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‘Chineseness’: The work of Lo Yuen-yi in memory of the women of nüshu

ABSTRACT
One of the difficulties facing art historians and curators when approaching recently produced artworks is how to interpret such works within the dominant narrative of art history and its traditional axis of historical time and geographical place. Often such works are interpreted as ‘global’ and effectively reduced to a western interpretation of the artworks. While this is a helpful approach for many artists and artworks, it can be less helpful to the interpretation of works that seek to address local issues that the ‘global’ approach might miss. Moreover, the criteria of the ‘global’ might exclude such works from being perceived as ‘contemporary art’. The problem today is acute when dealing with artworks in East Asia, especially China, because so many works have been accepted as ‘global’ only occasionally mentioning that they are ‘Chinese’. Hence the uneasy term ‘Contemporary Chinese art’ and the debate between its interpretation as ‘global’ and/or ‘Chinese’. If the latter perspective is applied, some form of ‘Chineseness’ will explicitly or implicitly be applied. This article takes the ‘local’ perspective in order to interpret a group of works by the Hong Kong/Macau artist Lo Yuen-yi in memory of the rural women who practised nüshu (women’s writing) through chants, embroidery and writing in Hunan province, China. In so doing, Lo can position herself within an alternative narrative of female literate and artistic ancestral narrative from which she is not excluded as a Chinese female artist. The article argues that the work cannot be fully understood from the ‘global’ perspective and thus requires a perspective that would necessarily adopt a strategic concept of ‘Chineseness’.

KEYWORDS
Chineseness
contemporary Chinese artefacts
Chinese female artists
feminism
calligraphy
Confucianism
global art
filial piety
‘CHINESENESS’, ‘CHINESE ART’ AND ‘THE CONTEMPORARY’

In the context of art discourse at least, the term ‘contemporary’ is often used when discussing recently produced art. There is an assumption that the title covers all recently produced works and that the term ‘global’ covers all geographical locations. And yet, the title of this journal *Contemporary Chinese Art* suggests that there are aspects not covered by the category ‘contemporary art’, which can only be addressed by adding the qualifying term ‘Chinese’. However, what might be the ‘Chinese’ in contemporary art?

The term ‘Chinese’ is itself problematic. It could be understood to describe the geographical, or the geopolitical region/s describing themselves as China, even if such regions have been, and still are, hotly contested. Our narratives might then be confined to works produced in what is seen to be the geographical space of a country (more than one geopolitical country?) that refers to itself as China. This will introduce criteria that will necessarily exclude artists who are no longer living in China but continue to maintain their national and cultural heritage practised in China. Chinese migration patterns, at least over the past 150 years, have constructed Chinese communities that maintain linguistic and cultural aspects despite residing outside the geopolitical space(s) of China. Moreover, in the past ten years or more, several internationally established artists have moved their workshops to the People’s Republic of China to take advantage of cheaper production costs. Might such works be described as ‘Chinese’? Do we expect more of ‘Chinese’ than mere geopolitical space? Is ‘Chinese’ also encountered beyond the geopolitical space?

In his introduction to his book *Art in China* (1997), Craig Clunas argues that the term ‘Chinese art’ is a recent invention that goes back only to the nineteenth century. While he does not elaborate on it in his introduction, it very much belonged to the colonial approaches at the time that sought to present Europe and European culture as modern and progressive by contrast to colonial (and/or potentially colonial) products of other geographical spaces. The Great Exhibition in London of 1851 is such an example. Hence, Clunas argues that

[...It] was in nineteenth-century Europe and North America that ‘Chinese art’ was created. It still exists in the West as an object of study contrasted with unqualified ‘art’, usually in practice the European tradition, with its extensions into America and other parts of the world. The National Gallery in London and the ‘National Gallery of Art’ in Washington, DC, despite the implicit claims to comprehensiveness made in their titles, do not contain work from China.

(Clunas 1997: 9)

Clunas’ focus is on pre-twentieth century art from the geographical space of East Asia (though the book includes some twentieth-century works). Clunas’ argument is that while ‘Chinese art’ is a recent European term, such works are actually not included in European narratives of the history of art presented in major art galleries. Instead, such works are generally shown under the subtitle of ‘Chinese art’ in ethnographical museums such as the British Museum in London or in ethnographic sections of museums such as the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

The discipline of art history developed in modern Europe. Art history is a relatively new academic discipline that can be traced back to the surviving
narratives of the Roman writer Pliny the elder (23–79), to Alberti (1404–1472), Vasari’s *The Lives of the Artists* (1550) and a growing number of narratives on art during the sixteenth, seventeenth and into the eighteenth century. However, it appeared as a distinct discourse that sought to establish categories through which it could group artists and artworks on the basis of historical periods (time) and geographical regions (space/place) with an emphasis on constructing connective (even linear progressive) narratives in the context of European discourse of nationalism and colonialism. To the extent that it prioritized history – so that forms of linear narratives could be made possible – it limited its geographical coverage. For example, in his *Parallel of the Ancients and Modern* (1697), Charles Perrault argued that,

> Though Chinese art is very ancient, they have remained at this stage. They will, perhaps, soon learn to draw properly, to place their figures in noble attitudes, and attain exact expression of all the passions. But it will be a long time before they attain a perfect understanding of chiaroscuro, the degradation of light, the secrets of perspective and the judicious organisation of a large composition.

