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Pregnancy as an Agent to Neutralize Painting as a Gender-Biased Concept in Contemporary China — The Works of Yu Hong, Ji Jingning and Xu Hualing

Tong Zhang[1]

[1] Institute of Art History, University of Münster, Münster, Germany

Correspondence: Tong Zhang, Institute of Art History, University of Münster, Münster, Germany.

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Abstract

This article offers a brief inquiry into pregnancy as a theme of contemporary art in the West and China. It subsequently tracks the entrenched frameworks of painting in China and the neglect of pregnancy as a theme in the Chinese art world from the historical perspective, in order to navigate pregnancy-themed paintings by three selected female artists: Yu Hong, Ji Jingning, and Xu Hualing. Through analyzing their paintings, it concludes that these pieces not only increase the visibility of women's self-perception during pregnancy but also aestheticize pregnancy as a subject within their respective artistic traditions.

Keywords: women's art, realism, ink-wash painting, fine brushwork, maternal imagery

1. Introduction

When viewing Susan Hiller's (1940–2019) *Ten Months* (1977–1979) from a distance, the audience might initially interpret this installation—comprising sequential photographs with captions—as pursuing the aesthetics of abstract minimalism or resembling lunar landscapes.[1] However, upon closer inspection and reading of the captions, the viewer can identify its subject—pregnancy and recognize that this installation is a visual representation of the pregnant belly in different chronological stages. Recognized as a feminist artwork, *Ten Months* unveils the artist's pregnancy and unfolds it as a theme of contemporary art imbued with aesthetic value. It challenges the phallocentric view of Art and aesthetics (i.e., the notion of art's autonomy), as well as the entrenched prejudice—prevalent in nearly every culture—that pregnancy and breastfeeding have traditionally been stigmatized or rendered invisible.[2] Since the early 1990s, the pregnant body has become a subject of sustained feminist engagement in art, literature, and cultural studies.[3] More recently, several exhibitions in the West have focused exclusively on human reproduction, including pregnancy,[4] highlighting both the increasing visibility of women's embodied reproductive experiences and their growing resistance to entrenched, phallocentric understandings of reproduction and gender-biased aesthetic frameworks. A landmark example is the exhibition *Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media*, held at the Foundling Museum in London in January 2020. This exhibition provided a historical survey of portraits of pregnant women spanning over 500 years and offered a predominantly British context in which to explore the evolving representations of women's

[1] Rosemary Betterton, (2006). Promising Monsters: Pregnant Bodies, Artistic Subjectivity, and Maternal Imagination. *Hypatia,* 21(1).

[2] Edward Lucie-Smith and Judy Chicago, (1999). *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications), 55.

[3] Rosemary Betterton, (2009). Maternal Bodies in Visual Culture. *Studies in the Maternal, 1*(1).

[4] Examples such as *Matrescence,* (2024, MassArt x SoWa Graduate Gallery, Boston), *Designing Motherhood* (2024-25, Houston Center for Contemporary Art), *Acts of Creation: on Art and Motherhood* (2024, Arnolfini, Bristol).

identity.[1]

Chinese female artists, following the influx of feminist thought into China after the *Fourth World Conference on Women* in Beijing in 1995, have also created artworks that challenge entrenched artistic conventions and their broader sociocultural networks. These challenges are often expressed through depictions of maternal or pregnant bodies using various new media—including photography, performance art, and installation—rather than traditional easel painting.[2] [3] Xing Danwen's (b. 1967) *Born with the Cultural Revolution* (1995) is an example of a photographic series that explores the conflict between women's embodied experience of pregnancy and the intervention of biopolitics, as defined in Foucauldian terms and shaped by Maoist revolutionary ideals.[4] In this series, the pregnant body is juxtaposed with portraits of Chairman Mao and other communist symbols (e.g., the five-starred red flag) from various angles, theatrically unfolding this ideological tension.[5] Due to its alignment with feminist art practices and its resonance with Western expectations of post-socialist Chinese imagery, the series has been exhibited in several overseas venues.[6] However, its subversive visual strategies likely make it unsuitable for domestic exhibitions in China, where nudity[7] and the critical appropriation of communist icons are prohibited. In contrast, a 2023 exhibition titled *Drawing for Mom* presented a collection of 97 paintings themed around motherhood. In this show, the model mother—embodying traditional virtues such as actively performing parental duties—was both articulated and promoted.[8] The exhibition was held at the Taicang Art Museum, a state-funded municipal institution, suggesting official endorsement of traditional motherhood and patriarchal family values (e.g., family harmony). The idealized images of mothers in this exhibition sharply contrast with Xing Danwen's "indecent" photographs of pregnant women, which defy both traditional and socialist stereotypes of femininity and womanhood. More broadly, activism related to motherhood and gender remains subject to censorship under the Chinese government.[9] [10]

