

# Between Two Worlds: Zhen Guo's Journey to Feminist Art

**Gail Levin**

*Distinguished Professor, Departments of Art History and Fine & Performing Arts, The City University of New York, U.S.A.*

*E-mail: GLevin@gc.cuny.edu*

## Abstract

The art and life of Zhen Guo (郭楨; born 1955) are linked. Her youth and art education took place in China, but most of her adulthood has been as an immigrant in the United States. Her life intersected with the Cultural Revolution, which, for much of 20th century, controlled the content of revolutionary art and excluded female discourse. Yet, Mao's emphasis on the class basis of art and insistence that art serve the masses led to his support for folk art.

Her father's political troubles caused Gao's education to be curtailed at age twelve. Sent to the countryside to learn sewing, she was then assigned to work in a clothing factory, where she qualified for workshops promoting folk art for farmers. She later used this experience to make post-modern visual art. Eventually, she managed to gain admission to art schools, including the prestigious Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, where she excelled as one of only two women in her class. Invited to join the faculty there, her career thrived.

Guo's proto-feminist interest in depicting mothers and children provoked male professors in China to accuse her of encouraging women to have more children when the government was limiting families to only one child. Guo's depiction of peasant mothers also shows her interest in traditional patterned Chinese textiles, which she would later incorporate in her art.

When Guo participated in a faculty show at the Zhejiang Academy, an American collector purchased her 1983 collage for an important 1987 show. Her art entered an American museum collection as a result. Recognized as part of the "new generation of Chinese artists," Guo, in 1985, married her contemporary and colleague. Despite her own record of stellar accomplishments, she fell into the traditional Chinese wife's role of supporting her new husband's ambitions, privileging his goals over her own. Betrayed by the husband for whom she had sacrificed, Guo, after their divorce, felt paralyzed by grief and unable to paint. Eventually, she found her voice and a supportive American husband. Finally understanding how much she had been exploited, Guo sought out and embraced not just feminism, but feminist art.

Guo's 2011 series of self-portraits bear facial expressions that document her agony. Having explored martial arts, she produced a series of women boxing, thinking of her

own struggles. In 2013, Guo resumed the theme of motherhood, for which she had been criticized in art school. Now she represented motherhood metaphorically as single voluptuous breast sculptures, sewn in different combinations, settings, materials, patterns, and colors.

A metaphor for her life, punching bags eventually became vehicles for some of her breast sculptures, which recall hats from Chinese folk costumes. Ironically, Mao's anti-elite dictate coincided with American feminists' rejection of elite male artists' Eurocentric aesthetic. Feminists' post-modernism drew from popular and folk art that had previously been the domain of women's handicrafts and non-Western cultures. Guo continues to express her view of feminism, combining Western philosophy with Chinese aesthetics, and reflecting upon her life experience.

**Keywords:** Chinese artist, feminist artist, woman artist, cultural revolution, Chinese diaspora in American

My life has been—and continues to be—split between two worlds. I grew up, was educated, and learned how to paint in China; however, I would say that I came into my own in the United States—both as an individual, as well as an artist. In other words: I learned about the world in China, and I confronted it in the United States.

—Zhen Guo (郭楨), 2018<sup>1</sup>

Women artists in China before the late 19th century had a bleak history. They had long been limited to prostitutes supported by wealthy patrons or to courtesans, living in the homes of scholar-painters and producing “parlor art”: flower paintings or scenes of daily domestic life in the inner chambers (Liao, 2000, pp. 67-68). A much more recent “retrogression of women’s values and a modern version of parlor painting” that began in the late 1970s and continued through the 1990s, has been observed by the Chinese curator and critic, Liao Wen (2000, p. 70).

Female artistic discourse was eclipsed by the focus on male aesthetics and standards

during and after the Cultural Revolution, which controlled the content of revolutionary art for much of 20th-century China (see also Tong, 2018, p. 15). From 1966 to Mao Zedong’s death in 1976, the dominant ideology of the Cultural Revolution affected the daily lives and fate of ordinary citizens, who risked being purged as “capitalists” and sent off to the countryside for re-education—or worse.

Mao emphasized the class basis of art and directed that art had to serve the masses. He thus privileged folk literature, folk music, and folk art as practiced by workers, peasants, and soldiers (Liang, 1988, p. 3). In his 1938 comments on *The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War*, Mao declared: “Foreign stereotypes must be abolished . . . they must be replaced by the fresh, lively Chinese style and spirit which the common people of China love” (Mao, 1967, p. 50, cited in Laing, 1988, p. 15).

