YANG FUDONG: IN SEARCH OF THE LOST *YIN/YANG* BALANCE

Christine Vial Kayser

The photographs, videos, and installations of the famous Chinese artist Yang Fudong (杨福东, b. 1971) combine a mastery of light and grain that bears a strong Western influence with a sense of melancholia for the Chinese past. These images have been interpreted as a reaction to the consumerism, individualism, and materialism that have overtaken Chinese culture since the 1990s, when Yang started his career. Critics suggest that the artist is looking for an alternative model based on inner harmony and withdrawal from the world, inspired by the poetic spirit of the literati. Despite the importance and special status of women in his art, his work has been approached as ungendered. This chapter argues that Yang's acknowledged taste for Chinese literati tradition takes onboard an allegiance to the modern Confucian doctrine of the 1990s, in which each gender has a specific social role. I posit that his representation of beautiful women attempts to address the crisis of masculinity in contemporary China, which emerged at a time when the economic power of women was growing, and an affirmative feminist movement was on the rise. I also acknowledge that the prevalence of white and its association with water, snow, and silence in some of the series is a possible indication that the feminine is a way to retrieve a *Yin/Yang* balance, a Daoist concept, also present in New Confucianism. I attempt to trace the intellectual and spiritual genealogy of this apparent contradiction throughout this essay.

Keywords: Chinese contemporary art, Yang Fudong, photography, video art, New Confucianism, Chinese feminism

1. Introduction[1]

Photographs, videos, and installations by Yang Fudong have been acclaimed world-wide for their fluid material appearance, their mastery of lightning, their sophisticated composition, and their rich semantic content, mixing citations from Western cinema of the 1960s and a sense of melancholia for the Chinese past. They feature young, elegant men and beautiful, sophisticated, often seductive women, which appear as *femmes fatales*, nymphets, or prostitutes. The characters have an otherworldly presence created by the lack of demarcation between the bodies and the background and a sideward dreamy gaze suggesting a form of aloofness. This aesthetics is deemed to be inspired by the Confucian literati tradition of withdrawal into nature in search of spiritual fulfillment or in opposition to the government of the time. It appears here as a reaction to the frenzied consumerism of contemporary Chinese society, including in the realm of relations between genders.

The current chapter argues that Yang's acknowledged taste for this tradition overlooks the ambiguities of these images, which present the feminine as both desirable and dangerous for the male subject. They contain an implicit allegiance to a modern Confucian doctrine which has been on the rise since the 1990s in mainland China, in intellectual discourse and within the government, with its emphasis on societal harmony, on moral traditional values of sexual restraint and chastity for women, which deem sexuality as dangerous for masculine spiritual energy. I posit that these portraits of women as *femmes fatales* are an attempt to address the crisis of masculinity in contemporary China, which emerged at the same period due to the growing economic power of women and the rise of an affirmative feminist movement. The artist's family context and childhood may also have contributed to this sensitivity, as Yang's father was a member of the military and Yang's primary education took place in a military compound, where he is said to have excelled in "moral conduct, academic studies and physical education" (Roberts 2011, 15).

In other works, such as *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007) and *Liu Lan* (2003), women have a distinctly non-sexual presence and men an androgynous demeanor while the scenery is suffused with white, water, snow, silence, which can be associated with the symbolism of *Yin*. These series are a possible indication that the feminine is a way to reach an ideal state of life for the

[1] This chapter is a revised version of an article first published in French, "Yang Fudong: le féminin comme nourriture spirituelle et comme menace pour le masculin," *Revue Art Asie-Sorbonne*, April 2023 (https://creops.hypotheses.org/yang-fudong-le-feminin-comme-nourriture-spirituelle-et-comme-menace-pour-le-masculin-christine-vial-kayser). Translated and reproduced with full permission.

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masculine in the form of a *Yin*/*Yang* balance that would have more to do with a Daoist spirituality.

Yang Fudong studied at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou, and then settled in Shanghai. His career began in the late 1990s, at the dawn of the second phase of Chinese contemporary art, the first phase having emerged in the early 1990s. This second period was heralded in the exhibition Post-Sense Sensibility in 1999, curated by the artist Qiu Zhijie (邱志杰, b. 1969), in which Yang's works were first presented. Qiu wrote: "Post-Sense is looking at your aged parents and doubting the purity of your bloodline. Post-Sense is how every person on the street looks uncomfortably similar to you. Post-Sense is Dolly the Sheep and Viagra. Post-Sense is Internet romance" (Qiu 1999). The aim was to depart from the first avant-garde's focus on Chinese politics via a criticism of the Cultural Revolution, to address the current frenzied capitalism modeled on Western values and fill the spiritual and cultural void created by the succession of the Maoist era, the politics of Deng Xiaoping in favor of "getting rich" and the atonement of June 4, 1989. It expressed a longing for a holistic tradition that could address a spiritual crave, together with issues of post-colonialism, globalization, and nationalism. As such, art followed a general intellectual pattern, also found in literature and philosophy, that revolved around the reexamination of Confucianism in the form of a continental (i.e., mainland Chinese) "New Confucianism."

New Confucianism, also called "modern Confucianism," is a somewhat diverse school of thought that emerged in the 1920s in a reaction against the New Culture movement of May 4, 1919, which rejected Confucianism as the basis of Chinese culture and identified it as the reason for its backwardness. In opposition to the May 1919 doxa, it wanted to resist the overthrowing of Chinese philosophical and literary tradition, and preserve its core values of unity between man and nature within the Dao, the concept of vital change as defined in the *Yijing* (易经, *Classic of Change*), and of *wu wei* (无为, "doing nothing"), the practice of a wandering mind. Such is the case with Xu Fuguan (徐复观, 1902–1982) who praised Zhuangzi (Sernelj 2020, 174; NG 2003, 219). Most of the exponents of this New Confucianism were republican and anti-communist individuals who fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong in 1949. New Confucianism has been reclaimed since the 1980s, however, by mainland Chinese intellectuals, and then by the Communist Party, taking various forms that are more or less compatible with Marxism. Makeham (2003; 2008), Van Den Stock (2016), Deng and Smith (2018), and Rošker (2020) provide detailed analyses of this complex movement and its precepts. The New Confucianist doctrine differs from the "Neo-Confucianism" of the Song and Ming periods in that it incorporates Western philosophy—from Kant and Hegel to Heidegger and Dewey—in a way that is sometimes syncretic, other times oppositional. It has retained, however, Neo-Confucianist syncretism and an interest in Daoist and Buddhist

concepts—while rejecting their purely transcendental aims (Lidén 2011; NG 2003, 227). It thus helped revive and modernize Daoism and Buddhism (Palmer and Liu 2012; Rošker 2020).

