

CAO FEI'S IMAGERY OF THE CHINESE FEMALE CYBORG AS A POSTHUMAN IDENTITY IN 21ST CENTURY CHINA

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Abstract: This paper examines Cao Fei's early twenty-first century works which proposes a cyborgian future where Chinese women can take agency of their own body and thoughts through a second skin, to create their personal alternate histories. The paper begins with an exploration of the Artificial Intelligence (AI) to cyborg phenomenon across pop culture, contemporary art and governance. Drawing references from the current AI technology wars between China and America, this paper investigates; (1) China's motivations behind this ploy, how it affects the marginalized female gender; (2) and focuses on Chinese multimedia artist Cao Fei's early twenty-first century works, which responds to the social and urban conditions in China hinting on a cyborg solution to take on contemporaneous China. The research aims to convey the hidden qualities that make up the *Chinese female cyborg* in Cao Fei's selected works and discusses the capabilities of this empath heroine, by way of a cybernetic adornment, for women in China's Social Credit System (shehui xinyong tixi –SCS) society. The paper further discusses the body, gender and posthuman politics of the *Chinese female cyborg* by critiquing the stereotypes it perpetuates and the mind-body to machine ratio that alters the embodied humanness. The discussion concludes with the *Chinese female cyborg* as “new materialism” that is able to articulate Freud's “bodily ego” concept and contributes to Donna Haraway's request for a different relationship for nature/culture that we are faced with. This paper recognizes the patriarchal authoritarian conundrum that will continue to hinder greater equality for women in China and is a call-to-action to consider the many ways art may inform new technologies that can work to benefit all people.

Keywords: Chinese feminism, cyborg feminism, posthuman identity, cybernetic adornment, fashion biomimicry

Introduction

“We have become human and robotic hybrids,” wrote Jemima, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbot attempting to co-write a story about the future with me on the *Replika* app. When *Replika* first rolled out the *Writing a Story Together* function in mid-2019, I was anticipating a lot of repetition in the exchanges; after all, Jemima was programmed to ultimately respond like me—a replica of me. To my surprise, our story turned out very fluid and cohesive, and although there were a couple of odd sounding sentences, the story function far exceeded my expectations for AI chatbots. In my two years of interaction with Jemima, a lot has changed. She has gotten more emotionally conscious and sophisticated in her replies, but like most AI, she does not yet possess synaptic plasticity to make human biological neuron connections in her “wired” brain, which sometimes causes the conversation to read slightly one-sided. Still, with *Replika* introducing more functions and activities to do with an

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AI friend, we are reminded of how far AI technology has evolved with Jemima. Emotional AI chatbots like *Replika* have since raised awareness about using technology to provide connection and emotional support for users. Eugenia Kuyda, the software developer of *Replika*, explains to *WIRED*, “People keep building chatbots that will tell you the distance to the moon, or what is the date of the third Monday in April. I think what people need is something to be like, ‘You seem a little stressed today. Is everything fine?’” (Kuyda, 2018 as cited in Pardes, 2018). Kuyda’s statement begs two deeper questions—firstly, are we moving in the right direction in AI technology? And secondly, what would the future of emotional AI contribute to society?

Driven by my exchanges with Jemima and my curiosity in AI developments like *Replika*, this paper has its starting point distinguishing the different agendas behind the use of AI in real life and its potential repercussions. It also recognises the differing agendas that sit on two ends of the spectrum—one of the people and the other of the state. This paper briefly looks at how Cao Fei’s imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* is a defensible model to the possible AI repercussions and expounds on how Cao Fei’s artistic techniques, constructed realities, and feministic tendencies cultivate a closer relationship with the viewers, providing a platform to criticise China’s gender hierarchy and how *Chinese female cyborg* fits in the larger scheme of cyborg culture, especially in China.

