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Staged and Reconstructed Memories: Temporality and Aestheticization in Chen Yifei's Paintings

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DEDICATION

To my family

my loved ones

those who have loved and supported me along my journey

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis investigates how Chen Yifei mobilizes evolving modes of realism to stage, aestheticize, and mediate memory in the context of post-Mao China. Focusing first on *Thinking About History at My Space* (1979), then his later *Poppy* (1991) and *Maids of Honor* (1998), the study examines how Chen's works transform realism from a tool of ideological narration into one of emotional and visual negotiation. In the former, realism is a psychological and spatial mode for reflecting on national trauma and historical rupture, integrating photomontage and self-portraiture to reconstruct a contemplative historical subjectivity. The later female figurative paintings reorient realism toward beauty and nostalgic desire, objectifying the female body as a curated surface for expressing cultural longing and constructing an aestheticized, consumable "Chineseness." This paper thus sets forth Chen's turn from historical witness to cultural entrepreneur, which reflects deeper tensions between remembrance and display, national identity and global taste. Ultimately, Chen's realism emerges as a mutable framework—one that refracts history, gender, and ideology through artifice and allure, revealing the uneasy entanglements of memory, modernity, and commodification in the nation's as well as the artist's personal transitions.

Introduction

Chen Yifei (1946–2005) occupies a singular position in the development of Chinese contemporary art, traversing the ideological shifts from Maoist collectivism to post-socialist commercial culture with a practice rooted in evolving forms of realism. What sets Chen apart is his seamless transition from state-sponsored artist during the Cultural Revolution to a market-savvy figure of China's reform era—an unusual trajectory marked by his later ventures into film, fashion, and lifestyle branding, and the creation of a successful media persona. This paper brings into focus two key moments in his oeuvre: the 1979 oil painting *Thinking About History at My Space* (Figure1), and the portrayal of female subjects that dominated his later career in the 1990s and early 2000s. While at first glance these works seem to belong to separate artistic and ideological registers—one invested in national trauma and historical reckoning, the other saturated with nostalgia and beauty—this thesis argues that they are connected through a shared commitment to realism as both method and affective strategy. As Jason McGrath, a film historian who specialized in modern and contemporary Chinese cinema and literature, notes, for Chinese artists, "realism was intimately linked to modernity itself."[1] Chen's works display a modern sensibility that uses realist aesthetics to negotiate memory, trauma, and cultural transformation in post-Mao China. More than a stylistic continuity, Chen's meticulous realism should be understood as a mutable framework for representing history, memory, and aestheticization amid China's rapid social transfigurations.

Painted shortly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, *Thinking About History at My Space* is emblematic of the Scar Art movement, which emerged in China in the late 1970s as a visual counterpart to the Scar Literature movement, marked by its turn toward individual

[1] Jason McGrath. *Chinese Film : Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

emotion and introspection in contrast to the heroic collectivism of Socialist Realism.[2] Chen's depiction of himself as a solitary intellectual standing in front of a wall of documentary images is an early visual articulation of psychological realism—what Julia Andrews has described as a return to the self after a period of extreme ideological suppression.[3] Here, realism serves as a site of quiet resistance, reclaiming the inner life as a legitimate subject of representation. Joan Lebold Cohen, an American art historian, curator, and photographer specializing in modern and contemporary Chinese art, similarly identifies this moment as one of rupture, where artists began to renegotiate their own relationships to history through personal memory, rather than state narrative.[4]

By the 1990s, Chen had shifted from depictions of historical reflection to producing lush, hyperrealistic portraits of elegant yet somber Chinese women—often dressed in clothes similar to, or which combined multiple features of, qipao, a form of women's dress that became especially popular in Republic-era Shanghai during the early 1900s, Qing dynasty Han and Manchu dresses. The women are usually posed in intimate interiors, their gazes distant, their bodies languid. These images, widely circulated through galleries, fashion advertisements, and even films, mark Chen's transition from state-trained oil painter to transnational cultural entrepreneur. Critics such as Wu Hung have noted how these later paintings exemplify a kind of "selective memory," one that repackages fragments of cultural heritage into aestheticized commodities.[5] They often display Chen's commercial allure, reaffirming his entrepreneurial

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[2] Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 302–304.
[3] Julia Frances Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China: 1949–1979* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 342–345.
[4] Joan Lebold Cohen, *The New Chinese Painting: 1949–1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), 144–47.
[5] Wu Hung, "A Case of Being 'Contemporary,'" in *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents, ed. Wu Hung* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 161–63.

success. Yet this body of work also demands closer scrutiny: it stages an intimate and complex realism, one that is intricately entangled with personal memory and sensibility, no less ideological than his earlier works, one grounded in beauty, melancholia, and gendered nostalgia. As Aida Yuen Wong argues, the feminine ideal in modern East Asian art frequently becomes a site for projecting anxieties about modernity and national identity.[6] Chen's works inhabit a space of ambiguity. He is enamored with beauty and history, the underlying multifaceted complexities; but his works also embody the tensions between reclaiming an identity and adapting to thus succeed in a globalized, Western-dominated art market.

This thesis brings *Thinking About History at My Space* and Chen's female portraits into critical dialogue through the interpretive lens of realism—reimagined not as a fixed doctrine, but as a conceptual mode through which Chen navigated shifting political, historical, and personal terrains. Drawing from previous scholarship, primary visual analysis, and exhibition materials, this study situates Chen Yifei's oeuvre within broader discourses of history, time, and the commodification of nostalgia. This paper does not recount Chen Yifei's entire artistic trajectory in totality. I intend to focus only on his transitional and pivotal piece, *Thinking About History at My Space* (1979), as well as his two comparatively later pieces, *Poppy* (1991) and *Maids of Honor* (1998), to demonstrate the artist's motives in reshaping cultural memory, more specifically, his intent to represent selected histories to construct and present his own complex vision of the nation's past as well as his role within. Ultimately, the paper provides a new and thorough reading into Chen Yifei's paintings. It also argues that Chen's works not only reflect a persistence and continuity in his artistic style of realism, but also an evolving language of

[6] Aida Yuen Wong, *Visualizing Beauty: Gender and Ideology in Modern East Asia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 112–19.

emotional and ideological negotiation—where the intimate is always closely associated with the historical, and the beauty is embedded in the burden of memory.

Embodied Histories: Reframing the Past

Chen Yifei's *Thinking About History at My Space* (1979) is an epic-scale oil painting measuring 186 x 356 cm. The work depicts the artist himself in quiet contemplation, facing a wall of reconstructed key moments in the history of modern China from the Opium War to the May Fourth Movement, creatively folding a linear chronology while achieving breakthroughs in both technique and thought (Figure 1). In *Thinking About History at My Space*, Chen Yifei blends documentary realism with deliberate theatrical staging that mimics the authority of historical truth, to construct a deeply personal yet instructive vision of China's past over a century of national struggle and perseverance; yet he subtly disrupts the objective narrative to assert his own authorship over historical memory. This part focuses on how this painting embodies the artist's nuanced approach to narrating history, reflecting his unique engagement with China's socio-political transformations during the late 20th century. Through analyzing the painting's composition, symbolism, and interplay of historical and personal motifs, I will examine the historical narratives the artist is drawing from and his careful selection and staging of such events.