New Confucianism is not a unified doctrine and its precepts hover between idealism and materialism, social disengagement and social consolidation, individualism and collectivism, anti-communism, and neo-Marxism as in the case of Li Zehou (李泽厚) (Chan 2003) and Feng Youlan (冯友兰) (Vandermeersch 2007). New Confucianism in its Marxist undertone is part of the current governmental emphasis on social harmony and Capitalism (or Socialism) "with Chinese characteristics" (see Van Den Stock 2016, 26; Makeham 2003, 2). What the various schools of thought share, however, is support for the patriarchal social order, based on the *qi* of the *Yang* principle. They argue that the May Fourth movement and Westernization in the 1920s, then Maoism and now Chinese feminism, have shattered this order. This aspect of modern Confucianism is overlooked—there is no entry regarding women or the feminine in the indexes of the publications cited above. It is as if the concept of *wenren* (文人, "cultivated individual, scholar") was not gendered. Some scholars have recently taken on the task of addressing this silence in order to resist Chinese and Western feminists' criticism (Rosenlee 2006) and allow Confucianism to enter the wider social discourse (Batista 2017).

The aim to rekindle Chinese tradition gave rise in art to different artistic styles and strategies from the kitsch mockery of Shanghainese Xu Zhen (徐震, b. 1977) to the ambiguously exotic and nationalistic works of Qiu Zhijie (see Vial Kayser 2019) and Cai Guo-Qiang (蔡国强, b. 1957), and to the neo-Shamanic/post-colonial/Dadaist art of Huang Yong Ping (黄永砯, 1954–2019), which deeply influenced Yang Fudong. Yang Fudong's art hovers, with its hybrid aesthetics, in between those trends that evoke the French Nouvelle Vague in as much as the Shanghai film industry of the 1930s, and conveys a sense of melancholy, of the social inadequacy of the characters represented and of the artist himself. Most of those who have written on Yang's artwork posit that the images act as a buffer from the brutal and dreary contemporary and can be understood in light of the Chinese literati tradition of the Song and Ming periods, i.e., as a withdrawal from the world in search of an inner harmony. Here the word "harmony" acts as a "floating signifier," as "harmony" is a double meaning word, at times designating harmony with nature and the inner self (in the Buddhist and Daoist sense) and at times Confucian "social harmony," in which individuals have to give up free will to preserve a functional society based on law and order. This vagueness appeals to Western viewers in search of a distinct, non-materialist, and a-historical philosophy of life. The distinctly Chinese aesthetic of Yang's works is associated exotically and superficially with a "spiritual" quest, through the neo-orientalist prism of "blandness," the meditative trend, and the "sense

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of nature," supposedly specific to China (see Gaffric and Heurtebise 2018). The centrality of the masculine in ancient and contemporary Chinese thought, as in Yang Fudong's work, has been ignored.

I argue here that Yang's interest in the 1930s, and the sense of threat and unease that runs through his art partake of the moral crisis of the Republican period marked by tensions between a colonial Westernization, the rise of feminist agency in the wake of the New Culture Movement of 1919, and the Chinese values defined by the New Confucianist movement in reaction to the latter.

After presenting the aesthetic analysis prevalent in the criticism of Yang's artwork from the first series of 2000 *Tonight Moon* and *Shenjia Alley-Fairy*, as well as in the artist's discourse, I shall undertake to deconstruct his take on the 1930s by looking at the *New Women Series* (2013), establishing a parallelism between Yang's intention and the social debates of the 1930s on which the series is based, thus illuminating further the embedded conservatism and anxieties hidden under the polish of the pictures dense pixelization, soft lightning, and elegant staging. I shall then propose a reading of artworks in which the feminine figure appears as both a danger to the masculine spirit in a Confucianist manner, and a spiritual treasure to be nurtured as per Daoist belief. This illuminates, in my view, the plastic elements of the *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007), *Liu Lan* (2003), and more recent works such as *The Colored Sky: New Women II* (2014), and *Ye Jiang/The Nightman Cometh* (2011), in particular the semantic of white—the color of death and of the *Yin* principle. I conclude that Yang's artworks help establish a link with ancient epics such as the celebrated Qing-era novel *The Dream in the Red Chamber* (红楼梦 *Honglou meng*) by Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹, 1715–1763) (Cao 2007) and the contemporary cinema of Han Han (韩寒, b. 1982).

2. The reception of Yang Fudong as literatus in *Tonight Moon* and *Shenjia Alley-Fairy*

The artist explains that he received a traditional education (in Yang and Stanhope 2014). His work is influenced by the Daoist/Confucianist doctrine of non-action, or *wu wei* (Lidén 2011): he allows ideas to come one after another, building the narrative of his films over time:

> My films do not have a script, plot, or very detailed outlines. Improvisation and adaptability are key to me. This situation is like a botanical garden where all the chi [*qi*] accumulates. Chi waters the plants and nourishes them. As time goes by, this botanical garden in my heart will then be exhibited. (in Yang and Stanhope 2014)

He is faithful to the notion of the indeterminate at the core of this tradition:

> In ancient Chinese painting, there has always been an emphasis on *liubai* [留白] – what's left undrawn on the paper. For me, no matter whether I am making a video or a film, the same idea applies... The undrawn part in a work is there for the audience to engage with, using their imagination for viewing and interpretation. (Yang 2012, 83)

Most critics develop this line of analysis. For example, the Japanese curator Yuko Hasewaga (2006, 78) writes:

> His detached point of view and introspective approach is that of the Taoist, who listens intently to his inner voice, reads the flow of chi around him, and lives in harmony with it. One can almost imagine Yang at the center of a frantic maelstrom of change and confusion, the one spot where everything is quiet and still.

