

EAST MARRIES WEST

A Thesis presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by
SUQIN "JACKIE" LIN

Professor Lampo Leong, Thesis Supervisor

MAY 2012

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The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
thesis entitled

EAST MARRIES WEST

Presented by Suqin “Jackie” Lin

A candidate of the degree of Master of Fine Arts

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Lampo Leong

Professor Matthew Ballou

Professor Peter Gardner

Professor Kristin Schwain

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor Professor Lampo Leong for challenging me and pushing me to be a better artist and writer. I am grateful for his endless support and infinite patience. I also want to thank Professor Matthew Ballou for his continued support and help. I would like to thank Professor Peter Gardner for spending time with me to help me expand my knowledge beyond the field of art. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Kristin Schwain for her support and important feedback on both my paintings and writings.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	v
ABSTRACT	vii
INTRODUCTION	ix
Chapter	
1 CULTURAL CONFLICTS WITHIN CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGE AS THE SUBJECT IN MY WORK	1
1.1 Cultural Differences Revealed through My Relocation from the East to the West .	1
1.2 Cross-Cultural Marriage as an Example of Intercultural Communication	3
1.3 Cultural Conflicts Reflected through the Situational Dynamics of Cross-Cultural Couples.....	8
2 HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES ON THE FORMATION OF MY WORK	12
2.1 Historical Paintings Influenced the Formation of My Formal Language.....	12
2.2 Contemporary Visual Materials Influenced the Creation of My Narratives	25
3 VISUAL MANIFESTATIONS OF CONFLICTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGES.....	35
3.1 Rationale for a Representational Approach to Cross-Cultural Conflicts.....	35
3.2 Visual Components Create the Narrative Strategy to Generate Cross-Cultural Environments.....	38
3.2.1 Using Compositions to Intensify Tension within Conflicts	38
3.2.2 Multiple Perspectives Convey Cultural Discord and Create a Mixed Visual Form.....	40
3.2.3 Manipulating Paint Applications to Develop the Narratives.....	42
3.2.4 Employing Colors Symbolically to Enhance the Narratives.....	47
CONCLUSION.....	50
PAINTINGS IN THE MFA THESIS EXHIBITION AND EXHIBITION INSTALLATION VIEWS....	52

BIBLIOGRAPHY 68

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, <i>Jewish Bride</i>	15
2. Artemisia Gentileschi, <i>Judith and Holofernes</i>	Error! Bookmark not defined.
3. Mary Cassatte, <i>The Child's Bath</i>	18
4. Claude Monet, <i>La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume)</i>	19
5. Vincent Van Gogh, <i>Cherry Blossoms, after Hiroshige</i>	20
6. Sandro Botticelli, <i>Annunciation</i>	21
7. Gu Hongzhong, Right Half-Section of <i>The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai</i>	22
8. Gu Hongzhong, Left Half-Section of <i>The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai</i>	22
9. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Thesis Exhibition Installation View	52
10. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Artist Statement Projected on the Wall of Thesis Exhibition	53
11. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Thesis Exhibition Installation View	54
12. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Thesis Exhibition Installation View	55
13. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Thesis Exhibition Installation View	56
14. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Thesis Exhibition Installation View	57
15. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Thesis Exhibition Installation View	58
16. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>Mr. and Mrs. Green Card</i>	59
17. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>Mr. Jack Daniels and His Wife</i>	60
18. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Traditional Chinese Therapy?</i>	61

19. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>"Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?"</i>	62
20. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, Study for <i>"Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?"</i>	63
21. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>Stir Fry</i>	64
22. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>"Hold on to This Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon."</i>	65
23. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>"Excuse Me, Mister! Could We Take a Picture Together?"</i>	66
24. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, <i>Drink One More Cup!</i>	67

EAST MARRIES WEST

Suqin “Jackie” Lin

Lampo Leong, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, people from all over the world inevitably encounter and experience cultural differences in the era of globalization. My painting project, *East Marries West*, is about cultural differences when Easterners and Westerners come together. It depicts the cultural conflicts within Chinese and Euro-American marriages with an attempt to elicit re-evaluation of cultural collision in our culturally and ethnically diverse society.

Inspired and enlightened by historical masterpieces and contemporary visual materials, I created representational images with intentional visual manipulations in order to unfold such conflicts and the dynamics behind. Through these allegorical images, I hope to bring to my audience the awareness of the outcomes from cultural clash and promote transnational understandings and cooperation on a more personal level. Obviously,

mutual understanding and appreciation between nations are inevitable to most of us in the era of globalization and such experiences can indeed enrich our lives positively.

Keywords: Cross-cultural marriage; Chinese and Euro-American marriage; cross-cultural conflict; intercultural communication; representational images with intentional visual manipulations

INTRODUCTION

Zuoyuezi, literally translated as “to sit for a month,” is a traditional and contemporary Chinese postpartum recovery practice, which requires a new mother to take rest by refraining from doing anything for herself or any household tasks for a thirty-day period after giving birth. In an interview conducted by Rosenblatt and Stewart in 2004¹, the interviewees Ping, the Chinese wife, who had grown up in China, and Peter, the Euro-American husband, mentioned their intense arguments relating to this cultural tradition. It is interesting to see that the Chinese wife acknowledged that she and her husband had no obvious cultural conflict until she gave birth to their first child and needed to “rest for a month.” This case indicates that cross-cultural couples might seem sharing similar household practices in a general sense but become aware of their cultural divergence when dealing with particular issues in their daily life practices together.

As an outgrowth of my personal experiences in the two cultures, my project, a series of paintings, entitled *East Marries West*, explores several aspects of the cultural conflicts in Chinese and Euro-American marriage. Examination of research on cross-cultural encounters reveals that the process of creating shared life patterns by cross-cultural couples epitomizes the process of adjusting to a new culture.

¹ Paul C. Rosenblatt and Ciloue Cheng Stewart, “Challenges in Cross-cultural Marriage: When She is Chinese and He Euro-American,” *Sociological Focus* 37 (2004): 51.

This written thesis is a formal investigation of my work. It starts off with my concerns on the issues/things of cultural differences and analyzes my rationale of using cultural conflicts within cross-cultural marriage as the theme for my paintings to reveal the dynamics of cultural collision. Through research and comparative studies in various disciplines and study of historical paintings and contemporary visual materials, I contextualize the subject matter of my work, investigate the formation of my visual language, and demonstrate the urgency, significance, and implications of understanding cultural differences in the present era of globalization.

1 CULTURAL CONFLICTS WITHIN CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGE AS THE SUBJECT IN MY WORK

1.1 Cultural Differences Revealed through My Relocation from the East to the West

In January of 2008, I relocated from China to the United States to attend graduate school. To me, this was not only a geographical relocation but also a cultural and conceptual transition.

Having grown up in Guangzhou, a modern metropolitan city with a population of 12.78 million, the Western culture and Western lifestyle are neither new nor exotic to me. In fact, under the “Reform and Open-Door Policy” initiated by the Chinese leader Xiaoping Deng in 1978, China’s economy has been booming, dramatically accelerating the pace of urbanization and modernizing Chinese social and daily lives. In recent years, due to the cultural and economic globalization, China has become, and is still becoming, very similar to the West: foreign-capital corporations entered into and occupied the Chinese economic market; merchandise from the West circulated more frequently into Chinese society; Western businessmen, tourists and students began visiting Chinese cities; and Western cultural products were increasingly imported. As a result, a Western-oriented modern lifestyle has gradually become the mainstream in China. We

now have Walmart, McDonalds, Starbucks, Holiday Inn., and Citi Bank; companies such as Nike, DKNY, GM, Mead Johnson, and Mary Kay have huge markets in China; Hollywood movies are popular choices for the Chinese audience; celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, Johnny Depp and Lady Gaga are no less famous or popular among the Chinese than among Westerners. Technological developments have also contributed to globalization and promoted cultural understanding between the East and the West, for instance, wide use of the Internet has enabled the Chinese to obtain more resources to learn about the West. Affected by both the internal development such as domestic urbanism and the external pressure of Western culture, the lifestyle of the Chinese in China is already very Westernized and international. Therefore, on a personal level, it seemed that I hardly experienced any culture shock when I first arrived in Columbia, Missouri and I found my lifestyle very similar to my Western friends. We wore the same brand of boots and jackets; we drunk soda for beverage and kept rice cookers at home; we all liked Lady Gaga's music and Jackie Chan's Kungfu movies; we liked having fun in a bar until midnight after studying and working all day.

However, as time went by, my frequent interaction with the Westerners in the United States became more intimate. I discovered more and more cultural differences and even conflicts between the Eastern and the Western customs. For example, I can call my professors by their first names in the United States, a practice that would be considered very disrespectful by Chinese teachers; I prefer having rice as my side order rather than mashed potatoes or French fries in a restaurant; I have many left-handed

Western friends but none in China, and so on. Such details in life made me re-think cultural differences at a deeper and more personal level. On the one hand, Chinese and Americans share a great degree of *mutuality*, especially in the present era of globalization. On the other hand, strong divergence between these two cultures certainly exists and may be more obvious to those who relocate from one society to the other and try to blend in. In the course of accommodating to another culture, what one confronts, how one copes with it, what it comes to mean, and whether it changes one's life in a positive or negative way are the things that I pondered during my four-year personal experience with the Western culture.

