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# INTRODUCTION



*Whether in the past or the present, language is always a domain of politics because it is inextricably linked with human interactions. Language always resides in tangible things, so each time, we must listen attentively, delving into the deeper meanings beneath the words. In a relationship that's inseparable from actions, a statement might be easily accepted or might be hard to accept; it might be beautiful or ugly, good or bad. In essence, in every utterance, that is, in every act of speaking, there are other eyes watching.*

*-Herta Müller, The King Bows and Kills, 2003<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Müller, Herta. Der König verneigt Sich und tötet. Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2010.). Translations are by Yichen Wei, unless otherwise attributed.



Resistance is not only manifested in overt actions but also resides in the most subtle narratives, which are often hidden and encrypted. For marginalized groups, the art of “hiding in plain sight”<sup>2</sup> is particularly evident. Faced with formidable power structures, they need to find covert means of expression. For feminists, this concealed non-cooperation and solidarity attests to their resilience, creativity, and intent, indicating their desire to effect change in a world that often tries to silence them.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott introduces the concept of “Hidden Transcripts.”<sup>3</sup> While this concept was initially developed by Scott in his late 20th-century research on rural Southeast Asia, it remains relevant for understanding the dynamics of domination and resistance within women's narratives today. Hidden transcripts are not only forms of expression that subordinates often find themselves compelled to use, but they also constitute the substratum of politics and ideology. They are not merely a discourse, gesture, or symbolic expression but also serve as the basis for practical action.

This thesis delves into these covert communication methods, revealing the intricate interplay between symbols, language, and images as tools of resistance. Through hidden narratives, this research exposes the layers of feminist expression embedded within cultural and societal narratives, embarks on a journey to unveil these secret modes of communication, presenting a multidimensional exploration that showcases how women throughout history and across various cultures have employed encrypted languages and unique strategies to assert their presence, share their experiences, and challenge the status quo.

As I grew up, China's social environment and policies underwent rapid and often unpredictable changes. The advent of the internet age brought decentralized and de-authoritarianized information channels in unprecedented ways, only to be met with control and suppression. With the development of the internet and society, feminism also grew amidst resistance and misunderstanding. Through explorations and observations, probably before I was sure about what feminism exactly represented, some seeds had already been planted in my mind. Starting in 2010, platforms like Google and Instagram, which could connect to the international internet, began to be gradually blocked by China's internet firewall. In 2018, #MeToo began with a tweet, triggering a global conversation about women's experiences of sexual assault and harassment. This conversation also spread widely on Chinese social media.

2 “Hidden in Plain Sight; Artist Amy Suo Wu on Steganography.” YouTube, February 25, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJRDxNqjGH8>.

3 Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009.

4 The concept of Orientalism, introduced by the British-educated scholar Edward Said in his seminal 1978 work "Orientalism," represents a mental construct employed by Western powers to exert control over Eastern regions. It serves as a reimagined form of discourse that facilitates imperialist control, yet it can also be viewed as a mode of resistance within the context of postcolonial critique.

5 "Orientalism" traditionally encompassed the study of the broad Orient, including East Asian and Islamic civilizations. However, Said's work primarily focuses on the Middle East, or the Islamic and Arab worlds. Historically, Europe equated the "Orient" with Islamic regions until wider Asian discovery in the late 18th century expanded the term. Nevertheless, in Said's analysis, "Orientalism" signifies Western engagement with the Middle East, encompassing scholarly research, literature, trade, and political ambitions.

When Said refers to "the West" or "the Western," he is typically addressing the geopolitical and cultural concept of Western societies, primarily those in Europe and North America, which have historically held economic, military, and political power on the global stage.

6 Said, Edward W. "Orientalism." *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 162 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41397448>.

On one hand, I witnessed how women on the internet who attempted to share their traumas were met with insults, skepticism, arguments, and censorship. But on the other hand, there was also an abundance of empathy and support with individuals who stood up like guiding stars leading their fellow companions - like subtle undercurrents beneath a calm surface. I recognized the significance of women's narratives in giving voice to previously silenced aspects of women's experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of women's lives and identities. Moreover, this mode of expression gradually extended from virtual spaces into real-world public spheres, forming a resistance to centers of power. In China, social media platforms at that time prompted people to invent methods to evade censorship, such as using emojis to replace sensitive keywords, which I will delve into in subsequent sections.

I changed countries twice for my education after graduating from high school in Beijing, from the U.S. to France. With each change of location, I have become immersed in vastly different ideologies. My feelings are often conflicted and segmented because even though I am geographically distant from China, my online habits and social media browsing predominantly revolve around my mother tongue. Simultaneously, I have the opportunity to access information from beyond the "Great Firewall." During the tumultuous years of the COVID-19 pandemic, this experience became particularly pronounced. I also witnessed how national boundaries became even more insurmountable, the constraints on personal freedom, the cognitive disparities caused by information gaps, and how individuals of various social statuses, marginalized groups, and even animals have navigated survival in the midst of this catastrophe.

In this juncture of reflection, It's also interesting to mention here that, as an Asian woman, I find myself entwined in the parallels between Orientalism<sup>4</sup> and Feminism.

Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient<sup>5</sup> – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing, views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, in today's globalized world, the blending and embrace of cultures have intensified, but the undertones of power struggles and entrenched stereotypes persist. Many Asians residing in Europe would attest to the familiar encounter, where like NPCs in a game,

Westerners sporadically greet them with a “nihao” or “konichiwa”.

In the writings of Japanese sociologist Chizuko Ueno, *Deconstructing the World with Gender*, she states that the East has been gendered, often depicted as the feminine counterpart.<sup>7</sup> While the East is not mute, its voice, if not in the dominant Western tongue, often goes unheard. Without adopting the language of the dominant, our narratives risk being silenced. Even critiques against these power centers, if not articulated in their dialect, fall on deaf ears. The West assigns the East a “historical role” or a designated seat, appreciating its aesthetics and sensual pleasures, but seldom expecting or allowing more. The language of women and the East, shaped and imagined from opposing narratives, remains an object to be gazed at.

Later, in my first year at HEAR, while taking a typography class as part of my graphic design studies, I came across the case of Nüshu in *A Cookbook of Invisible Writing*<sup>8</sup> by Amy Suo Wu. This discovery deeply moved me. Nüshu is a unique script and writing system that was developed and used exclusively by women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. It dates back over a thousand years and is often referred to as “women's script”. Nüshu was a secret form of communication among women in a society where they had limited access to education and opportunities for self-expression.

This case made me deeply aware of the connection across time and space. It turns out that stories that unfolded in different eras exhibit similarities. Despite employing entirely different visual symbols and modes of dissemination, the surprising commonality lies in the desire for greater freedom of expression within a backdrop of unequal power dynamics.

I witnessed vitality and aesthetic beauty intertwined with resistance in these narratives, leaving me profoundly moved. Even more astonishing is that this kind of case was my first encounter with it, all within the pages of a non-native language book. This sense of wonder reflects that such narratives were not part of the mainstream in my educational background. Coupled with my observations and experiences related to the censorship of LGBTQ+ content on the Chinese internet and movements like #MeToo, I began to develop a deeper interest in this subject.

Therefore, during my research. I aim to explore how women employ various strategies to confront power, foster communication, and establish spaces for self-expression and safety. These covert narratives serve as sanctuaries, like an onsen<sup>9</sup>, where solace and

7 Ueno, Chizuko. *Onna No Shisō: Watashitachi wa Anata o Wasurenai(-Women's Thoughts: We Will not Forget You)*. Tōkyō: Shūeisha, 2016.

8 Wu, Amy Suo. *A cookbook of invisible writing*. Eindhoven: Onomatopee, 2019.

9 “Onsen” refers to a Japanese hot spring. Due to Japan's seismic and volcanic activity, the country has many natural hot springs believed to have health benefits. Onsen baths can be indoors or outdoors and are culturally significant places for relaxation and therapy. Visitors must wash before entering, and facilities are typically separated by gender.

self-renewal can be found. To comprehend the strategies behind these languages and their design, we must consider the intricate interplay of environmental and cultural factors that influence decision-making. By scrutinizing the indirect nature of these strategies, we can reflect on their efficacy in conveying messages and resisting power. Moreover, shifts in modes of information acquisition have significantly influenced the shaping of these strategies, adding additional layers of complexity to the discourse. I wish to delve into the distinct forms of these strategies, considering their effectiveness. How have the intricate interactions of environmental and cultural factors molded these covert narratives? What's with the indirection, and why? How do these strategies enable one to respond to and resist power, carving out personal narratives and safe spaces?

While pondering these questions, I've encountered a series of cases ranging from secret scripts like Nūshu, used centuries ago, to modern memes and emoji languages. The need to create safe harbors for communication has proven the resilience of the female spirit. In *Language as Shelter*, we rediscover long-standing scripts like Nūshu and Hiragana, which allowed women to document their lives, sharing their sorrows, joys, and dreams, even within oppressive societies.

The section *Presenting Absence* examines the artful juxtaposition of the spoken and the unspoken. Through specific poetry, Italian feminism, and the perspectives of contemporary artists like Amy Suo Wu and Cao Fei, we understand how absence itself becomes a profound statement.

In the digital age, the landscape of resistance evolves into the vast expanse of cyberspace. The section *Creating a Space* unveils emerging modes of online feminist discourse, from memes to emojis, to the burgeoning domain of cyberfeminism. Yet, even in the throes of this digital revolution, the essence of community remains paramount. Be it through the radical pages of “Seitō” magazine, the pulsating rhythms of underground clubs, or the vibrant energy of Boloho, the creation and sustenance of communal spaces emerge as the linchpin of the resistance narrative.

The journey through this study is an invitation to reflect upon the resilience showcased by women across time and space. We embark on this journey to uncover tales of quiet yet unyielding strength, of women who raised their voices even when they weren't heard, their messages still echoing loud and clear to this day.



# 1. LANGUAGE AS SHELTER



*Historically, women have been taught by men that they should ally with males of the same societal category rather than connect with women from other groups, and to compete against women from other factions. Thus, it's not that differences were newly discovered among “women” but rather, such differences have always existed among them. However, one might argue that the construct of the term “women” made it possible for the first time in history to engage in collective discourse that transcends these differences... The bond “among women” is not inherent but is constructed and recognized through language. We could also argue that the concept of “women” is a product of fighting fire with fire; it leverages the method of “deconstruction” to construct a collective identity through language.*

*-Chizuko Ueno, Women's Thoughts: We Will Not Forget You, 2016<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Ueno, Chizuko. Onna No Shisō: Watashitachi wa Anata o Wasurenai (Women's Thoughts: We Will not Forget You). Tōkyō: Shūeisha, 2016.



# 1.1 NÜSHU

Our investigation begins with *Nüshu*. *Nüshu*, also known as “women’s writing” or “women’s script,” is a syllabic script created and used by women in Jiangyong, a small agricultural region in the southeast of Hunan prefecture, China, as a means of communication during times when traditional reading and writing were either forbidden or inaccessible to them. In ancient China, women were excluded from receiving

standard education until the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).<sup>11</sup> Women were not allowed to read or write Chinese. Literacy in China was at a very low rate, for both men and women (literacy rates for women were very likely even lower than for men) even until the 1950s, and was a privilege given only to the imperial family, nobility, administration, and academics (exclusively men, apart from a handful of high ranking women in the imperial family).

During the feudal era, a significant portion of women’s social culture in the Jiangyong region involved activities

such as gathering to create *Nüshu*, engaging in embroidery (women’s handiwork), and reciting or singing *Nüshu* stories. During this time, the “song halls” served as their informal schools. In a patriarchal agrarian society that followed the cultural norms of the Han Dynasty, men were responsible for laboring in the fields while women’s primary role was to be virtuous wives and nurturing mothers. Girls were raised with the expectation of marriage and the eventual separation from their natal family and village<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, the practice of foot binding<sup>13</sup> was prevalent, which was a deformity and cruel aesthetic preference of the time.

