

## MODERNISM AND ORIENTALISM: THE AMBIGUOUS NUDES OF CHINESE ARTIST PAN YULIANG

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### Introduction: The Misunderstood “Mistress” of Western Painting

At the successful staging of *20th Century Chinese Art* organized by Christie's, held in Hong Kong in November 2005, an auction record was set for a work by deceased artist Pan Yuliang (潘玉良, 1895-1977).<sup>1</sup> Previously estimated to be between HK\$3-3.5 million (approximately US\$384,600-448,700) in value before the sale, the partially nude self-portrait of Pan fetched an impressive HK\$9.64 million instead.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, films have been made on the life of Pan, such as the 1993 movie *A Soul Haunted by Painting (Hua Hun)*<sup>3</sup> that starred popular Chinese actress Gong Li and the 2004 Chinese Television series *Hua Hun: Pan Yuliang*, played by former Hong Kong beauty queen Michelle Reis. The recent sensation over the forgotten artist in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan is ironic in view of the lonely, frugal life Pan led as an independent artist before she died in her shabby apartment in Paris in 1977.

Pan's youth coincided with the overthrow of the long-reigning imperial Qing dynasty in 1911 when the new Republic of China was still in a state of political disarray. Her somewhat dramatic life and career could not but be intertwined with the turmoil and early modernization of China at the turn of the century. Her art evolved within the flux of transformations where conflicting dichotomies of East and West, tradition and modernity, male chauvinism and emerging feminism co-existed. Pan's modernist works contain novel socio-cultural concepts with which modern reformers strove to replace outdated customs. French curator Marie-Thérèse Bobot writes of Pan's work, “In her oil painting, she unites Western techniques with the sensibilities of Chinese materials

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1 There are several versions of Pan Yuliang's biography in Chinese sources. Differences in her date and place of birth appear in several sources. I have mainly followed a biography compiled in 1985 by Pan's grandson-in-law, Xu Yongsheng. Sara Sheldon, a researcher in Pan Yuliang for over twenty years, agrees (in my email correspondence with her during February 2010) that Xu is probably the person who has one of the most complete records of Pan's achievements as an artist, though he has limited knowledge on her earlier background. Xu's 1985 biography of Pan can be found in *Pan Yuliang Meishu Zhuopin Xuanji* (1988). A slightly revised version of Xu's compilation can be found in the recent catalogue *Huahun: Pan Yuliang* (2006), published by Taipei's National Museum of History.

2 Refer to the report “Autumn Auctions in Hong Kong”, *Orientalism*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Jan/Feb 2006, 102-108.

3 The 1993 movie is also available under the title *La Peintre*.

and lines. What is particularly captivating is her employment of black and colour ink techniques, which she experiments with on paper as she seeks inspiration from themes that are not classically Chinese”<sup>4</sup> (Bobot 1985: 44).

During her lifetime, Pan encountered countless instances of prejudice and injustice in relation to her gender and disadvantaged background. While she displayed exceptional artistic talent, Pan’s lowly background as an ex-prostitute, a concubine and a woman stirred disapproval and controversy within arts circles and Chinese society at large. Pan was born on 14 June 1895 in Yangzhou in Jiangsu province as Chen Xiuqing, and was renamed Zhang Yuliang when adopted by her maternal uncle after the early passing of her parents. Her guardian sold her to a brothel in the city of Wuhu in Anhui province when she was in her early teens. Greatly empathizing with Yuliang’s desperate situation, Pan Zanhua (潘贊化, 1885-1959), a customs official from Wuhu, redeemed her from the brothel. Zanhua was an advocate for modernity and a member of Sun Yat-sen’s (孙中山, 1866-1925) revolutionary league (*Tong Meng Hui*, 同盟会). He studied at the Waseda University in Japan together with the prominent intellectual Chen Duxiu (陈独秀, 1879-1942). Zanhua took Yuliang to be his second wife and resettled her in Shanghai in 1916, where she learnt to read and write. Out of gratitude, Yuliang adopted his surname “Pan”. Deeply drawn to her artist neighbour Hong Ye’s (洪野, 1886-1932) painting activity, Yuliang started taking oil painting lessons from him in 1917, which laid a foundation for her Western-style painting.<sup>5</sup>