During the 20th century, modern Chinese art underwent a rapid transition, with shifting subjects and styles that reflected the nation's turbulent political changes—particularly around the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. This artistic evolution was closely tied to Mao Zedong's agenda to erase the fragmented and "feudal" past and replace it with a unified, state-controlled visual culture that glorified revolutionary ideals and reinforced the authority of

the Communist Party. Emerging in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and amidst the reform era initiated by Deng Xiaoping, Chinese artists sought to redefine their roles in a society transitioning from ideological collectivism to individualistic and more self-oriented ideals. Among them was Chen Yifei, a modern realist oil painter. Born in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, Chen Yifei came of age during the Cultural Revolution, an era that profoundly shaped his artistic and cultural outlook. Trained in Socialist Realism at the Shanghai Art Academy, and under the influence of Mao's call for revolutionary realism, Chen Yifei's early works responded to the calls of the Communist propagandist art trends of the time, and manifested a romantic idealism. However his career took a pivotal turn when he moved to the United States in 1980 to study at Hunter College in New York. Immersed in Western artistic traditions, Chen embraced Romanticism and photorealism, blending these influences with elements of traditional Chinese aesthetics, which built up his later works of female portraits. Returning to China in the 1990s, Chen became a leading figure in the revival of Chinese realist oil painting, known for his evocative portrayals of nostalgia, history, and identity. *Thinking About History at My Space* reveals sophisticated reflections on personal and collective historical narratives, positioning him as a central figure in the dialogue between history and modernity in contemporary Chinese art.

Thinking About History at My Space is a true transitional piece, not only for the art of the country in general with the "Reform and Opening-Up" period that granted increased engagement with the outside world, but also for the artist himself, standing at a unique midpoint and intersection within Chen's larger oeuvre. It is distinctively different from his previous well-known propaganda paintings of patriotic themes under Mao's exhortations, such as *Yellow River* (1972) and *The Taking of the Presidential Palace* (1977), yet is also different from his later works of female portraits in a much more Western artistic style. One might also say that this

painting is Chen's departure from the nationalistic, communist, revolutionary romanticism realism to his later investment in aestheticized and even more commercialized projects. Created in 1979, a momentous year in Chinese history when Deng Xiaoping initiated a series of economic and social reforms that profoundly altered the nation's trajectory, Chen's painting is truly a significant hinge of not only his own artist style, but also art in broader Chinese society. Deng's policies, known as "Reform and Opening-up," prioritized modernization and opening China to the world, and more importantly, emphasized the restoration of economic as well as intellectual and artistic freedom that was tightly constrained by Mao's rigid regulations. In Chen's own narrative in a later interview, when asked about his opinions towards the socialist-realist painting during the time of Cultural Revolution, he stated that he believed that the "art during that specific time served as an important and irreplaceable cultural component;" yet it was less about the pure form of art itself than it was about time and culture. Therefore, this painting by Chen, with a distinct style of realism infused with the technique of photomontage that was never seen in his previous works, is a turning point in his artistic career. It corresponds to the drastically transformative political moment, serving as a defining moment in sharp contrast to his later commercially-oriented artistic career.

Under the ideological control and restrictions on the expression of art during the Cultural Revolution, most artists strictly adhered to the ideals of socialism and glorifying the proletariat. They did achieve success, yet at the detriment of the freedom to explicitly state the brutal history. Therefore, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, in the crucial turning moment of 1979, Chen Yifei created the piece, *Thinking About History at My Space*, finally able to be free of censorship and propaganda-driven mandates. The realistic approach he takes on in creating this painting is filled with his own insights and interpretations of history, as can be seen from his carefully

curated references demonstrated through his photomontage of events. In this self-portrait, the artist paints his own self from the back for the first and only time. He turns his body to the viewer, inviting us to join him in contemplating the historical scenes he presents to us, and to together reflect on the theme of modern history. He encapsulates the chaos and fragmentation of early twentieth-century China not through literal depiction, but by constructing a psychological and aesthetic space that transcends factual reality, offering instead a rumination on national trauma and the enduring, elusive search for meaning amidst disintegration. Through this particular realist style, Chen reimagines history not as grand narrative but as mood and space, transforming realism into a vehicle for cultural reflection in a rapidly modernizing China.

For the viewer to do so, it is also crucial for one to recognize the significant historical events Chen depicts in the background of the painting. Chen selects key moments of the early 1900s, a period of drastic transformations from the end of imperial rule to a time of fragmentation and warlordism, that laid foundation for the establishment of China as a modern nation. He draws directly from historical reportage photographs, establishing his creation with solid and accurate sources. In between the empty wooden chair and the artist's figure, the background depicts scenes that reference these historical moments in a hazy, layered, blurred, and subdued manner. A disconnected series of historical vignettes are portrayed in a style that resembles photomontage, with each section layered with others. The fragmented pieces of historical narratives thus together create a sense of bridged historical continuity, yet with the underlying rupture introduced by modernity. However, these depictions reference more than reality. It is a combination of the veristic and imaginary and suppositive, which generates an almost phantomic scene that is intentionally created by Chen Yifei to revive the buried memories of the chaotic past. He reconstructs out of the rubble of history, his personal, as well as the

collective memory of the turbulent national past. The painting thus does not only depict the history itself. Instead, it is integrated with the personal rewriting of the artist's intimate relationship and nostalgic memory of the history.

Most distinctively, occupying the most prominent position almost in the center of the composition, at the left to the artist himself, Chen likely depicts the May Fourth Movement, a significant moment when students and intellectuals rallied against foreign imperialism and traditional Confucian values, calling for cultural and political modernization (Figure 2). This event represented a watershed moment in modern Chinese history, embodying a collective demand to reflect on China's past and reshape its future. On May 4th of 1919, as a response to the Treaty of Versailles, which transferred German-controlled territories in China to Japan instead of restoring Chinese sovereignty, over 3,000 students from Beijing University and other institutions marched to Tiananmen Square to protest against both foreign imperialism and the weak leadership of the Chinese government. The action resulted in the government's violent suppression which revealed its authoritarian tendencies. Arrests, physical punishments, and censorship reflected its unwillingness to accommodate dissenting voices. This is thus referenced by Chen in his muted and ghostly depiction, reflecting the emotional and physical consequences of this period—frustration, anger, and disillusionment resulted from the government's failure to protect national interests and its suppression of patriotic youth. The blurred figures of protestors also make visible the physical sacrifices made by students and intellectuals, some of whom were beaten, arrested, and even executed.

In Chen's depiction of the event, the most direct reference is the flag held by a student protester that takes up almost one fourth of the upper canvas. This is an image drawn directly from the historical photograph of Peking University students demonstrating in Beijing on May 4,

1919. The flag is the Five-Colored Flag (五色旗), which was originally the national flag of the Republic of China from 1912 to 1928 and held symbolic importance during the early Republican period, including around the time of the May Fourth Movement in 1919 (Figure 3). The flag features five horizontal stripes—red, yellow, blue, white, and black—representing the five major ethnic groups in China: Han (red), Manchu (yellow), Mongol (blue), Hui (white), and Tibetan (black). It was intended to promote unity under the slogan "五族共和", meaning "the harmony of five races." While the flag was not a direct symbol of the May Fourth Movement, its presence in the political landscape of the 1910s and 1920s offers a critical visual and ideological contrast to the anti-imperialist, culturally iconoclastic ethos of the May Fourth generation. Here, Chen uses it as a layered symbol, evoking both the early Republican dream of ethnic harmony and the complex historical legacies that May Fourth intellectuals sought to challenge, which also contains an ironic undertone, considering the soon-to-come Chinese civil war and the party divisions and violent power struggles. By portraying these faint scenes in the background, Chen captures both the heroism of those who fought for change and the brutality they faced in their quest for a modern liberated nation. Such a theme and depiction would have been strictly banned and censored during the time of Cultural Revolution. Yet in this 1979 painting, Chen manages to intentionally state and objectively present this part of the past, constructing a continuous narrative of history and filling in the blanks that were silenced and beautified by Communist propaganda for the public.