*Nüshu* is a phonetic script, where each character represents a syllable and is used to record the local dialect. The *Nüshu* language system is like the Hiragana script in Japanese, where, when the dialect shares the same pronunciation, often a single character is used to represent it, and one character can convey multiple meanings. This uniqueness results in a much smaller character set



Fig. 1 Locality of where *Nüshu* is used

11 Leung, Christie K. K. “Women Who Found A Way Creating a Women’s Language.” *Off Our Backs*, vol. 33, no. 11/12, 2003, pp. 40. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20837958>. Accessed 2 October 2023..

12 Ibid.

13 Foot binding was the Chinese custom of breaking and tightly binding the feet of young girls in order to change their shape and size. In late imperial China, bound feet were considered a status symbol and a mark of feminine beauty. However, footbinding was a painful practice that limited the mobility of women and resulted in lifelong disabilities. (“Foot Binding.” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, November 6, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot\\_binding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foot_binding))

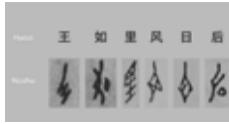


Fig. 2 Comparison between hanzi and Nüshu

14 Ibid.



Fig. 3 Nüshu calligraphy by Wang Chengxi, in Beijing

15 McLaren, Anne. "Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese Nüshu Writing." *Modern China*, vol. 22, no. 4, 1996, pp. 382–416. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189302>. Accessed 9 October 2023.

16 Wu, Amy Suo, *A Cookbook of Invisible Writing*. Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2019.

needed for Nüshu compared to the ideographic Chinese characters. However, readers can only understand text written in Nüshu when they grasp the dialect and context.

Distinct from traditional Chinese characters, Nüshu exhibits elongated and elegant lines. Its aesthetic allure is emphasized by delicate strokes, diamond shapes, and specific dots. Nüshu's characters lean at a unique slant, influenced by the embroidery practices of the local women, as they found a 45-degree angle to be the most ergonomic during their daily embroidery tasks.

The glyphs of Nüshu were inspired by the shapes and features of Chinese characters (they used what they could see around them)<sup>14</sup>. Many Nüshu characters are even distorted versions of Chinese characters, along with many other non-Hanzi-related glyphs at all. Nüshu's writing style was not systematically standardized, and its transmission typically occurred through the teachings of mothers to their daughters.

Compared to Chinese characters, which have a complex structure with strokes that occupy relatively large spaces that extend in various directions, with various stroke thicknesses due to different calligraphic brush strokes[fig.], Nüshu is considerably simpler. It lacks strict vertical or horizontal strokes, featuring mainly curved diagonals and straight lines (circles are formed by two curved lines). There are no punctuation marks and are relatively monolinear.

Within the community, Nüshu served as more than just a script. It allowed women to document their lives, express their feelings through poetry and stories, and communicate with their "sworn sisters"—creating a sense of sorority. These practices played an important role in fostering social cohesion, enabling women to establish autonomous communities and a strong sense of belonging. The Nüshu corpus is composed almost entirely in highly formulaic verse. The lines repeat over and over again the fundamental self-images of women in this community. These images of women's subordination, inferiority, and powerlessness are nonetheless exalted and celebrated in the recitation as a heroic overcoming of adversity.<sup>15</sup>

Women developed this alternative script, not to undermine systems of oppression, but rather as a coping mechanism. Nüshu was never meant to be a secret or to explicitly exclude men. Rather, it was men in the community who were indifferent to it.<sup>16</sup> The development of this gender-specific script in this region of China is still debated among scholars. However, factors like the close bonds between women, gender-based labor division, and a rich tradition of women's

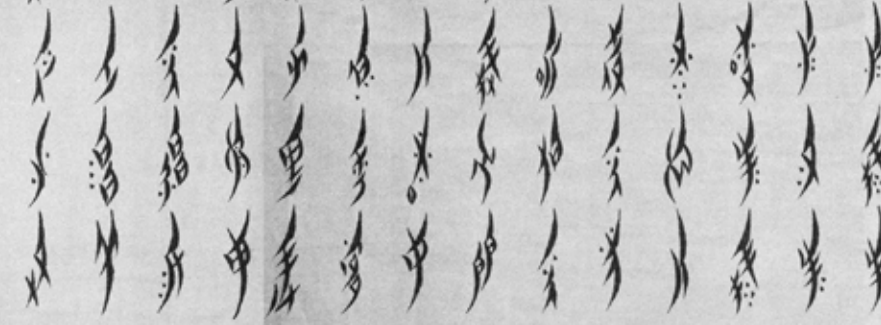


Fig. 4 Details of "Reply to Li Shuyi", written by Mao Zedong in 1957.

festivals all played a role in promoting Nüshu writings.

Sociologist Fei Xiaotong, in *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*<sup>17</sup> analyzed from spatial and temporal perspectives why written language was not essential in China's rural communities compared to urban societies. Fei Xiaotong mentions that the structure of rural communities was built upon kinship, neighborly, and geographical relationships. These communities were relatively closed off, with people's daily interactions predominantly occurring with those immediately around them and fewer exchanges with the external world. Against such a backdrop, oral traditions and face-to-face interactions became the primary modes of information dissemination.

*"However, not all words need to be written. Writing involves symbols that can be seen with the eyes, that is, characters. Words are not necessarily carved or written symbols; they can also be symbols spoken out loud, language. Every culture cannot be without 'words,' but not necessarily with 'written language.' I say this because I want to clarify that the rural society I'm referring to is, in large part, a society without 'written language.'"*<sup>18</sup>

17 Fei, Xiaotong. *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. 1st ed. University of California Press, 1992. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn6km>.

18 Ibid.

Based on his description, we can explore from another angle the reasons behind the emergence of Nüshu as a phonetic script. The women of Jiangyong, Hunan, as a more secluded group, did not invent Nüshu to convey complex abstract concepts or construct a comprehensive written language system. Instead, it was developed to document, communicate, and share everyday matters, emotions, and stories. Therefore, it was designed based on pronunciation rather than meaning, making it easier to understand and use within that community. The appearance of Nüshu was both a supplement and extension to the traditional modes of information exchange in rural communities

and a response to the specific needs of a particular group. As Fei said, “In every unique living community, there exists their unique language, with many phrases that other languages cannot translate. In face-to-face situations, sometimes these phrases convey emotions and intentions more easily than voice alone. Even when using language, it is always closely combined with other symbolic materials.” Though in his description, he does not specifically refer to women.



Fig. 5 The inheritor of Nüshu, He Yanxin, is writing in Nüshu.

Starting from the 1980s, with the dedicated efforts of several generations of scholars, this female script gradually gained recognition and attention worldwide. In 2016, Unicode officially

decided to incorporate Nüshu, which was subsequently released in Unicode 10.0. In 2020<sup>19</sup>, French-Chinese designer Lisa Huang completed Noto Sans Nüshu. In typeface design, attention to detail and uniformity of shapes are paramount. To ensure the consistency of shapes across an entire digital font set, she extracted the most prevalent features from various documents and samples, conducting an in-depth analysis of handwritten characters. For an accurate and authentic representation of the original Nüshu character forms, she undertook extensive research, including visits to the Nüshu Museum in Jiangyong, where she studied Nüshu texts and engaged with local Nüshu practitioners to gain further professional insights.<sup>20</sup>

19 Noto Sans Nüshu, type design with multiple unknowns. Accessed 9 October 2023. <https://www.lisahuang.work/noto-sans-nueshu-type-design-with-multiple-unknowns>.

20 Ibid

With increasing studies of Nüshu in recent years, documentaries and cultural products related to Nüshu have also emerged. These media have diversified the means of spreading Nüshu, increasing its outreach and visibility. However, at this stage, Nüshu is primarily used as a decorative symbol. In the 2022 documentary *Hidden Letters*, a particularly memorable moment for me was when Hu Xin, one of the female protagonists and an heir of Nüshu, embarked on a promotional tour, writing Nüshu in different locations. During this journey, only her grandmother, who possessed an understanding of Nüshu, could identify and correct her errors. Even though Nüshu is now exposed, visible, and being examined, it remains an enigmatic and elusive script for most.



Fig. 6 Nüshu calligraphy by Wang Chengxi, in Beijing

Therefore, in the present time when the lineage of language transmitters has been lost, Nüshu, as a language, might no longer serve

its original function and might be seen as a spectacle in the modern eyes. However, in its time, as a communication tool responding to the lack of educational opportunities and gender restrictions, Nüshu was not only a variant of Chinese characters but was also closely connected to the daily lives and customs of women in the region by its design and transmission. Nüshu represents a subculture, contrasting the male-centric mainstream culture of the old system.<sup>21</sup>The convergence of the psychology and culture of oppressed women at the bottom of society endowed Nüshu with strong cohesion and ensured its survival. Nüshu distinguishes itself from traditional Chinese characters with its unique syllabic nature and visual aesthetic charm, and when combined with the face-to-face interaction patterns of rural communities, it offered the women of Jiangyong a distinctive mode of communication and emotional expression. Nüshu scripts are written as a cohesive whole; their form is beautiful and delicate, the design is unique, neat, and balanced. Women used Nüshu to write poetry and literature, establishing a romantic spiritual kingdom grounded in their real-life hardships, thereby presenting us with a special aesthetic value.

21 "Nüshu Script - Alchetron, the Free Social Encyclopedia." Alchetron.com, December 17, 2022. <https://alchetron.com/N%C3%BCshu-script>.



Fig. 7 Noto sans Nüshu

## 1.2 HIRAGANA

*Whereas western feminists seek out sisterhood and are excited to discover a women's space and and culture in history, Japanese women have always found it already available. The feminist: anthropologist, Michelle Rosaldo, argued in 1974 that women's autonomy is a positive aspect of gender segregation, but: that: gender segregation works negatively as well, when it excludes women from the spheres of power and resources. Japanese women, especially housewives, benefit from a system of gender segregation which consolidates an autonomous space for women in society, as I myself concluded from a survey conducted by grassroots women networkers among activist housewives.*

*-Chizuko Ueno, The Making of a History of Feminism in Japan, 1996<sup>22</sup>*

<sup>22</sup> Ueno, Chizuko. 1996. "The Making of a History of Feminism in Japan." Asian Journal of Women's Studies 2, no. 1.pp.170-191. doi:10.1080/12259276.1996.11665781.



Fig. 8 Murasaki Shikibu: Genji Monogatari, Written text from the earliest illustrated handscroll (12th century)

In a similar vein to Nūshu, during the Heian period(794-1185), women were discouraged from learning Chinese script due to societal and cultural constraints, since it was considered the official, male-dominated, and academic writing language of the time. Instead, women turned to *Hiragana*, a writing system based on spoken Japanese, as a means to express their emotions in waka poetry and literature. While positioned as informal and secondary characters in contrast to the formal and official Chinese characters, hiragana continued to be used and refined, ultimately becoming an integral part of the Japanese language.<sup>23</sup>

The modern Japanese writing system uses a combination of logographic kanji, which are adopted Chinese characters, and syllabic kana. Kana itself consists of a pair of syllabaries: hiragana, used primarily for native or naturalised Japanese words and grammatical elements; and katakana, used primarily for foreign words and names, loanwords, onomatopoeia, scientific names, and sometimes for emphasis. Almost all written Japanese sentences contain a mixture of kanji and kana.<sup>24</sup>

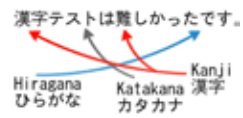


Fig. 9 Japanese writing system

23 Teixeira, Leo. "The Sexist History behind the Development of Hiragana." *Medium*, 2019. <https://medium.com/pomme-de-terre/the-sexist-history-behind-the-development-of-hiragana-e9f5676ab1f>

24 "Japanese Writing System." *Wikipedia*, October 9, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese\\_writing\\_system](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_writing_system).





Fig. 10 Murasaki Shikibu: Genji Monogatari, The Tale of Genji, Chapter 20

Hiragana, was developed during the early to mid-Heian period, from the late 8th to the 10th century. It emerged as a solution to the contradictions and complexities caused from borrowing Chinese characters for written communication while using Japanese for spoken language.