(Perrault, in Harrison et al. 2000: 57)

Perrault’s narrative can be seen as an early art historical account that focuses on ‘change’. He wants to argue that artworks need to be placed on a historical axis because it is necessary to record the historical moments of progress achieved. An implication that artistic innovation can take place only within a culture that has as its aim human virtues (from knowledge to morality) is already visible here in its early stages. The narrative of art history will thus present a narrative of change and innovation, which, for Perrault, could be seen in examples such as chiaroscuro and perspective. Hence, for Perrault and his contemporaries ‘Chinese art’ is primitive and static. It can ‘learn’ from Europe and thus follow European innovations, but it is static because it arises in a culture that is unchanging and should thus be excluded from the narrative of art history.

Of course, while the strategy of limiting the geographical region relevant to art history was in an attempt to serve art historical demands for continuous narratives, it was also probably not an entirely innocent move. At the time it provided the rationale that such cultures were static and ‘primitive’ as opposed to European progressive and civilized culture and thus needed Europe’s ‘civilizing’ help. By the mid-nineteenth century this was the explicit narrative that justified colonialism, most famously articulated in Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (1822–1830) and his *Lectures on Fine Art* (1820s). To the extent that such regions were perceived as ‘colonies’ (or potential colonies) under the rule of Europe the cultural products produced in the past were perceived outside historical time. This included works produced at the time; they were interpreted either as traditional or derivative (e.g., copying European innovation).

An often quoted example from mid-twentieth century – implicitly informed by Hegel – can be seen in Gombrich’s historical narrative *The Story of Art* (1950), which despite the general chronology of the narrative places art from China before early modern European art, even though many of the ‘Chinese art’ works mentioned were produced considerably later. Hence, the narrative of art history as established in the preceding centuries made it difficult to include artworks produced outside Europe. ‘Chinese art’, as Clunas
showed, was a term given to pre-modern artworks from the geopolitical regions described as China. Hence, contemporary art was not Chinese and Chinese art was not contemporary. In this context, ‘Contemporary Chinese Art’ was a contradiction in terms.

To circumvent the problem – which applies equally to Africa, India, South East Asia and others – the term ‘global’ came to the rescue. Contemporary art, it implied, was no longer European and/or American, but global: contemporary art means global art. However, while the term ‘global’ seeks to address the problem, it can only address artworks that do not seek to engage in specific local debates and where at least some ‘global’ (that is, European approaches to other cultures and other references) are clearly visible as innovative. Artists producing artworks in which the major references are to local debate, thought and culture and references to European approaches to ‘the global’ are less clearly visible do not fulfil the demands of the ‘global’ that would allow them to be perceived as contemporary art. Hence, they can easily remain invisible and fail to register as contemporary art.

Through an analysis of the work of Lo, I argue that in order to recognize some recently produced artworks with clear references to other (than European) art practices, debate, thought and culture where references to ‘global’ art practices and debate are not the focus of the work, a strategic use of terms such as ‘Chinese’ is required. This strategic use does raise many questions and many difficulties and yet I argue that, for the moment at least, and for the purpose of bringing into view important artworks that will otherwise remain invisible, this strategic approach is required. In utilizing the term ‘Chinese’ I will necessarily generate an implicit concept of ‘Chineseness’ that will effectively essentialize certain characteristics, practices and traditions as ‘Chinese’. I shall thus be working with a concept that at times will be seen as frozen in time rather than focusing on its fluid changes through time and in different communities. As such, at times it could be seen to continue the European approach to cultures outside Europe as ‘outside history’. It is a price this article will necessarily pay in order to highlight what otherwise remains invisible. Wherever possible, I shall try and show that the category of ‘Chineseness’ used is at the same time living and fluid and the traditions and practices it freezes are equally fluid and plural over time and space.

Essentialism was highlighted as a problem in western feminist discourse in the 1970s where feminists identified as a patriarchal strategy the use of biological ‘essential’ quality, which reduced all women to an aspect of their biology as set by ‘nature’: the capacity to bear and nurture children. Hence, the category of ‘man’ was contrasted to that of ‘woman’. The latter was aligned with ‘Nature’, the former with ‘Culture’. The former was unchanging, the latter progressing. ‘Man’ became the generator of history through culture, ‘woman’ remained outside history – with fixed ‘natural’ roles and excluded from culture. The category of ‘man’ was aligned with public life, ‘woman’ kept in the domestic sphere with a fixed role of bearing children and nurturing the needy.

Using the same logic, if we were to interpret ‘Chineseness’ in the way feminists identified the use of ‘woman’ as a category, then it could be perceived as a category generated in opposition to a prioritized category that of ‘Western’ or ‘European’. On this structure the prioritized category ‘Western’ would be presented as generating change and development; while the category ‘Chinese’ will remain outside history, it will operate on the ‘nature’ not ‘culture’ of the dyadic configuration.
FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH LO YUEN-YI’S WORK

In 1998, I was invited to give a guest seminar to what was then the new M.A. course in Drawing at the Wimbledon School of Art, London. After many years, in which drawing was perceived in western discourse as mere preparatory work and only the finished work was seen as a fully fledged work of art, the 1990s saw a new approach to drawing. Two major exhibitions took place; one was a series of drawing exhibitions organized by the Louvre Museum in Paris and the other a more modest exhibition that took place in London/Gent. Both attempted to rethink and re-evaluate drawing in different contexts and arriving at it from different perspectives.

The context for the Louvre exhibition was to show that their collection of drawings – usually only available to the public by request – could be shown differently in a context that presents it as ‘contemporary’ because it can be shown to address contemporary debate in both art and beyond. Hence, well-known philosophers and theorists were invited to curate such exhibitions from the existing collection, rather than art historians. The rationale for inviting philosophers was in order to circumvent approaches that took drawing as mere preparatory work for the ‘finished’ painting, sculpture or architecture. Hence, the exhibitions looked for what today we might refer to as ‘contemporaneity’ in the existing, almost forgotten, drawing collection.