Consequently, when viewers browse an exhibition catalogue or visit an art exhibition in China randomly, it is rare for them to encounter works centered on pregnancy or pregnant women. In the field of painting in particular, depictions of pregnancy are extremely scarce. Pregnancy, long understood as a biological process typically associated with cisgender women, is often regarded by male-dominated art institutions as irrelevant to the pursuit of so-called "universal" aesthetics.

Although some male artists have produced pregnancy-themed works, these often reflect entrenched stereotypes of women and conform to conventional artistic canons. For instance, Li Zijian (b. 1954) created a series of oil paintings depicting his wife's experience of motherhood, including scenes of pregnancy and childcare, which exemplify traditional gender norms. In this series, the wife is shown actively performing childcare duties with carefully styled makeup and clothing, appearing serene and content. *Pregnancy* (1987) from the series portrays a side profile of the pregnant wife seated. The soft color palette, long white skirt, introspective and elegant

[1] Foundling Museum, (n.d.). Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media, accessed June 29, 2025, https://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/event/portraying-pregnancy/.

[2] Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, (2020). *The Art of Women in Contemporary China: Both Sides Now* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 20-21.

[3] Specific Examples include Song Hong's *Fear of Birth* (1995), Feng Jiali's *Pregnancy Is Art* (1999) (Shuqin Cui, "The (In)visibility of the Female Body in an Art Traditionin *Gendered Bodies: Toward A Women's Visual Art in Contemporary China*, ed. Shuqin Cui (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015). and Cui Xiuwen's Angel series (2004-2008) (Karetzky, *The Art of Women in Contemporary China: Both Sides Now*, 65.).

[4] Karetzky, (n.d.). *The Art of Women in Contemporary China: Both Sides Now*, 20.

[5] Hong Wu, *Transcience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 48.

[6] In 1999, art historian and critic Wu Hong curated the exhibition *Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century* held in several museums in the USA, in which *Born with the Cultural Revolution* was included ("Transience: Chinese Experimental Art at the End of the Twentieth Century (Revised Edition), Asia Art Archive, accessed June 28, 2025, https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/library/transience-chinese-experimental-art-at-the-end-of-the-twentieth-century-revised-edition-89697.). Other exhibitions such as Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China held in various overseas venues. (Hong Wu, *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video from China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[7] Karetzky, *The Art of Women in Contemporary China: Both Sides Now*, 12.

[8] Zhangyu Deng, (2023). Exhibition Shows Portraits of Mothers, Center for International Cutural Communication, accessed July 1, 2025, https://www.heychinaculture.com/exhibition/1988.html.

[9] Julia Hartmann, (2021). Bold Characters Motherhood and Censorship in Chinese Art and Curating in *Radicalizing Care Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, ed. Elke Krasny et al. (London: Sternberg Press).

[10] Sara Liao, (2024). Unpopular Feminism: Popular Culture and Gender Politics in Digital China. *Communication and the Public*.

posture, and delicate facial expression together present an idealized woman embodying traditional virtues and feminine beauty. This painting was displayed in the *First Chinese Oil Painting Exhibition* (1987–1988) at the Shanghai Exhibition Hall, organized by the Chinese Artists Association, the official national art institution.[1] Its inclusion in such a high-profile exhibition demonstrates its conformity with state-sanctioned aesthetic standards.

With the surge of feminism in China, critics and artists influenced by feminist thought have begun to question the so-called "universal" aesthetic experience and its networked hierarchical norms, revealing their patriarchal and hegemonic underpinnings. These critics and artists have also worked to increase the visibility of women's everyday experiences and their understandings of art within the Chinese art world. Through the efforts of such forerunners—committed to promoting gender equality and challenging male-centered aesthetic traditions—painting has been increasingly exposed as a social and historical construct infused with phallocentric ideologies. In contemporary China, women's lives are shaped by the joint forces of Confucian patriarchy, masculine revolutionary culture, and a market-oriented neoliberal environment.[2] Among the various artistic media, painting is particularly entangled with these sociocultural forces, due to its enduring role in both traditional Chinese culture and socialist art institutions, as well as its high degree of institutionalization.[3]

In the existing literature on pregnancy and contemporary art in China, Shuqin Cui's *The Pregnant Nude and Photographic Representation* is a landmark study that exclusively examines pregnancy as a subject in contemporary Chinese art. By asserting that pregnancy is—or can be—an aesthetic phenomenon, Cui positions both pregnancy and maternal nudity as legitimate themes within the Chinese art world and as potential catalysts for transforming gender-biased sociocultural norms in broader Chinese society.[4] What distinguishes my study from Cui's work is its exclusive focus on painting. Inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality,[5] my study views each pregnancy-themed painting as a site where one of the dominant canons of painting in China intersects with the artist's lived, gendered experience and subjectivity.