It was into this restrictive era that the artist Zhen Guo was born in 1955 in Rizhao County in China’s Shandong Province.<sup>2</sup> With two sisters and a brother, she was the eldest of four children. Her parents were both Communist govern-

<sup>1</sup> See the interview transcript by Lee (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Unattributed biographical information and quotations are from Zhen Guo’s conversations with the author. They met at the New York City opening of Judy Chicago’s “Powerplay: A Prediction,” at Gallery 94 on the Bowery on January 13, 2018.

ment workers. Yet, her mother, Zhang Shouying, born in 1932, was not allowed an education and her mother, Guo's grandmother, suffered bound feet, the painful practice imposed on young girls to restrict normal growth and create tiny feet as "sexual props for men" (Van Gulik, 1974, p. 218). Her father, Guo Changfang, headed the propaganda department in Rizhao, working on cultural projects and education. His failure to navigate the Cultural Revolution's shoals caused the whole family to be sent for some months to the countryside when Guo was still an adolescent.

Her father's troubles kept Guo from attending school beyond age 12. When she was 14, her parents sent her to the countryside to apprentice with a distant relative and learn the craft of sewing. After that, in 1970, the government assigned her, nearly 16, to work in

a factory, cutting and sewing clothes (Figure 1). "You were supposed to only consider the government, follow the rules it set," she reflected, "still, it was in working these various jobs that I first touched paint and fell in love [with Chinese painting]" (Rolandelli, 2018).

Excelling as a factory worker, Guo gained admission to annual workshops teaching farmers traditions of folk art, which would have a lasting impact on her aesthetics, her love of bright colors and ability to design and sew her own art out of fabric.<sup>3</sup> Beside these workshops, however, from both of her grandmothers she learned another folk tradition that she would employ in her art: the technique of using scrap paper or fabric to craft objects. As *papier maché*, this technique originated in China and served for helmets as far back as the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.) (Wang & Li, 1983). Both of her



Figure 1. Zhen Guo as one of the sewing factory young workers (second row on the right). "It was taken in July 1973, just before my departure to Jinan, the Shangond Art School." From: Zhen Guo.

<sup>3</sup> For this folk tradition, see Mo (2007).

pragmatic grandmothers utilized this ancient craft, recycling scrap cloth to make linings for shoes. Guo later recast traditional *papier maché* to make sculptures of breasts, which she painted and then protected with a hard lacquered surface.

In 1973, towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, Guo wanted to take the examination to apply to study art; however, her father opposed her choosing any kind of cultural career, insisting that she should pursue medicine or engineering. Desperate to study art, she declined to take the science exams and ran away from home, traveling a great distance on her own to take the National College Entrance Examination for art. She was accepted to study at the Shandong Art School in Jinan, which she attended for three and a half years, graduating in December 1976.

All her professors at the art school were men. With special fondness, she recalls Yu Xining (1913–2007), who produced calligraphy and traditional Chinese paintings in ink and watercolor; and Zhang Hongxiang (1940–2019), a painter of Western-style landscapes and illustrative figurative art inspired by Soviet Socialist Realism. Guo followed a curriculum for making propaganda art, studying watercolor painting, oil painting, calligraphy, and book design.

Upon graduation, Guo was assigned to work at the Linyi Art Museum in Shandong, where she produced propaganda posters and helped with both political and art exhibitions. But, after a year at the museum, the government sent her to spend a year in the countryside instructing peasant farmers how to plant potatoes and organize economically, subjects about which she knew nothing. Although Guo had already graduated from art school and was working, her assignment paralleled Mao's "Down to the Countryside Movement," which began in December 1968 and continued for the next decade, forcing bourgeois youth living in cities to go to rural areas to experience life

working there. Then, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) announced a major change of direction with China's "Open Door Policy" (Huan, 1986). As soon as this news reached Guo in the countryside, she applied to go back to art school and continue her study.

Guo was able to enter Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou (now called China Art College), having been chosen as one of only two women in the second class of fourteen that resumed in September 1978, just after the Cultural Revolution (the first class was only for the previous half year). Now, most of the faculty were men, but there was one woman, Wang Qingming, who taught Chinese traditional-style figure painting.

In 1980, Guo painted *Mother's Love* (哺; Figure 2a), which her professor, Gu Shengyue criticized for what he perceived to be its "political" message. Although he had previously liked her work, he interpreted this painting, which depicted two farm women nursing their babies with a mother hen and her six chicks in the foreground, as a dissident statement encouraging families to have more children at the time that the government was just beginning to enforce its new "one-child" policy, which remained the law from 1979–2015. Guo responded to her teacher's accusation: "My idea of this painting was simply to express the requirement of nature that mothers care for their children" (Randian, 2011).

