

# *The Image of Motherhood in New China in the Light of Gender Archaeological Research—On the Meaning of He Chengyao's Performance Art*

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**Abstract:** He Chengyao's performance art works not only reflect the collectivist immersion of contemporary people, but also the trauma that generations of Chinese women have suffered after facing the persecution of patriarchal thinking. From He Chengyao's performance art works, this paper explores contemporary Chinese women's thinking and outlook on the identity of motherhood.

## 1. Introduction

After the founding of New China, as the protection of women's rights and interests by national feminism was strengthened and the status of women continued to improve,<sup>[1]</sup> the image of motherhood in art has also expanded as society has progressed. However, the propaganda of the idea of "absolute equality" between men and women can be seen in the propaganda paintings of the early founding of the country,<sup>[2]</sup> this requires women to take on not only the same amount of labouring work as men, but also the reproductive duties and family commitments traditionally undertaken by women.<sup>[3]</sup> This idea of absolute equality may seem to enhance the status of women, but in fact, it is the only standard and yardstick for men, giving women a masculine character and ignoring the individuality of gender differences,<sup>[4]</sup> which has contributed to a long-standing lack of diversity in the way mothers are observed and in the way women express their feelings about becoming mothers. He's performance art works, *Open Great Wall*, *Mother and Me*, *99 Needles* and *Broadcast Exercises*, reflect her relationship with her mother and present a maternal image based on her unique feelings, using nude performance art to narrate a family history from the last century. This article takes some of He's performance artworks as case studies, and uses the oral histories of curator Wang Nanming<sup>1</sup> and artist He Chengyao<sup>2</sup> as first-hand materials to explore the historical background, art market and expression of female desire involved in He's performance artworks

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<sup>1</sup>Wang Nanming is the curator of *The Pain of the Heart - The Performance Art and Video Works by He Chengyao*, and an audience member of the exhibition of He's performance artworks. As an art critic, he focuses on political art criticism of contemporary artworks.

<sup>2</sup>He Chengyao was born in Chongqing, graduated from Sichuan Fine Arts Institute and studied at the Contemporary Art Workshop of the Oil Painting Department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts. He Chengyao has held eight solo exhibitions and participated in hundreds of group exhibitions since 2000, and has exhibited all over the world. In 2017, she became a nun in Myanmar and has not participated in secular activities since then.

through the literature reviews.

## 2. The Family History of Maternal Images and Collectivist Thinking

In 2007, He Chengyao's retrospective solo exhibition "Pain in Soul - Performance Art and Video Works by He Chengyao" was exhibited at the Shanghai Zhongda Museum of Modern Art. *Open Great Wall*, *Mother and Me*, *99 Needles*, and *Broadcast Exercises*, which form a complete chain of stories, are all exhibited in pictorial form as important performance art works by He Chengyao. In *Open Great Wall*, He Chengyao mimics a scene in which her mother walks naked down a lane in her hometown with mental illness, which has led to controversy and discussion among journalists and the art world. *Mother and Me* links the artist's undressing to her mother's experience, explaining that her mother's mental illness was the result of an unwed pregnancy and demonstrating the artist's understanding and acceptance of her mentally ill mother. In *99 Needles*, He Chengyao experiences the physical pain suffered by her mother, as a reflection of the living conditions of the mentally ill at the time, and this work, along with *Broadcast Exercises*, expresses the collective cruelty to the individual. *Testimony* brings together three generations of He's family in a series of images that express the artist's thoughts on the past, present and future.

Wang Nanming argues that the depiction in *Broadcast Exercises* goes beyond the dimension of the photograph. In *Broadcast Exercises*, He Chengyao uses a sealing tape, wrapped around her body, with the adhesive-coated side exposed. After wrapping the artist's body with the tape, a broadcast exercise is performed in the gallery. Because of the adhesive on the straps, the artist's limbs were stuck together when there was a movement that required them to merge. Later on, when she was doing stretching exercises, the stuck limbs could only be separated after a struggle. As the exercise movements of the broadcast continue, the artist's straps are repeatedly glued together and separated. The sound of the straps repeatedly tearing from each other in the open and quiet environment of the gallery becomes a metaphor for the artist's struggle:

*"This work, as an independent work of hers, is at the same time more focused on our living environment, on such a subconscious and collective behaviour of our Chinese people, which is derived from her single, personal encounter to a wider social scene."<sup>3</sup>*

He Chengyao's 'personal encounter' refers to the psychological trauma of her childhood due to her illegitimate status and her mother's mental illness. As a result of her mother's unmarried pregnancy, He's parents lost their stable jobs, and in a time of deep sexual taboos, there was a strong rejection of the practice of unmarried pregnancy in rural areas, which led to He's mother being freely discussed and even humiliated in the streets. Under great mental stress, He's mother suffered from mental illness. The scene in "*Open Great Wall*", in which He walks naked on the Great Wall, is a parody of her mother walking naked on the street during a psychotic episode. With limited medical treatment, He's mother's mental illness was not well treated and she continued to bear children under the pressure of the patriarchal. As a child, He witnessed her mother's suffering and pain, and this performance art work, *99 Needles*, is a reproduction of her mother's repeated persecution.