References to Zen are also evoked, supported by the fact that Yang kept silent for three months in 1993, during an undocumented performance which he claimed was inspired by Zen Buddhism (Beccaria 2006). The reference to "Zen Buddhism," a practice that has almost disappeared in China but was revived by the New Confucians, is a possible indication of his interest in this philosophy, as is his declared interest in the painter and Buddhist/Daoist painter Shi Tao (石涛, 1642–1707).[2]

Yet the vagueness of the concept of tradition allows for a somewhat superficial take on his work, of which the reception of *Tonight Moon* (2000, see Figures 1 and 2) and *Shenjia Alley-Fairy* (2000, see Figure 3) is emblematic. *Tonight Moon* (今弯的月亮 *Jin wan de yue liang*) is a video installation comprising a large screen and six small monitors showing young men in a traditional Chinese garden (in Suzhou) playing in boats and meditating while facing the water (Figure 1). The large central screen displays a video of the garden, interspersed with 24 small video screens showing various dystopian images taken from old films. These screens have a disruptive role in the overall harmony inspired by the garden, projecting, for example, two men in briefs who appear to be learning to swim (one the breaststroke, the other the crawl) on a striped mattress surrounded by beach accessories (Figure 2).[3]

2 See Yang's exhibition *Yang Fudong: Endless Peaks* (杨福东：无限的山峰), ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, November 8, 2020–January 31, 2021.

3 For a full description of this complex work, see Pirotte (2013, 125).

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Figure 1: Yang Fudong, *Tonight Moon* (2000), video installation view at *Useful Life – Europalia. China*, M HKA, 2009–2010

(Source: © M HKA)

Figure 2: Yang Fudong, *Tonight Moon* (2000), video installation, detail of the central screen

(Source: Collection M HKA/Flemish Community, photo: M HKA. Courtesy of M HKA)

The installation *Tonight Moon* was presented as part of an exhibition entitled *Useful Life* in Shanghai in 2000, then in Antwerp in 2010, curated by Philippe Pirotte. Pirotte suggests that Yang emphasizes slowness, meditation, and aesthetic research as

a way of resisting the consumer race that has engulfed China. He writes: "The scenes recall the literati paintings of ancient China, made by artists and intellectuals escaping the real world to pursue spiritual freedom by living in reclusion" (Pirotte 2012, 101). He rightly explains that the clumsiness of the characters seeking a stereotyped spirituality is a criticism of the loss of these traditions under commodification.

The title of the exhibition, *Useful Life* (有效期 *Youxiaoqi*) is itself ambiguous because its literal translation is "period of validity" or "expiry date." It connotes the ephemeral and superficial nature of "useful" consumption and production compared with enduring spiritual values. According to Yang, "the characters for 'Useful Life' were a bit like a spiritual wave [...]. The words reflected everyone's attitude at that time [...] when everyone started to do art [...]. They all shared this mood, [and] it was really 'beautiful'" (Lu 2010). The concept of "beauty" is used here in the Confucian sense of the search for harmony and balance between morality and social life. It is a quest for the good through the beautiful, two interchangeable pillars of Confucian spirituality (Fu and Yi 2015).

The artist emphasizes that few artists and intellectuals have achieved this balance, exhausting themselves in feverish activity under social pressure. This exhaustion was already the subject of the film *Estranged Paradise* (陌生天堂 *Mosheng tiantang*, 1998–2002) (Beccaria 2006). The protagonist is a man whose clothing and gestures have the characteristics of a simple, virile, "authentic" masculinity. His engagement with reality, in particular with his elegant, sophisticated, elusive girlfriend, no longer works, and his repetitive attempts to regain her attention distract him from his existential search. The same pattern is at play in the film *The Fifth Night* (2010)[4] in which clumsy young men, their suitcases falling open, wander around a film studio, fascinated by an elegant but inaccessible woman who ignores them. As the camera spins around her in the manner of François Truffaut's *American Night* (*La Nuit Américaine*, 1973), she seems to play with their desire. Being both seductive and untouchable, she creates a vortex of unfulfilled desires that threatens her suitors. The background music is haunting.

These elements allow me to further differ from Pirotte's analysis of another work in the exhibition, *Shenjia Alley – Fairy* (沈家弄—小仙人 *Shenjia long—xiao xianren*, 2000). Like *Tonight Moon,* this photographic series refers to entertainment, no longer leisure games in a botanical garden, but sexual games. Yang has photographed prostitutes in the warm atmosphere of a Shanghai summer, relaxing in a cramped room overlooking a narrow alleyway, as the title suggests. Their lower bodies are exposed, unclothed, as they lie on mats of newspapers. Beers, cards, and clothes drying form the background of this promiscuous domestic environment. Funny phallic cacti add a kitsch element to this sad, cheap aesthetic. The girl's

4 See excerpts on https://vimeo.com/40177158?login=true.

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faces are rarely visible, while their truncated bodies expose their genitals crudely in the foreground at a short distance (Figure 3), indicating the proximity between the artist's face and the women's bodies. The sleazy picture can also be understood as a warning to the male client that in seeking "heaven," he will find hell. The subtitle *xiao xianren* (小仙人), translated as "fairy," does indeed have the popular meaning of nymphet (young and small beauty) but also evokes female Taoist immortals (仙女 xiannü) or *Xuannü* (玄女) a source of revitalization for the (male) spirit, related to the moon (Liu 2016). Often depicted standing, their long robes mingling with the clouds to indicate their celestial nature, these deities have no visible body. Yang Fudong's framing of the sexual parts of the "fairies," in contrast, emphasizes the earthly nature of the pleasure they provide, like a cheap, material version of spiritual ecstasy. Finally, the title also contains a pun on cactus (仙人掌 *xianrenzhang*),[5] a plant that according to Chinese medicine "activates the circulation of *qi*, makes the blood more tonic, clarifies the heart" (American Dragon n.d.).[6] The visual composition thus seems to parody Taoist rituals of longevity based on the ingestion of plants and sexual arousal (with no emission of sperm).[7] The aesthetic poverty of the staging, and its kitsch quality, add to the promiscuity of the nude bodies and the floor—and other low-value material such as newspapers—to suggest that this consumption of sex is degrading. The ease with which the girls seem to accommodate such dire conditions—displaying an apparent domestic comfort—further indicates that the origin of the decay is in them, and its victim will be the (male) viewer, or the consumer.

Philippe Pirotte sees in it, however, an aesthetic quest influenced by both literary refinement and a rejection of today's consumerism of sex. He argues: "It brings the literati's impassive attitude from the daydream to the brothel. [...] [T]he photographs portray naked or half-dressed young women passing time and possibly waiting for customers—suggesting a certain type of consumerism" (Pirotte 2012, 101).