2. Painting and Pregnancy as Two Social and Historical Constructs

To understand the patriarchal nature of painting and the scarcity of pregnancy as a theme in contemporary China, two terms hold central importance: Chinese painting and academic realism. The first refers to China's indigenous artistic tradition, characterized by ink-wash and brush techniques; the second refers to Western academic realism, which became institutionalized in China's art education system and cultural organizations following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. In imperial China, Chinese painting was predominantly produced by (male) literati or scholar-gentry who had passed the imperial examination and acquired high social status recognized by the imperial court.[6] This literati class dominated the creation, circulation, and discourse of Chinese painting, regarding it as a medium for spiritual cultivation (e.g., harmony with nature) and a means to assert cultural privilege.[7] Landscape painting was especially idealized for its transcendental aesthetic quality, exemplified through the atmospheric effects achieved by sophisticated ink-wash techniques. Another recurring theme was the "Four Gentlemen," referring four plants (e.g., plum blossom, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) used to eulogize the moral virtues associated with the literati.[8]

Conversely, women were largely excluded from learning and practicing Chinese painting, with rare exceptions such as courtesans or women from elite intellectual families.[9] Though seldom the creators of Chinese paintings, women frequently appeared as aestheticized subjects, often likened to flowers, birds, or plants—anonymous

[1] Li Zijian Art Museum, (n.d.). 世界上的一切光荣和骄傲，都来自母亲, [All the Glory and Pride in the World Come from Mothers], accessed July 2, 2025, http://www.lizijianmsg.com/post/53.html.

[2] Yun Zhou, (2025). How Gendered Lived Experiences Shape Sex Preference Attitudes in Contemporary urban China. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 87*(1).

[3] Academic realism and Chinese (ink-wash) painting are two types highly institutionalized in the official and semi-official art and cultural framework.

[4] Cui Shuqin, (2014). The Pregnant Nude and Photographic Representationin *New Modern Chinese Women and Gender Politics*, Routledge.

[5] Kimberle Crenshaw, (1991). Women of Color at the Center: Selections from the Third National Conference on Women of Color and the Law: Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6).

[6] Su Li, (2018). Scholar-Officialsin *The Constitution of Ancient China*, ed. Yongle Zhang and Daniel A. Bell (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

[7] Suzanne E Cahill, (2005). The Moon Stopping in the Void: Daoism and the Literati Ideal in Mirrors of the Tang Dynasty. *Cleveland Studies in the History of Art,* 9.

[8] Cui, "The (In)visibility of the Female Body in an Art Tradition."

[9] Ibid.

figures portrayed within rigid collective stereotypes, devoid of individual agency.[1] [2] In the Qing dynasty, the prevailing image of women emphasized submissiveness, introversion, fragility, and moral virtue—traits that catered to the aesthetic sensibilities and ethical expectations of male literati.[3] Female bodies in such works were typically clothed, conforming to the virtues prescribed by patriarchal norms. Within the canon of traditional Chinese painting, there is no known masterpiece that explicitly depicts pregnancy. Representations of pregnancy are found only in medical illustrations from imperial China, and even then, for practical rather than aesthetic purposes. These facts collectively suggest that Chinese painting has long operated as a hierarchical construct—both thematically and technically—reinforcing particular aesthetic ideals.

Following the demise of the Qing dynasty and the subsequent decline of the literati in the early 20th century, Chinese painting was revalorized as a symbol of national cultural essence by (male) cultural nationalist traditionalists. This effort aimed to bolster domestic cultural confidence and resist the intrusion of Western realism.[4] [5] On the one hand, the incorporation of cultural nationalism brought new vitality to Chinese painting; on the other hand, the reframing was still shaped by entrenched phallocentric views and led by male elites. During the Maoist period, Chinese painting was further remolded to serve the masculine ethos of socialist revolutionary culture,[6] [7] leaving little space for autonomous female voices in either the production or interpretation of Chinese painting.

