

# When is a Landscape *Like a Body?*

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When conveyed the provisional theme of this issue it proposed both the notions of “trembling landscapes” and “seismic movements”. Albeit on very different levels, one occupying squarely the domain of artistic culture and the other that of society and politics, both are of enormous importance in today’s Hong Kong. Landscape painting occupies such a prominent place in Chinese art that it would be absurd to try and explain its philosophy and historical importance in one text, no matter how extensive that might be.<sup>1</sup> It represents the highest genre of artistic expression in the entire painting tradition of China, its roots in Confucian literati philosophy and worldview assuring it such a prominent place that, in China (and the rest of the world) landscape painting made with black ink on silk, or paper, has very nearly become a stand-in for Chinese Art in general. Landscape can be said to represent something of an ideological battlefield for the Hong Kong artists who have chosen the medium of ink painting for their practice. Since the People’s Republic of China is now promoting Confucianism on many fronts of culture and politics, it is also promoting some of its most salient artistic expressions, including literati landscape painting. As a result, many artists in Hong Kong have tried to divert its message in very subtle ways<sup>2</sup> and Joey Leung Ka-yin, with her ink painting, *Mundane Mind* (2019),<sup>3</sup> is no exception. If literati landscape painting as a genre can be seen as an aesthetic battlefield for the artists of Hong Kong, the entire social and political environment of the former colony has recently become a wider site of conflict and deep transformation. The rapidity of these changes has felt like the very ground upon which any sense of stability was built was moving away all at once. Even though the ‘trembling landscape’ of *Mundane Mind*, where mountains are like bodies, had been made at a time when Hong Kong still felt like it had a reliably stable foundation, the recent ‘seismic movements’ of politics were also deeply felt by the artist, as her recent comments on this work reveal.

#### THE MOLLYWOOD SERIES

*Mundane Mind* was on display in a large exhibition dedicated to landscape painting at the Hong Kong Museum of Art, organized in 2020 at the occasion of the Museum’s reopening after refurbishment. Titled *A Sense of Place—From Turner to Hockney*, it consisted mainly of an important selection from the Tate Britain and presented a wide range of artists and understandings of the concept of landscape, from J.M.W. Turner and John Constable to David Hockney, and even Tracey Emin and Richard Long. Even though none of the artworks made by Hong Kong artists in the accompanying exhibitions were given a separate catalogue, they were mentioned by the Museum of Art Director, Maria Mok, in the preface to the *A Sense of Place* catalogue, describing two paintings made by local artists as being “added” to the group of artworks from the Tate Britain: “To complement these British landscapes, we have added a special section featuring ‘Hong Kong viewpoint’, in which we have invited two contemporary Hong Kong artists, Simon Wan and Joey Leung Ka-yin, to present their photographs, mixed-media works and Chinese ink painting in order to initiate new dialogues between traditional and modern art and between East and West.”<sup>4</sup> The absence of these two artists in the *A Sense of Place* catalogue signalled that they were relegated to the “East”, so prominently inscribed against the “West” by Mok in her preface. The uncritical use of the concepts of East and West is, of course, questionable, but it was to be expected in the context of an institution whose function appears to perpetuate these problematic clichés. The narrative used by the cultural authorities, from the Hong Kong Tourist Association to the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (which runs the Museum) was contingent on the concept of Hong Kong as the place where “East meets West.”<sup>5</sup>

The artworks of Joey Leung Ka-yin have been the topic of several passages in my two books on art in Hong Kong,<sup>6</sup> attracted by her approach to the practice of Chinese fine line painting (*gongbi*), a very laborious method of depicting extremely detailed figures with lines and colours, and by her quirky narratives. Even though she does not use the Chinese brush to paint, preferring drawing pens and pencils, her choice of format as well as her general aesthetic choices evoking the stereotypes of 'Chinese painting'. Hanging scrolls, horizontal or vertical, are frequently utilized and her use of the written text within the painting is clearly a reference to Chinese literati painting. Even with *Mundane Mind*, its technique of display derives from the history of Chinese art; especially after the Ming dynasty, large landscape paintings, or groups of related paintings like the flowers of various seasons, were made in a series of hanging scrolls hung side by side.

As for her paintings' quirky content, this can also be found in a series of comic strips she made for local newspapers in the early 2000s, a medium she used to such interesting effect that I compared them with the idea of "superflatness" advocated by Takashi Murakami, certainly the most famous contemporary artist who explored the limits between the high art of painting (or at least objects reminiscent of painting) and the low art of comic books (just as 'East' and 'West' are always problematic, so of course are 'high' and 'low' in art). However, where the Japanese artist advocated a form of neutral cultural artefact, where the cultural origins of an artwork are somehow erased by an applied commercial veneer, it was clear that Joey Leung was pursuing, in all her works, an exploration of her own roots as a Hong Kong artist. Her belonging to local culture is ubiquitous in her work, for those who would know where to look, and it begins with her use of the Cantonese language and its literary tradition. In a 2007 article on female artists in Hong Kong, art critic Koon Yeewan, who focused on the sexual connotations of the mountain in one of Leung's works, stated her exploration of writing was steeped in Cantonese culture. About the painting titled *Good View, Great Time: Element 123* (2007), she wrote,

*Leung refers to Chinese traditional painting by evoking a typical landscape painting of a central mountain with a fisherman in his skiff. But the central mountain long used as a symbol of the emperor as part of the cosmology of landscape, is now embraced by a young lady and turned into a phallus. Her short dress has motifs of young deer with one such deer climbing up her skirt. On top of this mountain are a willow tree and an apartment building. The poem plays with the term "willow" long used to denote female desirability and uses it as a homophone for "foreign (new style) apartment" and "foreign (hip) babes".*

*Next to the willow is a foreign apartment.*

*Inside the foreign apartment is a foreign babe.*

*Each day the foreign babe appreciates the willow.*

*Life as such is joyful without a care.*

*The style of the poem mimics Cantonese poems, which are often satirical rhymes. This one is no exception. It satirises the stereotypical desires of Hong Kong men – foreign apartments and women, but where "foreign" is used to refer to new and hip, rather than ethnic origins... willow landscape flaunts female sexuality, endorsing the complexities of women as possessions and possessors.<sup>7</sup>*

When is a Landscape *Like a Body*?

