The Gender Legacy of the Mao Era
Women's Life Stories in Contemporary China

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I Am a Rock
Shitou’s Life Story

What might be a Chinese lesbian woman’s take on the gender legacy of the Mao era and its “masculinization of Chinese women”? This chapter examines the life story of Shitou, a self-identified lesbian artist. Her story reveals that the Maoist *femin*ité, although apparently desexualized and defeminized, was produced and naturalized through a compulsorily heterosexual system and the erasure of a feminine space and the possibility of articulating “her story.” Moreover, Shitou’s narrative demonstrates the ways the gender legacy of the Mao era has been selectively and strategically reappropriated in surprising ways in post-Mao transnational queer politics. As a visual artist, Shitou provided two interrelated sources for the representation of her life: one verbal (her narrative) and one visual (her artwork). My understanding and interpretation of her life therefore derives from these sources.¹

Context: Female Same-Sex Desire in China

Female same-sex desire has existed in China throughout history, but until the twentieth century was hidden and largely ignored (compared with literature on male homosexuality). Taoism understands the supply of yin (the female substance/energy) as unlimited in quantity and regards women’s self-stimulation as harmless. It discourages male masturbation but tolerates female masturbation, including mutual masturbation between women (Ruan and Matsumura 1991; van Gulik and Goldin 2003).² Sex between women, called *mojingzi* (磨镜子, rubbing mirrors or mirror grinding), existed and was tolerated in households among wives, concubines, slaves, or servants in ancient China. It is observed in Chinese literature and art but was
subordinated under the male mode and rendered inferior, trivial, and harmless, subordinated to the demands of Confucian patriarchy in premodern China (Sang 2003). At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, there were organized groups of women, such as Mujing Dang (镜党, the Rubbing Mirror Party) in Shanghai, Jinlanhu (金兰会, Golden Orchid Association), and Zishu Nü (自梳女, Women Vowing Spinsterhood) in Guangdong. As Sang Tae-Ian (2003, 17) points out, despite a long history, female-female sex acts were not considered an independent erotic mode or a personal taste, as was the case for male-male eroticism, called nanse. Women in these relationships were referred to not by an integrated category label but by the traditional categories of sisterhood and friendship.

According to Sang (2003), between 1910 and 1930 the May Fourth neologism “female same-sex love” appeared in response to the dissemination of Western “sexual science,” which introduced the categories of normality and aberration, and the legitimacy of same-sex love was openly debated. The term designating the category of nü tongxing ai (女同性爱, female same-sex love) was introduced, and the concept entered the symbolic domain. Female same-sex love was debated in public: it was seen as a perversion, a fashion, a form of spiritual or platonic love, or a modern version of exclusive friendship. Some deemed it a harmless rehearsal for opposite-sex love and marriage, a fascinating modern phenomenon, or an alternative way of imagining modernity. Through these debates, female same-sex love received unprecedented attention in the media and became a subject of public scrutiny, criticism, investigation, and regulation.

As Sang (2003) argued, the increasing visibility of female-female desire is accompanied with the medicalization and pathologization of homosexuality in general. New Chinese terms and categories of homosexuality, situated in the “scientific” discourse of psychological perversion, were coined as conceptual tools to reinscribe heteronormativity and control female sexuality at a time when women started to have increasing access to education, professions, and economic independence and when traditional ideas about marriage and women’s roles were breaking down. Sang (2003) also observes that in the Republican era there was a tendency to idealize romantic love between women and emphasize emotion, compared with the more exclusively carnal and sensual male-male eroticism.

In the Mao era, homosexuality was declared not to exist in liberated China. The category of homosexuality was erased from official discourse on sex, and all references to it disappeared from circulated print materials (Evans 1997). However, a variety of sources documented the existence of sexual activity and other romantic behavior, both same-sex and opposite-sex, in the 1950s to 1970s (Ruan and Bullough 1992; Sang 2003). In addition, same-sex intimacy was less inhibited and taboo compared with premarital male-female intimate relations. Even though homosexuality was not criminalized, it could be prosecuted in the name of jijian zuí (奸淫罪, crime of male–male anal intercourse), an offense punished with a sentence to a labor camp, or liumang xinwei (流氓行为, conduct of hooliganism), which was subject to criminal and administrative punishments (An 1995; Wan 1996; Rofel 2007; X. Guo 2007).

In the post-Mao era, discussions about love and sexuality, including same-sex relations, have opened up again, along with the reevaluation of the Maoist past. These subjects are popular in the flourishing wave of more “liberated” publications and popular media produced in China, and the flow of information from the West includes feminism, sexual epistemology, and a wide range of erotic images. Many books, magazines, and manuals on sexual behavior, sex education, and the history of sexuality now include sections on homosexuality. The official definition of homosexuality as a mental illness, “a form of psychological perversion,” in the 1973 version of an official Xiandai Hanyu Cidian (现代汉语词典, Dictionary of the Modern Chinese Language), had been depathologized and deleted from the latest edition of Zhongguo Jingshen Zhongji Fenli Yu Zhengduan Biaozhun (中国精神障碍分类与诊断标准, The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders) in 2001.

Nevertheless, until the 2000s, in post-Mao research and discussions on homosexuality, lesbianism was largely absent. While male homosexuals were meeting in parks and bars in the 1980s and early 1990s, lesbians remained largely invisible and did not have such places to meet. The UN Fourth World Women’s Conference in 1995 in Beijing contributed to the public visibility of gays and lesbians, and the development of transnational gay networks in China over the past decade has facilitated lesbian and gay activism. In 1995, gay men like Ruan Fangfu, Wan Yanhai, and Wu Chunsheng (Gary Wu) started some activist groups and organized many tongzhi 同志 (a Chinese term for sexual and gender nonnormativity, see more detailed discussion in the storytelling section in this chapter) activities, such as parties, and a tongzhi pager hotline in Beijing; some lesbians also participated in these events and activities (He 2001; Sang 2003).

In the summer of 1998, the First National Men and Women Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing, with participants from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and foreign countries. In October 1998, the first National Women’s Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing, and in March 1999, their first community newsletter Tiankong (天空, Sky) was issued. In 2007 when I conducted the fieldwork for this research, lesbians in China have a national organization, Tongyu, their own magazine, Les+, and a club called lala (拉拉, Chinese name for lesbians) which holds weekly meetings in some large cities, as well as a lala website.
The increased social and geographical mobility of individuals since the 1990s also enabled the emergence of urban tongzhi cultures (Engebretsen 2013; Kam 2013). Homosexuals became a visible social group in Chinese public discourse. Strong transnational networks of lesbians and gay men emerged. They established their own social vocabulary, online and offline communities, and recreational culture. The development of these communities is closely connected to China's market reform and opening up to the world after 1978, influenced by global gay and lesbian culture and movements, especially from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, and by China's integration into the global neoliberal process (Dai 2002; L. Zhang 2008; Wang and Chang 2003). The force for heteronormativity has gradually shifted from direct state control of private life to surveillance by parents and colleagues (Kam 2013), and neoliberalism in China has consolidated homosexual identity through homonormativity and the consumer culture (W. Kang 2012; C. Y. Zhang 2014).

The process of gay normalization is manifested in the discourse of shuzhi (素质, quality) and homonormativity in the form of "good citizenship." According to Kam's (2013) research on Shanghai female tongzhi communities, with the belief that one has to have good shuzhi and be a "model citizen" before one can be socially accepted as a homosexual in Chinese society, the "politics of public correctness" compels Chinese tongzhi to constantly perform heteronormativity in family domains while performing homonormativity as good citizenship in public (discourse).

Shitou was born in the late Mao era and is a leading queer activist in post-Mao China. Her story is situated in the historical conjunction between Mao and post-Mao context, the development of Chinese tongzhi community and culture, and transnational queer geopolitics.

Shitou's Life Story

Outline

Shitou is a self-identified lesbian—lala or nü tongzhi (女同志, female comrade, female homosexual) in Chinese. She lives in Tongzhou district, previously a country but now one of the satellite suburb cities of Beijing, where many artists settled because the housing prices are much cheaper than in downtown Beijing. Shitou lives in a two-bedroom apartment with her female partner, Mingming, who works in film production and has participated in many of Shitou's projects. After we finished the interview in her apartment, Shitou asked me to give her a copy of the digital recording. "It might be useful," she said.
As one of the leading public lesbian figures in China, Shioutou has participated in lesbian activities and activism in Beijing since 1990s. She was one of the organizers of the first National Women Tongzi Conference and several later ones and was the editor of Tiankong. As the first well-known lesbian to publicly come out in China, Shioutou often accepts TV interviews in Hong Kong and mainland China discussing gay and lesbian issues. In 2000, Shioutou and Cui Zi'en (崔子恩, a gay filmmaker and writer in Beijing) came out publicly on the Human Weishi (湖南卫视, China Human Satellite Television) program, which has 300 million regular viewers. They discussed same-sex love with sociologist Li Yinhe (李银河), for the first time on mainland Chinese television.

In 2000 Shioutou met her current partner, Mingming, and since then they have lived and worked together. Shioutou initially did oil painting and established herself as one of the few successful female painters in Beijing. She has also been involved in multimedia creations, including installations, photography, digital video, and documentary film. In 1999 she played the leading role and participated in the production of the first mainland Chinese film about lesbian love, Jinnian Xianian (今年夏天, Fish and Elephant), which gained international attention, and she started to make her own documentaries. She made a documentary film on the Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco in 2002 and has just finished a new documentary called Nüren Wushi Fenzhong (女人五十分钟, Women: 50 Minutes). At the time of the interview she is working on a documentary about Chinese lesbians' lives. Her works have been shown widely at home and abroad.

Like Lin's life story in chapter 1, Shioutou's narrative was composed of two parts—a first and second stage of telling. I indicate the source of each narrative quote and discuss the effect of this format in Shioutou's case at the end of this chapter.

Being a Different “Woman”

Shioutou's personal gender project, which explicitly aims to contribute to a distinct collective Chinese lesbian identity, developed in parallel with the transformation of Chinese society. She has gone from being inspired and encouraged to emulate men, to a search for strength in female bonding and self-understanding influenced by the celebration of gender difference and femininity in the post-Mao era, to constructing a distinctive Chinese lesbian identity in response to increasing contact with the rest of the world in the past decade.

Shioutou's personal gender project starts with a signifying practice of (re)namings herself. Unlike European personal names, which usually come from an existing name repertoire with etymological meanings (and largely gendered), Chinese names can be made up of any morphemes in the Chinese language and usually have a literal meaning. Some Chinese names are clearly gendered. For instance, characters with a nü (女, female) radical, such as jiao (嫁, tender, lovely) are often used for female names. There is a wide range of names that do not have a gender connotation, such as chun (春, spring), and can be used for names for any gender.

Many Chinese people have more than one name, each used in different circumstances. Often a xiaoming (小名, nickname) is given at birth and used by family members and close friends, while a daming (大名, formal name) is used for school and public or official usage. Many people change the names given to them by their parents when they grow into adulthood to reflect their new identity, values, and circumstances (Blum 1994, 357–79). It is not unusual for a Chinese person to have more than one name simultaneously and replace their old name with a new one. People are accustomed to being addressed and referred to by an assortment of names, and they do not necessarily retain any of them as their “real” name or as the only one that they feel reflects their identity.

Naming is also a gendered and classed practice. Traditionally, those at the lower end of the economic ladder, like women, might have no real formal name or only names that verge on mere designation. In contrast, upper-class men often had a multitude of names—courtesy names, pen names, studio names, style names. Traditionally many educated Chinese also had pen names or title names, indicated by the prefix zi (字) or minghao (名号), for literary and artistic endeavors.