Another way to track painting in China is through the institutionalization and Sinicization of Western academic realism, particularly in the form of realistic oil painting. In classical Western art, the pregnant woman is most commonly represented in depictions of the Virgin Mary, yet her pregnancy is often symbolically reduced—her gendered experience muted by the sacredness of religious iconography.[8] In this sense, even before realism was introduced to China, both the artistic style and the theme of pregnancy were already embedded within patriarchal frameworks. When academic realism was imported into China, it was initially regarded as a scientific method for achieving representational accuracy.[9] [10] This introduction, which took place in the first half of the 20th century, was also spearheaded by male artists such as Xu Beihong (1895-1953), who favored heroic and monumental subjects rendered in realist techniques. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, socialist realism became the exclusive, state-sanctioned genre and the primary institutional pathway for studying and producing realist art.[11] Within this system, realist techniques were subordinated to the goals of collective, masculine revolutionary culture, leaving little room for women's self-perceived experiences, which were marginalized to the point of near invisibility. During the Maoist period, the dominant female public figure became the so-called "iron girl," a masculinized role model,[12] while traditional roles such as housewife and caregiver were relegated to the domestic sphere, serving the interests of male peasants and reinforcing gendered labor divisions.[13]

Despite the entrenched doctrines in painting in China that render pregnancy a taboo subject, many Chinese female artists have attempted to present their pregnant bodies through various media outside of painting. To explore how women artists in China respond to the entrenched norms of painting, the patriarchal framing of

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[1] Mary H Fong, (1996). Images of Women in Traditional Chinese Painting. *Woman's Art Journal, 17*(1).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Cui, "The (In)visibility of the Female Body in an Art Tradition."

[4] Qi Zhu, (2019). *重审水墨现代性* [Review the Modernity of Ink Painting] (Hangzhou: Xiling Seal Engraving Society Publishing House), 31.

[5] Michael Sullivan, (2013). *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China* [20 世纪中国艺术与艺术家] (Shanghai Shanghai People's Publishing House), 60.

[6] Julia F Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, (2012). *The Art of Modern China* (Los Angeles & London: University of California Press), 161, 66.

[7] Lan Qi, (2015). 现代语境中的中国画-20 世纪中国画的观念重构 [Chinese Traditional Painting in Modern Context: Concept Reconstruction of Chinese Traditional Painting in the 20th Century] (PhD diss., Shanghai University), 103, 09.

[8] EL Putnam, (2018). Performing Pregnant: An Aesthetic Investigation of Pregnancyin *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*, ed. Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

[9] Julia Frances Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, eds., (1998). *A Century in Crisis: Modernity and Tradition in the Art of Twentieth-Century China* (New York: Guggenheim Museum), 148.

[10] Peng Lü, (2007). *20 世纪中国艺术史* [History of Chinese Art in the 20th Century] (Beijing: Beijing University Press), 212.

[11] Sullivan, (n.d.). *Art and Artists of Twentieth-century China*, 227.

[12] Daimei Yao, (2010). *自我画像：女性艺术在中国 (1920-2010)* [*Woman Art in China (1920-2010)*] (Guangzhou: Lingnan Press), 104.

[13] Xinlei Li, (2018). "抱娃的妇女"-中国近现代美术图像中的"新母亲"形象研究 ["Woman Holding a Baby"-A Study on the Image of "New Mother" in Modern Chinese Art Images]" (MA diss., Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts), 91-92.

pregnancy, and the influence of global feminist art—by deploying pregnancy as both a theme and an agent to neutralize painting as a gender-biased concept—this study selects three representative female artists: Yu Hong, Ji Jingning, and Xu Hualing. Each is commonly networked with a particular stream of painting. Yu is frequently labeled as a practitioner of academic realism or new realism in contemporary Chinese art; Ji Jingning is widely recognized for her work in Chinese painting, particularly ink-wash and urban ink-wash; and Xu Hualing, the youngest of the three, is known for her engagement with fine brushwork or new fine brushwork.

3. Yu Hong, Realism and New Realism

Yu Hong (b. 1966, Xi'an) is an artist initially known for her work in new realistic painting.[1] The adjective "new" signals a departure from the socialist realism and grand narratives that dominated the Maoist period (1949–1976), while "realistic" refers to Yu's academic training in realism at the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA)[2] and her mastery of realist techniques.[3] As a female artist, she participated in several domestic exhibitions[4] in the 1990s that focused exclusively on women's art. This dual engagement situates Yu at the intersection of new realism and women's art.