Before the creation of Hiragana, the Japanese utilized *Man'yōgana*, a script based on Chinese characters, to represent possible pronunciations of any given Chinese character. The distinction between *Man'yōgana* and Hiragana lies in the fact that the former does not derive any unique features from Chinese characters but rather selects a subset of these characters to determine one pronunciation or another.<sup>25</sup> Each Hiragana character originates from the cursive script (Sōsho) version of *Man'yōgana* characters — it isn't a writing system in itself but a style of writing. Over time, this style of writing became associated with courtly women and was labeled “Onnade,” literally translated as “women's script.” For a certain period, Chinese characters and Hiragana coexisted, with the choice between them dictated by the author's knowledge and social status. Specifically, men of higher societal standing and reverence primarily employed Chinese characters, while women of relatively lower status gravitated towards Hiragana.<sup>26</sup>

This restriction led to unforeseen outcomes. Many works

25 Endo Oriha, “Women and Script: Hiragana, Han-gul, and Chinese Female Characters”, *Research Annual Report of the Center for Comparative Japanese Studies Education* no. 7.

26 Ibid.



considered classics of ancient Japanese literature were penned by women, such as *The Tale of Genji*<sup>27</sup> and *The Pillow Book*<sup>28</sup>. Female-authored works placed a greater emphasis on emotion and personal experience, contrasting sharply with the historical and philosophical writings prevalent in male literature of the time. This focus on emotion and everyday life imbued Japanese literature with a unique allure and has left a lasting legacy. Their work is not just the pinnacle of Japanese literature but also a testament to the significant role of women in literary creation. Their works provide us with a detailed and emotionally-rich perspective of the Heian era.

Both Hiragana and Nūshu were developed and employed by women who weren't bestowed with Chinese characters — the script of the ruling class. While there was a distinction between scripts that were self-created and those acquired from rulers, both were phonetic scripts crafted under the influence of Chinese characters. The use of Hiragana enabled Japanese women from the Heian period to carve out a unique narrative space for themselves, challenging the male-centric cultural and societal structures. The widespread use of Hiragana and its significance in literature and arts made it a central part of Japanese culture. This suggests that even though the societal structure may have been male-dominated, in the realms of culture and arts, women had redefined their position and influence.

In contemporary Japanese graphic design, the use of Hiragana with its fluid curves offers a contrast to the structured strokes of Kanji characters, leaving the type-setting with breathing spaces.

27 “The Tale of Genji,” (源氏物語 “Genji Monogatari”) by Murasaki Shikibu in the 11th century, is a foundational text in Japanese literature, often recognized as one of the first examples of a novel. Set against the backdrop of the Heian period, it details the life and affairs of Hikaru Genji, an imperial son demoted to commoner status. Through its 54 chapters, the novel delves into the psychological dimensions of its characters and the intricacies of Heian court life, offering a detailed portrayal of the era’s social customs and interpersonal relationships. Wikipedia. 2023. “The Tale of Genji.” Wikimedia Foundation. Last modified November 4, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Tale\\_of\\_Genji](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Tale_of_Genji).

28 “The Pillow Book,” (枕草子, “Makura no Sōshi”) by Sei Shōnagon in the 11th century, is a Japanese literary work from the Heian period, characterized by its journal-like format containing assorted reflections, from essays to poems. Not structured as a single narrative, it presents an array of personal anecdotes and observations, providing insight into the courtly life of the era. Wikipedia. 2023. “The Pillow Book.” Wikimedia Foundation. Last modified November 3, 2023. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Pillow\\_Book](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Pillow_Book)



Fig. 11 Detail of Mesquita Flyer



Fig. 12 Alternative Train, Ryu Mieno



Fig. 13 Nobuko, Wangzhihong



## 2. PRESENTING ABSENCE

Our previous chapter focused on the practical language developed by women in environments characterized by unequal power dynamics. In the realm of art, where creativity knows no bounds, a curious void persists—one that has lingered for centuries. This void is the conspicuous absence of women artists. As we delve into this profound and often overlooked aspect of the art world, we begin to unravel a complex tapestry of challenges, biases, and untold stories. These works are a form of language.

In this chapter, I have curated a collection of art and experimental design works from the modern to the contemporary era. The intent is to analyze the strategies employed by female artists to find their voice within the obscured female narratives. By delving into this domain, I focus on how the voices advocating women's rights are artfully interwoven into their stories, hopes, and challenges, reflecting broader cultural contexts. This chapter aims to weave a narrative that is both non-linear and by no means exhaustive.

The title *Presenting Absence*, draws inspiration from a book published to accompany the first retrospective exhibition of Colombian-born visual artist and sculptor Doris Salcedo. She roots her art in Colombia's social and political landscape, with an elegance and poetic sensibility that balances the gravitas of her subjects, evokes the significance of bearing witness and processes of collective healing.<sup>29</sup>

29 Salcedo, D., Rodrigues J., & Madeleine G. *Doris Salcedo*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

## 2.1 ITALIAN FEMINISM AND CONCRETE POETRY

*I speak here of poetry as the revelation or distillation of experience [...] For women, then, poetry is not a luxury.*

*It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought.*

*-Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, 1977 <sup>30</sup>*



Fig. 14 *Le mie parole (My Words)*, Ketty La Rocca, 1973

Now our focus turns to the story that unfolded in 1970s Italy, a collective experience articulated by Italian female artists of the 60s and 70s, combining text and images. Similar to the two language systems mentioned earlier, they employed non-traditional literary forms such as visual poetry and writing styles to convey their voices and experiences.

In the wake of the economic boom and the student protests, the women's movement took shape in Italy in the early 1970s, voicing demands on a range of issues, from new citizenship rights to a shift in how women were perceived—, as independent and different from men, with their own professional, interpersonal, and cultural specificities.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the decade, feminist groups, collectives, and the movement in general advocated the recognition of housework and care work, and conscious motherhood. In this context, many Italian artists who were exploring behavior, action, and performance were receptive to the new sensibility embodied by



Fig. 15 *Le mie parole e tu?*, Ketty La Rocca, 1971

31 Gallo, Francesca. "Intimacy and Emotions at the Dawn of Performance Art in Italy." *Modern Italy*, 2021, pp. 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2021.12>. p.276

feminism. This sensibility reshaped gender positions, emphasized the importance of the private sphere, and rehabilitated the emotional sphere. Therefore, the social and historical context of Italy in the 1960s and 1970s inspired artists to explore new themes and forms of expression that were more in line with the changing social and cultural landscape of the time.<sup>32</sup>

There was a notable transformation in Italian women's engagement with the visual arts, marking a period where their involvement was both widespread and sustained for the first time. Ketty La Rocca emerged as a seminal figure, infusing her art with language and elements of linguistic change to address the long-standing sidelining of women in the arts. Through her assertion of artistic identity, La Rocca took a stand against the patriarchal norms of the art industry and resonated with the burgeoning self-awareness of the feminist movement.



Fig. 16 Craniologia, 1974, Ketty La Rocca

*Though their work differed in format and media, each of these women combined both language and image. Often, they used language, in particular the linguistic shifter, to confront their historical erasure from artistic professions. Italian women artists embedded their artistic traces in a field of activity traditionally dominated by men, and these declarations of artistic presence harnessed the spirit of self-consciousness of an emerging feminist movement.<sup>33</sup>*

33 Cozz, Leslie, "Notes on the Index, Continued: Italian Feminism and the Art of Mirella Bentivoglio and Ketty La Rocca", *Cahiers d'études italiennes*, 2013, pp. 213-234.

Among her most acclaimed creations is a series of photographs that La Rocca began creating in 1971.. The title of the series, *You*, comes from the text that is scribbled over the images of gesturing hands. La Rocca believed that the language of hand gestures was a more immediate and unmediated mode of communication compared to other types of visual symbols. In this sense, these gestures established a primal and immediate connection between the gesturer and the interpreter, facilitating a conversation between the artist and the viewer. La Rocca overlays these gestures with linguistic shifters, again implicating both the artist and the viewer in complementary, dialogic positions. Thus, the shifter not only establishes identity, it also suggests its instability. Furthermore, the presence of not one but multiple hands throughout La Rocca's work suggests a division, not only between artist and viewer, but within



the artist herself, as she is like the rest of us a subject rendered through language.<sup>34</sup>

The ambiguity of identity that the shifters entail challenged the traditional ways of self-depiction. Ketty La Rocca's *Craniologie* (1973) that presents x-rays of the artist's skull on to which she overlays photographs and written text, are memorials to the simultaneous presence and absence of the female artist.

Throughout the early concrete poetry movement, figures like La Rocca carved a distinctive space for female creators. They collectively sought to "reactivate the atrophied tools of communication," striving to free language from the confines of genre, gender, patriarchy, and normative syntax. Their aim was to awaken the visual and sonic qualities of language and to explore the spatial syntax of poetry, thereby crafting a collective identity anchored in shared practices and a common vision for change.<sup>35</sup>



Fig. 17 *Craniologia*, Ketty La Rocca, 1973

34 Ibid.

35 Balgiu, Alex. *Women in concrete poetry 1959-1979*. Primary Information, 2020.

## 2.2 CAO FEI/ *WHOSE UTOPIA*



Fig. 18 *Whose Utopia*, Cao Fei, Video / 20mins, 2006, Tate Modern

*Whose Utopia* is a video artwork created in 2006 by contemporary artist Cao Fei. This piece was realized in collaboration with the workers from an OSRAM light bulb manufacturing plant in China, juxtaposing machinery in the lightbulb factory with the dreams of the workers.

At the end of 2005, Cao Fei received a commission from Siemens. It was her first opportunity to carry a camera and enter the production line. This took place in a workshop at the Osram lightbulb factory, a subsidiary of Siemens, in which there were up to 4,200 young employees on the assembly line.<sup>36</sup>

In the female workers' dormitory, the artist noticed a set of peacock dance costumes hanging by themselves at the head of a bed. A 16-year-old female worker, who had started working at the factory,

36 Wu, Ruby (Xiaofan). "‘Whose Utopia’ – Cao Fei at the Museum of Modern Art." IFAcontemporary. Accessed 8 October 2023. <https://ifacontemporary.org/whose-utopia-cao-fei/>.

told her that she had always wanted to learn dance but had to work early to support her younger brother's education.<sup>37</sup> This dress was the only thing that had been with her all along. So Cao Fei invited her to perform in front of her camera, in the warehouse where she worked. She put on the dress and danced. The camera recorded her in the dance dress, and in her everyday work attire, with the same spinning movements, overlapping each other. This iconic scene is from Cao Fei's renowned work, *Whose Utopia*.

Over the course of six months of filming, Cao Fei conducted a kind of “factory anthropology,” while distributing 500 surveys to inquire about the workers' interests. From these surveys, she selected 30 workers who expressed an interest in the arts. With these 30 selected workers, she conducted face-to-face art workshops and even organized artistic performances outside of the factory. This led to scenes in the film where the factory floor became a stage and theater, with workers portraying themselves in a natural and unscripted manner.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the “Pearl River Delta” region served as the “world's factory,” driving the rapid economic growth of China's manufacturing sector. However, the conditions of factory workers were often overlooked.

*“It's interesting because it's a lightbulb factory, illuminating our material world, but does it illuminate their inner selves or their lives?”<sup>38</sup>*

In the Pearl River Delta region, girls' education and personal development are often neglected, as Cao mentioned in an interview, “I met a lot of women workers who send money home to support their brothers because in traditional families, boys are considered to be more important, and so the girls' work will support their education. Stories like this are very common.”<sup>39</sup> Her focus is on individual desires, such as these female workers at Osram who serve as microcosms of a whole, and their personal struggles reflecting the collective plight. However, under the pressure of daily routine and mechanical labor, they might not know how to find their own voice.