Directed by the artist's left tilted head and gaze is another rather more realistically and directly referenced portrayal — the aftermath of an execution of Chinese Boxers (Figure 4). The Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901) was a violent anti-foreign, anti-Christian uprising led by a Chinese secret society known as the "Boxers." Fueled by frustration over foreign imperialism, missionary

activity, and Qing government's incapacity, the movement culminated in widespread attacks on foreigners and Chinese Christians, ultimately resulting in an international military intervention and further humiliation for the already faltering Qing dynasty. Though short-lived, the rebellion exposed the internal fractures and external pressures that plagued China at the dawn of the twentieth century, ushering in decades of political instability, revolution, and identity crisis. Chen Yifei's depiction responds not with direct historical illustration, but through a subdued and contemplative visual language that embodies the psychological legacy of this national rupture. The deceased's head lies away from his body, creating a strikingly gory scene.

Yet what is more striking are the spectators' almost illogically impassive reaction to the execution. The three men depicted in the near back facing the viewers seem almost apathetic. They seem to be accustomed to such a scene, callous or almost numb to beheaded bodies lying on the streets. According to Lu Xun's writing in the preface to *Outcry* (1922), he famously observed an "apathetic crowd of Chinese onlookers" who gathered around to watch the "imminent beheading of a Chinese spy for the Russians by Japanese soldiers."[7] This narrative is often accompanied by a famous reportage image of execution speculatively seen by Lu Xun when he was a student at the Sendai Medical Academy in Japan.[8] Therefore it could be understood that it was almost a common scene at the time that citizens gathered to watch the executions for entertainment. However, upon closer scrutiny, one can discern that there is not only insensibility on the onlookers' faces here depicted by Chen Yifei.[9] There are also expressions of confusion, shock, and sympathy, a sense of mixed feelings that are subtle but hard to overlook. Chen here seems to disprove Lu Xun's narrative of the insensibility of Chinese

[7] Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, Preface to *Outcry* in *Lu Xun: Selected Works, vol. 1* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 34–35.
[8] Winnie Won Yin Wong, "Lantern Slide Moments and the Taught Subject, 1906 and 2006." *Positions: Asia critique* 23, no. 1 (2015), 91.
[9] See Figure 5, close-up section of *Thinking About History at My Space* (1979).

people, indicating the complexity of Chinese peoples' emotions towards the misery of their compatriots under the violence of foreigners. Chen Yifei thus intentionally includes a detailed and carefully constructed section to subvert the British narrative which characterizes "Chinese people as capable of expressing only insensibility to suffering," thereby demonstrating their "contempt for the foreigners and their devices" used to execute their compatriots.[10]

The artist's posture, with slightly hunched shoulders and downward gaze directing our gaze to the brutal scene, implies the burden of memory and deep contemplation. Thus rather than depicting the Boxer Rebellion directly, Chen evokes its aftermath: a space where history has left visible scars not on the body but on the mind. The lack of action or narrative drama in the image heightens its emotional resonance, suggesting that the real chaos of early twentieth-century China is not only in the violence itself but in the silence that follows—the confusion, mourning, and paralysis that mark a nation's uncertain future. Through this visual stillness, Chen reflects on history as something lived internally and psychologically, offering a deeply personal interpretation of national trauma that is full of emotions and transcends the mere documentary realism of Socialist art.

Similarly drawing from historical photographs, right above this section, on the upper left, Chen depicts the ignominious moment when the warlord Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) attempted to crown himself as emperor right after China became a republic (1912). This references the photograph of Yuan's inauguration as Provisional President of the Republic of China in Beijing (Figure 6). Yuan is depicted with three of the leaders of the Beiyang Government, one of them, on the right, is the warlord Duan Qirui (1865-1936) (Figure 7). Yuan's failure to reinstate a monarchy fractured China politically. The central government lost legitimacy, and the country descended into warlordism, where regional military leaders seized control of provinces. Yuan's

[10] Hevia, *The Photography Complex*, 110.

actions symbolize a failure to reconcile tradition and modernity, and the ghostly quality of these depictions suggests how these moments—fraught with betrayal and disillusionment—continue to haunt China's collective memory. Through illustrating these scenes, Chen further dauntlessly reveals the unspeakable chaotic history of warlordism and internal instability of the nation, piecing together the fragmented memory of the harsh past.

Whereas the left side of the background represents harsh dictatorship and ignorance, to the right of where the artist positions himself seems to depict the theme of new hope. Students together rise against the warlords, the formation of the new Communist organization led by Zhou Enlai, and the depiction of peasants that represent the bewildered masses and the later unity of social classes, all together allude to the improved agency of Chinese people after the nation's new founding of the republic.[11] The background of the painting is thus not merely a setting but an integral part of the painting's narrative, serving as a repository of collective trauma and reflection. Chen creates depth by layering the background, blending historical imagery with the muted tones of the walls and floor. This layering suggests that history is always present, embedded in the space the artist inhabits.The interplay between the clearly rendered foreground and the hazy background also underscores the tension between personal experience and collective memory. Its visual elements, while evoking the complexity of Chinese history and reflecting both collective memory and the personal process of reconciling with the past, also demonstrate the artist's attempt in bridging the fragmented memory of the country's brutal past. Its positioning behind the contemplative figure of Chen implies that the past serves as both an unerasable burden and a foundation for identity. Much like the May Fourth intellectuals urged critical self-reflection to reform Chinese society, this work challenges viewers for a critical

[11] Joan L Cohen, *CHEN YIFEI: The Yellow River wasn't red enough*. ARTnews, 1980, Vol.79(6), p.71.

reevaluation of China's cultural and political identity, thus urging us to embalm history and consider how history informs their present.

The interplay between the background and the foreground also amplifies the painting's masterful handling of the spatial arrangement, as well as an investigation of temporality. The background, endered in subdued tones, grays, browns, and muted earth colors, creates a somber, reflective atmosphere, acting as the silent witness to the weight of history. This restrained palette evokes a sense of distance, as though the background exists in the realm of memory rather than immediate reality. Its muted and fragmented imagery also suggest a non-linear temporality—a fragmented, continuous flow of history where moments coexist rather than follow a strict chronological order, reinforcing the idea that history, while ever-present, is often partial, obscured, or painful to confront. These visual choices reflect the passage of time and the impermanence of historical moments, as well as the way we perceive history as a collection of fleeting, overlapping memories rather than a single, coherent narrative. Shifting to the foreground, on the left side of the plane is an old black wooden chair with a heavy sense of history, on the right side is the back of the artist himself with his head bowed in contemplation.

The original Chinese title is 踱步 (duo bu), meaning to pace or to walk back and forth in a contemplative mood. The verb is often used to highlight not only the physical action of pacing, but also the emotional state of contemplation, pondering, and important decision making. This original title thus aligns with the posture the artist portrays himself in, revealing his intentional positioning of himself as one who is caught up in thoughts. This spatial juxtaposition creates a temporal tension: the background represents the past, layered and blurred to suggest the passage of time and its enduring impact on the present, while the foreground represents the present, a still, reflective moment frozen in time. The vertical posture of the artist contrasts the sense of

immobility and permanence created by the rigid structure of the chair. By positioning himself as a reflective observer, Chen suggests that history is not something to be actively changed in this moment but rather something to be understood, pondered, and internalized. The self portrayal of Chen in the foreground thus serves as the nexus between the personal and the historical. Moreover, the artist and the chair anchor the composition in stillness, one that also captures the specific moment of reflection, while the layered, faded background implies the continuous flow of time. This duality embodies introspection and thus challenges the viewer to ponder upon their relationship to history: Are we passive observers frozen in time, or active participants in shaping its future?

The prominent empty chair is thus not part of the historical imagery but interacts with the background symbolically. It represents the absence of individuals silenced or displaced during these events, while signifying a dialogic connection with those who are absent, creating an interplay between presence and void, continuity and disconnection. Its position within the spatial arrangement creates an emphasized void in the continuity of history, perhaps representing history as a space that needs to be examined, occupied, or reconciled. For Chen Yifei himself personally, it might also signify his determination for a departure, both from the misery and horror of the nation's past and his choice of subject in depiction. He leaves the chair empty and stands in the center of the frame, looking back to the history and contemplating, and determined to step forward to his own new era. The chair thus also implicates viewers in the act of reconstructing history and memory, inviting us to take a seat in the empty chair he leaves behind, and revisit this collective history.