Shanghai, the place where Pan’s artistic journey commenced, was one of the first five treaty ports along the east coast of China to open up for international trade in 1842, as a result of the enforced Treaty of Nanjing at the end of the Opium War. The presence of large communities of foreigners exposed the residents of Shanghai to many aspects of Western culture. Shanghai Art Academy, under the bold leadership of its founder Liu Haisu (刘海粟, 1896-1994), took in its first batch of female students, including Pan, in 1918. The school’s vision of co-education was a response to the newly appointed Minister of Education in Republican China, Cai Yuanpei’s (蔡元培, 1868-1940) educational reforms. Shanghai Art Academy was one of the first Chinese art institutions that advocated Western painting. A champion of modern European styles, Liu’s practice of using nude models in class created a public outrage, leading conservatives to accuse him of being a “traitor of art”, “perverting truth and humanity”. This incident reflected the exciting yet uncertain period when modernists were advocating new foreign concepts while conservatives persisted in traditions.

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4 Original Sentence in French: “En peinture à l’huile, elle a su allier les techniques occidentales au sens chinois de la matière et de la ligne. S’attachant surtout aux techniques traditionnelles où les encres, noir et de couleurs, jouent sur le papier, elle a trouvé son inspiration dans des thèmes non chinois classique, comme le nu, et, peintre de la femme, a uni l’arabesque du trait à la fluidité de la matière.”

5 Much information on Pan Yuliang has also been generously provided to me by the Anhui Provincial Museum and through an interview with its senior curator and researcher, Wang Lihua (王丽华), on 26 February 2008.

In a nation-building effort, overseas scholarships were given to outstanding students in all disciplines. With her excellent results at the academy, Pan became the first woman artist in the Chinese Republic to win an official scholarship to study in France, despite the odds being stacked against her. In 1922, Pan studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris under the tutelage of French artists Lucien Simon (1861-1945) and Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret (1852-1929). Dagnan-Bouveret was a naturalistic painter best known for his meticulous peasant scenes and religious themes. Simon was a prominent *plein-air* master whose oeuvre of Impressionist works included scenes of Parisian middle-class leisure and familial activities. Simon was a close associate of Etienne Dinet (1861-1929), the famous Orientalist painter. In 1884, together with Simon's entomologist brother, the trio made a month-long trip to Algeria. While Simon was better known as a French genre painter, his friendship with Dinet and his trip to North Africa exposed him to the Orientalist outlook of art. In her analysis of Orientalist paintings, Lynne Thornton mentioned that Simon was one of those artists known for depicting "women wrapped in folds of the shroud-like haik worn by North African females" (Thornton 1985: 54).

When Pan graduated from the École in Paris in 1925, she was awarded the prestigious Rome Scholarship at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome. In 1928, the year that she returned to China, Pan held her first solo exhibition in Shanghai with the title *China's First Female Western Artist*. Chinese art critic Tao Yongbai highlights Pan's rising eminence, "When Pan returned to China in 1928, she had already impressed the art circles with her passionate brushwork and bold application of strong colours, as the oil paintings in China of the period still lacked a sense of colour" (Tao 2000: 199). Western art was still relatively unexplored during this time, and Pan's exhibition was particularly interesting for many as it was staged by a Chinese woman who had just returned from overseas. Pan taught at Shanghai Art Academy and was appointed the Director of the Western Painting Department in 1929. Within a decade, Pan held five solo exhibitions, apart from numerous joint exhibitions in various cities of China as well as overseas.

The rise of Pan's fame coincided with the inaugural *National Exhibition of Chinese Art*, held in 1929 in Shanghai. The women's magazine, *Funü Zazhi* (妇女杂志), highlighted the efforts of young women artists at the exhibition, including Pan, Fang Junbi, He Xiangning and Cai Weilian (Li Yuyi 1929). The magazine also featured Pan's exhibition submission, *Guying* (孤影, *A Lonesome Shadow*), in colour on its inner cover page. Writer Li Yuyi praised Pan's adept technique, "The figure's configuration is precise and the rendering of rich colours injects passion. Yet, her brush work is deeply endowed with an oriental flavour..." (Li 1929). Pan was honoured with titles like "The First Artist of Chinese Impressionism" and "A Leading Figure of China's Western Painting". The *Funü* magazine also published a column titled "Artist's Personal Experience", which featured Pan's article "My Artistic Practice and Experience with Pastels".