*Mundane Mind* belongs to a series of 'hair landscape' paintings Joey Leung has worked on since 2018. Titled in English *Mollywood*, the artist plays with words such as the name Molly, which could be identified as a stereotype of femininity but, more importantly, with Bollywood, the Mumbai-based Indian movie industry, which seems to include into this group of paintings the sort of exuberant and colourful nature of that kind of entertainment. Even though colourfulness and exuberance are evident, it is however a different characteristic the artist is exploring. It often arises with Hong Kong artists that the Chinese and English titles of their works vary, sometimes significantly. This allows for rich semantic ambiguities that are not lost on an artist like Leung for whom text always plays an essential role. The Chinese title of the *Mollywood* series is 'Hair Island' (*Maodao*), which seems to focus more closely on the landscape elements represented in these ink paintings. This title derives from the expression *famao*, which literally means to grow hair, but signifies to be panicked, scared or nervous. To clarify her intentions, the artist wrote a statement at the time she began the series:

*There is no time for worries in this city, all we do is to consume, indulge and light up the sky with vague smiley fireworks. Time also does not allow me to ignore my troubles, nor to forget my helplessness. To face this ridicule, I pile up all the troubles and worries and transform them into mountains and rivers, forming an island named "Mollywood". Hair in this series is a metaphor of 'worry'. When hair (worry) grows, it forms mountains and rivers. It also works as a kind of new bush strokes to form landscapes. Differing from traditional brush strokes, it does not look like the real mountain texture and it doesn't aim to. I am trying to create an imaginary space which is close to the real world mentally/emotionally. It seems like an adventure to explore the unknown.<sup>8</sup>*

The "new brush strokes" (*cun*) refer to a central technique of landscape painting in China. Usually translated in English as "surface strokes" they form a long list of the various ways to apply the ink on the surface of the painting in order to form natural formations, such as rocks and plants. One of these brushstrokes for rocks and mountains is, for instance, the "hemp fibre brushstroke" (*pimacun*), sometimes applied with fairly dry ink. One painting from the series exemplifies perfectly how the hair of Joey Leung's maidens can be used to mimic the traditional brush strokes of literati landscape painting. *The Carefree Stone* (2018) represents three young women: one is standing, letting her hair flow through her fingers, another one is sitting on the ground and brushing her hair, and the third, only her panties and thighs visible, is crawling inside the mass of hair. These three characters, actually giantesses, extremely young and seemingly emotionless, are all contained within an undifferentiated mass of hair, making it impossible to identify whose hair the viewer is looking at. Within this mass of hair, other characters and objects appear: a pair of gnarled trees, a minuscule bather with a swimming cap, a boat attached to one of the girls' toes, a white rabbit jumping, four golden shapes looking like clouds, and another minuscule figure reading inside the hair. The only exception is a bird whose proportions seem to be on par with the main human figures, until the viewer realizes that it has in fact human legs; maybe a stand-in for the artist as it appears again in other paintings from that series.

The reading figure seems to occupy a cave within this mountain of hair, while a very long lock emulates the cascades of the mountains of literati landscape painting. These two indications, and the general composition, are immediately readable as an imitation of that genre. Since the aesthetic and philosophical foundations of literati painting were established during the



Song dynasty, such landscape paintings count in the tens of thousands over a period of at least nine centuries. One example from the early Qing dynasty, by the major artist Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715), is enough to establish this 'family resemblance' between Joey Leung's figures and the mountains of literati landscape. Both the visual analysis of such works and the theoretical texts written by literati artists can be used to clarify how much they are defined by the patriarchal structure of Chinese culture, a position undermined by Leung given her visual choices. In *Mundane Mind*, an ambitious painting in terms of scale and detailing, the artist expands the 'landscape' by arranging many more giantesses — nine, if you count heads, or eleven, if you count the pairs of hands — with similar masses of flowing black hair. Their faces are emotionless, occupied by the same kinds of activities: taking care of themselves, or rather their bodies, surrounded by flowers and many of the same objects as in *The Carefree Stone*. Here too, the mood is of mild despondency. As in traditional literati painting, Leung added an inscription that clarifies these characters' frames of mind:



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*I thought it was common sense, turns out it's not.  
This sinking [feeling] is entirely unavoidable, statistic experts rely on clear data.  
Those are things I want to forget, but they're as stubborn as a million year-old stain.  
If the tears flow until they dry up, why are they still dripping?  
The air is sharp and absurd, what is the nutritional value of breathing?  
You want to clearly set a good goal, and suddenly your eyes are powerless.  
If the world is impermanent, how do you explain it never changes?  
My brain is nothing exceptional, it is so hard to understand it becomes annoying.*

This classical poetic structure has been used by Leung in many of her paintings, the verses rigidly configured and containing exactly the same number of characters. However, the grammar employed oscillates between contemporary and more classical forms. The content of this poem is comparable to that of all the other paintings of this 'growing hair' series: it clearly puts into words what these young women are thinking, expressing the disappointment and doubts inherent in life in a city like Hong Kong; not knowing what the future holds, living with pollution, feeling powerless, with little to look forward to. The notion of impermanence towards the end of the poem is not even a consolation, as this cannot be resolved through change: everything remains the same and the only feeling one encounters is boredom. It should be recognized that this painting was produced in 2018; things have changed considerably in Hong Kong since then, especially in regard to local culture.

#### MUNDANE MIND AND PAINTINGS OF BEAUTIES

The representation of female figures is far from rare in Chinese painting. From *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* scroll of Gu Kaizhi (c. 344–406), representing aristocratic women upholding the patriarchal mode of behaviour expected from educated persons, to the paintings of feminine beauties by the Ming dynasty painter Tang Yin (1470–1523), who was considered to be a literati painter even though he was not a member of the civil servant class to which the vast majority of literati belonged, there are many female figures prominent in paintings by male artists. There are also some renowned female artists within the literati artworld, their lives and artistic production having been the subject of monographs and histories. Some art historians have even emphasized the problematic concern that women were not forbidden access to the world of artistic production, thus trying to prove that Chinese culture was never misogynistic. In spite of the presence of these rare figures, some daughters and wives of literati families and famous courtesans of multiple artistic and literary talents, the fact remains that literati culture was male dominated, such that Leung's paintings present an interesting and quaint angle on the conservativeness inherent in literati painting. In terms of the representation of female figures in Chinese painting, some specific paintings and texts will instruct these representations in the deeply patriarchal society of the late imperial period.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, and most of the nineteenth, a painting genre of a new kind emerged in the form of the "painting of beauties" (*Meirenhua*). The most famous artist of this trend was Fei Danxu (1801–1850) who made figure paintings of beauties that offer an ideal starting point to understand how Joey Leung's giantesses are an interesting departure from older representations of women in Chinese art, i.e. in this case in paintings made with Chinese brush and ink (or at least something looking like it). First, there are some similarities in the faces of these paintings, especially the eyes that seem to all be fairly emotionless. The difference is however in the