Wang Nanming has a great interest in broadcast exercises as a form of exercise, and he believes that such activities have a great impact on the shaping of one's consciousness. As early as the late 1990s, Wang's views on broadcast exercises were included in his review of Zhang Jianjun's *TAICHI-Disco*. He argued that the broadcast exercises performed by the Chinese since childhood was a way of implicitly teaching the idea of collectivism. In expressing collectivism, He Chengyao has cleverly chosen the form of broadcast exercises, a work of performance art that combines a sense of history with a sense of the present. From Wang Nanming's interpretation and commentary

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<sup>3</sup>Extracts from the author's interview with Wang Nanming on 13th October 2022.

on the work "*Broadcast Exercises*", He Chengyao has performed the struggle of the individual mind under the impact of the great current of collectivism in an intuitive and clever way. The development of the concept of "collectivism" and the emergence of the "collective" and the "individual" as a set of concepts is inseparable from the development of scientific socialism. Collectivism in its narrow sense is inseparable from communism and socialism, which requires individuals to choose to protect collective interests in the face of conflicting interests between the collective and the individual, and requires the political system to take democratic centralism as its main form and the economy to develop in the form of a planned and collective economy. In contrast to individualism, collectivism in the broader sense has "altruism" as its essential feature, and promotes the individual's contribution to the authority of the collective.<sup>[5]</sup> In the process of the spread of Marxism and its application to the development of Chinese socialism, Chinese collectivism was unique because of its deep patriarchal tradition; in ancient patriarchal societies, the family, clan, clan and state could all be a collective, and this ancient collectivism was called 'patriarchal collectivism'. Patriarchal collectivism was based on the core concept of filial piety, and used the 'three principles' to maintain the order of family, clan and state (or society), stipulating the hierarchy of respect between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife.<sup>[6]</sup> He Chengyao's mother's mental illness was caused by her unwed pregnancy, which was not allowed by traditional ethics. The low productivity of the medical system at the time did not allow for proper treatment of He's mother, and there was a lack of understanding and tolerance for the mentally ill, so He's parents lost their jobs and her mother was traumatised.

### 3. Nude Performance Art in the Art Market

On 17th May 2001, He Chengyao visited Schulte's exhibition with other fanatical artists and journalists. While walking on the Great Wall, she suddenly took off her red coat and walked in the queue, a move He called performance art and named it "Open Great Wall"<sup>[7]</sup>. In Wang Nanming's recollection, *Open Great Wall* was a relatively sketchy piece of work, and the art media at the time reported the work simply:

*"There was a person who took off her shirt and walked on the Great Wall, and there happened to be a German artist doing junk art at the time, making a work on the Great Wall. She then took her clothes off right there."*

The media at the time was not positive about this work, and through the influence of the media, people's perception of performance art was one-sided - performance artists tended to be demonised by the media, and the unserious mass media took a cynical and derisive attitude towards art and artists, and the climate of public opinion was completely hostile to avant-garde artists. The environment of public opinion is completely hostile to avant-garde artists.

Although He Chengyao was lesser-known at the time, there was some discussion in art circles as to whether He Chengyao's *Open Great Wall* was a work of art: most people thought that He Chengyao's act was just a way to please the public, and the artist's name did not appear in the journalists' reports. As a result, the only people who knew about this work of art at the time were the students of the Central Academy of Fine Arts Advanced Research Class<sup>5</sup> who were with He Chengyao and a small number of other people. The media coverage of this work of performance art was also one-sided, and its audience was easily led to equate performance art with the act of undressing and mental disorder. At a time when the socialist market economy had achieved great

<sup>4</sup>In 2018, Wei Shuling's *Experimental Beijing: Gender and Globalization in Chinese Contemporary Art* was published, with a more in-depth discussion of He Chengyao's *Open Great Wall* and other works.

<sup>5</sup>Her studies at the Central Academy of Fine Arts Advanced Research Class played an important role in shifting He Chengyao's artistic experience from that of an art teacher to that of a freelance artist. In the interview, curator Wang Nan-ming mentioned that the senior class at the Central Academy of Fine Arts had produced a number of freelance artists at the time; however, in an interview with He Chengyao on 3rd January 2023, she recalled that many of the students from the senior class went on to work as art educators.

success and internationalisation was on the rise, but when most people were not yet aware of their femininity, the act of removing one's clothes was also seen as an act of exchanging one's body for fame and fortune. However, Wang Nanming had high praise for He Chengyao's attitude towards art. He believes that in the early 2000s, when the domestic art market was still almost non-existent, the underground avant-garde artists' creation of performance art and installation art was very pure.