To address some of the concerns mentioned above, I investigated the issues of cultural differences reflected on various fields of study and attempted to represent them on a small but typical enough subject – cross-cultural marriage. I hope the output of my investigation can help my audience become more open-minded when dealing with cultural conflicts in the contemporary society.

1.2 Cross-Cultural Marriage as an Example of Intercultural Communication

While all relationships are complex, cross-cultural or intercultural couples experience another level of complexity because both overt and

subtle cultural 'differences making a difference' are part of the couple dynamics.²

— — Kyle D. Killian

Any two cultures may differ in numerous ways, so even if a couple finds much to attract them, including many similarities, they may differ in ways that can be a source of conflict and stress.³

— — Paul C. Rosenblatt

Intercultural communication is an interdisciplinary field of studies that explores how people from different cultural backgrounds *interact*. It “refers to the influence of cultural variability and diversity on interpersonally oriented communication outcomes.”⁴ It is important to understand cultures and cultural differences if one is to achieve effective intercultural communication, especially in the present era of globalization. From my personal experiences with both Chinese and Western cultures, I believe that studying the domestic lives of cross-cultural marriages will provide a particularly interesting perspective to the study of intercultural communication.

² Kyle D. Killian, introduction to *Intercultural Couples: Exploring Diversity in Intimate Relationships*, ed. Terri A. Karis and Kyle D. Killian (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2009), xviii.

³ Paul C. Rosenblatt, “A Systems Theory Analysis of Intercultural Couple Relationships,” in *Intercultural Couples: Exploring Diversity in Intimate Relationships*, ed. Terri A. Karis and Kyle D. Killian (New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2009), 7.

⁴ Carley H. Dodd, *Dynamics of Intercultural Communication*, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 2.

The term, *cross-cultural*, means “relating to different cultures or comparison between them”⁵, while the word *marriage* has various meanings in different contexts.

In the book *Cross-Cultural Marriage: Identity and Choice*, the author mentions,

“In English alone the word has at least four general meanings. The first has to do with the legal aspect, dealing with rights, legitimacy of children and so forth. The second describes the actual, practical household, the routine of marriage. The third concerns the ceremonial aspect... And fourthly there is the joining of families, the affinal relationships which are formed on marriage.”⁶

Synthesizing all the meanings above, my interpretation of *cross-cultural marriage* is a marital relationship involving cultural differences, within which the couple may have to experience the issues raised from their different cultural values in their domestic life practices. Three scholars reinforce my interpretation: Killian defines “*cross-cultural couples* as consisting of partners from different countries, nationalities, ethnicities, and religions who may possess quite divergent beliefs, assumptions, and values as a result of their socialization in different sociocultural spaces;”⁷ Breger and Hill mention that “by definition, culturally mixed marriages present those involved with a wider palette of cultural practices than culturally homogenous marriages, including such issues as gender roles, child-rearing, mores, language and general lifestyle by which to

⁵ *Oxford Dictionary*, s.v. “cross-cultural”, accessed October 14, 2011, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cross-cultural?region=us>.

⁶ Rosemary Breger and Rosanna Hill, “Introducing Mixed Marriages,” in *Cross-Cultural Marriage: Identity and Choice*, ed. Rosemary Breger and Rosanna Hill (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), 6.

⁷ Killian, introduction, xviii.

shape their lives.”⁸ In other words, cross-cultural couples’ lives are guided both by shared household patterns and cultural intrusion.

From a social constructionist perspective, cross-cultural marriage, like any other type of marriage, “can be seen as an ongoing process of communication that co-constructs and maintains shared realities.”⁹ To create such realities, a cross-cultural couple may actively practice various kinds of interactions including acceptance, negotiation, tolerance, struggling and conflict because “reality is not a given but comes out of social interactions and is maintained by them.”¹⁰ The couple constructs their lives by balancing each other’s expectations of a good family that are rooted within their own individual cultures. Therefore, they may experience more conflicts than a homogenous couple “within their sociohistorical and politico-economic milieus.”¹¹ They may share many opinions regarding the establishment of a good family, but at the same time, face disagreements about expectations of gender roles, the patterns of caring for children and level of involvement in household duties. They may also need to put forth extra effort to eliminate their cultural obstacles.

From above, one can see that the communication of cross-cultural couples is affected by their cultural practices in their daily life. This sort of interaction is studied by

⁸ Breger and Hill, “Introducing Mixed Marriages”, 19.

⁹ Rosenblatt and Stewart, “Challenges in Cross-Cultural Marriage”, 43.

¹⁰ Ibid, 43.

¹¹ Killian, introduction, xviii.

specialists in intercultural communication. As Dr. Michael Herzfeld well claims the following in his book *Cultural Intimacy*:

“While we still study society and culture ethnographically—that is, by describing the minutiae of everyday life at a fairly microscopic level—our work is done in the context of far larger dynamics in which we ourselves are willy-nilly cast as the representatives of powerful and sometimes hated external forces. Nor can we ignore these entailments as our predecessors sometimes did with such blissful ease. To many people throughout the world we are both the signs and the agents of an intrusion, not just into private lives, but also into the privacy of nations—an intrusion into the collective space I have chosen to call *cultural intimacy*.”¹²

Dr. Herzfeld, as an anthropologist, highlights the significance of studying “the minutiae of everyday life” for understanding culture as a whole. “But if these matters are so unimportant,” he continues his argument in the following paragraph, “why do people invest so much energy in dismissing them? Clearly these reactions are diagnostic of a politics of significance in which much hinges on what is deemed important and what is relegated to the limbo of mereness.”¹³ For a cultural anthropologist, studying cultural phenomena through a group of particular people is a way to comprehend the culture, since such phenomena reflect how culture structures people’s lives. Likewise, my investigation of cross-cultural couples’ lives is a way of discussing intercultural communication at a very specific level. The outcomes of this investigation exemplify how and why people from different cultures interact as they do.

¹² Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), x.

¹³ *Ibid.*

1.3 Cultural Conflicts Reflected through the Situational Dynamics of Cross-Cultural Couples

Cross-cultural marriage is an interdisciplinary topic discussed by scholars in various fields: cultural anthropology, psychology, family studies, women studies and sociology. Although these disciplines have influenced my choice of the subject matter, my paintings are not merely a visual complement to them. Instead, they illustrate my concerns about intercultural communication and conflict. In the course of my research on this subject, I asked myself questions related to my own experiences of moving from the East to the West: What does marriage mean to cross-cultural couples and their respective cultures? What are their *actual* cultural practices in their daily lives and how do they deal with their cultural obstacles? And how can these practices be examined when placed in a larger cultural context? These questions helped me in narrowing down the scope of the subject matter in my paintings and were the guidelines of the creating of my work.

Through investigating cross-cultural marriage and intimate relationships in various fields of studies, I focused on portraying cultural conflicts within cross-cultural marriages occurring in the couples' household practice. Conflicts, in a marital relationship, are defined not only by Peterson as "actions of one person [that] interfere

with the actions of another,”¹⁴ but also, in Cahn’s words, as “interaction between persons expressing opposing interests, views, or opinions.”¹⁵ Fincham and Beach also point out that, “definitions of conflict should not require overt hostility to exist.”¹⁶ Additionally, conflicts in the context of intercultural communication refer to the situations in which people from different cultural backgrounds face disagreement, but also to mere “*misunderstanding [of] cultural expectation.*”¹⁷ The domestic conflicts within cross-cultural marriages in my paintings exemplify intercultural conflicts in that they present not only conflicts, but also the couples’ cultural misunderstandings and mismatched expectations. These are highlighted by the visual elements and narrative strategy of my paintings, as elaborated in the second chapter.

The conflicts that I depicted in my paintings cover various aspects of cross-cultural couples’ domestic lives within different marital stages. They involve expectations of fertility, ideas of parenting, ritual events, generational conflicts, extended family intrusions as well as domestic abuse. However, in spotlighting these conflicts, my purpose is not to point out the possible dangers of this form of marriage.

¹⁴ Donald R. Peterson, “Conflict,” in *Close Relationships* by H. H. Kelley et al. (New York: W. H. Freeman: 1983), 360-396, quoted in Sharon S. Brehm et al., “Conflict and Violence” in *Intimate Relationship*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 334-5.

¹⁵ D. D. Cahn, “Intimates in Conflict: A Research Review,” in *Intimates in Conflict: A Communication Perspective*, ed. D. D. Cahn (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum: 1990), 1-22, quoted in Sharon S. Brehm, et al, “Conflict and Violence” in *Intimate Relationship*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 335.

¹⁶ Sharon S. Brehm, et al., *Intimate Relationship*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 336.

¹⁷ Dodd, *Dynamics*, 188.

Instead, they demonstrate examples of what cross-cultural couples face and how they react to them.

According to Peterson, the possible courses of marital conflicts¹⁸ are divided into three stages: the Beginnings, the Middle Stages and the Termination. In the Beginnings, the initiating events lead the participants to the “interference with goal-directed action.”¹⁹ These conflict events could result in avoidance or engagement that could bring about five possible terminations of conflicts. In my paintings, I only captured the initial moments of the conflict events in order to avoid providing concrete solutions for terminating conflicts or unfolding the outcomes of them. By making each painting open ended, I left plenty of space for the audience to come up with their ideas as to whether these conflicts are problems in life or opportunities to enrich the life of everyone involved.