mouth, as Fei Danxu's beauties always carry a faint smile (which is true of most portrait paintings in China before the twentieth century), while Leung's girls seem bored. Fei Danxu's paintings were perfect representations of the ideals of feminine beauty that have shaped female bodies and behaviour in pre-twentieth century China. What was expected of these elegant and cultured women can be found in a famous text analyzed by art historian Wu Hung. Titled *The Manual of Beautiful Women*, by Xu Zhen (active seventeenth century), this book that was popular among past Chinese art critics when discussing female beauty.<sup>9</sup> His descriptions applied to courtesans in large southern cities such as Suzhou and Hangzhou in the late imperial period, and represented the activities expected from these highly educated courtesans who belonged to a social class that would have excluded them from any domestic setting. Cultural expectations from women in the home could be just as sophisticated, but only in the most cultivated of households. Such feminine perfections were still an exception, and these descriptions were clearly more of an idealization of the 'perfect woman' than anything existing in the reality of a world that, no matter how one looked at it, was still one of prostitution. By their very idealization, these descriptions, which can be compared with details of Leung's *Mundane Mind*, are perfectly befitting Fei Danxu's paintings of 'beautiful women'.

Their physical appearance was described with a series of often nature-related simile ("Cicada forehead; apricot lips; rhinoceros-horn teeth; creamy breasts; eyebrows like faraway mountains; glances like waves of autumn water; lotus-petal face; cloud-like hair; feet like bamboo shoots carved in jade; fingers like white shoots of grass; willow waist; delicate steps as though walking on lotus blossoms."<sup>10</sup>) The mention of feet in Xu Zhen's text is a clear indication that he was describing courtesans. Even though Fei Danxu's works only fit literati art because of some stylistic choices, such as the way rocks and plants are painted, they are however commercial paintings, but of the kind that still tried to appeal to an elegant and cultivated viewership. The visible presence of feet, even wrapped and bound, would have turned such paintings into erotic imagery, not an unusual choice for image makers of erotic art, but definitely not the kind an educated painter such as Fei Danxu would have ever made.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that Joey Leung does not lose an opportunity to show her giantesses' feet and painted toenails while Fei Danxu always hid them: since, at the time, these elegant women would all have had bound feet—these limbs would have been too much of an erotic item to be shown.

In most paintings by Fei Danxu, the figures' positions generally fit the expectations of Xu Zhen as they sit on benches in gardens with an "artful, captivating smile" and surrounded by "banana leaves [that] remind people of the background of songs."<sup>12</sup> Leung's girls are also surrounded by plants, even though they stand behind a wall, and while her girls are in water, they are not in a natural pond, but in an artificial swimming pool. The fact that it is summertime is indicated by the protective sun lotion one of the girls is applying to her skin. Other indications that these unsmiling figures are lying around in a summer scene are the toys with which they play, toys whose shapes and colour are reminiscent of the phallus Koon Yeewan mentioned in her article. An unexplainable second pair of hands holding an inflatable toy might be justified by the possibility of this girl being a quadrumane, after all such giantesses escape the normal requirements of human biology. There are no similarities between the activities described by Xu Zhen and those of Joey Leung's. The main actions of Leung's beauties are to take care of their enormous masses of hair, as well as applying sunscreen or playing with their inflatable toys. Both instances of such toys have strong sexual connotations, mostly because of the colour and shape of the objects and how they are manipulated: inflating the toy is literally a 'blowjob', while the position of the second toy is between the legs of one of the girls.

While Xu Zhen describes some fruit among the objects surrounding the elegant women he portrays, there are none in *Mundane Mind*, even though Leung added a series of plants, and especially lotus flowers and leaves. The lotus flower plays an important role in Buddhist art especially, but also in literati painting since many scholar painters were themselves either full-fledged Buddhists, or believed in a syncretic form of philosophy bridging the gaps between the three great systems of belief (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism).<sup>13</sup> The lotus is always seen as a symbol of purity growing out of the mud, symbolizing how enlightenment can come from coarse materiality. But in *Mundane Mind*, this most ethereal of plants suspiciously looks like round breasts with pink, erect nipples. Considering the provocative attitude of some of these giantesses, there is little ambiguity in the representational choice made by Leung, a fact emphasized by Lucy Lippard in a 1975 text written for the *9e Biennale de Paris* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, titled 'The Women Artists' Movement—What next?':

*But the time has come to call a semisphere a breast if we know damn well that's what it suggests, instead of repressing the association and negating an area of experience that has been dormant except in the work of a small number of artists, many of them women. To see a semisphere as a breast does not mean it cannot be seen as a semisphere and as endless other things as well, although the image of the breast used by a woman artist can now be subject as well as object.*<sup>14</sup>

It seems that the only girl who does not look too bored in *Mundane Mind* is the one with her face pressed to a bunch of these breast-lotuses, but then it might just be because her eyes are closed. Another indication of a possible homoerotic reading of this image is the tiny girl with her leg stuck inside a lotus pod, maybe an indication of penetration in this clearly eroticized representation. Even though Leung never eroticizes her painting too overtly, any representation of a sexual activity being either only hinted at or made into a visual pun: *Mundane Mind* is therefore very different from any of Fei Danxu's "paintings of beauties" that belong squarely to the type of art made for the highly conservative and patriarchal society of the literati, generally men who preferred to indulge in the privacy of the bedroom or brothel, with erotic images that were excluded from their highly intellectual and rarefied environment. According to Wu Hung,<sup>15</sup> representations of sexuality, although always subdued in the type of paintings made by artists like Fei Danxu, were even subtler during and after the seventeenth century (this is not true of openly pornographic images, certainly they were never part of the realm of 'serious' art like these "paintings of beauty" and in spite of their belonging to the domain of literati-inspired professional art).<sup>16</sup>