The other was an exhibition of contemporary drawings by women artists curated by Catherine de Zegher and entitled ‘Inside the Visible’ (1994–1996). This exhibition argued that drawing is a practice chosen by women precisely because of its focus on process rather than the end product. It arose out of two contexts of debate: the critique of the prioritization of ‘final’ work over the process of art practice and the focus on the performative moments in art.

Figure 1: Lo Yuen-yi, Mapping, graphite on primed canvas, 183 × 244 cm (1998).
rather than the art ‘object’. The seminar offered a feminist perspective of the two exhibitions – Derrida’s curated exhibition at the Louvre entitled *Memoirs of the Blind* (1990) and de Zegher’s ‘Inside The Visible’ – further developing the argument that drawing could be seen as the preferred medium for some feminist artists in the twentieth century, at least.

After the seminar I was shown several works by M.A. students present at the seminar and I was intrigued by a large work (183×244cm) that had the format of a triptych. The focal point of the central panel was left blank as if portraying a void. On either side were two drawn hands in motion as if attempting to reach each other. The two narrow side panels seemed as if they were meant as margins. On the margins were vertically drawn, what seemed to me as, Chinese characters that I could not read. On closer inspection I found out that the drawing, including the Chinese characters, were drawn with graphite on primed canvas. The work was entitled *Mapping* (1998) and the artist was Yuenyi Lo. It was clear that the work was the result of many hours of painstakingly drawing marks on the primed canvas, which does not readily accept graphite as a drawing medium. Primed canvas was designed in Europe as a medium for oil paints. Graphite works best on paper and was used by Renaissance artists, though paper itself came from China. While graphite on paper is used in some Chinese drawings, Chinese drawings on paper are drawn, most commonly, with brush and ink and are understood within the context of calligraphy. There are many examples of Chinese drawings on textile but mostly on fine silk. The rough primed un-stretched canvas introduced unresolved tensions between the medium of drawing in the form of graphite and its rough primed support. The resulting effect was a focus on the hours of labour it took to persuade the mediums to yield and respond to each other.

![Figure 2: Lo Yuen-yi, Attempt 6 (part), a series of 7 units of graphite on primed canvas, dimensions variable (1998).](image-url)
Despite the disturbing tensions, or perhaps because of the uncomfortable tensions that the work evoked, it was clear that the work was sophisticated for an M.A. student. There were references to the European Triptych, but equally, there were references to the type of Chinese drawings I was familiar with from the V&A and the British Museums, mostly on paper, though some were silk hanging scrolls. The two hands were haunting in the sense that it was difficult to tell whether they were groping or caressing what I could not see, or attempting to meet at some invisible point, or searching blindly for that which was not visible.

Having just held a seminar on Derrida’s *Memoirs of the Blind*, my thoughts were on how this striking work could be interpreted through Derrida’s 1993 Exhibition Catalogue of his Louvre exhibition. The two searching hands in Yuenyi Lo’s *Mapping* evoked a similar feel of blind searching present in several works in Derrida’s exhibition, for example, the hands in several of Coypel’s studies of blind people.

I was reminded by Derrida’s argument that drawing has two paradoxical moments: on the one hand, ‘the invisible condition of the possibility of drawing’, and on the other,

> […] the sacrificial event, that which comes to meets the eyes, the narrative, spectacle, or representation of the blind, would, in becoming the theme of the first, reflect, so to speak, this impossibility.  
* (Derrida 1993: 41)

Derrida’s point is that a form of ‘blindness’, not vision as is normally assumed, grounds the practice of drawing. The visible drawing arises through the sacrifice of the once seen but no longer visible scene. As such, he goes on to say, drawing

> represent this unrepresentable. Between the two, in their fold, the one repeating the other without being reduced to it, the event can give rise to the speech of narrative, to myth, prophesy, or messianism, to the family romance or to the scene of everyday life, thus providing drawing with its thematic objects or spectacles, its figures and heroes, its pictures or depictions of the blind.  
* (Derrida 1993: 41)

The work called for a narrative explaining the relationship between the two hands and the text. I had no access to decipher the Chinese characters on either sides; all I saw were two blindly searching hands, between them blank canvas and flanked by two vertical panels displaying Chinese characters, some of which were rubbed out and were barely visible.

In another essay ‘Geschlecht II: Heidegger’s Hand’ Derrida’s focus is on hands. The German term *Geschlecht* holds the complex meaning of distinctions. It can be translated as the distinctions under the following: sex, race, species, genius, gender, stock, family, generation or genealogy, community. Following Derrida, the two hands may well stand for distinctions including gender, culture, race, generation or genealogy. However, they may also stand for the distinction between showing and meaning, the invisible which is the condition for the possibility of drawing.

Heidegger’s discussion of ‘hands’ is attempting to rethink the metaphysical binary between mind/body, art/craft, and of course this has relevance to
all other derivative distinctions such as male/female (though Heidegger will insist that this is a later distinction, not a fundamental one). Heidegger’s approach to the problem through the human hand is strategic; he is attempting a critique of the above distinctions (though not the distinction between male and female). He is suggesting that perhaps thinking is akin to handicraft in order to question the mind/body distinction. Here is the English translation:

The hand does not only grasp and catch, or push and pull. The hand reaches and extends, receives and welcomes – and not just things; the hand extends itself, and receives its own welcome in the hands of others. The hand holds. The hand carries. The hand designs [draws] and signs presumably because man is a sign. Two hands […] But the hand’s gestures run everywhere through language, in their most perfect purity precisely when man speaks by being silent. And only when man speaks, does he thinks […] All the work of the hand is rooted in thinking.