Thinking About History at My Space creates an incisive focus, negotiating the duality of cultural legacy and modernity, serving as a meditation on history of the post-revolution era.

Through the use of realistic photomontage depiction of history, intricate and layered composition, and unique spatial construction, Chen constructs a sense of timelessness, inviting viewers to posit oneself through his own lens; he reveals his objective and neutral attitude towards the historical disruptions, stepping aside to allow history to reveal itself. The brutal and chaotic documentation of war-time and post-war China serves as a manifestation of the nation's modern establishment, through which Chen unfolds not only the historical moments but also a contemplation of the country's as well as his own past and future.

Therefore, by recontextualizing historical imagery within a controlled, contemplative setting, Chen reframes collective history as a personal act of interpretation, claiming the right to not only remember and remind the nation's past but to reshape how it is emotionally and visually understood. He positions himself as both witness and narrator, inviting viewers not merely to recall history but to reconsider it through the lens of individual reflection and national introspection. He does not merely demand we think through the lens he provides; he also asks us to take our own initiative, just as he does in creating this painting, to get rid of the tinted glasses imposed by the ideological contrarian of the Cultural Revolution, to revisit the catastrophic experience, thus to rethink about history, both collectively and individually, through a objective yet critical perspective.

Silent Spaces, Aestheticized Bodies

Although Chen Yifei's female figure paintings at first sight are distinctly different from his previous history-oriented paintings, they continue to closely engage with the theme of history and his exploration of realism as a conceptual framework. Chen Yifei tailors multifaceted aspects of the history together, seen through the hybrid style of clothing of the women and the

melancholic atmosphere that alludes to early twentieth century China. He displays his own agency in iterating the theme of history, however, he removes the autonomy of the female subjects in these successfully commercialized paintings of Chinese women, reducing them to sexualized aestheticized presentation. These works are not devoid of memory or ideology; rather, they reorient the gaze from collective trauma to aestheticized longing, mapping cultural nostalgia onto the female body.

From Historical Witness to Aesthetic Producer

Chen Yifei's relocation to New York City in 1980, just one year after he completed *Thinking About History at My Space*, marked a significant transformation in his artistic practice. He decided to step out of China and get in touch with the outside world, the West, in person to acquire western artistic knowledge and techniques. He was primarily driven by his desire to escape the confines of state-sponsored socialist realism thus to engage with a broader, international art scene.[12] But it was also the publication of an interview together with this painting that brought him contact with the west and precipitated his departure to New York.[13] Studying at Hunter College on the Upper East Side, in the heart of Manhattan, granted him the opportunity and accessibility to all the prestigious art institutions, museums, and commercial galleries. It was during this time that he extensively studied Western art while also working as a picture restorer.[14]

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[12] Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, *The Art of Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 307–309.
[13] Marlborough Gallery. *Memorial Exhibition : A Tribute to Chen Yifei, 1946-2005* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 2007), 6.
[14] Chen, Yifei, and Marlborough Gallery. *Chen Yifei : New Works : December 8, 1999-January 15, 2000* (New York: Marlborough, 2000), 3.

Immersed in Western art history and commercial markets, Chen Yifei finally encountered European classical traditions that he was only exposed to through textual sources when he was trained in school. This immersive learning opportunity profoundly influenced his aesthetics. The romantic lighting and compositional serenity seen in these later works of women reveal echoes of Caravaggio's chiaroscuro, Velasquez's meticulous rendering of subjects, and the Pre-Raphaelites' idealized depictions of femininity. These influences can be seen in his *Poppy* (1991) and *Maids of Honor* (1998), two paintings that depict passive female figures within decontextualized settings(Figure 8&9). These two paintings are highly typical of his later portrayal of beautiful, passive, feminine subjects dressed in traditional Chinese clothing; they perfectly demonstrate his shift of focus in subject and audience as examples. The two paintings are filled with historical references and metaphors, aesthetic and sexual symbolisms indicated by their facial expressions and poses, and the artist's attempt at self-Orientalizing. The women are removed of their subjectivity, presenting only as passive objects available for visual pleasure. They exemplify Chen's construction of a modified, idealized Chinese femininity through a blend of hyperrealism, traditional aesthetics, and restrained eroticism—central to understanding how his female figures become sites of aestheticized desire and vehicles for projecting cultural nostalgia as well as his strategies in self-orientalizing in a global art context. With these influences and references, Chen Yiei found his own path and niche that eventually gained him fame and success, bringing him attention and popularity among western audiences and making him a valuable asset in New York commercial galleries.

In 1983, he had his first solo exhibition at Hammer Gallery on 57th Street. In the 1992 Plum Blossoms Gallery catalogue, the art collector and dealer, Lawrence Wu, stated that Chen Yifei "not only caused Western viewers to wonder in admiration that China could produce such a

strong realist painter, but more importantly he transmitted a clear signal that as the 20th century draws to a close, in the mainstream of Western culture, top realist painters will be recognised by art circles and accepted by collectors."[15] This commentary indicates that Chen's position is significant because his presence in NYC marks a turn in the stereotypical view of China as a closed nation detached from the outside world, and the attractive new paintings he brings amaze his western audience. In 1995, he became the first Chinese artist to sign the contract with Marlborough, one of the most prestigious and successful Western contemporary art galleries in New York City.[16] Such outstanding achievements marked his initial success in Western commercial market. Yet, Chen Yifei does not merely commodify his paintings. Through his concrete cultural knowledge and tactful techniques, together with his entrepreneurial insights, constructs a complex vision and fixation of his own image of beauty and aesthetics. By projecting national longing, ancient aesthetic traditions, and social aspiration onto these silent figures, Chen's paintings become sites where history is not remembered but reconstructed, made beautiful and consumable. In this way, the female body in Chen's work becomes the surface upon which a complex politics of memory, identity, and modernity is played out.

A Realism of Desire and Nostalgia

Chen Yifei's stylistic borrowings were not merely formal but also ideological, shaping Chen Yifei's revival of an old memory of the pre-reform era and his representations of Chinese women as timeless, passive, and decorous figures. These works evoke cultural nostalgia, one that is restorative of a culturally rich nation untouched by the traumas of collectivization, war, or

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[15] Chen, Yifei, and Plum Blossoms Ltd. *Chen Yifei hui gu zhan = Chen Yifei : a retrospective* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Int'l Ltd, 1992).
[16] Chen, Yifei, and Marlborough Gallery. *Chen Yifei : New Works : December 8, 1999-January 15, 2000* (New York: Marlborough, 2000), 2.

political purges, for a generation that experienced cultural loss and is now seeking continuity, especially for 1920s–30s Shanghai as well as late Ming and Qing period; it is one that recalls the old Shanghai as "a floating world of leisure and longing", a city with "a legacy of absorbing Western ways of life and thoughts."[17] Moreover, the title of his painting *Poppy* also serves as an oblique reference to opium, pleasure, and fleeting indulgence, further reinforcing his reconstruction of an image of a remote era.

Thinking About History at My Space and Chen Yifei's two nostalgic, often objectifying female paintings may seem different at first glance, one more conceptual, the other sensuous and cinematic, viewers and critics have also found it difficult to "judge the stylistic links between his 'revolutionary paintings' and portraits."[18] Yet they share deep thematic and formal connections centered around memory, identity, and the construction of cultural history. These figurative paintings bear a contemporary and somewhat theatrical twist, blending historical reference with stylized modern femininity. They are almost Chen Yifei's contemporary reinterpretations of the traditional *meiren* paintings. Although fairly implicit and almost indiscernible, the paintings of women carry a subtle continuation in his attempt to display historical contexts just as he does in his early history paintings. These works of dreamlike depictions of women, set in intimate, softly lit interiors, strip the subjects out of an actual environment and context, almost segregated from reality, evoking an air of nostalgia for the prosperous heyday of China before the fall of empire and the Communist reform. This recalls pre-revolutionary elegance and refinement, an elaboration on the pure aesthetics that did not follow Mao's dictum of "art for the masses" or his emphasis on gender sameness.