The comments of the Antwerp Museum of Modern Art, which acquired the photographs (under Pirotte's supervision), also establish a link between this work and traditional painting from a formal point of view: "Fudong carefully stages the

5 I am grateful to Shan Xueping of Shanghart Gallery for this information.

6 Entry "Xian Ren Zhang – Rhizoma Opuntiae" in *American Dragon* (n.d.).

7 The general principle is to recover the cosmic order formed by *shen* (spiritual order), *qi* (the breath that maintains balance in change), and *jing* (material and bodily order). Producing sperm leads to a loss of *jing*. In contrast, withholding ejaculation reverses the flow. In this way, *jing* rises through the spinal column and nourishes *qi*. Once *jing* is strengthened, *qi* is strong and *shen* is powerful, leading to good health. Sexuality is thus part of vital nourishing practices (养生 *yangsheng*), which also include breathing exercises, gymnastics, and the ingestion of herbal remedies (see Despeux and Khon 2003, 194, 221, 224; and "Religious Daoism" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive* 2017).

scenes as would a traditional painter create the mood of his painting."[8] Pirotte rightly adds that the work is a warning to Chinese intellectuals faced with the Cornelian choice of participating in—and committing to—the world's affairs or standing aside in negative abstinence (Pirotte 2012, 101). When we compare *Shenjia Alley* with *Tonight Moon*, we do see an implicit association between the repression of desire, consumerism, and spirituality. If these two works are, however, a disenchanted critique of the spiritual state of China, their common focus on the male subject's disenchantment underlines the centrality of the masculine in Yang's search for the spiritual. It suggests that one should refrain from a shallow discourse on Yang's series as inspired by "Chinese spiritual tradition," using the neo-orientalist association of "blandness," meditative mood, and the "sense of nature" (see Gaffric and Heurtebise 2018). In such a discourse, the centrality of the masculine in ancient and contemporary Chinese thought, as in Yang Fudong's artwork, is ignored.

In my view, the work should be seen as a warning against lust, and thus as the reminiscence of a moral position, inspired by Confucianism and Daoism, and still present in New Confucianism, in which women are a danger to men's souls. In exhausting their semen, the women of *Shenjia Alley* jeopardize their *qi*.

Figure 3: Yang Fudong, *Shenjia Alley–Fairy*, 63 x 150 cm, 2000, photograph
(Source: Courtesy of Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery)

8 M HKA, collections, untitled and undated. Available at: https://www.muhka.be/collections/artworks/s/item/254-shenjia-alley-fairy.

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3. Female figures in Yang's work or the imprint of New Confucian morality

For Confucianism, as for Daoism, social harmony is achieved by respecting the social order, which is a reflection of the cosmic order in a macrocosm/microcosm relationship, in particular the balance between the masculine, active *Yang* principle and the feminine, passive *Yin* principle (Despeux and Kohn 2003, 640–641). At a social level, this implies control of the feminine by the masculine, in particular of its sexual appetite, which may exhaust masculine energy to the point of death, as exemplified in the Ming-period work *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅 *Jin ping mei*, 1617, translated by David Todd Roy, 1993–2013). According to Confucianism, women are either submissive, passive, "natural", and virtuous, or powerful, sophisticated, and impure. The powerful woman is depicted in literature and painting as dangerous, leading to the death of the male hero, while the woman who excels in her role as wife and mother reinforces the social order (Wang 2010, 636; Van Dung 2022).

The renewed emphasis on Confucianism in contemporary China, in official discourses and among the Chinese male elite, has been accused, by the emerging feminist movements, of rebuilding the patriarchal order of the Republican and Imperial periods, which had been suspended since 1949 (Sung 2012). I believe that this pattern is present in some of Yang's works.

3.1 *After All I Didn't Force You*

Yang Fudong's first video work, entitled *After All I Didn't Force You* (我并非强破你 *Wo bingfei qiangpo ni*), from 1998, shows a series of fleeting encounters between a single woman and various men of indistinct appearances. A succession of single sequences, where she faces her partners across a desk or a coffee table, alternate with scenes when she wanders aimlessly in the street, followed by the men, accompanied by romantic music, while the phrase "after all, I didn't force you" appears on the screen. The meaning of the sentence is unclear as the Chinese could mean "I am not breaking with you" and it is unclear who the "I" is. The domineering body language of the male and the recoiling body of the woman facing him across the table suggests that the "I" is the male while in the wandering scenes the woman, with her fashionable hairstyle and clothes, and distanced gaze, seems to be controlling her cohort of male partners. As Qiu Zhijie's curatorial line aimed at criticizing consumerism and the loss of traditional values, *After All, I Didn't Force You* does indeed evoke the anonymity of Internet dating. The multiple male partners facing a single woman suggest that elements of feminine versus masculine power are also at play, against a backdrop of the defense of this traditional family order, as the next series *New Women* also indicates.

3.2 *New Women* series

The video installation—which is also presented in photographic form—entitled *New Women* (新女性 *Xin nüxing*) (2013) (Figures 4 and 5) further addresses these tensions.

Figure 4: Yang Fudong, *New Women*, 2013, video installation

(Source: © Yang Fudong. Courtesy of Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery)

It presents beautiful naked women—actresses from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Sydney (Chen 2014)—in a private salon in the Sino-Western style typical of 1930s Shanghai: velvet and mahogany chairs, Victorian colonnades, and marble fireplaces. They are naked except for their jewelry—necklaces, earrings, bracelets—in a fetishistic staging. The light emphasizes their curves, which match those of the furniture they are caressing with their long, varnished nails. In the classical tradition, the virtuous woman/wife was represented with a plain cloth in a natural setting (Fong 1996, 25), underpinning the link between the absence of sophistication and "natural," moral behavior. Sophisticated clothing and decor evoke, in contrast, the corrupt, unvirtuous woman, the whore, the courtesan, as is the case here. The presence of a peach blossom in the background of one of these images (Figure 7), is a classical reminder, a semantic trope, that youth and beauty are passing while virtue is eternal, and a sign that this setting has a moralizing context. Yang's women are objects of desire, open to the gaze of the photographer and the visitor. One critic writes that

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Figure 5: Yang Fudong, *New Women*, 2013, video installation

(Source: © Yang Fudong. Courtesy of Yang Fudong and ShanghART Gallery)

the visitor moves between these monitors and feels drawn in, and "pressured" (Chen 2014). The work, Chen (2014) further suggests, is a celebration of elegant beauty as opposed to the vulgarity of "today's images." Indeed, the promiscuity and nudity of the models are reminiscent of *Shenjia Alley*, of which this second series appears to be a chic version.

