

Queer Match of Literary Icons: Curtains up for Ma Liang's "Pig-head Lover" of the "Book of Taboo" Series¹

Eva Aggeklint

(independent scholar)

Abstract:

Conceptual Chinese photography offers a platform where threads of time and space can be weaved into a new colourful and surreal fabric of mixed and internationalized appearances, so called hybrids. This essay takes Ma Liang's (Maleonn b.1972) conceptual artwork "Pig-head Lover" of his "Book of Taboo" (2006—2007) series as a case study to discuss problems of interpretation, when it comes to hybridized works of art. Through the activation of Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space," an infinite location of connotations concerning signs, symbols and thought systems is opened up. *Foreign elements*, i.e signs foreign to the Chinese cultural context, appeal to our immediate interest and start the interpretational efforts. The initial *foreign element* of "Pig-head Lover" would be the elaborate white collar (a so-called cartwheel ruff) of the white-clad and sophisticated pale lady, central to the picture. The artwork "Pig-head Lover" invites us to a scene in which two vaguely recognized fictive personas are spotted, i.e the signs of Queen Elizabeth I as the mythical "Virgin Queen" and the pig "Piggy" (Zhu Bajie)" of the epic novel *Journey to the West*. How hybridized literary icons of the same time period but from two separate cultural spheres and narratives are transformed and mixed to visualize taboo issues of queer China of the 2000s will be discussed. When interpreting "Pig-head Lover" in its "Third Space" location it becomes clear that the subtle likenesses to world literature icons presents us with an allegory — an allegory that distorts the normative mirror of representation, indeed offering contemporary Chinese art as an important agent for shaping a more humane future for individuals in China. It will be argued that it is first when interpreting a work of art like Ma's in its hybrid form that the unknown becomes known.

1 This is a revised and enlarged version of a chapter from my doctoral thesis, "*Bridal Couples: On Hybridity in Conceptual Chinese Photography, 1995-2009*, Stockholm University, 2013.

Keywords: Ma Liang, avant-garde photography, conceptual Chinese photography, *Journey to the West*, allegory, Zhu Bajie, Pigsy, Virgin Queen

Introduction

This essay was inspired by a growing curiosity about contemporary Chinese art, which since the early 1990s has attracted much attention internationally through exhibitions, books and articles. Contemporary Chinese works of art have further sold for enormous sums at international auctions, which makes one wonder what it is in them that attracts such attention and triggers such high prices. A deeper concern of this essay is to discuss how works of art with mixed appearances, visually crossing cultural borders, may produce meaning. The interpretive context forms the starting point for the ensuing discussions, since *hybrids* with their complex visual surfaces create perceptive nervousness and are more difficult to understand. Due to the uncertainty about the connections between various lines of thoughts, a work of art like Ma Liang's 马良 (also called Maleonn, b. 1972) "Pig-head Lover" (Zhutou airen 猪头爱人) of the "Book of Taboo" (Jinji zhi shu 禁忌) series.



Figure 1: Ma Liang 马良 Maleonn (b. 1972), "Pig-head Lover" (Zhutou airen 猪头爱人 2006-2007) of the "Book of Taboo" (Jinji zhi shu 禁忌之书) series.

之书) series proves to be a good case study. The odd match of a vulgar pig and a sophisticated lady inspired the present essay since the match clearly alludes to some kind of critique. At the same time it emphasises problems of interpretation *per se*. How may a contemporary Chinese work of art like Ma's, with very subtle likenesses to important icons of old fantastic tales, reveal something about modern China and its new social realities?

Pig-head Lover visually presents us with a space of a filthy backyard invaded by rats, running around the feet of an ill-matched couple. A white-clad Asian looking woman, wearing a white European cartwheel ruff, stands together with a semi-naked half-pig, half-human figure. The woman's stiff and armoured posture is contrasted with the more sensual and voluptuous body of the pig. Her icy, pale and serious countenance makes her look representative whereas the pig's naked breast, modern flowery shirt and pink glasses rather connote the vulgar. Colourful soap bubbles enhance the volatile feeling of the scene. The time we are invited to interact with is rather conspicuous. For one thing we are in a backyard of our modern time. But since there is something oddly familiar about the two characters posing at the centre of the scene, leading us back in history, we may assume that we are at the same time invited to another time spectrum — presumably the sixteenth century.

When observing the scene in its hybrid form a particular interpretive context is being activated, i.e Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space. By extension the articulation of a proposed fragmentation, typical for conceptual arts, links together narrative threads from different time and space settings. This opens up possibilities of interpretations that otherwise would not have been possible to reach. By embracing what we actually see on the surface, i.e some sort of recreation of two loved and well-known sixteenth-century icons, a new picture evolves as we go deeper into the analysis.

In its local context, a conceptual Chinese work of art may provide insights into the artist's reflections on life in general, history, patterns of tradition contra new life styles. In its global Third Space locality, the work of art, is engendered in the spaces of the gallery, the market and the academic sphere (both the Eastern and the Western) and is thereby in touch with arts and narratives from all times and all places. Further, this author understands the Third Space concept of *foreign element* as a trigger of interest, indeed functioning as an emotional trigger of interest in the same way as Roland Barthes semiotic concept(s) of *punctum* (and *studium*).² However the *foreign element* implied is here connected to something foreign to

2 For a deeper insight into Roland Barthes' ideas on the semiotic concepts of *Punctum* and *Studium* see *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (tr. to English by Richard Howard) (1980; New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

the Chinese cultural context, not necessarily elsewhere in the world. In Ma Liang's "Pig-head Lover" the eye-catching *foreign element* would be the woman's white European cartwheel ruff (oftentimes associated with Elizabethan England), which will lead us forward in the analysis. The particular relationships between the signs of the local (domestic elements) and the signs of the global (foreign elements) are of interest here and a focal point for the discussion.

As conceptual Chinese art is often constructed according to an internationalized postmodern approach characterized by its fragmentedness it is possible to assume that this scene is playing with interrelations between foreign and domestic elements, here understood as signs of the two iconic personas Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603) as the Virgin Queen and Zhu Bajie 猪八戒 (Pigsy) of the epic Ming-dynasty novel *Xiyouji* 西游记 (Journey to the West), written by Wu Cheng'en 吴承恩 (c. 1500-1582). The question is what this particular match between two literary icons of two separate cultural spheres of the sixteenth century may tell us about Chinese contemporary times?