Children often have nicknames given by others (parents or neighbors), earned with peers, or self-claimed for informal settings. Self-renaming is often associated with changing construction of an individual identity, which shifts and grows along with personal development and historical cultural context. As Smith and Watson puts, "Naming is the active tense of identity, the outward aspect of the self-representation process, acknowledging all the circumstances through which it must elbow its way" (Smith and Watson 2002, 5). Situated in her life context, Shioutou's self-renaming is a gendered and queer act, indicating a desire to find an alternative symbolic representation that can signify a different gender identity.

In her discussion of lesbian life in the West in the early twentieth century, Nicky Hallett (1999) notes that historically lesbians used renaming to re-create themselves and sometimes to enact a preferred male persona. Renaming oneself is a way to designate a self-ascribed identity, and gender is often affirmed or changed through the renaming (Hallett 1999). Many lesbians' desire to rename themselves is driven by their perception
of being excluded from representation by heterosexist language, including naming practices that allocate a person to one side of a binary opposition by assigning a gendered name. Renaming allows them to break through the hegemonic heterosexual cultural discourse and contest the limits of gender identities.

Shitou's renaming practice is simultaneously traditional, Chinese, and queer. She discarded her original typically feminine name given by her parents and claimed a name that seeks to express her queerness. This was her first self-conscious claim to an alternative identity that contests and extends what a “woman” is:

My original name is Shi Xuefei (石学飞). I felt that name was not good, and at the same time, I felt shī (石, rock) was good. Because it is close to nature, it is simple, and at that time I also felt, it was hard and jiān yìng (坚硬, solid, hard) So I called myself Shitou (石头, rock). . . . I was in elementary school at that time. (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

Shi, her family name, literally means rock or stone. Xu means catkin flowers, and fēi means fly. This given name conveys an image of a beautiful, feminine, vulnerable, and ungrounded female. Shitou, which means a rock or stone, is a name often used for boys. In this narrative, becoming Shitou is framed as rejecting certain femininity situated within a heterosexual framework and pursuing a different way of being: strong, tough, down to earth.

Shitou’s rejection to conventional femininity and desire to be strong and tough reflected her childhood experience of gender politics—the soft, feminine, weak women were not capable of protecting themselves against male violence. Her mother was a physically fragile but competent woman who could even butcher pigs, but at home, she could no: stand up to her husband.

My mother worked in a food company. . . . She had butchered pigs. You can’t connect her image with what she did. Her health was not so good. She was weak, she was very kind-hearted, and physically weak. But she butchered pigs. It might have been because at that time, whoever was available would do the job. . . . Her personality is very gentle. She is not bold or pó la (泼辣, sassy). Sometimes even if she wanted to be tougher, to fight for her children's rights and benefits, I felt that she couldn’t. . . . My father had a very short temper. . . . I felt she couldn’t handle my father any more. My father came home drunk every day. My mom was scared. . . . If I was there, my mother would feel she had company. But ever since I was little, I didn’t want to stay at home. (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

Shitou interprets her “weak” mother’s task of butchering pigs in a matter-of-fact way, as just doing her job rather than having any gender significance. However, woman-as-butcher was not a popular image before the Mao era, as butchery used to be a strictly male profession among the Han people. During the Mao era, inspired by the slogan “Women can do whatever men can do,” women entered the butchery profession.¹⁰ Her mother’s job as a butcher was a manifestation of Maoist ideas of women’s liberation. In her well-known feminist novel Shafu (杀夫, The Butcher’s Wife), Taiwanese writer 李昂 (Li Ang) tells a story of the sexual oppression experienced by Lin Shi, a butcher’s wife. The husband’s profession is used to symbolize patriarchal oppression and sexual violence toward women. It is revealing that the Maoist concept of women’s liberation in mainland China, which sought to emancipate women by encouraging them to take on men’s jobs, did not necessarily empower these women in their domestic relationships with men or solve the problem of gender oppression that these “butcher women” experienced at home, like Shitou’s mother.

Figure 2. Shitou, A Photo with Mother (Yu Muqing Heyin, 与母亲合影), 1997
A Photo with Mother was painted in 1997, the year Shitou’s mother passed away. Shitou painted this picture to memorialize her and their bond. In this image, her mother’s plain short hair, make-up-free face, and worker’s uniform exemplify a typical image of the Maoist funü; yet the red sweater and long bangs reveal some feminine style. Shitou appears in this painting with her signature bald head, though with girly clothes—her usual representational technique to convey a queer twist. The juxtaposition of a Maoist funü worker with her queer daughter is suggestive. Shitou’s funü mother exemplifies a new possibility for being a woman, yet also reveals its limits. The queer daughter beside the mother honors the heritage of the Maoist mother, while her bald head suggests the different path she takes. The mother as butcher and her revolutionary laboring “femininity” reveals that the weak wife described in Shitou’s story was at the same time courageous, powerful, and fearless (or not “squeamish,” see previous discussions in chapter 1). The queer daughter will carry that strength and courage further down her path, firmly holding her apple—the implicit forbidden queer desire. The flapping wings agitate the quivering desire for the flower.

I understand this painting as suggesting the linkage between Shitou’s queer gender project and the inspiration of the Maoist funü. This is also evident in Shitou’s life narrative. Growing up in the later Cultural Revolution, she was influenced by the “army uniform” fashion, which was continuously popular throughout the 1970s and 1980s (see chapter 2) and took up a masculine or unisex style. She liked to wear her father’s old army uniforms, switching between the old “cool” (army green) and the new “cool” (black), both of which contrasted with the girly style, conveying a rejection of a gentle, conventional femininity.

When I grew older, I had two styles. One was that I liked to wear my father’s clothes, because he was in the military; I liked to wear his old army things, such as the shoes, the leather boots . . . I also started to like to be cool. At that time I didn’t know the word “cool” yet. It just meant that I wore a lot of black. (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

As discussed earlier, the defeminized image of the Maoist funü in general, and the image of female Red Guards in army uniform in particular, evoked a revolutionary femininity or a femininity that aimed to measure up to revolutionary masculinity. It overlaps with butch lesbian images to a certain extent, blurring the gender boundaries between men and women, on one hand, and between butch lesbians and heterosexual women on the other. In that era, however, this type of gender style transgression was regarded as revolutionary rather than as potentially indicating queerness. The army uniforms Shitou wore were inherited from her father, indicating the masculine roots of such style. Nonetheless, that “style without a name” offered a space for Shitou to deviate from conventional heterosexual femininity, infusing queerness to the gender convention of that time.

From 1994 to 1997, during the first stage of Shitou’s career as a painter, she produced her Wuqi Xilie (武器系列, Weapon Series), which depicts naked female bodies mutilated and reassembled with weapons: they become strong by appropriating phallic symbols. The Weapon Series represents her search for alternative ways of being a “woman” and reflects the influence of the Maoist gender project. She commented on the symbolism of this juxtaposition:

Figure 3. Shitou, Weapon (Wuqi, 武器), #8, 1997
As for the symbol of weapons, it might be because they symbolize a kind of fearlessness, and a kind of rebellion. It seems that when you face society, face your environment, you need this kind of strong and determined attitude. It's actually related to warfare, I feel things like arms, in that era, had destructive functions, and a strong effect. . . . The guns . . . that gun, was very pretty, and delicate, it was a kind of jinianban (纪念版, for collection), a kind of art or craft, but it is a real gun. . . . I feel . . . it is interesting, it's pretty, but can also kill, it has the power to kill. It's a real gun. So, don't think that she [the girl in the painting] is just a huaping (花瓶, vase, a Chinese expression similar to “window dressing” in English). (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

Images of women with weapons (mostly female members of militias) were often seen in the posters and propaganda materials of Mao era China. As discussed in chapter 2, the militarization of civilian life from the early 1960s onward influenced the popularization of female militancy. The latter was represented in Mao’s poem “Wei niningbing tizhao” (为女民兵题照, Militia Women, see Honig 2002), and stories such as Hongse Nianqi Jun (红色娘子军, The Red Detachment of Women) and state-sponsored posters for militia training for women (White 1989). At that time, images of women with guns symbolized their emancipation, women’s recognized role as citizens of the socialist nation, and gender empowerment.

Shitou’s Weapon Series reminds me the Maoist gender project but is also drastically different from it. Both projects use juxtaposition of women and weapons, aiming to connect them with empowerment. They share the
underlining assumption that the female is inherently weak and inadequate; to
make her strong and complete, phallic symbols such as a gun need to be
borrowed and attached to her. Female power thus does not derive (or not
enough) from her own body and gender identity but from a transformed
or hybrid body—a body with arms, one that combines feminine and mas-
culine elements.

What Shitou enacts in the Weapon Series differs significantly from
the militant images of Maoist women. The women with guns in the gender
project of the Mao era are constructed with militant and revolutionary
femininities and as the political subject of the socialist state. In Shitou's
painting, the combination signals a differently oriented gender and sexual
project. The floral detail on the gun is not only decorative but evokes
femininity, so that the coexistence of weapons, flowers, and female bodies
in each picture suggests an ideal of the combination of the feminine and
the masculine. The naked feminine bodies are different from the muscular
laboring or militant funi bodies often appear in the revolutionary poster
of the Mao era, as there is no intention of hiding or erasing the existence
of the female body and her sexuality or of covering up the “female wound”
(see chapter 2). Different from the Maoist women, whose strength was
derived from rejecting the feminine and adopting a masculine appearance
and strength by covering/erasing the female body, Shitou imagines a dif-
ferent woman here, one who appropriates masculine strength with a positive
affirmation of the female body and the feminine.

Shitou told me, “I like to paint about power . . . hope . . . and some-
thing powerful” (Shitou interview 2006, part 2). Seeking ways to make the
women strong and invincible, Shitou imagined a bodily transformation
project for them. The mutilation may be seen as an implicit critique of the
violence and cost of such transformation, which is anything but natural. A
part of her body has to be literally cut off to engender the transformation,
and the weapon, still exterior to her body in appearance, is inserted force-
fully. Her new body manifests the costs of being strong and powerful and
the conflicting state of existence through appropriating phallic elements.
She is no longer One, as a part of her is forever lost, she is no longer One
because there is an Other within her—the phallic, masculine other.

The nontraditional, nonrealistic images in the paintings are in line
with the message they aim to convey. The still rare (at that time in China)
vanguard portrayal of the naked female body resonates with the post-Mao
call for a return to human nature, with the body as a site of this nature
and the rediscovery of women’s femininity and sexuality as an important
part of it. However, the representation of the female body in this series
is different. The mutilation of the body with weapons is intensely queer. The

juxtaposition of the female body and the flower in contrast with the weapon
is also intriguing. Flowers, the object of desire, appear repeatedly in this
series. If they meant to signify the feminine, then in signifying economy
it seems redundant to have both present. They overlay and intertwine, as
the subject and object of desire. In figure 3 the flower replaces the head as
the agent who desires, whereas in figure 4 the flower is on her chest like a
badge of pride. The weapons are part of her body and may be used to kill
or to guard her body and her flower. Being simultaneously the subject and
object of desire, and having gone through a violent mutilation to transform
into a weapon, what does she seek to destroy and kill?