Guo's painting of mothers with their babies reveals her early and natural interest in feminist themes. Her painting can be compared to pictures of the same subject in the work of American women artists, among them Mary Cassatt, whose work featured in an important exhibition organized at the MacBeth Gallery in New York in 1915 as part of the Woman Suffrage campaign (Dennison, 2003). Reviewing this show that aimed at promoting the right of American women to vote, the *Christian Science Monitor* commented: "The one note that is





Figure 2. (a) Zhen Guo, *Mother's love*, 1980, watercolor on rice paper, 68 × 48 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo; (b) *Guapi-mao* (瓜皮帽) or a "melon-skin" hats; (c) Mary Cassatt, *Maternite*, ca. 1890, pastel on paper, 44.4 × 68.6 cm, Private collection. From: marycassatt.org.

struck repeatedly is on the mother and child theme" (Dennison, 2003, p. 27). The *American Art News* described this theme as "a curious feature of the show" (Dennison, 2003, p. 27).

More recently in China, the critic Liao Wen observed that Chinese "Feminist art from this period [end of the 1970s to the mid-1990s] is almost entirely comprised of women, children, mothers and their children, flowers, and scenery" (Liao, 2000, p. 71). But she missed the feminist connection to earlier Western women artists. To this contemporary critic such works "seemed nothing more than a modern version of parlor painting and linked neither to Chinese contemporary culture, much less feminist culture" (Liao, 2000, p. 71).

Guo's depiction of these peasant women also shows her interest in traditional patterned Chinese textiles, which she would later design to support herself for a time in New York, after studying textile design at the Fashion Institute

of Technology. She depicted both babies in her painting wearing *guapi-mao* (瓜皮帽) or a "melon-skin" hats (Figure 2b), part of a well-known folk costume. This hat's form, with the raised ball in its center, would later inspire her stuffed fabric sculptures of single breasts with raised nipples.

Guo's interest in children and in rural themes shows in another of her ink and watercolor paintings of 1983 called *Children's View* (兒童的視線; Figure 3). In it, she compels the viewer to see things from a child's perspective; the heads and shoulders of the adult figures have been cropped out of the picture plane, but the bearded goat is fully visible on the right side of the composition. She explains that she was depicting "Southern Style" women who work in bare feet in wet rice fields.

Despite her professor's criticism of *Mother's Love*, Guo did so well at the Zhejiang Academy that she was invited to teach there after her

graduation in 1982. She believes she was “the first woman to be so honored since the Cultural Revolution” (Randian, 2011). *Hometown Peasants* (家鄉人; Figure 4), her graduation painting won praise. Very wide, like a traditional horizontal scroll, this Western-style painting depicted people that she had observed in the countryside. Her painting stood out because she depicted

male workers at rest, holding their shovels, and groups of women sewing clothes for a bride and doing other domestic tasks. Her portrayals of these workers, which were more naturalistic than typical heroic propaganda figures, caught the attention of both faculty and students.

When Guo participated in a faculty show at the Zhejiang Academy, an American collector



Figure 3. Zhen Guo, *Children's view*, 1984, ink on rice paper, 140 × 69 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo.



Figure 4. Zhen Guo, *Hometown peasants* [details], 1982, ink and watercolor on rice paper, 1,288 × 68 cm, China Art College, Hangzhou, China. From: China Art College.



purchased her 1983 work on paper called *Seated Woman* (女大学生; Figure 5a). It includes two collage elements: blue-and-white-check fabric in the foreground and a photograph held in the hand of the sitter, who is drawn in charcoal. Guo and her classmates were emulating collages that they saw reproduced in art books and magazines from the West. She might have seen reproductions of the work of the American Pop artist, Tom Wesselmann, whose 1962 *Great American Nude* series #31 (Figure 5c) features similar blue-and-white-check cloth. She incorporated the bold printed pattern to use as a flat surface, parallel to the picture plane as had Wesselmann and Picasso, whose 1912 *Still-Life With Chair Caning* (Figure 5b) with its patterned oil cloth became a watershed in the development of collage.

The American collector, who purchased Guo's art, was Waldemar A. Nielsen, then a

council member of "The Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange," established by the composer, Chou Wen-Chung, at Columbia University in 1978. For 40 years it remained the only "privately-funded, non-profit organization carrying out systematic exchanges between the two countries solely in the arts" (The Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange, n.d.). Most of the funding came from the Ford, Rockefeller, and Luce foundations. Nielsen was a former Ford Foundation official and author, who described the dramatic shift from the time of the Cultural Revolution when "every manifestation of what could be termed modern art was forbidden, from Impressionism to Pop" (Nielsen, 1987, p. 19). Nielsen quoted an unnamed young woman artist explaining her shift away from Chinese models: "Here in China the weight of our own tradition is so great that we have to make a conscious effort to break free of it. If we don't,