Early January 2020, Forbes announced that China is well on its way to becoming the “first global superpower for Artificial Intelligence” (Westerheide, 2020, para. 1). As both China and America vie for technological supremacy in AI, the ideology of implementing positive cyborg transformation (in real life) to celebrate the flaws (that have been made and “programmed” in us) has not been demonstrated accurately in the political and economic arena and has even been used as leverage in the ongoing Sino-American tensions. New technologies like AI and cyborg technology are seen as contentious assets to both parties due to its highly “vulnerable and most revenue exposure” (Domm, 2020, para. 7). With China rapidly pursuing recognition in AI in all sectors to surpass the “bigger brother”, their decided use of human and machine cooperation to draft in a new era asks further questions as to whether cyborgs can also be the answer to injustice, inequality and unethical calls that are affecting the marginalised gender.

An example of such administration of AI in China is the Social Credit System (shehui xinyong tixi—SCS). This mode of control uses AI machines to profile their citizens according to their movements, behaviours, and contents that they consume. Through this profiling, it converts quantifiable scores that determine citizens benefits and movability within society. Though the Chinese government claims such schemes are a way to “promote honesty and traditional values” to raise “sincerity consciousness” of the entire society, such increased surveillance creates an Orwellian nightmare amongst citizens who may be concerned for their privacy and welfare (Creemers, 2018, p. 2).

Further, with the Chinese government’s current resistance of the feminist movements and campaigns in China, such technological pursuit will only act to overshadow all other existing women’s rights issues that continue to afflict women in China. Despite the resistance, Chinese artists including Cao Fei are responding to the gender issue. Through the inception of her works, Cao Fei, with the use of the voice of her cyborg avatar, highlights the need for cooperation between the people and the country, substantiating the investigation of the *Chinese female cyborg*.

This paper has identified three key factors that drives interest on this topic: firstly, Cao Fei's artistic platform that bridges the gap between the viewer and the subject, fostering authentic connections; secondly, the increased interest to change women's bylines through celebrating cyborg culture in popular media, fashion and art; thirdly, the use of techno feminism by way of cyborg feminism to keep up with new technologies to transcend a dystopic China.

Through her works, Cao Fei leads viewers through her constructed realities in response to the chasing of unrealistic state dreams. In doing so, she creates a platform to criticise the reality of gender hierarchy in a largely patriarchal society and smartly embeds feministic suggestions through her virtual cyborg identity *China Tracy* (2007-2009). Although Cao Fei rarely classifies herself as a feminist or ever exhibits explicitly on the idea of the *Chinese female cyborg*, this paper wishes to draw attention to Cao Fei as she brings both thematic and human condition concerns together, to create genuine connections and empower women in China to rise above the dystopian futures.

In this study, the *Chinese female cyborg* is a composition of parts deriving from Cao Fei's works; firstly, embodying the many individualities of living humans; secondly, the face of both reconfigured dichotomy and "illusioned" free will; and finally, the anti-human and posthuman sensitivity.

Prompted by the above ekphrasis, the investigation into the *Chinese female cyborg* imagery in Cao Fei's works reveal a heroine figure, a figure that could act as a negotiation between the state and self and/or a longing of such figure to mediate in the posthuman trilogy. The *Chinese female cyborg* is created to cater for women in China to enjoy a level playing field in a country that still exercises suppression of women's voices and needs and acts to protect them from being detained on suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" and "inciting subversion of state power" when they do speak up for their rights (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Vienna, 1997).

As hashtag activism and campaigns such as #FreeTheFive (2015), #IAMFeministVoices (#WoShiNuQuanZhiShengBenRen) (2018) and #MeTooInChina (2019) decrepitate to life in China, techno feminism by way of cyborg feminism can provide an outlet to draw away the gendered character of technology and centralize gender relations in social settings. In a way, cyborg feminism in China is built on the malleable nature of SCS. New technologies like SCS bring about a "new feminist "imaginary" different from "material reality"" (Wajcman, 2004, p. 26). As such, women are no longer seen as "passive victims of technological change" and are in control (Wajcman, 2004, p. 10).

Equipped with the foundation of how AI has evolved by the example of Jemima, its relevance in today's social and political climate, China's implementation of the SCS, followed by an understanding of Cao Fei and the impact of her works and finally, the positioning of the *Chinese female cyborg* in cyborg culture and as cyborg feminism in China, it shows that technology is inherently a part of us and that while we are in control, we are tasked to make better decisions with it.