Introducing Ma Liang and His Conceptual World

Ma Liang was born in Shanghai in 1972 and grew up as the son of the head of the Shanghai Opera and a famous actress working with the Shanghai Youth Theatre (now called the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre). The Shanghai Youth Theatre was the first domestic theatre to play Western classical drama after the Cultural Revolution and the earliest to play Shakespeare dramas. Growing up among actors in an environment among props and costumes for the scene has certainly set the tone for Ma's many photographic works of art. Ma usually fabricates and constructs smaller scenes in his studio; sometimes he is inspired by existing icons, like for example Superman, but usually redefines and refines his ideas until he comes up with a more imaginative idea. Some of his works are shot outdoors, in backyards or on rooftops, or in visually spectacular quarters in Shanghai. The artist spends a lot of time preparing his scenes also when it comes to producing the most appropriate light to express the right mood.³

The artist has further declared a particular interest in the relationship between space and time and often completes his series with a poem, in accordance to the tradition of Chinese painting. Ma thus finds his inspiration in both the Chinese and the Western spheres; oftentimes in drama and film (he used to work as advertising film director before starting out as a photographic artist in 2004) and fantastic tales

3 Ma Liang 马良, 2016. Interview by Eva Aggeklint. July 4. In the artist's studio, Shanghai. See also Ma Liang, "The Fragment of Memories and Dreams" in *Maleonn* (Hong Kong: Voutu, 2013), 334.

as well as in (Western) medieval epics. One of his photographic series is entitled “A Midsummer Night's Dream”.⁴ What is of particular interest to this discussion is that the characteristics of an *epic* story is that it tends to highlight cultural norms and defines or calls into question cultural values, particularly as they relate to heroism. The *epic hero* indeed performs deeds and exemplifies certain morals that are highly valued by the society where the *epic* originates from. Many *epic heroes* are therefore recurring characters in the legends of their native culture.⁵

Ma's “Book of Taboo” (2006-2007) is a series of eight independent scenes of which “Pig-head Lover” is the second.⁶ The series is introduced with a poem in which many contrasts such as fake and real, sadness and joy, life and death, illusion and truth add to the feeling of disorientation, loneliness and happiness that we are all confronted with in a lifetime. The poem implies that “Book of Taboo” as a series sets up an implicit confrontation, creating a detachment between text and reality. Furthermore, the book itself seems to be a metaphor of life leaving behind the feeling that we should be better at enjoying the moment rather than trying to peep into the future and figure out how it all will end.

First page, life: next page, death; first page, happiness; next page, [suffering]

First page, growing up; next page, growing old; first page, departure; next page [returning home]

First page, illusion; next page, truth; first page, song of praise; next page, sentence of trial.

First page, freedom, next page, restriction; first page, carnival; next page, long solitude after carnival

You are crying; poet; why are you crying?

You shouldn't peep at life — the book full of sadness and joy

For our lives

一页是生; 一页是死; 一页是欢乐; 下一页就是痛苦

一页是成长; 一页是衰老; 一页是出发; 下一页就是归宿

一页是幻觉; 一页是真相; 一页是颂歌; 下一页是判决书

一页是笃信; 一页是怀疑; 一页是建立; 下一页是颠覆

一页是自由; 一页是束缚; 一页是狂欢; 下一页是狂欢后没长的孤独

4 Ibid.

5 Britannica Academic, s.v. “Epic,” accessed September 16, 2017, <http://academic.eb.com.ezp.sub.su.se/levels/collegiate/article/epic/110448>.

6 In the book Ma Liang 马良 *Maleonn* (Hongkong: Voutou, 2013) the series ‘Book of Taboo’ consists of ten scenes, which means that the series was completed with two more images at a later stage.

你哭了; 诗人; 你为什么哭?
你不该偷看生命 这本悲欣交集的书
就我们的生活⁷

The eight photographic scenes of the series are all shot in obscure urban milieus; both outdoors and indoors. The titles of the separate scenes are:

- 1) *Dream with Carps* (Meng sui liyu qu 梦随鲤鱼去)
- 2) *Pig-head Lover* (Zhutou airen 猪头爱人)
- 3) *Life and Death like Running Water* (Shengsi caoshui 生死漕水)
- 4) *Lonely Favorite* (Gudu de hongren 孤独的红人)
- 5) *Piano Player without Fingers* (Meiyou shouzhi de gangqinjia 没有手指的钢琴家)
- 6) *Chubby Birdman* (Xiaopang niaoren 小胖鸟人)
- 7) *Boy with Fire Extinguisher* (Miehuo shaonian 灭火少年)
- 8) *Superman Husband and Wife* (Chaoren fufu 超人夫妇)

Young women, men and animals (in the form of animated animals, plastic toys or masks) are somehow intermingled in the eight scenes. Individuals perform tasks in lonesome places; oftentimes a surreal twist is added to the scene. An example is the first scene entitled *Dream with Carps* (Meng sui liyu qu 梦随鲤鱼去) in which a young woman is setting four black carp fish free from the pages of a book, which is turned upside down.

Although the eight scenes in the series are all coloured by the same kind of surreal mood, set in empty spaces (thus forming a series); each and every photographic scene should at the same time be understood as eight independent realities, not otherwise connected. According to this way of understanding the series, every single scene of “Book of Taboo” may first be read as part of the series as a whole thus introducing happiness and sadness in our lives; but at the same time every single scene belongs to its own specific universe and context. What kind of contexts and what sort of questions each scene are about would need to be further analysed for an in-depth answer.

The amalgamation of mixed fragments of cultural expressions from both near and afar makes most of the scenes mind twisting. As Ma’s art bear references to both Chinese and Western culture, each scene of the “Book of Taboo” series may be analysed as a visual hybrid. Even so, “Pig-head Lover”, in focus here, is the only

7 Ma Liang 马良 *Maleonn*, 67.

work in the series that introduces subtle similarities to very particular icons of loved literary tales; moreover icons that belong to separate cultural spheres. Pig-head Lover is furthermore the only image in the series that introduces a very odd match of a couple; giving subtle associations to bridal portraiture, even.

The bridal couple in arts has in later years shown to be a tendency in conceptual Chinese photography, that started out as a performance entitled “To Marry a Mule” (Qu tou luozi 娶头骡子) by the artist Wang Jin 王晋 (b. 1962) in 1995. Since then many Chinese artists have made use of the concept of the bridal couple to discuss questions of personal identity and modernity as well as socio-economic development and new trends in urban China. Thus apart from being an image in a series of taboo issues, “Zhutou airen” 猪头爱人, “Pig-head Lover” or “Pig-head Husband,” may also belong to the category of images, in which the question of a perfect match is scrutinized thoroughly. Being an ardent collector of bridal portraits Ma has himself articulated a special interest in historical portraiture, which would speak for an interpretation dealing with how couples are matched in marriage in China’s modern times.⁸

Photography and Personal Identity

The medium of photography has indeed proved to be an ideal locale for expressing personal identity in the arts. In the mid-1990s, many Chinese artists in the East Village in Beijing began to direct and/or make their own photographic works of art. Most photographers of the 1990s were still auto-didacts or originally trained as painters or graphic artists; they have therefore been referred to as *shiyansheyingshi* 实验摄影家 (experimental photographers).⁹ During this period, artists were still rather poor and the cameras in use were simple automatic ones.¹⁰ In 1995, Liu Zheng 刘郑 (b. 1969), for example, started to work on a documentation plan that was to visualise his personal understanding of China. Liu developed

8 Eva Aggeklint, “*Bridal Couples*”: *On Hybridity in Conceptual Chinese Photography, 1995–2009* (PhD dissertation, Stockholm University, 2013).