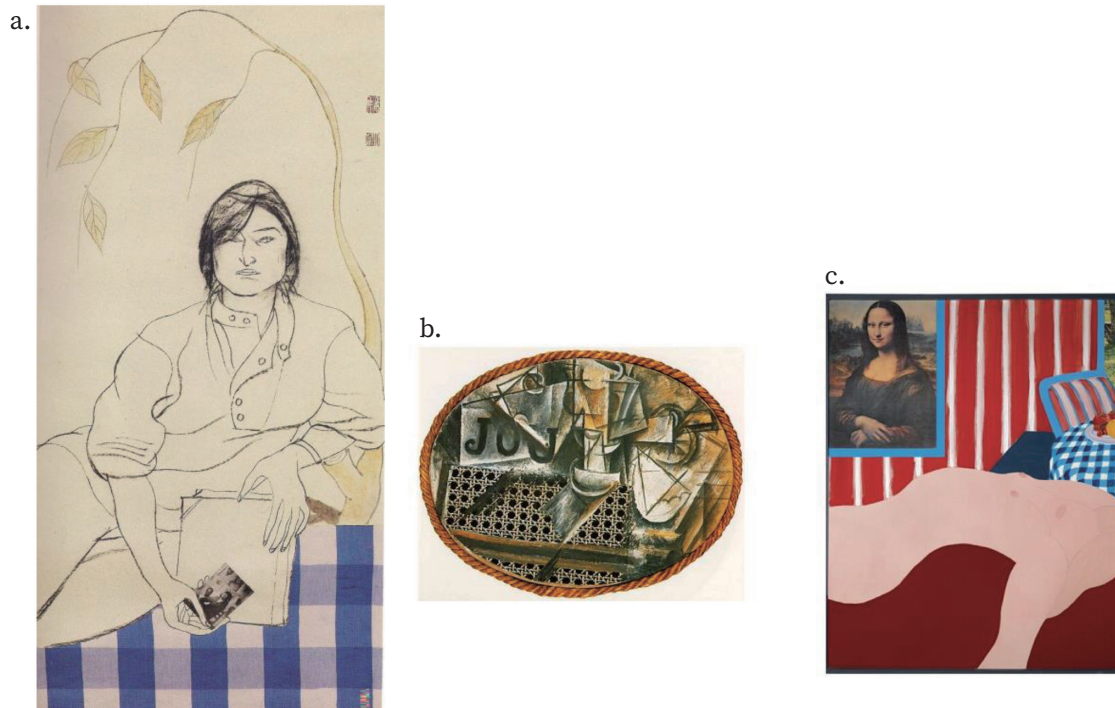


Figure 5. (a) Zhen Guo, *Seated woman*, 1983, charcoal ink fabric photograph, 138 × 68 cm, Pacific Asian Art Museum, Pasadena, CA. From: Zhen Guo; (b) Pablo Picasso, *Still-life with chair caning*, 1912, oil and oilcloth on canvas framed with rope, 29 × 37 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris, France. From: Musée Picasso; (c) Tom Wesselmann, *Great American Nude* series #31, 1962, oil and mixed media collage on board, 152 × 122 cm, collection of Galerie Bruno Bischofberger. From: Galerie Bruno Bischofberger.

it will smother us” (Nielsen, 1987, p. 22). The source of these unattributed words could well have been Guo, whom the American would have encountered when buying her work.

Making three “buying trips” to China aimed at producing an exhibition in America, Nielsen visited Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Nanjing, and met with artists and arts administrators both at established schools like Zhejiang Academy and outside of official networks (Center for U.S.-China Arts Exchange, 1988). He managed to get an American corporation, ARCO International Oil and Gas Company, to sponsor an exhibition called, “Beyond the Open Door: Contemporary Paintings from the People’s Republic of China,” held in spring 1987 at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena, California, showing the Chinese contemporary paintings that he collected.

The “Foreword” to the show’s catalogue was written by Henry Kissinger, who, during the Nixon administration, played a major role in United States foreign policy leading to a resumption of relations with China. He noted “The opening, or reopening, of China to the West in the 1970s was one of the most momentous political developments of the 20th century. By the early 1980s it had led to a broad new national program of modernization which, under good leadership, has already brought important benefits to the economy and the society in general” (Kissinger, 1987, p. 7). He added: the art “created by the new generation of Chinese artists” would be a “prism through which to perceive these developments” (p. 7).

Even while Guo was being recognized as part of this “new generation of Chinese artists,” in August 1985, she married her contemporary and colleague, Wenda Gu (born 1955 in Shanghai), who, having studied at Zhejiang Academy for his master’s degree, also began teaching there. He is known to have worked

for the school authorities on huge propaganda posters (Ho, 1992). Gu, while a member of the same faculty, was not among the artists whose work was selected for purchase by Nielsen. Yet, Guo, despite her own record of stellar accomplishments, quickly fell into the traditional Chinese wife’s role of supporting her new husband’s ambitions.