To summary, cross-cultural marriage for me is a metaphor to reveal the dynamics of cultural collision at its most intimate level. My aim is to make my audience aware of the outcomes from the cultural clashes and help them to better understand cultural divergence between the East and the West in order to promote transnational understanding and cooperation. In the present era of globalization, the awareness and

¹⁸ Peterson, “Conflict,” quoted in Sharon S. Brehm et al., “Conflict and Violence” in *Intimate Relationship* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001), 335.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

understandings of both nations and cultures could in turn enrich the life experiences of all citizens in both societies.

An excerpt from Aarik Danielsen's review of my work summarizes my chapter:

"But to assume Lin has lived here as a wide-eyed traveler overwhelmed by the enormity or exceptionalism of American culture would be to misinterpret her life's narrative. Lin has not felt steamrolled by the scope of American living but, on the contrary, finds Columbia a little too quiet and sometimes longs for the congestion that, to her, signifies home. As her work has progressed, she has avoided conveying obvious areas of cultural divergence and instead beautifully, subversively investigating points of tension small enough to lie beneath the surface of relationships yet large enough to transcend boundaries of geography and tradition...Lin hopes to pose questions rather than provide commentary; she wants viewers to consider whether one way is right, one is wrong or whether both have merit and should be brought to bear in a sort of cultural compromise. Lin knows neither she, with her cosmopolitan ways, nor the conflicts she highlights are often what people expect, but she has delighted in calling to viewers' attentions what makes us the same across cultures and how what makes us different might be different than we think."²⁰

²⁰ Aarik Danielsen, "Jackie Lin", *Columbia Daily Tribune*, January 2, 2011 C6, accessed October 19, 2011, <http://www.columbiatribune.com/news/2011/jan/02/jackie-lin/>.

2 HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES ON THE FORMATION OF MY WORK

2.1 Historical Paintings Influenced the Formation of My Formal Language

In his book *The Sacred Wood*, T. S. Eliot values tradition and discusses how to make a good use of it. He states:

“Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists...I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism.”²¹

These remarks demonstrated T. S. Eliot’s insight into the relationship between the ‘past’ and the ‘present’—an artist in the present can only create new things through investigating those of the past. No one can actually invent something that is absolutely detached from the past. Eliot’s remarks influenced my process of reviewing the art history, from the East to the West, in order to adapt various visual elements for my own

²¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen & Co. LTD.: 1920), 49.

use. Thus, discussing the historical influences in my work is significant because it will help my audience understand and interpret my work.

The Marriage of Pocahontas, by Henry Bueckner, is a painting about interracial marriage during the colonial era when Europeans first landed on the American continent. The painting depicts Pocahontas, the daughter of the Native American Chief Powhatan, and John Smith, a European White male, at their wedding. At the center of the picture, the European groom is swearing to God in front of a priest. On his right side, the Native American bride, with her eye closed, leans slightly toward her husband. The couple is surrounded by Europeans and Native Americans, both of whom are obviously differentiated through their features and costumes. Take a look the contrasting and telling costumes, postures, and attitudes on the figures: The White woman on the left side of the bride appears to be devoted, putting her hand on her chest and totally immersing into the ceremony. However, the half-naked man tilts his body and looks straight ahead with his leg crossing over to the person right next to him, which demonstrated his casualness in this formal ceremony. Furthermore, the Native American young boy on the right edge of the canvas is covered only by a piece of fabric and has a distracted and non-engaged look. From the depictions of these people, we can decipher how a European White male painter interpreted interracial marriage and what his attitude was towards Native American in the colonial era. Through the rendering of the exotic Native American costumes and the comparison between the

praying White woman and the half-naked Native American men, the artist may be trying to illustrate the Native Americans' "un-civilized" character, as assumed by Europeans.

Of course, the significance of interracial marriage in the colonial era is not examined in this paper. But this painting alerted me in terms of the depictions of different races. In my paintings, the races of the figures can only be differentiated by their facial features but not from their costumes, since costume could be a convenient mean to indicate peoples' race and social status, but also a source of cultural stereotype. Although Westerners no longer believe that Chinese males wear long pigtailed on their back, many are still under the impression that Chinese males wears *Changshan* (long shirt) or females wear *Qipao* (banner gown), both of which were Chinese traditional customs back in the Qing Dynasty and early Twentieth Century. In fact, today, Chinese people generally wear what Westerners wear in their daily lives because of the availability of fashionable clothing from all over the world. Therefore, Other than *Drink One More Cup!* and "*Excuse Me, Mister! Could We Take a Picture Together?*", I highlighted all the figures in my paintings wearing the same kinds of clothes, as a way to avoid stereotypical images, to show the similarity between the East and the West, and to imply the equal status in cross-cultural couples.

Other elements that raised my awareness in Bueckner's painting are the couple's central position in the picture and their interaction with each other. The White groom wears an elegant black gown, pointing towards heaven by raising his right arm. His up-straight gesture and the black color of the gown create a visual force at the center of the

composition, which may symbolize the Euro-centric ideology and their dominant status in the society. Look closer at the couple, one can also find that the White groom stands straight and looks forward at the priest while the Native American bride faces away from the priest and leans towards her husband. The bride's posture demonstrates her



Figure 1
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, *Jewish Bride*, c. 1665, Oil on canvas,
121.5 x 166.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Netherlands.
ARTstor
ARTSTOR_103_41822003038658

submissive position as seen through her bowed head, weak wrist and turned heel. Thus the audience may assume that the union depicted in this painting is unbalanced and overtly dominated by the White groom and the Europeans.

However, the portrayal of the couple in Rembrandt's *Jewish Bride* (fig. 1) is very different. Instead of placing the couple exactly at the center, Rembrandt creates more room on the bride's side and the red dress she wears makes her the focal point in the

picture. The shape extension of their clothes and their postures of turning towards each other create a triangle, which symbolizes the strong emotional bond of their relationship. Furthermore, the groom, whose head and body lean to his bride, looks straight towards her gently, holds her shoulder with his left hand, and places his right-hand on her bosom tenderly. In response to him, the bride slightly touches her groom's hand with her fingertips. Through the composition and the detailed rendering of couple's gestures, a harmonious and peaceful mood is achieved.

In my paintings, I broke with the devices which Bueckner and Rembrandt used and created a different kind of compositional structure to make my point. Unlike either *The Marriage of Pocahontas* or *Jewish Bride*, most of the couples in my paintings are not placed at the center of the canvas. Instead, they are on the side, some of who are cropped by the edges of the canvas or even partially hidden by others. All of these compositions are intended to indicate that these couples hold equal status and responsibility within the household. To contrast with the harmonious sense brought about from an upright triangle as in Rembrandt's painting, I often created four triangular shapes from each side of the canvas through the gestures of the figures. These triangular shapes create the dynamic of confrontation and interference. The specific analysis on this compositional strategy in "*Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?*", *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Chinese Traditional Therapy?*, and *Stir Fry* are detailed in 3.2.1.



Figure 2
Artemisia Gentileschi
Judith and Holofernes, circa 1620
Oil on canvas, 199 x 162.5 cm
Uffizi, Florence, Inv. 1567
ARTstor
LESSING_ART_1039490546

Of course, such compositional strategy is not unfamiliar in the history of art. In Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith and Holofernes* (fig. 2), Holofernes is lying down on the bed, his tilted body creating a triangle towards the vertical central line in the picture plane. His head is grasped by Judith's left hand as she hews at his neck with her right hand. The extended arms and body positions of Judith and the servant lady form a double-triangle pointing to Holofernes' head. A fourth and more acute triangle points to Holofernes' head from the space created by his curling leg and the servant's arm. In order to demonstrate the power of Judith and the lady servant, the artist places Holofernes' head below the central horizon line of the canvas, well illustrating the courage and resolution of these two heroines. Inspired by this painting, I was very much interested in carrying the force to the visual center with lines coming from the edges and corners of the canvas.

Since the main point of my paintings is not to present the danger of cross-cultural marriage, except for *Mr. and Mrs. Green Card* and *Mr. Jack Daniels and His Wife*. Otherwise, I avoided depicting scenes in dramatically lit environments such as that in *Judith and Holofernes*, but tended to employ a gentle warm light to moderate the tense

atmosphere in the household. And the figures and forms are then mainly emphasized



Figure 3
Mary Cassatt
The Child's Bath, 1893
Oil on canvas, 100.3 x 66.1 cm
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, Inv.
no. 1910.2
ARTstor
SCALA_ARCHIVES_1039614402

by lines and color patterns. Such manipulation was inspired by the subtle coloration and the crisp forms in Mary Cassatt's *The Child's Bath* (fig. 3).

Besides, I became interested in her manipulation of perspective. In *The Child's Bath*, the flipped-forward picture plane is produced from an overhead perspective. This flattens the space and invites the viewers into the picture. But the lip of the vase and the sidewall of the basin in this painting indicate that another viewpoint from a

lower angle is employed, which might be Cassatt's solution to compensate the overwhelmingly flipped-forward and top-heavy composition. By contrast, I deconstructed the sense of harmony by

applying multiple perspectives in an opposite way. In "*Did Your Mother Tell You not to*

Use Your Left Hand?", the figures are viewed horizontally, but their arrangement and

the flipped-over table show that the figures are viewed from above. The same strategy

of multiple perspectives can also be seen in *Stir Fry*, which is analyzed in detail in 3.2.2.