In 2022, *Whose Utopia* was featured in an exhibition of visual works with the theme of “Protest Sounds” at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris. Alongside the video installation, she recreated in detail the living environment of female workers' dormitories conveying to the viewers, the hobbies and dreams and the three-dimensional

37 “Interview with Cao Fei.” *The White Review*, October 11, 2017. <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-cao-fei/>.

38 Cao Fei: Constructing *Whose Utopia*. M+. Accessed 2 October 2023. <https://www.mplus.org.hk/sc/magazine/cao-fei-constructing-whose-utopia/>.

39 Ibid.

existence of individuals.

Whose Utopia raises a question for us all:

who constructs our utopia?



Fig. 19 Whose Utopia, Cao Fei, Pinault collection, 2022

## 2.3 DORIS SALCEDO/ *ATRABILIARIOS*

Atrabiliarios is an installation work by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo that revolves around themes of violence, suffering, and loss. The title references the Latin expression “atra bilis,” describing the melancholy associated with mourning.<sup>40</sup>

Pointed or round-toed, paired or solitary, these women's leather shoes are placed in niches embedded within the exhibition wall. They are arranged at irregular intervals, resembling a row of unevenly sized windows on the exterior wall of a building. They all bear a dim, hazy light, much like old photographs under a lamp, exuding a subtle, silent melancholy like a still-life painting.

The niches are constructed from white wooden panels and Saint-Gobain plaster. Their original colors are covered with a translucent membrane of cowhide, fixed to the wall outside the niches with surgical sutures. The irregular black stitches, like hand-crafted frames, capture the existence within the niches—the shoes and their owners. These once-worn old empty shoes that once held feet in them, now discarded, symbolize the absence of a body.

Salcedo collected these shoes from the families of the “disappeared.” These individuals, primarily women, mysteriously “disappeared” from their homes during the military conflict in Colombia in the 1980s<sup>41</sup>, leaving no trace behind. No charges were filed, no arrests were recorded, and no bodies were found. While death can be mourned, disappearance leaves an unbearable void for their families. Disappearance is not a resolution but a state of existence suspended forever between the past and the present. These disappearances were a deliberate strategy to weaken and terrify people in order to ensure their silence, a common method of social control in Colombia during the internal conflict between paramilitary forces and guerrillas at the time.

Doris Salcedo's works embody memory in a way that engages the viewer in an emotional exchange with distant others. Her works are open to personal interpretations, but the essential theme is the experience of embodied memory rather than any specific story that might underlie it.



40 “Atrabiliarios.” ICA Boston. Accessed 10 October 2023. <https://www.icaboston.org/art/doris-salcedo/atrabiliarios/>.

41 “Atrabiliarios, 1992-1997 by Doris Salcedo.”, 1992-1997 by Doris Salcedo :: | Art Gallery of NSW. Accessed 9 October 2023. <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/372.1997.a-o/#bibliography>.



Fig. 20 Atrabiliarios, Doris Salcedo, 1992-1997

By constructing these works as a form of memorial and exhibiting them worldwide, Salcedo has given these people a voice. In doing so, our response to their suffering strikes a blow against the dialectics of violence.



Fig. 21 Atrabiliarios, Doris Salcedo, 1992-1997

Salcedo fills these objects with white cement, rendering them mute and utterly dysfunctional. In doing so, she not only depicts the silence enforced by kidnapping but also shows us how this terrifying form of political action makes monsters of us all through our complicity in the silence. These artifacts, filled with history and transformed by the artist's touch, bridge the gap between the past and the present, mending the fractured reality of survivors and sharpening the memory of the disappeared. Through artistic restoration, they mourn and resist.

*"All of my work is based on real experiences. So I try to find individuals who have gone through extreme experiences. That is the point of departure. In this case, it's about the disappeared people in Colombia and how their families never ever hear anything about them. And what I found was a lot of pain located in the individual realm of each house.... In Atrabiliarios I had placed myself exactly there, with minimal resources and working with the most despicable material you can think of. Something that we all feel repelled by. Cow bladders on one hand, and old shoes. We don't like old shoes but nevertheless every time we see a shoe on the street we wonder what happened there. It's the wrong place for that shoe to be. So the materials come from that."*<sup>42</sup>

42 Doris Salcedo. atrabiliarios. 1992-93 | moma. Accessed 3 October 2023. <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/182/2430>.

## 2.4 AMY SUO WU/ *THUNDERCLAP*



Fig. 22 Thunderclap, Amy Suo Wu, 2017

43 Wu, Amy Suo, *A Cookbook of Invisible Writing*. Eindhoven: Onomatopoe, 2019.

Thunderclap employs steganography to publicly redistribute the erased work of Chinese anarcho-feminist He-Yin Zhen (1886–1920) through the medium of clothing accessories. This project is a part-shop, part-sewing workshop, and part-exhibition.<sup>43</sup> Thunderclap embraces Shanzhai fashion, a Chinese trend that blends nonsensical English with QR codes, serving as a covert system for disseminating sensitive knowledge originally designed for a Chinese audience. English is therefore utilized not for semantic understanding but as a decorative symbol signifying Western prestige and modernity. To English speakers, these texts might seem nonsensical or even poetic. (A comparable phenomenon is seen in the West, where Asian tattoos often bear incorrect meanings.) The artist Amy Suo Wu creates ribbons and embroidered patches containing translated English quotes from He-Yin's essays, nested around a QR code. When passersby scan this code, they can download her original Chinese writing. The work takes advantage of the use of English as ornamentation in this context, staging the aestheticization of a foreign language as a steganographic medium. In a similar way, the visual pervasiveness of the QR code inadvertently provides an innocent cover for knowledge to spread.

In her work, Wu integrates seemingly 'apolitical' accessories to subtly spread the knowledge of He-Yin, a figure previously deemed too radical. By incorporating quotes from feminist writings into modern textiles, she elevates He-Yin's contributions back to public attention. Thunderclap is a preliminary exploration within a broader research titled *The New Nüshu*<sup>44</sup>, delving into Chinese feminism, linguistic dynamics, steganography, and publishing within the Chinese milieu.

Amy Suo Wu's research on steganography and Nüshu serves as the primary inspiration for this thesis. Her meticulous observations of Beijing communities infuse her work with a strong sense of local identity. Being born and raised in Beijing myself, I can easily relate to the environments and contexts she describes, which allows me to better grasp the ideas her work aims to convey.

44 "The New Nüshu." Accessed 2 October 2023. <https://thenewNüshu.hotglue.me/>.



## 2.5 YAXIN XUE/ *AUTOBIOGRAPHIES*

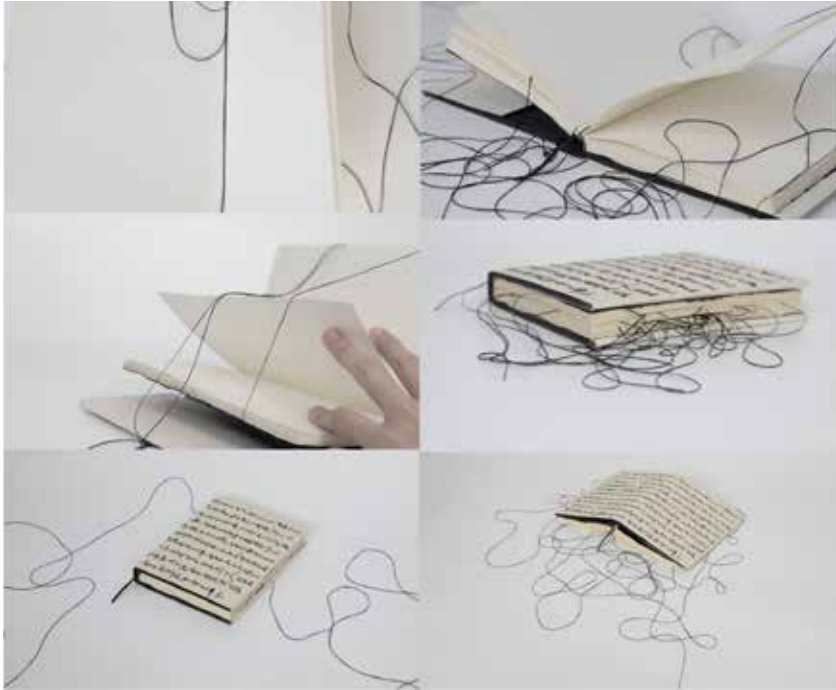


Fig. 23 Autobiographies, Yaxin Xue, 2018

Yaxin Xue, entered the Haute école des arts du Rhin of Strasbourg in 2021, initially pursued her studies in China, Hangzhou, before later moving to France. When I first encountered this work in her studio, my interest was immediately piqued. The book cover features stitched notes in Chinese from her diary, which even fluent Chinese speakers would find indecipherable. The inner pages of the book remain entirely blank, exuding a handmade texture in the paper, but for her, it remains a book rather than a mere notebook. She created this work by intuition, and the following is a dialogue between her and me about this piece.

*‡You said earlier that this book was your first work?*

In the beginning, I didn't consider it as an artwork. We had always been practicing sketching plaster busts and similar exercises until university. Occasionally, there might be some creativity, but it was mostly just drawing photos in a preferred style or doing fan art :).

*‡Are you referring to before the entry exam (for university)?*

Even after the exam and during university, the professional courses were mostly copying or practicing techniques. At that time, I took a course on bookmaking, and the teacher instructed us to make a book in any way we wanted. At that time, there was no mention of making an (artistic) work. I just thought that a book had to have a lot of pages. After I prepared the papers, I wanted it to have rough edges. As I worked on it step by step, I felt hopeful and driven. By the time I reached the cover, I felt that it was like me. This project consistently allowed me to fulfill my desires and project them without restraint... Well, how can I say, it was as if I was understanding myself during the week that we spent together. When I was writing the cover, there was no specific theme for the course, and I wasn't sure if it could be considered an artwork. But it was the first time I fully devoted myself to a period of time with some very tangible materials to do whatever I wanted, and I felt that I expressed something. Initially, it was not included in my portfolio, but one day when I came home and saw it, I suddenly felt that it was the most comfortable work among all my works. Although the process was quite painful, as the cover was my diary and sewn by hand into thick paper, I felt that I was burning together with this artwork.

*‡So the paper is not easily torn by the thread?*

You can touch it... At that time, the school's art supply store had various kinds of paper, and I remember this one was made of plants or something, with primitive ingredients. Also, the paper was the kind that, when you looked at the back, it looked like writing. At that time, I wanted it to be black for some reason.

*‡That suits you well.*

Haha. The reason why I chose this paper at that time was because I didn't want to write any words on the inner pages, but I didn't want it to be just a notebook, it was supposed to be a book. I wanted to make it, um, bring me back to that time and space...I think I was using it as a metaphor for my growth at that time. I would feel like why does it have to be presented in a very classic style or format? I left the inner pages blank to say that I hoped everyone saw something different in it, but on the cover, I wrote "My Story", and I wrote about myself. Yeah, I think it's similar to your (thesis) topic. I wrote it in Chinese, it's still readable content, but I wrote it in a connected manner that even I find it difficult to decipher. In fact, I find it difficult to read even now.

*‡Do you want others to understand the content inside?*

When I was writing, I felt it should be written that way, and all the periods have a small heart shape, as well as all other symbols. When I was writing, I felt a sense of "I'm alive in this world!" and the realization that I can't take anything with me when I die. Then I used this language, which has its limitations, but it's the way I can express myself because organizing language itself is a form of creation and a form of cooperation. The language structure is also man-made. So at first, I didn't think about whether or not to let people read it. It should just be done that way. I think rather than hoping everyone reads the content, I want to use this form to express something that is closer to me.

