

# PERFORMANCE OF GENDERS: MARKING MASCULINE/FEMININE IDENTITIES THROUGH BODY AND CALLIGRAPHY

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**Abstract:** In performance art, the body becomes a means of orientation and placement and a medium of social experience. Being a combination of four elements (time, space, the artist's body, and the relationship between artist and public audience), the "body in act" reclaims one's subjectivity through signifying gestures against cultural homologation, reactivating the alienating pragmatism of everyday life. Calligraphy, like performance art, focuses on physical execution, which materializes the physical power of the artist and the dynamics of momentum. The focus is on the artist's action involving the artist's body in a processual and spontaneous (but not unplanned) manner; the act of writing reaffirms the subjectivity of the calligrapher. Because of all these similarities between performance art and calligraphy, several contemporary Chinese artists attempt to interconnect these two art forms into innovative practices. Among them, we selected four artists (Sun Ping, Zhang Qiang, Echo Morgan, and Wu Xixia) who use calligraphy in performative actions to convey new conceptions related to gender (and) identity. Through the analysis of their most important works, this paper aims to explain how the use of calligraphy within the performative act reveals three significant socio-cultural themes: 1) the use of the body: the body is an active agent expressing the self through writing and related movements; 2) the question of gender: calligraphy is used as a symbol of masculine power over women (i.e., Sun Ping and Zhang Qiang) or as a symbol of feminine (i.e., Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia); 3) the definition of identity: calligraphy relates to identity as a symbol of Chinese tradition and culture, facilitating a contemporary reflection on gender identity.

**Keywords:** Performance art; Contemporary Art; Body; Chinese Calligraphy; Identity; Feminism; Gender Studies; Chinese Feminism; Cultural Studies.

## 1. Introduction

Performance act can be an art practice involving corporal endurance through the concept of “the role of the mediated subject of the acting body” (Berghuis 2006: 2). The body becomes a means of orientation and placement, capable of producing disorientation and displacement, becoming an arena and medium of social experience (Huber and Zhao 2013: 7). Combining four elements - time, space, the artist’s body, and the relationship between artist and audience - the performance reclaims subjectivity through signifying gestures against cultural homologation, creatively reactivating the alienating pragmatism of everyday life.

Performance art is time-based, site-specific, and body-centric, with both body and site being integral to conveying the message. The more explicit the body language, the more effective the message of the performance (Fok 2013: 4). Like performance art, calligraphy focuses on physical execution as it is the materialization of the artist’s physical power and the dynamics of momentum (Kao 1991: 76). The artist’s action involves the body in a “processual” and “spontaneous” (but not unplanned) manner, and the act of writing is a mode to reaffirm the subjectivity of the calligrapher and his social status (Ledderose 1986; Clarke 2005).

Because of all these similarities, several contemporary Chinese artists attempt to interconnect calligraphy and performance art into innovative artistic practices (Wei and Zhang 2019; Iezzi and Meccarelli 2024: 416-417). This article presents a selection of four artists - Sun Ping 孙平 (b.1953), Zhang Qiang 张强 (b. 1962), Echo Morgan (Xie Rong 谢蓉, b. 1983), and Wu Xixia 吴析夏 (b. 1993) - who use calligraphy in performative actions to express new conceptions of gender (and) identity. The selection was essentially based on two criteria: 1) maintaining gender balance, choosing two male and two female artists; 2) comparing four ways of using calligraphy in performative practices to convey different gender perspectives. Sun Ping and Zhang Qiang are in fact male artists collaborating with female counterparts to provocatively represent the gender inequality existing in society (Sun Ping) or to seek new ways for collaboration between the parties (Zhang Qiang); while Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia are female artists reaffirming their female identity through different calligraphic practices.

Within their vast artistic production, representative artworks of each artist have been selected based on art criticism (also in the Sinophone sphere) and direct confrontation with the artists (except Sun Ping)<sup>1</sup> aiming to explain how the use of calligraphy in performances reveals three significant socio-cultural themes: 1) the use of the body: the body is an active agent expressing the self through writing actions; 2) the question of gender: calligraphy symbolizes masculine power over women (Sun Ping and Zhang Qiang) or the feminine (Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia); 3) the definition of identity: calligraphy is a vehicle of

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<sup>1</sup> The two authors have been engaged in a long correspondence via email and WeChat with Zhang Qiang since 2020, exchanging materials and ideas about his work; M. Merenda also interviewed many of his female collaborators via email or WeChat, for example, Lia Wei, Zhang Qingzhi, and Ding Feifei in 2023. This last interview is part of the dataset of this article: see Iezzi, Merenda 2025. M. Merenda also interviewed Wu Xixia via email in 2023 (*ibid.*), and she met her in Beijing in 2024. With Echo Morgan, the two authors organized the performance entitled “Inky Strings” on October 29, 2023, at the International Museum and Library of Music in Bologna. On that occasion, and especially during the artist’s presentation that followed the performance, they had the opportunity to ask her questions and talk about her work. They also tried to contact Sun Ping and his assistant but after his removal from the China Artists Association in 2016 it is impossible to find his active contacts.

national, cultural and personal identity (Li 2009: 1; Pellat *et al.* 2014: 29-45) enabling contemporary reflection on gender identity. The artworks are analysed on three levels: a) stylistic-formal analysis; b) analysis of calligraphy texts (if any), and c) gender-related issues. This multi-layered analysis is the result of the three-level analysis (artistic, linguistic, and socio-political analysis) that was carried out thanks to the inclusion of these artworks in the semantic web archive based on Linked Open Data (LOD) principles called “WRITE digital archive” (Pasqual *et al.* 2024). This archive stores a large number of artworks that embody new forms of calligraphy in contemporary China.<sup>2</sup> The artworks analysed in this publication were selected from that large number as the most representative of different approaches/perspectives on gender issues in performance art.<sup>3</sup>

The theoretical concepts applied to analyse these artworks are: “ornamentalism” (Cheng 2018; 2019) and *nannü* 男女 (“man/woman”, Liu *et al.* 2013), in particular for Sun Ping and Zhang Qiang; “re-writing” (Rich 1979) and “negativity/radical passivity” (Halberstam 2011), in particular for Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia.

## 2. Sun Ping – Objectifying the Female Body through “Subversive Calligraphy”

Born in Heilongjiang in 1953, Sun Ping joined the “China Artists’ Association” in 1985 and graduated from Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts in 1987. As a controversial artist, he played a key role in the emergence of Chinese performance art. In the early 1990s his work was associated with Political Pop<sup>4</sup> and was sharply critical of societal conditions (Lee 2016). From the 2000s, Sun Ping centered his artistic reflection on female sexuality, sexual taboos, and calligraphy. In his first calligraphic performances, he used the female naked body as support to write works such as the “Heart Sutra” (*Xin Jing* 心经)<sup>5</sup> – a classic of Chinese calligraphic tradition. Later, in the performance “Hair Calligraphy” (*Fa shufa* 发书法), he transformed the female body into a calligraphic tool. On October 25, 2006, he held a white-dressed woman upside down, writing on paper with her hair soaked in black ink.<sup>6</sup> The woman’s body was stiff and motionless, personifying the calligraphic brush.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The two authors of this article are responsible for the entries in the archive within the collection of performing arts.

<sup>3</sup> The open access dataset of this publication (Iezzi, Merenda 2025) includes extracts from the “WRITE digital archive” (which means the metadata description of the selected artworks, their calli-writing units, series, authors, related literary works and exhibitions/events - in .jsonld form) and the cited artists’ interviews.

<sup>4</sup> In 1992 at the Guangzhou Biennale, Sun Ping’s performance entitled *China Sun Ping Art Shares Limited Company*, that consisted of selling fake stock market, was one of the first performances associated with the Political Pop movement (Berghuis 2006: 118). The “Political Pop” is an art movement “emerged in China in the 1980s, and combined western pop art with socialist realism to create art that questioned the political and social climate of a rapidly changing China”: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/political-pop>.