This kind of juxtaposition of different perspectives within one picture plane creates

tension and conflict, signaling the incompatible viewpoints within a cross-cultural family.

In *The Child's Bath*, Cassatt's use of fabric patterns and domestic clothing

permits the viewers to enter into the private life of the mother and child. In a similar



Figure 4
Claude Monet
French, 1840-1926
European French
La Japonaise (Camille Monet in Japanese Costume), 1876
Oil on canvas
231.8 x 142.3 cm (91 ¼ x 56 inch)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
1951 Purchase Fund
56.147, <http://www.mfa.org/>
ARTstor
AMICO_BOSTON_103838160

fashion, I rendered domestic clothing and private house setting to allow my audience to inspect the private lives of cross-cultural couples. In addition, the technique I used to render the Oriental motifs in the household setting is symbolic. For example, in *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Traditional Chinese Therapy?* and “*Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?*”, the typical Chinese brush painting motif of bamboo and plum

blossom on the folding screen and on the decorative fan are painted heavy-handedly with a palette knife. Instead of rendering the bamboo leaves and plum branches with classic Chinese fluent ink lines and washes, I applied textural opaque oil paints to depict these images, which remind the audience the treatments of the Oriental

subject matter in Monet's *La Japonaise (Camille Monet in*

Japanese Costume) (fig. 4) and Van Gogh's *Cherry Blossoms, after Hiroshige* (fig. 5). For

them, their imitations of the Oriental motifs on Japanese prints typify the 19th Century

Westerner's affection for Asian culture; for me, my painting technique for the Oriental

furniture is a way to convey the Westerner's affections for Asian culture.

The impact of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism on my work doesn't end



Figure 5
Vincent van Gogh, Dutch, 1853-1890
Cherry Blossoms, after Hiroshige, 1887
Oil on canvas, 55 x 46 cm
Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam
ARTstor
AHSC_ORPHANS_1071314184

here. In fact, these art movements are the transition between Academism and Modernism. From that time onward, artists began to reject conventional ideas in art, and fought for a revolution in the art world. This piece of history motivated me to employ various kinds of painting styles in the triptych *“Hold on to this Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon.”*. This narrative triptych, shaped in the form of a bedroom mirror, is about cultural collision occurring between a Chinese mother-in-law and an American daughter-in-law. In this

triptych, three different types of paint applications are employed sequentially on the three panels to highlight different values and ideas, and the sensitive relationship between them. On the left panel, the treatments of diminishing brush strokes, smooth color transition, and the chiaroscuro modeling technique are adopted from academic realism in order to match the traditional way of the Chinese mother-in-law. On the right panel, the more subjective coloration and bold brush strokes, which are associated with German Expressionism, are applied to exhibit the emotional reactions of the American

daughter-in-law upon receiving the gift from the Chinese mother-in-law. The middle panel, which is a transition between the two side panels, is utilized a style, emphasizing the quality of light with visible brush strokes, that is between those of the two contrasting side panels. This triptych captures a moment of conflict and embarrassment brought about from different cultures, generations, and traditions; and the three modes of painting employed in the panels not only attribute to different painting styles in art history, but also closely relate to the specific reactions and attitudes of each figure within this episode.



Figure 6
Sandro Botticelli, *Annunciation*, 1489-90
Tempera on panel, 150 x 156 cm
Galleria degli Uffizi
ARTstor
SCALA_ARCHIVES_1039488845

In fact, the composition in the middle panel of *“Hold on to this Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon.”* was inspired by Botticelli’s *Annunciation* (fig. 6). I found the incident of this painting somewhat parallels to that of Botticelli’s. The angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive a child and become the mother of Jesus, the Son of God. In Botticelli’s version of *Annunciation*, he highlights Gabriel’s sudden arrival and Mary’s

humility in the face of such honor by slightly cropping both figures on their sides.

Similarly, I cropped both figures in the middle panel of *“Hold on to this Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon.”* to suggest the mother-in-law’s unexpected gift, her intervention to the daughter-in-law the private issue of family plan, and the daughter-in-law’s reluctance to receive this gift.

“Hold on to this Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon.” is a turning point in my graduate study, where I began to rethink the narrative strategy of my work. In *Drink One More Cup!*, I tried to combine the visual characteristics from traditional Chinese brush painting with Western painting technique. *Drink One More Cup!* showcases a Chinese style wedding banquet for a cross-cultural couple. The format of



Figure 7. Original by Gu Hongzhong (10th century), 12th century remake of the Song Dynasty Right half-section of *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, 9th Century B.C. Handscroll, Ink and colors on silk, 28.7 x 335.5cm The Palace Museum, Beijing, China



Figure 8. Original by Gu Hongzhong (10th century), 12th century remake of the Song Dynasty Left half-section of *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, 9th Century B.C. Handscroll, Ink and colors on silk, 28.7 x 335.5cm The Palace Museum, Beijing, China

this painting is a huge version of Chinese hand-scroll painting. The narrative in this painting is split up into six scenes, and such technique was adopted from *The Night*

Entertainment of Han Xizai (fig. 7 and 8) by Gu Hongzhong, a Chinese painter in the ninth century. In *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, as with most traditional Chinese brush paintings, a shifting perspective is employed. Unlikely, in Western linear perspective, most of the time, only one viewpoint is applied to the entire picture plane. As a result, the subject matter in the foreground appears bigger than those in the background. While, in traditional Chinese figure paintings with shifting perspective, the figures in such a shifting perspective appear to be the same size, no matter where they are in a space. Those in the back are placed higher than those in front, as if viewed from overhead, to indicate spatial relationship. In *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, shifting perspective is used for the arrangement of the figures and house setting – but one may also notice that Han Xizai, the official with the tall hat, is painted relatively bigger than others because he was a very important figure in social hierarchy and held a very high position in the government. This technique is also used in other traditional Chinese figure paintings. In *Drink One More Cup!*, I painted the whole scene of a wedding banquet with a Western medium but combined the principle of shifting perspective to create a mixed visual effect. In this painting, the marriage of the Eastern and Western artistic styles symbolizes the marriage of cross-cultural couple and the fusion of both cultures.

With a hand-scroll format, *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai* shows an ongoing story about Han Xizai's entertainment with his friends at night. "The format of a hand-scroll allows for the depiction of a continuous narrative or journey: the viewing

of a hand-scroll is a progression through time and space.”²² The narrative of this painting is divided into five scenes, signified by Han’s presence in each section. Normally, viewers experience the whole story in a hand scroll painting by unrolling the scroll and reading the story from one section to another like reading a book. But for *Drink One More Cup!*, although I employed a hand-scroll format, its large scale and presentation on the wall, rather than a small rolled-up format on the table, force the viewers to move themselves from one side to another in order to see the entire painting. Such an experience is very similar to watching a movie or actually participating in a wedding banquet. Similarly to *The Night Entertainment of Han Xizai*, the protagonists in my long scroll painting are also repeated in different scenes in order to present the procedures in sequence in a fancy celebratory banquet.

The history of visual art is so rich that it affects our way of seeing and making art. The more work to which we are exposed, the more we are influenced, no matter whether we are an artist or a viewer. Some of the influences for us may be obvious, but some may be subconscious and indirect. Thus, it is true that one may and will indeed find more historical references from my work. I am sure that those findings will enrich the interpretation of my work.

²² Dawn Delbanco, “Chinese Handscrolls,” *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000—. <http://www.Metmuseum.org/toah/hd/chhs.htm> (April 2008).

2.2 Contemporary Visual Materials Influenced the Creation of My Narratives

East meets West is a huge cultural topic in the contemporary era. Even though the cultural exchanges between the East and the West have been active for the last fifty years, the dialogue between the East and the West are not equal. Other cultures are still judged and interpreted mainly through the dominant Western cultural values and framework. Representing the visual manifestation of this perspective, Hollywood movies may be some of the best examples of how Eastern cultures are (mis)interpreted and (mis)imagined by Westerners. However, there are other perspectives, based on serious academic studies on cross-cultural issues²³, which show that Western scholars understand the controversy behind globalization, acknowledge the one-sided interpretation of other's cultures, and start to reevaluate them from a more equal and balanced footing. Meanwhile, Eastern scholars have also been reviewing their own cultures from their own angle, examining the Western interpretations, and even attempting to confront the Western-oriented globalization. Reflecting in visual field, some Eastern artists, as well as those from other cultures, enter into the Western contemporary art world by incorporating different kinds of strategies in their work. They either introduce their own culture from their own perspective with a moderate

²³ Such articles are Brumann's "The Anthropological Study of Globalization: Towards an Agenda for the Second Phase," in 1998; Braginsky's "Rediscovering the 'Oriental' in the Orient and Europe: New Books on the East-West Cultural Interface: A Review Article," in 1997.

approach or subvert the Western aesthetics and taste with a provocative attitude. The subject matter of my work has been influenced by such new developments in the Eastern and the Western contemporary visual cultures.