Female Bonding and Self-Discovery

Shitou’s later experiences as a female artist in a male-dominated field
provoked her to consciously criticize the “sameness” gender project. Even
though the gender discourse of “women can do whatever man can do” opened
up the opportunity for her to imagine her future as a painter, it could not
exempt her from being judged by male standards. Shitou was expected to
be inherently inferior in this field because of her gender. Her art would
be devalued as “a woman’s art” if it demonstrated a “feminine” style, and
she would receive praise for being an “honorary male” if she could erase
any trace of “feminine” traits and paint “like a man” (and ironically prove
that the so-called masculine style is not something inherently associated
with male gender).

I had been growing up in a masculine discursive environ-
ment . . . . The boys would become competitive, and say that my
paintings were too feminine . . . . I felt awkward and insulted when I
heard such comments. But then I thought . . . . I thought I could see
things from a nüxing shijiao (女性视角, female perspective) . . . .
there are aspects [of female existence] that are very frustrating. I also feel
there is a special kind of acuteness in my work. I feel this is not a
criticism of my work, I turned the criticisms around. Of course there
are also people who viewed my paintings and said that they could
not tell whether the painter was a nüde (女的, female) or nande (男
的, male), they couldn’t tell. I knew that was meant to be a compli-
mant, but I didn’t take it as a compliment (laugh), because they still
meant to devalue the other nüxing (女性, female) artists . . . . Why do
they denigrate other nüxing, just because of their gender? Am I not a
nüde, standing right in front of you? So I really dislike others judg-
ing, using the fact that you are a nüde (female). (Shitou interview
2006, part 2)
Although Shitou admits that she used to be content to be approved by male critics and regarded as painting "as well as a man," the acclaimed superiority of a masculine style or content makes her desire to convey specifically female experiences unrepresentable. After her initial imitation of male models and satisfaction at the result, she realized she could not pass as male and decided not to continue on that path. Shitou started to embrace and cultivate a distinctly feminine/feminist perspective and a style that represented her understanding of life as a nü de. Her art obtained its depth and power by self-recognition and self-identification as a female artist, proud of being nü de. After establishing contact with the emerging lesbian circle in Beijing, she began consciously claiming a lesbian identity.

Unlike some lesbians who adopt masculine roles and mime male heterosexual attraction to be understood and understand themselves in a recognized binary frame, Shitou's construction of her lesbian subjectivity rejects maleness/masculinity as its reference point: "We could learn and borrow from each other, but not by using the male as the standard." Her rejection of the masculine image of women in the Mao era, and male standards in general, is reflected in the lesbian images she has produced based on awareness of a women-centered consciousness. She has been influenced by the development of post-Mao feminism in China and the inspiration and support she has received from her feminist friends, Western and Chinese:

Getting in touch with the "East Meets West Group" had a big impact on my life; it brought about the biggest change in my life. Because before that, among these people I met...just by categorizing one as male or female, just by using a simple category of gender, they could turn you upside down. And then, after I met them I had a lot of... support. And then I understood many, many things. I feel this is the most important thing that happened in my life. Without this... my life felt so heavy... [without this discovery] I would have had a lot of struggles. It would have been very painful. Before that I had a lot of struggles, so that is the most important thing in my life.

(Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

As Shitou derived knowledge and strength by identifying with the female body and lesbian sexuality, she rejected the Maoist gender project in favor of a more radical reformulation of sexual difference. Her later works direct her search into a women-only space and resort more to self-discovery, with the source of strength coming from female bonding and understanding oneself and other women as women, with less reference to men.

What I painted... was the feeling that nü de needed to build up alliances with other nü de... I felt the male artists had their bond, they had their own groups, but nüxing (women)... in that era, I felt it was very hard for them to support each other... Actually there were very few female artists... I realized that many nüxing were on their own. They were all somehow unique, compared to nüxing (男性, males), they existed in an awkward way. Nüxing also hardly formed a bond. It seemed they couldn't accept each other... Actually since I was little, I thought that if nüxing and nüxing could form an alliance... (laugh) I felt, there is something, when you learn about it, then it seems to open you up. (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

In the painting in figure 6, produced in 1993, the women are situated in a cave-like environment—a feminine space. In traditional Chinese cosmology, yin represents earth and darkness (Williams 1976), thus a cave in the ground is associated with the feminine. The thrusting breasts of the sleeping woman suggest admiration for the female body and an unacknowledged dormant desire. The fire, the symbol of love and desire, lights up the darkness, whereas the location of the cave indicates a hidden, secret desire. The woman watching the sleeping woman is waiting for her to "wake up" or reincarnate into a different being. In figure 7, a painting produced in 1997, the reincarnation seems to have occurred. This is when Shitou started to get in contact with Western feminism and lesbian circles in Beijing, two women come out under the sun. They raise their heads high, their hands hold each other's bodies, and their exposed bodies are completely at ease. They walk confidently, determinedly forward, in harmony, with big steps. A dog or wolf-like beast is left behind, his head lowered, crestfallen, slinking off.

Figure 6. Shitou, Female Friends—Reincarnation (Nüyou Lunhui, 女友—轮回), 1993
In Shitou’s previous paintings the sexuality of the women was ambiguous: they assert their femaleness by being comfortably naked, they stay intimately together and admire each other’s bodies, but the desire is implicit and hidden. A change has come in figure 7, in which one woman’s shaved head, highlighted in yellow, gives her a queer twist. The bald head in figure 7 conveys that these two women are not only outside of the patriarchal order, they are also forming a bond other than just friendship. The seemingly artificially inserted yellow head suggests a newly acquired queer identity—almost like a mask. It is not yet in harmony with the rest of the body and is in need of synthesizing, but it is now visible.

The bald head here is not necessarily an indication of masculinization or male identification. In China, Buddhist nuns shave their heads, as do Buddhist monks. It symbolizes a rejection of a secular way of life, including marriage and parenting. Becoming a Buddhist or Daoist nun has been one traditional sanctuary for women who reject patriarchy and heterosexual living arrangements. Religious asceticism provides a space outside of the patriarchal order, allowing the development of lesbian relationships. For instance, the Ten Sisters community in Guangdong, the origin of the Mojing Dang in Shanghai, was founded by a Buddhist nun several hundred years ago, and the members of the Ten Sisters community lived together as couples and took vows not to marry except among their group (Ruan and Bullough 1992). For these nuns, the shaved head symbolized a double rejection of secular life and of patriarchy.

It seems it was always nü de (females) more often being blamed, right? It seems whatever nan de (man) said was taken for granted as being true. The standards for nü de were very high, right? They had to do the housework, and so on... I felt that was not fair. I felt we should build alliances. This kind of solidarity might not be something material, but political and symbolic. But I felt that at least we should support each other emotionally. So I was like this since I was little... it has been always like this. My attitude toward girls is more... more obvious that I would want to be more tolerant, and take care of them. (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

Patrizia Violi notes, “the bonds between women are almost always sacrificed when a man comes on the scene: they lose out in the face of the patriarchal order, which in this case takes the form of love between a woman and a man” (Violi 1992, 173). She further points out that since female bonds have not been symbolized or represented in the public sphere in male-dominated cultures, there are few exemplary stories of female solidarity available, which makes it difficult for women to internalize models of such bonding. In China, this kind of isolation is reinforced by the traditional Confucian teaching of san cong (三从, the three obediences discussed earlier: obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son after the husband’s death), and was furthered by the Maoist gender project. Feminist critiques of the Maoist concept of women’s liberation have argued that the Maoist policies that attempted to erase gender differences also erased the foundation for women’s identification as women and collective gender consciousness. They undermined female solidarity, the very ground that women must rely on for articulating their demands and developing a united front. The supposedly pro-women top-down public policies of the Mao era theoretically promoted equality but actually cultivated women’s dependency on the state (Lin 2006).
If the bonding between women in general is fragmented and invisible in patriarchal cultures, the existence and representation of lesbianism and the possibility of female same-sex love are further suppressed and silenced. Even though Shitou did not identify herself consciously as a lesbian in her early years in Yuanmingyuan, she always felt the desire for women's company and experienced internal conflict related to an unidentified and unfulfilled nonconformist sense of desire. Compared with heterosexual women, Shitou's experience of isolation was twofold: as a woman in general, and as a closeted lesbian in particular. On one hand, her isolation and lack of solidarity with other women was acutely felt, compared with male homosocial bonding, such as the support among male artists; on the other hand, her isolation from other women thwarted her longing for female companionship and emotional exchange as well as the desire for love from other women.

The mood in figures 8, 9, and 10 is completely different from the Weapon Series, which was heavy, lonely, full of tension and conflict.

Cheerful and romantic, the Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series (Yuanyang Hudie Xilie, 南陽鴨蝶系列), painted in 2000, represents Shitou's dream of finding female bonding, which came true when she met Mingming. Shitou told me that she started to fall in love when she painted this series. She painted her joy in reuniting with her female self and forming a bond with another woman. In a renewed world full of the joy of female love, water nurtures their pleasure. The lonely faceless female in the Weapon Series is replaced with happy women with smiling faces. The light reflecting on the water is dancing on their faces—each is no longer alone, but enjoys the company of her partner.
Shitou's Life Story

...novels, which mainly portrayed romantic love between men and women. White-headed Mandarin ducks form couples that stay together and are often used to symbolize lifelong love. The butterfly metaphor comes from a well-known and ancient Chinese story about Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai (梁山伯与祝英台), the *Huaide* (化蝶, Butterfly Lovers) story. Butterflies symbolize a love that even death cannot rend apart and remind us of the queer twist in the story, as the woman was cross-dressed as a man to attend the school, and their love developed when they were supposedly both male, it is therefore ambivalent whether the love is heterosexual or homosexual. The butterfly has another layer of symbolism, suggesting a process of rebirth, from a larva into a chrysalis, and finally emerges as a beautiful butterfly when warm weather returns. Figure 10, titled *Zhuangzi Dreams Butterfly* (*Zhuangzhou Zi Meng*, 庄周之梦), makes reference to the famous story about Zhuangzi, one of the founding philosophers of Daoism, who woke from a dream pondering which one was real: Zhuangzi dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi (thus in the butterfly lover story, whether the man fell in love with a woman or a man, and whether the woman was in love with him as a woman or as a man). In Daoist philosophy, water is yin and associated with the feminine and...
nourishment, symbolizing female power. In figure 9, Shitou appropriated heterosexual symbols of love from China (Mandarin duck and butterfly) and the West (Cupid) to represent love between women and by doing so challenges heteronormative definitions of love and sexuality.

What followed the joy of discovery and fulfillment was a moment of quiet reflection and self-discovery—learning about oneself and each other. In the Together Series of 2001, Shitou and Mingming indulge in their own bodies as they reflect and explore themselves and each other. There are two overlapping gazes in this series: the gaze of a woman into herself in the mirror and the gaze of another woman behind her and the camera. These gazes are directed inward toward oneself and outward toward the other woman. The forced transformation represented in the Weapon Series by assembling a female body with phallic objects is replaced with internal reflection and self-discovery. It seems that now Shitou's empowerment as a woman comes from within, from exploring and understanding the mystery of femaleness that resides within her and between a female “us.” A new subjectivity based on a different positioning in relation to other women is in the process of forming.

Shitou's project of discovering and representing female bonding does not stop in the present or at individual becoming. She is engaged in symbolizing the rediscovered temporal dimension of lesbian existence by retrieving a hidden history of female bonding, making lesbians the subjects of history by recuperating and rehabilitating a symbolic system of lesbianism signification.