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[17] Chen, Yifei, and Marlborough Gallery. *Chen Yifei : New Works : December 8, 1999-January 15, 2000* (New York: Marlborough, 2000), 2.
[18] Chen Yifei, and Plum Blossoms Ltd. *Chen Yifei hui gu zhan = Chen Yifei : a retrospective* (Hong Kong: Plum Blossoms Int'l Ltd, 1992).

Chen's female figure paintings also resonate closely with the visual and emotional language of Chinese cinema in the post-Mao era, particularly with the works of 5th-generation filmmakers like Zhang Yimou. Much like *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), where women are staged in traditional interiors filled with symbolic stillness and repressed emotion, Chen's paintings use realist detail and ambient mood to evoke internalized trauma and aestheticized history. As Jason McGrath writes, this era of cinema often employed "psychological realism" to depict a subjective experience of modernity, where emotion and memory are foregrounded over action or political clarity.[19] Chen's interiors, with their stylized lighting, period costuming, and melancholic female subjects, function like cinematic stills—fragments of an unresolved historical drama in which the female body becomes both a sign of beauty and a vessel of cultural ambivalence. In this way, his realism aligns with a broader visual movement in modern China where beauty and silence operate as powerful metaphors for a nation reflecting on its fractured modern history.

I therefore argue that Chen's female portraits simultaneously evoke a nostalgia for those who are familiar with China's once prosperous era of luxury and indulgence, and serve as a refusion to the previous Maoist repression, revitalizing the image of unconstrained expression of femininity with underlying sexual desire to appeal to the male spectators. The two portraits thus also represent a negation to the extermination of "bourgeois art" proclaimed by Jiang Qing, reviving the refined aesthetic expressions, as well as the bourgeois lifestyle of feasting and pleasure-seeking that people were accustomed to before 1949.[20] They also indicate a subversion

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[19] Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 31–34.
[20] Harriet Evans, "'Comrade Sisters: Gendered Bodies and Spaces,'" *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China : Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 72.

and revolt to the idea that fashion served as a mere idea of conscious political stance instead of a matter of aesthetic preference.[21]

Sartorial Fantasy and the Fabrication of Chineseness

Starting in 1919 with the May Fourth Movement, there were gradual sartorial changes for both men and women. However, dress was always regulated, as codified in ancient texts, especially for women under a patriarchal society. The kind of dresses Chen Yifei depicts in his paintings, considering their delicacy and decorative nature, would not have been worn by women especially during the cultural revolution. Rather than celebrating women's unique identities, the previous Maoist gender discourse constructed equality as mere sameness, disregarding inherent differences. This ideology promoted the idea that women's emancipation was achieved through their integration into the workforce, particularly in industrial and agricultural labor. This rhetoric was thus extensively demonstrated in many visual representations such as posters in the 1950s through the 1970s, and Chen Yifei grew up under such influences.[22] Women's liberation was framed within their ability to perform the same roles as men, more particularly, the same form and tolerance of labor. This led to a minimization of women's roles, where femininity was downplayed in favor of presenting women as strong, productive workers. Women were required to wear Mao suits, which featured an "overcoat that was ideally a skirt coat, nipped in at the waist; and the trousers had to be full and long, the same width at thigh and calf."[23] This serves to conceal the woman's body from displaying explicit feminine features. There was little room for

[21] Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices : Chinese Women in the 1980's / Emily Honig & Gail Hershatter* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1988), 42.
[22] Harriet Evans, "'Comrade Sisters: Gendered Bodies and Spaces,'" *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China : Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 63.
[23] Yu Qing, "Hong zhuang su guo (Red clothing, white gaiters)," *Lao Zhaopian* (Jining: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 1996), 91.

discussions of sexual difference or femininity, and instead, gender was treated as a category that could be neutralized through labor and socialist participation. Women's liberation was not about personal empowerment or choice but was instead tied to their role in advancing socialism and the development of the nation. Therefore, Chen's expressive and exclusive form of portraying females and their explicit femininity negates such images, serving as an emancipation of females from the previous Maoist notion of transgression of gender division where the Maoist women's so-called "liberated femininity" was in fact put into service for the nation's benefit. They exemplify a "contested terrain of nostalgia by unsettling the post-Mao vision of natural, ahistorical femininity."[24] Chen's female paintings thus serve as a subtle rejection to the Communist era aesthetic ideologies, rejecting the Maoist erasure of femininity and instead stress and reintroduce the bourgeois values: elegance, beauty, and nostalgia, as the most essential aspects of womanhood.

Unlike the previous socialist ideologies and propaganda that downplayed personal suffering, love, or inner conflict, focusing instead on women's role in collective revolutionary progress, Chen's women seem to reinforce these aspects that had been erased under Maoist dictums, and Chen cleverly uses them to fabricate an Orientalized image of Chinese women especially palatable to male viewers. These women in both *Poppy* and *Maids of Honor* are portrayed within an intimate private atmosphere, where the exact setting cannot be discerned. They might be in their boudoir, or a private room where they feel comfortable enough to display their intimate posture. The portrayal has an obscured indication, one that is not spoken but can be discerned through the intimate setting of the room and the woman's nearly seductive pose and expression. The reclining woman exudes an aura of refined seduction, her pose and expression

[24] Lisa Rofel, "Socialist Nostalgia" in *Other Modernities : Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 136.

subtly hinting at an underlying narrative of desire and ambiguity. The interior setting also renders restricted space thus restricted movements, therefore invokes a sense of containment of the females, passive and available as objects of consumption, reflecting the traditional outdated gender norms of female virtues of submissiveness and domesticity. The formerly rejected elaboration of aesthetic preferences during the revolution era is also again revived in Chen Yife's emphasis on his construction of clothing details.

In *Maids of Honor*, Chen Yifei's detailed portrayal of the women goes beyond photographic and historic accuracy. The realism here is consummated through his combination of various sources he draws from the sartorial history of ancient China. In this painting, the dresses the women wear are not with the extremely high collar that prevailed in the late years of Qing. They resemble those with round necks instead, occasionally with a neck band, similar to those from the Ming and Qing periods (Figure 10). Here Chen Yifei creates a fusion of the two styles: Manchu long robe, but an underskirt seen underneath the slits, similar to Han style two piece shorter jackets and pleated skirts. This fabrication of the costume can also inconspicuously point to Chen Yifei's attempt in accustoming to the broader market, the western audience, which almost fits what Ingrid Chu describes of Western designers appropriating Asian culture that "extracting only aesthetic elements creates a mysticism about foreign regions without a true understanding of the culture itself."[25] The inability to source the origins or specific references Chen Yifei is drawing from renders a sense of dislocation from history, if not a complete detachment from history. It might seem almost imprecise in disregarding the accurate evidence of historical attire. The dresses seem to be of different fashion styles from different periods, and they are stripped of solid connections to history, becoming almost mere aesthetic symbols of exoticism. This rendering is almost an utilitarian appropriation of the textile histories.

[25] Ingrid Chu

Through piecing together different sartorial details to construct his own fashion, he risks creating a seemingly incoherent pastiche; Yet this temporality captured in the figurative paintings is nevertheless what he aims to present, corroborating a compressed memory of time, from the late 1600s to the 1920s, leading to the modern era. These extravagantly depicted dresses indeed function as aesthetic signifiers of an exotic and refined East, aligning with long-standing Western fascinations with Oriental beauty and elegance, appealing to his western audience. This appeal is sensual but sanitized—it doesn't require deep cultural knowledge to appreciate, only a taste for visual splendor. For the non-Chinese, the dresses provide a palatable and polished version of Chinese tradition that can be displayed as part of global art narratives. The dresses thus fabricate a unique "Chineseness", becoming a symbol not just of Chinese heritage, but of a globalized aesthetic ideal—beautiful, restrained, and emblematic of "Eastern sophistication," further demonstrating his acuity of vision in choosing what to present to the market.