9 Wu Hung, “Intersections: An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Photography and Oil Painting,” in *Making History: Wu Hung on Contemporary Art* (Hong Kong: Time Zone 8, 2008), 135. See also Zhu Qi, “1990s Conceptual Art and Artistic Conceptualization,” in *The First Guangzhou Triennial - Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)*, eds. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng and Feng Boyi (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 20-27.

10 Karen Smith, “Zero to Infinity: The Nascence of Photography in Contemporary Chinese Art of the 1990s,” in *The First Guangzhou Triennial - Reinterpretation: A Decade of Experimental Chinese Art (1990-2000)*, eds. Wu Hung, Wang Huangsheng and Feng Boyi (Guangzhou: Guangdong Museum of Art, 2002), 35-36.

a new approach to portraying marginalized identities, one that differed from those produced by the Chinese documentary photographers of the 1980s. This artist's large photographic portraits explored, according to Chinese standards, less attractive sides of China and its people.¹¹ During this period Chinese society was also becoming more globalized. The market economy transformed the country into an urbanized, mass-consumer society; demolition made ruins out of many traditional buildings and there were great changes in lifestyles. Artists like Rong Rong 荣荣, Zhan Wang 展望, Sui Jianguo 隋建国 as well as many others were intrigued by their surroundings and documented the new conditions of the city in their art. Expressions of foreign culture as exposed in China, also became of special concern to artists behind the lens.¹²

Another important factor in the development of a more expressive photography was the launch of independent experimental art publications that predominantly circulated within the art community. In 1994, the book known as *Heipishu* 黑皮书 (The Book with the Black Cover), later followed by *Baipishu* 白皮书 (The Book with the White Cover) and *Huipishu* 灰皮书 (The Book with the Grey Cover), introduced modern Chinese and Western photography as a means for Chinese artists to get inspiration and develop new ideas. The new generation of Chinese experimental artists like for example Qiu Zhijie 邱志杰 (b. 1969) and Zheng Guogu 郑国谷 (b. 1970) and several American artists such as Jeff Koons, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman, were also show-cased and discussed in these books.¹³

11 Wu Hung, "Photographing Deformity: Liu Zheng and His Photo Series 'My Countrymen'" in *Public Culture*, volume 13, number 3, (Fall 2001), 402. See also Yang Shihu 杨时煦, "Zhongguo guannian sheying shi nian qibu 中国观念摄影十年起步 [Chinese Conceptual Photography's Progression in the Past 10 Years]," in *Zhongguo xinwen zhouban* 中国新闻周刊 [China News Weekly], no. 26 (2007), 72—74.

12 Zhang Zhaohui, "Globalization, Urbanization, and New Chinese Art," in *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, November Issue (2002), 44—54; Gu Zheng 顾铮, "Chengshi Zhongguo," in *Xiandaixing de di liu zhang miankong* (The Sixth Face of Modernity) 24-27; Gu Zheng, *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, 10-11. See also Wu Hong, "Guoqu yu weilai zhi jian" (Between Past and Future), 135. Available in English in Wu Hung, "Between Past and Future," in *Making History*, 103; Wu Hung "Between Past and Future" in *Between Past and Future: New Photography and Video From China*, 21.

13 The Book with Grey Cover was published in 1997. The publication is filled with black and white photographs produced by Chinese up-and-coming photographers, like Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957) himself, Zheng Guogu and Qiu Zhijie just to mention a few. These avant-garde publications are difficult to obtain and my copy was bought in 798 for the price of 700 yuan through a contact under the table. Ai Weiwei's photographs in which he gives the finger at Tiananmen gate introduce the book. Ai Weiwei *Hui pi shu* 灰皮书 [The Book with the Grey Cover] (Beijing: Minjian yishu chubanshe, 1997). See also Shi Zhimin 石志民, "Zhongguo guannian sheying de jingzi" 中国观念摄影的镜子 [Chinese Conceptual Photography Through the Lens], in *Zhejiang Huabao* 浙江画报 (Zhejiang Pictorial), no.02 (2011), 33.



Figure 2: Qiu Zhijie, Good series, 1998.

The appearance of Rong Rong's and Liu Zheng's independent serial *Xin sheying* 新摄影 (New Photo) in 1996 was an important step in the development and spread of Chinese photography. The journal showed the newest photographic trends in China. *Guannian* 观念 (concept) was in this journal observed to have entered Chinese photography; this seems to be the first time the term *guannian* appears in the context of photography and came to play an important role to artists interested in developing idea-driven works of art.¹⁴ These independent photographic magazines were rare and they introduced documentary experimental tendencies in China in a large format.

14 *Xin sheying* 新摄影 (New Photo), no. 1 (1996), 1; *Xin sheying* 新摄影 (New Photo), no. 3 (1997), 1 in Wu Hung and Zhang Li. *Xin sheying* was published in Beijing, but not by a publishing house. Originally Rong Rong and Liu Zheng used a copy machine and bound the four large format magazines themselves and distributed them to photographers and artists within the art community. In 2007 the exhibition *Newphoto: 10 Years* inaugurated Rong Rong's and Inri's photographic art centre Three Shadows and the magazines were published in a limited edition edited by Wu Hung and Zhang Li. Zhong Linchun 钟林春, the former Library Director at Three Shadows Art Photography Centre. E-mail message to the author. March 7, 2013. For more information see Wu Hung and Zhang Li, *New Photo 10 Years* (Beijing: Three Shadows Press Ltd, 2007), 9–18.

Many of the experimental artists of the late 1990s also developed a dialogue between the past and the present by exploring old photographs in the wake of what has been called the “old photo craze,” partly caused by the publication of the book series *Lao Zhaopian* 老照片 (Old Photos) in 1996-1997. This series became an instant best-seller and more than 1.2 million copies of the first four volumes were sold between October 1996 and December 1997.¹⁵

Memorabilia from China’s more recent past, such as all kinds of old photographs but also old Shanghai advertisements and posters, so-called *yuefenpai* 月份牌, became highly appreciated since most people thought that these fragile objects had been destroyed during the political campaign of *Po si jiu* 破四旧 (Destroy the four olds) during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁶ Photography of the late 1990s therefore became intertextual by way of presenting a close dialogue with the past. How the past was represented in old photographs and other traditional objects became a hype. Chinese photography’s influence on artistic expression resulted in people being arranged in the poses of heroic figures of the close past. A good example is Qiu Zhijie’s photographic series “Good” (Hao 好) of 1998, in which the famous trio of the farmer/soldier/worker from posters of the Cultural Revolution have been switched. Three modern men wearing suits are here gesturing dramatically with umbrellas instead of holding the little red book in their hands, which points at the

15 Wu Hong, “‘Lao zhaopian re’ yu dangdai yishu: jingying yu liuxing de xieshang” 老照片热与当代艺术：精英与流行的协商 (“The Old Photo Craze’ and Contemporary Chinese Art: [A Discussion on Essence and Trends],” in *Zuopin yu zhanchang: Wu Hong lun Zhongguo dangdai yishu* 作品于展场：巫鸿论中国当代艺术 (Art and Exhibition: Wu Hong on Contemporary Chinese Art) (Guangzhou: Lingnan meishu chubanshe, 2005), 162. Available in English in Wu Hung, “‘The Old Photo Craze’ in Contemporary Chinese Art,” in *Making History*, 119. See also Wu Hung, “Intersections: An Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Photography and Oil Painting,” 144.

