. It is a lack of confidence in art, even blasphemy. Feminist art, on the other hand, is a rejection and reaction to female art. Mixing the two is likely to lead to a further deepening of the public's misunderstanding of “feminist art” (Wang, 2012b).

Some Chinese female artists have also provided some answers to the emergence of these phenomena. Jiang Mingjun (2023) believes that some female artists are more willing to criticize their works on a male-value scale because of the lack of women's studies and feminist thought in China. However, Jin Weihong believes that it is *“because they find that their identity (as feminist artists) only makes them more marginalized, more demanding of the tolerance of the male society and not able to give them what they originally wanted”* (Cao, 2013, p. 157). Cui Shuqin agrees and directly points out that for Chinese women artists, acknowledging their female identity is equivalent to implying the inferiority of their creative abilities and their marginalization in the social hierarchy (Cui, 2023).

Although previous research has pointed out some of the challenges involved in the development of feminist art in China, many of these studies tend to take a relatively limited perspective and don't provide a full or detailed analysis. This paper tries to address that gap by giving a more general overview of the current difficulties, with the hope that it can contribute to future discussions about how to deal with both the structural and discursive problems that are holding back the progress of contemporary Chinese feminist art.

3.0 Methodology

This study is qualitative research. To discover and summarize the dilemmas facing the development of feminist art in China, this study collects written documents such as journals, books, magazines, newspapers, and so on as the data materials mainly through two sources: online and local libraries, and selects the document analysis and comparative analysis methods to analyze them.

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents, which can be used to provide context, generate questions, supplement other types of research data, track change over time, and corroborate other sources, and consists of a three-step process of skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation (Bowen, 2009). As a research methodology, documentary analysis is particularly well-suited to intensive studies that produce detailed descriptions of a single phenomenon, event, organization, or project (Yin, 2009). Besides that, document analysis has the advantages of high efficiency, low cost, stability, accuracy, and broad coverage (Bowen, 2009). Specifically, this study aims to collect literature on the development of Chinese feminist art in recent years and to analyze and summarize the dilemmas facing the development of contemporary Chinese feminist art by comparing it with the development patterns of Western feminist art. Therefore, the literature analysis method is suitable for this study.

Comparative analysis is central to social science research, and it can be divided into two branches: case-oriented and variable-oriented. Variable-oriented studies establish generalized relationships between variables, while case-oriented research seeks to understand complex units (Della Porta, 2008, p. 198). Case-based comparative tends to explore diversity (and deviant cases) through extensive descriptions of one or a small number of cases, often compared on several dimensions. In particular, this research involves a

comparison of the development of feminist art in the West and China, belonging to a small number of cases and multiple dimensions, to identify the differences in the development patterns between the two, and to further the reasons for the dilemmas faced by the development of feminist art in China.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

Through an analysis of existing literature on the development of feminist art in China and comparing it to the Western context, this study points to six major challenges facing contemporary Chinese feminist art (see Table 1). As shown in the table, these challenges are categorized into two broad types: objective factors (structural conditions that are difficult to change) and subjective factors (current issues that may be addressed). Objective factors include historical timing and developmental trajectories, while subjective factors are further divided into social and art-world dimensions. Since the study is about the art world, it looks at this in more detail through three specific subcategories. The following sections will go through each of the six factors one by one.

Table 1. The Discussion on the Dilemma of Chinese Feminist Art
(Source: Compiled by the author.)

Objective Factors	Time	Chinese feminist art began about 20 years later than in the West
	Development mode	Top-down, lack of self-awareness and independence
Subjective Factors	Social level	Public stereotypes of females and misconceptions about feminism
	Art world level	Psychological rejection of women artists
		An imbalance in the population of male and female artists
		The lack of Chinese feminist art theories

4.1 Objective Factors

First, in terms of time, feminist art in the West has developed over a span of nearly six decades. In contrast, it wasn't introduced to China until the implementation of the Reform and Opening Up policy in 1978, and it wasn't until the 1990s that feminist art in China came together as a movement (Osaki, 2020). In this sense, the emergence of feminist art in China lagged more than two decades behind its in Western.