While Pan's rise to prominence might initially appear as a story of success, it was soon beset by problems. The Chinese art world of the period was still strictly organized by an order of seniority and its system manipulated by an established group

of male players. The legacy of traditional ink painting was dominated by male masters, many of whom were deeply rooted in traditional Confucian thinking. Traditionally, aged masters were highly regarded while younger artists were obliged to follow in the seniors' footsteps. In this context, Pan's apparent quick rise to fame not only aroused resentment from other artists; her modern representations of the nude, along with her outspoken ways, contradicted traditions and piqued conservatives in Shanghai. In no time, scandalous gossip related to her past created by the media and jealous colleagues circulated, leading the staff at the Shanghai Art Academy to become unwilling to accept her leadership in the Western Painting Department.<sup>6</sup>

In 1931, Pan decided to accept artist Xu Beihong's (徐悲鸿, 1895-1953) invitation to teach full time at the art department of the National Central University in Nanking. At the solo exhibition of the patriotic artist Shen Yiqian (沈逸千, 1908-1944), organized in line with the anti-Japanese movement in the 1930s, Pan publicly condemned "some opportunistic people" who took advantage of their country's wartime situation for their own gain.<sup>7</sup> It was speculated by some Chinese writers (such as Shinan) that Pan's 1936 solo exhibition in Nanking, also her last in China, was sabotaged by people who were offended by Pan's outspoken ways.<sup>8</sup>

Pan's experience, albeit seemingly theatrical and rare, can nevertheless illuminate the struggles of early Chinese women artists, particularly those without the support of a privileged family background. Pan had to wrestle endlessly with obstacles owing to persisting traditional morals against women's liberation, even in the advent of the modern age. Taking into account the elements of non-conformity and individuality in her works, Pan should rightly be honoured as a modern artist of her time. Yu Feng (郁风, 1916-2003), a prominent woman artist who studied under Pan in the 1930s, defended her, "As a highly innovative artist, Pan has every reason to be ranked with her male counterparts, including Xu Beihong and Liu Haisu" (Yang and Wang 2002: 10). While Pan's innovative works should have been given enduring recognition at a time when intellectuals were advocating modern reforms and pioneer feminists were encouraging women to step forward in society, this did not occur.

In addition, Pan was challenged for her use of non-traditional methods related to her choice of art form and subject throughout her career in China. Despite the progress made by modern artists in the early twentieth century, the extent and actual influence of Western art on Chinese society was limited, and the modernist art which Pan

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6 This is accounted in Liu Haisu's article on Pan Yuliang. See Preface, "Nü Huajia Pan Yuliang", *Pan Yuliang Meishu Zuoping Xuanji*, 1988. According to Anhui Museum's Wang Lihua, Liu Haisu was well advanced in age in the late 1980s, when Anhui Museum invited him to write the Preface for the 1988 catalogue. While there is no doubt that he thought highly of Pan Yuliang, Liu's recollection of his former student's life might not be all certain.

7 This incident is recorded in Xu Yongsheng's 1985 chronology of Pan under the year 1934.

8 See Shinan, *Huahun: Pan Yuliang*, reprint 2002, see Chapter Five, Part I, "Insult" ("Qu Ru"), 137-140.

practised was understood only by a small group of Westernized elites.<sup>9</sup> While Western painting was seen as a foreign cultural expression, the nude, a subject she specialized, was considered taboo and indecent. While Euro-American concepts of modernity had inspired China, the actual implementation of disparate foreign methods into the Chinese system proved much more problematic. Pan's experience might be seen to demonstrate how uncomfortable it was for both men and women to break completely with past traditions at this time. Struggling in predominantly male and conservative art circles, Pan felt rejected in this restrictive environment and left for France.

After departing for Paris in 1937, Pan participated in numerous group exhibitions and held solo ones in various countries, including France, England, Belgium and the United States. A regular participant at French salons, Pan was a member of *Salon d'Automne*, *Salon des Independants* and *Salon du Printemps*. While Pan could appropriately be considered part of French art circles, there is very little existing information on her in French art history. Out of the numerous works she left behind, only very few remain in France today.<sup>10</sup> Strange as it seems, while she was well-regarded in the French art community, it is her few sculptures rather than her paintings that make up the bulk of her works that are now kept in France.