## 2.6 YUTIE LEE/ *EKSTASE 123*

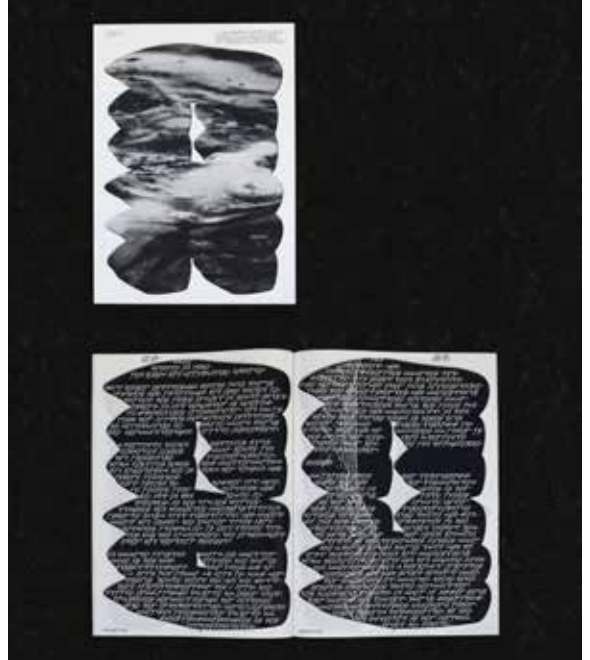


Fig. 24 Ekstase-123, Yutie Lee, Edition taupe, 2018

In Ekstase 123,

Yutie Lee interweaves narratives, both historical and fictional, of three notable women who engaged with coding through distinct approaches.<sup>45</sup> The 20th-century writer Ingeborg Bachmann explored linguistic expressions of pain in her dream notatas between 1962 and 1966. Hedy Lamarr, predominantly recognized as an actress, conceived an encrypted radio remote control during WWII, a technology foundational to contemporary Bluetooth devices. Meanwhile, the medieval abbess and polymath Hildegard von Bingen formulated her unique script and language. This artistic publication by Lee draws inspiration from Hildegard's "litterae ignotae" — a set of 23 secret letters. Building on this, Lee fashioned a digital font, enriched with ten Chinese symbols, adapted stylistically for numerical representation.

45 Yutie Lee, August 26, 2019. <https://www.yutielee.com/category/works/>.



# 3. CREATING A SPACE

In this chapter, I will discuss the roles of diverse spaces in hidden narratives. From digital movements to real-life gatherings that promote connections, these spaces reflect the ever-evolving landscape of women's voices. Digital media has facilitated the reshaping of feminism. Vibrant, youthful, and satirical digital narratives have enhanced the visibility and audience for women's causes. As a social-technological tool, the internet is mediating, contributing to the renewal of engagement forms. Meanwhile, offline spaces offer a different form of expression, especially after the global pandemic that began in 2019, making this experience particularly valuable. More diverse spaces empower marginalized voices with strength and authenticity.

These spaces serve as platforms that allow people to express themselves, share their stories, and challenge the status quo. They are like a sanctuary for the spirit evoking a comforting sense of safety as if immersed in the soothing warmth of steam.

In the digital world, feminist movements still face numerous challenges. To what extent do online environments pose risks to these movements, and how do these risks differ across diverse geographies? Moreover, can we assert that technological advancements have enhanced expressive capacities? It's important to note that feminist activism is intricately embedded within its cultural and political milieu. The ecosystem of connective media is not simply the sum of individual microsystems, but is rather a dynamic infrastructure that shapes and is shaped by the culture at large.<sup>46</sup> This chapter delves into the techniques and contexts that have enabled women to carve out these transformative spaces.

46 Jouë, Josiane. "Digital Feminism: Questioning the Renewal of Activism." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 8, no. 1 (2018): 133. <https://doi.org/10.22381/jrgs8120187>.

# 3.1 CYBERSPACE

## 3.1a MEMES AS STORYTELLING

*Butler's discursive pragmatics says “no” to outlawing hate speech as if it were banning language. She argues that words and concepts carry the load of history, and that instead of “not using/not allowing” them, it is better to keep giving them new meanings by misusing and appropriating them.*

*Whether it is the misuse and appropriation of the hegemon's words to transform them or the strategy of submitting to them, the disruptive discursive practices of what Spivak calls “resistance as obedience and obedience as resistance” are happening all the time. We find that change is already taking place, both consciously and unconsciously.*

*–Chizuko Ueno, Women's Thinking, 2016<sup>47</sup>*

<sup>47</sup> Ueno, Chizuko. Women's thinking (Onna No Shisō: Watashitachi wa Anata o Wasurenai.) Tōkyō: Shūeisha, 2016.



This chapter discusses the alternative narrative method that has emerged within the unique context of Chinese internet culture. As a case study, I have chosen the Douban MEMERS group, which appears on Douban. Douban is a Chinese social networking platform founded in 2005. Initially a social networking site for book reviews and recommendations, Douban has since expanded to include a wide range of areas including movies, music, events, TV series, and group discussions, making it a comprehensive cultural social platform comparable to Facebook Group and IMDb (Internet Movie Database).

The Douban group function serves as a space for people with similar interests. Some groups require members to provide specific reasons for joining which adds a sense of intimacy to this space interaction, creating a different atmosphere distinct from other social platforms like Weibo or TikTok.

Douban MEMERS is an active group with 150,000 members at present. Its unique feature is that you can only post and reply using memes without restrictions on discussion topics. This rule has led to the formation of a very engaging and entertaining ecosystem within the group. The only commonality among group members is their shared interest in creating entertaining MEMES, which serves as a playful medium for blending images and text to convey their emotions, rather than any shared ideological beliefs. This characteristic fosters an inclusive community that remains open to diverse discussions, avoiding the pitfalls of groupthink.

As written in the group's introduction: "This is a place encouraging everyone to express themselves in a humorous way and create original MEMES<sup>48</sup>. MEMES are characterized by their ability to entertain, carry a punchline, exude humor, induce laughter, and effectively convey a narrative that strikes a chord with the audience. They are a unique form of cultural transmission in human society, like biological evolution, gaining power through imitation, reinvention, and widespread sharing.

The deployment of the word "meme" into various disciplinary discourses has far removed the term from its origin (Burman 2012). Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins invented the word in the 1970s to signify what he theorized as an organic, self-replicating, and evolving unit of culture, to explain how "selfish" genes might make selections and account for the resilience of culture as an aspect of biological life (see Dawkins 2006). To qualify as a meme, the entity must be capable of replication, but cannot only reproduce exact copies. In

48 "豆瓣memers."  
豆瓣MEMERS小组.  
Accessed September  
10, 2023. <https://www.douban.com/group/MEMERS/?ref=sidebar>.

49 Kien, Grant. "Memes and Memetic Communication." In *Communicating with Memes Consequences in Post-Truth Civilization*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2021.

addition to self-replication, it must be capable of change, improvement, adaptation to changing environments, and become something other than what it started as. It must leave behind its previous generations, creating a history of development along the way. Memes, like our genetics, happen over time. In short, it must be able to evolve.<sup>49</sup>

The initial image of a MEME must be both simple and universally comprehensible, sometimes even transcending cultural and linguistic barriers to facilitate continuous replication and reinterpretation. It should be capable of eliciting strong emotional resonance in viewers, spurring them to share it eagerly. After consuming a MEME, people often save it on their phones for recurrent use. In doing so, MEMEs serve as powerful vehicles for conveying ideas and offering a buffer for communication. This is the unique influence wielded by a MEME in the realm of humor and expression.

As the group evolved, the female and lesbian members in the group became remarkably active. Since the group's theme is not restricted, the emergence of this phenomenon is somewhat mysterious and has piqued the curiosity and discussions of many members who have noticed it.

Perhaps this phenomenon arises from the attraction of like-minded individuals and the influence of big data algorithms. When members see positive feedback for expressions within the group, such as understanding female struggles and showing equal respect for sexual minority groups, it encourages new members to find the courage to share their own stories.

The post topics revolve around the amusing or vexing aspects of daily life, perhaps touching on subjects that are hard to discuss with those around you, like having a crush on someone of the same sex. At times, discussions on feminism and societal issues pop up, and some members earnestly turn MEMEs into PowerPoint presentations for sincere debates. Members often choose the storytelling mode to craft MEMEs into a narrative sequence, where taking a single image out of context renders it nonsensical. Because responses consist solely of images, MEMEs transform into a unique form of language that enables dialogue and communication through the combination of visuals and text. This format is like a picture book, allowing people to express the subtle emotions that words alone cannot capture.

*Zhao Ding has made the case that memes are a form of "vernacular discourse." he explained that vernacular discourse*

*is composed of “cultural syncretism and pastiche”. Cultural syncretism is constructing alternative rhetoric in opposition to mainstream discourse. This construction requires reusing fragments of mainstream discourse to mount a challenge to the dominating order. The resulting vernacular discourse is pastiche. Ding explained that internet-media-based vernacular discourse has revolutionary potential, justifying the claim that internet memes are “a powerful new form of vernacular expression in the digital era”.<sup>50</sup>*

50 Kien, Grant. “Living the Discrete Life.” In *Communicating with Memes Consequences in Post-Truth Civilization*. Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2021.

Therefore, this semi-secluded group becomes a shelter. Here, female empowerment is less about trying to create structural change and focuses more on less sensitive everyday topics, While it’s not exactly a bastion of activism, discussions in the group often espouse feminist views. [See case study p.58-67]

There have been discussions within the group whether embedding long texts into images qualifies as a MEME. Some have humorously likened these MEMEs to work-related PowerPoint presentations as they find it difficult to achieve the simplicity typically associated with MEMEs. However, in my view, this approach provides an emotional outlet for some individuals, and they often receive positive responses. Even if these creations don't perfectly blend images and text, the group is willing to embrace this unique form of expression.

Furthermore, MEMEs often serve to ignite more contentious and intense discussions in the vast world of the internet. In the era of algorithm-driven social communities, MEMEs have become the prime strategy for breaking through echo chambers, making them an indispensable weapon in information warfare. They can both defend and attack. However, when users lack self-awareness or lose sight of their initial intentions, it significantly restricts the space for public discourse. This can lead to a simplification of politics into binary oppositions and reduce all debates about values to mere choices between two alternatives.<sup>51</sup> The playfulness of MEMEs is often referred to as the hollow deconstruction of post-modern society. Nevertheless, within this group, MEMEs have become a place where emotions can be expressed with greater nuance, where communication is more gentle, allowing members to build trust and connections.

Certainly, every digital platform has its constraints regarding the subject matter users can broach. As the Chinese internet has evolved, so has its censorship framework, maintaining a degree of

51 “The Power of Memes and Internet Jokes Under Algorithms in Taiwan: Are They a Force for or Against Civic Society?”, 2020. October 3, 2023. <https://theinitium.com/article/20200506-opinion-taiwan-public-authority-fb-page-meme>

52 Carter, Cindy. "Farewell Letters: A Tribute to the Civil Society Groups, Bloggers, and Media Outlets We Lost in 2021." China Digital Times (CDT), 2022. Accessed 15 October 2023 <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2022/01/farewell-letters-a-tribute-to-the-civil-society-groups-bloggers-and-media-outlets-we-lost-in-2021>

ambiguity. In recent times, there has been heightened oversight on topics pertaining to LGBTQ+, gender issues, and politically sensitive content.<sup>52</sup> For instance, the "Les Sky" group, catering to lesbians and boasting 370,000 members, has been rendered less visible. While existing members can access the group's posts, it remains undiscoverable for newcomers. Interestingly, image-based responses face less stringent oversight than text-based ones, leading to the prevalence of vibrant discussions on sensitive feminist and LGBTQ+ subjects within the group.



Douban MEMEers Group user interface

CASE NO.

01

BLOG TITLE:

DATE:

20  
July  
2021

*Life sharing / Just some small talk, can't escape my incurable  
addiction to female competition (ci jing<sup>1</sup>) (Updates, Anonymous  
Confession)*

ACCESSED:

15  
October  
2023

SOURCE:

*[www.douban.com/group/topic/247491403/?\\_i=7993092xSrsrhn](http://www.douban.com/group/topic/247491403/?_i=7993092xSrsrhn)*

1. “ci jing” is an abbreviation for “ci xing jing zheng,” which translates to “Female intrasexual competition” in English. This term was coined within the Chinese internet community to describe the “sly competition” among women. Indeed, the concept of female intrasexual competition, is a well-recognized and extensively researched concept in academic circles, particularly in the context of workplace bullying among women.



you are not doing the female competition, you're just bullying yourself.