(Heidegger 1968: 16)

There is something in Heidegger’s above account that describes Lo’s Mapping (1998); the two hands reach and extend; the hands certainly gesture; they point to a language I am unable to read or understand; they sign something. Language and thinking for Heidegger are connected to the hands, to embodiment, not just cerebral, abstract activity. However, if language is required for thinking and thinking requires language, we are within a closed circle where no new thinking or language can arise. The argument of the book is that through art and the gesture of hands (as producing artworks, inviting, carrying and welcoming others), new signs and thus new language and new thought can come into being. The gestures of the hands can communicate what is as yet not articulated in established language. The gesture can nevertheless open up expressions as yet to be articulated in formal language. The relationship of the hands to both the body and to art/poetry is crucial for Heidegger’s articulation of thought. In Lo’s work the two hands are stationary and as such hold a moment of silence, which could be the condition for the possibility of new thought and/or language. Moreover, the two hands are flanked by Chinese characters, some of which are rubbed out. The hands may well have drawn the calligraphic characters and as such are introducing an additional tension of self-referentiality. The hands are frozen in motion but the stored energy promises further movement/action. It seems like a drawing of the action, a drawing of the process of drawing.

It was at this point that an explanation of the text on either side of the work came from Lo. I was told that the fourteen Chinese characters (seven on each side of the work) operate by combining two ideographs. The ideographs on the margins are constructed by using the ideograph for ‘feminine’ on the left, followed by another ideograph, which gives the overall character its meaning, but the meaning is necessarily feminized. As such, the feminine sign fixes the term as a gendered stereotype. The feminine sign of each symbol (the radical) on the side of the work has been erased by Lo and thus the overall ideograph lost its meaning.

This was a helpful explanation, though I could still not read the script and nor was I able to offer a satisfactory explanation of the overall work. At the time my only exposure to Chinese art and culture was limited. I was also aware the work engaged with areas of debate I was less familiar with...
and as such could not fully articulate: debates that at least at the time were Chinese and took place within the Chinese speaking and practising community (covering geopolitical regions identified as China and many communities beyond). Having spent many happy hours since early childhood at many public collections of ‘Chinese art’ from the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum and many European and American collections, I was familiar with at least the visual impact of Chinese landscapes and poetry on paper and silk and a range of other artefacts. I have seen many calligraphic works and I was aware of some European presentations of Chinese calligraphy and its role in historical Chinese culture and social and political life. I was also familiar with another perspective of China from my philosophy and art historical studies.

Lo’s interest in hands continued with a series of works entitled Attempt. In Attempt 8 (1998), the first impression is of great tension. However, here the two hands are clearly working together but it is unclear whether they are attempting to crumple the paper/canvas on which the drawing is drawn or fashion an object out of it. Lo’s drawing becomes self-referential: the hands that draw the scene drawn are also shaping the drawing that has been drawn. And yet, embedded in the image is also the energy with which the hands are handling the drawing material as if squeezing the drawing to extract something out of it.

I could continue to speculate with further European sources. However, it might be more productive at this point to look at Chinese sources to help us gain deeper understanding of the works. Roger Ames, who wrote an interpretation of one of the Chinese classics, On the Practice of the Mean, argues that in Chinese cosmology ‘the production of meaning is radically situated, emerging from the changing relations within our world of experience in our continuing present’ (Ames in Tsao 2011: 40). He goes on to suggest that this is captured by the Chinese expression tiyong, which he traces back to Wang Bi (226–249) and suggests that it has become a ubiquitous explanatory expression in
subsequent Confucian philosophical reflection. Simply put, he says, ‘all creativity is construed as situated and radically embedded – a collaborative co-creativity. Creating oneself and creating one’s world is coterminous and mutually entailing process’ (Ames in Tsao 2011: 40). If we apply this interpretation to Lo’s Attempt 8, it might help us explain why the hands and the act of drawing portrayed seem to present so much stored energy, holding still a movement that wants to explode into drawings and why it is titled ‘attempt’. The process of drawing is thus also the process of what is drawn and in so doing also the process of the artist’s self fashioning herself as an artist. This interpretation may also be useful for the series as a whole and in particular to Attempt 6 in which two hands are fashioning the radical character that stands for ‘female’. It is in the context of Chinese cosmology that the drawing seems more meaningful. For it is through drawing and erasing the radical female ideograph and the hands that draw it that the artist is attempting to fashion herself as a female artist in a cultural context where such fashioning is difficult, if not impossible, for women.

Lo was born and grew up in Hong Kong, then under British administration, but nevertheless within a Chinese environment. She continued her art studies in Florence and then in London where she was exposed to further European approaches to art, art theory and aesthetics, including European approaches to China and Chinese thought, culture and practices. Lo’s work navigates between the two cultures, but at the same time seeks to comment on the ‘local’ artistic environment in which she tries to live and work as an artist. Hence, unless both cultures/environments are acknowledged it is easy to miss the importance of her work both to the European and Chinese contexts.

CONFUCIANISM AS ‘CHINESENESS’

Like the term/concept ‘Chinese art’, the term/concept ‘Confucianism’ was a European invention. Moreover, the term ‘Chinese art’ was made possible because an existing concept of ‘Chineseness’ was already in operation in the form of ‘Confucianism’. The role of Missionaries, and especially Jesuits, in mediating between Christianity and what they identified as local religions in an attempt to show similarities between the two, is often underplayed or forgotten. In her book Confucianism and Women (2006), Li-Hsiang Rosenlee argues that

The term Confucianism […] was an ‘invention’ of Jesuits in the late eighteenth century. It was an invention rather than literal translation, or a representation of the culture of the literati in late imperial China, since there is no exact either literal or conceptual counterpart of ‘Confucianism’ in the Chinese language. Instead, what the Jesuits intended to represent by the term Confucianism is the concept of Ru, whose meaning […] is neither derivative from, nor dependent on Confucius, since its origins precedes the historical figure – Confucius. Otherwise it would be pointless to talk about the lives of ‘Confucians’ or Ru before Confucius.