The newlyweds planned to go to the United States, but Guo agreed to go first since she had some relatives living there who could serve as a guarantor to help her to obtain a visa. After only a year of married life, she left in 1986 to enroll at San Francisco Art College, but lasted only months, leaving to learn English. Meanwhile, she worked busing tables in a local Chinese restaurant, underpaid and barely able to fend for herself. In July 1987, her husband joined her in Los Angeles, where she had moved.

The couple soon left for the School of Fine Arts at York University in Toronto, Canada, where they were invited to be visiting scholars and they each had solo shows.<sup>4</sup> Even as her husband began to experience success, Guo remained devoted to supporting his career first, privileging his goals over her own needs. Yet in their year apart, both she and her new husband “went through some changes,” she has observed (Guo, 2020). As their marriage began to fail, she recalls experiencing domestic violence, a term that she says she had never even heard of while still living in China. “In China, women are beaten and shamed all the time, but no one ever called it ‘domestic violence,’” Guo explained (Guo, 2020).

Domestic abuse is a much-told story among artist couples, played out in public in the trials of celebrities. Such “he said, she said” conflicts are difficult to verify, so I will not investigate the sad story of these two

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<sup>4</sup> Guo’s 1987 show was at Yangtze Art Gallery, Toronto, Canada.



artists' broken marriage.<sup>5</sup> Yet, if we are to understand something of what propelled Guo to seek out and embrace not just feminism, but feminist art, it is impossible to deny or ignore the emotional pain she suffered in her first marriage.

Guo has described the harsh life that she led in America during the first few years of her marriage: she arose at seven and went to school to maintain her student visa status; then she worked until six in the evening as a waitress at a Taiwanese-Korean restaurant. After she returned home at seven, she had to clean the home of the Americans where the couple was boarding—in payment for their rent. She then worked until midnight on her schoolwork. She was exhausted by all of this, supporting herself and her husband, whose only responsibility was to attend school to learn English.

She recalled, “I silently bore all the burdens of my family, with the hope that my labors would be temporary and that my efforts would help” (Guo, 2020). Another time, speaking of her first husband, she explained why she made art that she considered “commercial”:

Because at that time we needed money to live on, unlike in China where we had jobs and the government gave us money every month. When we first got here, the big shock to me was everyone had to make money. I worked as a housekeeper, bakery worker, waitress, and many different jobs and tried very hard to support him to survive here. (Guo, 2020)

Researching the situation, Guo found galleries in San Francisco willing to sell her paintings, especially when she intentionally

produced more decorative pictures, rather than what she would have preferred to paint. But her husband was impatient to move to the center of the art world in New York and went without her, leaving her behind to continue working; he expected her to send him money to rent housing and pay his art school tuition. After six months, she dropped out of school and took an F2 Visa, a non-immigrant temporary permit for the immediate family of F1 Student Visa holders, which allowed her to leave California and join her husband on the East Coast.

Arriving in New York in 1988, Guo stayed at home making stylized figurative paintings including mother and child themes (Figure 6). She found that their flat linearity, resembling *art nouveau*, sold well enough that she could support her husband while he took English classes. Guo's dedication to support her husband, was admired by her few American friends, such as the sculptor Nancy Fried and her partner the painter, Christina Schlesinger, yet they wondered why he did not pitch in

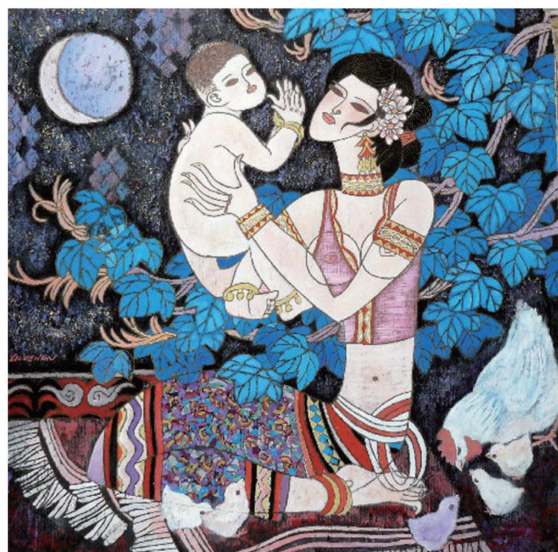


Figure 6. Zhen Guo, *Mother and child* (童趣), 1988, acrylic on rice paper, 102 × 102 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo.