3.3 New Woman or Modern Girl?

Figure 6: Marlène Dietrich in *Shanghai Express*, dir. Josef Von Sternberg, 1932, still image, 01:13:15

(Source: Archive.org, public domain)

Figure 7: Yang Fudong, *New Women*, 2013

(Source: © Yang Fudong. Courtesy of Yang Fudong and Marian Goodman Gallery)

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The seduction of the models is constructed using the characteristics of the *garçonne* with a tomboy haircut, and the vamp, reminiscent of the Republican era, and famously incarnated by Marlène Dietrich in *Shanghai Express* in 1932 (Figure 6): edgy hairstyle, full lips with heavy make-up, long thin eyelashes, intense and willful gaze underlined by a pencil line, an oval face with visible bone structure, and a small chin. The model from Yang Fudong's series (in Figure 7) has a similarly oval face (although her cheekbones are not salient), well-built shoulders, and almost masculine physical strength. A blurred reflection in the foreground, on the wood of the armchair, creates a depth that accentuates the focus on her face and hands. But unlike Dietrich's haughty pose, which seems immersed in inner reflection, untouchable, unfathomable, and impossible to contain, the eyes of Yang's model express melancholy. The passivity of her body's posture, which offers itself to the viewer's desire, is reinforced by her oblique outlook and body position that invites the viewer's gaze to enter the image, to follow the line of her shoulders and then her hip, and imagine in the semi-shadow, between the chair and the fireplace, her long legs, and naked buttocks.

What do these formal and semantic choices by the artist mean? Between the wars in China, and especially in Shanghai, a paradigm shift in femininity took place. Beauty criteria evolved, under Japanese and Western influence, away from the norms of classical beauty. There was a demand for full red lips, half-closed eyelids with no creases, eyebrows shaped like butterfly wings, modest eyes, a slender, fragile body (Fong 1996, 23), as well as a V-shaped face, a flat chest and clothing that did not show the curves of the body in order to reflect its virtuous dispositions (Zeng 2010, 22). Although the red lips were retained, in the 1920–30s the eyes had to be bolder, with a double crease drawn with a pencil on the eyelids to give it a Western appearance. The face became rounder, and the body exhibited muscular strength, large shoulders, and a strong bone structure, as if trained for swimming.

The comparison with Dietrich's posture in *Shanghai Express* demonstrates that the Westernization of female aesthetics was accompanied by a Westernization of moral criteria regarding women's sexual freedom. A wave of emancipation was then sweeping Chinese society. It took two forms, as it had in the West: that of the "New Woman" (新女性 *xin nüxing*), or the "Modern Girl" (摩登女孩 *modeng nühai*) (Zhou 2019), one being the Confucian modern mother figure, the other the degenerate socialite with a loose morality.[9]

Since 1918, for the intelligentsia and the republican elite, the "New Woman" had been both the new feminine norm and the emblem of Chinese modernity as a whole, following the example of educational, scientific, economic, and industrial development programs (Schwarcz 1986). Men thought of this new woman, not

9 I would like to thank Marie Laureillard for drawing my attention to this distinction.

as an individual but as a social role. Her acceptable degree of financial and sexual independence varied according to the parties involved (Ma 2003, 4–11). While the most left-wing intellectuals, like Lu Xun, thought it necessary for women to be financially independent and therefore to work outside the home, others deemed that they should exercise their rights and their new knowledge within marriage, which could become a place of equality between the sexes (Harris 1997, 287–288). These tensions are reflected in the passionate debates surrounding the character in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Nora, who decides to leave her home to find herself and be respected by her husband (Harris 1997, 287–288). In the Republican China of the 1920s, the tension between these two models became acute. The new woman had access to education, knew the rules of hygiene and the benefits of sport, but had to remain focused on her role as mother and wife. Her posture and clothing had to be fairly prudish,[10] as shown in women's magazines (see, e.g., Hubbard 2014; Ma 2003), and advertising calendars *yuefenpai* (月份牌). The breasts are freed from the corset—in line with the new hygiene and freedom from coercive rules of the past—and clearly visible under the garment, but evoke above all good health and breastfeeding (Lei 2015, 189).

The "Modern Girl," in contrast, is physically, sexually, and socially more liberated, may refuse to marry, insists on practicing men's professions and having equal legal rights in terms of property, vote, etc. It was driven by avant-garde women, actresses such as Ruan Lingyu (阮玲玉) (Ma 2019) and writers such as Ai Xia (艾霞) (Colet 2015) and Chen Xuezhao (陈学昭) (Ma 2003). The tensions between the two models of the modern, freer womanhood, were debated in prominent and rather mainstream newspapers in particular *The Ladies' Journal* and *The New Woman*, successively run by Zhang Xichen, a journalist who would later become an ardent feminist (Ma 2003; Hui-Chi Hsu 2018). While for Zhang and its readers, a debate on the degree of independence of women and their role outside marriage was acceptable, for conservatives, the modern girl was a danger to society. She was portrayed as a prostitute, a communist, or a lost woman with no future (Lei 2015, 188).

These debates and ambiguities are the subject of the 1935 film *New Women* (新女性 *Xin nüxing*) by the director Cai Chusheng (蔡楚生), who was close to leftist circles. The film is based on *Xiandai yi nüxing* (现代一女性, *A Woman of Today*), Ai Xia's largely autobiographical novel. It tells the story of a single, elegant woman writer who is somewhat infatuated with her beauty; photos of her in acting poses decorate her apartment. Constantly at loggerheads with men, who see her as an easy woman rather than a writer, she loses her job as a music teacher and thus her livelihood after spurning the advances of the headmaster, Dr Wang. She

10 See, for example, Xie Zhiguang (circa 1929), reproduced in Francesca Dal Lago (2000, fig. 2, p. 104).

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decides to become a prostitute to support her sick daughter, but in the end, makes the decision to commit suicide (and her daughter dies). Taken to the hospital, she changes her mind and wants to live on to fight against the corruption of the media world that is playing her for a fool. She dies speechless, as women workers march in front of the hospital, singing "The Song of the New Woman" (新女性主題歌 *Xin nüxing zhutige*), which would become the national anthem of the People's Republic (Harris 1997, 285).[11] This implies that true freedom lies in collective, socialist, and not individual, bourgeois freedom.