Recovering “Herstory”

I think nüxing (women) need their own independent history, a history of loving others and self, and a history that doesn't use men as the reference point. (Shitou interview 2006, part 2)

As Violi (1992) argues, the symbolic representation of male relationships has allowed the temporal dimension to be symbolized, and offers a means for men to generalize their individual subjective experience:

it creates a trans-individual space in which it is possible for men to identify with the collective and to inscribe their individual subjectivity into forms of collective subjectivity. ... The symbolic image of Man is constructed through a complex system of collective representations ... in the stories that men tell and have always told each other about themselves and about the world. (Violi 1992, 171–22)

Female bonding and lesbian existence have existed in the past, but never became visible or fully symbolized in androcentric culture and history. The exchange and transmission of stories that make the formation, internalization, and acknowledgment of a tradition of female bonding and lesbianism are now possible. Parts of Shitou’s Nüyou (女友, Female Friends) Series and Lao Guanggao (老广告, Old Advertisement) Series convey her attempts to construct visible, nonandrocentric, and nonheterosexual representations of female love and the tradition of female bonds, to recover “herstory” so that women can find an “I” “mirrored and legitimized in the ‘you’ of ‘society’ or ‘culture’” (Docherty 1996, 27).

In the Female Friends Series (figures 13 and 14), the black-and-white photographic effect is an intentional mimicry of old photos in painting, creating a sense of history. Shitou's shaved head disrupts conventional representation of female friendship and reveals the queerness of this history. As she uncovers and reinvents a lesbian history, she unveils the hidden
history of bosom friendship, the memory of growing up with other girls, and the shared experience of becoming women. The bird and corn in the background suggest a connection with nature and a rural environment, wildness and freedom, the sources of happiness in Shitou’s childhood. In figure 13 the fish-shaped body with pink wings in the background is also a queer image, signifying the (im)possibility of inhabiting both worlds, with capabilities of swimming in the water and flying in the air. The girl with braids wears a Western-cut blouse with a floral print often seen in the Mao era; Shitou herself is in traditional Han blouse. During the Mao era, many rural Han women still wore traditional clothes (as shown in figure 13), and some urban residents wore modified traditional clothes (as in figure 14).

Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang’s (张晓刚) famous paintings in the Xuexueyuan (血缘, Bloodlines) Series are also reminiscent of family portraits from the Mao era, but with distinctive marks of that era, such as the army uniform (one of Shitou’s favorite in youth), red scarf, red armband, Mao suit, and the color red. Instead of having those Mao era markers, Shitou chose to have traditional Han-style and Western-style clothes that were also worn in the Mao era. This choice imagines a different “bloodline,” an alternative lesbian history that has its roots before the Mao era and both inside and outside of China, and existed temporarily parallel of the Mao era but was outside of its dominant symbolic domain.

This project of retrieving a history of female love is also reflected in Shitou’s documentary film, Women: 50 Minutes (2006), which records women’s lives in China, exploring in particular the tale of a utopian lesbian town in Guizhou Province (Kiang and Chao 2006).

In the Old Advertisement Series (figures 15 and 16), Shitou pursues lesbian history further back, to the Republican era. In these pictures, Shitou and Mingming wear pink floral qipao (旗袍, Chinese gowns) with sexy split sides and are surrounded by modern commercial logos and symbols. This series is a queer parody of the old cigarette advertisements and calendars of the Republican era (1911–49), which often pictured young “modern” beauties, sometimes with two women together.

As Sang (2003) has demonstrated, the process of normalizing heterosexual romantic love during the May Fourth era was accompanied by a proliferation of neologisms related to sex and love and the diversification
of desire. As a symbol of the “new women,” sisterhood or female friendship became a popular motif in advertising posters and calendars. Sang (2003) argues that lesbianism or “female same-sex love” emerged to the surface and became visible in public images in the Republican era, and if the connections between friendship, sisterhood, and sexual intimacy were implicit and merely suggestive in the posters and calendars, lesbianism was more explicitly pronounced in May Fourth fictions such as those by Lu Yin (盧隱) and Ling Shuhua (凌叔華).
Since the 1990s, a nostalgic sentiment has emerged in post-Mao Chinese popular culture. One version of this nostalgic trend is a search for cultural resources for the construction of cultural capital and identity in the postsocialist era, by retrieving “traditional Chinese culture.” This includes revisiting the Republican era, which was criticized, rejected, and destroyed by the socialist revolution. As Dai Jinhua (2000) points out in discussing this nostalgic trend, the south, and especially colonial Shanghai with its hybrid, bourgeois urban culture, have been “discovered” as privileged sites for inspiration, evoking delicacy, luxury, beauty, antiquity, style, and art. Posters and calendars from Shanghai during the Republican era are now reprinted and sold in flea markets and tourist sites as representing what is believed to the lost “Chinese” past.

Shitou’s intentional parody of the depiction of female beauties in cigarette advertisements of the Republican era pays tribute to the presence of a lesbian tradition in that period. In these photos, Shitou and Mingming impersonate their lesbian ancestors and re-create a previously hidden lesbian legacy in China. The historical resonance of the advertisement also mocks current materialism, commercialization, and the flourishing contemporary culture of desire and consumption. The daringly queer gesture depicted in the photo challenges the prevailing heterosexual appropriation of the culture and history of the Republican era, drawing attention to the omission of homosexual desire, as Shitou intentionally reclaims lesbians’ position in the representation of that history.

Signifying “Chinese” Lesbians

In figures 13 and 14, Shitou wears Chinese-style clothes, and in the Advertisement series, Shitou and Mingming are in qi pao (figures 15 and 16), the Han Chinese costume popular in urban areas in the Republican era. The shaved head combined with Chinese-style clothes constitutes a unique image of Chinese lesbianism. In another photograph series (figure 17), Shitou shows multiple female couples wearing Western-style evening gowns, as if they are going to a ballroom to dance. The women in these photos have cropped or short hair, and one woman is holding a silk fan with traditional Chinese painting.

The emergence of Chinese gay and lesbian identities and practices is closely linked to transnational networks of lesbians and gays. The UN Fourth World Women’s Conference in 1995 in Beijing also contributed to the public visibility of gays and lesbians (Rofel 2007, 87). Sang (2003, 54) notes that the first few issues of Tiankong (Sky), the first Chinese lesbian newsletter, made no reference to female same-sex practices in Chinese history and concluded that Chinese lesbians tend to claim a share in a Western genealogy. In the following narrative, Shitou describes the influence of European feminists and lesbians living in Beijing.

I got to know an English... a... ni rén ba (女人吧, a woman, let’s say). Later we became shàn shì pengyou (算是朋友, kind of friends). We went to parties. She felt that the way I talked was a bit unique. She invited me to participate in gatherings at her home... They had a group called Dongfang wenhua jiäoliü xiaozu (东方文化交流小组, East Meets West). In fact all those there were nüxing (women), they got together to discuss nüxing zhuyi (女性主义, feminist) topics. That was in 1995 and 1996. Also at her home, there were gatherings for gays and lesbians ["gays he lesbia"—Shitou originally used the English terms]. I started to get in touch with this kind of, um, (hesitation) wenhua ba (文化吧, let’s say culture), about nüxing zhuyi, more systematically. Then gradually, we got our nü (女, female)... nüxingde (女性的, women’s)... that nü... nü (女... 女)... so lala (拉拉, the Chinese name for lesbian), you know about lala, right? Nüzongzi (女同志, female comrade), that is the term, to have some activities. That was because we got to know this friend [the English woman], so many of us could get together. Um, we also would... um, just establish some small groups, and had some lala activities, such as going to movies. (Shitou interview 2006, part 1)

Some works on globalization have examined local transnational appropriations of Western gay and lesbian rights and identity ideology. Dennis Altman (2001a, 2001b) has argued that there is a spread of Western models of homosexuality, or the “globalization of post-modern gay identities” (2001b, 19). Homosexuals in Asia and Latin America see themselves as part of a
global gay community; for them being openly gay often means being Westernized. As Rofel (2007) points out, such an approach understands the local and the global as deterritorialized and establishes temporal hierarchies. It imagines the West as the point of origin of world history, and "places Asian gays forever in the place of deferred arrival" (Rofel 2007, 91). Ethnographic research on same-sex cultures has demonstrated the complexity of cultural production in interactions between the global and local. Wong and Zhang (2001) demonstrated that gay and lesbian communities in Taiwan selectively borrowed and reworked the language of the gay and lesbian movement in the West to constitute a new discourse of resistance and negotiate community boundaries, giving Western concepts new meanings.

Rofel (2007) argues that in postsocialist China, cultural belonging has replaced political struggle and become the site on which citizenship is meaningfully defined, sought, and conferred or denied. The desire for cultural citizenship has inspired Chinese queers to domesticate the meanings assigned to transcultural practices related to sexual desire and queer identities and imagine queerness within a Chinese cultural context. Yet their activities and activism undoubtedly form part of a global network. Shitou has participated in various lesbian and gay cultural events in Europe and the United States, presenting her work and communicating with academics, artists, and lesbian activists from the West, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This experience and the transcultural context of the 1990s have provided multiple cultural frames for her performance and representation of queerness, evoking a particular Chinese lesbian identity that is "neither a wholly global culture nor simply a radical difference from the West" (Rofel 2007, 89).

While she acknowledges the importance of Western allies, the Chinese elements in Shitou's representations indicate her conscious attempt to claim a distinctive Chinese lesbian identity, rather than simply subscribing to a "universal or global" gay identity. In the illustrations here, this is conveyed through the combination of Chinese elements (the clothes, fan, and titles making reference to Chinese folk tales) and the shaved head. This juxtaposition of disparate allusions exemplifies Shitou's experiment in synthesizing a hybrid way of performing being a lesbian, with hybridity as a response to her encounter with foreign gay cultures in China and abroad. Shitou's performance of her lesbianness is closely linked to that of her Chinese cultural background and is addressed to an audience that includes gay and straight people, Chinese and foreigners. The fact that she initially developed her lesbian consciousness when she got in touch with foreign lesbians and gay networks in Beijing and witnessed different ways of performing lesbianness made her conscious of her Chineseness. She stated during our interview that "Chinese lesbianism is different from the West" (Shitou interview 2006, part 2). Her photo and film projects searching for Chinese lesbian roots are part of her efforts to establish a Chinese lesbian identity.17

In the post-Mao era, various Chinese cultural and historical sources compete in representing Chineseness in China and abroad. What counts as Chinese is highly contested: which aspects of Chineseness one wants to present to the world in an era of globalization are often individualized and always contextual. Among the group of artists from Yuanmingyuan, of which Shitou was a member, many used elements from Mao's Red China to symbolize China as the "Other" of the West, and these works gained popularity among Western collectors. Maoist China has fascinated Westerners for various reasons, being either celebrated as a utopian ideal for leftists, or condemned as an oppressive authoritarian communist regime by those seeking to reaffirm the superiority of capitalism and Western democracy. Wang Guangyi (王广义), an artist from Yuanmingyuan, was one of the first to succeed in the Western art market, with his Andy Warhol-style political pop Great Criticism Series, which combines echoes of Cultural Revolution posters with symbols of Western commercial culture such as Coca-Cola bottles and the BMW logo (Tang 2016). Many contemporary artists have followed in his footsteps and produced art that appropriates various tropes from the Mao era, such as Zhang Xiaogang, discussed earlier.