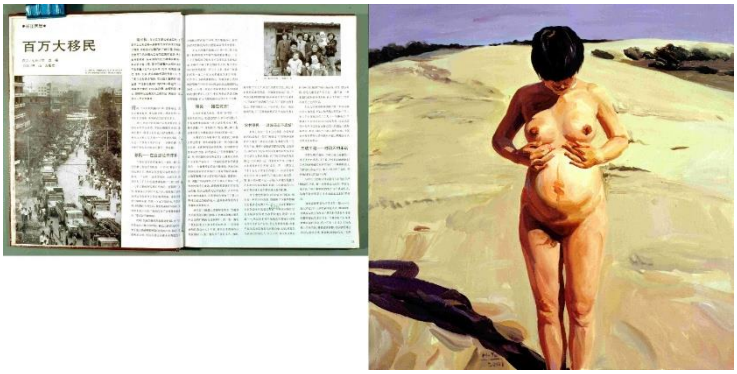

Figure 1.

Yu Hong

China Pictorial, p.25, No.1, 1994, A Million Migrants from the Three Gorges

1994 Yu Hong, Twenty-eight Years Old, Pregnant, 2001

Left: inkjet print, 68x100 cm

Right: acrylic on canvas, 100x100 cm

© Yu Hong; Courtesy of Yu Hong

Witness to Growth (1999–) is a representative series by Yu Hong. It is a long-term autobiographical project consisting of successive diptychs or triptychs that juxtapose a self-representational painting of the artist at a particular moment each year with a news photograph documenting a major collective event from the same year—thereby paralleling personal and collective memory. By juxtaposing revolutionary history with private experience, the series reflects the post-socialist atmosphere of the 1990s and invites interpretation through a post-socialist lens, revealing the artist's implicit response to China's revolutionary past. Within the series, Yu depicts herself, her grandmother, her mother, and her daughter—while male family members are largely absent. From a feminist perspective, this matrilineal focus may be seen as a silent resistance to patrilineal inheritance.

Each year since 1966, the year of Yu's birth, is represented by a diptych or triptych, with the exception of 1994. That year marked the birth of her daughter, Liu Wa. Unlike the diptychs used to represent the years from 1966 to

[1] Jerome Sans, (2020). 一个充满韧性的世界, [A World Full of Resilience]. *Art Panorama*, (7).

[2] Lili Zhang, (2010). 喻红绘画艺术探析 [The Art of Yu Hong]. (MA diss., Northwest Normal University), 2.

[3] Xiaoyun Zhao, (2018). 潘玉良和喻红女性题材绘画的比较研究 [A Comparative Study of Pan Yuliang and Yuhong's Female Works]. (MA diss., Zhejiang Sci-Tech University), 6.

[4] Examples such as *The World of Women Artists* (1990) (The World of Women Artists, Asia Art Archive, accessed July 3, 2025, https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/event-database/the-world-of-women-artists.) and Century-Woman Art Exhibition (1998) (Century · Woman Art Exhibition, Asia Art Archive, accessed July 3, 2025, https://aaa.org.hk/tc/collections/event-database/century-woman-art-exhibition.)

1993, a third panel is added from 1994 onward, depicting a specific moment from Liu Wa's life. Owing to the significance of her childbirth, 1994 is represented by both a diptych and a triptych: the diptych portrays Yu before childbirth, and the triptych captures moments before and after the delivery. The pregnancy-themed diptych consists of a news photo titled *A Million Migrants from the Three Gorges*, sourced from *China Pictorial*, and a painting titled *1994 Twenty-eight Years Old, Pregnant* (2001, Figure 1). The news image documents the mass relocation caused by the Three Gorges Project, which forced thousands of people to leave their homes and resulted in widespread geographic and emotional displacement. In the corresponding painting, pregnancy is the central theme. Yu's abdomen is placed at the center of the composition, drawing immediate attention. The figure of the mother-to-be is depicted with a downward, introspective gaze, her hands resting gently on her midsection—conveying deep concern, vulnerability, and a sense of wandering uncertainty in anticipation of the newborn. Her naked body, the barren desert backdrop, and the strong light contrast between brightness and shadow further intensify the atmosphere of emotional fluctuation and displacement, echoing the geographic upheaval of the Three Gorges Project migration. According to Yu, pregnancy made her fully recognize gender difference and fundamentally altered the trajectory of her life.[1] Through this work, Yu uses realist techniques not only to render her physical appearance but also to construct a symbolic, virtual environment that offers the viewer access to her inner emotional world during pregnancy.