There are many values in the world, and beauty is just one with a narrow definition. Try to explore other values and shift your focus! Moreover! Whether beautiful or not, it neither hinders nor aids us in finding meaningful intimacy and true love.



Sweetie, I also have a lot of anxiety that's very similar to yours. It's impossible not to care about what others think, but maybe we can try to - give zero fucks(bai lan)!)

1. "Bai lan" is a popular internet slang that involves self-deprecating humor. Literally, it can be understood as "presenting a bad appearance or state," creating a vivid and visual image. As an internet slang term, "bailan" refers to "when a situation cannot be improved and, as a result, no further measures are taken to control it, allowing it to continue in a negative direction. While some people use "bailan" to express their resistance to societal competition and stress, most people still make efforts to adapt to the current social situation after venting. The emergence of this term provides an outlet for those affected by increased social pressure and imbalances in their mental state due to issues like intense competition and the recurrence of epidemics, allowing them to release their anxiety in a more relaxed manner."

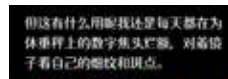
I really want to comfort you, but I can't, because I too am deeply anxious about my appearance and body shape.



I personally am the natural beauty you speak of, from weight to facial features, even hair.



But what's the use? I still spend my days fretting over the number on the scale and looking in the mirror at my fine lines and spots.



Perhaps we've all been shaped by this damn society into what it wants us to be.



But isn't loving ourselves all we can do?





CASE NO.

02

BLOG TITLE:

DATE:

20  
July  
2021

*Discussion on the difficulties women face in employment //  
Women, come and see!!*

ACCESSED:

SOURCE:

13  
October  
2023

*[www.douban.com/group/topic/235625865/?\\_i=7188948xSrsrhn](http://www.douban.com/group/topic/235625865/?_i=7188948xSrsrhn)*

Help, friends... I feel like the status of women is becoming more and more terrifying.



Born as a girl, I'm deeply sorry. Friends, I'm really anxious. I feel like I might as well get sterilized directly in the future. I've been thinking all night without sleeping.

I've seen many people online saying that even outstanding resumes of girls are treated worse than mediocre resumes of boys... Isn't the policy trying to prevent women from being employed, and then encouraging them to return to the family to increase the birth rate?



Job opportunities

Exceptional women

Men admitted with lower scores



I'm not sure which category this should go under... Everyone, please bear with it.

ORIGINAL POST

Gender differences in  
maternity leave + three-  
child policy<sup>1</sup>

women's workplace  
prospects



1. The three-child policy is a Chinese government initiative (2021) to combat an aging population by allowing families to have three children, facing controversy over its implications for women's rights, financial burdens on families, and the effectiveness of such policies in modern society.

REPLIES



You all need to be a bit more cautious when speaking! I've already been deleted... It's better to use punctuation, abbreviations, etc.! This topic is rather sensitive... I might be deleted and even have my account banned by tomorrow.



I also feel... the societal atmosphere is hard to describe in a few words. My conclusion is, never mix career with being a woman (but who knows if there will be policies to obstruct me later).

Study hard



and run away like Einstein.

Posted a replay

Continue browsing  
the group

Received a  
private message

Reply was deleted  
by the system

回复楼主

继续逛组

有了一个私信

被系统删除回复



Yes, many women exploit  
this policy for benefits,  
but it ends up putting the  
entire female population  
at a disadvantage. Female  
friends, we must stand  
united!



REPLIES



I saw an interview case on Weibo:

You performed very well, but we  
are hesitant to hire women of  
childbearing age.

I am a singleton  
who doesn't want  
children

how?Your  
life would be  
incomplete.

CASE NO.

03

BLOG TITLE:

DATE:

15  
July  
2021

*Why are there so many posts about lesbian emotional matters in the group?*

ACCESSED:

SOURCE:

13  
October  
2023

*www.douban.com/group/topic/235035817/?\_i=7124330x-Srsrh n,7982088xSrsrh n*



As a straight woman

I often wonder whether I have entered a lesbians group.

I've been in the group for a while now, but I've noticed that many posts are about lesbians.

It's not that I'm homophobic; it's just a bit shocking, as if I've opened the door to a new world.

But every time I enter a thread about emotions, I have to first make sure whether it's a discussion about lesbian-related feelings.



Are most memers lesbians?



I'm really confused about this and hopes a friend can provide an answer~



I'm a straight woman, and the Memers were so cute that I was passionate about joining the group.

Ditto, I've always wondered if it's Douban's big data that knows I'm a lesbian and targets me accurately or if it's just that MEME has been so big lately.



Maybe it's a reflection of the harmony and freedom of the group.

It's all love created by humans, what's the difference, really? The post that says "I am a lesbian" is a girl expressing her friendliness and goodwill towards others; she has already revealed herself. There's no need for the audience to specifically point out what they perceive as different. Is love not the same in all its forms?

都只是人类产生的爱呀，又有什么差别呢。帖子里说明“本是女”是女孩子对其他人的友好与善意，她已经揭露了自己，观众也不必特意指出自己所认为的不一样，爱有什么不同呢。



Because lesbians are super fond of writing short stories.

On Weibo and Douban:  
can write a 20,000-word  
mini-thesis on emotions  
at the drop of a hat, using  
an alternate account to  
document every emotional  
journey.



In reality: added a girl on  
WeChat, what can I say  
besides "hi"?

Maybe you're just too used  
to all the hetero posts  
everywhere.





CASE NO.

*04*

BLOG TITLE:

DATE:

*15  
July  
2021*

*The pain of falling for a straight woman.*

ACCESSED:

SOURCE:

*13  
October  
2023*

*[www.douban.com/group/topic/259153151/?\\_i=7988582xSrsrhn](http://www.douban.com/group/topic/259153151/?_i=7988582xSrsrhn).*

She's really cool; she skateboards to work and has this aloof vibe with a touch of gentleness. I really want to get closer to her.

No chance

Every time, there's me, clueless and trying to reach out.



Out of all the people in the world I just had to go and fall for a straight girl.

I couldn't help it, I texted her.

Knew it would be like this, left on read.

The pain of being left on read without a reply.

Rationality

I swore I'd never reach out to her this time

She smiles at me

Here's my Christmas present to you.

Happy Holidays.

Wow, that's a big Gingerbread Man. it's edible.

I know



Wild,  
babe.

The old me:  
I fell in love with straight  
women again



Me now: as long as I'm  
more straight than a  
straight girl, no straight girl  
can hurt me



Memorize it  
three times a day. Don't go  
near straight girl.

This is your future girlfriend



This is you

One day, you're gonna find yourself in a sweet, adorable relationship.

Thanks, and I wish you happiness every day too!



## 3.1b EMOJI AND #METOO TRANSCRIPTING IN CHINA



米  
mǐ  
me



兔  
tù  
too

Our capacity for change is shaped by our capacity for language: new phrases, vocabularies and revolutions are created by our ability to imagine new worlds and words.<sup>53</sup> From hashtags to political slogans, words serve as reminders and provocations of the paths we have taken and the directions we seek. Online, words manifest as both data and expression. From labels to political dissent, language has the potential to construct new realities and dismantle old ones. Concurrently, language has evolved into a form of data, driving machine learning systems for profit and becoming an arena for automated censorship.

In China, automated censorship has spurred a surge in creativity as netizens race to “trick the machine”, ingeniously utilizing homophones, imagery, and novel characters that bypass Optical Character Recognition (OCR). The Algorithmic Censorship Resistance Toolkit compiles various strategies that both obfuscate and encode text.<sup>54</sup>

53 The Future of Memory. Accessed 15 October 2023. <https://thefutureofmemory.online/about/>.

54 “Algorithmic Censorship Resistance Toolkit”. Accessed 3 October 2023. <https://thefutureofmemory.online/toolkit/>.

55 “Emoji” is a transliteration of the Japanese word (e=picture) (mo=write) (ji=character)[8]. They are graphic symbols with pre-defined names and code (Unicode). The first set of emoji was released in 1999 and was created by their Japanese originator Shigetaka Kurita (). On a social level, emoji, as a visual language, make it easier for cross-cultural communication. As indicates, emoji fill the need for non-verbal cues in CMC to express the intentions and emotions behind information.  
 Bai, Qiyu, Qi Dan, Zhe Mu, and Maokun Yang. “A Systematic Review of Emoji: Current Research and Future Perspectives.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02221>.

56 Wei, Li, and Zhu Hua. “TransScripting: Playful Subversion with Chinese Characters.” *International Journal of Multilingualism* 16, no. 2 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2019.1575834>.

Within China's internet-based feminist movement, that faces censorship, netizens have also innovated novel emoji<sup>55</sup> expressions, an act termed here as “TransScripting”. The term “transScripting” is employed to describe the linguistic act of crafting a script by blending elements from diverse writing systems, or amalgamating traditional language scripts with other symbols, including emojis.

*Translanguaging is a dynamic process whereby multilingual use multiple linguistic and semiotic resources, including scriptal, digital, and visual resources, as an integrated communication system to mediate complex social and cognitive activities—to act, to know, and to be. The process brings together different dimensions of language users’ personal histories, experiences and environments; their attitudes, beliefs and ideologies; and their cognitive and physical capacities into one coordinated and meaningful performance, making it into a lived experience. TransScripting, then, is a creative and critical act, as it pushes and breaks the boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the novel, and the acceptable and the unacceptable, and problematises and challenges received wisdom. Moreover, transScripting tells the stories of the scripters social experiences and attitudes.*<sup>56</sup>

In China, where the feminist movement was once a persistent but hidden voice, the #MeToo movement from Hollywood in 2018 set off a wave of women's accusations of sexual harassment and predators, which has brought feminism to the forefront of unprecedented attention and discussion. At the same time, however, feminists face increasing counteraction and censorship on the Internet.

Feminist Voice, a self-published media outlet founded by feminist activist Lv Bin in 2009 that played an important role in China's #MeToo movement was permanently banned in 2018. In an article published by Feminist Voice on September 12, 2017, “Can the Silence Breakers Break the Silence in China? the author wrote:


When the legal system for punishing gender-based violence is not sound enough, the power of the media and social networks is particularly important. This kind of coverage and dissemination of gender issues can make victims' voices heard, and make people pay more attention to the existence and prevalence of sexual harassment. However, just like the woman on the cover of TIME who was only

willing to show her elbow in front of the camera, there are many women in China who are afraid to tell the public about their experiences and to expose and accuse their sexual predators of their crimes. Sexual harassment and assault occur no less frequently in China than in Western countries, but there are far fewer women in China who dare to stand up for their interests. Maybe it's out of concern for their livelihood, maybe it's out of concern for their face. But in the end, it is our society that has not created an environment that allows them to speak out. It's not too late to recognize the existence of gender-based violence and the oppression of the patriarchal culture, and to make a change and break the silence.<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, to avoid censorship, social media users using the #MeToo hashtag on social media began using a combination of emojis of a bunny and a bowl-of-rice "Rice bunny" is pronounced "mi-tu" in Chinese.

Users have used rice bunny emojis in campaigns, forums and various accounts on platforms like Weibo and WeChat to discuss topics such as opportunity inequality, domestic violence and sexual harassment. The adoption of emojis serves as a tactical response to circumvent online censorship.

As more and more women started to pay attention and openly discuss gender discrimination and unpleasant experiences in their lives, opposition emerged. Some accused them of being too extreme, while others questioned whether they were exacerbating social divisions.

In an attempt to insult feminism, the second character in the term 女权 (nǚquan), meaning "feminism", is altered to "女拳" (nǚquán), to make a play on words where "quán" (拳) sounds like "quan" (权)<sup>58</sup>, suggesting that they saw feminists as aggressive and haphazard in their actions. Originally a derogatory term, feminists later embraced it, claiming ownership of the discourse, proudly calling themselves "女拳" and often using the fist emoji  to reinforce their empowerment.