<sup>5</sup> The “Heart Sutra” is a popular sutra in Mahayana Buddhism and one of the most important texts for Chinese calligraphers from ancient times until today. All the most important Chinese calligraphy masters have been interested in the transcription of this text, such as Ouyang Xun 欧阳询 (557 – 641), Zhang Xu 张旭 (713 – 740), Su Shi 苏轼 (1037 – 1101), Zhao Mengfu 赵孟頫 (1254 – 1322), Wu Zhen 吴镇 (1280 – 1354), Wen Zhengming 文征明 (1470 – 1559), Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555 – 1636), Bada Shanren 八大山人 (1626 – 1705), Fu Shan 傅山 (1607 – 1685), Qianlong 乾隆 (1711 – 1799), Deng Shiru 邓石如 (ca. 1739/1743 – 1805), Wu Changshuo 吴昌硕 (1844 – 1927), Yu Youren 于右任 (1879 – 1964), etc.

<sup>6</sup> The use of hair as a brush to do calligraphy is not a novelty in Chinese calligraphic tradition. This practice dates to the Tang era (618-907), when the drunken master calligrapher Zhang Xu used his hair as a brush to perform calligraphy. Upon awakening, he was amazed by the quality of his work that could not be reproduced in a sober state (Ouyang and Fong 2008: 215-218).

<sup>7</sup> To see some images of the performances “Heart Sutra” and “Hair Calligraphy”: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/bBPDvxu1RLxWzdOfdrXimA>.

Since 2006, the involvement of the female counterpart becomes more controversial with his “vagina calligraphy” (Lee 2016). Together with his female collaborator Luo Shan 罗姗, Sun Ping organized “subversive” (*dianfu xing* 颠覆性) calligraphy performances called “Unknown Tao” (*Wo bu zhidao* 不知道).<sup>8</sup> In these performances, Chinese characters were shaped by brushes soaked in red or black ink placed inside Luo Shan’s vagina. In one of them, Luo Shan “held the brush” (*zhibi* 执笔) with her vagina to write on paper the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” (*Lanting xu* 兰亭序), the most famous work in Chinese calligraphic history written by Wang Xizhi 王羲之 (303 – 361) in 353. For this “vagina font” calligraphy (“Bi – ti” *shufa* “Bi - 体” 书法), Sun Ping created special brushes combining sexual tools with classic calligraphy brushes to produce pleasure during writing (fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> Luo Shan inserted one such brush into her vagina and wrote calligraphy through lower body movements and tone creating a new type of calligraphy also called “sexual” calligraphy (*xing shufa* 性书法).<sup>10</sup> She is often half-naked and wears masks or costumes, as well as various accessories.



Figure 1. Brushes used for “sexual” calligraphy performances

According to Sun Ping, vagina calligraphy aims to challenge conventions and principles about sex and the almost sacred position of traditional art in Chinese culture through provocative performances.<sup>11</sup> In these performances, he also symbolizes the

<sup>8</sup> The literal meaning of this expression is “I don’t know”. The first “Unknown Tao” performance was held on June 16, 2017 at the Wall Art Gallery (*Qiang meishuguan* 墙美术馆) in Beijing. To see the announcement and the images of the performance: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/fTgU7FSR1P6lbbVj678m6w>. On May 30, 2013, Sun Ping and Luo Shan also performed vagina calligraphy during a collateral event of the Venice Biennale entitled “Slashed Ink at Venice”.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description of these “special” brushes, see: [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AGBzsk731x62H\\_chSWXCVw](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/AGBzsk731x62H_chSWXCVw).

<sup>10</sup> For this kind of works, in 2016 Sun Ping was expelled from the China Artists Association because they were considered “vulgar”, “uncivilized”, and “low class”. The China Artists Association on June 6 announced his ban from the group on its official WeChat account, stating that the style of artwork had an “adverse effect” on society and inflicted “considerable damage” to the association’s reputation. It added that the group shared the public’s unanimous disdain for the “vulgar” work, described as having «wantonly defiled calligraphy and trampled over civilization»: <https://www.artforum.com/news/sun-ping-expelled-from-government-led-china-artists-association-for-vagina-calligraphy-performance-60637>. Following these events, Sun Ping no longer posted on his social channels Facebook and Instagram and the link to his official website (<https://www.sunpingart.com/>) was no longer active as well.

<sup>11</sup> In an interview (2010), he affirmed that: “I just want to be upstream, to question and subvert everything creatively. [...] Sex happens to be a channel of doing so, because it always arouses people’s emotions” (You 2016). He also defined his vagina calligraphy as “an extraordinary ‘body calligraphy’ [...] amongst a life of idleness and common pleasures”, adding that “this may seem unfair, ugly, and vulgar on the outside because we’re clouded by principles and conventions. But it also bears elegance, beauty, and inner value. It is also art” (Lee 2016). To justify the use of a female vagina, he said: “The vagina is too often considered vulgar...But



subordinative role of women to shed light on this other reactionary aspect of Chinese contemporary society. Initially, the woman's body serves in fact as passive support, reflecting masculine supremacy. In "Hair Calligraphy", the woman is immobilized, reified, and helpless, held upside down in an unpleasant position. Then, in vagina calligraphy, although he gives the woman an active role, her movements are directed by male will, which had conceived the action and violated her body by inserting a brush in her vagina. Woman exerts physical effort while man is the spectator: the woman remains a tool subjected to male voyeuristic and sexual urges.<sup>12</sup>

Tracing brushstrokes with female vagina recalls two famous feminists' performances: "Vagina Painting" (1965) by Shigeko Kubota (1937 – 2015) and "Interior Scroll" (1975) by Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019). In her "Vagina Painting", held during the "Perpetual Fluxfest" at the Cinematheque of New York, the Japanese artist tied a paintbrush dipped in red inside her underwear and moved her hips to create abstract red lines. Kubota's performance was a feminine reaction to hyper-masculine action painting and phallus-as-brush imagery,<sup>13</sup> and it "has been praised by numerous feminist art historians in the decades since for radically subverting traditional, patriarchal roles" - because - "it challenges the longstanding notion of women as passive objects when it comes to art" (Watlington 2021). Similarly, in her "Interior Scroll", Carolee Schneemann pulled a paper scroll from her vagina while reading a text reflecting on female body and its role in society and art (Horne 2020: 995). In the proto-feminist action of Shigeko Kubota, the artist affirmed the feminine identity through a performative practice that highlights the vagina as a symbol of birth, life, and fertility. In the same vein, Schneemann's performance is a powerful act that challenges the sexualization and objectification of the female body, while exploring the connection between the body and its narrative, proposing an unconventional form of "writing". It is a way to "destabilize the structures of conventional art history and criticism" (Jones 1998: 5).

On the other hand, Sun Ping's "sexual calligraphy" envisions real objectification of the female body that is an immobile and helpless instrument of pleasure, or a mark of masculine power. He does not want to "re-write" (Rich 1979) reality through the feminist discourse as in Kubota and Schneemann narratives. He wants only to represent reality through the artistic lens and shake consciences on the (subordinate) female role in Chinese art and society. The inspiration for his vagina calligraphies derives in fact from real life. As he declared (You 2016), he took inspiration from nightclub performances where "women held felt-tip pens in their vaginas to write messages for guests". These real performances reflect the image of women as sexual objects subjected to masculine desires.

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it's where we all come from": <https://www.artforum.com/news/sun-ping-expelled-from-government-led-china-artists-association-for-vagina-calligraphy-performance-60637>.