Pan's *Bust of René Grousset* was commissioned by the Musée Cernuschi de Paris in 1952, when Grousset, a conservator at the museum, passed away. The Musée Cernuschi, an institution that specializes in Asian art, also currently holds a sculptural self-portrait by Pan and a few of her smaller paintings and drawings. Another sculpture that remains in France, the *Bust of Montessori* (1953), was commissioned by the National Educational Institute of France to commemorate the great educator, Maria Montessori. Pan's *Bust of Zhang Daqian* (1957), kept by the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, could be considered a timely memorial work for the museum because Zhang (张大千), Pan's teacher and an old friend, had just held a solo exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville in 1956.

While it is irrefutable that Pan was an accomplished sculptor known to possess acute sensitivity to form, it appears that her works that remain in France today are mostly possessed by institutions that either take a special interest in Asian artefacts or are pieces of interest only to collectors. The few busts that remain in France appear to be modelled after people known to the collectors and kept for commemorative reasons, rather than solely from the perspective and appreciation of Pan's creativity and individuality as an artist. This prompts one to question why her numerous paintings, which have attracted much attention in Asia lately, went generally unnoticed by the French. It is also apparent that she was not a very marketable artist in France, having left behind so many unsold works.

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9 Pan was not the only one to suffer the intolerance of a conservative audience. For instance, the artist Pang Xunqin received death threats after the showing of one of his modernist paintings, *Son of the Earth*, in the 1930s.

10 Pan left behind 4000 oil paintings, drawings, sculptures, water-colour and ink paintings. The majority of her works were transported back to China and are now kept in Anhui Provincial Museum. Some are preserved in Chinese Art Museum in Beijing, and a few pieces are kept by Pan Zanhua's descendents.

More than half of the works Pan left behind featured the non-Western female nude as their subject. This element of her work probably did not conform to European art tradition, which perhaps made it more difficult for the French to accept. Although she spent forty-seven years in Paris, Pan's nationality remained Chinese. As we shall understand later, although Chinese artists were generally not held in high esteem back then, Chinese male artists who ventured into French art circles appear to have enjoyed more recognition than Pan. From this viewpoint, Pan could have experienced a dual disadvantage in terms of gender and ethnicity in her relocation to France. As a migrant Asian woman artist, Pan remained on the fringes of mainstream French art history, and as an ardent advocate for the representation of the female nude in Western style, she sat on the periphery of Chinese society.

Many people who have heard of Pan today are more attracted to the story of an ex-prostitute becoming an international artist than seriously interested in her artistic accomplishments. Although there are books and films on her life, in-depth analysis of Pan's artworks has been scarce and only sporadically attempted. The overview above helps to locate the artist parallel to the socio-cultural and political issues of her period. To address this overemphasis on Pan's life and situate her within art history, this article will proceed to examine her nude paintings as pieces representative of the early Western art movement in China and possessing distinctive modernist qualities.

### **The Nudes of Pan: Reclamation of the Afro-Asian Female Body**

Pan's individualized artistic vision of early Chinese modernism is manifested through her distinct representations of the nude. For the duration of her artistic career, Pan affirmed that her nude paintings were her significant works. In her first publication *Pan Yuliang Oil Painting Collection* (1934), nudes are shown to make up a major component of the works done in her early career. Pan indicated that amongst her earliest works, two nude paintings, *Dawn* (*qingchen*; 1928) and *Spring* (*chun*; 1930, Figure 3), were her most satisfactory.<sup>11</sup> During her last exhibition in Paris in 1977, she revealed to French curator Vadime Elisseeff that she picked her series of Asian nudes for the show because they were her most representative works (*Quatre* 1977: Preface).

The nude is not only an avenue of self-expression for Pan, but her thorough investigation also suggests a conscious departure from established Chinese possibilities. Pan has depicted oriental nudes reading, playing musical instruments or simply relaxing outdoors. Coming from an oppressed background, the uninhibited expressions of Chinese (or other colored) women seeking knowledge, enjoying music and basking unclothed in unimaginable freedom and harmony with nature might be a personal vision of Pan. Emerging from a conservative patriarchal culture, where education was formerly inaccessible to women and herself attaining literacy only at a mature age, Pan's paintings transmit an allegory of modern women's desire for autonomy and access to a public sphere (signified by outdoor settings). In her book on women's poetry