Cai Chusheng's film actually presents several female role models, from the most despicable (Dr Wang's wife who forgives her husband's betrayal in exchange for a Cadillac) to the most virtuous (the music teacher Li Ayin who gives singing lessons to the workers). The intertwined destinies of these women demonstrate how difficult it is to invent and impose the status of the new woman individually, and how violent the journey is for the protagonists. The heroine is portrayed as both courageous and selfish, a good and a bad mother, anti-social and individualistic (she married a childhood sweetheart against the advice of her family), talented, and narcissistic. Her conquering gaze on the portraits that decorate her apartment is that of the tomboyish women who were also called "flappers" at the time (Lei 2015, 194). Her independence of spirit and morals, and her ambiguities, are punished by loneliness, social death or prostitution. The men are generally presented as selfish and immoral (Shen 2012).

The suicide of the lead actress, Ruan Lingyu, shortly after the film's release, on International Women's Day, March 8, 1935, dramatically confirmed these difficulties and sent shockwaves through public opinion. The actress, who had achieved financial independence, was divorced and lived with her lover, was attacked by the conservative press as a lost woman who was paying for her dreams of free love. For the press, both the heroine and the actress appeared not as the courageous and patriotic "New Woman" but as the "Modern Girl," i.e., as a danger to the social order (Harris 1997, 294) who seeks love but threatens to destroy her partners like a praying mantis, a she-demon (Stevens 2003, 89).

This Chinese *garçonne* is not a woman to love and marry, but a low-class woman to force and abuse. This second type is incarnated by Anna May Wong in *Shanghai Express* (1932). This film is a colonial view on the Chinese debate by an American author and producer, suggesting that in the West the situation is different: the military doctor remains in love and faithful to the courtesan Shanghai Lily (played by Dietrich), while the Chinese prostitute's fate is to be abused by her fellow countrymen. The film was indeed part of an American strategy to portray

11 The scene is visible on YouTube "Song of the New Women" (新女性主題歌) – New Women (1935): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAPaGj-heHY.

China as "backward," which led to the banning of Paramount films in China for a period of time (see Leong 2005, 74; Li 2020). The situation of free women in the West was of course more nuanced as remarked on by the Chinese feminist Chen Xuezhao, who emigrated to France at the time. She stated that French women were enslaved to seduction and to men, had no demand for independence, and were more backward than Chinese women (Ma 2003, 19).

On which side is Yang Fudong's *New Women* series? Some critics claim that with these portraits Yang supports the liberated status of women in China in the 1930s, as in contemporary China (Reynaud 2017). The artist statements are elliptic. He argues: "[My series is] a tribute to early Chinese films from the 1930s, including *New Women* (1935) directed by Cai Chusheng." He adds: "His was a realistic work, and I hope mine is a more abstract expression. The film talks about the image of an ideal woman, but there is a difference between reality and dreams" (in Stanhope 2014). In fact, Yang's (reverential) reference to the 1930s and to the 1935 film is part of a trend in the 1980s and 1990s that saw the emergence of a veritable cult of Ruan Lingyu, against a backdrop of tension between individual freedom and propaganda that culminated in the Tiananmen massacre (Harris 1997, 298). Despite a common interest in the figure of Ruan and the feminine, I believe that Yang's works and words do not partake in this political movement concerning individual freedom versus State control. Yang's series on New Women is a search for an unattainable ideal, the abstract concept of the feminine which does not refer to women only but is part of the human soul. This is confirmed when he adds: "In addition, 'New Women' is the depiction of the perfect woman image in each person's heart. [...] Therefore, 'New Women' also implies an idealistic state" (Lu 2013). Thus, the artist is in search for a "pure" (i.e., virtuous, spiritual) life that necessitates a "pure state" of mind, which suggests that Yang is looking at the debates on the feminine power of the 1930s from a masculine perspective.

Indeed, despite all the political feminist debate of the 1930s concerning *New Women,* the figure of the *femme fatale* (borrowed from the West) had, according to Sarah Stevens (2003), a psychological "mirror" dimension that was specific to China. Her deep, sometimes melancholic gaze and her marginal situation were an expression not of the specific situation of women, but of the insecurity of men (Stevens 2003, 90). It expressed the fear of emasculation of the male subject which was associated with the nation's loss of control over itself due to foreign control (Japanese and American). This analysis by Stevens helps make sense of the meaning behind Yang's *New Women* series, in which the gaze of the young women (towards the camera) appears both strong and fragile, active and passive. Like a mirror, it could express the contemporary Chinese male anguish, stemming this time not from the loss of Chineseness under the influence of foreigners, but

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from the perceived tensions in the relationship between men and women due to the rise of feminism in the 1990s.

4. Feminism in China in the 1990s

The feminism of the inter-war period merged with the communist movement of 1949 to form a non-gendered egalitarianism. After the Cultural Revolution, a new wave of female contestation emerged among intellectuals. It aimed to retain equal rights with men and fight against the return of traditional values while asserting a specific sensibility (Croll 1977, 723; Shen 2017, 7). In the 1980s, it gave rise to the term *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义), where *zhuyi* refers to the study of the feminine as the essence of woman and to a "feminine" struggle. It was not until the 1990s that the term *nüquan zhuyi* (女权主义), which refers to women's rights, came to designate feminist movements. It gained visibility at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 (which Hillary Clinton attended). Women, feminist, and gender studies departments were then established in many Chinese universities.

Despite all this, there was and still is a strong resistance to changing social canons and, as Professor Emerita at Nankai University in Tianjin Sheng Ying (盛英, b. 1939) points out, many contemporary writers display a patriarchal conception of femininity and view feminism as a threat to the cohesion of society. They revel in recounting the sexual fantasies of concubines as in Su Tong (苏童, b. 1963), *Wives and Concubines* (妻妾成群 *Qiqie chengqun*, 1990); in describing the sexual urges of ugly women presented as obsessive, controlling, and a destroyer of their weak husbands as in Mo Yan (莫言), *Beautiful Breasts, Beautiful Buttocks* (丰乳肥臀 *Feng ru fei tun*, 1996). Most express a fascination with a slim waist and thin eyebrows—a Chinese beauty canon since the time of Confucius—and indulge in descriptions of sexual intercourse using Taoist sexual metaphors, such as "dragon fighting," and "tiger marching" as in Li Peifu's (李佩甫) *The Gate of the Sheep* (羊的门 *Yang de men*, 1999) (Sheng 2010, ch. 8). The popularity of this genre is linked, according to Shen Ying, to the perception of male powerlessness in the face of the rise of female emancipation and prominence in education and business. This is a fact, as the success of girls is exacerbated by the gender imbalance created by the one-child policy and the selective abortion of girls. Indeed, powerlessness is the theme of Jia Pingwa's (贾平凹) untranslated novel *Huainian lang* (怀念狼, 2000), meaning "missing wolves" or "the wolves of the past." This book expresses concern about the disappearance of "wolf men," i.e., men with a strong libido. A hunter Fu Shan is impotent and masturbates to preserve his *Yin*/*Yang* balance. As we have seen, according to Taoist sexual theory, harmony between *Yin* and *Yang* is preserved by absorbing the female "essence" during intercourse, without ejaculation.