“For decades, American entertainment media have defined the Asian image to all the world. And usually, that image has been shaped by people with little understanding of Asian people themselves--and with little foresight into how such images would impact the Asian American community. Despite the good intentions of individual producers and filmmakers, limited and unbalanced portrayals of Asians have traditionally been the norm in the entertainment industry.”²⁴

— A memo from MANAA to Hollywood: ASIAN STEREOTYPES

The memo above is posted on the website of Media Action Network for Asian Americans, an organization “dedicated to monitoring the media and advocating balanced, sensitive, and positive coverage and portrayals of Asian Americans”²⁵. It aims to pressure Hollywood to create a more accurate image of Asians in American movies. In this memo, the author points out that in American mass media not only are Asian figures profiled as a shorthand symbol, but also “no distinctions are made between Asian Americans—acculturated U.S. citizens with deep roots in this nation—and Asian nationals who may or may not have any loyalty to the United States. Too often, the media insinuate[s] that Asian Americans don't belong in their own country.”²⁶ It may imply that the American West still understands Asians in an old-fashioned way, even

²⁴ “Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media and How to Balance Them,” *Media Action Network for Asian Americans*, http://www.manaa.org/asian_stereotypes.html (October 13, 2011).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

though America has increasingly been exposed to Asians and Asian cultures. Specifically, the stereotypical views towards Asians are gone away through the portrayal of Asian women in the Western mass media. This portrayal reflects the West's mis-imagination and the misinterpretation of the East influenced by the Orientalism, ethnocentrism and mysticism. Although this essay is neither to examine how the Asian women's images are shaped by Western ideology and other factors, nor to explore the consequences, I will briefly introduce how Asian women's images are represented in American mass media and compare them with those in my paintings.

Around the World in Eighty Days (2001) is a movie about Phileas Fogg and Passepartout making a quick trip around the world in eighty days. During this trip, Fogg and Passepartout encounter all kinds of dangers, including being hunted down by General Fang (played by the Hong Kong actress Karen Mok). General Fang, also known as General Black Scorpions, wears a black gown and has long dark fingernails. She has a high skill in martial arts and is sinister and inherently scheming. Such stereotypical view of Asian women as embodiment of the concept of "dragon lady" can be also found in the portrayal of the beautiful Chinese opera diva Song Liling in *M. Butterfly* and Ling Woo in *Ally McBeal*. These "dragon ladies" are sexy and mysterious but backstabbing and untrustworthy. Such an image is a contrast to the other stereotype of "China dolls", "geisha girls" or "lotus blossoms", which is a portrayal of Asian woman as exotic, subservient, and helpless figure who is in need of assistance or rescue. Examples of this image can be found in *Madame Butterfly*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, and *Miss Saigon*.

A Stereotype is a standardized and simplified conception of a group based on a series of prior and often prejudiced assumptions. Many Contemporary artists incorporate aspects of such stereotypical images to convey the meaning of their work. For example, Kara Walker and Gomes-Peña use sophisticated pictorial strategies to respond to stereotyping in African-American and Mexican-American respectively; thus, I make the comparison between our work in order to further explain the objective of my series of paintings.

“I figured out that I was a milestone in people’s sexual experience – to have made it with a black woman was one of those things to check off on your list of personal accomplishments. That already has a slightly masochistic effect: to have just been the body for somebody’s life story. I guess that’s when I decided to offer up my side-long glances: to be a slave just a little bit... So I used this mythic, fictional, kind of slave character to justify myself, to reinvent myself in some other situations.”²⁷

— — Kara Walker

Kara Walker, an African American female artist, is famous for her large-scale silhouette-based images and projections. Her images are notable for the exaggerated facial and body features of African women, as well as the eroticism of people of African ancestry as embodied in the stereotypical views of the Whites. By projecting these images on a blank white wall and operating the projection from presence to absence, it suggests that “[i]t’s a blank space, but it is not all a blank space, it is both there and not

²⁷ Jerry Saltz, “Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire [interview],” *Flash Art* 29, no.191 (1996), 86, quoted in David Joselit, “Notes on Surface: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 305.

there.”²⁸ David Joselit, in his article “Notes on surface: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness”, claims,

“This formal oscillation between positive and negative, body and shadow, black and white, captured the insidious nature of the stereotype. Stereotypes...are blank in their generality, and yet powerfully present in their introjection by the stereotyped subjects and their racial others...Walker is frank in her desire both to occupy and pulverize the abjection of slavery: her statements, like her art, demonstrate a desire of, as well as a disgust with, the stereotype.”²⁹

In response to the stereotypes of the African American, Walker’s strategy in her work is to “embrace” and adopt these stereotypes to create an ironic confrontation to those who created such stereotype. As she says, “Really it is about finding one’s voice in the wrong end; searching for one’s voice and having it come out the wrong way.”³⁰

A similar strategy can also be found in Gomez-peña’s performance art. With a good sense of humor, Gomez-peña creates stereotypical and cliché images of Latino by speaking English with a strong accent and using exaggerated body languages to suggest the multi-identities of marginalized people, immigrants, and hybridity. Such cultural codes question the classifications of ethnicities and races by an Americanized standard and reveal how ridiculous stereotype is. Additionally, his work brings about the

²⁸ Ibid, 82, quoted in *Theory*, 304.

²⁹ David Joselit, “Notes on Surface: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 304-5.

³⁰ Saltz, “Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire”, 84, quoted in *Theory*, 305.

questions of the U.S-Mexico relationship and the ongoing cultural misunderstanding between both countries.

Unlike these two artists mentioned above, my strategy to fight the stereotype of Asian women is less confrontational and trying to be more persuasive. The Asian figures I depicted are my interpretation of Asian from an Asian woman's prospective, side-stepping the assumptions of Westerners. It is an interpretation from inside-out, not outside-in, and an antithesis of that reflected in Western mass media and pop culture. For example, in *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Traditional Chinese Therapy?*, *Stir Fry*, and *"Did You Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?"*, the Asian women figures seem to be more dominant in constructing their domestic lives. From the standpoint of Western aesthetics, they are not beautiful, neither have a sexy body nor wear exotic fancy Chinese costumes and hair buns but are self-assured and independent. They are not a spectacle provided for the gaze of Western audience; instead, they are an equal member of a household and participants in cultural dialogue between the East and the West under balanced circumstances.

Whereas Western mass media affected my depiction of Asian women who are free of stereotypes, in fact, some contemporary Eastern movies also enlightened and influenced the narratives in my work. For instance, in the Hong Kong movie *Gua Sha Treatment (Scraping Therapy) (2001)*, we witness a cultural conflict playing out between the East and the West. This conflict is initiated when various American characters misinterpret the *Gua Sha* treatment as abuse. In the movie, Dennis, the son of a

Chinese immigrant family living in America, was discovered to have multiple bruise marks on his back. These marks were the remnants from the *Guasha* treatment performed by his grandfather, a traditional elderly Chinese man visiting his son, Datong Xu, and his family in America. However, in the subsequent legal proceedings which followed the discovery of Dennis' wounds, Xu attempted to explain this Chinese "folk" treatment to the court, but failed to convince the judge because of the judge's overarching belief in Western medicine. As a result, the court renounced Xu's guardianship of Dennis because of the "abuse" that Xu allowed to befall his son. Such a tragic fictional misunderstanding, however, accurately reflects the reality of conflicts that occur when disparate cultural clash.

This touching movie inspired me in the construction of my painting *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Traditional Chinese Therapy?*. Transferring the debate of the traditional folk therapy from public to private, this painting centers on the conflict occurring in a Chinese American family's domestic life. If we said the American doctor and the judge in the movie *Guasha Treatment* are outsiders intruding into the private lives of an immigrant family as a result of cultural misunderstanding, then the American father in my painting is an insider, who sees what happens to his child and will realize the treatment's efficacy. For me, instead of criticizing or defending this treatment, I want to bring out the cultural difference and let the viewers to judge for themselves, as the American father would do in my painting.

Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Traditional Chinese Therapy?

showcases a conflict between a traditional East and a “rational” West. But some Chinese traditions – such as scraping therapy – are gradually fading away among younger generation of Chinese. Therefore, generational tension which can lead to conflicts also caught my eyes. One can find similarities and differences between the representation of generational tension in my work and Ang Lee’s domestic trilogy. Throughout Lee’s trilogy there are conflicts between the New and the Tradition, the West and the East. And these conflicts emerge through a series of dramas of a father figure and his children. From a Taichi master in Lee’s *Pushing Hands*, to a retired military officer in his *The Wedding Banquet*, to a widowed Chinese master chef in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, the portrayal of the father in Lee’s trilogy is a signifier of tradition. But his children – a Chinese immigrant son married to an American novelist, a homosexual son dating an American gay man, and unattached daughters in modern Taiwan – all rebel against his authority in either subtle or obvious ways. As a result, the core values of the tradition, the hierarchy of a Chinese family, and the patriarchy system rooted in Confucianism are all being challenged seriously. Finally, the father has to yield to his children, signified by his compromise and eventual stepping back from his ever-dominant position in the family. In these three movies, the father always holds a non-rigid attitude to the challenges of his children: in *Pushing Hands*, he lives in Chinatown rather than having a direct confrontation with his American daughter-in-law; in *The Wedding Banquet*, he pretends that he doesn’t know the truth of his son’s sexual

orientation in hoping to have a grandson and to maintain a harmonious family; in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, he quits his divine position from the family when he finds his lovers. If the old father in Lee's trilogy is the defender of tradition, with a tolerant attitude to dodge or accept the challenges, then the mother in my paintings is the executor of tradition and more stubborn to behave in ways that she believes are proper. For example, in "*Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?*", the Chinese grandmother is unhappy with the mixed grandchild's left-handedness, which is considered to be improper in Chinese traditional culture; thus she cruelly seizes the fork from the grandchild's left hand. In the painting, her arms along with her torso turn to be a bulky red curve, dramatically reaching from the left side to the center of the canvas. The tension of this drama is increased by the distorted perspective of the dining table at the center of the canvas and the protruding chair on the left corner. In the case of Lee's trilogy, the sons are the mediators of their conflicts. Rather than directly interfering with the conflicts, the sons resolve the problems by communicating with the father and their lovers separately. But in "*Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?*", the Chinese mother, acting as a mediator, directly engages in the conflict, softly against her mother by waving her hand. However, in another painting "*Hold on to This Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon.*", the husband, as a mediator between his Chinese mother and American wife, is totally absent because he has fled the "war" between these two women.