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11 Refer to *Pan Yuliang Oil Painting Collection*, Shanghai Shuju Publisher, 1934, 8 and 12.

from China, Jeanne Hong Zhang writes, “Facing nudity is a daring gesture against rigid Confucian ethics” (Zhang 2004: 77). Undertaking nudity would be even more outrageous from a woman artist of a conservative background of Pan’s period. In the Chinese tradition, male artists and writers were entitled to use symbolic expressions for their aesthetic pursuit of taboo subjects like sexuality, while their female colleagues were required to stay uninvolved in such topics, in keeping with Confucian propriety. Contrary to traditional notions of the nude as “depraved” and “anti-Confucian”, Pan’s predilection for the subject is a way of challenging conventional beliefs as to what is suitable and dignified as art produced by men and women.

Pan’s oil painting *Spring* (1930, Figure 1) is a bold statement on the nude in the early modernizing Chinese context. Her rich palette of exuberant colors was something only rarely seen amongst the restrained expressions of existing Chinese oil paintings. Pan’s style and technique bear resemblance to that of French modernists like Matisse and André Derain; her human figures are depicted liberally with gestural brushwork and their forms simplified with rhythmic emphasis. The group of prancing figures central to the composition brings to mind Matisse’s dancers in his *La Danse* series (started in 1909). The outstretched limbs of the nudes distort the anatomical perfection found in classical naturalism.

Pan’s nude paintings had created controversy and made it difficult for her to remain in China. Not having the cultural background and understanding of “the nude” as an artistic genre, “the nude” was generally taken to be the state of being “naked” in early twentieth-century Chinese society. Art historian Sir Kenneth Clark commented that “the idea of offering the naked body for its own sake as a serious subject of



Figure 1. Pan Yuliang. *Spring (chun)*, 1930. Oil on canvas. Pan Yuliang Oil Painting Collection, 1934, Plate 8.



contemplation simply did not occur to the Chinese or Japanese mind, and to this day raises a slight barrier of misunderstanding” (Clark 1956: 9). This statement indicates that the nude as a genre in art was radical and problematic in the Chinese context. While Pan might be emphasizing the representation of the nude as an artistic subject in its own right, an analysis of her nude representations will reveal a commensurably complex and paradoxical position that seems to parallel her rather controversial background.

In the Western canon, the female nude has been considered a way of representing idealized beauty and femininity, which is usually represented by a white woman. The body of the colored woman has often been linked to qualities of inferiority, is relegated as the racialized “other”, and thus considered unsuitable in the representation of the nude. As Stephen F. Eisenman writes, “The body of the lower-class prostitute and the body of the Afro-Caribbean woman...were linked by their common *dégénérescence*, that is, by their combined intellectual, physical, and moral depravity, morbidity, and inferiority” (Eisenman 2002: 287). Pan, however, often chose non-white women to be her idealized figures in her paintings. She seems to be challenging the conventional representation of the nude and what it means to be racially different in a white society. Given the dominant artistic traditions and notions of femininity in European culture at the time, Pan’s alternative images of the female body would have created contradictions and challenged conventional notions of beauty.

The deliberate juxtaposition of a black woman with a white female in Pan’s *Black and White in Contrast* (1939, Figure 2), recalls Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (Figure 3). Feminist writer Lorraine O’Grady has argued that the subordinated figure of the plump black servant in Manet’s picture is not only overlooked, the painting also reinforces classical male European representation of female bodies. O’Grady writes that the white nude “stabilizes the West’s construct of the female body, for the ‘femininity’ of the white female body is ensured by assigning the not-white to a chaos safely removed from sight”, and of the black servant, she writes, “the not-white body has been made opaque by a blank stare...” (O’Grady 2003: 175).

The subordinated presence of the black servant in Manet’s painting reveals much about the racial and sexual politics of Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prior to Manet’s attempt of *Olympia*, the pairing of a subordinated black figure with a beautiful white nude can be traced in a number of classical works, such as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538), Jean Jalabert’s *Odalisque* (1842), and Leon Benouville’s *Esther* (formerly known as *Odalisque*, 1844). The combination of the black servant and the superior white nude is also a favourite subject of the Orientalist erotica in nineteenth-century Europe. The Orientalist aesthetics is formulated upon European’s colonial relations with Islamic North Africa, and has come to signify an expression that involves the politics of representation associated with colonial and postcolonial concepts (see Benjamin 2003 and Thornton 1985).