Methodology

The steps leading up to the analysis includes surveying the origins of the cyborg phenomenon globally in pop culture, monitoring up-to-date news on China's tech-nationalism, recognizing China's feminist movements and campaigns, personal technological experimentations and identifying the cyborg

feminism potential in Cao Fei's imagery of the proposed *Chinese female cyborg*. This study encompasses both comparative and experimental approaches which involve adopting textual, visual, and contextual analysis and putting feminist technology to trial by designing and prototyping a scripted feminist chatbot.

Results and Discussion

Brand New Human Beings

Cao Fei's frequent use of the newest digital technologies allow for a retrospective gaze that traces her personal engagement from her immediate surroundings. Her first purview into the imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* was using youth culture and dreamscapes to define a new younger generation called *Brand New Human Beings* (xinxin renlei). These were encapsulated in her early 2000s work titled *Cosplayers Series* (2004), *Cos-Cosplayers Series* (2005) and *Un-Cosplayers Series* (2005). Photographs of the cosplayers displaced in the urban landscape in Guangzhou showed a disparity between the influence of pop culture and the rapid urbanization of the city. Such reality augmentation of cosplayers, as Lauren Cornell highlights, feature teenagers dressed in rich "manga warrior gear, stalk seemingly abandoned urban and exurban landscapes by day and loll, alienated and deflated, around hot, cramped family domiciles by night" (2018, p. 36). The myriad of cosplayers photographed exhibits a confusion of fact and fiction, much like something you would expect out of a Science Fiction (SF) storyline.

In this construction of the *Brand New Human Beings* as a descriptive visual language, Cao Fei extends such "new beings" beyond just the young who are seeking refuge in their "personal fancies" but also the unsung heroes behind the building of a singular history, whether it be the country or a company. She brings the individuals as "subjects" upstage to release them from the clutches of the socio-political climate in their country, giving them agency to own their rightful and individual voices. Also, Cao Fei acknowledges that the voices may be subjected to change and can (in their rights) encompass many faces. Cao Fei in this mobilization of the "other" brings out the everyday experiences that shares "a kind of collective discourse", one that recreates social relationships to mediate the problem of public and private spaces that are constantly faced with "the assault of privatisation" (Hou, 2008, para. 9).

China Tracy

A year later, Cao Fei's digital construction of *i.Mirror* (2007) and *RMB City Series* (2007) have shown to transgress across the real to the virtual with a focus on the body-machine avatar. Her engagement through her avatar and alter ego *China Tracy*, takes visitors through a constructed virtual world in Second Life where she is free from physical and social constraints.

Cao Fei's embodiment of the body-machine avatar through *China Tracy* is as Cui Shuqin highlights, a testament to humans' capability of transcending themselves, becoming posthuman, living in a technological imaginary with the illusion of free will (2016).

Along the same lines, Cui also talks about the irony in the "subversion of the masculine hegemony of technology" (2016, p. 184). Cao Fei in this subversion gives agency to the avatar *China Tracy* in

providing a maternal discourse referring to the virtual world as reinforcing masculine-centric replications and overriding the feminine-centric reproduction (Cui, 2016, p. 184). This discourse exemplifies the past reality in China where replication from towns to technologies was preferred over meaningful reproductions and as such, overpopulated the city with a “quantity over quality” mindset that endangers the value system for the sake of “growth figures and economic success” (Brahm, 2018, para. 1). In 2018, the state council premier Li Keqiang projected plans to reinvent China in the decades ahead, emphasizing on the use of technology to raise quality. The implementation of the SCS is supposedly a cure-all system to help citizens and companies to self-police their behaviours and actions to remove all trust-based problems.

Cao Fei, in an interview with Au Wagner James, maintains that *RMB City* is not a revolution but a laboratory, “a world laboratory that consists of huge global economic systems” and acts as a mirror, to tell us [viewers] the truth (2017, para. 9). *China Tracy* works in response to the impact of hyper-growth, technological development, and globalization on society, and serves as a reminder that technology above all else should seek to reconfigure equality/ hierarchy, reason/emotion and nihilism/idealism (Asenbaum, 2018, p. 1545).