Without feminine contact, physical and spiritual death lurks. These anxieties may explain the return of a patriarchal and derogatory characterization of women's sexuality—or their desire for social success—with terms such as *shengnü* (剩女) or "leftover woman," which refers to careerist women who find themselves alone and less "marriageable" after the age of 25 (Ji 2015, 8–9; Shen 2017, 17).

Anuradha Vikram asserts, without demonstrating it, that Yang's portraits of young women in bathing suits in the *International Hotel 6* series (2010) are a stance in favor of women who aspire to independence (Vikram 2013). I argue, in contrast, that this work, showing young sportive women giggling cheerfully in front of the camera like naive schoolgirls is geared at the male viewer. The presence of some of these images in the collection of Qiao Zhibing (乔志兵), owner of Shanghai Night, a very successful karaoke bar on the Caobao Road area, and their display in one of the private lounges (Figures 8 and 9), where male customers are led by hostesses dressed as soubrettes, suggests that indeed their function is ambiguous: the photography of these models in bathing costumes, smiling to the camera much like "New Women" of the 1930s, are hanged over velvet sofas, in a subdued lighting. They appear in this context to second the décor geared towards the male clients. According to the scheme proposed by Laura Mulvey (1975, 11) in *Visual Pleasure and Cinema*: "the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work withing the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him."

Figure 8: Image of a Shanghai Night salon with three photographs by Yang Fudong (left: *Hotel International*, 2010; center and right: *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, 2003–2007)

(Source: Courtesy of Qia Zhibing's collection)

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Figure 9: Yang Fudong, *Hotel International*, 2010, in a private salon of Shanghai Night
(Source: Photograph by the author)

Yang's depiction of the "New Women" of the 1930s as fascinating, elusive, and also dangerous to men suggest therefore an unease in the confrontation with contemporary feminine power as a danger to the masculine spiritual balance, much aligned with New Confucianism's most conservative aspects. Yet his definition of the feminine as an ideal "part of the human soul" suggests a more Daoist dimension and a search for a lost *Yin*/*Yang* balance is also at play.

5. In search of the *Yin* of the male soul

Unlike the "religions of the Book," the position of Neo-Confucianism, inspired by Daoism, was that the feminine spirit (*Yin*) is as important as the masculine (*Yang*) for the spiritual and social vitality of men (Mclachlan 2021). Long before Carl Jung's proposals on the existence of a feminine aspect (*anima*) in the male psyche (1989, 391), and on the nutritive, transformative role of the feminine, symbolized by the alembic of alchemy (Jung 1989, 200), Daoism recognized this duality of the feminine and the masculine in the cosmic and microcosmic order, as expressed in particular in the *Secret of the Golden Flower* (太乙金華宗旨 *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi*, 1688–1692), as Jung himself acknowledges (Jung 1989, 197). Hence, at a social level, *Yin* is feminine, black, the absence of energy, and death and on a cosmic level, the balance between *Yin* and *Yang*, between passivity and activity, between desire and moderation (in sexual appetite, willpower) is a source of longevity (Fu and Wang 2015). In *Women*

in Daoism, Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn (2003, 19) even suggest that women, as bearers of life, have a special link with the Dao.

Yang Fudong's preoccupation with the feminine could be a search for such a *Yin/Yang* balance, harmonious masculinity, aimed at repairing the current situation of wandering men, too *yin*, or absorbed in their work, too *yang*. There are the men in office suits in *Tonight Moon*, meditating in front of water and plants (*Yin*); the male character in *Liu lan* (2003), an urbanite in love with a peasant woman. The woman is active (*Yang*), embroidering and fishing on calm water in a misty landscape (*Yin*); the man dressed in a white summer suit, wearing an oversized white (*Yin*) scarf, stares at her idly, while a popular song proclaims that lovers are always separated.

Another film, *Ye jiang/The Nightman Cometh* (2011), is undoubtedly the paragon of these representations of a lost masculinity symbolized by the omnipresence of white and death. Yang depicts an old general contemplating his defeat on a desolate snow-covered plain. A young princess comes along dressed in white, representing purity, like the deer that accompanies her; she is followed by a middle-aged woman, dressed in a white cocktail dress, together with an ephebe also dressed in an unlikely white suit. Their summer chic attire and the bewildered look they cast on the stage,[12] are an allegory of the capitalist, westernized Shanghai of the 1930s, which for Yang is a *topos* of decadence. Effeminate, maladjusted, coward, and selfish (in comparison to the grand detachment of the general), they wear the color of death in this snowy landscape.

With their languid appearance, strange postures, and sophisticated clothes, the *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (竹林七贤 *Zhulin qi xian*, 2003–2007) are also images of lost masculinity. At once androgynous and powerless, they walk with nonchalance, sophisticated elegance, and dependency through a rural environment. The artist says they are on a kind of road movie in search of beauty (Yang 2017). The M+ museum in Hong Kong, which owns one of these video artworks, writes that they are focused "not on nation-building, but on self-definition" (Blair 2019). This melancholic work is, according to the artist, influenced by the paintings of the reclusive painters Ni Zan (倪瓚, 1301–1374) and Shi Tao (Yang 2017). Both artists lived during periods of turmoil and retired in exile in a rural setting. Ni Zan's painting *Six Gentlemen* (六君子图 *Liu junzi tu*, 1345, see Figure 10) bears witness to this.

12 See some images at: http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitions/traderoutes/yang-fudong.html.

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Figure 10: Ni Zan, *Six Gentlemen*, 1345, Yuan dynasty, ink on paper, 61.9 x 33.3 cm

(Source: Shanghai Museum Collection; public domain)

Depicting six trees isolated on an island, it precisely illustrates the idea of the resilience of learned monks in the face of political and spiritual change, which corresponds to the work of Yang, whose "intellectuals" are referred to in the original title as *xian* (贤, "scholars and sages") (Svalkoff 2010, 6). Their fashionable and expensive clothes (from famous brands including Burberry) borrow from Shi Tao's taste for refinement and express a search for literary sophistication and poetic beauty (Vial Kayser 2015).