The portrayal of the old father's image may be attributed to Lee's profound understanding of Chinese traditional culture from his early life in Taiwan together with his experience with Western culture later after his coming to graduate school in America. Such experiences allow him to review the Confucian tradition (East) from Other's (West) angle. I attempted a similar use of experience in my representations of cross-cultural conflicts, the Asian women's images, as well as the relationship between the East and the West in general. What I learned from moving from modern China to the West, in a time period of globalization when some of the traditional Chinese concepts are being diluted in the process of modernization in China as well, is key to my approach to this body of paintings.

3 VISUAL MANIFESTATIONS OF CONFLICTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL MARRIAGES

My series of paintings, *East Marries West*, on cross-cultural marriages between Chinese and Euro-Americans reveals the intercultural conflict and misunderstanding on an individual or a family level. The seemingly straightforward representational approach in my images is actually full of intentional manipulations of visual elements that intensify the tensions of the narratives and reveal the dynamics behind. In this chapter, I focus on analyzing the formal language of my work and demonstrating how it brings out the meanings of the work.

3.1 Rationale for a Representational Approach to Cross-Cultural Conflicts

As one of the formal languages in art, a representational approach or representation is to use recognizable image to depict the physical appearance of subject matter, and, at the same time, capture something above and beyond just the appearance. As Ananta Ch. Sukla writes in *Art and Representation: Contributions to Contemporary Aesthetics*,

“It [representation] refers to the relation between two items in our experience—the internal and the external, the mind and the world...The word in its Latin origin *repraesentare* meant ‘to make present or manifest or to present again’ confining the referent almost exclusively to inanimate objects that are literally brought into someone’s presence—to present/embody/manifest an abstract idea/thought through/in a concrete object or even sometimes to substitute one object for another.”³¹

That is to say, a representational image is not only a depiction of the appearance of the reality, but also a representation of the artist’s ideas embedded in the resemblance of material phenomena in the outer world. In another word, the image (the “concrete object”) is not merely an imitation of the world, but rather a reflection (the “abstract idea”) of the artist’s perception of the world. Backed by such concept and theory, my series of paintings depicts conflicts within cross-cultural couples’ domestic lives, yet which also exist in other settings. The matter-of-fact quality of representational painting enables me to establish “realities” that best represent the misunderstanding and divergence, at the same time, reflect my own interpretation of this issue. Unlike other relatively more documentary media such as photography and video, the ‘realities’ in my paintings are reconstructed, and can combine moments that happened at a different time and/or in a different space. Therefore, the images in my works could be more subjective and reflect better the incidents depicted as well as my response to such incidents. While comparing this medium to three-dimensional media such as installation and sculpture, the limitation of a single viewpoint on a painting could be

³¹ Ananta Ch. Sukla, introduction to *Art and Representation: Contributions to Contemporary Aesthetics*, ed. Ananta Ch. Sukla (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2001), 1.

seen as an advantage that focuses the viewer's attention on the cultural conflicts portrayed.

Through representational description of the "realities", I attempted to build a bridge for better communication between my audience and myself. In the words of Feldman, "As for viewers, we benefit from the artist's struggle to see clearly and represent truly. We also learn to compare the artist's rendering of reality with the world as we know it."³²

In fact, representational painting plays an important role in contemporary Chinese art. This approach is deeply rooted in Social Realism in China in the last sixty years.³³ There is no doubt that this tendency in art also affected my early art training in China and my overall artistic choice. At Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts I benefited from studying techniques of representational as well as classical painting. This became the key to the visualization of my ideas. However, the representational approach used for this series of paintings is not a simple outgrowth of my academic training, it has been chosen over other approaches as an effective means to represent the subject. By carefully constructing the visual elements, my representational images also signify the bigger concept of intercultural communication and cooperation that is happening in our society at the time of globalization.

³² Edmund Burke Feldman, *Varieties of Visual Experience*, 4th ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 139.

³³ For more discussions about the development of Chinese art history, see the catalogue of the exhibition *Facing Reality*, Vol. 1, Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Australia.

3.2 Visual Components Create the Narrative Strategy to Generate Cross-Cultural Environments

3.2.1 Using Compositions to Intensify Tension within Conflicts

An “X” composition means that there are lines projecting inward from all four corners of a picture plane to generate a focal point. For most of my work, I generally created such an intersection at or around the center of my canvas by using this compositional strategy. Conceptually, this intersection is likely to be a place where different viewpoints converge and tensions are generated. Such composition can visually maximize the sense of tension attributed by there being different cultural perspectives within a cross-cultural family.

For instance, in *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Chinese Traditional Therapy?*, the intersection/focal point in the composition is produced by the crossing of the American father’s extended left arm from top left, the Chinese mother’s oblique arms coming down from upper right, her leg supporting her body from the bottom right hand corner, and the child’s body lying diagonally from the bottom left to the middle of the canvas. Within this intersection area, the father’s left hand is grasping the mother’s right arm tightly in an attempt to stop her “torture” of their child, while the mother is holding down the child with her left hand and scraping his back skillfully with a spoon in

her right hand. Such compositional approach focuses a viewer's attention on the tense interactions in mid-painting.

In "*Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?*", the intersection and focal point of the composition appears led by the figures' gestures. This point of convergence is created by many lines hidden in the composition: the projection from the American father's left hand, the Chinese grandmother's right arm forward toward the diagonally placed left arm of the child, and a vertical line produced by the Chinese mother's upright posture. Additionally, the directions of all the figures' eyes are looking toward the focal point of the interaction, which is a fork on the child's left hand. In this painting, the grandmother is willfully grabbing the fork from her granddaughter's left hand with her right hand, as by Chinese tradition, the right hand is viewed as the proper hand for dining etiquette. The straining arm of the child and her frown indicate that she is reacting against her grandmother's "radical" view.

In *Mr. and Mrs. Green Card*, although the "X" composition is not as obvious as in the others pieces, the tension is still created by diagonal and horizontal lines. The diagonal line is generated by the extension through the husband's raised right arm down into the wife's lifted arm, while the horizontal line is created by his left forearm, thus bringing the focal point on the Green Card. The Green Card itself symbolizes the only connection between the husband and the wife.

In addition, cropping is an important tool in the formation of my images and compositions; therefore, it is used strategically and filled with symbolic meanings. I believe that, in the case of collaborative cultural communication, everyone interacts with others on an equal footing and no one should be in a dominant position over the others. Therefore, in my paintings, most of the figures are not placed at the center of the composition; furthermore, some of them are even cropped off. In such organization, the protagonists in most of my narratives are meant to function as equal partners and just the participants in the conflicts and none of them are the winners.

In short, with the “X” compositions as well as the cropping, I was able to create intersections on my canvases that symbolize the meeting places of different perspectives and viewpoints, visually intensify the tensions of the conflicts I depicted, and equalize the focus on the conflict participants within cross-cultural environments.

3.2.2 Multiple Perspectives Convey Cultural Discord and Create a Mixed Visual Form

Except for *Drink One More Cup!*, the compositions of my paintings are in Western linear perspective. However, different from those European academic paintings that employ a purely fixed viewpoint perspective, many details in my paintings are purposely distorted in perspective in order to create a sense of discord due to the different viewpoints among the characters in the narratives.

This distortion of perspective is especially obvious in "*Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?*". In reality, if a person leans on a table, it should be moved by his/her force; yet the table in this painting is manipulated to tilt toward the direction of the grandmother's force. Thus, the shape of the table-top appears to be wider instead of a thinner shape that it should be in reality. This distortion creates the illusion as if the dinner table was flipping up, tilting towards the picture plane and forming a wide oval shape along with the Chinese grandmother's arms. This oval creates a dynamic movement in the middle of the picture and leads the viewers' eyes to discover the origin of the drama. Additionally, the flipping table-top and the falling bowl suggest the crashing down of a harmonious family gathering due to a conflict created by different culture traditions and beliefs.

The distortion in *Stir Fry* becomes even more dramatic and is definitely symbolic. The built-in kitchen cabinet is slightly bent toward the right side of the picture, seemingly toppling over the husband. Along with the flipping wok, the counter by the oven leans forward too. The perspective of the floor, marked by the bottom edges of the cabinets and the directions of brush strokes, seems to slant down toward the husband. All these distortions in perspective emphasize the tension of the moment: the husband's struggle and the arrival of the fire truck. Moreover, a sharp triangular shape emerging as the counter-top on the lower right hand corner of the painting, manifests another perspective interested into the picture plane. In contrast to that of the counter

on the wife's side, such ridiculous manipulation of perspective suggests the husband's and the wife's opposing viewpoints regarding the smoke "problem" in the house.