16 This campaign was a violent confrontation with old culture, old ideas, old customs and old habits. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was aimed at, once and for all, destroying the old society and replacing it with a new socialist order led by the generation that was born and raised under the communist system. See for example Roderick Macfarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, “Eliminating the ‘Four Olds,’” in *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2008), 113–116. For more information and illustrations of calendar posters see, for example, *20 shiji Zhongguo pingmian sheji wenxian ji* 20 世纪中国平面设计文献集 (Documentary of the 20th Century Chinese Graphic Design), eds. Chen Xiangbo and Xu Ping (Nanning: Guangxi meishu chubanshe, 2012); *Minguo shangye meishushi* 民国商业美术史 [Commercial Art History of the Republic], ed. Lin Jiazi (Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe, 2008); *Zhui meng yang qing: Yuefenpai, xinnian hua zhan hua ji* 追梦扬清：月份牌新年画展画集 [Tracing the Dream—Spreading Clarity: An Anthology of Yuefenpai and New Year Pictures], ed. Zhang Jian (Shanghai: Liuhaisu meishuguan, 2012), 1-222. See also, Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 123-126.

artist's critical exploration of the shift of ideological drama — from socialism to consumerism (Figure 2). Other artists still have juxtaposed old portrait photographs with newly taken group photographs of people (identical or nearly identical) to discuss trauma and/or memories of the more recent past.¹⁷ At this time, Japanese artist Yasumasa Morimura's photographic appropriation art became known to Chinese artists, in which Morimura himself posed as iconic figures like Marilyn Monroe and Charlie Chaplin in his role as Adolf Hitler. Digital cameras and computer-manipulated images slowly started to appear in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as well as software programs to post-produce photographic works.¹⁸ When Ma Liang started to work with photographic art in 2004 he predominantly worked with digital cameras and the new techniques that were available at that time.¹⁹ Additionally Ma has since the beginning been idea-driven as an artist in his way of producing imaginative and visually dramatic scenes.

Further Development of the Ideas behind Conceptual Chinese Photography

In the autumn of 1997, a number of artists formed a discussion group to debate theories of Western conceptual art with the aim of developing Chinese art photography further. This group was called Saturday Photo Salon and the artists participating discussed ways to create Chinese experimental photography as an art form with its own language, albeit through the use of Western conceptual ideas and postmodern theories.²⁰ Photographer and photo historian Gu Zheng 顾铮 (b. 1959) has been active in defining the difference between *sheying* 摄影 (photography) and *guannian sheying* 观念摄影 [concept or idea photography]; confining that the most striking difference is that conceptual photographers are usually artists educated at the fine arts institutes. Artists at the time interested in the new *guannian sheying* saw themselves as artists, not photographers. This would be the reason why these artists have had no particular interest in a membership in the China Photographers' Association, the largest organization in the field of Chinese documentary photography. Gu argues that these two types of photography need to be approached

17 "The Cultural Revolution Revisited," in *Chinese Art at the Crossroads: Between Past and Future, Between East and West*, ed. Wu Hung (Hong Kong: New Media Art, 2001), 17—56.

18 Karen Smith, 36. See also Francesca Jordan, "Photography and the Chinese Visual Environment," in *Out of the Red: The New Emerging Generation of Chinese Photographers*, eds. Primo Giovanni Marella et al. (Bologna: Damiani Editore, 2004), 15.

19 Wu Liang, 334-342.

20 Wu Hung and Zhang Li, 12-13.

in very different ways.²¹ The development of *guannian sheying* in China is thus connected to the development of contemporary Chinese art rather than (documentary) photography.

At the beginning of the 2000s, the Chinese official photographic world still preferred words like *jishi* 纪实 (documentary) and *yishu* 艺术 (art) photography to *guannian sheying*.²² This defines the tension between (official) aesthetic documentary photography and the more internationalized expression of *guannian sheying*, of which Ma Liang's work of art is a good example. Furthermore, contemporary Chinese photography as an art form can be described as having developed from photographs documenting performance art into a genre of its own: conceptual art photography. A number of different terms have been applied to what could be called conceptual Chinese photography: *xingwei yishu zhaopian* 行为艺术照片 (performance art photography), *xingwei sheying* (behaviour photography), *moni fangshi* 模拟方式 (appropriation style), *xingwei fangshi* 行为方式 (performance style) and *sheying zhuangzhi* 摄影装置 (photo installation), which may tell us that the term *guannian sheying* has proved to be a little too general to describe all the expressions included.²³ Moreover, a large number of photographs that present concepts in China are in the West referred to either as conceptual, postmodern or staged photographs.²⁴ Sun Ninglong, a scholar at the Beijing Film Institute, has defined these artists as directors rather than photographers and he states that as directors they do not even press the shutter button themselves, but just shout "ok" when the scene looks right, which pinpoints how conceptual photographers work as artists producing art and not as traditional documenting photographers producing documentary photographs.²⁵

Many Chinese photographic artists born in the late 1970s and 1980s have no

21 Gu Zheng, "Guannian sheying yu Zhongguo de sheying" 观念摄影与中国的摄影 (Conceptual Photography and Chinese Photography), in *Zhongguo xingwei sheying* 中国行为摄影 (Behaviour Photograp[h]y of China) (Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2000), 7-10.

22 Gu Chengfeng 顾丞峰, *Guannian yishu de Zhongguo fangshi* 观念艺术的中国方式 [Conceptual Art with Chinese Characteristics], (Changsha: Hunan Meishu Chubanshe, 2002), 76.

23 Sun Ninglong, "Guannian sheying - bei daoyan de jishi" 观念摄影 - 被导演的纪实 [Conceptual Photography - Staged Documentation], in *Xibei Meishu* 西北美术 (North West Fine Arts), no. 2 (2008), 3; Sun Ninglong, "Guannian sheying de qianshi jinsheng," 观念摄影的前世今生 [Conceptual Photography in Retrospect] in *Yishu yu touzi* 艺术与投资 [Art and Investment] No. 11 (2008), 59.

24 Gu Zheng, *Contemporary Chinese Photography*, 11-13.

25 Sun Ninglong, "Guannian sheying - bei daoyan de jishi" [Conceptual Photography - Staged Documentation], 2.

experience of the Cultural Revolution and many were too young to have had any direct involvement in the demonstrations at Tiananmen Square in June, 1989. Rather it is the one-child policy and the new consumer society that have defined their lives. Photography has in their hands become a medium to explore personal (sexual) identities and generational concerns tied to the many new fantastic spaces of present days consumer society.

A Theory of Spaces

The Western theoretical concept of space serves as a starting point for analyzing the rather complex dialogue that is visually apparent in Ma Liang's conceptual artwork. Interaction between cultures is of course not a new phenomenon. There is a long history of cultural import and export between countries in Asia but also between Asia and Europe, along with, for example, the Silk Roads and the East India Company's trade routes. It is well known that objects and ideas from the West (and Japan) have strongly influenced the development of society, politics and art in China since at least the nineteenth century.²⁶ Likewise, Chinese ideas, philosophy and art expressions have influenced other parts of the world for as long. This speaks for a multidirectional influence throughout history.