<sup>12</sup> The process of "reification" of woman is also represented by Sun Ping's practice to use sometimes brush pens made with female pubic hair. "Part" of a woman is used to create an instrument used by a man, that evokes phallus image and is the symbol of Chinese traditional patriarchy society. In his Instagram account (<https://www.instagram.com/sunpingart/>), Sun Ping used the hashtag "equality" to describe his vagina performances in an ironic and provocative way to underline the gender in-equality of contemporary Chinese society embedded in his performances.

<sup>13</sup> For this interpretation, see the page dedicated to Shigeko Kubota in the MoMa Website: <https://www.moma.org/artists/3277>.

### 3. Zhang Qiang – From “Blinded Calligraphy” to Gender Equality

Born in Feicheng (Shandong province) in 1962, Zhang Qiang is a leading figure in contemporary Chinese calligraphy as the initiator of “Traceology” (*Zongji xue* 踪迹学),<sup>14</sup> a method that involves active collaboration with a female counterpart during calligraphic performances. This method assumes that the calligraphic stroke represents the “trace of the spirit” (Barrass 2002: 258), the artist’s inner reality, his psychic and emotional state. For Zhang Qiang, the entire history of Chinese culture can be viewed as a “series of traces” (Zhang 2017b: 15–16). He believes that he can physically access the trace by altering the writing process itself to produce unpredictable “signs” (Jie 2020: 146). This process requires the involvement of a female counterpart, as the interaction between male and female generated the *yin-yang* dynamic, which underlies the origin of the Universe.<sup>15</sup>

Zhang Qiang began to develop the concept of “traceology” in the early nineties prompted by a systematic reflection on the inadequacy of existing methods in contemporary Chinese calligraphy and by a growing concern over its potential artistic impoverishment in the face of competition from Western Abstract Expressionism.<sup>16</sup> Deeply influenced by the work of contemporary Chinese calligrapher Qiu Zhenzhong 邱振中 (b. 1947)<sup>17</sup> and by the methods of “visual poetry”, in 1990-1 Zhang Qiang initiated his first “traceological” experiments with a female partner (Zhang 2021). However, it was only in 1993 (after his divorce) that his method began to take shape through a structured and deliberate practice (Barrass 2002: 258) known as “blinded calligraphy” (*mang shu* 盲书). From 1993 to 1995, Zhang Qiang continued refining this method, culminating in 1996 with the launch of a project titled “Traceology Report” (*Zongji xue baogao* 踪迹学报告).<sup>18</sup> This report is divided into two parts: “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/B Model” (*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/B moxing* 张强踪迹学报告 A/B 模型, 1990-2000) and “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/C Model” (*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/C moxing* 张强踪迹学报告 A/C 模型, 2002-2018).

In “A/B Model”, Zhang collaborated with one hundred women across one hundred performances, creating eight artworks per session, resulting in a total of eight hundred works.<sup>19</sup> Women involved had different nationalities, occupations, physical characteristics (height, weight, blood type, etc.), and personal backgrounds. During each performance, the female counterpart selected the brush type, the size of the paper and the dilution of the ink. She also controlled the movement of the support while Zhang, either standing at her side or facing away in *mang shu* position, inscribed spontaneous sentences that came to his mind. These sentences often consisted of everyday thoughts or spontaneous phrases and occasionally included lines from classical Chinese poetry or Zhang’s own compositions in classical style. The female counterpart also determined the duration of the performance.

<sup>14</sup> For a complete and exhaustive discussion of Zhang Qiang’s “traceology”, see: Zhang 2006.

<sup>15</sup> The concept of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳, derived from Taoist philosophy, represents two opposing yet complementary forces that constantly interact in the Universe. *Yin* is associated with the feminine, darkness, cold, and passivity, while *yang* is linked to the masculine, light, heat, and activity. These forces are not static, but in continuous transformation, with each containing a part of the other, as depicted in the *Taijitu* 太极图 diagram. The balance between *yin* and *yang* is essential for cosmic harmony, and this concept is relevant to numerous aspects of Chinese culture.

<sup>16</sup> He wrote two books *A Comprehensive Review of Modern Calligraphy* (1993) and *Broken Cubes in Games – Postmodernism and Contemporary Calligraphy* (1996) to explain his theory.

<sup>17</sup> Qiu Zhenzhong is the author of *The First Four Series* (1988-1989), a revolutionary series in which he uses calligraphic lines inspired by Chinese characters that currently lack a linguistic significance (Qiu 1989).

<sup>18</sup> For more information about the Traceology report, see: Zhang Qiang 2010.

<sup>19</sup> For the detailed description of each performance, see: Zhang Qiang 2021.

The outcomes are abstract ink works on paper or plaster geometric solids, documenting the “traces” produced by this dual-artistic “pas de deux” (Zhang 2021: 13).<sup>20</sup> One of the most representative examples from this first period is the four-hour performance entitled “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/B 50 (Sophia) Model – performance/installation: plaster’s geometric solids” [*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/B 50 (Suofeiya) moxing – xingwei/ zhuangzhi: shigao jiheti* 张强踪迹学报告 A/B 50 (索非亚) 模型 – 行为/ 装置: 石膏几何体] realized in 1998 at the Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art in collaboration with the British Sophia Huist (fig. 2). Accompanied by recorded traditional Chinese *guqin* music, Zhang and Huist created works on both paper and plaster geometric solids, which were later assembled into an art installation (fig. 3) (Barrass 2002: 256–259).<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2.** Zhang Qiang, *Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/B 50 (Sophia) Model – performance/installation: plaster’s geometric shapes* [*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/B 50 (Suofeiya) moxing – xingwei/ zhuangzhi: shigao jiheti* 张强踪迹学报告 A/B 50 (索非亚) 模型 – 行为/ 装置: 石膏几何体], performance, Beijing Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998; **figure 3.** Zhang Qiang, *Plaster geometry installation*, 1998. Courtesy of the artist

In “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/B Model”, although the female counterpart participates in the artistic action, her role remains largely marginal. As the artist himself affirms, the entire planning and the execution methodology of the performance is conceived and controlled by him (Zhang 2021: 13). He is the principal executor of the action: he directs the performance, “holds the brush” and leads the process, while the woman assumes an ancillary role. Her involvement is secondary, influencing the final product only indirectly, without leaving a discernible trace of her own. Even her physical positioning underscores this imbalance as she stands behind the male artist, who often turns his back on her during the performance.

Although the “traceology” method originated from Zhang’s desire for “reconciliation” with the female figure following his divorce, it does not promote an egalitarian vision of gender roles. The distribution of roles within the performance is asymmetrical, reinforcing male dominance through the woman’s subordination. The use of numerous female

<sup>20</sup> Although the performances of the “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/B Model” always follow a fixed scenario, there are some variables that operate at times: 1) after B 30, the introduction of questions and answers dialogue; 2) from B 21, the involvement of women from ethnic minorities; 3) from B 24, the involvement of foreign women; 4) from B 50, the use of geometric solids made of plaster as calligraphic support; 5) from B 55, the use of swimsuit and women bodies as calligraphic support; 6) the calligraphy of the performance B 94 realized on clothes made of rice paper (Zhang 2017b: 13).

<sup>21</sup> The use of “traceology” artworks to create art installations is not rare in Zhang Qiang’s work and has been replicated in the “Biface Graphy” experiment (2009-ongoing). Some of these installations are also outdoor and/or placed outside China, such as in Paris (2007) and in front of the Pyramids of Giza (2008). One of the latest examples was installed in front of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London (2018), following a performance with the female artist Zhang Kaini.

collaborators - contrasted with the consistent central presence of only one male artist - suggests a perception of women as interchangeable, thereby diminishing their individual subjectivity.