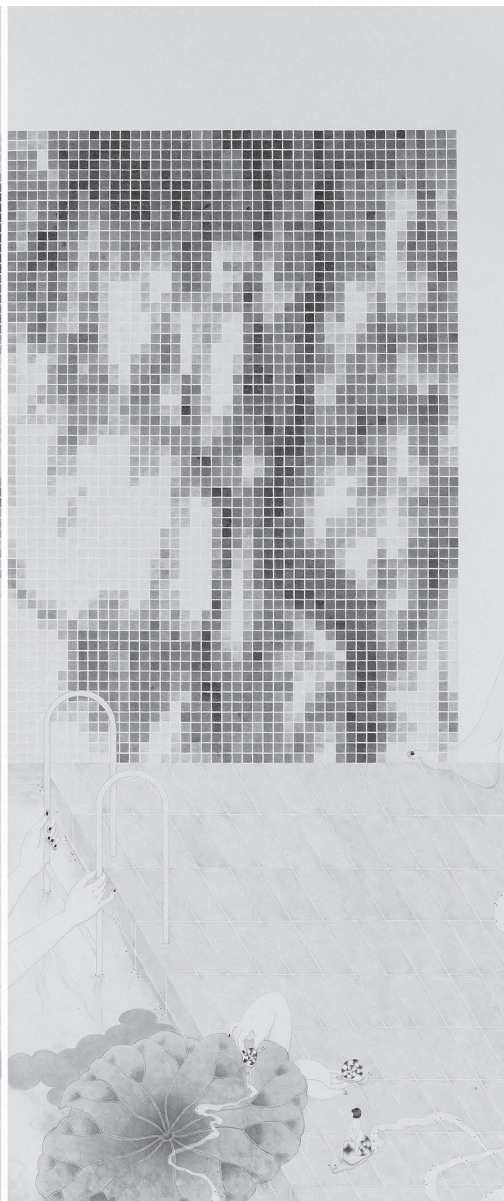
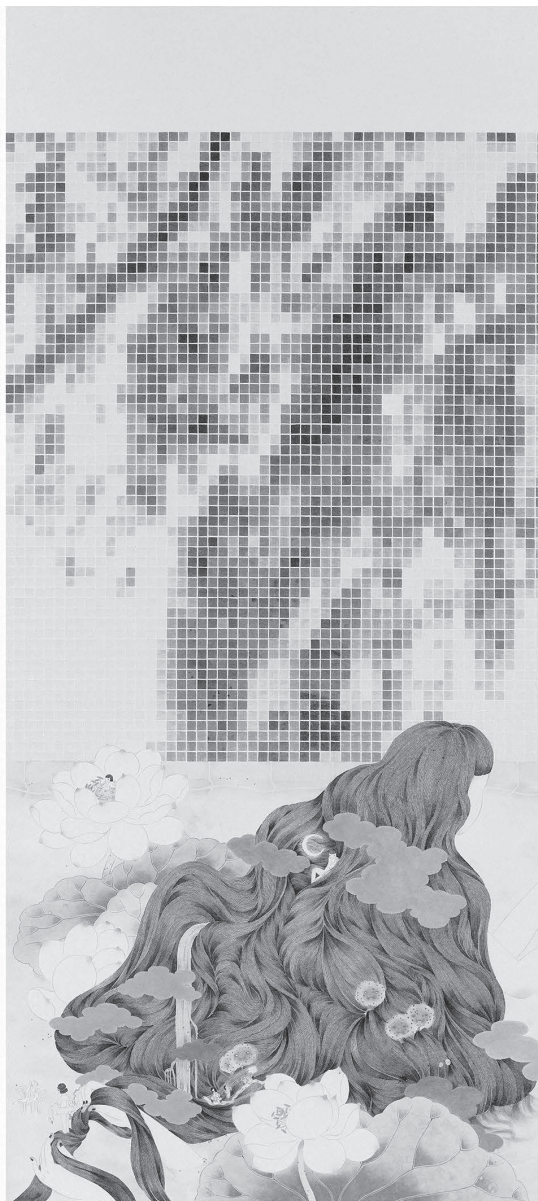
Because, stylistically and technically, Joey Leung refers to the 'fine line technique' of the early nineteenth-century genre of 'paintings of beauties', *Mundane Mind* voluntarily imitates images that have roots in a commercial practice, and that alone would make of it a deviation from the age-old respect for literati painting. Even though Leung's girls are a humorous reinterpretation of the classical beauty of Fei Danxu, a topsy-turvy portrait of the old representations of feminine perfection in Chinese patriarchy, it is not so much their activities and looks that matter than the fact that these female bodies are gigantic and occupy the space normally reserved for mountains in literati painting. It is this substitution, female bodies instead of masculine mountains, that constitutes *Mundane Mind*'s real ironic reading of literati culture and its patriarchal structure.







When is a Landscape *Like a Body*?



## GENDER POSITIONING IN LITERATI CULTURE

In the article ‘Contemporary Feminist Body Theories and Mencius’ Ideas of Body and Mind,’<sup>17</sup> from the book *Bodies in China* (2016), cultural theorist Eva Kit Wah Man explores the new ways available to contemporary feminism for the creation of a mode of rationalizing the body as part of a monistic worldview—such a worldview might contain the possibility of interpretation differently from the dualism that has shaped Western philosophy, from the idealist reasoning of Plato, to the later Christian perspective in which it fitted perfectly. Eva Man pointed out that even the monistic systems created by Spinoza and phenomenology, first among them being the works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, fell short of a conceptualization of the body that would put that, and mind, on the same level. Eva Man explains that feminist philosophers (such as Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray) saw in all the dualist dichotomies of post-Platonist and cartesian idealist philosophy<sup>18</sup> a worldview that systematically marginalized women, by consistently placing them on the subservient side of the body/mind divide inherent in these philosophical systems.

Eva Man then turned towards classical Chinese philosophy, and especially the work of Mencius (active fourth century BC, the most influential of Confucius’ followers, whose work became the foundation of what has been called Confucianism in the West) in order to find new potentials for a strictly monistic system that would eschew these dichotomies. Mencius’ faith in the inherent goodness of human nature, albeit one that needs nurturing to be maintained, led him to see the potential for such a quality in every human being. However, even though the body does not seem to be gendered in Mencius, the social context within which Confucianist philosophy developed in imperial China was always structured as a patriarchy, hence the understanding that the “great or superior individuals” mentioned in these texts were always men. It should be added that Chinese characters, and the classical written language, hardly ever use pronouns; and even when they are used, they are grammatically non-committal in terms of gender: there is no feminine, masculine or even neutral in classical Chinese grammar—and not even a plural, this being indicated strictly through the context, which makes it sometimes difficult to translate into a modern language.

Nonetheless, Eva Man concludes that even Mencius’ essentially non-binary system shows some signs that women tended to be relegated to the passive side, one that had been shaped by the *yin-yang* interactions for a long time in Chinese thinking, and already when Mencius was writing his texts. Even though the *yin-yang* system is not supposed to function according to the Western value system of the dichotomies already mentioned (there is no moral or practical hierarchy between the *yin* and *yang* principles), conditions such as passivity, darkness, dampness and many other attributes are the reserve of the *yin* principle, while those such as activity, brightness, dryness, etc. are of the *yang* principle. The *yang* and masculine dimension of strength and domination have always been seen as the force more likely to shape social structures in China. Even though the *yin-yang* interaction does not contain the very specific hierarchical dimension of the dichotomies inherent in the dualist/idealist philosophy of the West—dichotomies that automatically place women under the domination of men—it still allows for a mode of thinking leading to a strong patriarchal system where women are subservient.