(Rosenlee 2006: 17)

Confucianism, Rosenlee argues, is a concept that is perceived to govern the thoughts, social practices and all levels of ethical life. It is possible to show that
since the eighteenth century – some would argue since late sixteenth with the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci – has been taken to describe ‘Chineseness’ outside China. It is a concept that cannot be reduced to the works of Confucius. Hence, Rosenlee traces the origin of the term Ru back in history and shows that it can be seen to be going back in history as far as written documents allow. What unifies the concept over time is that it was always connected to scholars and men of letters. By the time of Confucius, she says, it has taken on an explicitly moral dimension that anchors its existence on reverence towards the past for the sake of the present. [...] Ru’s reverence toward tradition, including both literary and ritual traditions, in times of foreign invasions, had in turn become the ultimate guardian of Chinese high culture and thereby is synonymous with ‘Chineseness’.

(Rosenlee 2006: 24)

Confucianism as articulated above, Rosenlee argues, became Chineseness. It included both reverence to the past, which necessarily establishes hierarchies (family, social, state), and at the same time reverence to the literary (scholar/artist) tradition.

Confucianism as Ru is thus associated with Chinese elite culture; it formed the basis on which a highly literate culture (a literocentric culture) developed and flourished for at least 2000 years. Literacy was the marker of social status and as such was sought after even by those who could barely afford it. Nevertheless, it led to widening literacy and culture. According to Dieter Kuhn, during the Song dynasty, ‘candidates sitting for the civil service exams numbered not in the hundreds, as in the Tang, but in the hundreds of thousands’ (2009: 121). This means that the educated elite was of considerable size and developed a hierarchy of its own, though it still excluded the vast majority who could not afford the time and expense required to enter the examination system.

However, literacy was more than the ability to read; it implied knowledge and familiarity of what were considered ‘classical’ texts: be they texts by Confucius, attributed to Confucius, later interpretations or earlier texts that became incorporated into this group of texts through later interpretations. Hence, over time what was seen to be connected and/or attributed to Confucius was always already in flux and fluid. It is this body of texts and practices that was translated into ‘Confucianism’. Knowledge of the related texts was tested at the Chinese examination system necessary for attaining public office. It was thus an essential part of the education desired by the elite.

However, the examination system did not simply encourage scholarly pursuit; it was closely connected to character and ethical conduct. As I showed earlier on, early Chinese classics, such as On the Practice of the Mean, are connecting the practice of writing with ethical conduct. Hence, Craig Clunas notes that it was believed as early as the second century AD that written text in the form of calligraphy reveals character and moral strength (Clunas 1997: 135). The relationship between writing, poetry, drawing and ethical conduct can be traced back to the Book of Changes and other early Chinese classics. It also explains the practice of copying highly valued calligraphic texts. Not only can one develop the skills of calligraphy but in copying the work of masters one’s character and ethical conduct will equally follow that of the master.

In her article ‘Negotiating with the past: The art of calligraphy in post-Mao China’ (2012), Li-hua Ying notes that Chinese Calligraphy combines
language, art, philosophy, and poetry and it was considered as the highest art form in traditional China. However, despite the communist revolution, which sought to establish a different social and political organization, calligraphy continued to play an important role in modern China. Moreover, she says, to this day the same criteria remain the three aesthetic levels: ‘form’ (xing), which includes the execution of strokes, structure and composition; ‘rhythm’ (liudong or jiezou), which focuses on the control of movement and the application of strength; and ‘spirit’ or ‘style’ (jingshen or fengge), which deals with the personal quality that informs an artist’s work (Li-hua Ying 2012: 37).

The continuing interest in calligraphy may well explain, on one level at least, why calligraphic work is used by so many contemporary artists from China. Perhaps the most famous work with explicit references to the practice of calligraphy is Xu Bing’s Book from the Sky (Tian shu) (1988). Xu generated some 4000 unreadable characters. It became famous outside China after it was exhibited at the 45th Venice Biennale (1993) where it was interpreted as a critique of the none-sense generated during the Cultural Revolution. Other well-known artists who utilize calligraphy in their work include Qiu Zhijie with his work Copying Orchid Pavilion Preface a Thousand Times (1992–1995), which copied the celebrated classic of Chinese calligraphy a thousand times on the same sheet of paper until no calligraphic characters are visible and the paper is black. A similar approach of copying on the same surface till the calligraphic form is no longer visible is used by Zhang Huan in his Family Tree (2000). Over three days calligraphers were hired to copy the text of his family tree on his face. All three artists explained their work as an attempt to fashion themselves and reconnect with the past, be it personal or social/familial. Their works were understood as attempts to continue the long tradition of writing and calligraphy.

Dieter Kuhn argues in his book The Age of Confucian Rule (2009) that Confucian ethics governed individual life from birth to burial, as well as formed the basis of statecraft and government. One crucial aspect of the Confucian creed, as Kuhn notes, is that an individual was only a link in the chain from ancestors to future descendants. Death finished life, and the individual person was at peace, but death did not sever the relationship between the deceased and the living. The spirit of the corpse in its grave could be beneficial to the living when rituals were properly performed (Kuhn 2009: 112). It is possible to argue that artists like Xu Bing, who came from a literate academic family and was sent to the countryside during the Cultural Revolution (mostly being asked to write revolutionary slogans and other communications), sought a way of re-connecting his work to that of earlier artists, be they calligraphic masters or writers of revolutionary slogans. Xu Bing probably felt the need to reposition his work in the chain of ancestral artists and future descendant artists. Both Xu Bing and Gu Wenda as males who benefitted from good education and highly literate ancestors could place themselves within this chain of literati/artists with relative ease. The situation for Chinese women artists is more complex since they cannot easily connect themselves to this very male-oriented and patriarchal tradition.