<sup>5</sup> “He said, she said” is the current term for conflicting reports from two or more parties on an issue, prototypically involving a situation between a man and a woman without witnesses.

and take on his share of responsibility. Only gradually did Guo begin to grasp her husband's exploitation of her virtue as a Chinese woman. "Westerners don't understand us. We Asian women are willing to work hard for the family and to sacrifice," she told herself. Slowly, she recalls, she began to experience "a sour sense of grievance" (Guo, 2020).

After a time, she reflected:

For the first few years of my life in the United States, I was like a rickshaw porter with my family and all my support and dreams loaded behind me. If you were to ask me: What is the value of your life? I will answer you without thinking: To give my body, my ideals, my youth, my career, in exchange for a Coveted Position to watch someone else in the spotlight. (Guo, 2020)

This lopsided journey was doomed from the start.

Zhen Guo and Wenda Gu separated in 1993 and divorced in 1995. By then, after the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing during the spring of 1989, when troops and tanks massacred student demonstrators, the United States government, under the Chinese Student Protection Act, declared in 1992 that Chinese nationals who could prove they were in the United States from June 5, 1989 to April 11, 1990, were automatically eligible for permanent residency (Boston Globe, 1993). This had enabled Guo to obtain a Green Card residency document. Nevertheless, despite not having to leave the United States, she was devastated by the end of the marriage in which she had invested so much.

For several years, Guo felt paralyzed by grief and unable to paint. Years later, she reflected,

I had a voice when I was younger, painting as a pure artist. Later I would submit to society's rules and role for women, sacrificing my own ambition and desires. This is when I feel I became mute. I still had language, but I couldn't make noise. It wasn't until my family life started to fall apart—when my first husband and I separated—that I completely stopped painting. It just became too painful. So for a period of time, I lost my voice and I was stripped of my identity as an artist. (Rolandelli, 2018)

Once separated from her husband, she became involved with her Karate teacher, Robert Weinberg. Just over forty, she became pregnant and their daughter, Tian, was born in February 1996. She quit her job, which at the time was designing textiles for Cranston Print works, so that she could focus on the baby; she all but stopped making art. Marriage followed and Guo eventually realized that she had a spouse who supported and encouraged her career. Still, processing what she had been through in her first marriage took years.

By 2000, in *Untitled* (Figure 7a), painted on rice paper and one of thirteen in a series called "Life Death Love," she portrayed herself and her first husband seated at the dinner table. Her left breast has been stripped away and her broken heart has been removed and placed on her husband's dinner plate, which is bright red as is his side of the tablecloth. As large visible tears flow from her eyes, he holds his knife and fork, not chopsticks; her knife and spoon remain unused next to her empty plate, for symbolically, she was starving. Feeling anguish, grief, worry, jealousy, she was literally "eating her heart out" from the pain she experienced as a devoted Chinese wife, who had sacrificed for her first husband's success only to have him betray her.



Figure 7. (a) Zhen Guo, *Untitled*, 2000, acrylic and ink on rice paper, 76 × 102 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo; (b) Frida Kahlo, *Two Fridas*, 1939, oil on canvas, 173.5 × 173 cm, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico. From: [fridakahlo.org](http://fridakahlo.org).

Guo's expression of pain recalls the heart motif in Frida Kahlo's painting, especially her popular *Two Fridas* of 1939 (Figure 7b). When the poet Mai Mang observed similarities between her work and Kahlo, Guo commented:

I think, Frida and myself belong to two different generations. If there are any similarities between us, they lie in the fact that we both tried our best to use painting to express in maxim our own most memorable experiences of life and love. There is no covering up, no shyness, no frivolity, no utilitarian calculation, no falsehood. (cited in Mai, 2012, p. 4)

Guo defended the emotional content in her work:

No matter whether these scenes may appear too shocking, these feelings too unsettling, they all originate from a heart that is extremely sensitive, fully tested by life, battered and beaten over

time, and with profound feelings. (cited in Mai, 2012, p. 4)

"Frida was the woman who loves too much," says Nancy Hardin, producer of the 2002 film, *Frida*, "but she was able to incorporate loving too much into a creative life" (cited in Herrera, 1990). That was the challenge for Guo as she coped with her spouse's betrayal after her long energetic investment supporting their marriage and promoting his career.