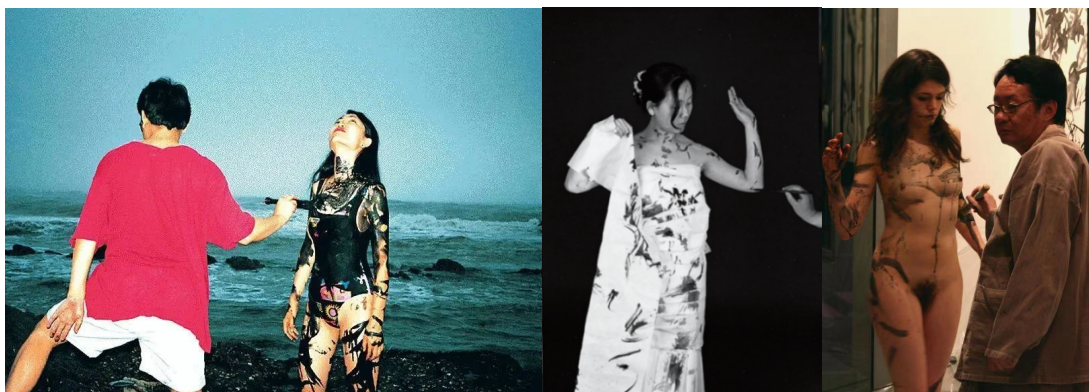
The marginality of the female role persists in “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/C Model” where the artist’s brush acts directly on the woman’s body, clothed or nude. As in Sun Ping’s early experiments, the woman’s body becomes the support of the calligraphic work - the “object” upon which the male action is inscribed. However, unlike Sun Ping’s often immobilized models, Zhang’s female counterparts remain dynamic - “bodies in motion” that engage in collaborative performances with the male artist in what he calls “Action Writing” (*xingwei shuxie* 行为书写) (Zhang 2017a: 26). While the women may choose the design and material of the garments they wear, their agency in the creative process remains limited. Their role, while more engaged than in the “A/B Model”, remains subordinate.

The woman’s body is reified as a surface and is, at times, stripped and sexualized. As Zhang himself declared (Zhang 2017b: 112), this practice closely parallels the work “Anthropometries” (1960) by the Western artist Yves Klein (1928-1962). In these series, Klein “ordered several naked women to cover themselves in YKB (Yves Klein Blue) colored paint and to stain the canvases with their paint-smear bodies” (Jones 1998: 88). Klein’s approach challenged traditional notions of artistic authorship and representation, where “the human body becomes Yves Klein’s brush to show the trace” (*ibid.*). Similarly, most of Zhang Qiang’s female collaborators are models rather than fellow artists, echoing the traditional art-historical role of the passive female muse.

The earliest examples of traceology involving the female body date back to “A/B Model”. In August 1998, on a beach in Qingdao, Zhang painted directly on the swimsuits and bodies of Chinese models using his traceological technique (“A/B 55 Model”) (fig. 4). In 2000, he wrote on garments made of rice paper created by Beijing fashion designer Zhao Jingyu and worn by models during a performance (“A/B 94 Model”) (fig. 5) (Barrass 2002: 262-263). In this latter case, the role of the woman in the creative process was partially re-evaluated: for the first time, a woman - in her capacity as a designer - conceived an element of the artwork (the garments) autonomously, without direct male input. Nevertheless, what she designed still served primarily as a support for the male artist’s calligraphic intervention.

Zhang continued similar practices in China and abroad within the framework of the “A/C Model”. His first international experiment took place on February 1, 2002, at the British Museum in London, where he inscribed calligraphy onto Chinese silk dresses worn by English models (“A/C 2” and “A/C 3 Model”) (Zhang 2021). In the performance “A/C 32 Model” (2007) held in Paris (fig. 6), Zhang extended this method to full-body painting, applying his brushstrokes directly to a nude model’s body, completely covering it with ink traces.





**Figure 4.** Zhang Qiang 张强, *Celestial Body/Zhang Qiang's Traceology Report A/B 55 (Li Ensuo) Model: One Beach Sensation* [Tianti/Zhangqiang zongji xue baogao A/B 55 (Li Ensuo) moxing: haitan ganjue zhi yi 天体 / 张强踪迹学报告 A/B 55 (李恩素) 模型: 海滩感觉之一], 1998; **figure 5.** Zhang Qiang 张强, *Zhang Qiang's Traceology Report A/B94 (Cao Rui) Model* [Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/B 94 (Cao Rui) moxing 张强踪迹学报告 A/B 94 (曹蕊) 模型], 2000; **figure 6.** Zhang Qiang 张强, *Zhang Qiang's Traceology A/C 32 Model Art Exhibition - Ink Action in Paris (Zhang Qiang zongji A/C 32 moxing yishu zhan - Bali xing mo 张强踪迹 A/C 32 模型艺术展 - 巴黎行墨)*, 2007. Courtesy of the artist.

In the “traceology” experience, the position of women appears to improve in “Zhang Qiang’s Traceology Report A/X Model” (*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/X moxing 张强踪迹学报告 A/X 模型*, 2013– 2018), a subcategory of the broader “A/C Model”. The “A/X Model” comprises approximately thirteen “free performances” (*ziyou xingwei 自由行为*) (Zhang 2017a: 173) which place significant emphasis on the concepts and initiatives of the female counterpart. In these performances, the woman is free to interact with the male artist and can even take full control of the scene. One of the most representative examples is “Zhang Qiang Traceology Report A/X 7 (Zhang Kaini) Model” [*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/X7 (Zhang Kaini) moxing 张强踪迹学报告 A/X 7 (张凯妮) 模型*, 2016]. The female counterpart actively expresses her thoughts throughout the performative process, writing autonomously on her body, face, or on paper, and freely choosing her movements and the materials with which she interacts. The result is a truly collaborative execution in which the male figure is, at times, relegated to the role of spectator (figs. 7-8). In this instance, calligraphy becomes a tool for negotiating a more balanced dynamic of “gender equality,” although - unlike in previous models - it is the female figure who takes the lead.



**Figures 7-8.** Zhang Qiang 张强 and Zhang Kaini 张凯妮, *Zhang Qian's Traceology Report A/X 7 (Zhang Kaini)* [*Zhang Qiang zongji xue baogao A/X7 (Zhang Kaini) moxing 张强踪迹学报告A/X 7 (张凯妮) 模型*], 2016. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2008, partly in response to critiques regarding the “gender inequality” in his art (Barrass 2002: 259), Zhang Qiang began collaborating with the Belgian female artist Lia Wei (in Chinese Wei Liya 魏离雅, b. 1986), adopting a new perspective that fostered true two-way synergy in the conception, execution, and spatial presentation of their works. This collaboration gave rise to the “Biface Graphy Project” (*Shuangmian shufa* 双面书法, 2009 – ongoing),<sup>22</sup> a calligraphic experiment involving large vertical panels jointly written by both artists (figs. 9-10). Each work requires the simultaneous and coordinated action of both Zhang Qiang and Lia Wei, who participate equally in the performative process through a principle of “inverted perception” - the core idea behind the term *shuangmian* 双面 “biface” - in which traditional gender roles are consciously counterbalanced. The writing, executed with traditional calligraphy brushes and ink, is not meant to be legible; rather, it emerges from the interaction between the two brushstrokes, each artist aware of and responding to the other’s movements (Zhang and Wei 2018: 5-7). This “two-sided calligraphy” creates an egalitarian artistic process in which male and female contributions hold equal weight. The first character in the project’s title, *shuang* 双, meaning “pair” or “double”, symbolically reflects this balance, being composed of two symmetrical elements that work together to form a unified whole character.<sup>23</sup> Zhang and Wei performances also extend to outdoor spaces: the interaction between the artists’ gestures and the surrounding space creates a performative harmony with nature. The complementary dynamic of *yin* and *yang* seeks to reconcile the rift between human and world through motion and ink traces.