Self-Orientalization and the Commodification of Femininity

The sense of "Chineseness" Chen Yifei intends to sell goes further to the idea of his attempt in self-Orientalizing. In *Maids of Honor*, the two women lie on the opulent carpet in a dimly lit interior. Their elegant postures also echo classical European portraiture that connotes refinement, leisure, and sensuality, positioning the female body as an object of aesthetic contemplation, while still maintaining a distinctly Chinese sensibility. The painting bears a resemblance to William McGregor Paxton's *The New Necklace*, a painting of a poised upper-class white woman richly dressed in Oriental clothing and framed by an opulent interior, leaning backwards extending one arm to receive a necklace (Figure 11). In both paintings, the women subjects are dressed in similar styles of refined silk garments, their figures fully covered

in the luxurious textures. The subdued lighting casts a golden glow over their faces and garments, creating a harmonious balance between realism and romanticized nostalgia. Chen Yifei's depiction of hybrid style of dress aligns with this Orientalist concept, serving as a cultural signifier of the exoticized past. Their expressions conduct a sense of serene yet enigmatic, as if immersed in a quiet reverie, and they are absorbed in her appearance, unaware of the viewer's gaze, yet offered up to it. The women thus serve as aesthetic objects, clad in extravagant Oriental clothing, whose elegance and restraint are meant to symbolize a larger cultural ideal—European bourgeois femininity in Paxton's case, and nostalgic Chinese refinement in Chen's.

The delicate layering of figures and nostalgic period costumes evoke a sense of ethereal beauty and restrained emotion that retrospects the past, yet creating a sense of eternity in time, as if the moment were captured and preserved and held in stasis. Their relaxed, stretched, and extended poses with seductive facial expressions generate a sense of "offering themselves as accessible objects of sexual desire, and are presented for inspection and visual enjoyment."[26] This creates an Orientalizing image, one in which the women serve not only as passive models, but also as figures tied to the historical image of courtesans, women caught between elegance, commodification, and societal ambiguity. The subtle eroticism in their body language and the enveloping darkness around them suggest a space of clandestine allure, making them more than just a symbol of nostalgia, but also an obscured yet compelling representation of a complex past of luxury, vice, and female agency.

Chen's rendering of delicacy in clothes and fabric implies and emphasizes ornamental representation over the women's organic flesh. Her flesh is covered and concealed under the delicately ornamented clothes, her skin is not revealed but her posture conveys a sense of

[26] James Cahill, Lecture 3: "Women Lorn and Longing."(Papers presented at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, November 11-13, 1994), 48.

revelation of what is underneath the fabric, inviting voyeurism and thus deeper imagination. The woman's personhood is thus merely "conceived through ornamental gestures, which speak through the minute, the sartorial, the prosthetic, and the decorative," as Anne Anlin Cheng describes of the peculiar process of orientalism.[27] His emphasis on the lavish costume also in a way shows his tactful techniques in depicting erotic subjects, as it only implicitly draws attention to their skin and bodies underneath cloth. His eroticism is veiled: their flesh is concealed beneath richly ornamented fabrics, and the surface beauty of silk and embroidery dominates the visual field. The eroticism is "ornamented," and her body becomes a prosthetic beauty covered under the superfluous decoratives, thus a synthetic "artifice" available for endless spectation.[28] This tactful covering functions not to eliminate erotic appeal, but to displace it, heightening desire through suggestion rather than exposure, inviting voyeuristic projection onto what lies beneath. In this way, the women are "encrusted by representations, abstracted and reified, the yellow woman is persistently sexualized yet barred from sexuality, simultaneously made and unmade by the aesthetic projects."[29] They become curated symbols of femininity and cultural elegance, suspended between accessibility and inaccessibility, presence and absence. The focus on lavish costume and poised demeanor not only flatters the viewer's aesthetic sensibility, but also aligns with global visual ideologies that commodify Chinese femininity into a palatable, exotic spectacle, highly consumable yet stripped of lived agency. Donald Kuspit commented in 1999 that these beautiful women "are not all pleasing harmony, but peculiarly odd, and as such, devious." He describes them as "*femme fatales*–sexually seductive, but emotionally disturbing

[27] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 18.
[28] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 15.
[29] Anne Anlin Cheng, "Introduction," *Ornamentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 5.

and dangerous."[30] Therefore, while *Thinking About History at My Space* evokes something reflective from the viewer, these portraits of female figures in a wistful mood also conjure up a melancholic and vulnerable sense, tempting and evoking something that is precarious and seductive from some western viewers at the time.

Such a portrayal also further embodies "male gaze," a framework through which women are rendered aesthetic objects for male consumption.[31] This dynamic aligns with a longer history in which Asian female bodies have been objectified in Western visual culture, often through tropes like the submissive "Lotus Blossom" or the mysterious "Dragon Lady," which renders the hypersexualization of Asian women, portraying them as submissive, exotic, and alluring figures.[32] Such a concept also closely parallel to the traditional Chinese *meiren* paintings (美人图), which refers to a genre of traditional Chinese painting that portrays beautiful women (美人), often highly idealized, conforming to patriarchal aesthetic values; they typically depict women in private secluded settings removed from actual social agency, and not based in any historical events. Although Chen may have intended to elevate and preserve traditional Chinese femininity, his *Poppy* and *Maids of Honor* are both reminiscent of older paintings and their implications, occupying a complicated space between cultural celebration and aestheticized objectification, one that is also filtered through both a self-orientalist nostalgia and Western desire.[33]

Similarly in *Poppy*, there is an undertone of Orientalizing aestheticization which Chen Yifei wields to present the beauty of Eastern women. The painting's background's indistinct

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[30] Chen, Yifei, and Marlborough Gallery. *Chen Yifei : New Works : December 8, 1999-January 15, 2000* (New York: Marlborough, 2000), 5.
[31] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975), 6–18.
[32] Gina Marchetti, Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2–5.
[33] Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 217–219.

darkness creates a sense of spatial enclosure, subtly suggesting entrapment within aestheticized femininity. The blurred, hazy background contributes to the dreamlike atmosphere, lacking any sharp edges or textured detail, making the woman seem as if she is emerging from memory rather than existing in reality. It seems almost like a formless void where all historical and social markers have been blurred. The woman appears stripped out of a specific context, existing outside of any specific place or time, more precisely to say, completely detached from labor, duty, or struggles, a stark contrast to the Maoist ideal of women as industrious workers. The dimly lit, intimate interior heightens the sensual quality of the composition, reinforcing an atmosphere of exclusivity and privacy. The intentionally dark, velvety, almost blank background contrasts with the luminosity of her skin, emphasizing her as the main subject and an object of beauty and desire. This absence of a concrete setting is a deliberate artistic choice, which strengthens the theme of nostalgia as a constructed, non-material memory rather than a concrete reality, while also allowing the particular femininity defined by the artist to emerge. The woman is thus almost like one that is "in a confined situation, waiting and longing for a reunion with their departed or estranged lover–the only excitement granted to their secluded life" like the women in classical Chinese love poetry.[34] Through this portrayal, Chen evokes the past not as a tangible history but as an idealized, painterly vision that is only a reminiscence of the past, one that also aligns with the Western perception of the Oriental. He modifies the tradition, constructing a visually seductive illusion that elicits a purely imaginary nostalgia in his western audiences who have never witnessed China's past yet yearn for those exquisitely adorned women who inhabited this past.

[34] Anne Birrell, ed. and trans., *New Songs from a Jade Terrace. An Anthology of Early Chinese Love Poetry* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 19.