This reflection shows how problematic it is to rely merely on a single source to try to understand a culture: when only looking at philosophy, it would be easy to assume that the non-hierarchical nature of the *yin-yang* system allowed women to be the equal of men in China (some specialists of Confucian philosophy are still frequently making that statement), but a cursory observation of real historical circumstances reveals that women have always played an ancillary role



in Chinese history, at least until the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Since then, that position has been contentious, and the terrain for frequent violent struggle. No matter what power women might have retained during the early imperial period, the establishment of the civil service, which initiated in the Tang dynasty the development of the literati culture that began in earnest during the Song dynasty, was created in the context of a constant reinforcement of patriarchy. By the Song dynasty, when literati culture received a form that would last until the collapse of the imperial system at the beginning of the twentieth century, the patriarchal system had durably been in place and the art theory produced by the painters and calligraphers of literati art could not but reflect that hierarchical structure.

Considering that the people who made these literati landscape paintings were precisely those writing nearly everything else, from poetry to philosophy, it is not surprising they also produced many theoretical texts reflecting upon their understanding of the arts (specifically poetry, calligraphy and painting). Because of the grammatical structure of the classical language already evoked, it is not possible to say that the mountain was referred to as a 'he' (which is true of some other languages, English would use 'it' while '*montagne*' is feminine in French—which does not mean it is female, the grammatical gender of this word does not erase its phallic, masculine connotations in painting). But it is possible to find in some early theoretical texts on painting an identification of mountains to people within a strict hierarchical structure. During the Northern Song dynasty, one of the most important figures of the early phase of literati landscape painting, Guo Xi (c. 1020–1090), wrote a short treatise titled *Lofty Message from Forests and Streams* (*Linquan Gaozhi*), in which he compares the arrangement of peaks and mountains in a painting to a sort of court hierarchy where the highest peak would be like the king:

*In the landscape, pay attention first to the tallest mountain, call it the main peak. Once it is established, you can start painting the others, whether they are close or remote, small or big. We call it the main peak because it is the monarch of the entire scene. It is like the hierarchy between lords and ministers. In the scenes of rocks and trees, pay attention first to the tallest of pines, call it the venerable ancient. Once it is established, you can start painting the other elements of the flora and the smaller rocks. We call it the venerable ancient because it is different from all the other elements of the mountain. It is like a noble gentleman among mere mortals.*<sup>20</sup>

This famous passage, which would inspire other theorists of landscape, clearly associates mountains and trees, i.e. the main elements of any literati landscape paintings, to the most important figures of the rigidly hierarchical structure of Chinese society during the imperial period. The main mountain as the reigning lord, and the main pine tree as its noble and ancient adviser, directly alludes to the patriarchal ordering of a court. The historical conditions that originated these concepts in the eleventh and twelfth centuries can explain how these associations of ideas were made. In his paper 'When is a landscape like a body?', historian and sinologist Martin J. Powers explains the rise of landscape painting in literati culture in sociological terms.<sup>21</sup> During the Song dynasty, landscape painting began to occupy the highest echelon of the hierarchy of painting genres, while the main genres of previous dynasties and especially the Tang, i.e. portrait and figure paintings, began to decline. Before the Song dynasty, the imperial examination system created a new elite that began to replace the aristocratic elites of the past, taking over their social, political, and economic functions. It was that new elite of the literati, who were at least initially all civil servants thanks to the imperial examination system, who picked up landscape as their favoured artistic medium, thus replacing the favourite genres of the old aristocracy and their preference for portrait and figure painting.

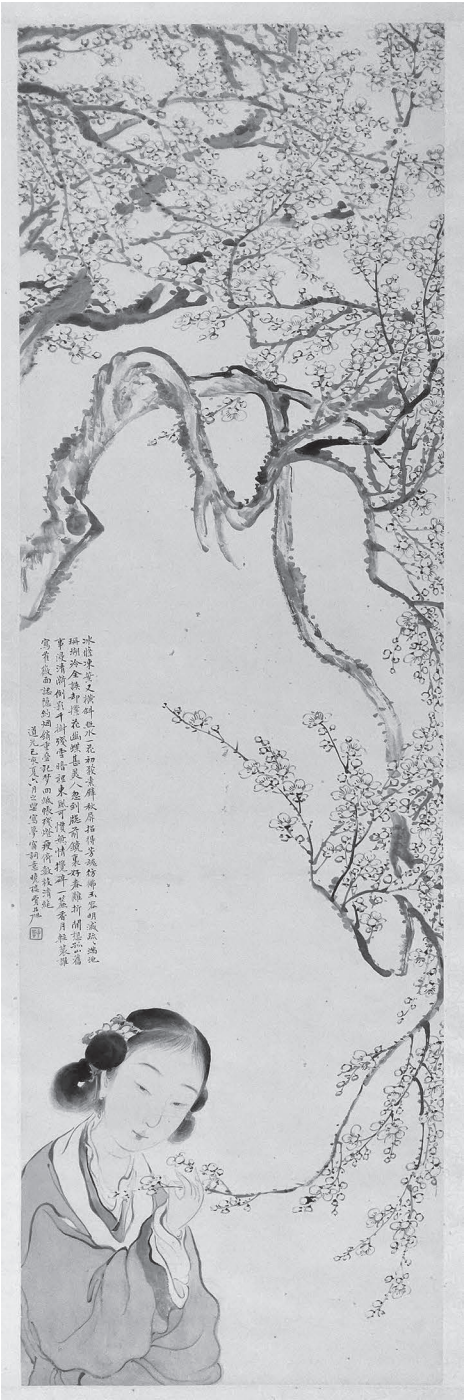
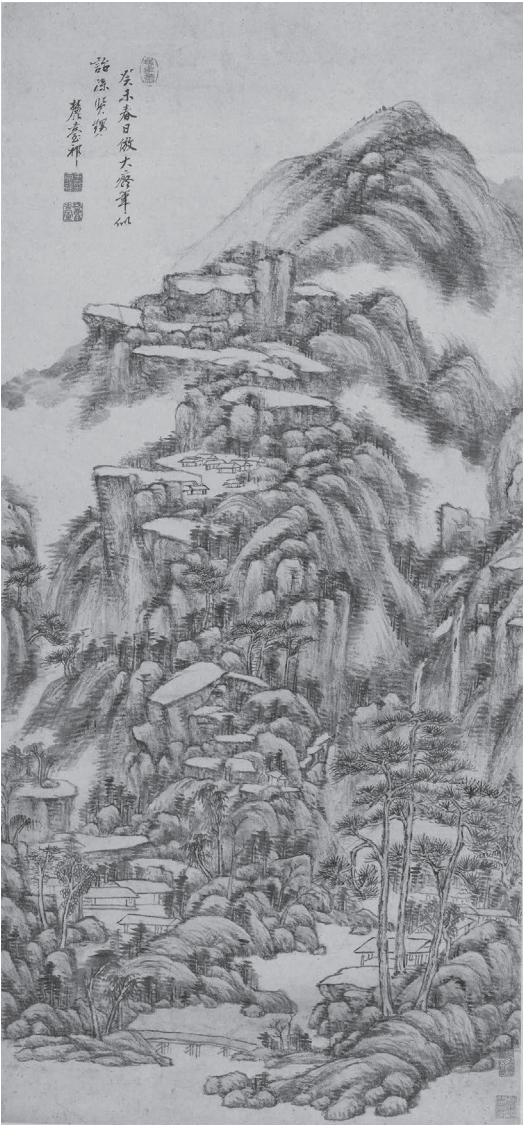
While portrait and figure painting, at the time it was in vogue among the aristocracy, had to be made by specialized practitioners and was therefore never made by the aristocrats themselves, landscape painting, on the contrary, was made by the literati who were also very eager to write about it. In these theoretical texts, they applied to their practice the knowledge of nature that was also present in the neo-Confucian philosophy that had emerged during the Song dynasty. It could be argued that the faces and bodies of portrait and figure paintings that dominated before the Song dynasty were turned into the landscapes and mountains of literati painting during and after that period. That sweeping view of art history is of course a generalization and starts to become less accurate as the social class of the literati became more complex, its ideology becoming increasingly difficult to follow closely under a changing social and economic structure. For instance, the idea that literati art should be made by disinterested individuals, painting and doing calligraphy for their own pleasure without thought of financial gain, became difficult to maintain during the Ming and Qing dynasties. That literati thinking had permeated so many aspects of art in general, and especially the making of paintings, even professional painters like Fei Danxu could claim at least a modicum of literati-ness for their portraits and figure paintings. By the twentieth century, the limits between what constituted literati and non-literati art had become so blurred that it was no longer tenable to reject portrait and figure painting from the realm of any definition of high art.