**Figure 9.** Zhang Qiang 张强 and Lia Wei 魏离雅, *Zhang Qiang, “Biface Graphy – Ink Action in Venice”* (*Shuangmian shufa – Weinisi xing mo* 双面书法 – 威尼斯行墨), Magazzino del Sale, Venice, 2018; **figure 10.** The long scroll realized by Lia Wei and Zhang Qiang hung in the center of the room. Courtesy of the artists

<sup>22</sup> The English translation of the name of the project (“Biface Graphy”) is the official translation by the two artists (Zhang and Wei 2012: 2-3).

<sup>23</sup> A second step taken by the collaborative duo was to spatialize the resulting scrolls in their full scale. Through a series of installations called “Open Scroll”, the “Biface Graphy” stepped out from the enclosed universe of the literati’s studio to invade man-made architectures and open-air landscapes. Hundred meters of soft silken scrolls were displayed outdoors, far from the two-dimensional surface of traditional calligraphy. These open-scrolls have been showed in many open-air locations, such as: in 2010 at the Xijiang Qianhu Miao Village, in 2011 at the Bishan Confucian Temple in Chongqing, in 2011 at the Xijiang village (Guizhou province), in 2012 at the Venice Arsenale in occasion of the “6th Laguna Art Exhibition”, in 2012 at the Taihang Mountains in Linzhou (Henan province) in occasion of the “Second Linzhou Ink and Wash Biennale”, and in 2013 at the Great Wall at Jinshangling (Hebei province).



In 2020-2021 with “Free Cloud Calligraphy” (*Yun zizai shu* 云自在书), Zhang Qiang revisited the *mang shu* technique from his early experiments of the 1990s, while also incorporating the element of air as a vehicle of artistic interaction. The project was developed with the artist Ding Feifei 丁斐斐 (b. 1992). Using *mang shu* method, Zhang holds an ink-soaked brush aloft while Ding moves a sheet of paper or silk above his head, evoking the movement of clouds in the sky (figs. 11-12).<sup>24</sup> Ding emphasizes that the project was co-conceived and co-executed, with all materials and techniques chosen by her.<sup>25</sup> However, “Free Cloud Calligraphy” may represent a partial step backward in terms of gender dynamics when compared to “Biface Graphy”: it is still the male artist who “holds the brush”, initiates the action, and leaves visible ink traces, while the female counterpart responds to his movement rather than directing it.



**Figure 11.** Zhang Qiang 张强 and Ding Feifei 丁斐斐, *Free Cloud Calligraphy* (*Yun zizai shu* 云自在书), performance in an open space, 2020; **figure 12.** Zhang Qiang 张强 and Ding Feifei 丁斐斐, *Free Cloud Calligraphy* (*Yun zizai shu* 云自在书) performance in Zhang Qiang’s Studio, 2020. Courtesy of the artists

These later works by Zhang Qiang reveal a concrete attempt to move beyond the hierarchical dynamic of male artist/female model that characterized his earlier “A/B” and “A/C” performances, opening instead to more collaborative and balanced approaches to the construction of the performative act.

However, these practices do not necessarily mark a definitive departure from patriarchal frameworks. While “Biface Graphy” demonstrates a genuinely shared masculine/feminine collaboration, “Free Cloud Calligraphy” seems to reassert the primacy of the male calligraphic gesture, despite its explicitly collaborative premise. These ambivalences suggest that Zhang Qiang’s artistic evolution does not follow a linear

<sup>24</sup> The performances have a duration that varies from 10 minutes to half an hour (excluding the preparatory work). They can be executed in open spaces or inside a studio. The indoor performances are usually accompanied by relaxing background music. The music consists of various tracks collected in NetEase Cloud Music (*Wangyi yun yinyue* 网易云音乐), a free music streaming service popular in China. Different types of paper or silk are used, e.g., goose skin paper (*yanpi zhi* 雁皮纸), alum silk (*fan juan* 矾绢), *geng* silk (*geng zhuan* 耿绢) or artificial Japanese silk (*Riben rengong juan* 日本人工绢). Different types of brush are also used, e.g., *zha bi* 楂笔, *dou bi* 斗笔, *baiyun bi* 白云笔, *yi wen bi* 衣纹笔, *ye jin bi* 叶筋笔 and *xie jing bi* 写经笔. Different types of ink are used, e.g., *jiao mo* 焦墨, *ku mo* 枯墨, *se mo* 涩墨, *su mo* 宿墨, *zhong mo* 重墨, *zhong mo* 中墨, *dan mo* 淡墨. The movements of the female counterpart Ding Feifei may also be different: throwing (*pao* 抛), tossing (*shuai* 甩), pulling (*che* 扯), shaking (*doudong* 抖动), etc.. The artworks realized may vary depending on the humidity present in the places of execution and the climatic weather (rainy, sunny or cloudy). From these performances a total of 100 works on paper or silk were created. For more details, see: <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/xLR2FGgK1VCKnHOHpNE-RA>.

<sup>25</sup> This is what the artist Ding Feifei herself stated (WeChat interview by M. Merenda, February 2023).

trajectory but is rather shaped by ongoing tensions that complicate any simplistic binary between dominance and equality.

From the analysis of the performances by male artists Sun Ping and Zhang Qiang, two key feminist theories emerge that effectively describe the strong patriarchal underpinnings of their artistic practices:

- 1) Anne Anlin Cheng's notion of "ornamentalism" which explores the representation of the Asian female body. This term highlights how Asian women, particularly Chinese women, have historically been portrayed as decorative objects and symbols of exoticism and sexuality in Western contexts (Cheng 2018; 2019).
- 2) Qing Dynasty anarcho-feminist He Yin Zhen's 何殷震 (c. 1884 – c. 1920) gendering category of *nannü* 男女 ("man/woman" or "male/female") which examines the systemic subordination of women in Chinese society, rooted in a Taoist/neo-Confucian patriarchal structure (Liu *et al.* 2013). While Taoist thought posits a complementary *yin-yang* relationship, *nannü* exposes a paradox: although women are considered complementary to men, they exist within a patriarchal order that subjugates them. This contradiction is also evident in artistic practices, where artists grapple with gendered and cultural identities. The *nannü* framework thus serves as a valuable tool for analysing works tied to Chinese historical and cultural contexts (Guest 2023: 7).

These two theoretical lenses are particularly relevant to Sun Ping's performances, where the female figure is clearly portrayed as a symbol of objectified sexuality. In Zhang Qiang's case, "ornamentalism" applies specifically to the "A/C Report", where the female body is used as a calligraphic support, while the *nannü* concept can be applied to most of his works - except for the "A/X Report" and the "Biface Graphy" project, which mark attempts at more balanced gender dynamics.

#### **4. Echo Morgan (Xie Rong) – The Performative Female Body**

Echo Morgan is the English name of Xie Rong, a Chinese female artist born in Chengdu in 1983 and currently based in London. She studied art at the High School affiliated with the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in Chongqing before moving to the British capital at the age of 19. In London, Xie Rong earned a bachelor's degree in graphic design from Central Saint Martins, followed by a master's degree in fine art from the Royal College of Art. As she explained, her MA thesis, entitled "Female writing and the symbol of identity" marked the beginning of her career as a performance artist. Her work engages with stereotypes of "Chineseness" and femininity in order to question and deconstruct them (Mette 2021: 52-55). To explore this complex relationship, she reflects on notions of Chinese identity as national identity, her own identity as a (Chinese) woman, and more broadly on the role of women in both Chinese and contemporary societies. Her performances consistently incorporate her own body in motion and reference elements of traditional Chinese culture, such as early Chinese script and calligraphy, blue-and-white porcelain, knotting art, Chinese lanterns, and tea rituals.

The female body in China has historically been objectified - often as a symbol of forced modernity or as a site of desire and control. As Rey Chow highlights, Chinese women frequently find themselves negotiating their identities between traditional Chinese values and Western influences (Chow 1991). In line with Chow's insights, Echo Morgan's work can be seen as a continuous process of reclaiming the female body as a site of self-expression and resistance.