In contrast to Manet’s *Olympia*, the black nude in Pan’s *Black and White* is seated in the foreground and occupies a central position. Pan’s representation of the black and white nude combination is markedly different from the conventional portrayal of black and white women in European art history, because the positioning of the black figure does not reinforces the notion of the supremacy of the white nude. In fact, Pan’s blond white nude





Figure 2. Pan Yuliang. *Black and White in Contrast*, 1939. 53 x 73 cm, Oil on canvas. Anhui Provincial Museum.



Figure 3. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. 130.5 x 190 cm, Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

is interestingly seated in the background. The white nude's casual sitting position defies the "desirable" pose of the sex goddess seen in many classical European representations of the reclining white nude. While the black nude is portrayed gazing steadily (though in a non-threatening way) at the audience, the white nude appears to be directing a look at her foreground companion in a gentle manner. Pan's representation of the women seems to signify a gentle, relaxed and amiable connection between the two women, and a kind of "sisterhood" that transcends racial barriers is made possible. In choosing the classical pairing of black and white nudes, Pan appears to be participating in the Orientalist discourse and representation. Yet, the unusual relationship and placement of the nudes in Pan's painting seems like an attempt to underline her view in questioning the very history of exclusion, in both ethnicity and gender. We shall see later that, while Pan interrogates certain sexist constructions in Europe, paradoxically, some of her paintings also draw from the visual language of male European artists, particularly Matisse.

There are profound similarities between Pan's oil painting, *Woman by the Window* (1946, Figure 4), and a few of Matisse's paintings on the subject of odalisque. The decorative management of Pan's dark-haired oriental woman sitting languidly on a couch by the balcony recalls, for instance, Matisse's *Odalisque, Harmony in Red* (1926) and *Seated Odalisque* (1926). The repeated blue and red ornamented patterns on the carpet, vanity table and couch flatten out space and divide the picture into distinct graphic planes, a strategy Matisse frequently employs. Self-consciousness emanates from the dark eyes of the olive-skinned woman, as she admires herself sideway from a partially concealed ornamented mirror on the right. The nude is sensuously marked by wide tonal variations of lucid pink, red, blue and brown, apparently hues picked up from her surroundings. Her finger and toe nails are painted rouge and even her nipples are enhanced with sensually red tints.

The visual economy of Pan's sensuous painting seems to echo certain aspects of Western Orientalist paintings. Orientalist representations generally emphasize the dissimilar appearance of non-white subjects from white models as they are implicitly known to have been produced for a white European audience. In "The Imaginary Orient", Linda Nochlin argues that the aesthetics of Orientalist paintings promulgate colonial stereotypes, which imply "processes of exclusion and concealment that naturalized and secured the privilege of Westerners to judge and fantasize about Islamic cultures" (Nochlin 1989: 33-34). The woman's carefully shaped arched eyebrows, powdered red cheeks and crimson lips in Pan's painting create a sensual and desirable image. Pan's nude is represented as a conventional image of decorative femininity, replete with Oriental references. The opulent interior setting that Pan so favoured (also seen in *Lazing Around*, Figure 5), with rich carpets and ornamented fabrics, not only denotes an Eastern background but also a sense of luxurious indulgence that Orientalists emphasized.

Indeed Matisse, by whom Pan appears to be enormously inspired, has been associated with the field of Western Orientalist paintings. Matisse appropriated not only the oriental-inspired motifs in his composition but also the spectacle of the colonized (his Moroccan sitters) for the production of his version of the beautiful. His abstract, high-color visual treatment also owes much to the Orientalist tradition. Implicating the context of Orientalism might seem a controversial way to situate Pan's nude paintings,

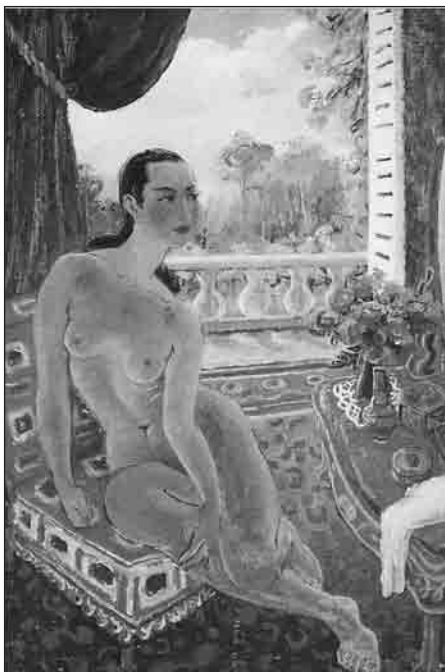


Figure 4. Pan Yuliang. *Woman by the Window*, 1946.  
78 x 120 cm, Oil on canvas. Anhui Provincial Museum.