In Chinese, the relationship between characters and their pronunciation is intricate. Unlike Latin alphabets, Chinese characters do not directly represent sounds. While certain characters possess phonetic components, these do not always indicate their pronunciation. Additionally, the pronunciation of a phonetic component as an independent character can differ from when it is part of another character. Given the abundance of homophones in modern Chinese, a single pronunciation can correspond to multiple distinct characters.

57 "[404 Media]Lawman Law, Voice of Women's Rights."China digital times, October 12, 2023. <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/701052.html>. Translate by the author.

58 In Chinese, "拳" (quán) refers to a fist or martial arts, typically associated with physical strength or combat, as in boxing ("拳击"), whereas "权" (quán) denotes power or rights, often used in political or legal contexts to describe authority ("权力"), rights ("权利"), or influence ("权威"). The key distinction lies in their application: "拳" relates to physicality and "权" to societal and authoritative domains.

Although Chinese children are taught that characters are visual representations of meaning with fixed templates and strict stroke orders, the pronunciation of these characters must be learned separately.<sup>59</sup>

The adoption of these characters, words, and expressions are examples of language subversion, symbolizing an innovative avenue for expression and the articulation of opinions within a digital landscape dominated by pervasive online censorship. The utilization of emojis to amplify the impact of their expressions serves as a testament to the resilience exhibited within the Chinese feminist movement. This transcription of the word represents both a covert and overt, intimate and public act of resistance and subversion. It embodies underlying narratives, challenging long standing conventions, authorities, and ideologies.



### 3.1c CYBERFEMINISM INDEX



Fig. 25 Cyberfeminism Index

*Cyberfeminism Index*, initiated by designer and researcher Mindy Seu, is an ongoing digital database that compiles techno-critical works dating back to 1990. The project's origins can be traced back to a tweet in March 2019 when Seu announced her intention to create a cyberfeminist index. She initially shared a link to a spreadsheet with the aspiration that it would evolve into a collaborative platform. As the spreadsheet expanded to encompass almost seven hundred entries, it aligned with the rise of information activism and open-access libraries, which played a role in raising awareness, particularly during global events like the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests. Leveraging this dataset, Seu transformed it into a user-friendly

website, accessible at [cyberfeminismindex.com](http://cyberfeminismindex.com).

In Seu's telling, the term "cyberfeminism," which came into usage in the early 1990s, "was meant as an oxymoron or provocation, a critique of the cyberbabes and fembots that stocked the sci-fi landscapes of the 1980s." As a provocation, the term has certainly succeeded: over decades, it has brought feminisms and technologies into conflict and conversation, while the term itself has been contested, reimaged, debunked, and expanded. Cyberfeminism Index does not attempt to resolve these contradictions, but to honor the multiplicity of practices that might be gathered under this imperfect umbrella, particularly making efforts to center non-Western and nonbinary approaches.<sup>60</sup>

60 "First Look: Cyberfeminism Index." Rhizome, Accessed 7 October 2023. <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2020/oct/22/first-look-cyberfeminism-index/>.

*In an interview, she described the design of the website as "[...] The static sites, those that were hard-coded with HTML and CSS without the use of third-party libraries or new languages, aged well with the browser over 25 years. It felt quite durable, so we incorporated this into the design and development of the site. The trail that you mentioned is what we call a 'hyperlink trail,' or a 'learning trail,' as coined by my good friend and collaborator Charles Broskoski from Are.na. Everything that you click creates a list of your selections, that you can download as a PDF. So whether you're selecting intuitively or intentionally, you're able to build associative links. We don't store any of the personal information of the person visiting the site, but we do list how many entries were downloaded, and at what time. When you talk to digital archivists, they'll tell you that duplication is key. Paul Soulellis describes downloading as an act of resistance because we don't own our content anymore: We access it through streaming services, it's hosted in the cloud. We upload all of our content to platforms. Storing something on your local machine is an act of preservation—whether that's the intended purpose or not."*<sup>61</sup>

61 Varghese, Sanjana. "With 'cyberfeminism Index,' Mindy Seu Snapshots a Mutating Movement." Document Journal, March 9, 2023. <https://www.documentjournal.com/2023/03/mindy-seu-cyberfeminism-index-feminism-technology-literature-book-release-interview/>.

The Cyberfeminism Index website, created by Angeline Meitzler, adheres to a minimalist aesthetic by utilizing default web components and system fonts. This design choice guarantees the site's enduring functionality, adapting seamlessly to evolving appearances due to software updates and technological shifts. Looking ahead, the Index will continue to be supervised by Seu and other community members

in a post-custodial capacity, while retaining its commitment to openness for submissions and collaborative efforts.

The Cyberfeminism Index that evolves into a mobile, versatile, open-access library is an online space that fosters and encourages non-linear reading. Mindy Seu and her group of collaborators celebrate the diverse voices that have made defining cyberfeminist thought wonderfully challenging, inviting fresh, reinterpretations of our online existence over the past three decades.

## 3.2 COMMUNITY

### 3.2a SEITŌ MAGAZINE/ SEITŌ SOCIETY

62 Cortes, Martina. "Seitō magazine: The amplification of Japanese feminism." *Rock & Art*. June 22, 2022. <https://www.rockandart.org/Seitō-magazine-japanese-feminism/>. Accessed 7 October 2023.



Fig. 26 Seitō Magazine Cover, 1911

63 Hiratsuka Raiteu, "In the Beginning, Women Were the Sun," *The Meaning of the Preface to The Bluestocking Explained in an Easy-to-understand Way*." Tanka., Accessed 6 October 2023. <https://tankanokoto.com/2021/05/hiratuka.html>.

64 Laskow, Sarah. "The Banned 1910s Magazine That Started a Feminist Movement in Japan." *Atlas Obscura*, March 2, 2022. <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/bluestockings-feminist-magazine-japan-sassy>.

Seitō Society, was founded in 1911 by Hiratsuka Raicho, Yasumochi Yoshiko, Mozume Kazuko, Kiuchi Teiko, and Nakano Hatsuko, all graduates of the newly established Japan Women's College.<sup>62</sup> The Seitō magazine served as the primary medium for this group and caused a sensation in Japanese society at the time as it was created by women and targeted female readers. The group aimed to challenge prevailing societal roles and expectations for women, advocating for women's equality and autonomy. Article 1 of the Seitō Society's constitution stated: "The purpose of this community is to promote the development of women's literature, enable individuals

to express their innate characteristics, and aim to give birth to future female geniuses."<sup>63</sup>

In 1911 Japan, it was daring for a woman to put her name in print on anything besides "a very pretty poem". The magazine's name, Seitō, which translates to "Bluestockings," is a nod to an unorthodox group of 18th-century English women who gathered to discuss politics and art, which was an extraordinary activity for that time.<sup>64</sup>

The Seitō women also recognized the need for critiques of established authority. The founding members' elite status and education allowed them financial backing to start an all-women's journal with a dedicated mission to empower Japanese women and critique the misogynistic aspects of society, encompassing social, economic, and political structures. In other words, the Seitō Society aimed to liberate women from traditional gender roles and codes of female morality, and enable women space to explore their individuality through literature. As Raicho declared in the Society's manifesto: "When Japan

was born, woman was the sun, the true human being. Now she is the moon! She lives in the light of another star.”<sup>65</sup>

Seitō Society debated issues such as abortion. Raicho believed that in order to liberate women to “fulfill their own personal needs as individuals”, women had to be liberated as individuals, and this also encompassed sexual liberation which required the availability of abortion and contraception. Simply engaging publicly in these debates led to the censorship of the Seitō magazine. When Noe later became the editor of Seitō in 1915, she published an issue on whether or not abortion was considered a “woman’s right” or “a crime lacking in consideration of mankind and the destruction of human morality,” which was suppressed due both to its commentary on abortion and the economic positions of many women considering abortion. Overall, government opposition led to the complete suppression of five issues of Seitō, and increased societal tensions that ultimately led to a dip in membership as many members could not take the pressure.

The Seitō Society’s contributions to the conversation amongst the Japanese elite about the definition of the Japanese “New Woman” redefined womanhood in a way that allowed women to exist within the confines of womanhood without resigning themselves to the patriarchal family unit.<sup>66</sup>

Raicho, Koichi, Toshiko, and Chieko, among other Seitō Society members, engaged in same-sex relationships, challenging traditional gender roles. Toshiko writes to Chieko “

*“I have forgotten the fact that I am a woman and the requirements for being a woman since I met you . . . Every time I recall that we can live the women-only life without ‘man,’ I feel so happy, as though my body were sailing out over the huge sea.”*

65 Ibid.

66 Burdick, Lily, The “Woman Problem”: The Deconstruction of Gender Roles and the Construction of the Japanese ‘New Woman’ by the Seitō Society, 1911-1916 HIS 389, Women, Gender, and Sexuality in Japan



Fig. 27 Album cover of Seitō: In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun, 2019

These relationships sparked discussions about love and sexuality in early 20th-century Japan, redefining the concept of the “New Woman” beyond the established patriarchal norms of the Meiji period.

In 2019, the independent French record label released an album titled “Seitō: In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun,” referring to Seitō magazine.

67 "Seitō: In the Beginning, Woman Was the Sun, by Various Artists." Akuphone. Accessed 9 October 2023. <https://akuphone.bandcamp.com/album/seit-in-the-beginning-woman-was-the-sun>.

This album brings together Japanese female artists across diverse electronic and experimental music genres. Recorded between 2017 and 2019, this collection showcases the vibrancy of the contemporary Japanese underground music scene. This wonderful album also resonates and echoes well with the spirit of the Seitō community.<sup>67</sup>

## 3.2b BOLOHO

*BOLOHO* is a homophonic term for pineapple core, which is the seed of the big pineapple tree. People who are used to consuming the flesh of the fruit often do not realize or forget that the core is also a flavorful delicacy.

BOLOHO initially started as an entrepreneurial project by two career women, BUBU and CAT, and served as a breathable space away from home where they aimed to organize their lives and work.

Prior to its establishment, BUBU and CAT both worked with their partners in design studios, taking on private commissions. However, in these relatively solitary family relationships, boundaries were sometimes not very clear. As a result, the two women decided



Fig. 28 BoloHo Living Room

to collaborate and attempt to create a shared workspace that was more their own, breaking free from the perspective of individual households and relocating to a more open and public place.

Over the past few years, additional members gradually joined our venture.

Subsequently, the entrepreneurial aspect evolved into what can be described as a 'company' platform. It not only offers an opportunity for those who cannot solely rely on art for their livelihood to take on projects but also serves as a catalyst for contemplating, discerning, and resolving real-world issues. Within this journey, BOLOHO plays an important role as a gatherer and coordinator. BOLOHO is more than just a physical space; it is a company, a platform, and a community.

BOLOHO's studio is nestled within a residential building in the old city area of Guangzhou. The interior retains the authentic architectural style. The living room and three rooms serve diverse, multifunctional purposes.<sup>68</sup> This includes a space dedicated to

68 "Breaking Shackles through Collective Strength: BOLOHO from Guangzhou's Artistic Experiments at the Kassel Documenta and Hong Kong Basel." WeChat Official Account. Accessed 29 October 2023. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jvee-9aRwa8t63im6MaCqKA>.

BOLOHO's "company" projects, a room that once housed the Pineapple Core partner's "Reading Room," CAT's garden on the balcony outside the kitchen, and the living room's role as the most adaptable and versatile space. When collective creative work is required, the living room transforms into a setting for shooting, painting, sewing, and meetings. During regular times, it becomes a place for friends to gather and take care of children. Most of the Pineapple Core members spend the majority of their time here, and their creativity unfolds from this space. "Perhaps the vast machinery of 'urban development' isn't all-powerful; it too has its limitations. The intricate composition of land in the old city area of Guangzhou provides us with a relatively stable shelter."<sup>69</sup>

69 "Conversations with BOLOHO: Taking Jobs to Keep Living | Kassel Series Vol. 1." Wechat official accounts. Accessed 28 October 2023. <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jhYTLz3MJ8v3h-coh8wh-AQ>.