Drawing on Adrienne Rich's concept of "re-vision" (Rich 1979: 33–45), Morgan's engagement with writing and Chinese calligraphic and artistic tradition becomes a fundamental way to see herself as a woman and to define her identity. Her performances critique patriarchal structures by confronting traditional cultural symbols, not to perpetuate them, but to break their historical control over female identity.

One of her key strategies involves the deconstruction of Chinese characters, particularly those central to patriarchal ideology. She inscribes them on her face and/or body, breaks them down into their components, or juxtaposes them with characters of seemingly opposite meaning - thereby prompting reflection on the gendered underpinnings of Chinese language and culture. These actions question how language continues to name, define, and confine both female and male identities.

One of her most significant performance in this regard is "Woman 女 + Horse 马 = Mother 妈" (2022) (figs. 13-14), which reflects on the traditional and cultural role of women as mothers and, more broadly, of women within patriarchal society.



**Figures 13-14.** Echo Morgan (Xie Rong 谢蓉), *Woman 女 + Horse 马 = Mother 妈*, live performance, TJ Boulting Gallery, London, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

This performance took place in 2022 at the TJ Boulting of London during "Love, Celebration and the Road Ahead", a three-day festival (September 29 – October 1) marking the launch of Hettie Judah's book "How Not to Exclude Artist Mothers (and other parents)" which denounces the long-standing belief that artists cannot be both mothers and successful professionals (Hettie 2022). For this occasion, Echo Morgan painted her face white and inscribed on it the Chinese character "ma 妈" (mother). The character, written in blue/green ink,<sup>26</sup> matched the ink-soaked clothing she wore. The artist then wrapped her body with white lanterns bearing various inscriptions, combining Chinese characters with English words and phrases such as: *ziyou* 自由 (freedom), *hao* 好 (good), *popo* 婆婆 (grandmother), *shengming* 生命 (life), *tielian* 铁链 (iron chain), "Can be a good mum and a good artist?", "The Chinese word mum is combined woman 女 + horse 马", "Mothers are the best in the world if you have one you are precious", "Yellow face wife" and "Sea big ocean like mother care". At a certain moment in the performance, the space darkened and the lanterns illuminated with a yellow light, drawing attention to the inscriptions and inviting viewers

<sup>26</sup> One of the canonical "Five Colors" in Chinese tradition is *qing* 青, a polysemantic term that denotes not only blue and green, but also black and dark. This color is based on the "Five Element Theory" (*wu xing* 五行), a principle of Chinese traditional physics.

to reflect on the cultural stereotypes they conveyed. Through the decomposition and reconfiguration of the character *ma* 妈 (mother) on her face, Echo exposed the patriarchal legacy embedded in the Chinese language, where “mother” (*ma* 妈) is composed of the characters for “woman” (*nü* 女) and “horse” (*ma* 马), a pairing that has historically symbolized a form of dehumanization and subjugation (Guest 2018). The physical posture of the artist - standing upright with lanterns hanging from her body - visually contrasts with the original pictographic form of the character *nü* 女 (woman), often depicted as a kneeling figure with folded arms, symbolizing submission and domestic servitude in traditional Chinese culture. Echo’s upright, mobile body thus counters the static, submissive female body encoded in classical script, challenging its continued cultural influence and “breaking its hold” over contemporary female identity. The performance is marked by an ironic use of language, prompting viewers to critically engage with ingrained ideas about motherhood and gender roles. By incorporating English text, Echo extends the scope of the work beyond the Chinese context, emphasizing the global resonance of her critique. The Chinese characters on each lantern - and especially the character on her face - further underscore the inadequacy of language in encapsulating the totality of a person’s identity. The term “mother” cannot define a person in their entirety; it represents only one fragment of a much more complex human puzzle.

Other important performances that employ a similar practise include (among others):<sup>27</sup>

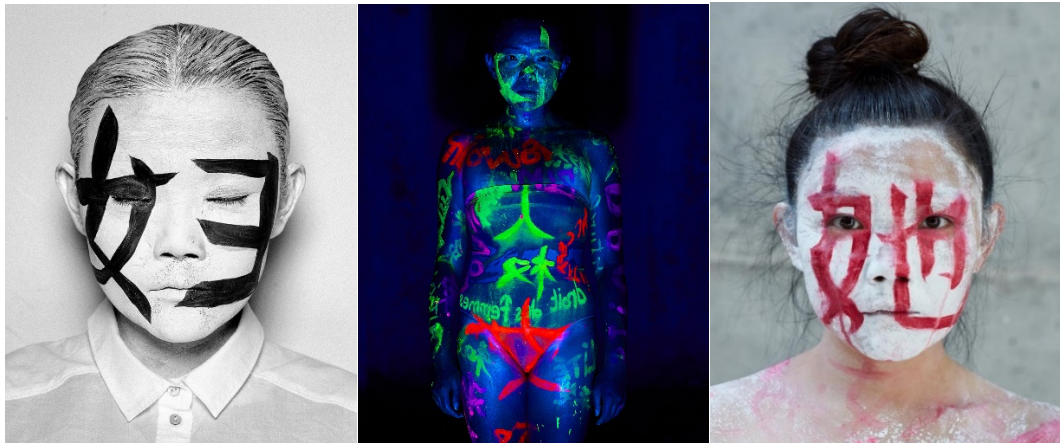
- 1) “妇 (Woman) = 女 (Female) + 扫 (Broom)” (2016) (fig. 15), in which Morgan denounces the traditional notion of women as the “angel of the hearth”, whose roles are limited to domestic labor and childcare;
- 2) “*Quan* 权 - Power, Rights Authority” (2022) (fig. 16) where she separates the components of the character *quan* 权, recounts its historical evolution, and interweaves it with contemporary protest slogans advocating for human, women’s, queer, and animal rights;<sup>28</sup>
- 3) “She/her (*Ta* 她)” (2022) (fig. 17) in which her body becomes a scroll of patriarchal text, covered in numerous Chinese characters derived from *nü* 女, revealing the persistent misogynistic frameworks that shape gendered discourse;<sup>29</sup>
- 4) “My M(OTHER) is Beautiful” (2023) where she once again reflects on the role of motherhood in a choral performance that also includes a male performer. Instead of Chinese script, she deconstructs the English word “mother” into individual Latin letters, expanding the conversation into a cross-cultural context.

<sup>27</sup> Echo Morgan hold similar performances also to send messages related to social denunciation and to reflect on nature and climate change: see, for example, “Absent” (*Quexi* 缺席, 2017); “You Have My Blood in You” (*Ni shenshang liu zhe wo de xue* 你身上留着我的血, 2017); “Delete” (*Shan* 删, 2017); “Demolition” (*Chai* 拆, 2018); “Sea” (*Hai* 海, 2019); “Human” (*Ren* 人, 2019); “Disaster” (*Zai* 灾, 2020); “Love Wild Lawn” (*Ai Ye Cao* 爱野草, 2021).

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed analysis of this performance, see: Merenda 2025: 153-155.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 147- 150.