Shitou draws on various cultural resources, ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, to signify an image of Chinese lesbians. While Maoist images and symbols served as cultural capital in the global market, she left them out of these representations. Traditional Han costumes are present, such as the qipao and Chinese-style jacket or blouse, which evoke certain images of China. In figures 15 and 16 from the Old Advertisement Series, Shitou and her friends adopted either traditional Chinese blouses or Western-style blouses with floral prints, but not the fashionable costume of that era, such as the army uniform or the red scarf, which most children wore (a symbol of membership in the Children's Pioneers, the party's student organization in elementary and junior high schools). I argue that the absence in her work of reference to markers of Maoist women (such as the Iron Girl, the Red Guard, the army uniform, red star, red scarf, all the symbols Shitou grew up with), conveys a conscious rejection of the Maoist gender project.

In Shitou's lesbian signifying practice, Chineseness is represented by traditional Han Chinese cultural symbols, but not Mao's red China. Although the "masculinized" Maoist jūnū might have appealed in some ways by resembling butch lesbian stereotypes, it is possible that Shitou found the erasure of the feminine in Maoist gender discourse made lesbian existence un-representable. The post-Mao project of reviving gender difference, along with the transnational feminist discourse of sisterhood and


Since there were still very few publicly prominent out lesbians in China in 2007, Shitou viewed accepting interviews as an important part of her lesbian activism, and she was often approached by magazines, online platforms, and TV programs. She wanted to reach a wider audience and facilitate understanding and communication about gay and lesbian issues. Most of the interviews with Shitou that I could find focus on her identity as a lesbian artist. They are often about what lesbian love is or how her creations represent lesbian lives and desire. The interviews are often targeted toward an ignorant and curious heterosexual audience.

A friend of mine in Beijing put me in touch with Shitou through Cui Z’ien, a prominent gay activist and film scholar in China. Shitou seemed at first to expect this interview with me, a Canada-based Chinese researcher whose sexual orientation was unclear to her, to be like the other interviews she has given—focusing on her “peculiar” life choice and desire. When I first asked Shitou to tell me about her life, she finished her story in twenty-four minutes. She spent less than four minutes giving a chronological account of the first twenty-six years of her life; the remaining twenty-minute narrative dwells on the period after 1995, when she encountered feminism and the emerging lesbian culture in Beijing. This story was about how she became a self-defined lesbian and her lesbian activism. She then stopped and said, “It seems I am giving you a day-to-day bookkeeping kind of account of my life!” She looked at me, as if to say, “So that is my story, that is how I became a lesbian artist and activist, what else do you want me to tell?”

It seems to me that Shitou followed a coming out narrative structure she is familiar with—a script she has codeveloped with her other interviewers. Whereas a heterosexual person never needs to give an account of their “discovery” and justification of sexual orientation, a lesbian feels the constant expectation or pressure from straight people to do so. This coming out narrative structure is embedded within an explanatory framework that answers the question, “How did you become (or discover yourself as) a lesbian?” As B. Martin (1980) notes, it depicts a linear progression from a past grounded in confusion, constraints, and denial to a present or future of liberation. It presumed a true self and desire that one eventually recognizes and returns. It presents lesbian life as a journey form patriarchal distortion to a woman-identified consciousness, accepting and affirming lesbian identity against enormous odds, and the happy end of the story of living one’s life in a new world of women. Lesbianism thus becomes the central moment around which a life story is reconstructed. While recognizing the political importance of the coming out story for creation of identity, community, and political solidarity, B. Martin (1980) warns of the danger that such a
When she paused or stopped, I asked questions to help the narrative move forward. Her art work on the walls also helped draw a link between her life and her work, facilitating further discussion and reflections on her story. In our narrative exchange, Shitou got to know more about me, and she felt comfortable providing a more comprehensive account of her life in which her sexual orientation was not the only center of narration.

When Shitou retold her life story without singling out and explaining the development of her sexuality, it became an organic part of her life that emerges from and is integrated into her general development and broader gender consciousness. Her lesbian identity was no longer the dominant theme, separated from the rest of her life; rather, the narrative focused on reflections on her encounters with gender inequality and masculinist standards, and on female love and bonding, combined with comments on her paintings and photographs.

Shitou’s life story differs from that of many heterosexual women in plot and how the story is told. The plot could be summarized like this: her experiences of gender inequality lead to a search for female empowerment, which is achieved through female solidarity and lesbian love. Shitou collects her memories and organizes her storytelling around this plotline. For example, she witnessed her parents’ quarrels, her father’s alcoholism, her mother’s weakness, and domestic violence in a neighbor’s family, as evidence of gender inequality in everyday life. She connects these memories to her determination, even as a young girl, not to believe in heterosexual love and marriage as her life goal, being protective toward other girls, and never wanting to have children. In her youth she experienced isolation as a female artist in a male-dominated field, and her work was subjected to judgment according to male criteria. Her art and style were devalued because of their “feminine” aspect. Her rite of passage occurred in 1995, when she met the feminist group in Beijing and then self-identified and publicly came out as a lesbian. Shitou links her past experiences of gender oppression to her longing for female bonding and her present commitment to feminism and lesbian activism.

The plot development in Shitou’s life story is thus driven by her resistance to gender inequality, and the search for female bonding and empowerment as means to overcome it—together we become strong, as solid and independent as a stone. Her struggle as a woman against gender oppression prevails over affirmation of her lesbian identity. Although her lesbian desire emerges as a natural development from her longing for female bonding and solidarity, the emphasis is less on physical or sexual aspects and more on emotional and political ones. Lesbianism is presented as both a personal sexual preference and a political choice. The type of
conflict in this life story is between genders (women versus men) rather than between sexual orientations (homosexuality versus heterosexuality). She sees heterosexual women as her allies, because women are all nü de (女的, female) and share the experience of gender oppression under patriarchy.

Elizabeth Meese (1992) claims that by telling the story of someone who did not officially exist in history or in the symbolic domain, lesbians can disrupt patriarchal narrative conventions through excess, manipulation, and alternative plots. Johnston suggests that lesbians can narrate “within, under, and beside accepted narratives” (Johnston 2007, 7). The telling and retelling of Shirou’s life story is a collaborative project seeking a more fully narrated life. In contrast to her initial defensive account addressing expected accusations of perversion and abnormality, Shirou went on to speak of her life as a journey that led her to choose a different way of living. As she “deviates” from heterosexual gender expectations and consciously becomes a transgressive other, and as the narration of her life goes beyond the coming out master script, Shirou’s exploration of the meaning and purpose of her life, her sexuality, and her identity, like her narrative about these journeys, has no script to follow. The lack of script leaves her sometimes searching in the dark and narrating with hesitation, but it also provides the potential for developing alternatives in verbal and visual representations of her life.

Contesting Heterosexual Language

Many Western feminist studies of lesbian life stories claim that we can uncover a rewriting of sexual difference based on the rejection of patriarchy in lesbian narratives and that this rewriting requires changes at the level of language. In her study of early twentieth-century English novels by lesbians, Nicky Hallett (1999) makes the case for a distinct “lesbian aesthetic.” She argues that lesbians negotiate a way through masculine and heterosexual discourses to redevelop the existing language of love, gender, and sexuality. She claims that “in the economy of words, language is borrowed, if only temporarily, and returned with interest” (Hallett 1999, 23).

As Sang (2003) notes, the Chinese words traditionally used to describe female–female relations before the early twentieth century had limited semantic scope and specific focus, designating either feelings, sex acts, or local communities. There was not a general Chinese name or category designated to female–female relations until the formation of the category nü tongxinlian (女同性恋, female same-sex love) in the 1910s and 1920s, which was coined within the context of the pathologization. With the silencing, invisibility, and stigmatizing in history, nonderogatory vocabulary and categories for homosexuality and especially for female same-sex love have become available largely after 1995 and are still not widely known by most heterosexuals. This leads to the issue of historicity in representation and difficulties in narrating these desires and identities in retrospective narratives, especially when one tries to avoid projecting current ideas onto the past or speaking to the audience outside of the community. Oral narrative is one of the venues where the process of borrowing, contestation, and negotiation becomes visible. For instance, in Shirou’s narrative there are often pauses and repetitions, and it sometimes seemed that she almost fell into a state of aphasia when it came to defining or describing gender- and lesbian-related identities. She was hesitant in her diction and somehow reluctant to commit the terms available, but eventually she adapted existing discourses to verbalize the experiences she wanted to communicate.

When Shirou had to use existing Chinese terms produced in a heterosexual language framework, she often used the word ba (吧), which can be understood as “let’s call it xxx for now,” or the English “so to speak.” The silences, hesitations, and linguistic negotiation in the narration reveal the difficulty of articulating a lesbian existence in a heterosexual language system, as well as Shirou’s conscious resistance to the interference of heterosexual norms.

To verbalize her existence and make female same-sex love visible and recognizable to a heterosexual audience, Shirou resorts to and revises a range of multilingual and multicultural linguistic resources. Her narrative practice reflects Chinese lesbians’ and gays’ specific struggles over language use in the process of formulating tongzi (同志) subjectivities, by appropriating, extending, and challenging existing linguistic constructions of gender difference and sexuality.

Shirou’s contestation of the heterosexual language frame starts with distrust of the linguistic construction of “woman.” As Judith Butler (1999) argues, in limiting its field of description, constraint is built into the political and linguistic “representation” of gender, “women” determines in advance what constitutes or ought to constitute the category of women through certain exclusionary practices. The usage of the terms funü (妇女) and nüxing (女性) has already been discussed in previous chapters. Shirou’s narrative reveals that the discursive formation and representation of a “woman,” whichever of these two terms is used, is to “achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix” (Butler 1999, 9). Either term can be appropriated by or applied to heterosexual, male-oriented women. Lesbians, disqualifed as the “ultimate candidate for representation” (Butler 1999, 4) are denied access to being “the subject.” They have to create a separate
symbolic domain and a semiotic system that can signify their invisible and previously un-representable existence.

Shitou avoids using the term funü (evoking political women, the Maoist subject) to refer to women, and at times she uses the term nüxing, which became popular in post-Mao times (as discussed earlier). Among the two common translations of the English term “feminism” in Chinese, Shitou uses the term nüxingzhu yi (女主义, the female idea, or feminine-ism), instead of the term nüquanzhu yi (女权主义, the idea of women’s equality and power, or a feminism that emphasizes women’s rights). In popular understanding, Nüquan zhi yi connotes the stereotype of an oppressive man-hating woman hungry for power, whereas Nüxing zhi yi appears less political and threatening and has more semantic flexibility. Nüxing zhi yi is often used to promote an idea of femininity based on the gender binary and is more popular among Chinese scholars and various types of feminists. Although Shitou does use the terms funü or nüquan zhi yi, she also has reservations about nüxing, since it often refers to a return to hyperfemininity, denoting compulsory heterosexuality, as illustrated by comments from the women interviewed in previous chapters.

Seeking to find a suitable designation of her own, Shitou used various alternatives to describe lesbian and gay identities. She directly uses the English terms “gay and lesbian” when foreign queers are included, but she distinguishes Chinese lesbians and gays by using the Chinese term tongzhi. Although there are other terms for lesbian, such as the translated term lesbigian (蕾丝边, lace trim) for the English term lesbian, or media-tized term such as nüzongxinglian (女同性恋, Chinese translation of female homosexual), she uses two terms, lala (拉拉, a Chinese slang expression coming from the L for lesbian) and nüzongzhi (女同志, female comrade) for Chinese lesbians, and these are the identity labels Shitou uses to identify herself. To communicate with heterosexual audiences, she uses nü de (女的), a more neutral informal vernacular term used in Mao and post-Mao times, meaning simply “female” and implying biological sex) to refer to both straight women and lesbians. For instance, the English woman who introduced Shitou to feminism and lesbian circles was a lesbian, and Shitou referred her as a nü de after some hesitation. This was at the beginning of our interview in 2006 when terms such as tongzhi and lala were still largely in-group terms, and Shitou was not sure about my knowledge or attitude toward the queer community.