By depicting pregnancy with personal sensibility, Yu renders women's private experience more visible and challenges the entrenched notion of pregnancy as a shameful or taboo subject. Her painting not only conveys her self-perception of the pregnant body—empowering women to reject the stigmatized, patriarchally defined view of pregnancy as merely a biological process—but also functions as an agent that revitalizes painting, particularly realist painting, in China. Since its introduction into China, realism has been closely tied to various ideological agendas: the pursuit of Western scientific accuracy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; heroic imagery used to promote nationalism and war propaganda during the anti-Japanese and civil war periods; and revolutionary ideals during the Maoist era. After 1978, contemporary Chinese artists began to detach realism from grand narratives, instead using it to portray the ideological vacuum of the post-socialist condition—seen in well-known genres such as cynical realism and political pop—as well as to depict mundane daily life and collective experiences amid China's sweeping transformations in the 1990s.[2] [3] Notably, these new realist genres and movements have been largely dominated by male artists, whose perspectives have shaped the mainstream trajectory of realism in the post-1978 art scene. Consequently, female realist painters have remained on the margins, largely due to their limited access to power within China's art institutions and cultural networks. However, their marginalization does not imply a lack of agency or contribution. Yu's depiction of her naked maternal body connects realist techniques with two traditionally stigmatized themes—nudity and pregnancy—offering a compelling alternative to dominant interpretations of realism. Her approach provides viewers with a new lens through which to understand realism as a mode of representation. This reimagining of the genre stands in contrast to the more conventional and idealized portrayal of pregnancy seen in Li Zijian's *Pregnancy* (2015).

4. Ji Jingning, Ink-Wash Painting and Urban Ink-Wash

Ji Jingning (b. 1957, Nanjing) is generally categorized as an artist of ink-wash painting or Chinese painting. She studied ink-wash painting through a professional curriculum at Hebei Normal University and later at CAFA, refining her techniques under the guidance of Zhou Sicong (1939–1996) and Lu Chen (1935–2004), two esteemed ink artists known for their expressive styles.[4] Ji mastered expressive ink-wash techniques with notable skill. Her works, characterized by the depiction of mundane urban life using emotive brushwork, are frequently labeled as "urban ink-wash" or "expressive ink-wash,"[5] [6] embodying both her absorption of contemporary social and cultural themes and the influence of Western expressionism.

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[1] Zhang, "喻红绘画艺术探析," 14.

[2] Zhu Zhu, (2013). *灰色的狂歡節-2000 年以來的中國當代藝術* [*Gray Carnival: Chinese Contemporary Art since 2000*] (Taipei: Diancan Art & Collection), 105.

[3] Minglu Gao, (2006). *墙: 中国当代艺术的历史与边界* [*The Wall: Reshape Chinese Contemporary Art*] (Beijing: Renmin University of China,), 97.

[4] Rui Long, ed., (2007). *画品丛书: 纪京宁 [Paintings Series: Ji Jingning]* (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Arts Press).

[5] Xiu Liu, (2013). 浅析都市水墨人物画的表现主义倾向. [A Brief Analysis of the Expressionist Tendency in Urban Ink Figure Painting]. *Literatures*.

[6] Bing Xu, (2013). 都市水墨人物画的表现主义倾向 [The Expressionist Tendency of Urban Ink-wash Figure Paintings]. *Art Panrama*.

Figure 2.

Ji Jingning

Pregnancy

Ink on paper, 180x96 cm, 2014

© Ji Jingning; Courtesy of Ji Jingning

Like Yu Hong, Ji also participated in the *Century-Woman Art Exhibition* (1998). Her potential classification as a "women's artist" can be inferred from her frequent depictions of everyday scenes involving maternal and familial duties, revealing her lived experience of motherhood and domestic labor.[1] Ji acknowledges that childcare and housework constitute significant parts of her daily life[2] and she presents a subtle resistance to traditional familial roles and their associated patriarchal norms by vividly portraying women fatigued by domestic responsibilities.