Only in 2010, did Guo get in touch with her fury, expressed in *Self-portrait* (自畫像; Figure 8). She depicted herself as an angry caged leopard with pigs' feet and a human face, growling at the world. "This is about screaming and not being heard," she protested, "about not being able to leave the cage." She followed this harrowing image with a 2011 series of acrylic on rice paper (Figure 9a): *Suffocation* (窒息) was the first of what turned into eight grimacing and choking self-portraits. She has commented, "I wanted to deeply embed anger and hatred, resentment and submission in my art, as well as love and sorrow felt to the bone." She turned to Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy she had read in



art school after the Cultural Revolution, quoting a passage translated from the Chinese as: “Extreme pain is the last liberator of the spirit. Only this pain compels us to understand.”<sup>6</sup>

In its heightened emotional intensity, Guo’s series of grimacing self-portraits recalls Edvard Munch’s icon of alienation, *The Scream* of 1893 (Figure 9b). Like the Norwegian painter, she



Figure 8. Zhen Guo, *Self-portrait*, 2010, acrylic and ink on rice paper, 102 × 127 cm, Artist’s collection. From: Zhen Guo.

understands that facial expression mirrors the agony of the soul. She too was dealt a hand of personal trauma and suffered from melancholy. She says that her choking self-portraits express “my own feelings of suffocating: a woman unable to breath—choked by constraints and limits placed on her life, by her duties and expectations to society. She works, struggles, and suffers, but when she tries to speak, she has no voice. Without that voice, she feels worthless.”<sup>7</sup> She has continued the struggle to reclaim her voice.

It is not surprising that Guo’s next series, painted in 2012, was of women boxing. With the man who became her second husband, she had already studied Karate, a martial art that developed in Japan’s Okinawa, once an independent kingdom heavily influenced by China, including its martial arts. Boxing, yet another martial art, also attracted her. Its head movements and footwork appealed to her as well as the opportunity to throw punches.

Guo enjoyed hitting punching bags in the gym—unlike the American feminist artist, Judy Chicago, who in 1970, had merely posed

a.



b.



Figure 9. (a) Zhen Guo, *Choking self-portraits series*, 2011, eight pieces each ink and acrylic on rice paper, 102 × 101 cm, Artist’s collection. From: Zhen Guo; (b) Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, oil, tempera, pastel and crayon on cardboard, 91 × 73.5 cm, National Gallery and Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway. From: National Gallery and Munch Museum.

<sup>6</sup> “It is great pain only which is the ultimate emancipator of the spirit; for it is the teacher of the strong suspicion . . .” (Nietzsche, 1887, p. 3).

<sup>7</sup> Zhen Guo to my Baruch College, the City University of New York class, May 17, 2022.

as a boxer to show her toughness (see Chicago as a boxer in Levin, 2018, p. 1). Guo's boxing pictures, painted in acrylic and ink on paper, show women active in the ring in what was traditionally a male domain, even forbidden to women. With titles like *Under the Light* (Figure 10a), *Last Blow* (最後一擊; Figure 10b), and *Still Standing*, they enabled her to express aggression. She has recalled,

I had to fight for this path in life—to study art in school and pursue a career as an artist. During the Cultural Revolution in China—and in most other places in the world—the life of an artist was associated with struggle, almost as being less honorable. The artist's path wasn't viewed in the best light. (Rolandelli, 2018)

a.



b.



Figure 10. (a) Zhen Guo, *Under the light*, 2012, ink and acrylic on rice paper, 93 × 95 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo; (b) Zhen Guo, *Last blow*, 2012, ink and acrylic on rice paper, 93 × 95 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo.

In 2013, Guo again took up the theme of motherhood, for which she had been criticized in art school. She represented motherhood metaphorically as single voluptuous breasts, sculpted and shown in different combinations, settings, materials, patterns, and colors. She turned back to her roots in sewing and folk art. Ironically, Mao's anti-elite dictate happened to coincide with American feminists' wholesale rejection of the elite male artists' Eurocentric aesthetic in favor of a post-modernism inspired by popular and folk art that had previously been the domain of women's handicrafts and non-Western cultures. American feminist artists like Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, and Judy Chicago, who championed quilts, pattern and decoration, lace, and embroidery, exemplified this trend (see also Buszek, 2011, p. 5).

While Chicago stirred controversy with her focus on female genitalia, Guo sees the breast as "the most recognizable body part of the female" (Guo, 2017, p. 26). Back in 1989, she had seen her friend Nancy Fried's powerful *Self-portrait* sculpture (Figure 11a) with her right breast cut away after a mastectomy. Guo had heard of mythical Greek Amazons who had their right breasts removed so that there would be no problem throwing a spear or firing an arrow. Then, too, for one so tortured as Guo, there were suggestive art historical images of the martyred *St. Agatha* (Figure 12b) showing her holding her amputated breasts on a platter, painted by artists such as Spain's Francisco de Zurbarán in 1630.