Some of the most influential painters of the Shanghai school for instance, who brought major changes to the understanding of what constitutes acceptably 'high art' to late nineteenth century China, had no problems making portraits and figure paintings (obviously, the main reasons behind this change was the social and economic environment of Shanghai, this most commercial of cities). In the twenty-first century, ideas of literati art are far from being a thing of the past, but they had to adapt to a very different environment where other notions, such as 'the contemporary' were bound to reshape them substantially. The fact that Joey Leung is a contemporary artist has superseded the notion that she could be a literati painter, making the question of whether her figure paintings are or are not literati painting somehow moot. And yet, there is no escaping entirely these issues since she also chose to make her girls look like mountains, something that might not be immediately obvious to viewers who would not be familiar with Chinese painting in general, and literati painting in particular. Leung's giantesses, with their mountain-like bodies and hair are therefore a slap in the face of the male mountain so clearly revealed in Guo Xi's text. This painting, and the *Mollywood* series it belongs to, can also be seen as a statement on aspects of the local culture of Hong Kong.

#### HONG KONG MUNDANITY AND PATRIARCHY IN MAINLAND CHINA

Leung's writings, in her comics and the inscriptions of her paintings, pertain to certain literary traditions of the region of Guangdong where Hong Kong occupies an original place. If Guangzhou remains the capital of the province of Guangdong, Hong Kong has been something of its crown jewel. Its colonial past puts it apart from the rest of China in terms of culture and language, and even though Cantonese is also spoken in the rest of the province, Hong Kong Cantonese is somehow quite different because of its many uses of English words, different everyday expressions and even accent. Although Leung's texts are not immediately recognizable as Cantonese, since their grammatical structure is a mixture of more classical forms and modern language (just like in Mainland China for more literary writings), they become quite clearly so once spoken aloud, since the Cantonese pronunciation will make the ending of phrases rhyme.<sup>22</sup> Also, some of its architectural context, as well as some of the visual elements of *Mundane Mind*, can be read as an expression of the local culture.

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Leung has explained where these elements came from: “Regarding *Mundane Mind*, it was the first time I put real scenery in my painting (the tree shadow at the back; it is a place I always passed by when I visited my grandma). I turned it into mosaic which is like a process of sealing in a memory. The text was what I thought during 2019.”<sup>23</sup>

The use of ceramic tiles to ‘seal in a memory’ probably refers to the durability of ceramics, evoking one of the most common architectural sights in Hong Kong as well as Mainland China. The association of such a visual detail with the subtly Cantonese references of the written text present *Mundane Mind* as a good candidate for a cultural artefact defined by its Hong Kong Cantonese context. Leung’s comment is arresting as it indicates a change of mind concerning the content of the entire *Mollywood* series and especially its discontent towards the unchanging and dull nature of the everyday; that condition, in Hong Kong since 2018 no longer being valid.

These points, used by Leung in the email sent in October 2020, and therefore just a few months after the creation of the new National Security Laws, indicate how much the situation has changed in Hong Kong since she began working on this series of paintings. As has been widely reported in the international media, large demonstrations took place during the summer of 2019 in reaction to the Hong Kong government’s attempt to introduce an extradition treaty with the People’s Republic of China, where the justice system is empowered by the Chinese Communist Party. Public anxiety generated by this proposed new law turned firstly into fear, and then terror, after the government allowed its police force to crack down on the demonstrations, generating in turn more violence. While the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 brought about a less violent tone to the confrontations between police and public, the central government in Beijing then imposed a new set of laws designed to suppress any show of political dissent. Enforced by a highly secretive police with personnel directly appointed by Beijing, these laws have presented a death blow to the ‘One Country Two Systems’ principle allowing Hong Kong to retain an unchanged political and social system until 2049 (violating the international treaty signed with the UK in 1997, and confirmed at the United Nations in 1984), and are profoundly changing all Hong Kong institutions and the way they function. This eventuality had yet to occur by the time Leung began working on her *Mollywood* series. These paintings are now beginning to look like a remnant from a much-regretted past, however recent it is in reality, a past when things were blissfully boring and uneventful.