Pregnancy (2014, Figure 2) is a full-length portrait that exclusively depicts the frontal view of a pregnant woman. With no background to distract the viewer, the painting draws explicit focus to the subject. She appears to be a young woman, as suggested by her hairstyle and facial features. Her belly is rendered transparently, allowing the audience to observe the fetus inside the uterus. The fetus, curled within the womb, appears to be nurtured and protected by the mother-to-be. In stark contrast to the fetus's peaceful state, the woman herself looks exhausted—her head tilted, legs swollen, and eyes closed. Her contorted figure, painted with expressive brushstrokes, seems to dissolve into the surrounding aura, further emphasizing her emotional and physical fragility and her lack of readiness for the imminent birth. This visual juxtaposition—the vulnerable mother-to-be and the secure, developing fetus—reveals the inner conflict of the pregnant woman. On the one hand, as an inexperienced mother, she appears emotionally overwhelmed and physically drained by the process of pregnancy. On the other hand, she is intensely concerned about her child's well-being and safety.

By vividly portraying an exhausted pregnant woman, Ji subtly resists the "harmonious" view of the mother-child relationship as defined by patriarchal norms—one in which mothers are expected to embrace maternal duties with grace, skill, and joy, reinforcing the notion of a "natural" inclination toward caregiving roles. By representing a self-perceived image of pregnancy, Ji challenges this entrenched myth of harmony. Her approach parallels that of Yu Hong, who uses her female perspective on domestic life to counteract patriarchal interpretations of painting, particularly in the context of realism. Similarly, Ji contests orthodox understandings of ink-wash painting. Ink-wash painting—or Chinese painting more broadly—has been recognized as the

[1] Weiwei Yang, (2022). 纪京宁水墨创作研究-兼论其创作的女性视角 [A Study on Ji Jingning's Ink Painting Creation-Also on the Female Perspective of His Creation] (MA diss., Hebei Normal University), 6.

[2] Shaojun Lang, (2015). *心路历程:21 世纪中国水墨艺术家创作探究系列. 纪京宁卷* [*Journey of the Mind: A Series on the Creation of Chinese Ink Artists in the 21st Century. Ji Jingning*] (Shijiazhuang: Hebei Fine Art Press), 96.

quintessential national genre of China since the early modern period. However, it bears the weight of historical expectations imposed by male cultural traditionalists, modernizers, and revolutionaries. Cultural traditionalists, in particular, are committed to preserving the canon of ink-wash painting, which includes the thematic focus on landscapes, expressive brushwork, and a spiritual pursuit of seclusion and tranquility. This canon, rooted in literati aesthetics, epitomizes the tastes and life experiences of (male) scholar-gentry elites. As patriarchs in their families, these men were typically unburdened by the repetitive and exhausting labor of childcare and domestic work, allowing them the privilege of connecting with nature and cultivating spiritual and moral refinement. Consequently, the traditional canon of ink-wash painting is phallocentric at its core. Likewise, during the Maoist period, the remolding of ink-wash painting to serve revolutionary ideals infused it with new dynamics such as realism and communist iconography, aligning it with a masculinized revolutionary culture. By boldly presenting the image of an overwhelmed pregnant woman, Ji disentangles expressive brush techniques from their conventional thematic associations and the spiritual aspirations of the literati, distancing her work from ideological uses of ink-wash painting. Instead, she offers a self-perceived experience of pregnancy as a fresh lens through which to reevaluate the legacy of traditional ink-wash techniques in contemporary contexts.

5. Xu Hualing, Fine Brushwork and New Fine Brushwork

Xu Hualing (b. 1975, Harbin) is an artist labelled with "new fine brushwork." The adjective "new" signals the contemporary inheritance and reinvention of the fine brushwork tradition. Simply put, fine brushwork is a subcategory of Chinese painting but is less representative of national cultural essence compared to freehand brushwork in contemporary China, which is often used interchangeably with ink-wash painting. Due to its emphasis on refined line drawing and realistic techniques, fine brushwork has traditionally been regarded, within the hierarchy of Chinese art, as a form of craftsmanship—thus considered inferior to ink-wash painting, which emphasizes seclusion and transcendence.[1] When the term "Chinese painting" is used discursively, it typically refers to ink-wash painting, which implicitly relegates fine brushwork to a peripheral position within the broader framework of Chinese painting. Xu herself studied in the Department of Chinese Painting at CAFA, where she completed her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. This academic trajectory underscores the significant overlap between Chinese painting and fine brushwork.[2]

As a new genre, new fine brushwork represents a creative continuation of fine brushwork's legacy by contemporary artists. Among those labeled with this term, He Jiaying is a prominent figure, known for his depictions of introspective and elegant young women in contemporary settings, rendered with exquisite brush lines and soft coloring.[3] Although He incorporates modern clothing and activities into his work, his portrayals largely reproduce the traditional image of women as beautified objects for the male gaze. Xu, too, pursues an aesthetic of elegance and softness, producing numerous paintings of young girls. However, what distinguishes Xu's representations is the girls' evident self-awareness and their introspective observation of their own bodies, rather than their objectification.