The examination system was never open to women. Some Chinese women may have been highly educated, but women were not allowed to enter the examination system or hold office in imperial China. While there are several famous examples of Chinese women who were highly educated – there is evidence and some surviving poems, drawings and paintings by women of
the elite – such examples are very exceptional. Most women, even from the literate elite, were illiterate. Chinese society was, and many will argue still is, patriarchal. Hence, for a woman artist to be visible and for her works to be perceived as contemporary art is more problematic.

Lo could not easily position her artwork as part of a chain between ancestors and descendants. Growing up in Hong Kong she was exposed to both Chinese and western cultures, yet could not easily position her artwork in either. In what follows, I will present her journey through her interaction with nüshu in attempting to position herself as an artist following in ancestral tradition and her artworks in the context of a tradition. I shall argue that her work is Chinese, not because of ethnicity or geography but because her work is motivated by a form of Confucian filial and humanist ethics that in this article I present as ‘Chineseness’.

ANOTHER TRADITION OF WRITING: THE WOMEN OF NÜSHU

In her earlier works Lo was interested in exposing Chinese hanzi script as a system that imposed gender stereotypes and thus questioning her own position within this tradition. In her later work she is looking at nüshu as an alternative literary and artistic tradition developed by women. In so doing she can reposition her own work within another narrative of ancestors and within a literate cultural chain from which as a woman she is not excluded: that of literate nüshu women. Moreover, while the tradition of literati/artist

Figure 4: Song of Nüshu in nüshu script, written by Hu Ci-zhu (1905–1976) in the mid-1950s, adapted writing by Lo Yuen-yi.
was exclusive – it was a mark of belonging to the elite – *nüshu* was inclusive, it did not exclude those who were illiterate in *nüshu* but sought forms of inclusion.

Lo’s interest in the tradition of calligraphy and Chinese characters as symbols of gender exclusion led her to an exploration of another form of writing, that of *nüshu* (literally, female writing), which was practiced by rural women in the remote Jingyong prefecture in Hunan province. This is a very different script from the official *hanzi* characters, which comprises some tens of thousands of characters. The *Nüshu* script is phonetic and so far some 2000 ‘characters’ have been identified that phonetically transcribe the local Chengguan vernacular language. Unlike the square characters of *hanzi*, the *nüshu* script takes the form of rhombus-shaped characters. *Nüshu* was always accompanied by *nüge* (literally, female song); both were used almost exclusively by women and the practice of both *nüge* and *nüshu* formed part of a series of ritual/traditional practices that women performed. As Lo notes, writings in *nüshu* are found on papers, paper fans and booklets. Some texts are written or embroidered on fabrics. The texts include accounts of historical events, prayers, folk songs, correspondences with female friends, wedding missives, biographies and autobiographies. However, few artefacts survived; not only are the materials (paper and textile) fragile the custom of burning or burying the artefacts when the owner died so that the owner could keep chanting and writing in her afterlife meant that very few examples survive (Lo 2014: 398–99).

Rural women in the region married outside their village; the distance and their new responsibilities meant that visiting their natal village was difficult, if not impossible. In a social structure were filial duties would
place the new wife in a position of exclusively attending to her husband and his parents until at least the birth of a male son, yet always relying on their support, life was not always easy. The practice of \textit{nushu} and \textit{nige} allowed women to develop ‘sisterhood’ relations within their natal village that could later develop into cross-village exchanges. Fei-Wen Liu suggests that \textit{nushu} practices were tightly woven into women’s major life events. Before marriage, young girls made sisterhood pacts and wrote \textit{nushu} letters to each other. As their wedding approached brides performed weeping laments over their separation from their natal village, family and friends. Their peers and female relatives prepared \textit{nushu} wedding texts (sanzhaoshu) to present as bridal gifts. After marriage, women relied on \textit{nushu} as a source of personal strength during times of vulnerability or lack of male support (Fei-Wen Liu 2004: 253). The existing texts also suggest that much attention was put into the format of the texts and that a tradition of what different ‘genres’ could do and how each should be written. While the texts are not generally viewed as ‘literature’, they do bare much of the characteristics of literature, albeit written by women in a script that is not the one used by the official elite.

While literacy in \textit{hanzi} characters and classical texts was the distinguishing factor of the elite, the boundaries between literate and illiterate are not clear cut in \textit{nushu}. As Fei-Wen Liu notes, although \textit{nushu} is a written form, it must also be performed by singing or chanting, and this makes written \textit{nushu} accessible to script-illiterate women. Likewise, oral \textit{nige} can be transcribed into \textit{nushu} text (Fei-Wen Liu 2001: 1052). There is evidence, Fei-Wen notes, of women asking \textit{nushu}-literate women to transcribe their \textit{nige} biography into \textit{nushu}. There is also evidence that wedding missive texts (sanzhaoshu), which were presented to the bride and were meant to be composed by natal female associates and performed by her affinal village women, required to be transcribed into \textit{nushu} in order to be given as a text. However, if they were not proficient in \textit{nushu}, they asked a \textit{nushu} expert for help. There is also evidence that \textit{nushu} experts were known in the community and that they have been helping other women to transcribe \textit{nige} into \textit{nushu}. As such, \textit{nushu} is not elitist in the way that literacy and the practice of calligraphy operated in imperial China. There is evidence that \textit{nushu} script was known outside the region in the 1950s, that is, after the 1949 Communist
Revolution. However, despite its rural/peasant practitioners and despite its inclusivity, Fei-Wen notes that during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), its practice was denounced as ‘witch script’ and its users portrayed as witches. The Hanzi script was simplified and widely taught. Hence, as village practices changed under the communist regime and education (including literacy in hanzi) became available to all (male and female), the practice of both nüshu and nüge was abandoned.