Figure 5. Pan Yuliang. *Lazing Around* (detail), 1946.  
92 x 64 cm, Oil on canvas. Anhui Provincial Museum.

since she seems like the archetype subaltern figure, as a struggling female Asian artist, in Europe. However, it is important to recognize the ambiguous relationship Pan has with the representation of non-Western nudes in the European context. Because it is visibly undeniable that Pan was adopting certain aspects of the Western Orientalist aesthetics, a perceptive response to her work must canvas controversial interpretations of her representation of the nude.

In the French tradition, the capacity to create great art was perceived as an operation of the highest powers of intellect and imagination that belonged exclusively to the domain of men. Studies show that even in late nineteenth-century France – the nation that first proclaimed democracy and equal values to the world – the first enrolment of French women students into the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts in 1897 was met with vehement opposition (Garb 1994: 103). This prejudice towards women was likely to have extended into early twentieth-century Parisian society, when Pan was amongst the first Chinese women enrolled at the École, twenty-four years after the first male students' protest. Although Pan was diligent and talented, we can deduce from socio-cultural studies in gender, race and migration<sup>12</sup> that she would have encountered difficulty in gaining recognition within predominantly white and male French art circles. Susceptible to semi-colonization and war from Western powers and Japan, the unstable political standing of China projected a poor international image and that was unfavourable to overseas Chinese artists.

Due to the efforts of Cai Yuanpei and art educators like Liu Haisu and Lin Fengmian (林风眠), major exhibitions of Chinese art started to tour Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. While the exhibitions aimed partly to dispel dissatisfactory perceptions of China as a nation, the shows were met with less than desired success in terms of their reception. Writing on *Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes à Paris* in which the Chinese participated in 1925, Craig Clunas has highlighted the unfavourable yet paradoxical position of Chinese Arts. Clunas writes, "it was an event rich in irony, since China speaking for itself went unregarded by western opinion precisely at the time when a strong strand of Chinese-derived exoticism was so prominent in the art and design of European nations" (Craig 1989: 100-101). This not only reflects the poor standing of Asian arts in early twentieth-century Europe, but also highlights the political implications of colonialism and Orientalism on the reception of non-Western art.

It appears that that male Chinese artists generally did better than their female compatriots in early twentieth-century France. Pan's associates, Zao Wou-ki (赵无极, born 1921) and Sanyu (常玉, 1900-1966), were part of the small cohort of Chinese artists who were invited regularly to French organized male-dominated exhibitions. Studies on Zao and Sanyu show that although they too, like Pan, were often confined

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12 Examples of studies on female Asian migration in white-dominated societies include Enakshi Dua, "Exclusion through Inclusion: Female Asian Migration in the making of Canada as a White Settler Nation", *Gender, Place and Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Aug 2007, 445-466; and Seungsook Moon, "Immigration and Mothering: Case Studies from Two Generations of Korean Immigrant Women", *Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 6, Dec, 2003, 840-860. On the general oppression faced by immigrant women because of nationality and class, see chapters in Simon & Brettell, 1986, and Morokvasic, 1983.

to the category of *artistes chinois*, there was obviously more interest from the French in them, which was reflected in critical writings, publications and patronage from art connoisseurs. Zao's had strong support from his close friendships with Henri Michaux and Bernard Dorival, curator of the National Museum of Modern Art, who presented his first one-man show (as well as subsequent shows) in Paris at the Galerie Creuze in 1949. The show attracted the French art circle as well as the media, and a writer of the "Daily Mail" consequently gave Zao the title "Chinese Bonnard" after viewing the show.<sup>13</sup> Even the works of Sanyu, enigmatic to his Chinese compatriots, won the ardent support of a few dealers and patrons, such as Henri-Pierre Roché (1879-1959) and Johan Franco (1909-1988).