[1] Jiaying He, (2009). *何家英美术作品集* [*He Jiaying's Art Collection*] (Changchun: Jilin Fine Arts Press), 10.

[2] "Xu Hualing, CAFA, accessed April 23, 2025, https://www.cafa.com.cn/en/figures/artists/details/8110524.

[3] He, *何家英美术作品集*, 6.

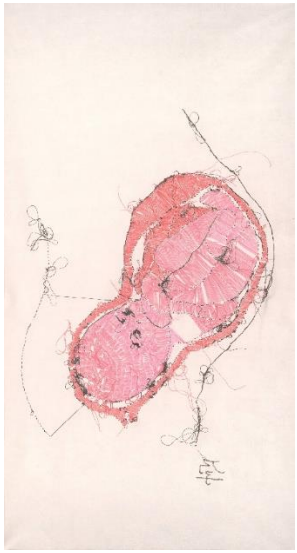

Figure 3.

Xu Hualing

Embroidery – Pregnant

Watercolor on silk, 160x80 cm, 2009

© Xu Hualing; Courtesy of Xu Hualing and Lin & Lin Gallery

Among Xu's oeuvre, *Pregnant* (2009, Figure 3), part of her *Embroidery* series, stands out as a bolder attempt. This fine brushwork piece mimics the reverse side of an embroidered cloth, visually representing an enlarged pregnant belly. According to Xu, she created this piece during her own pregnancy, a period marked by emotional ambivalence—an oscillation between joyful expectation for the baby's arrival and an overwhelming sense of unpreparedness.[1] The emotional dilemma presented in Xu's *Pregnant* resonates with that in Ji Jingning's *Pregnancy*, revealing a shared, self-perceived experience among mothers-to-be. In embroidery, the reverse side is typically more chaotic and unrefined compared to the neatly arranged front. By meticulously reproducing the disordered stitching of the backside with fine brush lines, Xu draws an intertextual connection between the inner turmoil of pregnancy and the unseen, less idealized side of embroidery. The piece may also metaphorically suggest that women's lived experience of pregnancy—the "backside"—is often concealed beneath the polished, idealized image of motherhood. The mirrored character "yùn (孕)," meaning pregnancy, further affirms her visual reference to the reverse side. Simultaneously, the work shows Xu's exceptional line-drawing technique.

Nevertheless, the unique value of this piece is not limited to increasing the visibility of pregnant women or showcasing sophisticated line-drawing skills. It also implies a silent resistance to the internal hierarchy of traditional Chinese art. Within this hierarchy—beyond the division between fine brushwork and freehand brushwork—craftwork, due to its perceived technical nature and association with artisanship, is traditionally regarded as secondary.[2] [3] Embroidery, labeled both as "craft" and as "women's work," has been particularly devalued in the patriarchal structure of Chinese art history. By integrating embroidery, fine brushwork, and the theme of pregnancy into a single composition, Xu disrupts not only the internal hierarchy of traditional Chinese art but also the thematic hierarchy imposed by the literati tradition, in which landscape is elevated as the ideal subject.

6. Conclusion

With the rise of feminist discourse, pregnancy as a subject reflecting the emotional and physical sensibility of pregnant women has become increasingly visible in China. In the field of painting—where patriarchal power remains more dominant than in new media art—examples of women's self-perceived depictions of pregnancy

[1] Hualing Xu, (2010). *新工笔文献丛书: 徐华翎卷* [*New Fine Line Painting Literature Books: Xu hualing Volume*] (Hefei: Anhui Fine Arts Press), 68.

[2] Michael Sullivan, (1961). *An Introduction to Chinese Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press), 79.

[3] Jie Yuan, (2020). 新工笔批评 [New Fine Ink brush] (MA diss., Nanjing University of Arts), 9.

are gradually emerging. In the cases of Yu Hong, Ji Jingning, and Xu Hualing, their pregnancy-themed works increase the visibility of women's voices during this transformative physical and spiritual process and challenge entrenched phallocentric perceptions of pregnancy. They also aestheticize pregnancy as a subject by innovating the canonical techniques they inherit, presenting a subtle resistance to the phallocentric definition of aesthetics and reaffirming the statement "pregnancy is art."

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