In her introduction to *She is a Fragment and a Whole* (2014), Lo presents her interest in nüshu taking shape only once she had read Luce Irigaray. She presents western feminist philosophy as the motivation of her work. However, as I show below, I shall be suggesting that a more fundamental ‘Chineseness’ was also at play.

Rosenlee argues in her book *Confucianism and Women a Philosophical Interpretation* (2006) that Confucianism (Ru) should be re-read in the light of historical practices in an attempt to explain what she sees as a the gap between Confucian moral teaching and the historical reality of gender oppression in Imperial China with its implications for cultural traditions that still govern Chinese social and political life today. For Rosenlee, filial hierarchy belongs together with the use of Confucianism as an instrument for government. However, filial relations can only be justified through an ethical approach. Hence, she traces the meaning of Confucianism as Ru back in history. In so doing she shows that while Confucianism as Ru developed to serve different rulers in slightly different ways, filial duties established a patriarchal, familial social hierarchy that did not change radically over time. However, she argues,

Confucianism should not be reduced to a set of hierarchical kinship and rigid gender roles, since in this reductionism one overlooks the dynamic aspect of Confucianism, whose ethical theory of ren 仁 as well as its emphasis on the lifelong project of self-cultivation and maintaining proper relations, at least at the theoretical level, are akin to the feminist ethic [...] and its socially constructed self as a web of relations.

(Rosenlee 2006: 16)

Through her historical analysis she shows that the meaning of Ru has changed over time. However, the connection to burial and mourning rituals by a class of learned people is one aspect of its historical meaning. Another is the civil ideal of humane governance with emphasis on reciprocal relations of obligation, such as between kinship relations as well as ruler and subject. Rosenlee’s argument is that while Ru is gendered Ren is not.

The concept of a person (Ren), she argues, is an ethical category defined by one’s practical achievements, instead of being defined by male gender traits. However, she goes on to argue,

in Confucianism, the self is never seen as an isolated, autonomous individual whose essential qualities and intellectual capacities are bestowed from without and possessed solely within. Instead, a person is always a person situated in a social context; a person qua person is a self-in-relation. For a person without social relation is also a person without humanity.

(Rosenlee 2006: 39)
Rosenlee is looking for a way in which she can separate that which is problematic for western thought today from that which easily accords with western values. Problematic as this might be, there is no denying that a concept similar to western humanism is embedded within Confucianism and that humanism includes an ethical/moral expectation. The Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) attempted to show Confucianism as a form of Renaissance humanism at the end of the sixteenth century. While Roselee does not fully develop the relationship between filiality and the concept of Ren, in places her argument points in this direction. Lo’s work does bring the two together, in order to overcome the difficulty faced by Chinese women artists who would otherwise remain invisible.

Lo made three visits to the region of nüshu between 1998 and 2003. During these visits she spent time with the women and especially with the very few remaining elderly women who were willing to share their memories of days when both nüshu and nüge were practised. Lo photographed the women often holding nüshu items and she recorded their chants (nüge). Lo’s photograph of Yang Huan-yi stepping out of the house with a nüshu booklet in her right hand is part of a series of photographs and video’s recording nüshu women in the region practising both nüshu and nüge.

Lo’s work An (In)Visible Letter (2013) returns to the fourteen Chinese hanzi characters used in Mapping (1998) where the female radical is essential to the meaning of the character. However, here we have fourteen personal letters dedicated to the nüshu women who once practised nüshu and nüge. Each hanzi character forms the title of a personal letter and its meaning is utilized in the

Figure 8: Yang Huan-yi stepping out of the house with a booklet in her right hand, photographed by Lo Yuen-yi, Yangjia Village, Shangjiangxu Township (1998).
letter that follows. The work is composed of personal letters to the oldest
woman Lo met in the region who still remembered niSHU and was able to
recite niSHU texts (niGE). Lo’s artistic medium here is not limited to the visual
or even the oral; the practice is of drawing, but drawings that include writing –
not unlike traditional Chinese literati drawings that often included a poem.

Readings translated niSHU texts it seems that often niSHU writings
follow a specific literary structure and most seem to be written in rhyme.
Most were written in the first person singular and the narrative seems to be
one commemorating times that have gone past or circumstances that are
no longer. Sentiments of longing and lamenting are common. Many of Lo’s
letters are accompanied by a single visual work: a photograph of a person,
an object or a three-dimensional artwork to commemorate the women of
niSHU.

The first letter in An (In)Visible Letter (2013) starts with the character of
yan, translated as ‘charming, fascinating, captivating, the captivating smile of
a woman, rich crimson and tender green’ (Lo 2013: 689). The letter is address-
ing ‘The respectable Granny Yang’. The image accompanying it is of Yang
Huan-Yi (1905–2004). The woman is portrayed smiling with an apron embroi-
dered in niSHU. The letter recollects their meeting and it mentions that Yang’s
niSHU chanting (niGE) was hoarse and accompanied by pumping water.

I repeat here a short section from Lo’s letter:

You are always in my thoughts. I have written about you in my writ-
ing, I have appropriated your artefacts in my drawing and the extensive
creative work. I have shared your chanting with a wide range of people,
young and old, male and female, across cultures and disciplines.
(Lo 2013: 689)

Here is an example of a translated niSHU text:

Holding a pen, I write with double-flowing tears
Write to comfort my sister, anxiously.

