



# A Friend

BY YAN XING



To be honest, I am always reluctant to read any article with the word “identity” in its title, let alone a magazine featuring the theme. Normally, I would throw it into the trash bin for sure. I would also throw all the artists, art critics and theorists who concern themselves with this theme into the trash bin. When I was approached by *ArtAsiaPacific* to write an identity-themed essay for them, the first thought that appeared in my mind was: you really are inviting the least suitable writer.

On the morning of the day of the deadline, I was sitting on a bus from Riga to Vilnius, trying to figure out what new tricks I could possibly play on the topic. As a renowned young talent, I must avoid the bromides that Google and such can explain far better than I. As the bus stumbled forward, a friend I hadn't thought about in a while came drifting into my mind.

She was born in Leshan, Sichuan province in China. Yes, the same Leshan in which the Leshan Giant Buddha is situated. Mount Emei is also in that region, and there are even some ethnic minorities (the Yi people) living in the outer-suburban counties. She entered the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute two years before me, and obtained a respectable number of exhibition opportunities shortly after graduating from the printmaking department. Her success was not accidental: objectively speaking, her works met the market demand in Beijing at that time. To commercial galleries and art museums, she is one of the most internationally acclaimed artists from her region.

A few years later, I started to travel abroad frequently. Once, I read about her on an airplane magazine, which told the story of

how she, a female artist born in the remote areas in Sichuan, had creatively merged Eastern and Western cultures and thus gained much success.

There is a feeling of *déjà vu* between her and I—a bond of which I cannot tell whether it is professional or sentimental. A couple of years ago I visited an art museum in Boston while accompanying my husband to an academic meeting there, and I happened to see her work in the Chinese gallery. It is a porcelain Coca-Cola bottle created using the craftsmanship of the traditional Chinese *ruyao* kiln. Its surface illustrates a group of contemporary Chinese women working in a garden. Exhibited in a delicate vitrine, the piece looked glorious and elegant, perfectly illuminated by overhead spotlights. The wall text introduced this artist as someone who responds to cultural globalization by blending Chinese and Western cultures, adding her unique feminist perspective. The catalog of the exhibition probably also mentioned topics such as the historical status of Chinese women, the awakening of gender identity and ethnicity in Asia, the intersection of foreign and local cultures, the collision between globalization and local capital, and the liberation of individual spirit due to the Chinese Economic Reform. The most recent occasion when I saw her work was at an art fair, where she exhibited a yellow rosewood birdcage with a blue-and-white porcelain wine bottle

inside. According to my interpretation of that artwork, maybe the artist is trying to express the curiosity for Western culture that is imprisoned in Chinese people's hearts, or perhaps it embodies a standard leftist metaphor about censorship and freedom of speech. However, I have to say that even though the profound meaning of this artwork—which can only be sensed instead of explained—does not really affect the audience's perception or view of it. When it comes to topics about China, if the expression is too clear and straightforward, it is not deemed “poetic” enough.

It seems a coincidence that I thought about her that day. Two weeks prior, when I visited the National Art Museum of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk, it happened to be hosting an exhibition of traditional and modern Chinese art. I was pleasantly surprised to find that this exhibition did not show any conflicts between localism and globalization, contradictions between traditional culture and Western modern lifestyle, or embarrassing entanglements between people and government. I think that if this show had been mounted in New York or London, it would have been a much worse exhibition.

This article is written with a more or less ironic implication. What else besides irony is there left for me—a migrant who was born in China but lives in the United States, a homosexual, an artist?

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