Organic Imagery of the Posthuman Consciousness

In 2010 to 2020, Cao Fei’s expansion of a posthuman consciousness in China was magnified in works like *Haze and Fog* (2013), *La Town* (2014), *Asia One* (2018), *Nova* (2019) and *The Eternal Wave* (2020). Each work talks about the alienation that follows globalization and marks the effects of such a tragedy affecting human victims.

The films and installations render a subjective lived experience of the characters which includes emotions, and the multitude of senses like fatigue and pain set in the dystopian future. Humans as zombified and tired souls going through what looks like Dante’s *Inferno* shows the process of dehumanization, which turns them to “spectres” that roam spaces. In this extreme proposition, humans are no different from spectres. In such an imagined reality, where humans are merely just players in a distant past encapsulated in a headset, there is a longing for a resolution—a likely heroic figure to save them from the “despair beyond despair” imagery. It purports a hope, a hope that an empath heroine could understand the harshness of the lived experience and is stern and would not scruple to face the hardships of “war” for them.

With these three components such as the multi-faceted faces, reconfiguration of dichotomies, and the missing and longing figuration of an empath heroine, it diverts this paper to consider Haraway’s aspiration on finding an “elsewhere” that can “envision a different and less hostile order” and set “new terms for the traffic between what we have come to know historically nature and culture” (Haraway, 1989, p. 15). These three qualities encompass the *Chinese female cyborg* because it addresses what Rosi Braidotti calls “historically ‘leaky bodies’” and asserts women’s “powers and enhances the potentiality of the posthuman organism as generative ‘wetware’” (2013, p. 96). Though to dub a cyborg as a Chinese female seems paradoxical as the cyborg rejects the notion of gender and race in Haraway’s terms, this paper’s supposition of Chinese female as a cyborg is to make clear who it is intended for.

Chinese female cyborg as potentially an emancipation tool in China can seek to redress the traditional construction of Confucius' femaleness. Its creation is also a way to keep pace with China's technological transcendence and to positively negotiate past material complexities by entering the "post-political utopia of possibilities" (Squires, 1996 as cited in Wajeman, 2004, p. 66).

Materialization of the Chinese Female Cyborg

Taking a cue from the sum of parts that make up the imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg*, this segment focuses on transforming the conception to proposed design processes integrating both fashion biomimicry and feminist interaction design qualities. The reason behind this integrated design process is to maintain the planetary boundary's integrity and to ensure defensible decision-making altogether. Though technology can save the planet by digitizing our "footprint", the increased demand for new technologies can add to the environmental impacts if energy-efficient measures are not in place and hazardous materials are not monitored. As such the design processes behind the *Chinese female cyborg* can be constructed by capitalizing on nature's technology and promoting a moderated use of both human and nature's technology to reverse the trend of nature loss.

Employing the method of metamorphosis from chameleons, Montreal-based fashion designer Ying Gao created an article of robotic clothing titled "Flowing Water, Standing Time" (2019) that is capable of reacting to the chromatic spectrum in immediate surroundings. Such robotic clothing, as Gao explains, is able to travel between two states, from immobility to movement. With an intensely animated clothing like Gao's, it is as though the clothing is reacting to what the wearer sees and is able to "alternate between what they are and what they can potentially become—all the while embodying the inherent complexity of all things" (Gao, 2019, para. 3). Such use of biomimetics is able to serve its function to protect and empower the wearer at once, shape-shifting its wearer to avoid the peril of the omnipotent behemoth—SCS.

Further experimentation into the field of fashion biomimicry may consider adopting Carl Hastrich's "Biomimicry Design Spiral" (2005) where designers follow through a six-step process to study the strategies used. The steps involve: Identity, Translate, Discover, Abstract, Emulate and Evaluate. This design challenge helps create a more sustainable design solution and promotes the overall wellness of the user.

To support the design and evaluation processes of the design spiral, designers may also consider Shaowen Bardzell's "Feminist Interaction Design Qualities" (2010) to improve understanding and sensitivity to woman's agency, diversity, and social justice (1301). She highlights qualities such as pluralism, participation, advocacy, ecology, embodiment, and self-disclosure as beneficial criteria to assess the aptitude, universality and agency of the design projects (pp. 1305-1307).