(Fei-Wen Liu 2004: 263)

It is possible to see that Lo’s text seeks to follow some of the formal structure
of some niSHU texts and in so doing continuing the chain of filial relationships.

Another letter by Lo is under the character of Di, translated as ‘a younger
sister, wife of a younger brother’. Yuenyi writes,

You know, Granny, a name is essential to a person. We are given a
name when we are born. A name is the representation of a persona …
(Lo 2013: 690)

This letter is accompanied by a photograph of Lo’s drawing entitled Utterances
(1999).

The last letter relates back to the first. The letter is under the character
Yuan, which is translated as ‘a beauty, beautiful, your daughter, a famous
beauty, talented and beautiful’. Here Lo writes,

Granny, I made several drawings since I last visited you. With the
insight of your practice of niSHU …
(Lo 2013: 704)
Lo then quotes a transcribed nüge probably based on a nüshu recitation by Yang:

Inside you, I gradually shape / am shaped
what shape is it I ask
the flowing water
carries me away
I once thought I was water
the water that carries me away
is no longer pure
but never is still

(Lo 2013: 704)

This quotation in the last letter returns to the mention of water in the first letter where the sound of pumping water in the village echoed in the hoarse voice of the woman reciting nüshu. Time has passed like the flow of the water ... The letter concludes with the words ‘With respect, a humble child’ (Lo 2013: 704).

Earlier I argued that in Confucianism – especially in the Chinese classical texts such as The highest Order of Cultivation (Ta Hsueh) and On the Practice of the Mean (Chung Yang) – the production of meaning is radically situated. Ames offers the following translation of a passage from the letter that makes use of the term ‘creativity’ (other translations are more Kantian and emphasize ‘agency’). Here is how Ames translates section 25 of On the Practice of the Mean:
Creativity (Cheng) is self-realising (zicheng), and its way (dao) is self-advancing (zidao). ‘Creativity’ references anything (wu) taken from its beginning to its end, and without this creativity, there are no things or events. It is thus that, for exemplary persons (junzi) it is creativity that is prized. But, creativity is not simply the self-realising of one’s own person; it is what realises other things as well. Realising oneself is becoming consummate in one’s conduct (ren); realising other things is exercising wisdom in realising one’s world (zhi).

(Ames in Tsao 2011: 41)

The passage, even in this translation, is somewhat opaque but in the context of several texts and applying it to Lo’s work, it is possible to show, as Ames does, that in Confucianism all creativity is construed as situated and radically embedded: creating oneself and creating one’s world are coterminous. However, there is more than simply ‘realising oneself’ and ‘one’s world’. Goodness, as Ames points out,

is not the purity of one’s individual soul, but emerges first and foremost as a focal achievement in one’s aggregating conduct in one’s role as this daughter and this sibling and this wife, and then derivatively and abstractly, it is interpreted as a personal quality.

(Ames et al. 2001: 43)

In her letters to individual women of nüshu, Lo has shifted the practice/tradition to give it a more abstract status, that of art. In so doing, she is presenting the work of the women as art and in continuing to engage in it she is also fashioning it as a living tradition and herself as an ascendent and practitioner of the practice/tradition. She becomes a Chinese woman artist who can be placed within this genealogy. At the same time, she is also practising the Confucian ethics that underlie the tradition of nüshu: it is a practice governed by the ethics of filial piety. It was ‘born’ in response to the restrictions it imposed on women, and at the same time, it made the practice of communication between the women through nüshu possible.

If we accept Confucianism as a form of ‘Chineseness’, then the work of Lo as I have showed above might be seen as working within Confucianist ethics, where a form of humanism is the guiding ethical demand. However, unlike western humanism, which led to the development of concepts such as autonomy, Confucian humanism is relational and as such inseparable from filiality. Lo’s focus in her later work moved to a specific practice of writing, not that of the well-known calligrapher artists but to a practice of writing by women in rural Hunan province. Unlike the work of the literati, which became highly prized and as it continued to circulate gained further value, the work of the women in the nüshu region was almost forgotten. In Confucianism, as Clunas notes, the canonical ‘Five Relationships’ are as follows: ruler–minister, father–son, elder brother–younger brother, husband–wife and friend–friend. The work of the women of nüshu was circulated between women friends and as such belongs outside the five categories above. They could not gain greater recognition; the works were always understood as personal, and hence they were either buried or burnt with the deceased.

Lo’s practice seeks to bring to light this heritage and in the process also reposition her own identity as a female Chinese practising artist. However, this can only gain the status of heritage and recognition if it can circulate
beyond the women of nüshu. Lo’s artistic practice may also have the potential of giving a voice that could be heard, to the women who even when they were able to write and communicate were only able to do so under conditions that did not allow their voice to be heard. As Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty point out, ‘we are not outside of politics when we are dispossessed’ (Butler and Spivak 2007: 5). The dispossessed voice is not heard, until such time as their voice is allowed/accepted to be heard – the voice needs to be heard as the voice of a human being and a member of a community of human beings.

Heidegger’s argument in *What is Thinking* ends up with the claim that thinking and thanking are related – thinking arises as a gift. Derrida develops this argument by pointing out the relationship between gift and obligation. Derrida adopts Levinas’ interpretation of the relationship between gift, obligation and ethics. From my perspective, aspects of Confucianism could be seen to be closely related to both Heidegger and Derrida’s thought and ethics. The moral tone in some interpretations of Confucianism is always with an emphasis on social relations and social obligations, which are made visible in the work of Lo in her negotiation between cultures and ethics.

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