As early as the late 1960s, the concept of space won a special place in academic writing. Michel Foucault's (1926—1984) essay "Of Other Spaces", based on a lecture given in 1967, presented ideas of how to write about history through sites instead of focusing on linear progression only. Two decades later, in texts about cultural diversity, the concept was employed to specifically discuss the East and the West as separate spaces since Westerners had turned much of the Orient from alien spaces into colonial spaces. Edward Said (1935—2003) was the first to describe the idea of the imaginary space of the Orient. He argued that when Westerners wrote about the Orient, there was a "universal practice of designating in one's mind a

26 Contemporary art in the era of mass communication and globalization has in recent years become a field of particular scholarly interest. See for example, *Art and Globalization*, vol.1, eds. James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska and Alice Kim (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); *Is Art History Global?* ed. James Elkins (New York: Routledge, 2007); Iain Robertson, *A New Art from Emerging Markets* (Farnham and Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2011); Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd, 2011). In her unpublished doctoral thesis *Responding to the World: Contemporary Chinese Art, Exhibitions, and Criticism in the 1990s* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), Peggy Wang has noted that the 1990s observed an earlier unprecedented interest in making art from the periphery part of the international scene.

familiar space which is ours and an unfamiliar space beyond ours which is theirs [...].²⁷ He further noted that this imaginative geography intensified its sense of itself by stressing “the distance and difference” between near and far. Said argued that Western writing about “the Orient was to be understood as a discourse that mainly represents institutionalized Western knowledge of the Orient”. He subsequently coined the term Orientalism, convinced that the discourse “exerts a three-way force, on the Orient, on the Orientalist and on the Western consumer of Orientalism.”²⁸ This implies that the Orientalist approach, according to Said, was performative in the sense that it encouraged people to preserve romantic ideas of the exotic or barbarian Orient. In the 1990s, Homi K. Bhabha (b.1949) rejected Said’s idea of an imagined balancing act on a proposed border between the East and the West. This is of importance for the discussion below since Bhabha acknowledges that cultural products may simulate representations from other cultures but his ideas do not polarize, degrade, romanticize or exoticize such cultural expressions. From this point of view, Bhabha’s reformulation of the dichotomy of the East and the West and his concept of a “third location of culture,” the Third Space for so-called hybridized works is crucial for defining hybridized works as originals and not imitations.

Homi K. Bhabha further stressed that the usual definition of culture is often perceived as a kind of “imagined community” (for one thing bringing people in the same nation together by reference to ancient tradition).²⁹ He argues that this strict definition is unsatisfactory since it fails to explain the profound ambiguity of modern and contemporary artistic expression.³⁰ Instead, his construction of the Third Space explicitly erases the “mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open expanding code.”³¹ It further challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a “homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary [original/imaginary] Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People.”³²

In the case of Ma Liang’s “Pig-head Lover”, the sign of the Virgin Queen is foreign to the Chinese cultural context and therefore unstable to the interpreter. This is why the process of evaluating the *foreign* in what Homi K. Bhabha calls the

27 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978; London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2010), 54.

28 Ibid., 54-67.

29 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

30 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994; New York and London: Routledge, 2010), 231. In his book Bhabha polemizes against Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* on the origin and spread of nationalism.

31 Bhabha, 54.

32 Ibid.

hybrid becomes important to an interpretation in the Third Space.

According to Bhabha's ideas, the interpretation of *hybrids* is never simply an act of communication between the interpreter and the object. For him the production of meaning requires that the two "places" or "utterances" that are simultaneously visible in a *hybrid* are mobilized into the conceptual site of a Third Space. If this mobilization is not specifically articulated, the two utterances remain in the unconscious and produce ambivalence in the act of interpretation. This may prove that cultural expressions are still usually bound to specific cultural spheres. Even though Bhabha's theory primarily concerns literature, his concept of *hybrid* for a new kind of cultural and artistic product is applicable also to visual works of art.

However, the Third Space does not merely transform often degraded mixes of simulated Western sources into *hybrids* (new products). As this writer understands it, Bhabha's *hybrid* is, more importantly, connected to the postmodern concept of appropriation in a dichotomous relationship. Whereas an appropriation, dubious precisely because it is a simulation, is understood to transfer the whole original idea³³ to a new work in order to offer some kind of new reflection or critique, the *hybrid's* simulation is more complex. A *hybrid* only communicates with "originals" to a certain extent. The *hybrid* only vaguely resembles their "originals." In addition, traces of meanings from "originals" produces what Bhabha calls "foreign element" that, because of their mixed appearance, could result in what Bhabha calls "unstable elements." This vacillating conceptual instability can be compared to a kind of perceptual nervousness, which is why the concept of *foreign element* needs to be scrutinized before what he calls an "interstitial" or an "in-between" (Third Space) can be revealed. It is this process that produces an entirely new product, a *hybrid*. Thus the *hybrid* presents a much more subtle affinity to canonized works of art than the appropriation does, and the ways the *foreign elements* to a certain extent communicate with "originals" is important to the meanings of the new product.

Ma Liang's "Pig-head Lover" share the same characteristics of subtle recognition of something foreign (to the Chinese cultural context), in other words, this writer understands "Pig-head Lover" as a visual *hybrid* in the above sense. From this point of view, the foreign is a *sign*, tied to fantastic tales from both the Western and Chinese cultural spheres. It will further be argued that hybrid expressions are employed by Chinese artists who are interested in upsetting the borders of cultural and geographical imaginations and are interested in an intellectual debate. Bhabha

33 An example is the above mentioned Japanese artist Morimura, who works with appropriations of visually identifiable icons like Marilyn Monroe, Charlie Chaplin etc. In these cases viewers may instantly recognize the originals, which is not the case with hybrids.

has acknowledged that even though he is reluctant to use terms like “original” and “copy,” he concedes that it is rather evident that cultural expressions may travel, thereby producing new types of texts or images in an age of globalization. This is the reason why he argues for close studies of *foreign elements* and “insists [on scrutinizing] the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; [that] becomes the ‘unstable element of linkage’ [...]” He concludes the discussion of the foreign by saying that he is more engaged with

the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which “newness comes into the world.” The foreign element “destroys the original’s structures of reference and sense communication as well” not simply by negating it but by negotiating the disjunction in which successive cultural temporalities are “preserved in the work of history and at the same time cancelled.”³⁴

According to Bhabha, it is the practice of translation that comprises “the performative nature of cultural communication.” Thus, it is the *foreign* as translated that transforms the original utterance into a new phenomenon — the *hybrid*. Furthermore, the different utterances, the “split articulations that a *hybrid* introduces, give many different meanings to the work.”³⁵ This corresponds well with the way Ma Liang’s scene seemingly produces double or contradictory meanings; for this reason, Bhabha’s theoretical approach functions well as a means to explore the image’s double faces and what hybrids do. *Hybrid* works, like Ma Liang’s, may be understood as expressions that can maintain but also form new social and political patterns, thus presenting the *hybrid* as an active agent and thereby utterly performative.