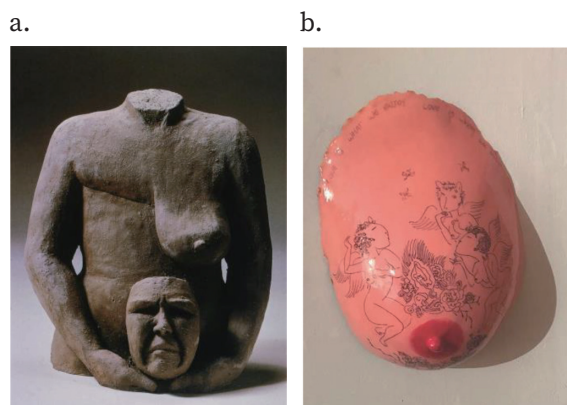


Figure 11. (a) Nancy Fried, *Self-portrait*, 1989, black clay, 26.6 × 24.1 × 20.3 cm, private collection. From: Nancy Fried; (b) Zhen Guo, *Breast*, 2015, papier mache acrylic ink, 35 × 26 × 16 cm, private collection. From: Zhen Guo.



Figure 12. (a) Zhen Guo, *Motherhood (母親)* [detail], 2015–2016, cotton, linen, silk, burlap, yarn, and acrylic paint, 900 × 225 × 35 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo; (b) Francisco de Zurbarán, *St. Agatha*, 1630–1633, oil on canvas, 127 × 60 cm, Musée Fabre, Montpellier, France. From: Musée Fabre.

“A woman’s breast has many different uses beyond nursing,” Guo reflects.

She is very proud of them and keeps them secret. They demonstrate her youth and health and disclose her aging. They are her strength and her vulnerability. This body part is full of emotion and intimacy and sensitivity

but at the same time they bear the most pain and the sadness of deterioration. (Guo, 2017, p. 26)

At first Guo made her soft fabric breasts and sewed them onto 50 leather and canvas punching bags (Figure 13) by herself. Her daughter wrote: “These breasts have become attached to the phallic symbol of violent masculinity. They cannot be dislodged and are slowly choking the bag and rendering it useless and impotent” (cited in Guo, 2017, p. i8). Later, when exhibiting them in China, she hired local women to help fabricate her designs. She chose attaching breasts to punching bags as a “direct and imposing image of violent masculinity,” since she viewed the heavyweight boxer as “a symbol of violence and patriarchal society.”

Guo has explained that her choice of fabrics for the breasts from expensive silk to humble linens represents a multitude of women from different social classes, having diverse personalities. She also produced *papier mâché* breasts in the same shapes as the ones in fabric, drawing imaginary figures on them with ink and sometimes inscribing messages of love (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Zhen Guo, *Punching bags (沙袋)*, 2014–2018, fabrics and mixed media, each item 183 × 56 × 56 cm, installation at NEST Planning Contemporary at Beijing Zero Art Center, 798 Art District, Beijing, China, 2017. From: Zhen Guo.





Figure 14. Zhen Guo, *Motherhood*, 2015–2016, cotton, linen, silk, burlap, yarn, and acrylic paint, 900 × 225 × 35 cm, installation at Meixi Art Center, Changsha, China, 2018. Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo.

“Sometimes I also use huge works to call upon the image of the breasts,” she points out,

. . . to alert people's consciousness to the power of the female gender. These are not only meant to have people recognize the beauty, softness, kindness of the female, but also to shock the viewer with females' power, resilience, and limitless flexibility of the value and meaning within their existence. (Guo, 2017, p. 26)

Four panels of Guo's *Breast Wall* tapestries were at the Donghu Art Museum of Shenzhen during the summer of 2015. She recalls

when I showed my *Breast Wall* tapestries in China, I noticed some people would start to cry standing in front of them. . . . The textiles—both cotton and silk—

and patterns I have employed in this work are directly connected to people's lives. These are materials they've felt and seen before, and they evoke reflection on the past. I'm making this work for anyone with a mother. (Guo, 2017, p. 26)

A feminist critic in China, Tong Yujie, singled out these works as symbols showing “the eternal power of motherhood” (Tong, 2018, pp. 130-131). Guo's first solo show featuring the breasts was in 2017 at Amerasia Bank Gallery in New York's Flushing neighborhood, with its large Asian immigrant population (Goodman, 2017).

Most recently in her solo show at 456 Gallery in New York, Guo showed *Mother and Earth* (母親和大地; Figure 15) of 2022, with some of her *papier mâché* breasts against an evocative ground of dark ink drawings that harken back to Chinese traditional art. These



Figure 15. Zhen Guo, *Mother and earth*, 2022, ink on rice paper, 600 × 200 × 30 cm, Artist's collection. From: Zhen Guo.

lyrical works are a part of what she calls “Muted Landscape.”<sup>8</sup> She continues to express her view of feminism, which she laments is not accepted by most Chinese female artists: “They avoid characterizing themselves or their art as feminist—even though it’s quite clear they are addressing feminist issues.” Her opinion concurs with other observers (Tatlow, 2018, p. 35). Combining Western philosophy with Chinese aesthetics, Guo sees her own art as reflecting her life experience. Her art communicates that high drama.

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