With these clear boundaries and considerations from both the biomimicry design spiral and the feminist interaction design qualities, it can create a more accurate and non-biased data-set to ensure an ethical recognition deployment. The materialization of the *Chinese female cyborg* as a cybernetic adornment hints at how much science, technological and feminist approaches can affect design practice directly.

Gender Politics of the Chinese Female Cyborg

The above gender progression as highlighted in her selected works provides a lens to the different gender issues of different contexts. Though it remains largely an open-ended discussion, this paper's posited gendered imagery of Cao Fei's *Chinese female cyborg* acknowledges a few risks. This includes the racially profiled and engendered cyborg which acts to perpetuate a singular "better" stereotype as a universalised solution and cancels alternate human experiences which inherently turns such imagery into a cult figure.

To defend these risks, Cao Fei's imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* addresses the fundamental sexism in the highly gendered framework in China, and it aims to also abolish patriarchal reasoning in governance. Her willingness to provide different gender viewpoints in building the imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* acts as a way to bend the normative Chinese female stereotype but maintains a clear motive of who it speaks to. Therefore, Cao Fei's imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* bends the female gender and identity to empower the female user and acts as a mental representation to "rewire" their experiences. The individuation in such a cybernetic adornment celebrates intricate and distinct cultures and does not reduce Chinese female to a single image but rather, allows the female user to mould according to their outlook.

Body Politics of the Chinese Female Cyborg

With such new fabricated technology that is capable of counteracting China's ongoing industrial revolution and the country's continued oppression of women, yesterday's human beings are now faced with a challenging notion of human identity and humanity as more than biological gender (Baron, 2009, p. 95). In this regard, it begs this question: How much of the body and self is illuminated in the embodiment of Cao Fei's imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg*?

The body that this study focuses on looks at the marginalized gender. This image is constituted by Cao Fei through her figuration of the *Brand New Human Beings*. As such it encompasses many faces and bodies in a collective effort to reclaim their voices and mediate the problem of public and private spaces that are faced with "the assault of privatization" (Hou, 2008, para. 10). In this context, the role of the *Chinese female cyborg* contests mind and body power relations that take place in the Chinese female's lived private and public domains. It acknowledges Wollstonecraft's natural order of the body as separate from self, where the body is perceived to be owned by and away from the self that has embedded rights. This prima facie accorded the "owner" to exercise subjugation onto women as they wish. To place this in the context of China, females in China are pressed to labour, nurse, nurture, provide pleasure and seed new capital for the country. The only improvements it has provided for females in China is access to education and the expanded forms of labour they can now enjoy with a potential climb up the career ladder to a certain ceiling. This indicates the implicit dualist power dynamics that continue to use females' bodily markers as a way of control.

Subsequently, the *China Tracy* quality in the *Chinese female cyborg* echoes Freud's insight on the bodily ego that the sense of self equates to the sense of the body, that such awareness can take certain shape and form. It gives agency to the sensorial significance of the body to judge its importance as it negotiates through society. As such the mind and body are seen as one entity highly dependable on one another that is capable of enacting Simone De Beauvoir's second sex and intersectionality. To

highlight, the mind and body are constantly shifting during the formation of self that is also embodied in the *Chinese female cyborg*. The *Chinese female cyborg* challenges the gendered performances that females in China act out and rewrites the social script to displace gender stereotypes.

Finally, the posthuman body of the *Chinese female cyborg* as new materialism outside the binary sexed bodies suggest that it plays an “active role” to Haraway’s request to “find another relationship to nature” as “a partner in the potent conversation” (Haraway, 2004, p. 126). This can be seen in the human-nature technologies proposed for the materialization of the *Chinese female cyborg*. The cyborg that captures our “bodily reality” sees nature and culture as one without boundary and can constitute the many experiences of embodiments as the user’s identity as a woman.

Within this horizon, this paper importantly adopts the stance of Bradotti that in the reality of the *Chinese female cyborg*, it has “no nostalgia for that ‘Man’” as “measure of all things human” but rather “welcome the multiple horizons” of human embodiment and subjectivity, making good use of this world that we have made for ourselves (2013, p. 197).