It is not just the freedoms used to be guaranteed in Hong Kong that are under threat, there is also a fear that even the local culture and language could soon be put into question by the CCP. Any allusion, even remote, to the possibility that Hong Kong is different from Mainland China is now being construed as a call for independence, a notion that is being actively pursued as a crime by the National Security forces. Such an attempt to erase Cantonese culture also happened in the Mainland. Even before the events of 2019 in Hong Kong, the Mainland authorities had tried to shut down local Cantonese television broadcasts in Guangdong province, sparking demonstrations in Guangzhou, whose inhabitants believed they should protect and even promote their own culture.<sup>24</sup> The explanation given by the central government was that these broadcasts were no longer necessary, considering the influx of migrants from other Mainland provinces had made an understanding of Cantonese unnecessary. It was clear that this cultural difference was seen as an obstacle to the wider economic, cultural and political integration of the country. The resistance against this integration was sharp but has been weakened considerably by Beijing’s efforts to create the Greater Bay Area, a gigantic project of economic integration that will basically erase all limits between the great cities

of the Pearl River Delta. The creation of this economic behemoth is the ideal pretext to abolish any historical and cultural differences between these large cities and the rest of the country, and especially the strong sense of otherness many Hongkongers feel towards Mainland China.

This sense of cultural difference under attack in Hong Kong also refers to other tendencies felt to be potent in the Mainland, especially in the cultural attitudes promoted by the CCP in the institutions of the PRC. Some of these tendencies are clearly expressing a suspicion towards any form of criticism towards the state, even when it takes the shape of feminist activism. And yet, there is resistance in the PRC against these efforts to normalize very conservative attitudes towards society in general. There are many Mainland female artists engaging in an extraordinary variety of tactics to defend and promote a feminist viewpoint. All the same, there is an official culture that has become more visible today and has been given more importance by the state in its soft power strategies. Its emphasis is on a culture that does not seem interested in reflections on gender identity in the field of culture or even in the defence of women's rights. Stories of feminist activists being arrested for causing trouble and disturbing the peace, the most common accusation used by the state to arrest whoever questions whatever decision taken by the CCP, abound in the press. Two examples will suffice, but there are many others. Firstly, Lu Pin, an activist and curator of the travelling exhibition, *Above Ground: 40 Moments of Transformation*, which examined the public demonstrations of Young Feminist Activists in China documented through photographs and narratives, who was arrested in 2018,<sup>25</sup> and secondly, Huang Xueqin who was arrested in August 2019 for simply being a powerful voice of the #metoo movement in China.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of these dark examples it is possible to somehow remain optimistic and look at this reinforcement of patriarchy as something of a joke, thanks to an event that happened in 2020. The student handbook of the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, the largest art school of the country in terms of numbers of people and the size of their several campuses, contained advice given to female students to avoid being sexually abused, by listing some of the factors that "encouraged" assault:

*The factors include a "focus on looks and material enjoyment," "a beautiful appearance and frivolous lifestyle," "cowardliness and an inability to defend oneself" and "a weak mind and inability to resist temptations." It said sexual assaults could occur at night and in summer, and in classrooms, laboratories and dormitories. Under "prevention of sexual assault," the academy in the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou said, "women's dormitories pose a safety issue" and it recommended that women students not stay in the rooms on their own. Women students should also "take major roads at night, not talk to strangers, and not wear clothes that expose too much."<sup>27</sup>*

It was reassuring to see the social media backlash against the China Art Academy, many commentators pointing out that the blame was placed on women without attempting to address the actual issues. Sadly, patriarchy is alive and well, even growing in its assertiveness in official culture fostered by the CCP, a fact that has become increasingly obvious in the last decade. But it is another fact that resistance to such a patriarchal culture is just as alive and well, though threatened by the growing obsession for control exerted by the state. Strategies of resistance range from the most confrontational, a choice that puts its defenders at risk, to the extremely subdued and subtle, like Joey Leung's giantesses. A sense of humour remains a powerful weapon for today's weary minds.

This text relates to a public talk given by the author as part of the ‘University of New South Wales, Art and Design and the 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney Presents’ annual research seminar series. In 2020 the series was co-organized online by Prof. Paul Gladston and Dr. Yu Chieh-Li (UNSW) with Dr. Mikala Tai and Bridie Moran (4A).

Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have written a comparative study of painting theory concerning landscape by choosing a period where art theory had developed extensive reflections on the subject in both Western Europe and China in the eighteenth century. Titled *Académiciens et Lettrés*, Paris: Youfeng, 2010, this study contains a chapter titled ‘Landscape’ (‘Paysage,’ pp. 280–310)

<sup>2</sup> One example would be one the works of Lam Tung Pang, a 2008 performance-cum-painting titled *Faith Moves Mountain*. The artist painted, with a Chinese brush and ink, a large monochrome landscape painting on planks of plywood. Then, in order to interrogate the weight of the literati painting tradition that many ethnic Chinese artists feel they have to face, he carefully tried to wipe it away with an eraser, an impossible task considering that the ink had penetrated too deep inside the cracks of the plywood. Although Lam Tung Pang made this painting in Beijing at a time the art market was only interested in the works of Mainland artists who were mainly present in the capital, this work was also a statement about the fact that this Hong Kong-born artist did not identify with the culture of the People’s Republic of China and its renewed interest in the Confucianist social order it once rejected. See Frank Vigneron, *Hong Kong Soft Power*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010, pp. 170–172

<sup>3</sup> Chinese ink, drawing pen, gouache, acrylic, coloured pencil on paper

<sup>4</sup> Maria Mok, ‘Preface’, *A Sense of Place—From Turner to Hockney* (exhibition catalogue), Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2020, p. 7

<sup>5</sup> I have written extensively about this problem in my book *I Like Hong Kong... Art and Deterritorialisation*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2010, particularly in chapter three ‘Infra-national culture’, pp. 55–82

<sup>6</sup> In *I Like Hong Kong... Art and Deterritorialisation*, pp. 153–157, and in my more recent book on the art ecology of Hong Kong, pp. 231–239

<sup>7</sup> Yeewan Koon, ‘Skirting the Borders: A Preliminary Sketch on the Issue of Gender in Hong Kong,’ *Hong Kong Art Yearbook 2007*, Kurt Chan (ed.), Hong Kong: Fine Arts Department, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008, pp. 219–229

<sup>8</sup> From an email by the artist to the author, 2 November 2020

<sup>9</sup> Wu Hung, ‘Beyond Stereotypes: The Twelve Beauties in Qing Court Art and the Dream of the Red Chamber’, *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang eds, Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997, p. 336