The multiple linguistic, cultural, and ideological resources Shitou used to articulate different gender identities and sexual orientations demonstrate the transcultural features of the construction of post-Mao Chinese lesbian subjectivities. Various interrelated, overlapping, and distinctive identities have been formulated, demarcated, contested, and negotiated in this process. These linguistic exercises form a semiotic system that charts a matrix of “gay kinship”—the complex relationships between various gay identities and labels. As Rofel has stated, “The linguistic heterogeneity of terms for gayness” exemplifies the searching for an identity that “refuses the opposition of global and local” (Rofel 2007, 102).

As the foregoing discussion shows, the rejection and appropriation of certain terms conveys the rejection or appropriation of the ideologies that inform the creation and definition of these terms. Shitou’s rejection of the term funü is associated with her turning away from the Maoist binary gender project, and her reservations toward the term nüxing reveal her resistance to its heteronormative connotation. Her adaptation of the term tongzhi is part of her identification and commitment to tongzhi community in post-Mao China, and the term lala indicates the inspiration drawn from global lesbian and gay culture and identification with it, but also Chinese lesbians’ “Sinification” of a foreign term and identity.

Among the terms Shitou used, tongzhi needs further consideration because of its apparent connection with the Mao era. Why would tongzhi be appropriated by Chinese lesbians, while the term funü, from the same era, is rejected? Tong (同) means common, and zhi (志) means will or goal. The term tongzhi has existed in ancient Chinese texts and means people who share a common will or goal. These two words were joined to translate the word for “comrade” from Russian in the early twentieth century and became an independent appellation to address fellow party members by the Nationalist and Communist Parties in China in the 1910s and 1920s. Its use was later extended to refer to all members of the CCP, the CCP’s army, and employees of the CCP. Tongzhi eventually became a widely used way of addressing people in the Mao era. It replaced traditional terms, such as xiamen (先生, master), xiaojie (小姐, miss), nüshi (女士, lady), laoji (老爷, senior master), shaoji (少年, junior master), and taitai (太太, madam), and was used as a gender-neutral and nonhierarchical term to address or refer to socialist subjects, men and women, old and young, people in any occupation, of higher or lower rank (except those belonging to the categories defined as jieji diren (阶级敌人, class enemies; Scotton and Zhu 1983; Lee-Wong 1994; Fang and Heng 1983).

Self-identification as a tongzhi was an indication of allegiance to the CCP, and being addressed as tongzhi signified one’s recognition as a subject of the socialist state. Women were often referred to as nütongzhi (女同志, female comrades), and men as nantongzhi (同志, male comrades). As a positive political category, tongzhi represented communist ideology and egalitarian ideas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with de-Maoization
and commercialization, older terms of address made their way back into use along with new terms from abroad; the use of tongzhi has gradually faded from everyday life and become reserved for official occasions.

To reject the pathological connotation of tongxinglian, since the 1990s, among various terms for same-sex love, ku'er (酷儿, queer) and tongzhi have become the most recognized words for referring to the community and are sometimes used interchangeably.20 Ku'er is a Chinese phonetic translation of the English term “queer,” and literally means “a cool kid.”21 This translation was proposed by Taiwanese critics Chi Ta-wei, Tan T'ang-mo, and Lucifer Ling Hung at a leftist journal Dacyu Bianyuan (岛屿边缘, Isle Margin) in 1994 (Lim 2008). In mainland China, since Li Yinhe's (李银河) translated anthology Queer Theory: Western Sexual Thought in the 1990s, the term ku'er has become popular in China's LGBT communities and helped shape merging activist and academic work. Ku'er does not have an existing Chinese history or equivalent and is thus a concept with no concrete Chinese referent. Although it does not have the negative historical connotations that its counterpart has in the West, as a borrowed term it has limited usage for its radicality in China and is often confined to academia and radical politics. Moreover, the translated term privileges the young and the rebellious; the word ㄦ (er) also has the connotation of “son,” so it excludes those who are “uncool,” old, or female (Lim 2008).

Ku'er's limited usage is not simply due to the foreign roots and biases in age, gender, and attitude. It also has an association with queer theory and its elitist roots, which has been rejected by some as unfruitful and inappropriate for Chinese culture, politics, society, and such as Hong Kong activist-scholar Chou Wah-shan (2000) and US-based Chinese gay activist Lu Damien. For instance, Chou Wah-shan, in Howhmin tongzhi (后殖民同, Postcolonial Tongzhi) argues that homophobia and homosexuality are imports from modern Western culture, whereas attitudes toward homosexuality in Chinese tradition are characterized by cultural tolerance and the desire for harmony, and same-sex relationships are tolerated in Chinese families in a "don't ask, don't tell" way. For the same reason, Western labels such as "gay," "lesbian," and "queer" were rejected for failing to capture the nature of Chinese same-sex desire and relationships, and tongzhi was adopted as a term of localized denotation of same-sex erosicism in China (W. Chou 2000).

Tongzhi was first publicly used in its new sense of queerness in 1989 in the Chinese title of the First Hetong-Gong tongzhi din-ying guai (香港同志电影节, Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival). According to Chou Wah-shan, in the context of 1997, Hong Kong queers’ adoption/adaptation as their self-designation as tongzhi, “the most sacred term in Communist China,” signifies a desire both to indigenize sexual politics and to reclaim their cultural identity (2000, 368). Since then, tongzhi has been widely adopted by gay and lesbian individuals and organizations in Hong Kong and in Taiwan in 1992 at the Taipei Jinma Guoji Dianyingji (金马国际电影节, Golden Horse International Film Festival). It aimed to embrace all nonconforming sexual identities, emphasizing respect for shared ideals, goals, and aspirations (W. Chou 1997, 2000; Wong and Zhang 2001). It was then reintroduced to mainland China and has become widely accepted and used by Chinese gays and lesbians. Although first used in-group and means many things to many people, tongzhi enjoyed a more colloquial usage and later became more widely known as a term to refer to sexual and gender nonnormativity. It has been transformed from a word that was gender-neutral with no reference to sexuality to one that singles out people with nonmainstream, nonheterosexual sexualities (Wong and Zhang 2001; Wong 2005; Lim 2008; Liu and Rofel 2010, 281; Schroeder 2012; Engebretsen 2013; Chiang and Heinrich 2014). Tongzhi gained popularity for “its positive cultural references, gender neutrality, desexualization of the stigma of homosexuality, politics beyond the homo-hetero duality, and use as an indigenous cultural identity for integrating the sexual into the social” (W. Chou 2000, 2).

As Petrus Liu (2015) notes, the proliferation of sexual identities and categories in modern China is not separable from a long history against colonialism and imperialism and the imperatives of national survival and sovereignty. Debates in Chinese queer discourse are intertwined with the traumatic memories of colonial dismemberment and the acute anxieties over the right to national self-determination. However, I suggest that claiming the term tongzhi is not driven only by an anti-imperialist agenda and queer geopolitics, as the choice is between Chinese and foreign terms and about which Chinese identity is to be used to describe and prescribe the community. Tongzhi evokes a particular political and cultural identity, one that is associated with communist revolution and China’s socialist past. It is not just a parody of a term, but is also a queering of a revolution.

Andrew Wong (2005) shows that the (re)application of tongzhi in Hong Kong is reminiscent of the struggles to redeploy words like “nigger” and “queer” in the United States. Whereas tongzhi activists in Hong Kong attempt to rehabilitate the term by injecting positive meanings, some journalists intentionally parody this usage to ridicule gay rights activists, which may lead to the word being perceived as pejorative. Taiwanese tongzhi, on the other hand, like to use this term because it suggests the elements of choice and political activism in projecting a sexual identity (Sang 2003, 236). Andrew Wong and Qing Zhang’s (2001) study of the use of tongzhi in Taiwan shows that the word invokes the voice of Chinese revolutionaries,
calls for respect and equality, and gives a sense of legitimacy to the tongzhi cause as a quintessentially Chinese social movement. They argue that the association of tongzhi with Chinese revolutionaries is clear in the direct borrowing of expressions of combat, struggle, and encouragement of tongzhi activities, echoing a discourse of solidarity and resistance. As Petrus Liu (2015) demonstrates, the adoption of tongzhi is connected with cultural Marxism (decoupled from state ideology and bureaucracy) in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and there has been a tradition of queer Marxism in Taiwan, which understands “queer” not as a synonym for homosexuality but a material reminder of one’s relation to an unequal structure of power.

The adoption or adaptation of tongzhi in mainland China shares a similar desire to reappropriate some aspects of communist ideology, but it is taking place in a different historical and political context than that in Hong Kong and Taiwan. For tongzhi in mainland China who grew up with memories of the Mao era, this state-sanctioned term is not just associated with egalitarian ideals and the revolution, it also signifies socialist citizenship. In the Mao era, gays were labeled “bad elements” and were not entitled to the label tongzhi. The reappropriation of the term thus creates a space for queers to reclaim their access to citizenship and underscores their desire to be recognized as legitimate subjects.

An egalitarian, gender-neutral, and politically engaged term, tongzhi offers queers in mainland China a more direct ideological inspiration than it does for most tongzhi in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Tongzhi who grew up with a Maoist education, like Shitou, were taught that as the successors of China’s revolution, they should prepare to devote their lives to greater goals than individual well-being. For them, identifying with the term evokes the memory of the revolutionary passion of the Mao era. The goals for today’s tongzhi may have changed, from achieving communism on Earth to ensuring queer rights, but the framework of commitment to change through activism remains the same. The term tongzhi bridges the gap between politics then and now and facilitates the ideological jump from fighting for poor oppressed people to fighting for marginalized sexual minorities.

Petrus Liu reminds us that the fact that tongzhi and liumang are borrowed from Chinese revolutionary vocabulary suggests a suppressed connection between sexual struggles and Marxist intellectual practice (2015, 43). It is thus not a coincidence that in present-day mainland China, there are only two disparate groups addressed as tongzhi: CCP members and queers, who share a similar historical inspiration and aspiration for a utopian equality in spite of radical differences in other respects. Moreover, the term tongzhi is also evokes the revolutionary legacy of Sun Zhongshan (Sun Yat-sen, 孙中山 or 孫逸先), the founding father of Republican China who moved to Taiwan in 1949, whose famous will was summarized as Geming shang wei chenggong, tongzhi reng xu nuli (革命尚未成功，同志仍需努力), the revolution has yet to succeed, fellow comrades [tongzhi] still have to work hard). With the shared origin of tongzhi in the Nationalist and Communist Parties, the word now unites tongzhi cross the strait under the common goal of equality for sexual minorities.

Between the Un/Speakable and the In/Visible

While oral narratives, even those that reveal conformity, are useful for our understanding of social life and the production of gendered subjectivities, they have limitations as a form of self-representation. As J. Phelan (2005) warns, we need to be cautious and aware of the danger of “narrative imperialism,” of reducing (or expanding) everything to narrative. Galen Strawson (2004) suggests considering whether the grand narrative of self-as-narrative can be “one size fits all.” Individuals have different relationships with various representational forms and meta-narratives, depending on differences of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, age, and so on. They experience selfhood as narrative in different degrees. Besides, not everyone is a good storyteller or finds oral narrative the best way to express herself.

To supplement oral/textual life narratives, photos and other images have often been included in the study of individual lives, playing mostly an illustrative role. With increasing availability—especially the dramatically rising quantity of personal digital photography—photo images are playing an important role in recording and understanding individual lives and sometimes may become a major biographic source. Increasingly, studies discuss the relationship not just between photo image, identity construction, but also autobiography.