**Figure 15.** Echo Morgan, 妇 (Woman) = 女 (Female) + 扫 (Broom), live performance, Skövde (Sweden), 2016; **figure 16.** Echo Morgan, 权 叔 Power, Rights Authority, live performance, Medoc (France), 2022; **figure 17.** Echo Morgan, She/her (Ta 她), live performance, Linz (Austria), 2022. Courtesy of the artist

For Echo Morgan, her female body becomes the means through which she retraces her personal history, the troubles of her life: using her body, her hair and even her breast milk.<sup>30</sup> Juxtaposing English narration with Chinese traditional writings, she narrates her difficult childhood,<sup>31</sup> the story of her family, the failure of her first marriage, and the destabilizing experience of motherhood all feed into her ongoing search for identity. Her body becomes a canvas on which she writes a woman's story of suffering, underscored by strength and courage, while also revealing vulnerability. As she stated:

I do really respect the power and strength of women, but I think in my work you see a lot of fragility. And that is how I feel, as a daughter, as a wife, as a mother. (Mette 2021: 54)

Her artistic practice contrasts with that traditional paradox emerging from Chinese figurative painting, which highlights “a visible female image but an invisible female body/identity” (Cui 2015: 18). Through personal storytelling and the exploration of individual memory and intimate experience, Echo Morgan reflects on the complexity of the female role in both Chinese and contemporary society at large. Using her “written” body, she navigates the space between gesture and stillness, past and present, abstract mark-making and meaningful writing, public exposure and private intimacy.<sup>32</sup>

### 5. Wu Xixia - Chinese Calligraphy in the Female Womb

Wu Xixia was born in mainland China in 1993 and later immigrated to Macau. She is an installation artist, performer, and designer as well as co-founder of the Macau Kun Studio

<sup>30</sup> Echo Morgan uses breast milk in the performance “Mother” (Mu 母) which took place in Gothenburg (Sweden) in 2016. With the word “mother” (mu 母) written on her face, she carried black balloons filled with the same amount of milk as her two sons weighed at birth. In her hands were five-litre bottles of breast milk she had pumped since arriving in Sweden. It had been three months since she gave birth, and this was the first time she was away from her children — the guilt was overwhelming.

<sup>31</sup> The artist's past was marked by troubled events concerning her family. See more details in her autobiography at: <https://www.echomorgan.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Echos-Autobiography-1.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Echo Morgan's artistic concepts are fully explained on her official website: <https://www.echomorgan.com/#/about/>.

and the Kunying Art & Culture (Zhuhai Hengqin) Company.<sup>33</sup> In 2018 she earned a master's degree in art history and theory from the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (USA) with a thesis entitled "The Non-maleness in the Symbolic Order: Phallocentrism and the Castrated Third Sex". Since 2018, Wu Xixia has been active in the art world, beginning her artistic research into feminism and gender issues with her first series entitled "Plastic Women Series" (*Su nü xilie* 塑女系列). This photographic series portrays women wrapped in cellophane - symbolizing the oppressive male gaze - and surrounded by women personal items such as shoes and handbags, representing a materialistic society that objectifies female body.

Starting from this work, Wu Xixia began experimenting with performance art, using her own body as a tool to attract and redirect the external gaze - from the "male gaze" to what she terms the "common gaze" (Wu 2022: 33). Her body becomes the medium through which she speaks - sometimes through acts of self-harm - about her own experiences and the broader condition of women. In this context, Chinese calligraphy emerges as a crucial element of her performances, functioning as a symbol of patriarchal tradition, now subverted by a woman's hand. Her decision to incorporate calligraphy stems from her personal background: she began studying calligraphy at the age of five, under the guidance of her grandfather.<sup>34</sup> As she explains, calligraphy carries deep identity and cultural value; its rules are established by ancestors, tradition, and authority. For Wu, calligraphy represents the patriarchal values embedded in traditional culture - transmitted over thousands of years through ethics, morality, and custom, and perpetuated today through mass media.<sup>35</sup>

One of her earliest calligraphic performances is "Writing the Orchid Pavilion Preface One Time" (*Shuxie Lanting xu yibian* 书写兰亭序一遍)<sup>36</sup> held at the "Casa Garden"<sup>37</sup> of Macau in 2021 (figs. 18-19).

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<sup>33</sup> The Macau Kun Studio was founded in Boston in 2016 and provided professional photography services. The Kunying Art & Culture Company is an organization that deals with art curating. See the official web page, URL <https://www.facebook.com/thekunstudio>.

<sup>34</sup> His first calligraphy teacher was the director of a Chinese painting school in China, and later his grandfather. As a child, Wu Xixia was reluctant to learn calligraphy and painting, as traditional arts require patience and perseverance (e-mail interview with Wu Xixia by M. Merenda, May 2023).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> The title refers to the work "Writing the 'Orchid Pavilion Preface' One Thousand Times" (*Chongfu shuxie yi qian bian 'Lanting xu'* 重复书写一千遍'兰亭序', 1990-1995) created by the artist Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969) in which the artist copies the text 100 times until he reaches a completely black sheet to denounce the senselessness of the teaching method of Chinese calligraphy based on the reiteration of the already existing and claiming greater individual and creative freedom.

<sup>37</sup> "Casa Grande" is the base building of the "Orient Foundation". The historical landmark building was acquired from the Portuguese administration in the late 1980s. The delegation comprises two galleries for temporary exhibitions and an auditorium for conferences, music, cinema, and theatre shows.





**Figures 18-19.** Wu Xixia 吴析夏, *Writing the Orchid Pavilion One Time (Shuxie Lanting xu yibian 书写兰亭序一遍)*, performance and installation, 2021. Courtesy of the artist

In this performance, the artist enters an airtight inflatable sphere - symbolizing the uterus - and begins to write the “Orchid Pavilion Preface” on the inner surface of the plastic structure. While transcribing the text that for Wu Xixia is “the first running script in the world” (*tianxia di yi xing shu 天下第一行书*), she makes a radical change: the twenty-one occurrences of the character *zhi* 之 - long celebrated and emulated by generations of Chinese calligraphers - are replaced with red-ink phalluses. As calligraphers throughout Chinese history have been overwhelmingly male, Wu sees the character *zhi* as a symbol par excellence of patriarchal order and “authority” (*quanwei 权威*). Traditional calligraphic education is rooted in systems that are predominantly male-centered. Influential figures such as Wang Xizhi, Wang Xianzhi 王献之 (344–386), and Yan Zhenqing (709–724) have shaped the discipline, while female calligraphers remain rare exceptions. The “Orchid Pavilion Preface” has become a canonical text for students to copy in childhood, with the twenty-one variations of the character *zhi* representing the technical and aesthetic mastery of Wang Xizhi. This repeated practice led Wu Xixia to question why these specific forms were so revered, and more broadly, why the entire field of calligraphy remains so male-dominated.<sup>38</sup> Her critical engagement is informed by feminist art history, which has long addressed the exclusion of women from institutional recognition. In this context, the phallic imagery in her performance transcends mere biological representation, standing instead for broader structures of power, wealth, and status in a patriarchal society.

The artist’s nightgown and the fake bruises covering her body allude to the domestic violence historically inflicted on women. The theme of female suffering, as well as the gradual erosion of women’s freedom and self-awareness, is further embodied in the physical act of writing inside the sealed sphere: as the performance progresses, oxygen is depleted and replaced by carbon dioxide, making it increasingly difficult for the artist to breathe. Just before the point of suffocation, she attempts to cut her way out of the sphere or calls for help, enacting a symbolic “rebirth” - a release from the condition of female castration imposed by patriarchal society, embodied by the canonical calligraphic text and the red phalluses. Wu Xixia describes this type of work as “a self-redemption with the aim of

<sup>38</sup> E-mail interview with Wu Xixia by M. Merenda, May 2023.

suffocating” (*yi chang yi zhixi wei mudi de zi wo jiushu* 一场以窒息为目的的自我救赎) (Wu 2022).<sup>39</sup>

A similar performance titled “Writing the Orchid Pavillon for the Second Time” (*Shuxie Lanting xu di er bian* 书写兰亭序第二遍) took place in Wuzhen on November 27, 2022 (figs. 20-21). Apart from the “aquatic” setting, which resembles an ovum encountering seminal fluid, there are four main differences compared to the the previous year’s performance:

- 1) The use of two writing systems. The four-character idiom *zhihuzheye* 之乎者也<sup>40</sup> is not written in standard Chinese characters but in “women’s script” (*nüshu* 女书), a “secret” female writing system derived from Chinese characters used exclusively among women in Jiangyong County in Hunan province of southern China (Zhao and Falcini 2021). By employing this script and rendering the characters in large size, Wu Xixia opposes traditional patriarchal culture with an alternative culture developed by women, giving it greater visibility and significance, and emphasizing that it can stand alongside male-dominated culture.
- 2) The absence of phallic imagery. Wu Xixia replaces the character *ye* 也 with a depiction of the female vagina. In oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions, the original form of *ye* resembled a part of the female body akin to a vagina.<sup>41</sup> Similar to the use of *nüshu*, this replacement symbolizes a female re-appropriation of a traditionally masculine symbol, echoing Adrienne Rich’s concept of “re-vision” (Rich 1979).
- 3) The presence of a long, snake-shaped inflatable strip floating on the water around the sphere, resembling an umbilical cord detached from the maternal womb. On this transparent strip, the artist wrote comments received after the “One Time” performance, including phrases like “calligraphy bitch” (*shufa biao* 书法婊), “pajama bitch” (*shuyi biao* 睡衣婊), “insulting male genitalia” (*wuru nanxing shengzhiqi* 侮辱男性生殖器), “insulting calligraphy” (*wuru shufa* 侮辱书法), etc. Whether positive or negative, Wu chose to surround herself with these comments to provoke public debate on gender issues, creating an “open comment area”<sup>42</sup> while simultaneously isolating these remarks from her performative act to preserve her artistic integrity and freedom of expression.
- 4) The use of ink colour. In “One Time”, the Orchid Pavilion Preface was written in black ink, with the phallic symbols in red. In “Second Time”, the text is written in red, while the *nüshu* characters and the writings on the “umbilical cord” strip are painted in black. In “Second Time”, the red ink symbolizes the continuous flow of blood, reflecting a process of ongoing blood congestion connected to the act of writing. Meanwhile, the black ink used for *nüshu* refers to a secret, suppressed history

<sup>39</sup> When it was completed for the first time, the sphere had a zipper. In the follow-up creation, she cut the ball with a knife and then came out from the cut hole. Cutting often failed. In those cases, the staff rescued her (*ibid.*).

<sup>40</sup> “*Zhizhuzheye* 之乎者也” is a historical Chinese idiom. It originally refers to four classical function words frequently used in literary Chinese, symbolizing the fundamental skills a scholar was expected to master. Later, this idiom was used to ridicule literary scholars who only know how to “chew words” but cannot solve practical problems (*ibid.*).

<sup>41</sup> As Xu Shen 许慎 (c. 58 – c. 148), calligrapher of the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220), wrote in his “Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters” (*Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字) the character *ye* 也 really means “female vagina”, URL [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xu\\_Shen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Xu_Shen).

<sup>42</sup> E-mail interview with Wu Xixia by M. Merenda, May 2023.

- intentionally obscured or hidden - drawing attention to the marginalized and often silenced narratives of women.<sup>43</sup>

In this second performance, the hermetic sphere not only represents the maternal womb, a symbol of life, but also the uterus, where the woman's body fills with blood - whether menstrual or from childbirth. The sphere becomes a maternal and feminine space for the rebirth of female narration, both artist's personal story and that of all women.



**Figures 20-21.** Wu Xixia 吴析夏, *Writing the Orchid Pavillon for the Second Time (Shuxie Lanting xu di er bian 书写兰亭序第二遍)*, Wuzhen Theater Festival - Muxin Art Museum Water Terrace, 2022. Courtesy of the artist

Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia perfectly embody what Guest identifies as artists' intent to reinvent forms of ink and/or calligraphy by incorporating a feminist or counter-patriarchal subjectivity, following the concept of "Experimental Ink Painting" (*shiyan shuimohua* 实验水墨画) as defined by art historian and curator Wu Hung (Wu Hung in Guest 2022: 254). Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia use ink as the main tool for their performances, "examining how the performative constructions of Chinese identity intersect with private histories and complex feminist and "feminine" identities" (Guest 2023: 5). Perhaps influenced by relatively moderate traditional Chinese cultural values, the spirit conveyed in these works leans more toward "existing within an unequal social situation" rather than "highlighting inequalities and actively resisting" it, adopting a subjective attitude that emphasizes the self. Unlike resisting the "other", contemporary Chinese women's art increasingly focuses on exploring self-gender identity.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia pay close attention to the presentation of the body in theatrical, often viscerally shocking performances. Their performances, which incorporate elements of bodily confinement, suffocation, and public vulnerability, align with what can be defined as "Feminine Calligraphic Activism" (*nüxing shufa xingwei zhuyi* 女性书法行为主义) (Merenda 2025: 375) - an embodied art form that challenges historical invisibility through acts of symbolic and physical inscription.

Citing the performance "Cut Piece" (1964) by Yoko Ono (b. 1933), Halberstam reads her apparent passivity not as victimhood but as a radical, productive refusal that destabilizes binaries of active/passive and male/female. The performance, in which Ono invites the audience to cut her clothes, displaces agency onto the viewers while critiquing their sadistic desire and the racialized sexualization of her body (Halberstam 2011: 135-

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

145). Halberstam frames the exposed, fragmented body as a ritualization of trauma, transforming Ono's vulnerability into a powerful act of resistance. Through stillness and silence, Ono enacts unbeing and unbecoming, embodying a queer passivity that unsettles normative orders and shifts power onto the spectator, challenging traditional notions of gender and subjectivity. Similarly, Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia subvert the male gaze through their use of the body, demonstrating a conscious awareness of how the Asian female body has been historically objectified and commodified in art and popular culture. Inserting their female bodies into the discourses of performance art from which women had previously been marginalized, "they reclaim and re (gender) the narrative" (Guest 2023: 103).

## 6. Conclusions

Analysing the artistic practices of the two male artists Sun Ping and Zhang Qiang, who collaborate with female counterparts in calligraphic performances, what stands out is the contrast between Sun Ping's "subversive" calligraphic practice - where the woman's body is reduced to a mere performative object, reaffirming male supremacy over women- and Zhang Qiang's "traceology study", which initially confines the female counterpart to a marginal and ancillary role but later evolves into the "Biface Project" achieving an artistic balance between male and female.

In contrast, the female artists Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia reinterpret calligraphic practices in their performances by inserting their female bodies, histories, and subjectivity into a field historically dominated by men. They belong to the feminist current that emerged in the 1980s, which identified Chinese writing and calligraphy as the quintessential symbols of patriarchal culture (Guest 2022: 27 - 42) and seek to rewrite this male-centered art history by reinventing forms of calligraphy that incorporate feminist or counter-patriarchal subjectivities. Calligraphy performed on the body and in motion becomes a tool to break the walls of patriarchy and affirm feminine identity.

All these artists explore different ways of marking masculine and feminine identities through the body and calligraphy in their "gender performances". This analysis highlights a broader shift within contemporary Chinese art, where traditional cultural forms are actively re-examined and transformed through feminist perspectives. By challenging the patriarchal legacies embedded in calligraphy, artists like Echo Morgan and Wu Xixia not only contribute to redefining Chinese art but also resonate with global feminist art practices that seek to reclaim marginalized voices and bodies. At the same time, male artists such as Zhang Qiang through projects like the "Biface Project", demonstrate an evolution toward a male/female artistic balance, while others like Sun Ping who presents "subversive" calligraphic practices, reduce the female body to a mere performative object, reaffirming male supremacy in society.

The work of all these figures opens new possibilities for the future of contemporary art in China, promoting more inclusive, critical, and embodied approaches to cultural heritage and identity. Ultimately, this renewed vision of calligraphy - both feminist and engaging with evolving male perspectives - signals a dynamic intersection of tradition and innovation that could inspire broader global dialogues on gender, art, and cultural transformation.



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