Performativity

The concept of performativity derives from J.L. Austin. He launched the concept in the 1950s as a potential to discuss what he called language “speech acts.”³⁶ Performances of words, phrases and images are to be viewed as such acts, and typically is that they do not merely describe the world but rather changes it. An example Austin referred to is the marriage act, in which the bride and the groom say I do, meaning that the phrase is an act that changes the civil status of the couple,

34 Bhabha, 326.

35 Ibid., 53.

36 J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

meaning that it is a performative act involving some kind of transformation.

In the 1990s Judith Butler took the concept of performativity to discuss gender, suggesting that gender is something you do rather than something you are.³⁷ Thus, she applied Austin's theory on a new aspect of social relationships and transported the concept of performativity from the discourse of language to the discourse on identity. It is therefore possible to assume that expressions like those in contemporary arts photography could help questioning and reshaping expectations about gender, along with sexual identity, its status and perhaps also notions of how civil society should be formed around these questions. As pointed out by Butler, women are not the only subjects of feminism, claiming that anti-normative manifestations of the body may in many societies be punished if openly displayed, which is why visually breaking with norms is to be equated with political activity. Butler adds the queer identity to discussions on gender, thus giving multiple perspectives to the normative representation of gender.

The Politics of Spaces in Reform Period China

In the last few decades, China has witnessed fast economic development and with that a radical social change has been taking place. People have been presented with many new spaces of consumption and more money to spend. New places of consumption have proved to be more than just physical constructs; they also bear with them new social constructs. It is evident that when "people choose particular spaces over others, they are also choosing to engage in different sets of meanings. Spaces of consumption thus become staging grounds for the expression of social distinction, self-identity, and family relationships."³⁸ An interesting example is how the new bridal fashion in bridal portrait studios since the mid-1990s has slowly become a mode to express one's own personal (heterosexual) identity and with this also newly gained consumer rights.³⁹ The younger generation find their role models in fashion magazines rather than in model operas of the parent generation.

Moreover, traditional Confucian family values and conservative approaches to life start to change in this rapidly transforming society, making room for a greater consciousness not only of individual rights but also of expressing one's

37 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; New York and London: Routledge, 2006).

38 LiAnne Yu, *Consumption in China: How China's New Consumer Ideology is Shaping the Nation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 34.

39 Eva Aggeklint, "Bridal Couples:" *On Hybridity in Conceptual Chinese Photography 1995—2009*, 2013, 122-123.

own individual sexual identity.⁴⁰ In China homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and since 2001 it is no longer counted as a mental illness. Although openness and tolerance towards homosexuality is greater in China after 2001 it is still controversial to live openly as a homosexual; this much because a central thought in Confucian tradition is that a son should provide for the continuation of the family line. Li Yinhe 李银河 (b.1952), a Chinese sociologist has tried to legalize same-sex marriage several times since 2000. In 2006 and again in 2007 Li proposed the Chinese Same-sex Marriage Bill at the National People's Congress and has continued doing so without success. The first Pride Festival was held in Shanghai in 2009, two years after Ma Liang's work of art was produced. Despite reports of harassment and discrimination, a liberalization trend has gradually been taking place since the 1980s through the first decades of the 2000s.⁴¹ Even so the question of coming out publicly may be a life-long and rather complicated process for most people especially in cultures like China, where people are living and loving according to the Confucian tradition to please the parents. The fast economic and social developments are naturally reflected in the visual arts, as will be discussed below.

“Pig-head Lover” - Curtains up!

As discussed earlier, Ma Liang's conceptual photograph stages a white-clad Asian-looking woman wearing a white European cartwheel ruff posing together with a semi-naked half-pig half-human queer figure. Through the activation of the Third Space an infinite space of connotations is unlocked; a space that would not otherwise have been possible to reach. It is in this in-between locality that the signs of the epic heroes of the Virgin Queen and Pigsy come alive and enables an interpretation that links together narrative threads from two literary classics, one Western and one Eastern, both products of the 1590s. This is to eventually weave a new fabric that in its turn presents a discussion on issues of personal sexual identity in China of the 2000s.

When looking at Ma's staged scene, the first visual clue that arouses a special interest — the so-called *foreign element* — would, as pinpointed earlier, be the white cartwheel ruff and in addition the dazzling white facade of what appears to be the sign of Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen. When exploring “the folds and wrinkles of the original,” the cult of Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen “wedded to

40 Si Han, *Secret Love* (Stockholm: The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 2013), 8.

41 Si, 14-15.

her kingdom” tells the story of a gradual creation, which is said to have started as the Queen grew older without getting married. Living in a conservative society, in which both tradition and religion proclaimed the natural inferiority of women, Elizabeth consciously used her sex to her advantage by creating a personal myth that raised her high above the ordinary. When Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558 the Crown lawyers elaborated a legal theory known as the “King’s Two Bodies,” which in reality meant that the Queen’s mortal natural body was wedded to an immortal body political to govern the country. The body political was timeless and perfect, which is why her gender was no longer believed to be a threat to the nation. Even though Elizabeth I had many suitors she had no wish for a husband. She rejected important proposed matches and ruled her country in more than just name.⁴² Elizabeth’s alleged virginity thus set her apart as an extraordinary woman. Artists and poets raised her to the level of a “virgin goddess” in literature, music and the arts; and attached allusions to her as the chaste moon-goddess Diana, the fairyqueen Gloriana, and even made her a rival to Virgin Mary.⁴³

Most importantly, the colour white as a symbol of innocence and virginity helped create the myth around Elizabeth I as the Virgin Queen. Moreover, in Elizabeth’s later years, her painted portraits grew less realistic and more iconographic. Elizabeth I was highly interested in fashion and in presenting an iconic facade creating a sphere of mystery around her persona. From 1562 she often wore heavy make-up and wigs due to scars she had received from small poxes.⁴⁴ One of the epic poems that especially contributed to Elizabethan mythmaking was Sir Edmund Spenser’s allegorical poem *The Faerie Queen* of the 1590s, which is of importance to this analysis.

The Virtue of Chastity as Representation of Cultural Identity

In Spenser’s England, *The Faerie Queen* was to “fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline.”⁴⁵ *The Faerie Queen* was especially dedicated to Elizabeth I, the only living heir of King Henry VIII. She was the poem’s primary addressee and was indeed invoked as a “mirror of virtue.” Even so,

42 J.E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960).

43 Matthew Woodcock, *Fairy in The Faerie Queene: Renaissance Elf-Fashioning and Elizabethan Myth Making* (Aldershot: Achgate publishing Company, 2004). See also “The Virgin Queen,” <http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/history/elizabeth/virgin.html>, accessed from the Internet 2010-12-08.