The inclusion of the visual helps overcome the limitation of linguistic representation, extends the possibilities of autobiographic representation, and complicates and reconstructs the life narrative through visual intervention. In Iconology: Image, text, Ideology, W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) argues that rather than being oppositional, the relationship of visual image and verbal language is intimate, inextricable, and multivalent. For Mitchell, the visual and textual are not iterations of the same but are in dialogue in the articulation of a subjectivity (Mitchell 1978). Smith and Watson (2002) suggest that because the textual is configured differently from the visual mode, when both are present, their different vocabularies overlay different versions of autobiographical subjectivity. They see the interface as a site at which visual and textual modes are interwoven but also confront and mutually interrogate each other. The interfaces of autobiographical acts
affect or mobilize meanings in various ways: the textual can inspire certain readings of the image, and the image can revise, retard, or reactivate that text (Smith and Watson 2002).25

One of the primary ways the visual contributes to the constitution of subjectivity is through its modes of embodied self-representation. As Smith and Watson (2002) note, life narrative is a site of embodied knowledge because autobiographical narrators are embodied subjects. Furthermore, gender as a signifying practice is produced and performed through “the stylization of the body” (Butler 1990, 140), materialized through body language, relying on a shared sign system that encodes gender. This sign system is inscribed on, shown through, and materialized through bodily gestures, expressions, movements, and styles. The visual aspect is as important as the discursive aspect of gender signification, if not more so.

In the context of representing lesbian lives, specific forms of heterosexual patriarchy in particular contexts determine the forms that are available for lesbian narrative practices and the shape their resistance takes (Auchmuty, Jeffreys, and Miller 1992). Visual images could be used as an alternative to contest heterosexual representational frameworks, and facilitate the construction of a lesbian subjectivity.

Shitou’s paintings and photos filled her living room walls. Many of her works are autobiographic and feature herself. The telling of her life story was intertwined with discussion of her works. Her paintings and photographs often reflect her life trajectory directly or indirectly, and they added an important dimension to her life story. As an artist, Shitou is used to expressing herself through visual language. Furthermore, the heteronormative language limits the narrative space for her to articulate a sense of self and lesbian desires, and resorting to visual expression becomes a conscious or unconscious attempt to resist heteronormative representational frameworks. The inclusion of her art, including paintings and photography, creates an alternative space to articulate her story beyond what oral narrative allows, whose normative operation prescribes who and what counts as the proper subject and what is speakable.26

For instance, sexuality is often a taboo subject in Chinese society, especially in oral narratives. Among the research participants in this project, only a few explicitly talked about their sexual desire and sexuality in their oral life narratives (see chapter 4). As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, female same-sex desire has been rendered largely invisible in Chinese history. Literature and the visual arts in this Republican era represented female same-sex relations as “aesthetic, platonic unions or vacuous” and ignored the aspect of physical desire (Sang 2003, 26). The representational silence leads to the lack of vocabulary and discourse in the articulation of lesbian love and sexuality. While the tongzhi community has gained increasing visibility in contemporary China, with the recent development of the homonormative discourse of gay and lesbians as “good citizens,” the “politics of public correctness” often means downplaying gay and lesbian sexuality in general and suppressing nonconformative queer sexual desires in particular. In the representation of queer sexuality, on one hand, it is important to assert and affirm queer sexuality; on the other hand, there is a danger of satisfying the heterosexual voyeurism or reinforcing stereotypes about gay and lesbian as sexually deviant and promiscuous.

As a public figure and queer activist, Shitou gave an oral narrative that highlights female solidarity and lesbian love but didn’t explicitly touch lesbian sexual desires. Lesbian scholars have warned of the danger of reducing lesbianism to feminism in the name of female solidarity, which renders lesbian sexuality invisible. While Shitou’s oral narrative reveals the difficulty in articulating lesbian desire in oral language, the representation of lesbian sexual desire constitutes an important theme in her artwork. It disrupts the heterosexual male tradition in artwork that represents woman as objects serving the heteronormative masculine gaze. The provocative images of girls and women with bald heads and naked bodies, cuddling or gazing at each other, as both subject and object of desire, speaks explicitly of lesbian desire.

Artwork also offers Shitou alternative vocabulary to represent a lesbian subjectivity. In oral narrative, Shitou constructs her lesbian subjectivity through renaming herself and contesting heteronormative language. In her art, she created a distinctive sign system to signify a Chinese lesbian subjectivity—the combination of queerness with the Chinese element: for instance, the girl/woman with a bald head wearing clothes with Han Chinese elements. These elements, such as the cloth and silk fans, and the historical references such as the black-and-white-style portrayals of the Mao era, ground the construction of a lesbian identity, signified by the bald head, in Chinese history and cultural tradition.

The inclusion of Shitou’s visual creations enriches her life story in a language that helps articulate what is unrepresentable in language and provides embodied and materialized ways of self-representation that are hard to convey verbally and usually go unrepresented in heterosexual/masculine language. The interface of the visual and the oral is where gendered subjectivity and agency in self-representation take place (Smith and Watson 2002). The representational strategies Shitou adopted demonstrate various ways an individual gender project can challenge heteronormative gender models, in both their linguistic and iconic representations.

The juxtaposition, contrasting, and interplay of the visual and the verbal materials in Shitou’s life story provided a new mode of self-representation
and deepened the understanding of both narratives as well as the self-construction in and through them. For instance, situating her art in the context of her life story elicited a more contextual and deeper understanding and interpretation of these works and their roles in constituting her self. This was also an enlightening exercise for Shitou. For example, in one of her series of images (which I cannot analyze in full due to space constraints), Shitou painted babies; she commented that these works coincided with the one brief moment in her life when she was thinking about having a baby. I pointed out to her that her parents both passed away in the same year. She was struck by the possible connection between these events and started to think about her motivation behind the paintings differently. She was very happy with this moment of connection and self-discovery.

The juxtaposition of Shitou’s visual and verbal narratives has helped me develop new interpretative strategies that combine narrative analysis of an oral life story with semiotic analysis of artwork, leading to reflection on what is hearable/sayable and what is seeable/showable. Attending to both also helps me explore the interrelations between image and language and between the “self” constructed through autobiographical narration and depicted in artistic creation. The result of the interface is a heterogeneous representation of the self, often with the oral narratives implicating the visual narrative, and the visual image engaging components of the oral narrative. In both cases, what is not said or not shown but may be implied provokes a reflection on the limits of the sayable or showable (or the hearable or seeable), and the relationship between them. They invite reexamination of the assumptions about the knowability of any subject, as well as the heterogeneity, ambiguity, and complex intersectionality of the subject in life narratives. The “outing,” in words and pictures, of Shitou’s life story demonstrates the self-conscious formulation of a lesbian gender project, conveyed through alternative ways of articulation.

**Maoist Legacy and Queer Geopolitics**

Studies of sexuality in twentieth-century China inevitably have to engage with interactive dynamics of the local and the global. For instance, Sang Tze-lan (2003) demonstrates that the emergence of the modern lesbian is accompanied by a process of translations and traveling neologisms in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and mainland China since the late Qing period. Fan Martin (2003) suggests that “neither the Euro-American psychoanalytic or medical model of studying sexualities nor a ‘Chinese’ model based on the centrality of reproductive familiarity” could explain “the intricate heterogeneity of contemporary Taiwanese tongxinglian [homosexuality]” (17). Discourses about homosexuality in Taiwan are simultaneously regional and indigenous, are implicated by the “global,” and are deployed to articulate nationalist desires and a globalized image.

One of the global forces is neoliberalism, and Chinese queer critics expressed concerns about neoliberalism and gay normalization, in particular the “new homonormativity” in US culture. For instance, Lim Song Hwee (2005) links the rising representations of homosexuality in Chinese screens to neoliberal globalization. Lucetta Kam (2013) notes that the emergence of homonormativity in urban China is part of “a greater project to construct a new sexual morality for the newly capitalized and increasingly commodified society” (2013, 89).

However, as Petrus Liu (2015) points out, in the critique of queer liberalism there is a tendency to regard neoliberalism as the dominant cultural logic of contemporary queer Chinese culture, thus treating this culture as a symptomatic expression of a globalizing neoliberalism with no local history nor agency. He warns that it would be a mistake to interpret the emergence of queer identities and communities in Taiwan and mainland China as belated versions of post-Stonewall social formations in the United States under a singular logic of neoliberal globalization.

Petrus Liu (2015) suggests we consider geopolitical and sexual identities as mutually constitutive. For him, the “queer” and the “Chinese” always bear on each other, and China is an unstable but necessary geopolitical referent for the articulation of the queer. Arguing against the popular assumptions that queerness and Marxism are antithetical and that the emergence of queer cultures in China is partly the result of the end of Marxism and socialism, he maintains that the Cold War divide and the historical creation of the PRC and the Republic of China (ROC) are foundational elements for queer life. He notes that if the Maoist past enters the discussion of contemporary queer culture in China at all, it generally does so as a negative reference. The Maoist socialist past was understood as a distortion of people’s “natural” genders and sexualities, and postsocialist desires, including queer desire, are understood as rejections of the socialist past and state control, partly through liberating one's gendered and sexual self and often through cosmopolitan consumption. On the contrary, Liu proposes a queer Marxism in two Chinas (PRC and ROC) as a neoliberal alternative to the Euro-American model of queer emancipation grounded in liberal values of privacy, tolerance, individual rights, and diversity.

While Liu discusses the significance of Marxism in theorizing queer life in two Chinas in general, I highlight the relationship between the gender project of the Mao era and post-Mao queer life, and in particular, the
construction of post-Mao transnational lesbian identities. Shiou's gender project and its signifying practices remind us how the history and memory of the socialist past and Maoist gender project leave their marks on the articulation of lesbian subjectivities in postsocialist China. Contemporary Chinese lesbian culture is grounded in a specific socialist past and influenced by the geopolitics during and after the Cold War.

Shiou's story demonstrates the ambivalent encounter of the gender legacy of the Mao era with post-Mao lesbian lives. On one hand, the post-Mao transnational context offers multiple cultural inspirations and possibilities for performing Chinese *lala* identities; on the other hand, the Maoist past leaves its marks on the *lala*'s self-identification and subjectivity formation—in its persistent reincarnation (as in the use of the term *tongzi*) or in its not coincidental absence (as in Shiou's rejection of the term *funü* as evoking a masculinized heterosexual woman). Shiou's memories and reflections on the Maoist gender project shaped her imagining of her post-Mao *lala* subjectivity. Her artistic project and personal journey reveal the heteronormative and patriarchal foundation of models of gender in the Maoist and post-Mao gender projects.

Narrated in a post-Mao transnational context, Shiou's life story also poses a challenge to the dominance of Western lesbian and gay liberation discourse and a "universal/global gay identity," as well as the assumption that contemporary Chinese queer culture is a symptomatic expression of a globalizing neoliberalism. Her desire for cultural belonging has led her to seek out lesbian images in Chinese history for inspiration, throwing a different light on shifting models of femininity in the past and their echoes in the present. The history of the Maoist past inevitably leaves its mark on contemporary Chinese queer culture, even for those born in the post-Mao era, in the community's name *tongzi*, in the queer daughter's inspirations from her Maoist mother, in the memory of an alternative "masculinized" revolutionary femininity, and in a life beyond being the "women of the family."