Unlike other paintings in the series, *Drink One More Cup!* employs a shifting perspective, which originated from traditional Chinese brush painting (refer to the detailed discussion on shifting perspective in 2.1). *Drink One More Cup!* is an image that depicts the cumbersome etiquette in a Chinese-style wedding banquet. By using a shifting perspective in a long scroll composition, the images of the cross-cultural couple is repeated in multiple scenes of the banquet. Nevertheless, my purpose was not to criticize the form of this kind of exhausting wedding banquet, instead, to illustrate another cross-cultural setting in which cultural expectations differ awkwardly.

In summary, the manipulation of perspective is an important narrative strategy in this series of paintings. This insertion of multiple perspectives in one single picture plane creates straining visual dynamics and signifies the conflicts between the cross-cultural family members. In addition, the shifting perspective combining with a Western painting style creates a mixed visual form that symbolizes the marriage of the East and the West.

3.2.3 Manipulating Paint Applications to Develop the Narratives

Application of paint can be a signifier of an artist's work and could serve as an important visual element for bringing out the meaning behind the work. In art history,

for example, earlier Renaissance egg tempera painters demonstrated their dedication to God by making tiny interwoven hatching lines³⁴; Impressionist painters signified the constant changes of light by retaining their visible and dancing brush strokes on their imagery³⁵; Lucian Freud created his autobiographical portraits to represent the physical aging body by utilizing impasto technique³⁶; Jackson Pollock conveyed and celebrated the spirit of freedom by dripping and splashing paints on his canvases³⁷. For me, the varying applications of paint and the shifting painting styles within each painting or between paintings in the series all help to support the development of the narratives in order to reveal the meanings of my work.

Throughout the whole body of my work, thick layers of paint, or impasto technique is my main painting approach. By building up layers of paint, I constructed various degrees of textural paint surface on each painting in order to represent the personalities as well as the emotions of the characters in the narratives, and their attitudes and reactions to the conflicts. For example, in the painting *Mr. and Mrs. Green Card*, the first piece of my *East Marries West* series, about the possible danger of

³⁴ Altoon Sultan, *The Luminous Brush: Painting with Egg Tempera* (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 1999), 14.

³⁵ Nicolas Pioch, "Impressionism," *WebMuseum*, June 19, 2006, <http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/glo/impressionism/> (October 16, 2011).

³⁶ Sebastian Smee, "The Skin We Live In," *Prospect*, issue 191, January 25, 2012, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2012/01/the-skin-we-live-in-sebastian-smee-lucian-freud/> (April 1, 2012).

³⁷ For more discussion about the interpretation of Jackson Pollock's painting, see Chapter 6 in Erika Doss's *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: from Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 1991).

domestic abuse in a cross-cultural marriage, I characterized the abusive husband and the mistreated wife by using two different kinds of paint application respectively. The Wild dry brushstrokes, spreading on the husband's torso, imply his abusive nature. These rough strokes and palette knife marks that penetrate to the background create a rugged surface, which suggests the defective marital relationship of this couple. By contrast, at the bottom right hand corner of this painting, the wife, leaning backward but extending her arm to reach the Green Card in her husband's hand, is painted in a very different way. On her body, the relatively fluid brush strokes flowing along with her gesture suggest her vulnerability. In short, these two different methods of applying paint—dry and fluid, wild and gentle—make a clear statement and create a contrast between the brutal husband and the mistreated wife.

However, I assigned these two kinds of applications of paint in an opposite way in the painting *Mr. Jack Daniels and His Wife*. On the one hand, in the foreground, I created a grainy and textured surface with palette knife on the wife's skin to visualize her physical pain caused by her husband's abusing. I extended this rough texture to her surrounding environment, the stone-like couch, but separated this foreground from the background by using different type of brush-marks on the latter. In the background, on the other hand, I constructed the husband's legs and a belt with smooth and floating brush strokes. His seemingly shaky walking gait suggests his brutal behavior is caused by intoxication. Such contrasting painted surfaces can also be found in *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Chinese Traditional Therapy?*. In this painting, I

employed dry thick paint on the wife's bathrobe but relatively fluid and thin layers of paint on the husband's. The dominant presence of the wife is achieved by the bold and textural palette knife marks on her bathrobe and the harsh definition of her body. Her distinction in the picture and the clear details on her hands imply her confidence in the efficacy of the Chinese traditional therapy for her child. Contrasting with this, the soft edges of the husband's arms and body, and the reduced chiaroscuro effect on his bathrobe make him appear to reach forward to his wife yet still hold back. This dilemma suggests his hesitation and struggle over whether he should or should not stop his wife "torturing" of their child.

Besides the personalities as well as the emotions, the varying manipulation of paint also suggests movements. In *Stir Fry*, I depicted an emergency situation raised from the smoke resulting from the Chinese wife's cooking method. The wife is stir-frying on a wok, producing a great deal of smoke that has activated the smoke detector and brought the fire truck to her house. However, the wife enjoys and believes in her cooking and is not bothered by this "problem". Her confidence and enjoyment are demonstrated by the dancing brush strokes on her flowing hair and moving hands, the steady gesture and the rigid outline of her legs. The American husband, however, standing on a step stool, trying vehemently to dissipate the smoke from the smoke detector, and he seems to be annoyed by having to deal with this situation. Painted with palette knife and brushes, I produced multiple imageries for the husband's right hand, right leg and head. These overlapping imageries along with the vibrating outlines

of the husband's body capture his movement and validate his internal sensation of being out of control of in this situation. In a word, the different movements of these two figures, which are strengthened by the applications of paint, manifest their different attitudes and reactions toward the smoke "problem".

In addition to the thickly applied paint, I also explored other kinds of applications to signify the meanings of my work. In *Drink One More Cup!*, a painting that is less heavily painted than others, I depicted a Chinese-style wedding ceremonial banquet scene with diluted paint and looser brush strokes to capture the lively gestures, movements and facial expressions of the bride, the groom, their families and guests, and the celebratory atmosphere. In this work, fluid and vivid brushstrokes are utilized to showcase the joyful beginning of a cross-cultural marital relationship. No obviously underlying conflicts between the couple have surfaced yet. Instead, the tension that exists within such mixed-cultural environment is subtly suggested through the sketchy and somewhat clumsy brush-marks. The thinner layers of paint, what's more, indicate a less developed marital relationship of the newlywed. In the background, instead of depicting a specific and concrete environment as in my other paintings, I stained the canvas with water-down reddish pigment to imply the atmosphere of a festival, but, at the same time, to leave a lot of room for the viewers' imagination. The sketchy style together with the purposefully nonspecific background in this painting signifies the unknown future of the couple as they build their life together in a cross-cultural surrounding.

3.2.4 Employing Colors Symbolically to Enhance the Narratives

The choices of color schemes for my paintings are closely related to the subject matter and the narrative meanings behind the work. Therefore, the colors are not only practical and emotional but also symbolic; they are employed to strengthen the content of my work. Because of cultural differences, some of the interpretations of colors in my paintings are different from those generally used in Western cultures.

The dichotomy of the meanings of blue is well demonstrated through my work: In both paintings, *Mr. and Mrs. Green Card* and *Mr. Jack Daniels and His Wife*, dark blue that permeates the canvases and arouses a cruel atmosphere and horrible feeling. While the lighter various saturations of blue in the warmer-hue painting *Stir Fry* composition could be seen as the sense of calmness. The light blue shirt of the Chinese wife, as well as the bluish ascending air around her, suggests her calmness in contrast to the red emergency light of the approaching fire truck outside the window. In addition, in *“Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?”*, the couple’s outfits and their child’s pants are all variations of blue hues, which could be read as agreement and alliance of left-handedness since all these colors are analogous.

The color of red in different hues could generate different meanings too. The cadmium red on the husband’s body in *Mr. and Mrs. Green Card* represents his sanguinary nature while the dull red on the wife’s body in *Mr. Jack Daniels and His Wife*

signifies that she is the victim of domestic abuse. Moreover, in *Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Chinese Traditional Therapy?*, the bloody red marks on the child's back demonstrates that he could be a victim of abusive treatment, no matter how therapeutic it might be. In this case, the mother, who obviously plays a dominant role in the family, strongly believes the effectiveness of such therapy and fearlessly practices it on her child. All these elements are indicated by the orange bathrobe that she wears, which stands out from the background. However, the warm hue of the bathrobe tends to make her "warmer", thus reducing the "violence" of her behavior to a more understandable level. Intense reds are another matter. In *"Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?"*, the fiery-red outfit worn by the grandmother makes her distinction from the other figures that are in cooler and lighter hues, and characterizes her radical personality and strong will. The green hue on the granddaughter's outfit, which is the complementary color of red, further implies the grandmother's and granddaughter's opposite attitudes toward left-handedness. Moreover, in *Stir Fry*, a generally cooler composition, I contrasted the visual effect of warm and cool colors. The bright red emergency light on the fire truck intensifies the feeling of urgency. This feeling is further strengthened by the red fire on the stove.

Besides for the meanings above, the use of red in my paintings also has a significant cultural reference. In *"Hold on to This Guanyin and You Will Give Me a Grandson Soon."*, the red colors on the background of the left panel, the bed cover in the middle panel, and the Chinese wedding dress in both of the middle and right panels

are all associated with happiness in Chinese culture and weddings in China. In *“Excuse Me, Mister! Could We Take a Picture Together?”* and *Drink One More Cup!*, the use of red also has the same meaning. The red in these two paintings illustrates the circumstances of weddings and creates a happy and celebratory atmosphere.