His hyperrealistic artistic style amplifies surface detail to create an image that is more polished and more emotionally charged than reality itself. It blurs the boundary between representation and illusion, turning the subject into an almost theatrical presence—visually persuasive yet emotionally stylized. His depiction of the women thus fuses the illusionistic power of realism with the fantasy of ideal beauty, creating figures that seem more perfect—and more haunting—than real women ever could be, making them the most ideal aesthetic "objects" that cater to the Western taste. The woman here in *Poppy* is painted completely decontextualized, only framed for visual pleasure and consumptive contemplation. The removal of the contextual environment leaves space for endless male fantasies, ones that imagine the woman as obedient, lonely, and ready to receive their desire. And the fantasy reinforces power dynamics, where the spectator holds control over the spectated and its meaning, while she remains silent and still.

Chen Yifei thus asserts his own constructed vision of or even fascination with highly anesthetized Chinese women. In doing so, he removes the autonomy of the women, reducing them to mere passive objecthood defined by voyeurism and eroticism. The women he paints in reclining poses appear elegant yet powerless, seem to be confined within the luxurious but restrictive spaces, symbolizing the tension between beauty and oppression. The woman in *Poppy* reclines gracefully on a plush, dark couch that is almost invisible blending in with a dark background setting. Her posture is at once relaxed yet intentionally poised. Her elegantly extended limbs, with one arm resting delicately on the invisible couch while the other gently holding a fan, recall classical images of courtesans in both Western and Chinese artistic traditions, especially reminiscent of Chinese erotica that represent women with indexed codified sexual symbolism.[35] Her pose is identical to a Qing depiction of Madame Ho-Tung, a lady who

[35] Francesca Dal Lago, "How 'Modern' was the Modern Woman? Crossed Legs and Modernity in 1930s Shanghai Calendar Posters, Pictorial Magazines, and Cartoons," *Visualizing Beauty: Gender and Ideology in Modern East Asia* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 50.

sits with one leg raised on the side of a canopy bed, associated with the lascivious position of courtesans and prostitutes (Figure 12). Her head tilts slightly, different from Madame Ho-Tung's bold look of directly gazing into the viewer's eyes seductively, the woman's gaze is directed downward or away, not engaging the viewer directly, avoiding contact but seems to be inviting observation. This distant yet alluring expression, combined with the soft shadows accentuating her face, evokes a sense of quiet mystery. Her legs are not depicted in the "ankle-over-knee" pose explicitly linked to the act of sex. Chen modifies the portrayal to construct an Oriental manner but with a more restrained expression, demonstrating his intentionality in adopting the traditional conventions but adapting not too revealing to appeal to a wider audience.

The signs of Chen Yifei attempting to cater to western taste can be also seen in his reference to European artists. The woman's body is enveloped by soft, flowing fabrics. She is dressed in a traditional Chinese dress that resembles qipao but also combines stylistic details from earlier periods in China. The dress's silk surface catches the light, emphasizing the delicate curves of her form. Her face, framed by her neatly pinned-back hair, exudes a quiet introspection, and her gaze is slightly averted as if lost in thought. The atmosphere is rich with warm, muted tones—deep reds, browns, and golds—enhancing the painting's dreamlike, nostalgic quality. The interplay of light and shadow gives her skin a porcelain-like glow, heightening her ethereal presence, similar to the women portrayed by John Singer Sargent, perhaps adopted from Chen's previous working experience as a restorer for the European master he was given to work on.[36] This stylistic parallel further reinforces the speculation of his attempt to cater the international market. His Western oil painting techniques, chiaroscuro lighting, and Renaissance-inspired compositions signal art-historical prestige to global audiences. This blend

[36] Marlborough Gallery. *Memorial Exhibition : A Tribute to Chen Yifei, 1946-2005* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 2007), 6.

reflects an “East-meets-West” ideology that caters to global tastes while marketing a curated version of Chinese cultural identity. As he transitions into an international entrepreneur, this artistic construction aligns with a global luxury aesthetic—where beauty becomes a site of consumption, performance, and branding. His women do not represent actual Chinese women of the 1990s but rather an internationally consumable ideal: poised, elegant, timeless, and emotionally distant. The paintings thus offer a softly Orientalist experience to Western viewers, while simultaneously allowing Chinese viewers to reclaim pride in their classical heritage, now repackaged for modern elites.

Chen Yifei’s female depictions thus operate within a charged visual economy where beauty, nostalgia, and desire are intricately staged, negotiated, and commodified. Beneath their surface serenity lies a complex politics of representation: these works do not merely depict women as timeless aesthetic ideals, but rather transform them into sites upon which broader anxieties about cultural memory, post-socialist modernity, and identity are projected. Through the meticulous construction of hybrid sartorial codes, anachronistic interiors, and stylized passivity, Chen crafts a fantasy of Chineseness—one unanchored from any single historical referent, yet saturated with the allure of tradition. These women are not agents in the historical sense; instead, they are curated bodies, strategically placed in aesthetic stasis, functioning simultaneously as objects of visual pleasure and vessels of cultural longing. Ultimately, these portraits embody a tension central to Chen Yifei’s later career: between cultural preservation and commodification, between self-representation and self-Orientalization. In crafting these elegant, ambiguous women, Chen constructs not just an image of beauty but a stage upon which the politics of memory, gender, and transnational identity are rehearsed—quietly, seductively, and with exacting control. His realism, here, becomes a tool not of historical fidelity but of aesthetic

negotiation, reflecting the artist's continued attempt to locate himself—and his art—within the shifting contours of China's past and the demands of its global present. In doing so, Chen also implicates himself in a broader circuit of global cultural production, where the lines between authenticity and artifice, self-expression and self-commodification are blurred.

Conclusion

Chen Yifei's artistic trajectory—spanning from *Thinking About History at My Space* to his evocative portraits of women in the 1990s—reveals a sustained commitment to realism not merely as a style, but as a mode of emotional and ideological inquiry. Across dramatically different historical moments and visual idioms, Chen reconfigures realism to serve the evolving needs of memory, identity, and self-representation in a transforming China. His early historical painting uses spatial depth and photomontage to confront collective trauma, positioning the artist as both witness and subject within the process of national reckoning. By contrast, his later works stage beauty, silence, and nostalgia through the hyperrealist depiction of female figures—producing surfaces of elegance that invite desire, fantasy, and projection. Yet beneath these surfaces lies a quiet violence: a rendering of femininity that is ornamental, disempowered, and stripped of subjectivity, even as it performs a complex cultural longing.

What unites these seemingly disparate works is their shared investment in constructed memory. In *Thinking About History at My Space*, memory is spatialized and burdened, inviting a critical re-engagement with a fractured past. In *Poppy* and *Maids of Honor*, memory is aestheticized and commodified, reassembled into a stylized "Chineseness" that appeals to both national nostalgia and global Orientalist desire. Chen's realist language is not fixed; it is elastic—capable of expressing solemnity and spectacle, history and fantasy, reflection and

seduction. He does not simply transition from ideological painter to commercial artist; rather, he recasts the project of representation itself, navigating between state-sanctioned narratives and market-driven aesthetics to produce images that are as politically loaded as they are visually alluring. In doing so, Chen implicates himself in the very systems he appears to critique. His women are not only objects of beauty, but instruments of cultural performance, structured by the same logics of commodification that shape the global art world. The ideological weight of his early historical realism is never fully abandoned—it is refracted, translated into a visual language where history is no longer narrated but worn, gestured, or suggested. Ultimately, Chen Yifei's work underscores the uneasy entanglement between memory and display, between art's capacity to bear witness and its complicity in aestheticizing the past. His oeuvre leaves us not with answers but with questions—about what is remembered, who gets to remember, and how beauty itself can become a strategy for both preservation and forgetting.

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Figures

Figure 1. Chen Yifei, *Thinking About History at My Space*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 186 x 365 cm, Long Museum West Bund Shanghai, China.