Pan's gender might have made it more difficult for her to secure close friendships and substantial support within the male-dominated art community. The fact that Chinese male artists were not overlooked to the same extent as their female counterpart within the French system implies that gender was as much a factor to consider in Pan's peripheral situation as her race and ethnicity. Hence, Pan could be subjected to double marginalization because of her ethnicity and gender. Ironically, Pan fled to France specifically because she felt Paris could accommodate a woman's creative energy more than her native country.

Studies have shown that representations of Asian women in the West are very much rooted in the socio-political systems of domination and cannot be separated from processes of struggle in relation to imperialism and representation. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri C. Spivak points out that women, more than men, are likely to suffer in the imperialist historiography of representation. Spivak writes, "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (Spivak 2006: 32). Pan's situation is further complicated by her controversial attempts to represent the oriental nude and her ambiguous style in doing so. Pan attempted to "speak" of her distinct identity in the West by turning her race, as well as her gender, into a site of self-expression through her multiple representations of the Oriental body. Besides portraying dark haired and skinned nudes, her paintings are often accompanied by indigenous embellishments, such as the ornate Chinese fan seen in her oil painting *Woman with a Fan*. In addition, her sitters are regularly decorated with an ethnic hairdo.

In fact, the facial demarcation and overall disposition of several of Pan's nudes resemble the appearance of the artist herself. Taking into consideration the steep cost of hiring models and possibly the lack of availability of Asian models in the West, Pan was likely to have posed for her own paintings. Boldly using herself to look into the unexplored area of the female Asian body, Pan appears to highlight the complexities and contradictions inherent in her "different" identity. By situating herself in a "vulnerable" subject position as the exotic "Other" ready for the viewer's consumption, and then disrupting the process of viewing by claiming authorship of the work, Pan destabilizes the fetishized imagination of the colonized as she interposes herself between spectator

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13 See Leymarie, Jean. *Zao Wou-ki*, documented by Francoise Marquet, translated by Kenneth Lyons, Spain: Ediciones Poligrafa, S.A., 1978.

and subject. Her power in representing and vulnerability in being represented complicates the exchange of viewing. Her attempts in depicting the oriental nude can be seen as reclaiming agency in nude representation from her subjective Asian female position.

## Conclusion

We have seen that Pan experienced ambivalence in presenting her “ideal” female image. Pan struggled to present alternative feminine images from her liminal position as an Asian woman and recipient of Western culture. The very history of nude painting that she was pursuing originated from Europe. From Lucien Simon, her French mentor, Pan learned to apply layers of complementary colors to create enriched multi-hue surfaces. Pan’s art training in Paris exposed her to both French traditional academic fashion and modernist trends, where representational and artistic codes were rigorously formulated by European men. From the above analysis, not only did she repeatedly use the flat and decorative style closely reminiscent of Matisse, Pan also appears to have followed a certain Orientalist approach in depicting women.

While Pan questions certain sexist constructions, paradoxically, her work can be simultaneously considered as embedded in the visual language of the Western European male canon. Thus it appears that, on one hand, while she is resisting the projection of white men’s fantasies on the female body and, on the other, she is conceding to it. While she is the maker of the work, Pan sometimes appears to be the participant and perhaps the voyeur of her pictures as well. Although she constructs a certain ideal, she also seems to confront its illusion. Pan’s paintings are full of contradictory signs that reveal her Asian feminist modernity in its very ambiguousness.

From her marginalized position, Pan worked against European constructions of women by appropriating, manipulating and subverting stereotypes of non-European women so as to reclaim a position as an artist. Pan’s work seeks to reclaim the female body as an active agent of artistic expression for women, questioning assumptions of the nude as the sole province of men and that pleasure in looking is an exclusively male prerogative. Pan’s point of departure in her exploration of Afro-Asian female nudes can be viewed as a corrective strategy to stereotypes of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Her remapping of the European icon of a beautiful body through the modernist discourse, tantamount to asserting her autonomy in Europe, underscores an Asian woman’s ability to create a sovereign visual experience. Against the secured segregation of Orientalist works by male European masters, Pan’s representations signal an intervention from a non-Western artist to reappraise the Orientalist subject. These interventions imply that the colonized is able to intervene in as well as to influence the discourse like the colonizer.

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### Biographical note

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