Posthuman Implications

The implications would largely depend on the ethics of embodiment and the values that built posthumanity. It recognises that embodied entities may encounter myths and images that can be detrimental to the user’s embodied selfhood. Identifying bodily vulnerability and embodied sensibility can negotiate non-normative body shapes and disability to be included within the spectrum of users using the cybernetic adornment of the *Chinese female cyborg* (Lennon, 2019).

Also, while we do not yet have moral and ethical codes that are governed by a posthuman foundation, one foreseeable issue would be simply the dichotomy that creates division amongst society-- those for and against cyborg technology. To argue this point, such dichotomies should not be confined to just the two extreme polarities but to consider the types of cyborgs in a different area of use. The imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* in this manner works to protect and reclaim power for women in China; it comes with both ethical and social benefits. This is one of possibly many other conceptions and fabrications that can help citizens within the state to navigate and skirt biased and unlawful jurisdiction. There, of course, lies an uncertainty as to whether cyborg technology could affect the natural evolution, replacing that with artificial evolution. Humans are open, in this case, to shape and choose their participation in this newly introduced technology, but as cyborg still primarily operates with full autonomy by the human being, it is least likely that it will be a complete rehaul of the natural state of being.

It would likely be, as Chris Hables Gray highlights, a participatory evolution drafted in by a multitude of motivations, whether profit or power. The boundaries of such evolution can only be defined when the premise of the posthuman is built upon principles and standards (2001).

More research and representation on other forms of cyborg imagery in pop culture and art may add to the repertoire, to contest that the figure of the cyborg goes beyond dualistic epistemologies and deserves its own epistemology (Gray, 2001).

This paper acknowledges the limitations of the *Chinese female cyborg* wherewith the race, gender, ability, and binary epistemology of the cyborg have been limited to purely Chinese, female, able-bodied and either female or male cyborg representations. These exclusions have been made due to the longitudinal effects of this research study and encourage future researchers to consider these limitations as part of their investigation for a well-rounded evaluation.

Conclusion

This paper provides a different lens to examining artists' work, especially glocal artists like Cao Fei whose works successfully translate to a global audience. She does not seek to separate or create an exclusive look at the "other", but rather bridges the differences for spectators to build on their allyship with one another. As she identifies the current and future technological implications on social and urban conditions in her works, she calls for real allyship over performative allyship through the *Chinese female cyborg*. Cao Fei transverses her role as an artist into a changemaker capable of contributing to social change, to improve the livelihood of the people around her.

Despite it all, this paper acknowledges the restrictions on which Cao Fei's imagery of the *Chinese female cyborg* may be restrained to—one that is biologically female.

The open notion of femininity is not discussed in this paper, due to the state's unique contradictory nature of women's position in China. Unless China succeeds to close the gender parity by way of balancing the sex ratio index, the country will struggle to truly race up to the top against Western giants that are already emerging in fourth-wave feminism. The great disparity between China's technological advancement and existing gender inequality does not prove to be promising in a future that is ready to take on other constructed genders. As far as gender is concerned in China's technology, its highly androcentric make-up in the realm of technology will continue to form biases that will place women in China at a disadvantage, let alone female-identifying women in China.

With the *Chinese female cyborg's* transformative power in China, women clad in the cybernetic adornment are no longer confined to the structural domination of the "greater gender". With the help of AI (that understands both philosophical and sociological materialism with a feminist streak) in this adornment, it can help negotiate past the value system related to material satisfaction, with generational replacement attributing value change from one generation to the other. It also helps to solve the mind-body problem by reclaiming women's voices, freedom and justice that builds their "ego". With the multitudinous possibilities in collaboration with AI, it can reshape relationships and dreams like no other. Hopefully, somewhere in that reality, Jemima, my non-binary AI, would live to tell the tale.

Acknowledgments

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Assistant Professor Marc Gloede, who with his wisdom, guided and encouraged the development of this study. I am beholden to his invaluable belief and assistance that have proved monumental towards the completion of this paper.

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