The artist's discourse and personal demeanor evoke the *caizi* (才子), or the talented scholar, the archetype of masculinity in the classic period, different from the warrior but just as respected. A portrait of this "successful literati" can be found in the cinema of the Han Han (Hunt 2020, 34) such as *The Continent* (後會無期 *Hou hui wu qi*, 2014), which tells the journey of three men in search of "re-virilization." During the journey, Jiang Hu, a sensitive-looking scholar with large round glasses

and a soft voice (Hunt 2020, 34–35) grows in self-confidence, thus becoming successful with women and wealthy. Pamela Hunt (2020, 34–35) describes the film as "a journey in search of an ideal masculinity that seemed lost," "a space for the (re)construction of an authentic and dominant masculinity in the face of the crisis [of virility]."

The seven intellectuals in Yang's artwork include two women. No sexual or sentimental interaction between men and women is suggested as if the spiritual "road" journey implied celibacy and chastity. The danger of the feminine as *Yin*/white/water/death is looming, however, as in the portrait of the main model, immersed in a white bathtub on a beach, staring at the viewer with her dark, unfathomable gaze (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, Part IV*, 2006, photograph, 120 × 180 cm

(Source: Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery)

In this series, a Daoist/cosmological connotation also appears in the way the wanderers' journey is associated with the elements: water and earth obviously, but also wood (trees), iron (in the peasant instruments they inefficiently use). This association gives a definite cosmic flavor to the series that evokes the Daoist concept of *wuji* (无极, "limitless, primordial state, no energy") (Zhang 2002, 14), which moved into a sense of "completion" in the writings of the Neo Confucian philosopher Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐, 1017–1073) (Lindèn 2011, 167–168). The elements form a dynamic diagram in which the union of the two sexes result in the production of myriads of beings, and thus "give rise to the phenomenal world" (Lindèn 2011, 167–168).

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6. Conclusion: Yang Fudong and *The Dream in the Red Chamber*

My analysis aims to highlight this dual aspect in Yang Fudong's work, which seems to offer both praise and fear of the feminine. This ambivalence can be explained by the fact that the 2000s coincided with the emergence of a new Chinese feminism, a crisis of masculinity in China, and a renewed interest in New Confucianism as an alternative to Western modernization. In this respect, the artist seems to be part of a conservative trend aimed at re-establishing a dominant masculinity that has been jeopardized by the educational and professional success of women—a trend that is in line with the government's concerns (Gang et al. 2021), and of which the film-maker Han Han is a well-known example (Hunt 2020). In contrast to these calls for virile masculinity, however, the artist also expresses a desire to rebuild masculinity through an aesthetics suffused with literati references to the feminine as a spiritual principle. The figure of the *caizi* as the poet intellectual with a feminine soul, with an elegant but nonchalant demeanor, regains agency over the Western "businessman."

The ambivalence at the heart of Yang's work echoes Cao Xueqin's famous eighteenth-century novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber*. This novel has recently been regarded by Chinese critics as "feminist" and "progressive," an anticipated version of the works of Lu Xun and Mao Dun (Edwards 1990, 407). These claims are based on the portrayal of women by the main character, the effeminate Jia Baoyu, who celebrates femininity as a higher cosmic principle, as can be seen in chapter 20, quoted by Louise Edwards:

> As a result of this upbringing [among girls], he [Baoyu] had come to the conclusion that the pure essence of humanity was concentrated in the female of the species and that the males were its mere dregs and offscourings. To him, therefore, all members of his own sex without distinction were mere brutes who might just as well not have existed. (Cao 1978, 407–408, quoted in Edwards 1990, 410–411)

In this novel, pre-pubertal girls are the carriers of this cosmic harmonious ideal. They are "fairies," while married and elderly women, and cantankerous nannies are impure because of their sex life; they are "monstrous demons" who disrupt this harmony because they are cruel, jealous, envious, and angry. The "fairies" who concern themselves only with poetry and music, are the keepers of the cosmic order as long as they stay away from power, which, according to the Qing value system, "corrupts" (Edwards 1990, 408). Hence, fairies in the novel are powerful, they behold the secret of life but must be confined to their apartments, in divine seclusion.

Figure 12: Yang Fudong, *The Colored Sky: New Women II*, 2014, photograph

(Source: Courtesy of the artist and ShanghART Gallery)

As in *Dream in the Red Chamber*, Yang's depiction of women contains a condemnation of the lustfulness of New Women/Modern Girls and praise of the transcendent femininity of young girls like the young princess in *Yie Jiang* or the starlets in *The Colored Sky: New Women II*, 2014 (Figure 12). In this second work, multiple-colored screens reminiscent of candy wrappers (and of childhood sweats) project a warm light on the bodies of young girls in swimming costumes (Yang 2015). Sexual symbols surround them: shells with openings resembling the female sex, turgid cacti, and a viscous snake. A false deer and a horse appear, which, according to the artist, is a quotation from a traditional fable, "Show a Deer and Call It a Horse" (指鹿为马 *Zhi lu wei ma*), from the Qin dynasty (221–206 B.C.E.), the equivalent of "The Emperor's New Clothes," which talks about what is false and what is true (Anonymous 2015). Yang opposes the false reality of the colored screens, of the deer with the purity of young girls who, in his opinion, hold a "special secret" (Yang 2015), as do the "fairies" in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*.[13]

[13] Edwards (1990, 427, note 11) notes that "the conflation of the goddess and the whore within Chinese culture is also revealed in the word *shennü*, which the *Cihai* explains has long meant both goddess and prostitute."

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Hence, it appears that the desire and fear of the feminine, that is a leitmotif in Yang's work, are part of a more general crisis of masculinity in China, threatened by both the rise of women's power, and the loss of the value of the feminine in men forced to emulate the Western macho, virile model. Incidentally, my analysis sheds light on the meaning of Xu Zhen's (徐震, b. 1977)' work, *The Problem of Color,* presented in *A Useful Life*. It shows a naked man of sculptural elegance, photographed from behind, a trickle of blood running down his thighs, suggesting castration or menstruation, we do not know. According to the artist, the work exudes a sense of beauty: "There is nothing abject in these pictures, but rather an insistence on beauty" (Xu Zhen, quoted in Pirotte 2012, 99). Perhaps the beauty in Xu Zhen, as in Yang's works, comes from the feminization of the male body, and from the resistance to de-virilization that strikes a balance of *Yin* and *Yang* in the male spirit.

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