44 Neale.

45 Elisabeth Heale, *The Faerie Queen: A Reader’s Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9.

The Faerie Queen strongly questioned the queen's ability to rule effectively because of her gender and inscribed the "shortcomings of her rule."⁴⁶ As discussed above, the queen's female body represented more than a physical body; it represented a political body and as such it constituted the body of the nation. Elizabeth's physical health and purity was therefore intimately connected to the strength and stability of the nation. Sickness, doubtless sexual morality and infertility became political questions and the queen was closely observed to maintain the stability of the nation.⁴⁷ Despite the limitations she operated within, it seemed as though Elizabeth I self-consciously created the myth around her and was able to function powerfully as a ruler atypical of her time.

The concept of the virtuous political body of the Virgin Queen has been kept alive in popular culture. It was widely actualized in 2007, in the same period as *Pig-head Lover* was produced, in Shekhar Kapur's motion picture *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (Figure 3).⁴⁸ The film addresses the status of Queen Elizabeth I as a self-determined unmarried woman of great political power. In the ending scene Elizabeth I enters the stage as the pale white virgin, clad in white (and with an elaborate white cartwheel ruff), a symbol of chastity, purity and political power.



Figure 3: Cate Blanchett as Elizabeth I in Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, 2007.

46 Ibid.

47 Anna Whitelock, *Elizabeth's Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen's court* (Bloomsbury Publishing Ltd: London, 2013), 19.

48 *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, Blu-ray disc, directed by Shekhar Kapur (2007; Orlando: Universal Studios, 2010).

In “Pig-head Lover” the reference to the sign of the Virgin Queen is perceived only through the white cartwheel ruff, the woman’s white complexion and the white dress that covers the queen’s entire physical body like an impenetrable armament. Even so, this familiarity soon leads to ambiguity. The Asian-looking woman in Ma’s constructed scene presents us with a highly hybridized figure, signifying Europeanness and Chineseness at the same time; meaning that within the European or North American spheres the white complexion and the cartwheel ruff would to some viewers directly connote the Virgin Queen and with her the virtue of chastity. In the Chinese cultural context, on the other hand, the colour white is often associated with grief but also with the moon. Thus, the colour white could rather allude to the Moon Goddess who, according to the tale of *Journey to the West*, was heavily courted by Pigsy (Zhu Bajie), who in his turn was punished for his lustful behaviour. This intricate weave of icons certainly moves the focus to the more general matter of chastity and sexual repression, tied to the Chinese cultural context; as hybrids address and reject the “original” at the same time.

In China, some of the deepest mysteries are those concerning sexual emotions and practices. The world’s oldest sexology has its roots in China although good virtue has been celebrated alongside. Significant for the discussion here is Neo-Confucian philosophy, which has celebrated a sexual conservatism and with that the virtue of chastity, indeed introducing chastity as part of a national cultural identity.

Furthermore, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has since 1949 tried to wipe out what was perceived as the feudal past and make China pure, which has included suppressing deviating sexual expressions.⁴⁹ When scrutinizing the sign of Ma Liang’s chaste queen it becomes evident that it may personify a deep-rooted conservative Confucian tradition imbued in Chinese culture as part of a heritage around a pure national cultural identity.

Individual Lust Proposed as an Important Part of Identity in Modern China

Moving the focus to the detail of the huge book in the hands of Ma’s queen one may wonder what kind of ideology it would symbolise in the Chinese cultural context. To find out, it is again important to examine “the folds and wrinkles of the ‘original’” — here proposed to be the Virgin Queen. During Elizabeth I’s reign, she restored England to Protestantism and reintroduced the English translation of the Bible to her people, which had been banned during the Catholic Mary Stuart’s

49 Ruan Fangfu, *Sex in China: Studies in Sexology in Chinese Culture* (New York: Springer Science, 1991), 83. See also Johan Lagerkvist, *Kina i globaliseringsn mitt* [China at the Centre of Globalization] (Stockholm: Forum, 2007), 126-167.

(1542—1587) reign.⁵⁰ This would certainly strengthen this queen's subtle likeness to the symbolism around the icon of the Virgin Queen. An interesting twist to the interpretation of Ma's work of art is the cult around Elizabeth I as the Faerie queen Gloriana, which includes her mate Arthur (King Arthur) who in the fairy tale is described as the boar of Cornwall — a pig — turning the scene's message upside down as it balances in-between cultures in an intriguing way. As discussed initially the queen and the pig of Ma's work of art will prove to be signs of their own. This implies that a *hybrid* may alert only certain virtues of the above icons (originals)—the Virgin Queen and Pigsy and reject others, as we will soon see.

Although, it is the sign of the Virgin Queen that may have ignited the above reading to a well-introduced Western scholar (also mobilized into the Third Space), the sign of Pigsy would probably be the initial focal point for the Chinese intellectual reader/viewer.

Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* is based on the Chinese monk Xuanzang's (600—664) pilgrimage to India for the purpose of collecting Buddhist sutras. After returning to China the monk's adventurous journey became a source of many folk tales. To aid Xuanzang to overcome the dangers of attacks of evil monsters, the monk was assisted by the monkey Sun Wukong, the pig Pigsy (Zhu Bajie), the monk Sandy and a horse. Of interest to this essay is that *Xiyouji* can be read as an allegorical tale and as such the monk symbolises a man in search of enlightenment, the horse carrying him may be understood as his will, the monkey as his heart and mind and the pig as his physical powers and inclinations.⁵¹

According to *Xiyouji* the character Pigsy used to be an immortal in Heaven and was later sent to the human world as punishment for flirting too heavily with the Goddess of the Moon. After arriving on Earth, he was reincarnated into a half-pig, half-human by mistake. Pigsy is characterized as a simple and honest figure willing to bear hardships but at the same time, he is gluttonous, lustful and lazy. Pigsy is thus often described as an ordinary human being that people would easily identify with.⁵² At first sight Pigsy would therefore not seem to best personify the *epic hero*, however, as he is constantly punished for his carnal and lustful behaviour but still overcomes difficulties, he serves as a good example of an everyday hero. The sign of the pig in Ma Liang's version is drawn as an ordinary, vulgar and feminine version of Pigsy, implying a moral twist of how one as a sexual being should not

50 Neale.

51 Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A Guide to Chinese Literature* (The University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1997), 208-209.

52 Ma Liang 马良, 2016. Interview by Eva Aggeklint. July 4th. In the artist's studio, Shanghai.

behave.

The connection between what appears to be the signs of the fictive personas the Virgin Queen and Pigsy, both products of the 1590s, certainly reveals a visual intertextuality somehow tied to a sixteenth century context; with an inclination to critically comment on the status of social reforms in modern China as being too old in a modern world. Furthermore, as signs, the queen and the pig represent each other's contrasting characters, alluding to the particular format of an allegory.⁵³ The scene certainly demonstrates a powerful interplay of Eastern and Western literary icons created by Ma Liang; a self-declared world citizen, at home in China as well as in the world outside. His artistry is part of one of the most transformative periods in modern Chinese and recent world history — 1989 to 2008; a period of time when China's artists presented us with some critical expressions of a very bold art movement, involving conceptual arts.