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Even though erotic art existed in China for many centuries, it was never part of any ‘high’ forms of art making, and especially not literati painting, always existing as part of the creative domain of craftsmen. Fei Danxu, being a nineteenth century painter, however, already belongs to a time when the possibility of more licentious representations existed for image makers: “Records of erotic activities, including kissing, are easily found in some late Qing erotic paintings that were mass-produced in popular and vulgar styles and widely circulated in brothel areas. Now, nineteenth century China was rife with an interesting tension and divergence between the Manchu ruler who adopted Confucian policies and the lifestyle of nouveau-riche merchants. The background of most of these paintings featured the newly prosperous towns of the lower Yangzi river valley, where there was demand for a more hedonistic lifestyle... Erotic behaviour in these paintings reflected the complex crosscurrents of society, including bureaucratic values and ‘immoral’ and ‘heterodox’ ideas that the government tried to ban. The traditional, leisurely approach to sex was replaced by a ‘frenetic’ mode of sexual excitement and sensation, even of decadence.” Eva Kit Man, ‘Kissing in Chinese Culture’, *Bodies in China*, Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2017, p. 82

<sup>12</sup> In relation to the activities of the ladies described in Xu Zhen’s treatise, Wu Hung describes their skills by comparing them with those of the women of the *Book of Songs*, emphasizing what appeared to be a stronger sense of equality between men and women in the antique text: “Skills: Whereas women in seventeenth-century China were playing the lute; embroidering; weaving brocade; comprehending musical pitches and rhymes; swinging and playing the ‘double six’ game; the women in the songs, as discussed above, were either doing hard laborers’ work, sewing, and picking in the field, or the wealthier ones were singing and longing for their men. Yet one must say the female activities in the later portraits were more idealized and imaginary than realistic, in which the women were taking care of orchids, catching butterflies, fashioning clothes, and so on.” Wu Hung, *ibid.*



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<sup>13</sup> In fact, what has been called in English “neo-Confucianism” is generally the accepted term used to talk about several philosophical movements that started in the Song dynasty. The first representatives of this movement, which has characterized all the intellectual pursuits of the literati ever since, and engendered many books and new ideas, is always described as a syncretic elaboration of ideas coming from the moral philosophy of Confucius and his followers, ideas from the more nature-oriented philosophy of Taoism, and ideas allowing for considerations on concepts such as the ego (its inexistence in fact) and the afterlife from Buddhism

<sup>14</sup> Kerr Houston, *An Introduction to Art Criticism: Histories, Strategies, Voices*, Boston: Pearson, 2013, p. 292

<sup>15</sup> “Sexual Suggestions: Expressions of this kind became more repressed and calculated in later developments, while basic gestures remained the same as in the songs, like leaning drunkenly on her lover’s shoulder; laughing seductively; secretly exchanging glances, showing slight jealousy, and so on.” Wu Hung, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Literati artists, even when selling their works, always believed that they had to adhere to the status of the amateur artist, practicing their art without regards for monetary gains and only to cultivate their own minds and the respect for other literati. Because Fei Danxu never even attempted the civil service examination, the commercial nature of his practice did not allow Chinese art historians to put his work inside the domain of literati art. Considering that ‘literati art’ is often described by these same historians as an aesthetic choice (and therefore in, great part, stylistic and visual), it would however not be entirely impossible to consider his work as being part of the dominant culture of the literati, since the way he used ink and brush was not very different. But the additional fact that he was a portrait painter made his association with literati painting impossible for the same art historians, since portrait painting had been relegated to the position of a craft by the literati painters ever since the Yuan dynasty (only in the late eighteenth century would literati art theorists reintegrate portrait painting as a possible venue for literati artists and even then, with great difficulties)

<sup>17</sup> Eva Kit Man, pp. 1–17

<sup>18</sup> Eva Kit Man even provides a non-exhaustive list of the dichotomies inherent in these philosophical systems: “mind and body, sense and sensibility, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance, mechanism and vitalism, transcendence and immanence, temporality and spatiality, psychology and physiology, form and matter, and so on.”

<sup>19</sup> An important moment in the reaction against the traditional roles of women in Chinese society was, for instance, the anti-foot binding movement in early republican China; the list of such efforts, whether officially sanctioned or not, is quite long and has a fascinating history with remarkable ups and very depressing downs

<sup>20</sup> My translation. Yu Jianhua, *Zhongguo Hualun Leibian*, Beijing: Renmin Meishu Chubanshe, 1957, p. 642

<sup>21</sup> *Landscape, Culture, and Power in Chinese Society*, Wen-Hsin Yeh (ed.), Berkeley CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California: Center for Chinese Studies, China Research Monograph 49, 1998

<sup>22</sup> As this example from the painting *The Carefree Stone* will show: “She thinks she cannot be bothered; Only because she is so lazy. Too lazy to care or bother; She lives a carefree life.” Although this quatrain could even be considered to be written in ‘classical’ Chinese, it only rhymes when pronounced in Cantonese. “Lazy” is pronounced “lan” in Putonghua, the official language of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan, and almost similarly “laan” on Cantonese (with a longer vowel); but the last character, meaning “unoccupied”, is pronounced “xian” in Putonghua (i.e. a sound closer to the older Wade-Giles transcription of “hsien”) but “haan” in Cantonese. If “laan” and “haan” rhyme, “lan” and “xian” do not. This, of course, in addition to the fact that the characters used are ‘traditional’ ones, like those used in Taiwan, and not ‘simplified’ like those used in the PRC

<sup>23</sup> From an email sent by the artist to the author, 2 November 2020

<sup>24</sup> Wing-Chung Ho, and Jian Lu, ‘Culture versus the State? The “Defend-My-Mother-Tongue” Protests in Guangzhou’, *The China Journal* 81.1, 2019: pp. 81–102

<sup>25</sup> ‘Curator Lu Pin Will Speak About Feminist Activists in China’, *Targeted News Service*, 28 March 2018; <https://targetednews.com>

<sup>26</sup> ‘China/Hong Kong: China Arrests Feminist Activist Huang Xueqin After Hong Kong Visit’, *Asia News Monitor*, 28 October 2019; see <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/china-arrests-feminist-activist-huang-xueqin-after-hong-kong-visit>

<sup>27</sup> Phoebe Zhang, ‘Chinese art college handbook accused of blaming sexual assaults on women’s behaviour’, *South China Morning Post*, 25 September 2020; <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3103096/blaming-victim-chinese-art-college-handbook-tells-women-prevent>; accessed 12 October 2020