Second, regarding the developmental mode, the feminist movement in the West began with the democratic revolution. Feminist artists used theory and practice to challenge the patriarchal dominance within the art world, leading to a bottom-up formation of feminist art. In contrast, China's women's liberation movement was state-led and closely intertwined with the socialist revolution. Women's rights were granted from the top down. Feminist art was introduced to China as a foreign concept, rather than evolving from domestic artistic practices. According to artist Li Xinmo, this has contributed to a lack of autonomy and gender consciousness among women artists (Wang, 2012a). As a result, many prefer the label "women + art" over "feminist art", reflecting a more ambiguous identification with feminist discourse (Bai, 2019).

4.2 Subjective Factors: Social Level

Under the wave of ideological emancipation in the 1970s and 1980s, feudal and backward customs with a male gaze were eradicated institutionally. However, in scholar Zhu Yingyi's view, these traditional concepts have evolved into an agreed-upon perception in a patriarchal society, and some women have internalized them into female self-consciousness. *"They think that as long as they follow the established ways of a patriarchal society, they are good mothers, good wives, or good daughters under the popular perception"* (Zhu, 2019, p. 35).

In addition, apart from the stereotyped ideology of some females themselves, there are also many misconceptions about feminism in the public. "Nü quan" in Chinese means feminism, or literally, women's rights. Internet citizens have replaced "quan," which means "rights," with a homophonous character meaning "fist." For them, *"the militant feminists are unreasonable, punching fists everywhere and demanding privileges"* (Feng & Wang, 2021). In this regard, sociologist Zhang Guannan (2018) argues that the stigmatization of feminism in China is actually an expression of prejudice and discrimination against socially disadvantaged groups by the dominant group using stereotypes to refer to them. Zhang Jintao further suggests that the main thing these people have in common is a male-dominated way of thinking (J. Zhang, 2020).

In sum, within such a social context, public stereotypes of women have become more and more ingrained, and the meaning of feminism has been distorted or misunderstood. Moreover, as female legitimate demands is frequently met with stigmatization, verbal abuse, or even online violence, they have gradually lost their voice, giving way to silence and withdrawal from public discourse.

4.3 Subjective Factors: Art World Level

At the level of the art world, the dilemma of Chinese feminist art can be categorized into three parts: 1) the psychological rejection of woman artists, 2) the imbalance in the population of male and female artists, and 3) the lack of feminist art theories.

First, because of the social environment of "feminism isn't welcomed," the mentality of some female artists towards feminist art has changed. Some have broken away from their initial State of blindly imitating and following Western feminist art and hold an ambiguous attitude toward it. For example, sculptor Xiang Jing attempted to consult with feminist art researcher Li Jianqun about whether she could be considered a "feminist artist" (Sun, 2019). Others seem to be more radical; they avoid talking about feminist art and even deny the

identity of “feminist artists.” For example, Lin Tianmiao declared that “*art is the only art, art that knows no boundaries, art that knows no gender*” (Li, 2012, p. 8). Yan Ping also said it seems a bit outdated to talk about feminist art nowadays (Yang & Li, 2023).

Second, although the number of female artists has grown a lot compared to the past, there is still a big gap between the ratio of men and women. The researcher has counted the male-female ratio of graduates from China’s top 8 art schools, and the results are as follows (see Table 2). The table shows that, on average, the number of female graduates of Chinese art schools is 2.5 times that of male graduates. However, the number of female artists in China is far less than that of male artists. Only 11 female artists are in the 2023 list of the top 100 contemporary Chinese artists. Among the 100 most academically valuable painters of modern China in 2023 are only three women. In addition, Forbes’ list of the top 30 most influential young Chinese contemporary artists at the end of 2023 includes only nine women.

Table 2. Male to Female Ratio of Graduates from China’s Top 8 Art Universities
(Source: Compiled by the author.)

University Name	Male	Female	Ratio (M: F)
Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA)	412	869	1: 2.1
China Academy of Art (CAA)	629	1849	1: 2.9
Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts (GAFA)	464	883	1: 1.9
Hubei Institute of Fine Arts (HIFA)	545	1458	1: 2.7
Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts (LAFA)	534	1125	1: 2.1
Sichuan Fine Arts Institute (SFAI)	484	1334	1: 2.8
Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts (TAFA)	338	917	1: 2.7
Xi’an Academy of Fine Arts (XAFA)	530	1398	1: 2.6
Total	3936	9833	1: 2.5