The success of He's exhibition at the Shanghai Zhenda Museum of Modern Art was a stroke of luck. Six years after the performance of *Open Great Wall*, the museum still does not allow performance art, so the curator chose to present her work in photos and video format. As the curator of a formal art museum, Wang Nanming was unable to allow He Chengyao's performance art to be presented in a live performance on the floor. Cultural censorship allows most artists to perform, photograph, and communicate with each other without the knowledge of the public. Therefore, after weighing the risks and the content of the exhibition, the curators decided to exhibit He's work in the form of photographs and videos at the Shanghai Zhenda Museum of Modern Art. When asked about the reaction of the audience to the exhibition, the curator said that as the exhibition had only a small audience, there was little impact and no further discussion.

#### 4. Expressions of Female Eroticism

Although gender archaeology presupposes a dichotomy of gender in the process of research, it is intended to illustrate the conclusion that the division of labour in ancient human societies was not related to gender. In addition to Wang Nanming's criticism of the political nature of He's work, Cai Qing's exposition of He Chengyao's artistic healing, and Wei Shuling's Western-centric view of He's work in relation to Western contemporary art, He's performance art is also noteworthy for the desire revealed in the nude itself.

As mentioned earlier, He's mother's unwed pregnancy is an expression of a woman's rebellion against morality and control over her own body, and her psychotic attack on others is a form of mental self-protection - only she can destroy herself. When He's mother lost her job, lost her financial resources and had nothing to lose, the only "weapon" she had was her naked body, which was not only a symbol of rebellion against society, but also a demonstration of female desire. He Chengyao's performance art works, in imitation of her mother, express her inheritance of the role of 'mother' in terms of identity. Inheriting her mother's identity, she also inherits her mother's rebellion; as a woman who cannot escape the discipline, she expresses her female desire and her control over her body through this series of works.

Commenting on Claude Lévi-Strauss's and Freud's views on incest and taboo, Judith Butler argues that desire should not be rightfully constructed as some kind of privilege for heterosexual men, and that taboo is born out of desire.<sup>[8]</sup> The reason for He's strong identification with her mother is not just their shared motherhood and female gender, but the fact that during childhood, the original female desire is projected onto the mother, and the daughter internalises the taboo against her mother's desire, thus creating a female gender identity.<sup>[9]</sup> In internalising her motherhood, the 'daughter' also internalises the trauma of her mother. At the same time, under the taboo of incest, the 'daughter' is forced to give up her homosexual fantasies and acquires a feminine and melancholic temperament, resulting in a heterosexuality that is melancholic in nature.<sup>[10]</sup> Analysing Butler's theory, He's own process of combining her nude performance art with her mother's is in fact a self-violent act of the subject against herself, in which she acknowledges the interventions and traces of the other in order to seek existence. In her performance art works, He Chengyao presents the rebellion that comes from the suppression of primitive desire. In this sense, the power of He Chengyao's works related to her mother comes from the release of primitive desire, the confrontation of "melancholic heterosexuality" and the subversion of heterosexual power structures.

He Chengyao's series of artworks related to her mother are some kind of public display of ritual art. The earliest of these works, *Open Great Wall*, is very reminiscent of Cersei Lannister's naked tour of the city in the tenth episode of the fifth season of the television series *Game of Thrones*, and the similar painful stabbing and crucifixion in *99 Needles*. For the abused, the process is similar to that of torture in SM. For the masochist, pain, punishment and humiliation are all necessary to ensure ultimate pleasure, and the process of masochism is a state of waiting that delays the arrival of pleasure; the form of fantasy, the waiting and delay, the display and the demand for punishment constitute the four basic elements of masochism.<sup>[11]</sup> He Chengyao's performance art work on the theme of 'Mother' uses a mother walking naked and being stabbed with needles as a form of witnessing her body being restrained in the form of nudity and performing her struggle after being stabbed with needles and wrapped in a box of straps, to gain inner peace after the performance. This work, which exposes the female body as an expression of female desire, has been deliberately de-emphasised by Wang Nanming as a politically critical work against collectivism, not as a sublimation of its subject matter, but rather as an expression of the devouring of female artists and feminist artworks in a patriarchal art system. In He Chengyao's work, 'mother' is not only an identity, but also an object of identification, a projection of desire and a template for fantasy.

## 5. Conclusion

Past analyses of He Chengyao's performance art works have mainly focused on her family history, the context of the era in which she lived, and the level of art therapy. He Chengyao's performance art works not only reveal the survival of rural women in the 1960s, but also express and release the denied and suppressed female desire and primitive homosexuality for thousands of years.

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