As discussed the signs of the queen and the pig introduce a variety of opposites and would imply many tangible dualities that are typical for an allegory. At the same time Chinese philosophical concepts of *yin* and *yang* describe well how opposite forces are at the same time complementary and interrelated. The sign of the queen as the Virgin Queen, signifying a powerful woman with masculine power, is tied to the literary rather than the vernacular sphere; whereas the sign of the pig as Pigsy signifies a beast and a commoner and is the outcome of a vernacular tale. Furthermore the queen of this allegory is presented as a symbol for the sage/king/nation that within a Chinese cultural context would address the importance of acknowledging traditional Confucian ethics like purity and self-consciousness as the role model for China. The pig on the other hand would connote the opposite, an ordinary human being, with lust and flaws, who according to Confucian ethics is set to learn from the king.

According to the allegorical scheme the match of a virgin queen and a lustful pig would imply a conflicting meeting between chastity on the one hand and individual cravings of lust on the other hand. Another possible reading would be to understand the match between a queen and her subject as representing the normal hierarchical order of Confucianism; it is still the king who sets the examples and ordinary people who learn to become sages. The son is to look up to his father and the wife would answer to her husband — all in good harmony. However, judging by the pigs prominent breasts, the implication points to a more complex interpretation than that. Since the sign, of what simulates the popular folk hero

53 *Britannica Academic*. "allegory," accessed October 2012, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/16078/allegory>.

Piggy, is here visually represented as a sow rather than a boar; “Pig-head Lover” may be understood as a visual riddle on queerness to discuss the status of same sex relationships in modern China. In Ma’s work of art the sign of Piggy is definitely presented as an everyday hero, openly visualising his flaws and carnal cravings (visually presented and hidden at the backyard), which implies a wish to depict a more humane attitude to life. Rather than the usual hunt for defining a socialist hero, as China has seen in the recent past, we are here invited to get glimpses of another reality, which embraces flaws and the right to be your individual self in many different situations.

An Allegory of the Representative and the Hidden

This essay started with questions about ambiguity and hybridity. The signs of the queen and the pig appeared to seduce the viewer with their intriguing surfaces, but at the same time they also provoked puzzlement since they only subtly recall recognisable literary sources while alluding to both Chinese and Western traditional expression. The interpretation above has revealed that this work, produced in an era of economic and social reforms, does not aim to please but engage in personal reflections on contradictions, foreign influences, social pressure as well as personal identity and gender constructions. It has been argued that hybrids are often constructed according to a postmodern expression. However, the critical edge is expressed in a manner slightly different from the way many Western postmodern works make use of mass media images, texts and other visual material. For one thing, Chinese artists like Ma Liang, make use of hybrid premeditated images in a humorous way, involve (Chinese) people in thinking of less attractive sides of their immediate Chinese reality.

When interpreting “Pig-head Lover” through the perspective of the Third Space, it becomes clear that the implied same-sex match distorts China’s normative mirror of representation. The signs of the queer foreign hero/ine Virgin Queen and the local hero/ine Piggy certainly alludes to a conspicuous balance between the representative and the hidden, given that the match between the chaste and the carnal is obscured in a dark backyard invaded by filthy rats, implying that this queerness is to be equalled with something that at the time should not be displayed openly.

However, there seems to be more to the allegory than just defining virtues. The allegorical format is close to satire and as such the scene is performative by way of problematizing the inherent struggle between what is traditionally and morally expected in a country where family plays a more pervasive part for an individual

than what an individual may personally crave. The majority of the people in China still get married and an example shows that about 90% of gay men in China are married because of their parents' requirement of a grandchild to maintain and prolong the family name.⁵⁴ This means that homosexuals still to a large degree, live with lies and that homosexual desires have been handled in utmost secrecy, literally kept secret in the backyard burdened by feelings of guilt and unhappiness.

Ma Liang's work was created in 2007, which is exactly ten years after homosexuality was decriminalized in China and six years after it was removed from the list of mental illnesses, in 2001.⁵⁵ The medium of photography as a frozen scene without a resolving end would here satirically imply a status quo regarding social development despite an otherwise rapid societal modernization. Homosexual relationships were in 2007 still not uncomplicated to display openly, which is still true in 2021-2022 when this essay was completed. Although sociologist Li Yinhe has struggled with the question of legalizing same sex marriages since 2006, it has still not materialized on the mainland, only in Taiwan.

This Third Space analysis of Ma Liang's hybrid scene of fluctuating opposites, contradictions and virtues to the utmost punctuates the superficiality of the progression of modernization in an internationalized China. The interchanging personalities and genders as well as the subtle simulations to iconic literary figures of the 1590s narrate a story of the controversy of existing hidden and secret love in a "fast-developing" but morally conservative society. It is possible to assume that "Pig-head Lover" is part of a broader act connected with challenging norms by introducing a queer approach to the discourse on gender, which in China historically has made woman the main focus of the feminist debate. Nota bene, in 2008 the first Queer Centre in Beijing opened its doors to the world and this event was followed by the first Pride Festival in Shanghai the year after; this making "Pig-head Lover" become one of many images in the beginning of the 2000s to stir a debate on the question of being able to "come out" openly from the backyard to express one's true sexual identity more freely for those who wish to do so and are interested in the matter.⁵⁶

54 Zang Xiaowei, "Family, Kinship, Marriage, and Sexuality," in *Understanding Contemporary China*, ed. Robert E. Gamet, (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2008), 281—30& See also Ping Yao, *Women, Gender, and Sexuality: A Brief History* (New York and London: Routledge, 2021).

55 "Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo xingfa 79 ban" & "Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo 97 ban", <http://vip.chinalawinfo.com/NewLaw2002/Slc/SLC.asp?Db=chl&Gid=556>. Accessed from the Internet 2012-01-08.

56 See other examples of this motif in the catalogue of the exhibition *Secret Love* on homosexuality and queerness in China at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 2012.

A visually perfected alliance between the conservative and the reformatory may be understood as a longed-for but illusive state of mind. The final metamorphosis of tradition and modernization, a completion, which will see a mix of old and new into a true hybrid (new product) is still to come perhaps sometime in the future. Although that day seems to be far away, Ma Liang's visually beautiful and surreal surfaces may create some hope and help to stretch the borders of our imagination through both time and space.

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Author Profile:

Eva Aggeklint, Ph.D in China’s Arts and Culture. Since graduation she has worked in the museum sector in the roles as antiquarian, pedagogue and

researcher at the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, the Hallwyl Museum, The Economic Museum - the Royal Coin Cabinet and the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm. As a hybrid and cross cultural art historian and scholar within the field of Chinese studies she is interested in arts and cultural expressions that have travelled and reveal mixed appearances. Models of interpretation of hybrid works of art was the main focus of her doctoral thesis. She is especially interested in how thought systems and philosophies color expressions of arts and culture and how the art market may be a motor for creating new trends and tendencies in the arts — presenting works of art that are balancing between the commercial and the performative. Since the outbreak of the Corona pandemic Eva Aggeklint is working as an independent scholar and writer on topics related to Chinese arts, culture and museum objects and has been published widely. She is currently working on a book proposal related to her research interests. Her email address is aggeklint@live.se.