Finally, in terms of theory and practice, before the birth of Western feminist art, the Western feminist movement already had a wealthy theoretical foundation. In developing feminist art, Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, Laura Mulvey, and others have developed a rich feminist art theory. Thus, Western feminist art is a mutually reinforcing development that combines theory and practice. However, theory development in Chinese feminist art lags far behind practice. It wasn’t until 1981 that Zhu Hong translated and published what is regarded as the first document introducing feminist theory into China, *Selected Works of American Women Writers-Preface*. Since then, Western feminist theories have been translated into China, one after another. In addition, Chinese scholars’ research on feminist art theories has primarily focused on translating and introducing Western feminist theories with a superficial understanding. It hasn’t “formed the spirit and discourse system of feminist art with Chinese characteristics” (Ding & Sang, 2020, p. 81).

In conclusion, the analysis suggests that the six factors discussed above collectively contribute to the developmental challenges faced by feminist art in China. However, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that may affect the generalizability of these findings. First, the number of selected sources is limited, and most of the literature analyzed was published from the 2010s onward, which may have excluded earlier or emerging perspectives. Second, the majority of these sources were written by Chinese authors, potentially lacking international or cross-cultural viewpoints. Third, this study focuses primarily on the collection and analysis of textual literature, with limited engagement with visual materials. Finally, the researcher’s subjective interpretation may have influenced the outcome to some extent.

Despite these limitations, efforts were made throughout the data collection and analysis process to enhance the study’s accuracy and reliability. Relevant literature was collected as comprehensively as possible until theoretical saturation was reached. Preference was given to works by influential scholars to ensure the credibility of sources. At the same time, some official data were included in the analysis in order to reduce the effect of personal bias on the research results.

5.0 Conclusion

This research analyzed the development of Chinese feminist art and compared it with the development of Western feminist art. It found that the development of contemporary Chinese feminist art faces multiple dilemmas. Before Western feminist art was introduced to China as a foreign culture, Chinese female artists were almost “lost” in Chinese art history. Hence, when Western feminist art was introduced to China, it sparked a wave of passionate imitation among Chinese female artists. They break away from oppressive, even male-pandering arts and boldly express everything about themselves as woman in their creations.

However, because there wasn’t a solid theoretical foundation or enough social support, Chinese feminist art kind of fell flat with the public. There was a lot of misunderstanding and pushback from the culture. Over time, many artists came to realize that, unlike in the West, feminist art in China didn’t necessarily lead to greater creative freedom or increased visibility in the art world. Some people, though, faced more criticism and controversy because of their involvement with feminist ideas.

In summary, the late start, the top-down development mode, the public’s misunderstanding of feminism, the lack of feminist art theories, the imbalance between the ratio and status of male and female artists, and the psychological rejection of female artists have all contributed to the predicament of the development of female art in China today. Although Chinese feminist art has also seen a slight upturn as the global feminist movement has risen in recent years, its future is still a “long, slow slope” due to the influence of these factors.

Although this study provides a preliminary summary of the developmental challenges facing Chinese feminist art, there remains room for improvement. Due to its relatively narrow focus on representative phenomena and typical case studies, it has not yet comprehensively covered women's artistic practices across different regions, generations, and media. Future research could expand the breadth of material collection and the diversity of theoretical tools employed to enhance the depth and verifiability of research findings. Furthermore, while this study primarily adopts a macro-narrative approach, future research could supplement it with more detailed case studies or employ interdisciplinary methods to enhance the robustness and explanatory power of analytical outcomes.

This study also offers several potential directions for future academic exploration. Subsequent research could further compare the developmental patterns of feminist art across different cultural contexts to reveal the diversity and interactivity of women's artistic practices within globalization. Additionally, more in-depth discussions could be conducted from perspectives such as social acceptance, institutional support, art market structures, and audience viewing mechanisms, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how feminist art operates within the Chinese context. Furthermore, with the rise of digital art, new media, and online feminist movements, the practices of a new generation of female artists warrant sustained attention. Their work may propel Chinese feminist art into a new phase.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

The impact of this study can be discussed in two aspects. First, on a theoretical level, the researcher analyzed articles about the development of Chinese feminist art in recent years and summarized the dilemmas facing the development of contemporary Chinese feminist art, which will benefit future scholars. Secondly, from a practical point of view, as this study summarizes the dilemmas facing the development of contemporary Chinese feminist art, it serves as a guideline for those who have the determination and ability to change the current predicament, thus helping them to formulate appropriate measures to improve the situation.

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