As the previous chapters have shown, in the post-Mao era, the Maoist woman, rural women, and lesbians all appear to have been constructed as less than real women, positioned as the abjected other of the hyperfeminine *nüxing* who occupies center stage and is now largely perceived as the norm in post-Mao gender construction.

In this chapter, I investigate the life story of an apparently successful cosmopolitan *nüxing*, Anne. She has had the experience of studying, working, and living abroad, returning to China in 2003 and becoming general manager of a multinational company with its head office in Beijing. As a young, attractive, urban woman with transnational experience and a prestigious job, she seems to be the very embodiment of the post-Mao image of the *nüxing*—yet she felt unable to inhabit that position. Did Anne, the cosmopolitan daughter of her Maoist *funü* mother, still carry the specter of the *funü* in her, when she traveled across different cultural, ideological, national, and economic boundaries and gender systems? Exposed to competing discourses of what it means to be a woman, how has the Maoist past played out in Anne's personal gender project? How has the gender legacy of the Mao era figured and interacted with other cultural and ideological sources in her resistance to what Ingerpul Grewal and Caren Kaplan called "various patriarchies in multiple locations" (1994, 22)? These are the questions this chapter explores.

To situate Anne's story, the following section briefly outlines the economic and political transformations that have taken place in China since the end of the Mao era and China's increasing interactions with the outside world.
28. Young takes on Irigaray’s (1985) idea that masculine desire is expressed through visual metaphors, whereas feminine desire moves through the medium of touch and sees clothes giving women pleasure by touch, with the sense of skin on matter, fingers on texture, and an orientation to sensuality. She thinks that clothes often serve for women as threads in the bonds of sisterhood, and that women take pleasure in clothes because looking at them and looking at images of women in clothes encourage fantasies of transport and transformation.

29. Sinitic languages belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family, which is part of the Tibeto-Burman family, which includes almost 400 languages spoken across China, Tibet, South Asia, and parts of Southeast Asia (Shi, Tsai, and Bernards 2013).

30. For instance, the phonetic script reform and the national language movement since the late Qing period; the baihua (白话, vernacular) movement in the May Fourth era; the Latinized New Writing movement in the 1930s; and the debate on “national forms” during the period of the Sino-Japanese war (1937–45).

31. Lo, Kwai-Cheung (2000, 184) argues that by unifying the tools of exchange and communication and hierarchizing one dialect over the others, writing serves as the ideological apparatus that helps create the concept of cultural nationalism and inscribes the mastering subject in its space of articulation.

32. In Chinese, different words may have the same pronunciation but have different meanings.

33. Dong learned Mandarin at school, which is the standard language in education system in mainland China. As a shy student, she might have hardly spoken in class, and even when she had to, she would have spoken to the fellow students, and chances are none of them were native Mandarin speakers.

34. Liu Jin (2014) also made this point, citing Stuart Hall’s discussion on the relation between the global and the local, and argues that the “distinct” local identities promoted and celebrated in Chinese local language rap songs may turn out to be examples of diversity within conformity, pluralism within unity, heterogeneity within homogeneity, and localization within globalization.

35. For instance, standard Mandarin (Putonghua) borrowed much of its vocabulary from Taiwan Gwoyeu (国语, Mandarin), see Shao (2015, 19–38).

Chapter 3. I Am A Rock: Shitou’s Life Story

1. Shitou kindly provided copies of her work and granted permission to reproduce them for this book. Since she is a public figure, I consulted Chinese and English news reports and television interviews with her. They provided background information for my interpretation of her life story. Such sources are indicated wherever points do not come directly from my interview with her.

2. For instance, illustrations in van Gulik and Goldin (2003) and Tanba, Ishihara, and Levy (1968) show lesbian activities.

3. Kang Wenqing (2012) argues that since “hooliganism” is a broad category including nonsexual behaviors such as loitering, public indecency, vandalism, delinquency, and gang flights, strictly speaking the state did not persecute homosexuals per se, as it is not a legally recognized existence, and the state cannot persecute a population whose existence it denies. For the same reason, Guo Xiafei (2007) argues that the “decriminalization of homosexuality” in 1997 was an unintended result of the removal of the provision on hooliganism.

4. Various terms have been used to refer to the Chinese queer community, such as gay and lesbian, ku'er (酷儿, translation of the English term queer), LGBT, tongshi (同志, comrade) each with its own range of acceptance, specific usage, and audience. In particular, the terms tongshi and quee are often used interchangeably in everyday use, and there are no strict or formalized distinctions between them (for a discussion of the genealogy, usage, and relationships between these two terms, see Engelsren, Schroeder, and Bao 2015). I use the term tongshi to refer to the queer community and culture in contemporary China, for it is an accepted way of identifying oneself in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and for its geopolitical connotations. I use the English term “queer” for its nonnormativity connotations and subversive orientation and in theoretical related discussions.

5. The term lala (拉拉) for lesbian was imported from Taiwan in the 1990s and originated from a lesbian character named Lazi (拉子) in Eyu Shoujiri (鯉魚手紀), The Crocodile’s Journal, a novel by Qiu Miaojin (邱妙津) (Sang 2003).


7. I have shared with Shitou a Chinese translation of this chapter as well.

8. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, artists came from all over China and formed an artist community, a Chinese Soho, in a village in the northwest part of Beijing near Yuanmingyuan (圆明园) Park. They rented peasant houses as studios and aimed to sell their works to the mushrooming art galleries in Beijing; there was also emerging interest in collecting contemporary Chinese art overseas. Many internationally acclaimed Chinese artists, such as Fang Liping and Wang Guangyi, have lived in Yuanmingyuan.

9. For instance, Mao Zedong’s (毛泽东) ming (名, formal given name) is Zedong (泽东), while his zi (字) is Runzhi (润之); he also had the nicknames Shitou and Shisanzi (石头, 石三子), and he used more than ten pen names, such as Mao Sanshi (毛三石), Zedong (泽东), Runzhi (润之), and Yan Ziren (杨子任).

10. There was one news report in the late 1950s, where the Changsha Meat and Fishery Products Company encouraged female employees to learn to butcher pigs. This became a national “news story of the year.” See Roushi shuaicun gongsi nüyúfu (肉食水产公司“女屠夫.” Women Butchers in the Meat and Fishery Product Company), available at http://bbs.baiying.com/thread-27650-1-1.html (accessed November 20, 2008). Note that this discussion is about butchery as a profession. Many women have been responsible for killing poultry, pigs, sheep, and so on as part of the food preparation for their families. Butchery as a male profession used to be a tradition of the Han people, but not of some minority groups in China. For instance, among the Naxi (纳西), a matrilineal society living mainly in the
southwest part of China, women have always been butchers and were considered better at it than their male counterparts.

11. Another painting of a woman with a knife as her arm may reflect Shitou’s childhood memory of seeing her mother wield a butcher’s knife.

12. Such images often appear in posters from the Cultural Revolution era, which can be found at Chinese Posters Collection at University of Westminster, London. Available at http://chinaposers.westminster.ac.uk/zenphoto/ (accessed December 2017).

13. For a study of the mandarin duck and butterfly literature, see Chow (1986, 69–93) and Link (1981).

14. Zhu Yingzai, a young girl from a higher-class family, dressed as a mam to attend school (where only men were allowed) and fell in love with a classmate. Their love ended up as a tragedy because of her family intervention. Liang died of desperation, and Zhu joined him in his tomb on her wedding day, avoiding a marriage arranged by her family with another man. After their death, the lovers became two butterflies, happily together, never separated again. For a study of Liang and Zhu’s story, see Altenburger (2005, 165–205).

15. For example, Sang reproduced some of these posters in The Emerging Lesbian (2003, 2, 18–19, 57). For a catalog, see Zhang (1994).

16. While that might be true in the early period of lean activism in China, a more complex construction of Chinese lesbian identities is now taking place, as Shitou’s works suggest.

17. Shitou is not alone in seeking ways to articulate distinctive Chinese lesbian identities. For instance, the organizers of the Beijing lala club consciously incorporated Chinese cultural traditions into their signifying practices, such as combining the rainbow sign with kite flying at the Great Wall in the documentary Queer China (Z. Cui 2009). See also Engebretsen (2015).


19. Some scholars translate nüquan (女权) as feminism and nüxing (女性性) as womanism, for example, Lin (2006, 115) and Barlow (2004, 49–63). The term “womanism” is understood as a form of feminism that acknowledges women’s natural contribution to society and has been used in distinction to the term “feminism” and its association with white women. This term originated in the United States among African American women and has very different connotations compared to nüxing (女性性) in contemporary China. For a discussion on the translation of the term “feminism” in China, see Ko and Wang (2007) and Min (2007, 174–93).

20. I use this term in a different way from most scholarly discussions of gay kinship, which relate to gay men’s relationships with each other, their family, and patriarchal culture. On Chinese gay and lesbian and kinship, see for instance Rofel (2007) and Engebretsen (2009, 3–22).

21. For instance, in a recent book the editors decided to juxtapose “queer” and tongshi in its title as Queer/Tongshi China (Engebretsen and Schroeder 2015). Although tongshi is also sometimes used as the Chinese translation for the English term “queer,” it is often perceived as the appropriation of the communist term “comrade” (though also a translated term).

22. There are other, less circulated Chinese translations of the English term “queer,” such as Guaitai in Taiwan, meaning weirdo, or freak. See Fran Martin (2003, 4) and Chan Hsiao-hung’s (1996, 6–25, 2000) discussion of this term.

23. Zhou and Lu’s writings constitute part of the debate in the study of history of sexuality in China between the anti-universalist and the anti-essentialist arguments. The anti-universalist Chinese exceptionalism regards China as having a distinctive, different history and culture of homosexuality. The anti-essentialist position questions the romanticization of a homosexual tradition in China. In her study of Ming literature culture, Sophie Volpe (2001) argues that same-sex culture remained marginalized and illegitimate. Kaim (2013, 92–93) further emphasizes that “silence can be a violent form of symbolic erasure,” and that tolerance as a “discourse of depoliticization and personalization of political issues” and self-shaming as being the only emotion permitted to nonnormative sexual subjects within Chinese families.

24. For the adaptation of the term tongshi by Chinese gays and lesbians in Hong Kong, see W. Chou (1997, 2000) and Wong (2005). For the adaptation of the term tongshi in Taiwan, see Wong and Zhang (2001) and Lim (2008).

25. The term liumang (流氓, hooligan) began to enter the political and legal documents in China in the 1950s under the Chinese communist regime. It comes from a translation of the German term Lumpenproletariat in Marx’s Communist Manifesto, into liumang wuchanhe (流氓无产者, hooligan proletariat). Liurnang wuchanhe was used by the communist regime to refer to the remnants of the old society, who were subjected to socialist education and reform; if they refused to change, they would be punished by the state. See Zhou (2009).

26. They discussed four primary ways the interface could mobilize visual and textual regimes: (1) relationally, in which the word and image are parallel or interrogatory juxtaposed; (2) contextually, through documentary or ethnographic juxtaposition; (3) spatially, through palimpsestic or paratextual juxtaposition; and (4) temporally, through telescoped or serial juxtaposition. The four modes of the interface producing meaning at a visual/textual matrix, and these modes must be read against/through each other. They may be in irreducible tension, interrogatory, and tell different, even contradictory, stories (Smith and Watson 2002, 21–23).

Chapter 4. The Cosmopolitan Daughter of Fund: Anne’s Life Story

1. For discussions of River Elegy (or Deathsong of the River), see Richard Madson (1995, chapter 8) and Fewsmith (2001, chapter 4).