In addition to working together, they emphasize the physical and emotional dimensions of "shared labor." For instance, the two daily meals they have during work have become essential for replenishing nutrients and fulfilling bodily needs. Beyond the sustenance itself, the act of cooking and dining together has gradually evolved into a significant moment for BOLOHO members to understand one another and build trust.<sup>70</sup>

70 BOLOHOPE! Take Power But Differently! Accessed 9 August 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AwHG209XF8>.

Building upon this foundation, BOLOHO initiated "Forever 18 Kitchen," inviting elders and friends to periodically take charge or spontaneously participate. The memories, knowledge, and embodied experiences shared through food have bridged the gap between different generations and values. It has also enriched the meaning of living in a foreign place and coexisting with others.

71 "Bolocho." documenta fifteen, Accessed 28 October 2023. <https://documenta-fifteen.de/lumbung-member-kuenstlerinnen/boloho/>.

At the 15th Documenta in Kassel, Germany, BOLOHO constructed a "Factory Cafeteria." Here, the audience could savor Asian dishes while watching the BOLOHO-created sitcom series "BOLOHOPE" on television screens.<sup>71</sup> The space was adorned with wallpaper and tablecloths featuring text manifestos and charming patterns, and several screens were themed around caregiving and sewing—BOLOHO, with its focus on "shared labor," responded to the paradoxical mechanisms contemporary art confronts with a light-hearted and humorous attitude.

The character portrayals in the video works were also bold and lively. They had colorful hair and diverse wigs, representing subcultures from mainstream society but were embraced and created their own world within the artworks. The Kassel Chinese restaurant served as an extension of the Guangzhou studio, just as the BOLOHO and their friends interacted in their daily lives. They hoped that the





Fig. 29 Screenshot of Bolohope, 2022

Kassel audience would consider any information they gathered from Guangzhou while sharing food as a successful act of translation.

BOLOHO, with a gentle approach, created a new narrative style, endowing everyone with equal power and space. In this space, people could find a sense of belonging and community, engage in open discussions, and share responses to their surroundings. This was the initial vision with which BOLOHO was founded.

## 3.2c UNDERGROUND CULTURE AND PARTY SCENES

Scene is a community culture that connects the works of musicians and the audience as end-users, mediated by music labels, clubs, music promoters, and event organizers. This community culture also expands with the evolution of time.

China's underground culture and party scenes have been experiencing a significant transformation and growth in recent years, but is still in its relative infancy<sup>72</sup>, and outside of China's most developed cities, can only sustain a handful of clubs within acity. These scenes encompass a wide range of artistic, musical, and cultural expressions that often exist outside of mainstream or official channels. While they have faced some challenges and restrictions due to government regulations and censorship, there is a vibrant and diverse underground culture in China that continues to evolve.

Underground club culture in most Chinese cities is often an endeavor of passion. Scenes are maintained off the back of individuals' selfless perseverance. Nothing better demonstrates this than Ellen, the owner of TAG, the legendary Techno jewel in the Playcenter's myriad venues. During the first years of TAG, she juggled the responsibilities of ownership during her pregnancy (and the after-birth). She previously said: "At the beginning, I thought about giving up 100 times. But every night, maybe 4 to 5 people would come up to me and say 'we love TAG.' This spirit, those people, that's what made me keep going."

Club culture offers a rich landscape for collective and expressive performative acts. Within this context, music labels also strive to assert their self-expression within the constraints of limited space. Numerous parties focus on showcasing emerging local female DJ talents and LGBTQ+ and queer communities have successfully established their own underground events and parties. Despite challenges, these events provide safe spaces for self-expression and identity exploration.

72 "Mainland Pressure - China's Underground Club Culture." MAEKAN, Accessed 29 October 2023. <https://maekan.com/story/mainland-pressure-chinas-underground-club-culture/>.

## Label/QueerEst

Queerest is a label that plans cultural and art-related projects, builds a community that is visible and inclusive of queer in China, and that digs into the locality.

*"We are not only concerned with identity but, more importantly, we think about things beyond queer identity. We step into the public eye to celebrate romance and intimacy in a fresh way, embedding queer narratives into heterosexual society because fundamentally, these are all 'human experiences,' and we need to do this."*

The name QUEEREST gives a sense of being both specific and broad—it holds different meanings for different people, focusing on its essence, as it continues to evolve. It becomes a richer vocabulary, a warm family-like community. We also hope to create a unique 'QUEEREST' golden age for the present generation in China, our era. Like waiting for flowers, swaying like waves, in my dream, life and the ever-changing dreams I have lived. They have created many queer scene moments, aiming to extend the deeper dimensions of identity and new standards of aesthetics in club and queer culture."<sup>73</sup>

73 Queerest. "Queerest. "Queerest | Cruising the Alternative Temporal-Spatial Dimensions of Queer Futurity." Wechat official account. Accessed 28 October 2023. [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Kp3L-SPUM-WF07y\\_TH8dhYQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Kp3L-SPUM-WF07y_TH8dhYQ).



Fig. 30 QueerEst Event Posters

## label/Saferoom

SAFEROOM is a record label born at the end of 2021. The fashion buyer shop SAFEROOM as the source of creative collision. It synchronizes with the fashion and art appreciated by the owner and tries to provide a private and relaxing experience for all creatures, to open

74 "SAFEROOM." BAIHUI.  
Accessed 29 October  
2023. <https://baihui.live/hosts/saferoom/en/>.

a completely safe space. SAFEROOM starts from fashion things and multiculturalism, and radiates club parties, podcast, video, creative consulting. Whatever in the SAFEROOM store or the party scenes we organized, we respect all orientations and embrace raw desires and emotions.<sup>74</sup>



Fig. 31 Saferoom Event Posters

The event posters for these clubs are both striking and experimental, setting them apart from mainstream commercial projects. Designers enjoy greater creative freedom when it comes to crafting club posters, allowing them to push the boundaries of design. The visual identity of these labels serves as an embodiment of their attitudes and aesthetics, perfectly complementing the experimental and non-traditional nature of electronic music.

Today, our understanding of music like techno or more experimental genres is not solely based on their melodic qualities, but rather a result of how our auditory senses have evolved over time. Consequently, the objective of club event posters is not to conform to a fixed standard of beauty, but rather to embrace more experimental and impactful typographical choices, including distorted fonts and innovative layouts.

Underground club spaces act in a way as playgrounds for adults, where people have the opportunity to engage in free, voluntary activities in spaces symbolically isolated from the everyday world and marked as “special”. Participants are thus able to experiment with ideas, identities, and (re)constructions of self in a characteristically supportive atmosphere.

The performative nature of club culture has garnered scholarly attention globally, and its impact in the West, particularly since the late 1980s rave scene, has been profound. This focus, initially tailored to the Western context, has significant parallels in the growing underground club scene in China. As Buckland depicts the role of club culture in identity formation and expression, especially pertaining to gender, this study clears up its implications as a form of queer world-making in a different cultural milieu.<sup>75</sup>

Within the research arena, articles investigating the dynamics of space, play, and performativity in the underground club milieu have been crucial. One such piece on the UK scene by Alice O'Grady critically examines these concepts. Applying Turner<sup>76</sup>'s work on subjunctivity and Jill Dolan's concept of "utopian performatives"<sup>77</sup> Dolan's assertions that live performances act as arenas where individuals collectively indulge in meaning-making, imagination, and envisioning a more equitable future, provide a compelling lens to view clubbing experience. Such moments, described as "utopian performatives," elevate attendees, summarizing them in sensations that mirror the intensity and emotional volume of the dance floor's ambiance, like fleeting epiphanies or "the vibe", or the "spontaneous communitas" as conceptualized by Turner, resonate as powerful moments of mutual understanding and identity confrontation.<sup>78</sup>

This academic discourse also mirrors the intricacies of the underground club culture in China. For Chinese youth, partaking in nocturnal revelries stands as an act of resistance, challenging both systemic confines and societal norms. Within these venues, participants liberate themselves from the pressures of quotidian life, immersing in an ephemeral community. These spaces pulsate with authenticity, where imagination intertwines with tangible pleasures like music and unrestrained expression. Yet, life's incessant rhythm continues, permeating both the daytime and nighttime, acting as a reminder of the enduring human spirit. Such impulses, transcending the physicality of the club and individual identities, defy temporal and spatial constraints. Elevating "play" to "improvisation," the expansiveness of this imaginative realm is boundless. It prods participants to reimagine their roles in society—be it as performers, audience members, or merely as beings unhindered by conventional norms, all the while celebrating the fluidity, dignity, and humanity inherent in such spaces.

In the Chinese context, as participants converge in these underground venues, a sense of community is fostered, one that

75 O'Grady, Alice. "Spaces of Play: The Spatial Dimensions of Underground Club Culture and Locating the Subjunctive." *Dancecult* 4, no. 1 (2012) pp. 86–106. <https://doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.01.04>.

76 Turner, Victor and Edward Bruner (ed.). 1986. *Anthropology of Experience*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

77 Dolan, Jill. 2005. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the theatre*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

78 Ibid.

bridges gaps of age, nationality, and language. The shared experiences become rehearsals for reality, encouraging participants to reflect not only on their individualities but also the collective potential. Immersion in this simulated realm offers opportunities to envision alternative realities. Such engagements, embedded in these narratives, empower individuals to transcend conventional paradigms, fostering an expansive vision for both individual and collective futures in the spheres of performance and creative exploration.



# CONCLUSION

Historically, the dynamic interplay of language, art, and space has played an important role in narratives of resistance and self-expression. Faced with pervasive global beliefs of racism, gender discrimination, oppression, incongruence, falsehood, and illogicality, no form of resistance can entirely address these issues. However, the ambition behind such resistance is evident; more often, it resembles a form of self-healing rather than an aggressive revolt.

This paper was conceptualized amidst global crises including the rampant outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and the Israel-Palestine disputes. Against this backdrop, I delved into how women, as a gender shaped by society and language, have discovered modes of resistance and self-protection. While women are not the sole oppressed group, their resistance exhibits qualities that are subtly yet powerful, and profoundly poetic.

They voice their concerns through collectives, spaces, connections, and even by inventing new languages. I believe these modes of resistance are invaluable. Although this paper doesn't cover all aspects, such as the resistance of Korean and Iranian women, and the emergence of women designer groups, various women support groups, and numerous other examples remain unaddressed. Nevertheless, it's good to acknowledge the known unknowns.

In conclusion, I discerned that language, art, and digital spaces have offered sanctuary for women and marginalized communities. Such sanctuaries act as bastions for our beings, extensions of ourselves, shaping how we opt to live and the environments that surround us. They provide a potential modality of "existence in the world" that challenges the orthodox, welcomes diversities, and looks forward to reciprocity.

Overall, this exploration attests to the enduring spirit of women and marginalized communities. Despite the challenges, they consistently seek innovative means to communicate, express, and resist. As we reflect upon these tales of resilience and creativity, let us be reminded to continually safeguard and cherish these invaluable spaces, languages, and narratives to ensure their profound impact on generations to come.





◉ *Thank you for your reading.*

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## ◉ACKNOWLEDGEMENT◉

I'd like to thank So-Hyun Bae, my tutor, for her proof reading and her always supporting comments. And Yohanna my Nguyen for her ideas and discussions. As well as Anne LaForêt and Alexandra David for their references in feminism. Thanks to all the Communication Graphique class and professors at HEAR for their support and suggestions.

I would also like to thank Dazhao for emotional support, Yaxin for our talk, And a special thanks to Mochi for the fluffiness.



# *Colophone*

## *Typefaces*

ABC Diatype by Dinamo Typefaces

PP Editorial New by Pangram Pangram Foundry

PP Fragment by Pangram Pangram Foundry

Times New Roman

## *Paper*

Lana Paper 90g

## *Printing*

COREP Strasbourg

November 2023