Through the intentional manipulations of the visual elements in my paintings, I was able to create a pictorial structure that better presents the content and concept of the narrative. This pictorial structure is characterized by symbolic composition in multiple perspectives as well as shifting perspective, varying applications of paint within painting or shifting painting styles between paintings, and intentional utilization of color. Through fabricating a believable “reality” with a representational painting style, I unfolded the cultural conflicts and discord, revealed the dynamics behind them, and provided space for my audience to evaluate the issues I depicted.

CONCLUSION

Triggered by my experiences in China and the United States, my series of paintings, *East Marries West*, showcases the cultural conflicts between the East and the West in the present era of cultural and economic globalization. Through unfolding the cultural conflicts within Chinese and Euro-American marriage, my images illustrate intercultural communication and conflict at a very specific level. With this series of narrative paintings, I intended to bring about better consciousness and attention to the outcomes of cultural collision in our society.

The representational painting style is the formal language that is used to present my narratives. In the process of creating my images, I investigated a variety of historical paintings and contemporary visual materials, both of which influenced the formation of my work. In addition, through carefully organizing and manipulating certain visual elements in my paintings, I fabricated a believable “reality” with an effective narrative strategy. This “reality” presents the cultural conflicts within cross-cultural marriage, and brings out the dynamics behind such conflicts to my viewers. It is my goal to motivate the viewers to re-evaluate cross-cultural conflicts in today’s culturally and ethnically diverse societies.

I believe that this painting project, which is about cross-cultural marriage between Chinese and Euro-Americans, is just the beginning of my investigation on cross-

cultural issues. As one can see, my project has covered many aspects of cross-cultural marriage, including cooking, dining etiquette, child care, gender role expectations, involvement of other family members, and social relationship with others, as well as domestic violence. One can also see that my project mainly focuses on the marriages between Chinese wives and Euro-American husbands. In the future, this project can be expanded to deal with issues such as the West marrying *in* the East, which happens less frequently, various cultural values' impact on mixed children, the second-generation Chinese American marrying with Euro-American, and so on.

To summarize, I hope my project can trigger greater awareness and further studies in cultural differences, and encourage Western scholars and artists, as well as the general public, to re-evaluate the East and the Eastern culture, and my approach to this project can be applied to other broader cross-cultural issues in contemporary society.

PAINTINGS IN THE MFA THESIS EXHIBITION AND EXHIBITION INSTALLATION VIEWS



Figure 9
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Installation View from Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition-*China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011

China Marries America

中美婚姻

众所周知，两个不同文化背景的人的婚姻生活实质上就是两种文化的结合，其中由于跨文化所产生的冲突和碰撞在婚姻这种

亲密关系中得到了充分的彰显，甚至进一步被强化。我的作品通过揭示

跨文化婚姻家庭生活中的一些冲突细节，让观众了解到中西文化的差异，并藉此促进中美两国人民的相互理解和合作。

在全球化的今天，中西方文化的互相渗透与融合已经是我们生活中不可或缺的部分，对文化差异的认识和相互的理解不仅能大大丰富我们的生活阅历，而且还可能成为中美两国交流合作和共存双赢的哲学基础。

As we all understand, to marry an individual from another culture means to marry that culture. In such an intimate relationship, cultural conflicts could be magnified and escalated. In my paintings, through revealing the domestic conflicts caused by cross-cultural marriages between Chinese and American, I hope to bring to my audience the awareness of cultural differences and promote transnational understanding and cooperation on a more personal level. Mutual understanding and appreciation between the two nations are inevitable to most of us

in the era of globalization and such experiences could indeed enrich our lives positively.

Suqin "Jackie" Lin

Figure 10
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Artist Statement Projected on the Wall of Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition *China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011



Figure 11
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Installation View from Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition *China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011



Figure 12
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Installation View from Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition-*China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011



Figure 13
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Installation View from Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition-*China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011



Figure 14
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Installation View from Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition-*China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011



Figure 15
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Installation View from Suqin "Jackie" Lin's Thesis Exhibition-*China Marries America*
George Caleb Bingham Gallery, University of Missouri-Columbia
2011

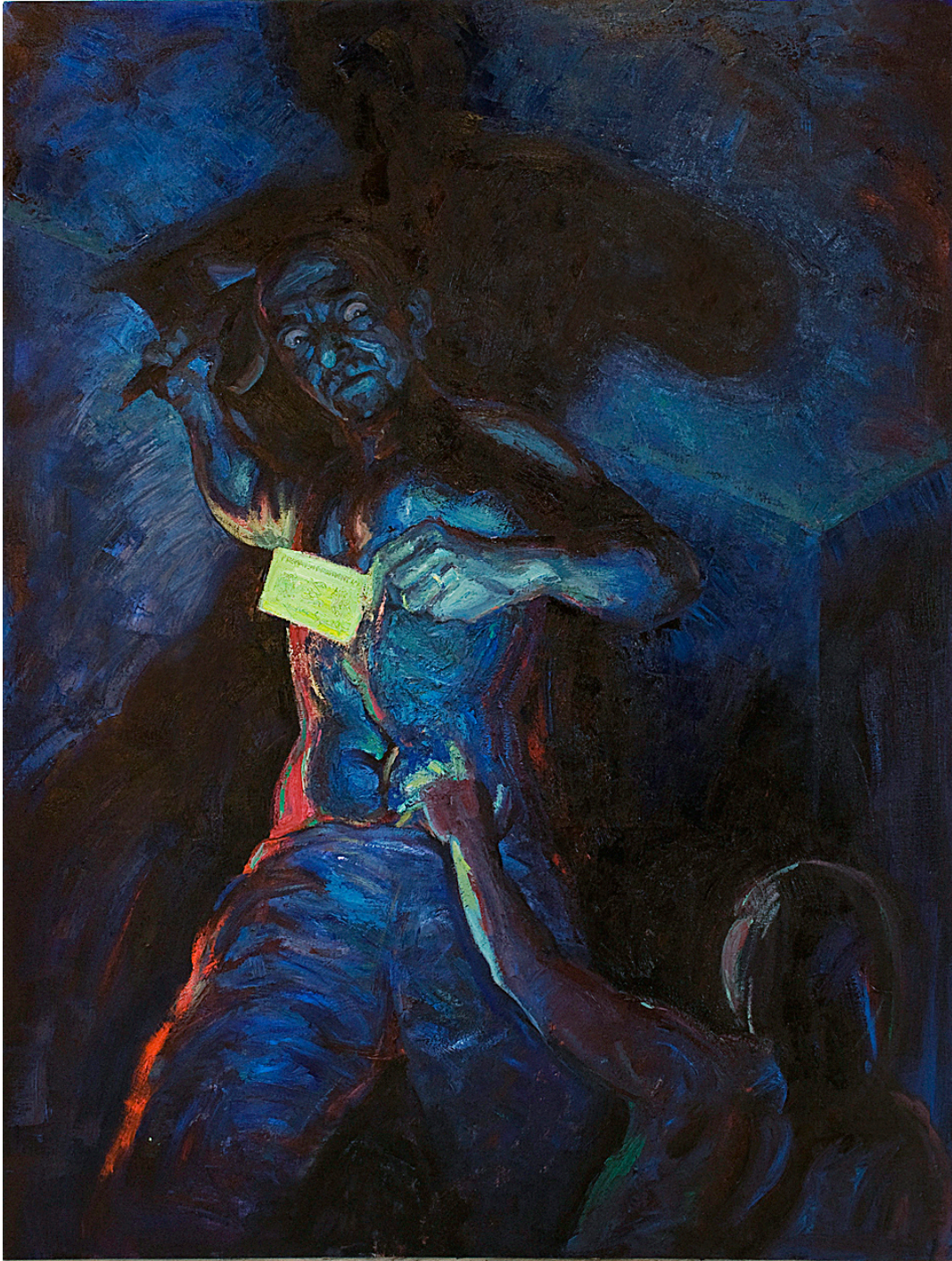


Figure 16
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Mr. and Mrs. Green Card
Oil on canvas
70" x 50"
2009



Figure 17
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Mr. Jack Daniels and His Wife
Oil on canvas
48" x 66"
2009



Figure 18
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Scraping Therapy: A Torture or an Effective Traditional Chinese Therapy?
Oil on canvas
66" x 48"
2009



Figure 19
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
"Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?"
Oil on canvas
66" x 48"
2010



Figure 20
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Study for *"Did Your Mother Tell You not to Use Your Left Hand?"*
Pastel on board
40" x 32"
2009



Figure 21
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
Stir Fry
Oil on canvas
64" x 48"
2010



Figure 22
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
"Hold on to This Guanyin and You will Give Me a Grandson Soon."
Oil on wood panels
Triptych in the shape of a bedroom mirror, middle panel 43" x 34.5", side panels 34.5" x 25" each
2010



Figure 23
Suqin "Jackie" Lin
"Excuse Me, Mister! Could We Take a Picture Together?"
Oil on canvas
52" x 48"
2011



Figure 24. Suqin "Jackie" Lin, *Drink One More Cup!*, Acrylic on un-stretched canvas, 48" x 300", 2011
Below: Details of *Drink One More Cup!*



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