Figure 2. Peking University students demonstrating in Beijing on May 4, 1919. Photograph. Location unknown.

Figure 3. Five-color Flag 五色旗, Digital reproduction, Date & Location unknown.

Figure 4. China: the bodies and heads of four men beheaded during the Boxer's Rebellion, 1900, Photograph, sheet 14.2 x 18 cm, publisher not identified.

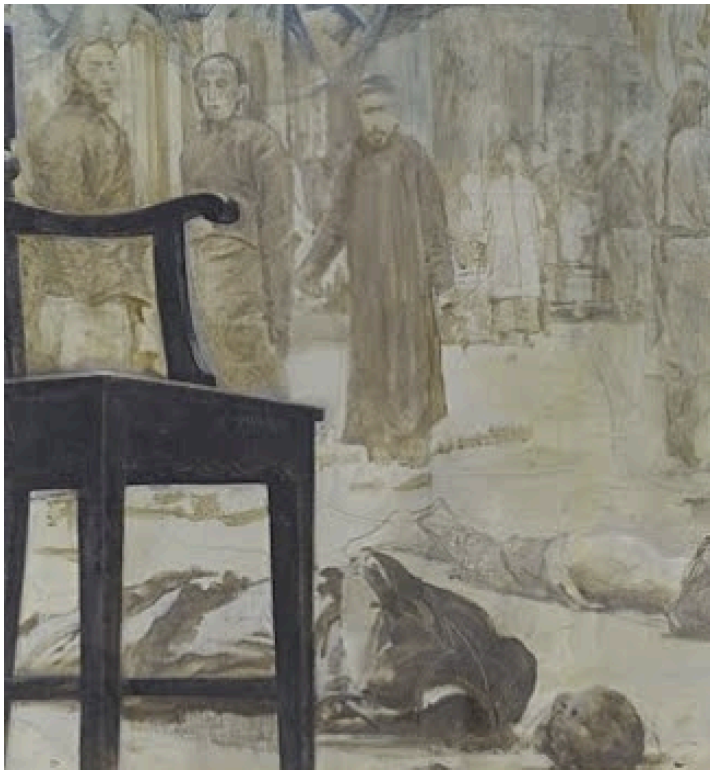

Figure 5. Chen Yifei, *Thinking About History at My Space*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 186 x 365 cm, Long Museum West Bund Shanghai, China. Close-up section of the painting.

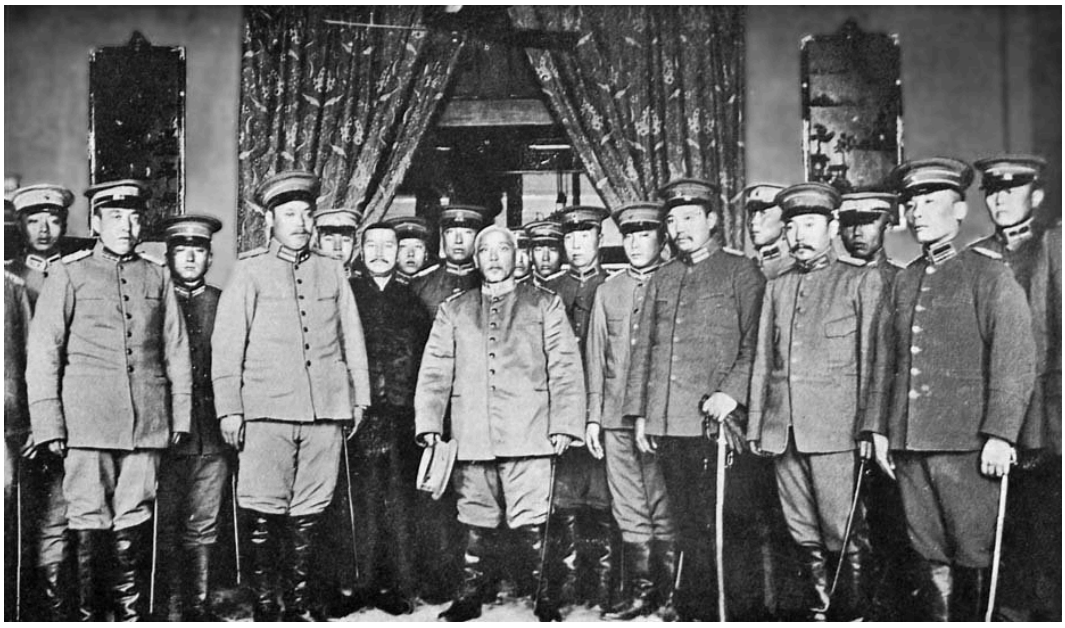

Figure 6. Inauguration of Yuan Shikai as Interim President, March 10, 1912, Photograph, Location unknown.

Figure 7. Chen Yifei, *Thinking About History at My Space*, 1979, Oil on canvas, 186 x 365 cm, Long Museum West Bund Shanghai, China. Close-up section of the painting.

Figure 8. Chen Yifei, *Poppy*, 1991, Oil on canvas, 50 x 58in (127 x 147cm), Originally sold at Christie's Hong Kong for HK$3,870,000 on November 3, 1997.

Figure 9. Chen Yifei, *Maids of Honor*, 1998, Oil on canvas, 167.5 x 164.2 cm. (66 x 64 5/8 in.), Private Collection.

Figure 10. *The Blending of Manchu and Han*, cartoon illustration in *Shishi Huabao (Current Affairs Pictorial)*, Canton, August 8, 1907, no. 9, p. 179.

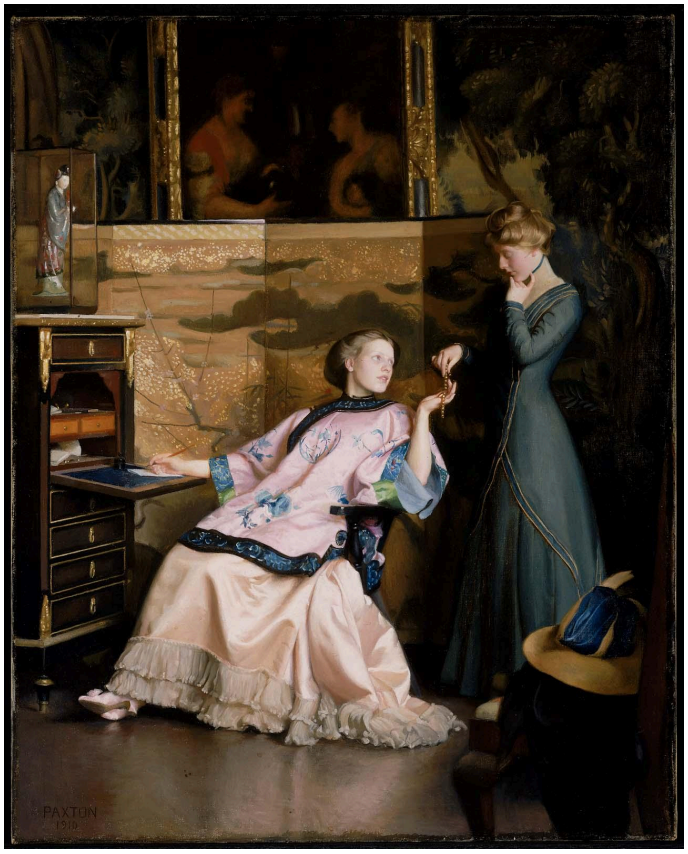

Figure 11. William McGregor Paxton, *The New Necklace,* 1910, Oil on canvas, 91.76 x 73.02 cm (36 1/8 x 28 3/4 in.), Zoe Oliver Sherman Collection.

Figure 12. *Madame Ho-Tung* (1618-64), Attributed to Wu Zhuo (17th century), probably of the school of Leng Mei (Qing Dynasty, first half of 18th century), Ink and color on silk, Arthur Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums.